

A FIGHT FOR FORTUNE

T·C·BRIDGES

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# A FIGHT FOR FORTUNE

BY  
T. C. BRIDGES

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# A Fight for Fortune

## CHAPTER I

### THE MAN WITH THE BLACK BAG

“Clive Denham, what are you doing in Plymouth?”

Clive, who had been sheltering from a sharp shower under a shop awning at the corner of Dockyard Road, looked up with a startled expression upon his thin, keen face.

An alert-looking youngster of about his own age, seventeen, stood before him, with a smile twinkling in his merry blue eyes.

Clive drew a quick breath, and grasped the other’s outstretched hand.

“I might ask you the same question, Austin, old chap. You’re the last person I expected to run into down here.”

“Why? You knew we lived in Cornwall.”

“Yes, but somehow I didn’t connect Cornwall with Plymouth.”

“Machinery and mathematics are the only things you ever could connect up,” laughed Austin, cheerily. “Cornwall is only just the other side of the Hamoaze, and I’m often in Plymouth. But as for you, I thought you were up in your father’s works at Coventry.”

“My father is dead,” said Clive, quietly.

A quick expression of remorse crossed Austin’s face.

“My dear chap, I’m awfully sorry. When was it?”

“A month ago,” said Clive.

“Are you going to carry on the works?” asked Austin.

“There are no works to carry on,” replied Clive.

Then, seeing the other’s look of astonishment, he went on:

“My poor dad ruined himself with his experiments. He spent every penny on that new flying machine, and then he caught cold just before he’d

finished it. He'd been overworking, and was in an awfully shaky state, and he got pneumonia, and it finished him inside a week."

"Hard luck!" said Chesney, sympathetically. "Then you're at a loose end?"

"Very loose," said Clive, with a grim smile on his thin face. "I've got rather less than five pounds between me and the work-house."

"Rot, man!" retorted Austin. "A chap with a head like yours can always get a job."

"It must be my hands that are at fault, then," replied Clive. "I've been trying everywhere for the past three weeks, and can't get taken on. I came down here to look up Captain Brereton, an old friend of my father's. He's skipper and part owner of a tramp steamer, the *Sphinx*. I hoped to cadge a passage to Australia, where I thought I might find a job."

"Are you going?"

"Worse luck! He's just sailed. And he won't be back for four months or more."

Austin gave a low whistle.

"That's bad," he said. "Look here, old chap, it's nearly one. Come and feed with me, and we'll talk things over. We'll go and have a blowout at the 'Lockyer.' "

Clive hesitated. "I'm afraid——" he began.

"Afraid be blowed!" said Austin. "You're not going to be too proud to have lunch with your old school pal. Come on, or I'll call a taxi, and take you by force."

A very pleasant smile lighted up Clive's rather sad face.

"Bosh, man! I'm not proud in that way. Only my togs are hardly up to 'Lockyer' form." And he glanced down at his neat but almost threadbare blue serge.

"I don't care where we go, so long as we get a square feed," said Austin. "I'm as hungry as a hawk, for I breakfasted at seven. The rain has stopped. Come on."

Down around the Barbican in Plymouth lie some of the meanest streets to be found in any big town in the South of England. They are narrow,

squalid, and dirty, and haunted by plenty of the bad characters who are always to be found in any big seaport.

Austin, however, seemed to know his way, and struck up through an alley which was one degree worse than the road which they had just left. The rough cobbles streamed with muddy water, the windows of the tall houses which rose on either side were many of them broken, and the holes stuffed with dirty rags. In the grey light of the raw autumn day the place had an indescribably squalid appearance.

Half-way up the alley, which rose steeply towards the main part of the town, there passed them a thin, wiry-looking man of about forty years of age. He was carrying a small black bag, and walked with a slight limp.

The boys both noticed him because he was such a contrast to the ordinary inhabitants of this part of the town. His dark tweeds were well cut, his linen was white, and his brown boots perfectly polished. In spite of his slight lameness and his quiet attire, there was something distinguished about him. He was the sort to attract attention even in a crowd.

“A service man, I’ll bet,” said Austin, glancing after him. “Navy probably.”

“I wonder what he’s doing in this beastly slum,” said Clive.

Austin shrugged his broad shoulders.

“May have got a yacht down in the Cattewater,” he said. And then, with a sudden change of tone, “Hulloa, that chap’s following him!”

Out of a dark archway had glided a most villainous-looking loafer—a squat, beetle-browed blackguard, dressed in greasy overalls and an old brown fisherman’s jersey. His cap was pulled well down over his forehead, but failed to hide as vicious a face as either of the two boys had ever set eyes on.

“I believe you’re right,” replied Clive, in a low tone. “Keep moving, Austin. Don’t let him see you’re looking at him.”

The two walked slowly on, but each keeping the tail of his eye on the loafer, who had quickened his pace, and was keeping about twenty yards behind the man with the black bag.

Austin pinched Clive’s arm.

“There’s another,” he said, in a sharp whisper. “See—coming out of that turning on the other side of the street.”



Clive glanced quickly round.

The new arrival on the scene was not quite so repulsive-looking as the first man, but appeared every bit as dangerous. He was a foreigner, and by his yellow-brown face and high cheek-bones apparently from the Far East.

He was dressed in ordinary seaman's kit, but in spite of his rough garb and heavy boots there was something suggestive of a panther in his soft, swift step and agile movements.

As he came out of the turning he gave one quick glance at the man with the black bag, then, keeping on his own side of the street, followed the other two.

"There's not a doubt about it," said Austin Chesney; "both those men are after him. I don't half like the look of it."

"More do I," said Clive. "I vote we turn and follow them."

"Just what I was going to suggest," replied Austin, quietly. And, suiting the action to the word, he turned, and the two began to walk quickly, but as quietly as possible, down hill behind the other three.

The first ruffian quickened his pace, and, catching up the lame man, passed him.

"False alarm, after all," muttered Austin.

"Don't you be too sure," replied Clive.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the foreigner broke into a sharp run, and coming up behind the lame man with surprising speed and silence, snatched the bag out of his hand, and bolted straight on down the alley as hard as he could leg.

With a cry of rage the lame man started in pursuit, and it astonished the boys to see how fast he could travel in spite of his limp.

But now the beetle-browed fellow took a hand, or rather a foot, in the game.

As the lame man came opposite he thrust out one leg and tripped him, sending him sprawling on hands and knees on the slimy cobbles. Then he darted off at top speed after his confederate.

By this time the boys were both running hard in pursuit. They did not wait to pick up the lame man, but as they dashed past Austin shouted:

"Don't worry. We'll get your bag back."

The fellow who had tripped the lame man heard Austin, turned his head, saw the two boys in full chase, and redoubled his pace. At the same time he gave his accomplice a warning shout.

Austin and Clive were both pretty fast, and they gained on him hand over fist. Within fifty yards they were almost level.

Suddenly the ruffian swung round and turned on them, brandishing a sheath-knife.

“Get back!” he cried, with a horrible threat. “Get back, or I’ll do for you!”

Austin had a heavy walking-stick. Without checking at all, he ran straight at the fellow, and with a sweeping blow caught him clean across the knuckles.

A howl of pain escaped him, and the knife flew from his numbed fingers and spun tinkling across the cobbles.

“Get on, Clive, and catch the other chap,” shouted Austin. “I can tackle this beggar.”

With one glance behind him Clive sped on.

Mad with rage, the burly ruffian hurled himself at Austin, and attempted to kick him in the stomach.

It was the most foolish thing that he could possibly have done, for Austin had not been five years at a big public school and the rest of his life among Cornish mines without learning how to defend himself in any kind of rough-and-tumble.

Like a flash he stooped and seized the man’s upraised foot in both hands, and gave it a quick hoist. The natural result was that his assailant flew bodily into the air, and that the first portion of his weighty person which again reached firm ground was the back of his head.

His skull met the pavement with such a crack that he simply flattened out, and lay as limp as a rag doll. It would be a good many hours before he would take any further interest in black bags or other such important matters.

“Well done, my lad!” came a shout from behind, but Austin did not even turn his head. Leaving the ruffian where he lay, he was off as hard as he could run after Clive and the foreigner.

He was just in time to see the latter whirl to the left through an archway, and Clive, turning so sharply that he had to catch the masonry at the edge to steady himself, followed at equal speed.

The ugly thought flashed across him that the foreigner was certain to be armed, and might lie in wait round the corner, and put his knife into Clive as he came up.

He spurred for all he was worth, but when he got into the narrow court which ran up from the archway his fears were not realised.

Clive and the foreigner both had totally disappeared.

He stared round. There was not a soul in the place, and the dirty windows set in the tall walls on either hand seemed to mock him with their silence and emptiness.

## CHAPTER II

### ACROSS THE ROOF-TOPS

“Clive!” he shouted at the top of his voice.

To his great relief Clive’s voice answered: “Here, Austin. Second door on the right.” And there was his chum looking out of a first-floor window.

Austin did not wait to ask questions. He dashed in through the door into an empty, boarded passage, and up a steep, narrow flight of bare, dirty stairs.

Clive was now a landing higher. He looked back as Austin came clattering up.

“I’ve treed him,” he cried, breathlessly. “He’s gone right up to the top. Come along. We’ll collar him somewhere up in the attics.”

“I heard a door slam up at the top,” said Clive, quickly, as Austin joined him. “He’s trapped all right.”

“I doubt it,” answered Austin, as side by side they raced up the last flight leading to the top floor.

Here was a long passage with four doors opening out from it, two on each side. By the rotten state of the flooring, and the thick damp and mildew on the crumbling plaster of the walls, it was plain that the house had been long uninhabited.

Austin flung open the doors one by one. Three yielded at first touch, but the fourth was fastened from the inside.

“Here’s where he is,” said Clive, his thin face blazing with excitement. Austin hardly knew him for the quiet, melancholy-looking fellow whom he had met barely half an hour before. “We must burst the door in.”

“Shoulders to it,” said Austin in a quieter tone. “And look out for his knife if we get through.”

Stepping back a few paces they made a rush, and both together drove their shoulders against the door.

It was quite rotten, and under their combined weight went all to flinders, and they landed inside the room on their hands and knees in a cloud of dust and splinters.

Heedless of cuts and scratches, they were both on their feet in an instant, but the room was as bare as the other three.

“The bird’s flown,” muttered Austin.

“And there’s the door of his cage,” answered Clive, pointing to a trap-door in the low-browed, sloping roof.

There was a broken chair beneath it, and Austin was up on this in an instant, and had got both hands against the door.

To his surprise it was not fastened, and flew open easily. They found afterwards that the staple which held the bolt was rusted through.

Austin swung himself actively up, and Clive, who was thoroughly roused, followed.

“There he is!” cried Austin, in triumph.

The foreigner had slid down the slates at the back of the house, and was clambering steadily along the edge, his feet in the gutter and his body sprawled out along the sloping roof. The black bag was slung by a piece of cord around his neck, and hung across his back.

He saw the boys emerge upon the roof, and his thin lips drew back in a wolf-like snarl.

Clive glanced at the steeply sloping roof, and the great depth below the eaves. It was at least a fifty-foot drop.

“He’s done us,” he said, bitterly. “The chap’s a sailor, and we can never follow him.”

“Not follow him?” answered Austin, in surprise. “Why not?”

Then, catching the look in Clive’s face, “You stay here,” he said. “I’m accustomed to this sort of game. I’ll fix him all right.”

Young Chesney’s father was owner of a big Cornish tin-mine, and the boy had been accustomed, almost since he could walk, to clambering about the old shafts and winzes. Height had no terrors for his seasoned head, and without hesitation he pulled off his boots, and in stockinged feet let himself slide quietly down the slope of the roof until he reached the gutter.

Then, getting his feet into the narrow iron trough, he began working his way steadily along in pursuit of the thief.

Clive Denham, watching breathlessly from the mouth of the trap-door, saw the confident look on the Easterner’s face change to terror as he saw

that his pursuer was as good a climber as himself, and watched him quicken his pace. The house they were in was the last but one in the row, and the gutter ran straight onwards to the end of the next roof.

What there was beyond Clive could not see. Apparently a sheer drop into some open space. What would happen when the fugitive reached the end he could not imagine.

No more, for that matter, could Austin. He saw even more plainly than Clive that there appeared no way of escape for the thief. But at the same time he was equally at a loss how to tackle him, now that he had got him cornered.

Neither of them would be able to use their hands, so all he could do would be to keep his position and wait until help came.

He looked up.

“Clive,” he cried, “go and fetch a bobby. And tell him to bring some rope. We shall have to lasso this beauty from the ridge of the roof.”

The foreigner uttered an exclamation of fury in a language unknown to Austin. It sounded rather like the spitting of an angry cat. But all the time he kept on moving slowly but steadily along the gutter.

As he neared the extreme end he suddenly quickened his pace. Why he did so Austin could not at first conceive. But he very soon understood.

Reaching the extreme corner, the foreigner turned to Austin, and made a gesture of derision, at the same time hissing out some insulting words.

Then he deliberately let himself down off the roof, and hung with his hands gripping the gutter.

For a moment Austin fancied the fellow must have gone mad. He himself, flattened out across the slates, could not see the object of the thief's manoeuvre.

Clinging with his yellow, claw-like fingers to the edge of the gutter, the latter swung a moment, then his head slipped slowly over the edge, his hands let go, and he vanished from Austin's sight.

At last Austin understood. A rain-pipe ran down at the angle of the wall, and was stapled far enough out from the brickwork to give plenty of hand-hold. Down this the agile Easterner was clambering with the ease and assurance of a monkey.

Austin felt rather like a dog that suddenly sees its bone snatched away from in front of it. But he was one of the sort who are not easily defeated. He was not going back to the lame man without his bag—if it were in any way possible to regain it.

If the downfall pipe would bear the other chap it would bear him, and it was quicker to follow him that way than to climb back into the house. Indeed, he was more than doubtful whether he could manage to return up that steep slope of smooth slates.

Austin hurried as quickly as possible to the corner, and, glancing over, saw the other nearly half-way down. Deliberately he swung off, and, gripping the pipe between his knees, followed.

Now he blessed the forethought which had caused him to take off his boots before he started. With his bare feet he got a far better grip on the pipe than was possible to the thief, and he slid down at a great rate, gaining rapidly on the other, who, active as he was, was hampered by his heavy footgear.

Even so the foreign gentleman had such a big start that it was doubtful whether he would overtake him before he reached the bottom.

Glancing down, Austin saw that the pipe ended in a yard, or garden, small but very neatly kept. There were plants in pots and a small arbour covered with creepers.

He was still quite ten feet from the ground when he realised that the other had reached the bottom. Another moment and he would be out of reach. Without stopping to think Austin let go, and came crashing down right on the thief's head, knocking him flat and falling on top of him.

The shock almost stunned Austin, and he rolled over on the hard gravel, and lay there with all the wind knocked out of him, helpless as a baby.

The Oriental staggered to his feet. His face was absolutely fiendish. He drew his knife from the sheath at his belt, and swooped down upon Austin like a hawk stooping at its prey.

Another moment and the gleaming steel would have been buried in Austin's side, when, with a roar like that of a small lion, a large brindled bull-terrier came galloping across the little garden, and buried a fine set of shining white teeth in the calf of the Oriental's leg.

With a yell of pain and fright he turned and made a wild stab at the dog. But as he swung round so did the dog, and the knife-blade wasted its force

on thin air.

“Ah, would ye?” came a voice which put the bull-terrier’s to shame. “Ye murtherin’ thief! I’ll tache ye to thry them sort o’ tricks! Stick Chump, is it? Begorra, I’ll carve ye into cat’s-mate before I’m through wid ye!”

And the new-comer, a burly Irishman with fiery red hair and a forty-five-inch chest, seized the Easterner by the scruff of the neck with one huge fist, and with the other snatched his knife from him, and sent it whirling over the wall into the next yard.

With a snarl the brown man twisted himself round, and buried his teeth in the other’s wrist.

A clout on the side of the head that nearly stunned him was his reward.

“Ah, ye’d dine off me, would ye, ye dirty cannibal? Begorra, I’ll give ye something to drink wid it!”

And swinging the vicious little scoundrel clean off his feet he lifted him high into the air, and, stepping across to the water-butt, deliberately dropped him into four feet of almost ice-cold rain-water.

“Steady on! You’ll drown him,” exclaimed Austin, who had got his wind back, and had struggled to his feet.

“Faith, and a good job too! If every Malay in Plymouth—aye, and in the Islands, too—was drowned ’twould be no loss. But ye needn’t worry, mister—there’s his head stickin’ out, for all the world like a monkey’s from a cage.

“Stay where ye are till I’m ready to attend further to ye,” he continued, shaking his ponderous fist at the miserable thief, whose face was livid with cold, while his teeth were chattering like Spanish castanets. “Watch him, Chump.”

The bull-terrier uttered a thunderous growl, and took up a strategic position close under the barrel, and for the life of him Austin couldn’t help laughing at the brown man’s expression of abject terror and misery.

“And now,” said the big Irishman, turning to Austin, “I’d be mighty obliged if ye’d tell me the reason of this unexpected call ye’ve made on Terence O’Rourke. That’s my name, and yonder’s my house.”

Austin quickly put his new acquaintance in possession of the main facts of the case, and O’Rourke nodded his big head in vigorous approval.

“Begorra, young sir, ye’ve done mighty well,” he declared. “Then I’m thinking this will be what ye might call the bone o’ contention,” as he



picked up the black bag, the string of which had been broken when Austin dropped on the thief.

At this moment the back door of the house burst open with a crash, and the lame man, followed closely by Clive Denham, hurried out into the little garden.

“Be jabbers, but ’tis a lot o’ callers I’m getting this day!” said O’Rourke, showing a fine set of teeth in a wide and cheerful grin.

## CHAPTER III

### WHAT THE BLACK BAG HELD

“We’ve got the bag all right, sir,” said Austin, taking it from O’Rourke, and holding it up.

Its owner literally snatched it from the boy’s hand, and, pressing a knob in the metal top, opened it and looked inside.

“They’re all right,” he said, with a deep gasp of relief. “Forgive my rudeness; but you can hardly realise what it would have meant to me if those scoundrels had got away with my pearls. I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you and your friend, and to this gentleman,” turning to O’Rourke.

The latter had been staring at the owner of the bag with a puzzled look in his china-blue eyes. All of a sudden he gave a sort of muffled bellow.

“Sure, it’s Captain Heritage!” he roared. “If it isn’t I’ll ate that bag, pearls and all.”

For a moment the lame man stared at the huge Irishman. Then a light of recognition broke upon his face.

“Terence O’Rourke!” he cried, and thrust out his hand, which was instantly swallowed in O’Rourke’s immense fist.

“And what is it you’re doing in Plymouth, captain dear?” asked O’Rourke, pump-handling vigorously.

“That’s much too big a question to be answered all in a minute,” replied Heritage, with a pleasant twinkle in his keen grey eyes. “I’ll expound later on. See here, have any of you lunched yet?”

“We were just on our way to feed, sir, when we met you,” said Austin.

“Then if you’ll be so good, you’ll all three come and lunch with me, and I’ll tell you the story of the contents of this bag. But I don’t as yet even know the names of you and your friend. Mine is John Heritage, late of His Majesty’s Navy.”

Austin introduced himself and Clive.

“Hadn’t we better hand that foreign gentleman over to the police before we do anything else?” suggested Clive, with a glance at the shivering occupant of the water-tub.

Heritage hesitated.

“If I do,” he said, in a low voice, so that the fellow should not hear, “he is sure to be committed for the assizes. And we shall all four have to appear as witnesses. I don’t know what your plans are, but long before that date I expect to be some thousands of miles away. Under the circumstances I think my only course is to let him go.”

“Faith, I’d sooner let a mad dog loose,” said O’Rourke.

“I know that it doesn’t seem right,” said Heritage, in his quiet, even tones, “but it is flatly impossible for me to remain in England a day longer than is absolutely necessary. Every twenty-four hours’ delay may mean hundreds, even thousands of pounds out of my pocket.”

The boys and O’Rourke stared. What enterprise could this quiet-looking, lame, middle-aged man possibly be engaged in which had such tremendous issues? Yet it was a testimonial to his force of character that not one of them so much as dreamed of doubting the truth of what he had stated.

“Why wouldn’t I drown him?” suggested O’Rourke, coolly. “I’m not thinking that anyone would miss him.”

“My good O’Rourke, we’re in England, not in the Islands,” replied Heritage, smiling. “Take him out, and I’ll say a word or two to him before we turn him loose.”

O’Rourke strode over to the water-butt, took the miserable Malay by the scruff of the neck, lifted him out as easily as though he had been a kitten, and, carrying him across to where the captain stood, dumped him down as unceremoniously as a sack of coals.

The man’s face was the colour of an unripe banana, his teeth chattered incessantly, yet there was a look in his dark eyes which unpleasantly reminded Austin of one of the poisonous adders which he had so often run across on the sunny Cornish moors.

“What’s your name?” demanded Heritage, and there was a crisp quality in his voice which was new to the boys.

“Kwala,” muttered the man, unwillingly.

“Speak out!” ordered Heritage, sharply. “You are a Malay?”

“Yes.”

“From Pahang?”

A gleam of surprise crossed the man's face, but he assented.

Heritage suddenly switched off into a language unknown to the boys, but which Austin recognised as the same quick, spitting tongue as that which Kwala himself had used on the roof.

The Malay's face betrayed surprise and fright.

Heritage gave him what was evidently a tremendous dressing down, and the Malay made no answer.

"Now you can turn him loose," said Heritage to O'Rourke. "I've told him plainly that if he ever dares to meddle again with any of us four no mercy will be shown him."

"Begor, I'll show him the same mercy I would to a karaib,<sup>[1]</sup> neither more nor less," said O'Rourke, grimly.

And seizing the fellow by the collar, he ran him through the house, and the boys, following, were just in time to see the Irishman's immense boot lift the little reptile half-way across the street, sending him sprawling in the mud.

He picked himself up and looked round. He said nothing, but there was that in his face which made both Austin and Clive shiver in spite of themselves.

"We'll have trouble with Mr. Kwala before we're through," said Austin.

"He doesn't look the sort to forget very easily," answered Clive.

"Forget him," said Heritage. "And come along to lunch, all three of you."

Heritage called a cab and drove them, not to the "Lockyer," but to a well-known restaurant at the top of George Street, where he ordered a private room. The condition of Austin's garments after his climb across the roof made it impossible for him to feed in the main room.

While they waited for lunch Heritage telephoned to a tailor, and gave directions to bring over a selection of ready-made clothes suitable for a young fellow of Chesney's build.

"It's the very least I can do for you," he laughed, when Austin remonstrated. "Now don't talk, but do as you're told."

Five minutes later they all four sat down to a meal which was not only one of the best which they had ever eaten, but was destined to have an

enormous effect upon the lives and fortunes of host as well as guests.

“I’ll keep the story of my pearls until we’ve finished,” said Heritage, as he carved a fine sole. “But first of all, O’Rourke, I want to know how you come to be in Plymouth.”

“Well, sorr, it was this way,” explained the big Irishman. “After I was wid ye in the *Albatross* I came to Plymouth here to see me ould aunt Kate McKeown, who lived in that same house where ye found me. The crathur was sick and ould, and being a rough neighbourhood, she wanted a man around the place. So the ind of it was she promised she’d lave me the place and all her little property if I’d give up the service and stay wid her. Three months later she died, and iver since I’ve lived there all alone barrin’ Chump.”

“And how do you like it?” asked Heritage, keenly.

“’Deed, sorr, there’s times I weary for the say. And if it wasn’t for a bit of a boat I have to go fishing in around the Sound and Whitsand Bay, I’m thinking I’d have let the house, and been off again a long while since.”

“How would you like a trip to the Islands?” suggested Heritage, slyly.

“Wid you, sorr?”

“Yes, in my own ship.”

“I’m your man, sorr. Begorra, ’tis too good to be true.”

Joy beamed in his big face, and he snatched up his long glass of Devonshire cider.

“Here’s luck to the trip, sorr; and it’s mesilf would follow ye anywheres, whether it’s to the Islands or the North Pole.”

“Thank you, O’Rourke. I couldn’t have a better testimonial, or a finer follower,” said Heritage, gravely, as he clinked glasses with the Irishman.

The boys had listened eagerly.

“What are the Islands?” asked Clive Denham.

“The South Sea Islands, my lad,” replied Heritage. “The great archipelago of the Pacific. Sailors call them ‘The Islands.’ They are the most beautiful places in the whole world, but some are also the most dangerous and the most wicked. But one and all have the most amazing charm and fascination. The man who once gets the sandal-wood scent in his nostrils is

always irresistibly drawn back to the hibiscus thickets and the palms, and the blue Pacific breakers crashing on the coral reefs.”

“And that’s where pearls come from?” said Austin.

Heritage nodded.

“Quite true, Chesney. As soon as lunch is over you shall hear all about it.”

An excellent fruit tart served with yellow clotted Devonshire cream was the last dish, and when they had all done justice to it the captain rang for coffee, and they pulled their chairs around the fire.

The autumn afternoon was cold and dull, and the bright flame of old ships’ timber was cheery and comforting.

When the waiter had left the room, Captain Heritage opened his bag and took from it a roll of black cloth. Unfolding this, he laid it on the table, and then poured upon it from a wash-leather bag a shower of pearls of all sizes and shapes.

The boys gasped at their number and beauty. Against the black cloth the wonderful iridescence of these most exquisite gems showed up to perfection. Some were quite tiny, but others were the size of a large marrowfat pea, and one or two almost as large as hazel-nuts. In all there must have been more than two hundred.

“Beautiful things, aren’t they?” said Heritage, running his thin brown fingers through them. “Our friend Kwala would have been rich for life if he had got away with that little lot. There must be over ten thousand pounds’ worth on the table there.”

He picked up three of the largest.

“I want you each to have one of these as a memento of what you have done for me to-day,” he said, quietly.

“’Deed, and I won’t take it, sorr,” declared O’Rourke, stoutly. “I’m going wid ye where I’ll find plenty for mesilf. Don’t be asking me to take wan.”

Heritage glanced at the man.

“All the same, you’ll take one, O’Rourke, and have it mounted as a pin at my expense. Do you see?”

And he pressed the beautiful gem into the Irishman’s unwilling hand.

Then he gave one to each of the boys, and quickly cut short their thanks.

“It is I who am your debtor, not you mine,” he said. “If I had lost my bag I should have lost more than any of you dream of. Not only my fortune, but my life’s work, my honour itself.”

His voice deepened, and his deep-set eyes glowed. Austin and Clive stared at him in wonder.

“I promised you the story,” he went on. “I’ll tell it you. But first, does my name recall anything to you?”

“Yes, sir,” said Austin, promptly. “I’ve seen it in the papers. You were in command of the cruiser *Scylla* when she was wrecked and lost off Perim three years ago, weren’t you?”

A painful flush stained Heritage’s sun-tanned cheeks.

“You are right, Chesney. And as a result I was censured and placed on half-pay, and on half-pay I have remained ever since. The Admiralty never forgive a man who has blundered.”

The boys said nothing. It was plain that words of sympathy would be idle.

“But I love the service,” went on Heritage, in a ringing tone, “and I mean to get back if it is humanly possible. I think I can trust you to keep my confidence?”

“Av coorse ye can, captain,” said O’Rourke, and the boys both nodded.

“So far as I can see,” said Heritage, speaking slowly and impressively, “there is only one way of doing it. To restore to the nation a war vessel in every way equal to the lost *Scylla*.”

The amazing character of this proposal literally staggered his three hearers. They sat silent, staring at him and one another.

“Ah, you think that I have a bee in my bonnet!” said Heritage, with a slight smile. “But I assure you that I am perfectly sane, and that I have stated no more than the exact truth when I tell you that it is my firm intention to carry out this plan.”

“But a cruiser costs a fearful lot, sir,” burst out Austin.

“A vessel equal to the *Scylla* can be built and fitted out for £750,000,” replied Heritage, quietly. “And that is the least sum which I have set myself to make.”

“Will it be out of pearls, captain?” asked O’Rourke, eagerly.

Heritage nodded. “Yes, out of pearls. And these”—pointing to the glittering gems strewn on the cloth—“are the first consignment. Let me explain. Some years ago I had the luck to do a good turn to a native of Formosa. His junk was in difficulties in a cyclone, and I got him and his people off just in time.”

“Sure, and don’t I remember it!” exclaimed O’Rourke. “I was wid ye at the time, captain, and ’twas nip and tuck for the whole lot of us.”

Heritage smiled and went on.

“Well, Wun Sing was grateful, and it was he who told me of Sunshine Island and the pearl lagoon. At the time the news had no particular interest for me, for I had a command, but when my trouble came Sunshine Island was the very first thing I thought of.

“I went out there, and fossicked about, and ascertained that Wun Sing’s story was true, and then I applied to the Japanese Government and got two years’ lease. That was eight months ago, and I began work as soon as I could manage it, and there you see the results.”

“But, captain dear, them won’t buy a battleship,” broke in O’Rourke.

“Have patience, O’Rourke,” said Heritage. “I soon found that the diving-dresses and equipment which I had hired at Hong-Kong were nothing like sufficient to clean up the oysters in sight within the two years. So I have left a man in charge, and hurried straight home to sell these pearls, and with the money buy a seaworthy vessel and proper outfit, with which I can do the job thoroughly.”

“And ye want me wid ye, sorr?” exclaimed O’Rourke.

“I couldn’t have a more useful man if you care to take on the job,” smiled Heritage.

“And begorra ye couldn’t have found me a job I’d like better,” declared O’Rourke, joyfully. “Barrin’ that I’m feared there won’t be no fighting.”

“No fighting,” repeated Heritage, quietly. “I’ll tell you what, O’Rourke, the chances are that you’ll get more than you bargain for before we finish with this job.”

“Is that so, sorr?” said O’Rourke, his big face lighting up with the joy of a born fighter at the prospect of battle.



“It is so. And you’ll understand the reason why when I tell you that the Black Flags have planted themselves on the neighbouring islands.”

O’Rourke gave a low, musical whistle.

“The Black Flags!” he repeated. “Faith, they’re the bhoys to fight! ’Deed there’ll be scrapping and to spare before we’re finished wid them pirates!”

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[1] A deadly Indian snake, always killed on sight.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SCHOONER "BRILLIANT"

Clive Denham, who had been listening with growing eagerness to the talk between Captain Heritage and O'Rourke, stood up suddenly.

"Captain Heritage," he said, and his voice quivered slightly with repressed excitement, "do you want volunteers? If so, will you take me with you?"

"And me, too?" exclaimed Austin Chesney.

A startled look crossed the captain's face, but before he could answer Clive went on:

"I'll go in any capacity. I'm no sailor, but I understand motor and other machinery. I know a good deal of practical mechanics, for I've been in a workshop ever since I left school. I honestly believe I could be useful in an expedition of this sort."

"I've no doubt you could," said Heritage.

"But your people, my boy. What would they say?"

"I have no people," answered Clive, with a touch of sadness. "I am quite alone in the world."

"Then I'll take you, and gladly," answered Heritage.

"And me?" questioned Chesney, eagerly.

"Are you in the same position as your friend?"

"No, sir, I am not. My father is still alive, and lives near Trevurtha, in Cornwall. He owns a tin-mine, but a few weeks ago the water broke into it from some old workings, and flooded the whole place. It will cost more money than my father has got to pump it out, and he is at his wits' end what to do. When I met Denham this morning I had just been to our solicitors to ask them if there was any possibility of raising money, but they gave me no hope. It would be the greatest help to us if I could get work."

"I'm very sorry to hear of your misfortune," said Heritage. "But it is evidently my gain. A young fellow who could show the pluck and presence of mind which you showed in hunting down the thieves just now is exactly

the sort I want for the work I am engaged in. If you can get your father's permission I shall be delighted to have you."

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Austin. "It's just the sort of work I'd choose before anything else. And, if I may say so, sir, you're the man I'd like best to go with."

"That's very nice of you," replied Heritage, with his rare smile.

And at that moment there was a knock at the door, and the waiter announced that the tailor was there with the suits that had been ordered.

"Good business," said Heritage, briskly. "And while you are about it, you two boys had better get your outfits. O'Rourke will be able to advise you exactly what you want. He knows those seas almost as well as I do. And now I'm off to meet the man who is to purchase my pearls. He is waiting for me at the Royal Hotel. I shall find you here when I get back."

"Ye'll go in a cab, if ye plaze, captain," said O'Rourke, as Heritage gathered up the pearls. "Remember there's others besides Kwala as would like to relave ye of thim pretty stones."

"Don't you worry. I've had my lesson," said Heritage, as he left the room.

Then O'Rourke began to show his capabilities. He got to work at the telephone, and before the tailor had finished fitting Austin, there came tradesmen with stocks of shirts, and shoes, and dungaree overalls, and all sorts of clothes necessary for tropical wear.

And in spite of his jovial, devil-may-care manner, the big Irishman proved himself a shrewd hand at a bargain. He bought with a promptness and decision which fairly dazzled the boys.

When Austin said so, O'Rourke laughed.

"Faith, I tell ye, ye'll have to get a hump on yourself if ye are to serve the captain. Begorra, but he'll open your eyes for ye before ye are much older."

When Heritage came back, two hours later, the boys' outfits and O'Rourke's were almost complete.

"I've done well with my pearls," said Heritage, cheerily. "Eleven thousand five hundred is what I've got for them. I see you've got your clothes. Now how about a ship, O'Rourke?"

“I thought ye’d be needing a craft of some kind, captain. So I took the liberty to telephone Welby & Co., and they’ll be waiting for ye if ye’ll come straight down. Have ye banked the money, sorr?”

“Yes. I was just in time to do so. And I’ve kept my taxi. Come, we’ll all go together.”

Ten minutes’ swift run through the narrow Plymouth streets saw them at the shipbrokers, and Heritage rapidly explained to Mr. Welby the sort of craft he was in search of.

“As luck has it,” said the shipbroker, who was a stout, pleasant-faced, bald-headed man, “there’s a vessel that pretty well answers your description lying in the Cattewater this minute. She’s the schooner *Brilliant*, about seven hundred tons, and has an auxiliary motor-engine. A fine, big, roomy boat, not very new, but well built and sound as a bell. She is very well found in all respects, and is the sort of craft you could start in to-morrow and sail round the world.”

“A good sea-boat?”

“None better. I’ve been across to the Baltic in her myself, for she belongs to a friend of mine.”

“Is she for sale or charter?”

“Either, but preferably for sale. Her owner has lost money, and can’t afford to keep her any longer.”

“Can I see her to-night?”

“It’s rather late now, Captain Heritage. Couldn’t you wait till morning?”

“No,” said Heritage; “I haven’t an hour, let alone a night, to spare.”

“Very well. It’s never too late in the day for me to do business. We’ll go at once.”

Mr. Welby had not exaggerated. The *Brilliant* appeared to be all that he had said she was. She was a stout-built craft with tall, raking masts. She looked clean and smart, and had any amount of room below her long, flush deck.

Heritage and O’Rourke were in their element. They explored every nook and corner, from the deck-house and galley to the hold.

Presently Heritage hailed Clive, and the latter, going below, found him examining the motor-engine.

“You know more about this than I do,” said Heritage. “Overhaul it, and give me your opinion.”

Clive flung off his coat, and plunged delightedly into the work. When Heritage came back half an hour later the boy was black grease to the eyes.

Heritage glanced at him approvingly.

“Well?” he said.

“First class,” declared Clive. “A good, solid bit of work. Just wants a little overhauling, and this magneto requires taking down, and some new platinum points, and——”

“Steady on,” said Heritage. “I’ll leave all that to you. Get what you want, and charge it to me. This will be your department. I put you in complete control.”

It was dark before Heritage finished his inspection. Then he turned to Mr. Welby.

“If the surveyor passes her I’ll take her,” he said. “Buy her outright.”

Welby’s cheery face beamed.

“You’re the sort of customer I like, captain. She’s as good as yours, for no surveyor can pick holes in her.”

Heritage, too, had a pleased look as he and his party drove back together to their hotel.

“Not a bad day’s work, O’Rourke,” he observed.

“Sure there’s not a Yankee in America can make things hum like you, captain,” replied O’Rourke, heartily. “How soon do ye think we’ll be able to get away?”

“I’ll have the riggers at work to-morrow. All the running-gear must be overhauled. Then I must go to London for the diving-dresses, and I’ll leave you to engage a crew. With any luck we ought to get off within a week.”

O’Rourke nodded.

“It won’t be my fault if we don’t do it, sorr,” he remarked, with decision.

## CHAPTER V

### THE FLOATING CASTLE

“I say, Clive, the sea seems to suit you,” remarked Austin, as he strolled into the little engine-room, and found his chum in a suit of greasy overalls busy over his beloved motor.

Clive looked up. He was visibly fatter, and his face had quite lost its strained, anxious appearance.

“Work for a boss like ours ought to suit anyone,” he answered, cheerily, as he balanced himself against the roll of the schooner, which was running close-hauled and dipping to a big head sea. “It was the biggest stroke of luck I ever had when I met him.”

“Same here,” said Austin. “I say, we’re getting jolly near Sunshine Island. We’re off the Paracels at this minute. With any luck we shall reach our destination by to-morrow night.”

“Good business!” said Clive. “I’m keen as mustard to get among those pearls.”

“So am I. But it’s just on dinner-time. Go and wash, Clive, and come on deck.”

Clive nodded, and five minutes later they met in the saloon, where the usual well-cooked meal was served by a Chinese steward in spotless white drill.

Captain Heritage was on the bridge, so O’Rourke took the head of the table.

“It’s the last lap we’re on, me bhoys,” he said, rubbing his great hands together cheerily. “If the wind wud only shift a point or two aft, we’d be at the island within twenty-four hours.”

“If the skipper would let me use the motor we’d be there sooner,” declared Clive.

“While there’s wind we’ll be saving our petrol,” replied O’Rourke. “But don’t worry, Mither Engineer, we’ll be needing your services before we’re through wid this little game. What wid calms an’ storms, an’ pirates an’ Black Flags, ’tis as well we have not got to thrust to sail-power alone.”

“I say, O’Rourke,” said Austin, suddenly. “D’ye think the skipper will ever get the money he wants out of this lagoon? Seven hundred and fifty thousand is a fearful lot of coin.”

“It’s there, and more, too,” replied O’Rourke. “ ’Tis the richest oyster-bed in all the Islands, and wan that no one has touched yet, barring the captain. I wouldn’t wonder if there was two millions’ worth of pearls and shell there.”

Austin gave a low whistle.

“All the same,” he said, presently, “if I had two millions I shouldn’t want to make a present of half of it to the British Government. They tax one enough as it is.”

“Ye don’t know what ye are talking about,” said O’Rourke, sternly. “ ’Tis not the dirty money the captain is afther. ’Tis his honour.”

The boys both stared at the big Irishman. They had never heard him speak like this before.

“D’ye mane to tell me ye don’t understhand?” demanded O’Rourke.

“I understand that Captain Heritage lost his ship by running her on a reef off Perim, and that he means to replace her with a new one, which he will give to the country,” said Austin.

“And is it yourself that thinks that a man like the captain would be afther losing his ship by bad seamanship?”

“I certainly shouldn’t have thought so, but I suppose anyone is liable to make a mistake.”

“So ye nivver have heard the truth of it at all?” exclaimed O’Rourke.

“I suppose not,” said Austin. “Tell us.”

“I will. It was not the captain at all that lost the *Scylla*. He was not even on the bridge whin she tuk the rocks. ’Twas Lootenant Ormston, his brother-in-law, that was navigating her—an obstinate mule of a man that always thought he knew betther than anyone else.

“The captain had set his course for him before he went below, but the lootenant must needs alter it. ’Twas a smooth sea, wid only a bit of a fog; but he druv her full on the Murra Reef, and the fust the captain knew of it was the crash when she hit the rocks at full fourteen knots.”

“You mean he saved his brother-in-law at his own expense?” said Clive, sharply.

O’Rourke nodded.

“Ye are right, Misther Denham. That’s what he did. Threw away the finest career a man cud have for the sake of a fellow that wasn’t worth his little finger. He tuk all the blame; and whatever the Court of Inquiry might have suspicioned, they had no choice but to put him on the shelf.”

For a full minute neither of the boys spoke.

Then Austin broke the silence.

“Thank you, O’Rourke,” he said, quietly. “I am glad you told us. Now I understand a lot that puzzled me before. And I’ll tell you this—that whatever we can do to help him to win back his proper place, that we’ll do to the last drop of our blood.”

“We will,” said Clive.

O’Rourke looked very kindly at the two lads.

“Sure we’ll live to see him an admiral,” he said.

Before any of them could speak again there came the sound of running feet on the deck above. Next moment Sam Coot, the boatswain, thrust his head in at the saloon door.

“The captain would like to see you on deck, sir,” he said, touching his forelock.

O’Rourke sprang up, and the two boys followed him up the companion.

Arrived on deck, the first thing they saw was an enormous junk lying right across the schooner’s course.

She was a huge craft of her kind, with sides that towered like an old-fashioned man-of-war, and no fewer than three masts. But she had no sails set, and lay wallowing in the swell, apparently out of all control.

O’Rourke ran up to the bridge; the two boys stood staring at the junk.

“Must have come to grief in that bit of a blow we had last night,” said Austin.

“Yes, and I suppose that flag she’s flying upside down at her fore is a signal of distress?” added Clive. “What a whacking big craft she is!”



“Jove—yes! She’s twice our size. Take a bit of a crew to navigate her. With those high sides she must be about as hard to handle as a haystack.”

“I can’t see many men aboard her,” said Clive. “I wonder what she wants us to do.”

“Port your helm!” came Heritage’s voice from the bridge. “Down tops’ls!”

The schooner’s head was run up into the wind, and she lay tossing gently in the long swell.

O’Rourke came up to the boys.

“Misther Denham, the captain’s ordhers are that ye have your engine ready to stharta. Misther Chesney, will ye see that ammunition for the quick-firers and the six-pounders is brought up from the magazine?”

“Why, what’s up?” exclaimed Austin, in surprise.

“’Deed, and we don’t know that anything is up,” said O’Rourke, coolly. “But we won’t be takin’ any chances in dealing wid Chinese junks.”

“But she’s a wreck,” objected Austin.

“Maybe she is, and maybe she isn’t,” said the big Irishman, with a twinkle in his eyes. “Just you obey the masther’s ordhers an’ ye’ll see what ye’ll see.”

Much mystified, Austin called a couple of hands and went below to the magazine. For a small sailing ship the *Brilliant* was extraordinarily heavily armed. She carried half a dozen of the latest quick-firers, including two Maxims which fired the one-pound shells known as pom-poms, and two Hotchkiss six-pounders which had a range of 4500 yds. She also had plenty of modern magazine rifles, and there was hardly a man of her crew of sixteen who could not make fair shooting. During the whole of the voyage Captain Heritage had kept them hard at work at firing practice.

All the guns were at ordinary times kept well concealed, being covered up with heavy tarpaulins, and when Austin came on deck again he was ordered not to uncover them until he was told to do so, but to have all ready to open fire if necessary.

“It’s the rummiest game I ever heard,” he muttered to himself, as he carried out his instructions. “Surely we can’t be in any danger from that hopeless-looking old hulk!”

The junk had now drifted down to within about a hundred yards of the schooner, and Captain Heritage hailed her through a speaking-trumpet. He spoke Chinese sufficiently well to make himself understood.

A pig-tailed, yellow-skinned man, short in height but broad in build, stood up on the lofty poop and answered.

“He says his rudder is broken, and that they can’t mend it,” explained Heritage to O’Rourke. “Wants to know if we can send a boat aboard with help.”

“’Deed, sorr, I wouldn’t do anything of the sort,” answered the big Irishman.

“I don’t mean to,” said Heritage. “You can’t trust any of these beggars. At the same time it may be a genuine case, and if that is so we don’t want to leave them in the lurch. My notion is to start up the screw very quietly, and move the *Brilliant* near enough to find out a little more about her. Then we can act accordingly.”

“Very good, sorr. But I’d have the men take cover before we git in range.”

“Pass the order to that effect. I’ll call down to Denham to start his engine.”

The screw began to revolve, but as there was no smoke or noise, and no disturbance of the water, it was impossible for anyone to see what was causing the *Brilliant* to creep slowly nearer to her big neighbour.

Within a couple of minutes the two vessels were within biscuit-throw.

Along the front of the *Brilliant’s* bridge ran a low parapet of thin sheet steel. Keeping well behind this, Heritage picked up his trumpet again and hailed the junk.

As he did so her lofty bulwarks suddenly swarmed with armed men, and Heritage had just time to duck below his armoured breastwork before scores of antiquated firearms were levelled on the schooner, and with a tremendous crash a storm of bullets raked her fore and aft.

At the same moment the great mat sails of the junk ran up like magic, and as they filled, her lofty bow, decorated with two immense red eyes, swung round, and she bore down upon the schooner like some enormous cormorant swooping upon its prey.

The deck of the *Brilliant* was covered with white scars, there were numerous small holes in her sails, and here and there her running rigging hung loose, cut by a bullet from a jingal or one of the other antiquated firearms used by the pirates.

Otherwise there was no damage. Owing to the precautions taken by Captain Heritage, not one of the schooner's crew had been touched.

At the same time, Heritage had not been prepared for the bold manœuvre which the junk was now carrying out. She was twice the size of the *Brilliant*, and if she managed to run the schooner down the latter would be the sufferer.

Springing to his feet regardless of the missiles which still whistled through the air or thudded against the woodwork, he shouted an order to the men at the guns, then sprang to the engine-room telegraph.

Quick as a flash the tarpaulins which had hidden the Maxims and six-pounders were whipped aside, and with a roar that made the stout little vessel quiver in every plank, the muzzles of these four weapons burst into flame.

At such a range there was no question of missing, and every shell went crashing into the very heart of the huge unwieldy hull of the junk.

Great gaps opened like magic in her tall sides, and from the heart of her arose yells and screams in a wild medley of many Eastern tongues.

Her rascally crew had expected an easy capture. The very last thing that had entered their minds was that the inoffensive-looking trading vessel should turn out to possess such teeth.

"Let 'em have it, lads!" roared the big O'Rourke, his blue eyes glittering with excitement. Battle to him was the very breath of his nostrils. "Begor, but the treacherous spalpeens shall have their lesson!"

Austin, behind the steel shield of the other six-pounder, laughed as he thrust another shell into the smoking breach of his gun.

"Go it, O'Rourke! The beggars have caught a Tartar this time!"

"Fire higher. Cut the masts out of her!" came Heritage's ringing order from the bridge. "Quick, or she'll be on us!"

Hulled as the junk was, her masts and sails were intact, and so too was her tiller. With the strong breeze behind her, she was bearing down at ever-increasing speed upon the *Brilliant*.

Below, in the engine-room of the schooner, Clive was working desperately to get up speed, so as to run the vessel clear of the junk.

But as ill luck had it, some little impurity in the oil, a bit of fluff or something of the sort, had partially choked the supply pipe from the oil-tank, with the result that the engine was not developing half her proper power. It was no fault of his, but it was a matter which, if it did not right itself, would take time to remedy.

If Heritage had known what was wrong he could have trimmed sail and run clear, but he had not heard Clive's reply to his first order to give full power, and every moment he was expecting the *Brilliant* to quicken and draw clear.

By the time that he had realised that something was wrong, it was too late. The towering bows of the junk rose like a cliff above the *Brilliant's* rail.

Heritage shouted to the man at the wheel to luff.

The latter obeyed instantly, but even so there was not time left to avoid the impact. The bows of the junk struck the *Brilliant* a glancing blow on the starboard side near the stern, and at the moment of the collision a score or more of her pirate crew who had been massed ready under her bulwarks leaped down on to the schooner's deck.

"All hands repel boarders!" roared Heritage, and, revolver in hand, he came leaping down the bridge ladder.

The deck of the *Brilliant* rang hollow under a rush of feet as a dozen of his men came tearing from every direction to join him.

The pirates did not wait to be attacked. With their ugly crooked kreeses gleaming in the bright sunlight, they dashed forward in a compact body.

Austin had a vision of bare brown bodies, dark faces and flashing eyes. He heard the skipper's pistol bark twice, and saw two of the pirates drop in their tracks. Then he and the rest of them were in the thick of it.

## CHAPTER VI

### HOW THE BIG JUNK CAUGHT A TARTAR

It was no twentieth-century, long-range fight, but a hand-to-hand battle like one of those which Marryat describes.

The *Brilliant's* men had cutlasses, and as most were old man-of-war's men they knew how to use them. For the most part they fought silent, and the only sounds were the clash of steel on steel, the beat of bare feet on deck, the panting breath of the combatants, and now and then a shriek of agony as one of the invaders went down beneath a crashing blow from a muscular British arm.

Fierce and active as were the pirates, and although they outnumbered the *Brilliant's* men four to three, yet the issue was never for a moment in doubt. Raging at the abominable treachery of the pirates, each white man fought like two, and in less than five minutes it was all over.

Nine of the pirates lay upon the deck; the rest, panic-stricken, flung themselves overboard, and their shaven, pig-tailed heads were seen bobbing among the waves as they swam desperately towards the junk.

The junk was now more than half a mile astern. The obstruction in the oil-pipe had suddenly come away, and Clive had got his engine going full blast, so that the schooner, with her sails drawing and her screw running at its best, was flying along at something like ten knots.

"Will I get her round, captain?" cried O'Rourke, who stood with flushed face and dripping cutlass. "Ye won't let the spalpeens escape. Sure, we'll sink her in two-twos."

Heritage glanced at the junk. She was perceptibly lower in the water. Her main mast, cut by Austin's last shot, was trailing over her side.

"We don't need to trouble about her," he said quietly. "Keep the schooner on her course. Tell Denham to stop the engines. Chesney, see that the decks are cleared, and report how many of our men are wounded."

He hurried back to the bridge after giving these orders, and Austin set about carrying out his share of them.

Of the nine pirates on deck, eight were stone dead, and the bodies were at once got rid of by flinging them overboard.

The ninth, however, was apparently only stunned by a glancing cut over the scalp. Austin ordered him to be taken below.

Of the *Brilliant's* men no one was killed, but no fewer than five were wounded. Austin, whose experience in his father's mine had given him useful training in first aid, got out bandages and antiseptics, and himself saw to the wounds. Only one man was severely hurt; the others would all be on duty again in a day or two.

"Sure, we're well out of that!" said O'Rourke, cheerily, as Austin came down into the cabin to dinner. "Thim Black Flags is the curse of these seas."

"What are Black Flags?" asked Austin.

"Sure, it's just a name for Chinese pirates."

"I thought pirates were an extinct breed."

"There's plump people wid frock-coats and shiny hats walking in London city that thinks so. Begorra, but I'd like to set thim all cruising up and down the Eastern Ocean. I'm thinking they'd change their minds mighty quick."

As they talked Clive came quickly in.

"I say, Austin, have you seen the prisoner?" he exclaimed eagerly.

"I saw him," replied Austin, "and I told them to take him below, put a bandage on his cracked poll, and lock him up safely."

"You didn't recognise him?"

"Recognise him?" repeated Austin wonderingly. "Why, I wasn't aware I had any pals among that yellow-hided outfit of cut-throats. Anyhow, his face was so covered with blood that his own mother wouldn't have known him."

"Ah, that explains it," said Clive. "But now that he's clean you'd spot him in a jiffy. It's our old friend Kwala."

Austin and O'Rourke both stared at Clive in amazement.

"Impossible!" burst out Austin. "We left the Malay at Plymouth less than two months ago."

"Can't help that. It's Kwala right enough."

"'Tis not impossible," put in O'Rourke. "If the little thafe had shipped on wan of thim big liners he would have rached Hong-Kong a couple of weeks ago. And thin he might have joined the big junk the very next day."

"I'm going to see, the very minute I've finished my grub," said Austin, as he helped himself to a liberal plateful of apple tart.

"So am I," said Captain Heritage, who had come in while they were talking.

As soon as the meal was over he and Austin went forward to the sick-bay, where the Malay was lying in a hammock. There was no risk of his doing mischief, for a sturdy A.B. was in charge.

As his two visitors appeared the Malay turned his head and saw them, and a queer flicker came into his deep-set eyes as they rested on Austin.

It was gone as soon as it had come, and then, as if a veil had been drawn over it, all expression vanished from his brown face.

"It's Kwala right enough," said Austin, staring hard at the evil-looking little ruffian. "You talk to him, sir."

Heritage stepped forward to the side of the hammock and began sternly to question the Malay in his own curious, hissing language.

Austin, who, of course, could not understand a word, stood by.

The Malay answered readily enough, and seemed to be speaking humbly, even imploringly.

Presently Heritage took Austin by the arm and led him out and back down the gangway to the cabin.

"I wouldn't talk to you before him," he said, "for I've a notion he knows more English than he lets on. A fellow like that, who's been in the stokehold of big steamers, can generally understand English."

"But what did he say, sir?"

"It's as O'Rourke suggested. He shipped for Hong-Kong in the *Orion*, got there nearly three weeks ago, and then, according to his own account, joined the junk to reach Satow, where he expected to get another ship."

"'Tis a lie, sorr," said O'Rourke, sharply.

"Very probably. But he went on to say that he had never before had anything to do with the Black Flag, and doesn't want to."

"'The divvle was ill, the divvle a saint would be,' " quoted O'Rourke.

"Quite so, but listen. He vows that he recognised the *Brilliant* as my ship, knew she was armed, but did not tell Loo Ching, the pirate skipper,

because he wanted to escape, and that he jumped aboard to escape, not to fight us. He says he fell down at once, and that that was the reason he was the only one of the boarders who was not killed outright.”

“And a mighty ingenuous story, too,” said O’Rourke. “If I was you, captain, I’d just put him overboard before worse comes of it. The sooner thim sort is shark’s meat the better for their fellow-cratures.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” replied the skipper, half laughing, half annoyed. “We shall have to keep him until we can hand him over to the proper authorities. See that he is well guarded, O’Rourke.”

“I will, sorr,” said the big Irishman, touching his forehead. But as he left the cabin, he added under his breath, “Throuble will come of it. Mark my words, throuble will come of it.”



## CHAPTER VII

### HERITAGE TAKES THE TILLER

The wind pulled round a trifle in the early afternoon, and the *Brilliant*, with half a gale a little aft the beam, went slashing along in fine style, sending up an unceasing fountain of iridescent foam under her shapely bows.

The first dog watch had just been set—in other words it was four in the afternoon—when the look-out shouted, “Land in sight,” and a tiny black hump became visible against the blue horizon on the starboard bow.

At the pace at which the schooner was travelling she soon raised it, and it was seen to be a small island.

Austin, who had just come on deck, ran up to the bridge. “Is this Sunshine Island, sir?” he asked, eagerly.

Captain Heritage shook his head. “No, Chesney. We’ve a long way to go still. That’s Batol, and a very different island to Sunshine. Sunshine is a coral island, and lies quite low in the middle of a big lagoon; but that, you can see for yourself, is a big lump of land with tall cliffs all around. As a matter of fact, it’s nothing but the top of a submerged mountain, and the water is a mile deep quite close to the shore.”

Austin stared at the strange-looking island, and presently went below and fetched a pair of glasses.

By the aid of these he saw tall black cliffs rising sheer from sea level to a tremendous height.

“Anyone live there?” he asked.

“Not a soul. They say that a goat couldn’t climb those cliffs.”

“But there’s smoke rising,” said Austin, sharply, a minute later. “I can see it plainly.”

“Volcanic,” replied the skipper. “An old *soufrière* or a hot spring.”

The grim, black island with its wall-like cliffs fascinated Austin. He could not take his eyes off it. On the course the schooner was making it was plain that she would pass within a mile of this strange volcanic cone which

looked so startlingly out of keeping with the soft blue sky and the waves that sparkled under the hot afternoon sun.

As the *Brilliant* drew closer Batol seemed to rise higher and higher, and its gigantic cliffs to acquire a more and more forbidding aspect. Soon they were close enough for the glass to give a view of the white surf breaking in huge fountains of foam around the base of those iron cliffs and of the sea-birds like withered leaves fluttering against the ink-black background.

Austin focused his binoculars on the upper part of the island, but not a single green thing could he see. All was one desolation of jagged rocks and tumbled boulders, and high in the clear air above rose the plume of grey vapour which was caught by the strong breeze and carried away to windward.

Suddenly Austin gave a startled cry, which made Captain Heritage start sharply.

“There’s somebody up there,” he declared.

“Nonsense!” returned the captain, a trifle impatiently.

“Take the glasses and look, sir. Just to the left of that tall black pinnacle on the top of the cliffs.”

Heritage took the glasses. They were prismatic binoculars of great power, a present which he had made to Austin before starting.

But the focus which suited Austin was not right for the captain, and he had to adjust the screw.

He did so, and took a long steady stare.

At last he lowered the glasses, and turned to Austin with a smile. “There’s nothing there, Chesney.”

“I saw three men,” replied Austin, decidedly.

“You must have fancied it. Look again.”

Austin did so.

“They’re gone now, sir. But I saw them plainly enough.”

“They were probably birds.”

“No, sir,” replied Austin, obstinately. “I know a man from a bird. I saw three men.”

And this he stuck to in spite of a good deal of mild chaff from Heritage and O'Rourke. Clive was the only person who had any belief in him, and even Clive evidently had his doubts.

Before dark the gloomy heights of Batol were hull down, and with the breeze remaining steady the schooner flung the leagues behind her, and every hour was ten knots nearer to her destination.

Austin was on deck at earliest dawn, and climbed up into the cross-trees, with his glasses slung in their case over his shoulder.

A little after two bells in the morning watch he made out a tiny bluish speck lying dead ahead, and focusing his glasses upon it soon made sure that it was not a cloud but an island.

His loud hail of "Land ho!" brought half a dozen men tumbling up on deck, and in a very few minutes every soul of the ship's company, except those in the sick-bay, were staring out across the sea at the faintly seen atom of land which was the object of their voyage.

For Heritage had made no secret of their destination. He was not the sort to sail under false colours. O'Rourke had picked his crew, and when each man was selected, had first made him understand the hazardous nature of the enterprise, and then promised him, in addition to his wages, a small share of the eventual profits. Small, but large enough, if all went well, to assure the man comfort and ease for the rest of his life.

By breakfast time the dot had grown till it had assumed definite proportions, and with his powerful glasses Austin could pick out the tops of the graceful palms which covered the atoll.

There was an air of suppressed excitement as the officers met in the after-cabin for breakfast, and Heritage's lean cheeks had an unusual touch of colour.

"Wid this breeze, we'll make it before four bells, captain," said O'Rourke.

"I only hope we shall find all well," said Heritage, with unusual earnestness. "Pagan will be glad to see us. You never met John Pagan, did you, O'Rourke?"

"No, sorr."

"I hope you'll like him."

“Begor, av he’s the man ye cud lave in charge of a job like that, he’s good enough for me, captain, avick.”

A ghost of a smile crossed Heritage’s face. It was plain the compliment pleased him.

Breakfast was hurried through, and all were on deck again in less than twenty minutes.

The *Brilliant* lay over to the strong breeze till at times her lee scuppers ran with a gush of green water. Sunshine Island had grown perceptibly. They could now see the line of white which marked the reef.

“Is it a good entrance, sorr?” asked O’Rourke, with his eyes on the rim of foam.

“Plenty of water, but desperately narrow,” replied Heritage. “I shall take the wheel when we get a bit nearer.”

The schooner seemed as anxious as her crew to reach her destination. She tore through the water like a steamer, flinging acres of foaming wake behind her shapely stern.

The island now showed itself as a long strip of milk-white sand crowned with the exquisite green of cocoanut-palms and other tropical vegetation, and round it lay the wide lagoon, a huge mirror of intense blue barely ruffled by the strong breeze that drove the *Brilliant* at fully eleven knots.

Heritage walked forward and took the wheel from burly Sam Coot, the bo’sun.

In front lay a long line of dark coloured rocks. In some places they rose to a height of six or seven feet above the sea, but in others they hardly showed above the tops of the great waves which broke upon them in ceaseless thunder.

The whole air was full of the never-ending crash of the breaking water. Even in the calmest weather this sound does not cease, for the ground swell of the great Pacific never slumbers.

“What wicked-looking rocks!” said Clive, uncomfortably. “I don’t see any opening at all.”

“Trust the skipper,” replied Austin, coolly. “He knows his way in.”

For some distance the schooner swept on almost parallel with the reef. Then came a sharp order from Heritage:

“Down tops’ls.”

And as the work was rapidly carried out Heritage put the helm hard over, and coming round on the other tack with the speed and certainty of a racing canoe, the *Brilliant* drove straight into the line of crashing foam.

The boys were not the only ones aboard who held their breath as the fine little ship rushed towards what looked like certain destruction. They felt her rise bodily on top of a huge green wave crested with a mane of snowy foam.

Then, as she plunged forward, right under her bows there opened a passage through the reef, a passage so narrow that it looked, on the face of it, as though there was barely room for a whale-boat.

With a rush like that of a toboggan flying down an ice-clad hillside, the schooner flashed towards the opening.

For a moment all was din of roaring waves and mist of flying spray. Then, as if by a miracle, they were out of the pandemonium and gliding on perfectly even keel across the lake-like surface of the wide lagoon.

“As pretty a bit of work as iver I saw,” was O’Rourke’s verdict. “Begor, but there’s few stameship sailors could do that same bit of steering.”

The boys hardly heard him. They had even forgotten the island for the moment. The wonders of the lagoon claimed all their attention.

“It’s like floating in air!” gasped Clive, as he gazed over the rail into the limpid blue depths beneath.

“The fish look exactly like birds flying,” answered Austin.

“What in the name of sense are those thundering great mushrooms?” demanded Clive.

“Sure, they’re mushroom coral,” explained O’Rourke, coming up. “ ’Tis the way some coral grows.”

“Look out, we’re going to run slap on to that one!” exclaimed Clive, in sudden alarm.

“Ye needn’t worry,” laughed O’Rourke. “If we dhrew as much as the *Dreadnought* herself, we’d not touch it. ’Tis the clearness of the water desaves ye.”

Sure enough, the schooner passed clean over the strange-looking coral mushroom without harm, and presently Clive and Austin began to realise that the water was quite three times as deep as it looked to be.

Suddenly, from the clear green depths, there wobbled into sight a creature of such amazing appearance that Clive, who spotted it first, gripped Austin by the arm and pointed, speechless, at the monster.

“Suffering cats!” muttered Austin. “It looks like a dining-room carpet suddenly come alive.”

“I never saw a carpet with eyes,” said Clive.

“Nor with a long tail,” added Austin, “What is it, O’Rourke?”

“A giant ray,” answered the Irishman. “Devil-fish some calls thim, and, begor, they deserve the name, for there’s not a nastier brute that swims. Faith, I’d a dale sooner tackle a shark than wan of thim gentry. ’Tis sorry I am to see him in the lagoon.”

“Would he tackle a man?” asked Austin with interest.

“’Deed, and he would that! He’s a flesh-eater, like all his sort, and there’s a nasty cunning about him which the shark hasn’t got. D’ye see the sting on the tail of him?”

The great ray, which was nearly square in shape and at least fifteen feet across, swam slowly onwards, staring up at the ship with his great glassy green eyes, and with his long tail undulating slowly behind.

The tail was as long again as the fish, and through the glass-clear water both boys could plainly see the curious bony barb or spear near the end of it.

Clive shivered. “I hope I’ll never see that brute again,” he muttered.

“’Deed, and I hope so, too,” said O’Rourke. “Or if ye do I hope ye’ll be as safe as ye are this same minnit.”

## CHAPTER VIII

### WHEN THE FISH STOPPED BITING

As the *Brilliant* made her rush through the channel into the lagoon, a gig, manned by Kanakas, and with a white man in the stern-sheets, had put off from the shore; and as the schooner reached her moorings the boat ran smartly alongside, and her steersman came scrambling over the rail on to the deck.

Heritage hurried forward. "I'm very glad to see you again, Pagan," he said, shaking hands warmly with the new-comer.

Pagan, a big, square-shouldered man, with a hard, resolute face and close-cropped hair, returned his employer's grip with interest.

"You can't be as glad, sir, as we are to see you. And all the more that you've got a well-found ship and some guns," answered Pagan, glancing at the six-pounders.

"Why, what's up?" asked Heritage, anxiously. "Have you been having trouble?"

"Nothing else, sir, ever since you left," returned Pagan, grimly. "First, the Kanakas got measles, and that, as you know, is almost as bad as smallpox among these chaps. Three died, including Ramidar, my best diver. Then we got the tail end of a typhoon, which blew down the storehouse and played the mischief with the stores; and after that, just as we got to work again, we had a visit from a junk full of those Black Flag gentry."

"How did they get inside the lagoon?" demanded Heritage, sharply. "I gave orders for the entrance to be mined while I was away, and the wires always ready in your hut."

"That's true, sir, and your orders were carried out; but as it happened I was down with a go of fever, and it was a pitch dark night. So the junk sneaked in before anyone was the wiser, and the next thing I knew was Sundra, the boat-steerer, shaking me by the shoulder and telling me there were two boatloads of chinkies landing."

"You were in time?" said Heritage, quickly.

"If I hadn't I shouldn't be here talking to you to-day. I sunk one boat with a couple of bullets from my big rifle. The others scrambled ashore, and

we had as pretty a turn up as you'd wish to see."

"And beat them off?" asked Heritage, as the other paused.

"There weren't any left to beat off by the time we'd finished with them," was Pagan's grim reply. "But I lost two more of our own chaps, and that hasn't left me enough to carry on. Still, I've got a few more pearls, and if you'll come ashore, captain, I'll show them to you."

"You have done well, Pagan," said Heritage. "I'll come ashore later. But first we must break cargo, get out the portable huts and diving-dresses. We've got a busy week before us."

What Heritage said was no more than true. For the next five days it was work from morning till night. The portable houses were landed and put together, a new storehouse was built (much more solid than the old one), and, by way of precaution in case of further attacks, a stockade of stout posts with six strands of barbed wire was erected all round the camp, and a deep ditch dug outside it.

Austin and Clive worked with the rest, and as each night fell were so dog-tired that they simply swallowed their supper, and, tumbling into their cots, slept like logs until *réveillé* the next morning.

Heritage ran everything on service lines, and discipline was strict. At the same time food was good and plentiful, and the men, with the prospect of fortune before them, worked well and eagerly.

At last, on the sixth evening, the preliminary work was complete.

"You fellows had better take a day off to-morrow," said Heritage, kindly, as the two sun-tanned youngsters came in to supper.

"We're all right, sir," declared Austin. "This sort of thing suits us down to the ground."

"Yes, you don't look as if there was much the matter with you," smiled Heritage, as he glanced them over with his keen grey eyes, and noted with satisfaction the way in which the muscles of both—Clive especially—were hardening and swelling under their clear brown skins. "And I'm not going to give you too slack a time. But we want fish for the camp, and if you care to take the dinghy you can go out and catch some."

"Whoop!" shouted Austin. And then, ashamed of his sudden outburst, "I beg your pardon, sir."



Heritage laughed outright. "Don't apologise. I like to see a chap keen. Only don't make that row when you're fishing, or you won't catch much."

"I've caught trout on Dartmoor, sir," replied Austin, nettled.

"Then it's my turn to beg your pardon. If you can do that you can catch anything."

"You haven't had a look at those pearls yet, sir," said John Pagan, who had just come in.

"All right, I'll see them after supper."

The cook of the *Brilliant* had his galley rigged ashore, and with a Kanaka helper kept the camp in a good temper with plenty of well-cooked dishes. To-night they had corned beef hash, baked yams, a tart made of tinned fruit, and a dessert of fresh cocoanuts.

Coffee was the drink, for Heritage allowed no spirits except in case of illness.

By the time that the meal had been finished and cleared away the swift darkness had fallen, and a lamp was lighted and placed in the middle of the table.

Pagan took a small tin box from his pocket, opened it, and lifted a layer of cotton wool. Then he turned out its contents upon the table.

A gasp of delight and surprise came from the little knot who were gathered round, for the pearls, though few in number, were of amazing size and lustre, and gleamed under the lamplight with an exquisite iridescent sheen.

"I have some hundreds of seed pearls besides, but these are the only ones worth looking at," said Pagan, as he rolled them over with the tip of his big, square forefinger. "These, and this," he added.

He took out another box, and unwrapping some small object, handed it to Heritage.

Heritage took it and held it up. It was one of those curiosities which, now and then, are found in a large pearl oyster, and of which the most famous example is the well-known "Southern Cross."

This was not a cross, but a five-pointed star, almost perfectly regular in shape, and perhaps an inch across. It was all pure pearl, and anything more wonderful or beautiful could hardly have been imagined.

“Pretty, ain’t it?” said Pagan.

“That’s no word for it,” said Heritage. “It’s the most exquisite thing that I ever saw in my life, and if I’m not much mistaken, it’s worth all the rest of these pearls put together. The ‘Southern Cross’ sold for £20,000. This is worth more money, for the pearl is thicker and finer. Pagan, you have a great prize here, and you shall have ten per cent. of whatever it fetches, besides your ordinary share.

“What shall we call it?” he went on, turning to the boys. “It ought to have a name.”

“Call it the Dog Star, after Chump,” suggested Austin.

“That will do excellently,” said Heritage, with a laugh. “It couldn’t——”

At this moment Clive sprang up so suddenly that he sent his camp-stool flying, and dashed towards the door.

“What’s the matter?” exclaimed Heritage.

“I thought I heard a rustle, sir,” said Austin, as he, too, jumped up and hurried after his friend.

In a minute or so Clive came back, hot and breathless.

“He’s gone!” he exclaimed, angrily. “I can’t see a sign of him.”

“Who’s gone?” demanded Heritage.

“The fellow that was at the window,” answered Clive. “He was looking in at us.”

“Who was he?”

“I don’t know. I only caught the least glimpse of him. He was off as I raised my head. All I know is he was a brown-skinned man.”

“One of your Kanakas, Pagan?” asked the captain.

“No, indeed, sir. They wouldn’t come poking their heads in like that,” replied Pagan, with some indignation. “Besides, they’ve all seen the pearls.”

“But there’s no other native on the island.”

“Yes, there is, sir,” broke in Austin. “There’s the Malay.”

“Kwala. Sure, he’s safe locked up in the little hut beyond the storehouse,” said O’Rourke.

“We’d best go and see,” said Heritage, frowning.

Pagan put the pearls back in his pocket, and they all hurried off together.

Outside, the night was very dark, for clouds had come up at sunset, and a thunderstorm was threatening.

The hut where the Malay had been confined was at the other end of the enclosure. It was small but stout, and it had not been considered necessary to keep a guard over it.

O'Rourke handed Heritage the key, and he unlocked the heavy padlock. Austin, who had the hurricane lamp, swung it forward.

A sharp exclamation burst from the captain's lips.

"Chesney was right. The prisoner is gone."

On the floor lay the leg-irons, both filed through. At the back of the hut was a burrow in the sandy soil which ran right under the back wall. Apart from the mystery of how the Malay had got the file, the manner of his escape was clear.

"Rouse the camp," cried Heritage, who was the first to recover from his surprise. "We must catch him at once. Nothing will be safe with that little fiend loose. O'Rourke, you guard the landing-place. He will probably try for a boat."

In a minute all was hurry and excitement. Lanterns flashed in every direction, and men ran in and out among the cocoanut-palms, hunting here and there for the fugitive.

In a very short time O'Rourke was back with news. "Too late, sorr," he said, angrily, as he found Heritage waiting anxiously in the messroom. "The spalpeen's stole a small boat, and got away. There's six of my chaps afther him in a whaler, but I'm not thinking they'll catch him. 'Tis dark as a wolf's maw, and no lightning even to guide thim."

O'Rourke was right. Though the boat pulled round the lagoon for more than two hours they saw nothing of Kwala, and at last Heritage gave orders for all except the usual two sentries to turn in.

The thunderstorm passed without breaking, and the morning dawned clear, fine, and hot. But it was a silent and worried-looking crowd who gathered in the messroom for the morning meal.

"I wish I knew where the little reptile got that file," growled John Pagan, as he helped himself to porridge.

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” said Heritage, comfortingly. “After all, we’re saved the bother of looking after the fellow. That’s cheap at the price of the boat. And in any case there’s no land he can make. The chances are that the wretched man will drift till he dies of thirst.”

“If I thought that I wouldn’t worry,” said Pagan, harshly. “It’s his being picked up I’m afraid of. He’s seen the pearls, and he’ll move heaven and earth to get them.”

After breakfast the two boys lost no time in getting down to the dinghy. They had tackle of all sorts, from a shark hook on chain cable down to a fine steel wire and thin silk lines for the smaller, shyer inhabitants of the lagoon.

Sundra, the head Kanaka, had got bait for them in the shape of some white grubs called “sawyers,” found among the roots of the scrub in the centre of the island, and he pointed out the best places to fish.

Forgetting all about Kwala, they pulled off in high spirits, and, anchoring near the reef, baited their hooks and set to work.

“I don’t believe we’ll catch a thing,” declared Austin, looking doubtfully over into the still water. “It’s so beastly clear, you can see everything down to the very bottom. Surely the fish aren’t fools enough to bite when they can see the line.”

“It’s always the same, Sundra says, and he catches lots,” replied Clive, who had not had Austin’s experience of the clear trout streams of the high moor.

“By Jove, I’ve got one already!” he cried in great excitement, and began to pull up rapidly hand over hand.

“Great Christopher, it looks like a painted porcupine!” exclaimed Austin, as a round creature covered with spines came up and splashed feebly on the surface. “And it’s got a beak! Ugh! I never saw such a brute in my life.”

Clive drew it into the boat, handling it gingerly, for the spines were sharp.

It was a sea parrot, a fish which neither of the boys had seen before.

But they had little time to admire it, for next moment Austin felt a tug at his line.

This was a goby of most ferocious appearance and brilliant ultramarine colour.

Then the fun began in earnest, and one or other, and sometimes both at once, were hauling up fish as fast as they could bait and lower their hooks.

“Nothing shy about these,” said Clive, as a big horse mackerel thrashed wildly on the surface.

“I’d rather stalk trout,” said Austin. “But, all the same, this isn’t bad fun. I wonder if these weird-looking beasts are good to eat.”

They had caught four or five dozen, and the bottom of the boat was covered with many-coloured sea creatures, when, all of a sudden, the fish stopped biting.

“That’s rum,” said Austin, after waiting fully five minutes without so much as a nibble.

“I expect it’s a shark about,” said Clive. “Sundra told me that would stop ’em biting.”

“Can’t see anything of the sort,” replied Austin, peering down through the pellucid blue depths to the tangle of exquisitely coloured seaweeds far below.

“He may be cruising around behind one of those big coral mushrooms,” said Clive. “Anyhow, I vote we put a shark hook over and see what happens.”

“All right. But if we hook him, won’t there be trouble? This boat is a bit light to stand the pull of a big shark.”

“We’ll have to get up the kedge pretty quick if we do hook him. Then he can tow us around as much as he likes. We’re all right so long as we’re inside the lagoon.”

“Suppose he makes tracks for the open sea?”

“Plenty of time to think of that if we catch him. Don’t count your sharks before they’re hooked.”

They had brought a good lump of salt pork with them, and with this they baited the big shark hook and lowered it gently into the crystal depths.

The slight tide run carried the hook and bait some distance astern, and the two boys, leaning over the side, watched it till it vanished among the jungle of gorgeously coloured weeds which covered the floor of the lagoon.

“There’s something moving along the bottom,” said Clive, presently. “Something jolly big. See it, Austin?”

“I believe I do. But what on earth is it? A shark doesn’t creep along the bottom like that.”

“Whatever it is, it’s coming straight for the bait,” said Clive, in an excited whisper.

Now both could see a slight commotion among the weeds as Clive suddenly clutched Austin’s arm.

“Look at its eyes!” he muttered.

Austin saw two great glassy orbs, about a foot apart. They were larger than the biggest marbles, and set in raised sockets. They glared upwards with a steady, unwinking, malignant stare.

“Great guns!” exclaimed Austin. “It’s the big ray.”

So it was, for now they could plainly see its huge flattened body, its squarish outline covering many square yards of the bottom.

“Pull up the line,” muttered Clive. “We can’t do anything with a brute like that.”

“Pull up the line! Not much,” retorted Austin. And as the words passed his lips the line gave a little jerk.

## CHAPTER IX

### AT GRIPS WITH THE SEA-DEVIL

“Got him, by thunder!” said Austin, his eyes aglow with excitement. “No, don’t pull yet. He’ll take a minute or so to swallow it.”

Jerk, jerk, jerk—each sharper than the last. Then the cord began to run out steadily.

Austin let it run for several seconds, then rising to his feet braced one foot on the thwart, took the line in both hands, and flung his whole weight backwards.

There was a jerk which almost pulled the boat’s nose under water.

“Up anchor!” roared Austin.

In the excitement they had forgotten all about the kedge. Clive did the only thing possible—whipped out his knife, and as the rope came tight slashed it.

Austin was doing his best to check the flying line, but it whistled through his fingers at a pace which rasped the skin off.

“Make it fast,” cried Clive, who was so excited that he had forgotten all about his previous reluctance to try conclusions with the monster.

Flinging some coils loose, Austin took a turn round the forward thwart, and “snubbed” the line.

Next instant came a jerk which sent the gunwale level with the water. The line tautened, and the boat began to smoke through the water as though in tow of a destroyer.

A feather of foam sprang up on either side of the bow, and the two boys flung themselves back into the stern, sitting as far aft as possible, in the endeavour to keep her from towing clean under.

“Now we’re in for it,” said Austin, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “Keep your knife ready, Clive, in case we have to cut. And where’s that lance?”

Clive reached forward, got the long light whaling lance from the bottom of the boat, and drew off the sheath which protected the head. This head was

leaf-shaped and sharp as a razor. It was Sundra who had insisted on their taking it, and as things turned out it was lucky they had done so.

The ray kept a straight course, parallel with the reef. Every now and then it spurted, and each time Austin was forced to slacken the line to save them from driving under.

So far they had seen nothing of their formidable capture, but all of a sudden the line slackened and a gigantic form shot upwards out of a smother of foam.

For a moment it seemed to hang suspended full six feet above the sea, and the boys both caught their breath as they realised the gigantic proportions of the sea-devil.

Then down with a report like a small cannon, sending the spray flying in every direction.

“Phew, what a brute!” said Clive. “Why, he must weigh three tons!”

“Yes, and more. Hulloa, what’s he doing now?”

The line had gone quite slack, and the boat rocked in the waves flung up by the monster’s fall.

“Look out, here he comes!” almost screamed Clive, as a giant form rose through the clear water alongside. Its jaws were wide agape, showing hideous rows of crushing teeth, and its flukes were widely extended. It looked the very embodiment of rage and evil.

It was Austin who snatched up the lance and drove it fiercely at their fearful enemy.

The keen-edged point struck it full between the eyes, and the huge sea beast swerved in mid-career, while the water was encrimsoned with a torrent of blood.

Austin kept hold of the shaft of the spear, and, though he was as near as a touch pulled overboard, managed to jerk the iron out.

Next moment the line tightened again with a violent jerk, and again the boat went rushing across the calm surface of the wide lagoon.

“You damaged him that time,” said Clive, exultantly.

“He’s a long way from dead yet,” replied Austin between set teeth. “And if he tries that game again we may not get off so easily next time.”



By this time they were nearing the passage which led through the reef to the open sea. To their dismay, the sea-devil swerved and headed for the opening.

“We shall have to cut,” said Clive, frowning. “We daren’t risk those breakers in this small boat. We’d be swamped in a jiffy.”

“We’ll hang on to the last,” returned Austin, grimly. “It would be a bit of a triumph to bring this brute back to camp.”

In a very few minutes they were near enough to the opening to see the foam-crested surf swinging in great rollers through the gap.

Like a flash the monster swung and headed for the channel.

Austin seized the knife and sprang forward. Before he could cut, the heave of a swell running through the opening broke over the bows. Instantly the boat was half swamped, and it was only the boy’s quickness in jumping aft again that saved her from going right under.

“Bale!” shouted Austin, and Clive, snatching up the dipper, set to work like mad.

This was the moment which their enemy chose to turn upon them a second time. As before, he broached, and before the echoing crash of his fall had died away, the line had gone slack and he was on them again.

Again Austin seized the lance, but the sea-devil had learnt its lesson, and with more cunning than such a creature could have been credited with, went right under the boat and came up the other side.

“Here—this side!” cried Clive. And Austin spun round.

It was too late.

The great, flat, hideous head rose clear of the water, and the huge jaws met in the gunwale with a sharp, rending sound.

The boat, already half full of water, rolled slowly over. But before it quite capsized Austin made a desperate stab at the ray, and, more by good luck than good aim, drove the steel straight into its head. The point probably penetrated right into its brain, for immediately it began to lash with its tail and smite the water furiously with its immense flukes.

Foam flew in every direction.

“Jump!” shrieked Austin, and leaving the lance sticking in the sea-devil’s head, he made a wild spring out on the other side, and struck the

water just as the boat, dragged down by the vast weight of the ray, vanished beneath the surface.

As he came up he looked round, and to his intense relief saw Clive's head close by.

"The reef. Make for the reef!" he cried.

They were only a few dozen yards from the line of rocks, and, luckily for them, it was almost full ebb. In another couple of minutes they had reached the ledge and scrambled hurriedly up into comparative safety.

"Great Christopher, that was a close call!" gasped Austin, as he gained his feet and swept the water out of his eyes.

"Where's the ray?" muttered Clive, looking round in a half-dazed fashion.

"Gone down, and taken the boat with him. He's pretty badly damaged. I got him full between the eyes, and left the spear sticking in him."

"I wonder if he's dead."

"Not yet. Takes a lot to kill a brute like that."

As he spoke, the water broke close under the reef.

The ray, summoning all its remaining energies, had risen to the surface. First the long straight shaft of the spear shot upwards out of the blue depths; then the black bulk of the sea-devil darkened the shining blue.

"Look out!" said Austin, apprehensively. "If he sees us he'll go for us. And he can reach us with that spiked tail of his. Get back on the top of the rocks."

They scrambled quickly up to the top and over on to the seaward side. The surf was breaking with a deep-toned roar immediately below them, and the spray flew over them in sheets. But the jagged edges of the coral gave good hand-hold, and they clung there watching anxiously for what would happen next.

The cold glare in the glassy eyes of the sea monster was hideous to behold. For a few moments it cruised slowly round, evidently searching for its human enemies.

The blood was pouring from the lance-wound in its head, and it was plain that its strength was slowly but surely failing.

Failing to find what it sought, rage seized the creature. Once more he flung himself clear from the surface, and fell, with a resounding crash, full upon the upturned boat, which, by this time, had floated up again. Upon this it vented its last paroxysm of rage. Seizing it with its teeth, it literally rent it to fragments, sending splinters flying in every direction.

In a few moments there was nothing left but broken scraps of wood, which tossed on the waves flung up by the giant fish.

Then, exhausted by this last tremendous effort, a quiver passed through the monster. It turned over and floated on its back, and presently was still.

“Dead!” said Austin, quietly.

“Dead as a door-nail,” added Clive. “And let me tell you, Austin, the next time I meet one of his kind I mean to give him a wide berth.”

“Same here,” replied Austin. “The next question is, how are we going to get back? Seems to me we’re rather in a hat. Two miles is a pretty long swim, and that chap may have brothers, to say nothing of sharks.”

“We must wait till they send a boat out,” said Clive.

“Yes, but they’re all on the other side of the island. We may stick here all day and no one see us.”

“By Jove, I never thought of that! We’re in the soup with a vengeance.”

“We shall be when the tide turns,” said Austin, grimly.

“They’re sure to come after us sooner or later,” said Clive, comfortingly. “And we’re all right for the next four or five hours. Look here, I’ll swim over and get that lance, and we’ll stick up a signal.”

This was done, and the two boys perched themselves on the grilling rocks and waited with what patience they could. All their food had gone with the boat, and also the beaker of water. The sun was fiercely hot, and they were soon both hungry and thirsty. Two hours passed. The tide began to turn. There was no one in sight on the nearer side of the island.

Another hour, and the tide was half-way up the reef. The tops of the waves were breaking clean over them. Austin was getting very anxious. He stood up and stared around. Suddenly he gave a sharp exclamation, and pointed out to sea.

“What’s that, Clive?”

Clive stared, shading his eyes with both hands from the blinding glare of the afternoon sun.

A small dark object was rising and falling on the smooth swells a mile or so away out to sea.

“It’s a boat,” he said. “An empty boat.”

## CHAPTER X

### THE COMING OF THE CASTAWAY

Yawing from side to side at the whim of tide and wind, the boat drifted, slowly but steadily, towards the reef.

To the boys watching her keenly, she appeared to be derelict. She had no mast or sail, and there was no sign of any crew.

As she came nearer, they could see that her paint was worn and blistered. She looked as though she had been knocking about for a long time.

“She’s coming straight in,” said Clive presently.

“She’ll go to bits on the reef if she hits it,” replied Austin. “I must stop her before she gets into the surf.”

“You can’t swim through it,” said Clive, sharply.

“I think I can,” replied Austin, modestly. “There’s no wind to speak of, and if I dive through the first roller as it breaks I ought to be all right.”

“It’s beastly risky,” said Clive, nervously. “Think of the sharks.”

“It’s got to be done, old chap. We need that boat.”

As he spoke he was pulling off his boots and shirt, and stood up dressed only in his light drill trousers and singlet.

The boat was now within little more than a cable’s length of the reef. Austin waited till one of the great blue swells was on the point of breaking, then flinging up his hands above his head, sprang outwards.

He vanished with hardly a splash, and Clive, watching anxiously, saw his dark form cleave like a dolphin through the crystal heart of the wave and presently bob up safely on the far side.

Getting a good breath, he dived again, and once past the second line of surf was safe, and began to swim strongly towards the boat.

With a feeling of intense relief Clive saw him reach it and scramble aboard. Next minute he had a pair of sculls in the rowlocks and was pulling hard for the gap in the reef.

The day was calm and the surf was not breaking in the wild way that it broke on the morning when the schooner made the passage. All the same, it

required great skill and care to keep the clumsy boat's head straight to the run of the swells, and Clive was vastly relieved when Austin came shooting safely through, and, swinging the boat briskly, pulled round to where his friend was standing.

Then Clive saw that Austin was not alone. Stretched in the bottom of the boat lay the limp figure of a man.

"Just as well we happened to be on the reef," said Austin, quietly. "We've saved this chap from Davy Jones's locker."

"He's dead already, isn't he?" said Clive, quickly, as he stared down at the body. It was that of a man of at least six feet three, and built on enormous lines. His rolled-up sleeves showed a pair of arms that Sandow himself might have envied, and his blue cotton shirt, open at the throat, gave a glimpse of the massive arch of his chest covered with a forest of thick black hair.

His face was in keeping with the rest of his appearance. It might have been cut out of rock. The huge square chin, high cheek-bones, and beetling brows had been burnt by the sun to the colour of dark mahogany.

His eyes were closed, and salt crystals coated his thick eyebrows and his coarse dark hair.

"No, he's not dead," answered Austin. "He's breathing, but he looks as if he'd had a pretty rough passage. We must get him back as quick as we can. The skipper will know what to do for him."

The boat, if weather-beaten, was sound, and there were two pairs of oars and a mast and sail in her.

The boys soon stepped the mast, and set the sail, and in less than half an hour were back at the landing.

They shouted for help, and a couple of men came down with a stretcher and carried the castaway up to the camp, where Heritage put him to bed and administered beaten egg and brandy.

"Don't say anything about the ray," whispered Austin in Clive's ear, as they waited outside the hut where the shipwrecked man had been carried.

"Why not?"

"I want to bring the brute back, and spring a surprise on them. We can use this chap's boat."

Clive nodded, and just then Heritage came out.

“How is he?” asked Austin and Clive at once.

“All right,” said Heritage. “He’s come round already.”

“Did he tell you who he is, sir?” asked Austin.

“Yes. He says his name is Burnett, and that he was mate of a whaler called the *Anne Hopkins*, which was burnt at sea three days ago.”

“What became of the rest of her crew?”

“According to his account, they bolted and left him and the skipper alone. The skipper was killed by the fall of the mast, and he got off in the only boat that was left.”

“Funny thing he didn’t bring some grub with him,” said Austin, thoughtfully.

Heritage gave the boy a quick glance. “I asked him that, but he said there wasn’t time.”

“He’s a queer-looking bird, isn’t he, sir?” said Austin, as the three walked away together.

“I think he’s the biggest and most powerful-looking man I ever saw in my life,” replied Heritage. “And one of the ugliest,” he added, as an afterthought.

As the boys went back to the hut which they shared between them the supper bugle was sounded, and they just managed to wash and dress and reach the mess-house in time.

“Mind—not a word about the ray,” said Austin as they went in.

“Suppose they ask about the boat?”

“Put ’em off somehow. I’m awfully keen on springing the beast on them. If the sharks haven’t tackled him we ought to be able to tow him in.”

They need not have worried, for everyone was too keen about the new arrival to think of the fishing.

O’Rourke was not best pleased.

“Sure, I wish he’d found some other island to be washed up on,” he remarked, frowning. “It’s mesilf doesn’t like the look of the big spalpeen. And what will we do wid him at all?”

“Wait till we’re sending to the mainland and send him off,” said Heritage.

“And have him blabbing all round about the pearls, captain. Faith, we’d be having ivory beach-comber in the seven seas upon us in a month.”

“If he’s a decent fellow we might keep him on and give him his share,” said Heritage.

“That will be the best plan, sir,” said Pagan, quietly. But O’Rourke kept silence. Plainly the idea did not please him.

The very minute supper was over the boys slipped away and made down to the beach. They launched the boat, put in a coil of rope to tow the ray, a lantern, and also a harpoon in case they met with sharks.

Then they pulled quietly away into the darkness.

The moon had not yet risen, and a soft veil of cloud hid the stars. They had to make a course by compass, and when they reached the reef found themselves a long way from the channel.

“You take the lantern, Clive, and try to spot the beast,” said Austin. “I’ll pull along slowly.”

Clive agreed, and the search began.

They cruised in this fashion for more than an hour, but could see nothing of the sea-devil.

“He’s drifted out to sea, I believe,” said Clive at last.

The search went on for another half-hour and then Clive turned to Austin.

“The wretched lamp has gone out,” he said.

“Never mind. I’ve got some more oil. We’ll fill it and take one more turn.”

He shipped his oars and was searching in the stern locker for the oil-can, when a slight throbbing sound came to his ears.

“What’s that?” he said, sitting up sharply.

“The throb of a screw,” answered Clive. “What’s more, it’s the *Brilliant’s* screw.”

“Rot, man! She’s at her moorings.”

“Was, if you like—she’s not now. You don’t think I’ve been all those weeks in her without knowing the sound of her engine.”



“But it’s impossible! Who could be bringing her out, especially at this time of night?”

“That I know as little as you do, but I’m sure, as I sit here, that it’s the schooner. Yes, there she is,” as a dark blot showed against the grey night sky. “All sails furled, and running under her engine alone.”

“She’s making straight for the channel,” said Austin, tensely. “Clive, there’s something wrong, and it’s up to us to see what. Ship the other pair of sculls and pull like mad! We’ve got to cut her off before she reaches the passage.”

## CHAPTER XI

### THE BATTLE FOR THE SCHOONER

The boys bent to their oars with a will, and, pulling with long, silent strokes, sent the boat gliding swiftly across the lagoon towards the gap in the reef.

The schooner, slipping along at not more than five knots, hardly gained upon them, and was still a mere blur in the soft darkness when Clive and Austin gained the reef.

“Back water!” came Austin’s whispered order. “That’ll do. Let her come in quietly. We don’t want to stave her.”

As he spoke he sprang to his feet, and taking the painter nimbly, jumped for the rocks, landing on a rough slab of coral just above the water’s edge.

“Come on, Clive,” he said. “Sharp as you can. There’s no time to waste.”

“What can we do?” asked Clive, in a tone of despair. “We can’t stop her.”

“We’re going to have a jolly good shot at it,” returned Austin, between clenched teeth. “Follow me, and be careful not to show yourself against the sky.”

They had run the boat in quite close to the passage through the reef. Austin made the rope fast to a jagged point of coral, and then started off climbing along the reef with wonderful speed and swiftness towards the very edge of the gap.

He had noticed earlier in the day that on the side of the passage was a peak of rock which rose to a height of seven or eight feet, and absolutely overhung the channel.

He gained the foot of this, and waited for Clive.

“Are you game for a big jump, old chap?” he asked.

“You mean aboard the schooner?” answered Clive, sensing Austin’s plan.

“Just so. It’s our only chance of saving her; if, as I suspect, she’s been stolen.”

“I’m game,” said Clive, quietly.

Austin gripped his friend’s hand.

“It’s going to be a tough job, old man. And we don’t stand a dog’s chance if we miss the deck.”

“That’s all right. We won’t miss it,” replied Clive. And there was a ring in his voice which made Austin feel confident that, whatever happened, his chum would not fail him.

“Crouch down. Don’t let them see you,” he said. “Our only chance is to take the beggars by surprise.”

Clive nodded, and obeyed.

The schooner was now very close. The boys could see her plainly, with the phosphorescent ripples curling under her forefoot. She was making straight for the passage at a steady five knots.

There was someone at the wheel, but who it was there was not light enough to tell. For the rest her decks seemed to be empty and deserted.

“There must be two at least,” whispered Clive in Austin’s ear. “They must have someone in the engine-room.”

“Wish I knew who it was at the wheel,” replied Austin. “If it’s that big beggar we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

The bow of the schooner was now less than a cable’s length from the passage. The boys crept forward to the very edge of the rock, and crouched ready for the spring.

Beneath them the long Pacific swells rolled inwards in great heaving mounds of water, but the weather had been so calm during the past week that the surf was less dangerous than usual, and there was no risk whatever for the schooner, so long as her steersman kept her head straight.

Austin quivered with eagerness, like a greyhound on the leash, as he watched the schooner’s rapid approach.

Next moment her bows entered the passage, and she curtsied deeply to the swing of the first wave.

Clive made a quick movement, but Austin seized his arm and steadied him. He waited till the foremast was opposite them, and the beautiful little vessel, dipping again, lay right below them, and so close that they could almost have touched her port rail.

“Now!” he cried.

And as the words left his lips and the schooner began to rise again to the second swell, he and Clive together jumped with all their might.

So perfectly had Austin timed his effort that they both just cleared the rail, and landed almost simultaneously on the schooner’s deck.

The shock flung them both forward on hands and knees; but they were up in an instant, and side by side dashed straight for the wheel.

A cry of rage and terror burst from the lips of the man who was steering, a curious, hoarse, guttural sound which instantly betrayed his identity.

“Kwala!” cried Austin, aloud, and, filled with blind rage that this little reptile, whom they had twice spared, should dare to try to ruin them in this dastardly fashion, he fairly hurled himself at the man.

Although he had seen the boys spring aboard, the Malay had not ventured to let go the wheel, for he knew that if he did so the schooner would at once broach-to, and, flung athwart the passage by the next roller, be hopelessly wrecked.

But now, as a gleam from the binnacle lamp showed him the vengeful light in Austin’s eyes, he gave a second shout, and, letting go the spokes, his right hand flashed to his knife.

Austin was just too quick. Before the Malay could release the crooked blade of his kreesse from its scabbard, the young Englishman’s fist struck him between the eyes, and sent him spinning backwards all across the deck till he fetched up with a crash against the starboard rail.

This saved him from falling, and, spinning round, he raced forward, screaming like a mad monkey.

“Take the wheel, Clive!” shouted Austin, as he tore away in pursuit.

Luckily, Clive had done so already. If he had not, the *Brilliant* would certainly have been smashed against the sharp coral teeth which jutted out on either side of the passage.

The Malay made straight for the forward hatch, which, Austin saw, was wide open, and reaching it with Austin at his very heels, literally hurled himself down it.

There was a heavy thud, followed by a crash as though some weighty body had fallen from a considerable height into the hold below.

A roar of rage was followed by a shrill scream.

Austin waited to hear no more, but slammed down the hatch, and drove the bolt into its staple. Then turning like a flash he ran hard down the deck to make equally sure of the after hatch.

“Got ’em both!” he shouted triumphantly to Clive, as he shot home the bolt of the after hatch.

“Who’s the other?” demanded Clive.

“I didn’t see him; but ten to one it’s the big brute who calls himself Burnett. He made as much row as a sack of coals when he fell back into the hold.”

“Did you knock him back?”

“No; Kwala did that for me,” chuckled Austin. “The Malay took a flying leap down the hatch just as Burnett was coming up, and they went down together. Must have jolly near slain ’em both.”

“I only hope it did,” answered Clive, vengefully. “What’s next? We’re safe outside the reef; but I don’t suppose you’re anxious to go for a midnight cruise. And, anyhow, we shall be in a beastly hole if the engine stops.”

“That’s true. And you may jolly well bet that, if Burnett isn’t too badly damaged to get back to the engine-room, he’ll shut her down in short order. Best thing will be to turn her round at once, and get back into the lagoon. With any luck we’ll do it before the engine runs down.”

Clive nodded, and began vigorously spinning the spokes. He had taken regular spells at the wheel on the way out from home, and could steer as well as any of the *Brilliant’s* crew.

“And I’ll fire a gun,” went on Austin. “It’ll wake ’em up on the island, if they haven’t yet found out what’s up.”

As the schooner swung, and, with the tide behind her, headed back through the surf to the channel, Austin quickly pulled the tarpaulin off the small, muzzle-loading signal-gun aft, and lighting a match put it to the touch-hole.

There was a bright flash, and a loud bang echoed away across the sleeping lagoon, rousing strange echoes from the distant island.

Almost instantly the bang was followed by five sharp reports in succession from the bows of the vessel, and Austin, with a cry of alarm, ran forward.

As he came in sight of the forward hatch he saw what had happened. Someone had clambered up the ladder, and with bullets from a heavy-bored pistol blown away the bolt.

Furious with himself for not foreseeing such a proceeding on the part of the prisoners, Austin rushed recklessly forward in the hope of flinging his weight upon the hatch-cover before the prisoners could escape.

He was just too late. The heavy hatch door was flung back as lightly as though it had been a mere toy, and the giant figure of Burnett shot out from the opening.

In his huge right hand he gripped a great 48-calibre navy revolver, his dark, sinister face was stained with blood which oozed from a cut on his forehead, and his deep-set eyes glowed red, like those of an angry wild beast.

“Ye young fool! Did ye think ye’d tricked me?” he rasped out, with a strong American accent. “Come another foot, and see what happens.”

As he spoke he raised the pistol, so that Austin was looking down its grim, black muzzle.

On the face of it, it was certain death to advance. But clearly imprinted in Austin’s mind was the recollection that he had heard five shots fired.

Most pistols are five-chambered, only a few are six. Burnett certainly had had no time to re-load.

Like a flash Austin made up his mind to take his chances, and with hardly a second’s pause he dashed in.

Ah, he was right! Burnett did not even pull the trigger. Instead, he hurled the heavy weapon with all his force full at Austin’s head.

If it had hit him it would have killed him just as surely as a bullet. But Austin saw the backward movement of Burnett’s hand in time, and ducked. As the revolver hurtled past and crashed against the deck-house just behind them Austin’s outflung arms caught Burnett round the waist.

Austin was a youngster of very powerful build, and his muscles had been hardened by the steady drill and the course of Japanese exercises which Heritage had put him through on the way out. He was not as tall as Burnett by five or six inches, and in anything like a stand-up fight he would not have stood a ghost of a chance.

But here he scored immensely in the fact that Burnett had never for one moment expected him to dash in as he had. The big man had been confident of bluffing him off, and Austin's desperate rush took him entirely by surprise.

He went staggering backwards across the deck, which here was comparatively narrow.

Before he knew it he was against the rail. Austin saw his advantage, and his heart leaped. Putting out all his energies he flung all his twelve stone of weight forward, at the same time twisting his left leg behind Burnett's right one.

Reeling and almost off his balance Burnett tried to shift his grip, and get Austin round the body.

Before he could do so the rail caught him across the hips just below the waist, and with a bellow of rage he went right over backwards.

Even then he was quick enough to crook his knees on the rail, and save himself from going overboard. But it was no time for squeamishness, and Austin, seizing him by the feet, gave one vigorous lift and shove.

Next instant there was a heavy splash alongside, and the giant vanished head foremost into the salt water.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. So quickly, indeed, that as Austin turned he saw Kwala only just emerging from the hatch.

Austin's blood was up. Instead of any alarm he had nothing but contempt for the wretched little Malay. With a ringing shout he charged full at him.

This recklessness came very near to costing him his life. The Malay's right hand drew back, and something that hissed like a snake hurtled through the air.

Austin felt the wind of it on his cheek as it passed, heard a sharp thud as the kreese's keen point sunk deep into the deck behind him and remained there quivering.

Then he was on the Malay.

But Kwala had no stomach for fight. He had seen the end of Austin's encounter with the great Burnett, and the sight had filled him with incredulous terror. If he had kept his head and his kreese Austin would have

been at his mercy, but now that he was weaponless his vicious little soul was filled with deadly terror, and he spun round and ran for his life.

He reached the rail, with Austin not a foot behind him, and with a shriek of terror hurled himself into the sea.

Austin saw him strike the water and vanish, but as he watched, the man rose again to the surface and began swimming strongly for the reef.

For a moment Austin had a strong impulse to run down to the arms-rack, fetch a rifle, and put a bullet through the ugly bullet head. He had the strongest presentiment that he had not seen the last of the little reptile. But he felt that he could not shoot a defenceless man; the impulse passed, and he turned away sharply and walked down the deck to where Clive, with his face drawn with anxiety on his chum's account, was still at the wheel.

"Thank goodness you're all right!" exclaimed Clive, in tones of deepest relief. "When Burnett put that pistol to your head I made up my mind you were done for."

"I knew it was empty," answered Austin. "He'd fired his five cartridges. But it was a bit of luck my getting him over the rail. Once he'd got those great paws of his on me I'd have been as helpless as a baby. However, it's all right now, and here we are safe again in the lagoon. Tumble below, and see to the engine, old chap, and I'll steer her in."

Much to his surprise, for he knew that the signal-gun must have roused them, Austin saw no sign of any boat putting out from the landing.

It was not until he had got the *Brilliant* safe at her moorings, and he and Clive had launched the dinghy and pulled ashore, that he discovered the reason.

Heritage, O'Rourke, and John Pagan met him on the beach, and in reply to their eager questions he told them what had happened.

Heritage gave a sigh of relief when he heard that the schooner was safe and uninjured.

"You've done excellently well, Chesney," he said, in his deep, quiet voice. "I am proud of you and Denham."

As for O'Rourke, he gave Austin a smack on the back which nearly knocked the breath out of him.

"Begor, but it's you that's the broth of a bhoi!" he exclaimed. "And 'twas mesilf missed all the fun, slaping like a tortoise whin I ought to have



been awake.”

“Didn’t you hear the gun?” asked Austin.

“Yes,” said Heritage. “That was what roused us. But when we got down to the beach we found that every boat had been staved, so it was impossible to follow you.”

“The boats staved?” repeated Austin, in amazement.

“Yes, every one of them,” replied Heritage, grimly. “That ruffian Burnett must have done it before he started.”

“But I don’t understand,” said Austin. “You had the usual guard posted.”

“Yes. But one is dead, stabbed by the Malay’s knife, and the other is lying in the hospital with a cracked head. It is owing to you that the two scoundrels have paid the penalty of their crimes.”

“But I don’t know whether they have,” replied Austin, quickly. “Kwala was swimming like a good ’un when I last saw him. Probably he and Burnett have both reached the reef.”

Heritage started, and in the lantern light Austin saw his face set grimly.

“Then we’ll be after them,” he said, sharply. “At once, please, gentlemen.”

In a very few minutes they were again aboard the schooner. The moorings were cast off, Clive started up the engine, and at her full seven knots the *Brilliant* glided back towards the reef, where an armed party was landed and a thorough search made.

Austin, scrambling across the saw-toothed rocks, came to the place where he had left his boat.

It was gone.

“That settles it,” he said to O’Rourke, who was with him. “They’ve collared the boat and skipped out.”

“’Deed, I’m thinking you’re right,” growled back the big Irishman. “And wid the hour’s start they’ve got there’ll be about as much chance of catching thim as of finding a squeal in a dead pig. We’ll tell the captain, but I doubt he’ll thry to follow.”

O’Rourke was right. Captain Heritage gave as his opinion that pursuit was useless, and once more the schooner’s bow was turned towards her moorings.

## CHAPTER XII

### IN THE DEPTHS OF THE LAGOON

“Looks easy, doesn’t it?” said Austin, as he and Clive, peering over the gunwale of the boat, watched the diver at work below them.

His body, monstrous in his huge diving-suit of thick rubber, and crowned with a great, ball-shaped copper helmet, was curiously foreshortened as he moved quickly along the bottom, scooping the “shell” from the floor of the lagoon, and the long blue sea grass swayed beneath his lead-soled boots at each step he took.

From the valve in his helmet a steady stream of silver bubbles rose flashing through the marvellously clear water and burst on the surface, while just behind the boys the wheel of the air-pump turned steadily with a slight chugging sound.

“Faith, it’s easy enough at that depth,” replied O’Rourke, who had been standing just behind Austin, and had overheard his words. “ ’Tis not more than five fathoms where the chap is working. But wait till ye go to fifteen, aye, and twenty. I’m thinking ’tis a different story then.”

“How deep can a chap go?” asked Clive.

“There’s mighty few can stand the pressure at more than twenty-five fathoms,” replied the Irishman. “But now and then ye’ll find a man that’ll go deeper and take no harm. Thirty-two fathoms was the record for a long while. ’Twas Lambert did that. But they tell me he was beat by the young Frenchman De Plury. ’Tis said he went to sixty-six fathoms.”

“Three hundred and thirty-six feet!” exclaimed Clive. “Why, the pressure must have been something awful. I wonder it didn’t crush him flat.”

“ ’Tisn’t the pressure kills,” explained O’Rourke. “ ’Tis coming up to the top too quick—that’s what does the harm. The big change gives ye diver’s palsy, and that’s what kills most divers.”

“What’s the use of going so deep?” asked Austin.

“Faith, all the best shell lies at or about twenty-five fathoms,” explained O’Rourke. “And there’s a dale that’s below that, so dape that even thim dare-devil Filipinos daren’t thry for it.”

“I’d like to go down myself,” said Austin, suddenly.

O'Rourke glanced at him sharply.

"Have ye iver been inside a diving-suit before?" he asked.

"Yes, several times. When our tin-mine was flooded I went down twice, and another time I had a Fleuss dress on, and went down into a gallery which was full of water to get out the body of a poor chap that was drowned."

"'Deed thin, ye ought to be fit to have a thry in the lagoon," returned O'Rourke. "I'll spake to the captain to-night, and av he says yis, ye shall take a turn to-morrow."

O'Rourke was as good as his word, and as Heritage made no objection, Austin had a suit on the very next morning, and after a little practice showed that he would soon be as useful as any of the professionals.

The pile of pearl shells grew apace, for work went on from dawn till dark.

The first task in the morning was to search the previous day's take for pearls. The shells were opened and cleared out, the body of the fish being carefully examined, for the best pearls are usually found embedded in its soft substance. The shell itself was also carefully scrutinised, and if there were any blisters on its surface these were opened and examined, for pearls are sometimes found buried in the coat of mother-of-pearl.

Sometimes hundreds of shells would be cleaned out without a single pearl being found; at other times a dozen good pearls would be taken out of one heap, and three or four score of little seed pearls besides. Very occasionally three or even four pearls would be found in a single oyster.

But even when no pearls were found the party had the consolation of knowing that their labour was not entirely lost, for the shells themselves were worth money. They are used for making pearl buttons, studs, and ornaments, and fetch ninety to a hundred pounds a ton. It takes from twelve to seventeen hundred shells to weigh a ton, and so thickly was the bed of the lagoon covered with the oysters that sometimes the pile grew by nearly half a ton a day.

In spite of the speed at which they worked, Heritage's face remained grave, and he was very silent when they gathered at the evening meal.

"It's fretting the masther is," explained O'Rourke to the boys. "Ye see the lease is but for two years, and wan year is mighty nigh gone already. He's thinking that he'll niver get the half of what lays in the bottom of the

lagoon, and wid him 'tis neck or nothing. What wud be fortune to you or me is no use to him at all, wid the dhream he's got of building the big ship."

"But I thought the Japanese people would grant him a renewal of his lease," said Austin.

"Maybe they would if they didn't know more than it's likely they know now," replied the big Irishman.

Austin looked puzzled.

"I don't understand," he said.

"'Tis this way. Whin they granted him the lease they hadn't any more notion than you or I what they were giving away. But it's mighty onlikely that it hasn't come to their ears by this time. And seeing that the Jap's about the canniest business man ye cud meet in a lifetime, I'm thinking that they'll not give the captain one day more than they have to."

Austin nodded.

"Now I see. Well, the only thing will be to wire-in like fury and get all the spoil we can out of the place. What a pity it is we can't tell just where the best shell lies."

"Now ye spake of that," said O'Rourke, "ye remind me that while I was fishing last evening I found a mighty deep hole close by th' reef. I'm thinking it may hould good shell."

"Let's try it to-morrow," said Austin, eagerly.

"I'm doubting ye will get to the bottom," said O'Rourke.

"We can but try. I'm game to have a shot at it. If it's too deep, why, you'll just have to yank me up again."

"Sure, 'twould be foine if we cud give th' captain a raal leg up," said O'Rourke. "Say nothing to any of thim, Mither Chesney, and you and I and Mither Denham will take a little prospecting thrip to-morrow morning."

It was barely six o'clock when the little party reached the spot which O'Rourke had spoken of. It was round at the back of the island, and close to the reef, across which the rising tide was rushing in a snarl of white surf.

There was no wind, and inside the barrier the lagoon lay like a great mirror, its surface gilded by the rays of the new-risen sun.

O'Rourke and Clive had been pulling, Austin on his knees in the bows, with his head over the side watching the bottom.

"Here's the pit," he said, suddenly. "Back water. We shall have to anchor on the ledge. It's too deep beyond."

The oar-blades dipped deep, the way of the boat was checked at once, and the kedge was dropped so neatly that it caught on the upper edge of the bank while the stern of the boat swung over the deep pit.

Austin quickly got into the diving-suit, O'Rourke screwed on his great copper helmet, the ladder was flung over, the air-pump started, and Austin began his descent.

A certain thrill of excitement ran through his veins as he dropped rung by rung through the translucent green depths. Blue as the water appeared upon the surface, the light turned to green as soon as he was below.

A diver must descend slowly, so as to let his body become accustomed to the rapid alteration in pressure. So Austin had plenty of time to observe the beauties which surrounded him.

The tropic sun-rays, piercing the exquisite emerald depths, revealed beauties such as no land garden can show. The warm water teemed with life. Gay-coloured fishes shot in and out of a tangled growth of gigantic weeds. Life swarmed on every side, from tiny creatures smaller than the head of a pin to great crabs and other sea beasts monstrous in shape and terrifying in appearance.

Across the thick glass of his helmet floated dozens of jellyfish, their thread-like tentacles quivering as they swam. The first time Austin had been down he had not been able to resist the feeling that these creatures would actually strike his face with their slender stinging rays. But now he was well accustomed to them, and his only care was to avoid their fastening upon his hands, the one exposed portion of his body.

There was no nervousness about Austin. He had perfect faith in his sound, well-tested suit, and in his mates above, Clive at the rope, one end of which was round his body, O'Rourke at the pump which sent the fresh air down to him in steady gushes.

For defence against shark or ray—which, however, seldom venture to attack a man in diving-dress—he carried at his belt a heavy diver's knife, double-edged, sharp as a razor and with a blade fifteen inches in length.

On this occasion he was also equipped with a small but powerful electric lamp, which was fixed upon the front of his helmet, and supplied by an electric battery secured around his neck.

In a few minutes he had reached the top of the ledge. Behind him lay the rough, but moderately level, bottom of the lagoon, where the water was no more than thirty to forty feet deep; in front yawned the deep chasm which O'Rourke had discovered.

Austin stopped a moment and looked over, and for his pluck felt a slight sensation of awe. The pit was so deep and so wide that he could neither see the bottom nor the far side. There was nothing but a vaguely translucent, greenish dusk in which dim forms, some vaguely phosphorescent, moved to and fro.

"Won't do to look down into that too long," he grinned to himself, "I might get giddy."

And feeling with his lead-shod feet for the rungs of his rope ladder, he continued his descent into the depths.

As he went downwards the light decreased. He counted the rungs. Ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty. He began to fear that the ladder would not be long enough to reach the bottom.

But at the forty-third step from the edge of the pit his left foot struck firm ground, and switching on his lamp he cautiously relaxed his hold on the ladder, and stepped off on to the bottom.

Looking upwards, he could just see the boat poised so far above him that it looked like a mere toy. The bubbles from the valve in his helmet rose like silver streaks to the surface.

On one side the rock wall rose abruptly. It was coated with a hanging tangle of strange sea-growths, mostly of a dull yellow or livid green colour. The vivid pinks and scarlets did not show in these greater depths. And this rock wall was hollowed out along its base into a series of shallow caves.

Leaning forward, he flung his light out across the floor of the pit.

This was level and sandy. Clumps of sea grass rose here and there, waving in the faint currents which move even in the depths, and branching corals grew among the clumps. But Austin took little notice of these. Oysters were the object of his search, and he had not gone six steps before he came upon a sight which made him gasp.

A space the size of the floor of a large room was literally carpeted with the largest, finest shell which he had ever set eyes upon.

He stooped and tore one loose, and lifting it turned his lamp upon it. It was the true golden tip, and nearly a foot across.

Gasping slightly with excitement, Austin pulled his basket into position and set to work to fill it. The shell was so thick that all he had to do was to kneel down, and, without moving so much as a yard, tear up oyster after oyster and stow them in the basket.

Their size filled him with amazement. The first, instead of being exceptional, proved rather below than above the average, and presently he pulled up one which was at least eighteen inches in diameter, and weighed, as far as he could judge, the better part of seven or eight pounds.

At this rate it took only a matter of two or three minutes to fill his basket, and he was in the act of rising to his feet when suddenly, and without the slightest warning, he felt a grip like that of a man's hand settle on his left shoulder.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE MASTER OF THE PEARL PIT

The shock brought Austin's heart to his throat. But it was nothing to the shudder of loathing which seized him when, starting round, he saw what it was that held him.

A slender, snake-like thing, pale in colour, and speckled with small, livid spots, and armed on the lower side with cup-like suckers which held like steel.

There was no need to tell him what creature owned this awful weapon. It was a cuttle-fish.

Instinctively Austin's right hand flashed to his knife. He drew it swiftly from its scabbard, and with one sharp stroke slashed off the clinging tentacle.

The raw stump shrank back, writhing, and Austin sprang back, at the same time signalling wildly to be hauled up.

But at that instant another livid tentacle darted out of the gloom under the rock-face, and fastened with a vice-like grip upon his left leg.

There came a tug at the rope, and he was drawn clear of the bottom. This made it impossible for him to reach the arm that now held him with his knife, and he realised that in a moment he would be the centre of a tug-of-war which could only result in one way. His companions in the boat could by no manner of means be a match for the unseen monster which lurked in the hollow under the rock-face.

Cold fear clutched his heart, but he retained sufficient presence of mind to signal swiftly to be dropped again.

The signal was obeyed, and he dropped, as luck would have it, almost astride of a thick trunk of coral which grew to a height of some five feet, and which he instinctively gripped with his left arm.

Next instant came a jerk so sudden and terrible from the tentacle which had seized his left leg that he felt as though he were being torn in halves.

The pain was exquisite, and if Austin had not managed to make a rapid slash and free himself he would have fainted from the agony.



Once more he strove to back away, but now the green dusk was full of writhing arms, and two more fell upon him, one clutching his right shoulder, the other gripping him round the body.

This was no ordinary octopus which was attacking Austin. An octopus has but eight arms. His foe was a true cuttle-fish—one of those monstrous, ten-armed squids which are the scourge and terror of the greater depths, and are a match for the shark or even for the swordfish.

But for the friendly coral stump Austin must have been instantly dragged in towards the gaping mouth which waited to devour him.

The stump, however, saved him for the moment, for he got his body athwart it, and his gigantic enemy must either tear him to pieces or pull the tough growth from its solid base.

The grip on his right shoulder hampered him terribly, but still he did not lose his presence of mind. Rapidly changing his knife from his right hand to his left, he sliced away the clutching tentacle from his shoulder, and then, once more getting the knife in his right hand, attacked the arm which held his waist.

But this was thicker, and its toughness made it impossible to cut with a single slash.

Before he could hew it through three more of the horrible things laid hold upon him, two by the legs, one round the body.

The point of the latter tentacle lay just in the centre of his chest, and a sick shudder seized the boy as he saw that its tip was gone. It was one of those which he had cut through already.

The conviction that his monstrous enemy was utterly insensible to pain gave Austin a worse shock than anything yet, and for the moment he was near to despair.

But there was no time to think, and he slashed away with a mad and desperate fury.

His blade began to blunt upon the leathery tendrils, and his strength to fail under the fearful strain. He realised that his moments were numbered, yet still he clung to his coral stump, and made frantic play with his knife.

So far he had seen nothing of his ghastly enemy except its attacking suckers. Suddenly the rays of his lamp were reflected in two great oval lenses like pools of ink, and with a shudder of loathing he saw a vast, bloated, shapeless bulk, as large as the body of a carthorse, slowly

advancing towards him out of the black shadow under the foot of the rockwall.

The gigantic, unblinking eyes glared straight at him. Their owner was coming out of his retreat to see what sort of creature was giving him so much trouble.

The colossal size and nightmare appearance of the terrible denizen of the sea-caves almost paralysed Austin. But only for a second or two. Then a mad fury seized him, and he hacked and sliced with a frantic strength that he did not know himself to possess.

But though he did not realise it, this was the last effort of his overtaxed brain and muscles. For the past five minutes he had been undergoing a strain beyond the strength of mortal man.

All of a sudden something seemed to snap within his head, and the strength went out of him. Like a flash, one of the long, waving tentacles of the cuttle swirled down upon his right arm and pinned it, rendering him entirely helpless.

He could no longer struggle. All that he could do was to cling to his rock, and watch the loathsome shape of his gigantic enemy moving steadily nearer.

Those awful eyes fascinated him. He could not take his own off them. Beneath them he saw the vast, thin-lipped mouth opening and shutting in horrible anticipation.

A vague wonder came to him as to whether Clive and O'Rourke realised what was happening, and tearing his gaze away for an instant from the approaching monster he glanced swiftly up at the little oval shape which was the boat floating high above him in the sunlight on the surface of the lagoon.

As he did so a long, dark bulk shot suddenly like a cloud between him and the surface, cutting off his view of the boat.

He felt his rope vibrate as some heavy object brushed against it.

But wonder as well as other emotions were almost exhausted. After all, it mattered little whether it was a shark or ray, or what other monster of the deep.

So Austin thought. He had never heard of the "killer," as the whalers call the grampus, the *orca gladiator*, fiercest and boldest fighter of all the sea creatures, or if he had heard of it he knew nothing of its pluck or peculiar qualities.

Therefore he could hardly believe his senses when, without the slightest warning, the crushing weight of the cuttle's huge tentacles fell away from him, and left him breathless, weak as a child, yet free.

So amazed was he that it did not even occur to him to give the signal to be hauled up, but he still clung to his coral pillar, and watched in dumb astonishment while the cuttle, trailing its wounded tentacles behind it, wobbled rapidly back towards the cavern from which it had emerged.

Rapidly, but not fast enough to escape the fury of the killer. Like a black avalanche the great fish shot downwards, and drove torpedo-fashion straight at the vast, pallid bulk of the cuttle.

Though the diver is deaf inside his thick copper helmet, yet Austin almost believed that he could hear the crunch as the killer's great conical teeth met in the leathery body of the cuttle, and shore away a hundredweight or so of its substance as easily as a steam-shovel cuts clay.

The cuttle's tentacles rose whirling, and fixed upon the killer's black shining body. The killer cared not at all. It was twenty feet long, and had the strength of three elephants in its torpedo-shaped body. With another terrific snap it bit off two tentacles at the roots; then it bored straight in at the head of its prey, and the water darkened as a mist of sand rose, and hid the titanic combat.

Then, and not till then, Austin realised that he was free. He gave the signal to haul, and a few moments later was hauled safely over the side of the boat, and fell in a limp heap into the bottom.

Clive and O'Rourke had his dress and helmet off in about the quickest time on record.

At sight of his chum's face Clive went white.

"He's dead!" he groaned.

"He's not dead," replied O'Rourke. "But by the look of him 'tis an ugly time he's been having. See, he's opening his eyes. Give me the brandy till I put a dhrop down the throat of him."

The strong spirit brought a little colour back to Austin's grey cheeks, and he stared round wildly.

Then suddenly he seized hold of O'Rourke's big, horny hand, and clutched it as though he needed the feel of warm human flesh to help him realise that he was at last in safety.

“Ye poor spalpeen,” said O’Rourke, with unusual feeling, “ ’tis a terrible time ye’ve been having. Can ye tell us about it?”

“Let’s get back first,” muttered Austin, with a strong shiver.

O’Rourke motioned to Clive, the two quickly hauled up the kedge, and as they pulled back across the sunlit surface of the lagoon Austin told them of his awful experience in the black depths of the Pearl Pit.

Austin was in bed for the best part of a week after his battle with the great cuttle. His whole body was black and blue, and he could bear no one to touch him except Sundra, the Kanaka, who massaged him daily with his long, slim, brown fingers.

And at night he would wake over and over again, bathed in perspiration after ghastly dreams in which the strangling coils of the sea monster were round him again.

But by degrees his fine constitution reasserted itself, and within ten days he was out and about, his own vigorous self again.

Although his basket of shell had been lost in his battle with the great cuttle, yet the story of the riches he had discovered in the depths of the Pearl Pit had fired the others with wild enthusiasm, and half a dozen men had volunteered to risk the perils of the pit.

After consultation with O’Rourke and Pagan Captain Heritage had a submarine mine made out of a barrel filled with explosives, and towing this out sunk it in the centre of the pit, and fired it by means of an electric wire.

A huge fountain of white water leaped into the air, and hundreds of fish and other sea creatures were found floating on the surface, but there was no sign of any cuttle or octopus among them.

Feeling pretty certain that the tremendous shock would have driven out any relations of the brute which had tackled Austin, supposing any more to exist in the rock caves, Heritage then permitted his divers to go down, and the harvest of shell taken on the first day was three times greater than that of the best previous day.

What was more, these great golden-tip oysters were particularly rich in pearls, and within a week the stock which Heritage kept locked within his safe increased by the estimated value of fifty thousand pounds.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE HUNTED SHIP

“I’m going to send the schooner to Hong-Kong next week,” announced Heritage at supper one evening about three months after the discovery of the Pearl Pit.

The other four stopped eating, and looked up sharply.

“What will ye be doing that for, captain dear?” asked O’Rourke.

“Because I don’t like to risk keeping such a quantity of pearls here on the island,” answered Heritage. “I reckon we have nearly a quarter of a million pounds’ worth in the safe, to say nothing of the shell, and I confess that I should sleep happier of nights if I knew they were in the strong room of the Eastern Companies’ Bank.”

John Pagan nodded gravely.

“I think you’re right, captain. There’s always the chance of these Black Flag gentry swooping down upon us again. And next time they’ll come in big force. To tell you the truth, I’ve been a bit surprised they haven’t done so before now, for they must know well enough what we’re after.”

“Perhaps they haven’t forgotten their reception at your hands last time,” remarked Heritage, with a smile.

“They wouldn’t worry much about that, sir, if they thought there was any chance of success. Human life is cheap in these seas.”

“It’s Burnett & Co. I’ve been expecting,” put in Austin. “I don’t suppose there’s any doubt that Burnett’s castaway dodge was a regular plant to get him ashore here in order to spy out the land.”

“None whatever, my boy,” replied Heritage. “We must only hope that he and the Malay failed to reach their friends or accomplices.”

“I’m not thinking there’s much doubt that they did, captain,” said O’Rourke, gravely. “They had a sound boat beneath thim, the weather was fine, and there’s plinty of islands they cud have reached widin a couple of days.”

“Well, at any rate I shall send the pearls off as soon as I can,” said Heritage. “The typhoon season is coming on, and I want the *Brilliant* to

make the trip before the weather breaks. She ought to do it there and back in less than a week, and meantime we'll carry on the work as fast as we can. We've no time to waste, for there'll be many days coming when the boats won't be able to go out."

Boom!

The glass in the windows rattled, and the whole frame of the light building quivered.

Everyone in the room sprang to his feet.

"A gun!" muttered Heritage.

"And a big one, sorr!" added O'Rourke, making for the door.

There was still plenty of light, for it was summer now, and the sun had only just set, and the first thing they saw was a small steamer approaching the island at full speed. The cloud of black smoke which rolled from her single funnel, and extended in a long, dark line behind her, showed that she was running under forced draught.

A couple of miles behind her was a second vessel of a very different type. A long, low craft, resembling one of the gunboats which are used for patrolling the shallow waters and the big rivers of the African and East Asiatic coasts.

The latter was also travelling at full speed. Apparently she was faster than the first, and was steadily overhauling her.

Heritage clapped his binoculars to his eyes and quickly focussed them.

"The first is flying Japanese colours," he said, sharply. "The other has no flag at all."

"But she manes mischief, sorr," returned O'Rourke. "Watch that, will ye?"

As he spoke a little ball of white vapour leaped from the bows of the second vessel, and they saw a spurt of white foam rise from the sea close to the side of the first vessel. A moment later the heavy report of the gun reached their ears.

"Pipe all hands!" shouted Heritage. "Tumble aboard as quick as you can. It's time we took a hand in this game."

Already the whole camp was astir. The men, roused by the sound of the guns, had gathered along the stockade, and were eagerly watching the

strange sight.

The moment that they heard the trill of O'Rourke's silver whistle each man was off at a run for the beach. In an incredibly short time they were in the boats, and, pulling out to the *Brilliant*, tumbled aboard her in a desperate hurry and began casting off her moorings.

They needed no urging. Old bluejackets almost to a man, the prospect of a fight excited them to the utmost of their powers, and it is safe to say that a vessel was never got under way more rapidly than was the schooner.

What breeze there was was off-shore, and in a few moments the schooner, with every sail drawing and her motor-engine working at its topmost speed, was flying across the lagoon at fully ten knots, while on her deck a dozen stout fellows under Austin's direction were busily uncovering the guns and bringing up ammunition.

By this time the chase was within a mile or so of the reef, and heading for the channel.

Her pursuer was rapidly closing up, and had fired twice more, but apparently without hitting the other vessel.

With her skipper himself at the wheel, the *Brilliant* ran straight out through the opening in the reef, and plunging heavily in the surf cleared it, and was headed straight for the small steamer.

The latter began to signal vehemently.

The *Brilliant's* signal-man brought the message to Heritage.

"Japanese Government vessel, sir," he said, touching his forelock. "Chased by unknown gunboat. Asks assistance."

"Signal her to run inside the reef. We'll look after the pirate."

At this moment the gunboat fired again, and this time her shot went home. The *Brilliant's* crew heard the crash as the shell struck the Jap, and saw a cloud of smoke and splinters lift from her stern.

She staggered, but continued her course for the opening in the reef.

"That's a bigger gun than anything we've got," said Heritage to O'Rourke, who was standing beside him.

"It is, sorr. But I'm thinking they're mighty poor shots wid it. 'Tis the first time they've hit the chase."

Heritage glanced at the gunboat. She was now little more than a mile away from the *Brilliant*.

“Tell Chesney to open fire,” he said. “She’s not armoured, and if he can hull her those high explosive shells ought to do a bit of damage.”

O’Rourke hastened across to Austin, who, like the rest of the guns’ crews, had been simply aching for the order.

The schooner’s biggest weapons were only six-pounders, but they were the newest and best of their kind. They were fitted with the very latest in sighting apparatus, and the shells they carried were filled with lyddite.

Austin, with one hand on the elevating screw, took a quick glance along the sights, his finger touched the button, and the loud smack of the report was followed by the shrill scream of the shell as it flashed away on its vengeful journey.

Next instant the gathering dusk was lit by a short, sharp blaze of flame.

The shell had struck the gunboat just forward of the funnel, and as the smoke cleared away the schooner’s men raised a cheer, for a big hole gaped in the strange ship’s side.

“Too high, and too far forward!” cried Heritage. “You must hull her, Chesney.”

Austin bit his lip, and prepared to do better next time.

Meanwhile the schooner’s second six-pounder came into action, but her shell went high, and all it did was to lift one of the pirate’s boats out of its davits.

The moment that the *Brilliant* opened fire the strange vessel, abandoning her chase of the Japanese steamer, had swung round with the evident intention of bringing her broadside to bear on the schooner.

And just as the second shell from the schooner left the gun an answering crash came from the pirate, and a heavy projectile hurtled between the *Brilliant*’s masts, dropped into the sea beyond and went ricocheting away across the smooth swells.

“Begor, if wan of thim gits aboard us there’ll be throuble!” muttered O’Rourke, as he glanced back at the flying shell.

Austin, with his lips tight set, and his eyes narrowed to two lines, was staring along his sights. The short twilight of the sub-tropics was fast deepening, making accurate shooting extremely difficult.



At last he pressed the electric button.

The crash of the explosion had hardly died away before a shout of triumph rang along the deck of the *Brilliant*.

The shell had hit the base of the gunboat's funnel and carried the whole thing away. Her pace decreased at once, and they could see men swarming to repair the damage.

"Good, for you, Misther Chesney!" exclaimed O'Rourke, in high delight. "Twas a foine shot. Ye've crippled the spalpeens this time."

"It was pure luck." growled Austin. "I was aiming ten feet lower. I meant to hull her, as the captain ordered."

As he spoke the other six-pounder barked, and this time made a fair and square hit, knocking a big hole in the stern of their adversary.

But the luck was not to be all upon the schooner's side. The pirate's big gun roared again, and though as before the shell flew high, yet, as ill luck would have it, it struck the *Brilliant's* fore-topmast, and carried it away.

It fell with a fearful crash, carrying away part of the standing rigging, and leaving a raffle of wreckage towing over the side.

Worse, a heavy block struck an A.B. named Jack Morris on the head, and stretched him insensible, and apparently dead, upon the deck.

"Clear that wreckage away. Open with the quick-firers!" came Heritage's ringing tones; and the men, enraged by the disaster, obeyed with a will.

The pirate was now in easy range of the Maxims, and a storm of the vicious little one-pound shells raked her fore and aft, exploding with fearful force as they struck her, wrecking her upper works, and doing fearful damage.

Shrieks and yells arose and echoed across the calm sea, and the gunboat at once put her helm up, turned tail, and scuttled away like a wounded duck.

Not a mother's son aboard the *Brilliant* but was eager to chase, but the damage to the rigging made this impossible, and in any case Heritage had no notion of risking his ship under their adversary's big gun. If one of those heavy shells hulled her she would in all probability be done for, and it would be impossible to replace her without long delay.

So the schooner, too, turned, and followed the Japanese vessel, which had now safely negotiated the passage and was steaming slowly across the

lagoon.

“I wonder what she’s doing in these seas?” said Heritage, thoughtfully, as he watched the other ship. “She’s a Government vessel without doubt.”

“Then bedad, sorr, they’d ought to be ashamed, sending an unarmed craft like that into these says. Sure, it was just inviting thim Black Flag gentry to help thimselves.”

“You think that gunboat was a Black Flag?”

“I do, sorr. Things move here as they do iverywhere else, and ye can buy a craft like that, whin her Government has done wid her, for less than the price of a tramp steamer.”

“It’ll be a poor look-out for us if all these pirate fellows take to gunboats,” said Heritage, with a crooked smile.

“All the more rayson for gitting thim pearls safe to Hong-Kong, sorr,” replied O’Rourke.

By the time the *Brilliant* reached her moorings the other steamer had anchored, and a boat was putting off for the shore. Heritage got into his gig, and was pulled at once to the beach. Naturally he was not anxious to have strangers about loose on the island.

The last rays of daylight had faded before he landed, but a brilliant moon had risen out of the eastern sea and flooded the calm lagoon and the snow-white strand with its silver light.

A little group of small but well-built men was waiting at the landing-place.

“Japs, right enough,” said John Pagan, grimly, as he followed Heritage ashore. “I wonder what the little beggars are after.”

Austin, who was beside him, was surprised at his tone.

“They’re our allies, anyhow,” he said.

Pagan grunted.

“I’m one of those that wish they weren’t,” he replied. “They’re a sight too smart about business matters to please me, and they get the best of the bargain every time. I’d sooner deal with John Chinaman any day of the week.”

One of the Japanese stepped forward as the white men approached. He was evidently a man of birth, for he was fairer than his companions; his

hands and feet were small and delicate, and he wore a well-cut suit of European white drill.

He bowed politely.

“Captain Heritage, I believe?” he said, in perfect English.

“That is my name, sir,” replied Heritage, with equal ceremony.

“I am Mr. Kusima, at your service,” said the Japanese. “And I and my companions have to offer you our grateful thanks for the great service which you and your brave companions have just rendered us.”

“We were fortunate in reaching the spot in time,” said Heritage, with his pleasant smile. “But, if I may say so, it is risky to navigate these seas quite unarmed.”

“We have one gun, Captain Heritage,” replied the other. “Unfortunately it jammed at the critical moment, and we were forced to trust to our heels. We are fast enough to escape from any ordinary steamer, let alone a junk. The last thing that we expected was to find that Stark had got hold of a gunboat.”

“Stark—who is he?” asked Heritage, quickly.

“Is it possible that you have not heard?” asked the other in surprise. “The wonder is that he has not attacked you before this.”

“I assure you, we know nothing of him, Mr. Kusima. None of us have been off the island for months. He appears to be a pirate?”

“He is the chief of the Black Flags in these seas,” explained the Japanese. “A renegade American, we believe, who has already given my Government endless trouble. He is a giant of a man—cunning, cruel, and unscrupulous.”

“A giant!” repeated Heritage. “A fellow of about six foot four, with very high cheek-bones, and a face that looks as if it were carved out of solid mahogany?”

“Precisely,” answered Mr. Kusima.

“Then we have seen him. Only we knew him under the name of Burnett.”

“That is the man,” said Kusima. “And a very dangerous neighbour, too. He is established at the present moment with his gang of cut-throats on Batol Island, which, as you know, is but a day’s sail from here.”

“I told you so,” cried Austin. “I knew those were men whom I saw on the island.”

“You were right, sir,” said the Japanese, turning and speaking directly to Austin. “Though the island was supposed to be inaccessible Stark has apparently found not only a way up to the rocky summit, but also a harbour. There he is collecting a force for purposes best known to himself. One of them, I make no doubt, is a raid in force upon this island.”

## CHAPTER XV

### KUSIMA DRIVES A HARD BARGAIN

“Faith, we’d ought to have gone afther the spalpeen, and sunk him,” growled O’Rourke.

“It was impossible,” said the Japanese. “Crippled as you were by the loss of your topmast, you could not have caught him. But I feel sure that you inspired him with a wholesome respect for your fighting qualities.” And Mr. Kusima showed his even, white teeth in a pleasant smile.

“You will accept our hospitality for the night, Mr. Kusima,” said Heritage. “Our quarters are rough, but we can give you a bed.”

Kusima thanked him cordially.

“It will be pleasant to spend a night on firm ground,” he said. “Besides, it will give me an opportunity to talk over with you the business which has been entrusted to me by my Government.”

The words, polite as they were, were like a cold douche to his English hearers.

To Heritage especially. He had felt uncomfortably certain that the amazing value of his concession would leak out, and that sooner or later the Japanese Government would come down upon him for its pound of flesh.

But his voice betrayed nothing of his feeling as he assured Kusima of his delight in having an opportunity for a conversation.

He took Kusima into his own quarters, gave him refreshments and cigarettes, and, leaving the rest of the Japanese to the care of O’Rourke and the boys, sat down to hear what his visitor had to say.

The latter first presented credentials which proved him to be without doubt an envoy from his Government, and entitled to receive the first year’s rent of the lagoon.

“May I be permitted to hope that you are doing well?” said Kusima. “I notice that you have collected a large quantity of exceptionally fine shell.”

“Shell is plentiful,” replied Heritage, quietly. “More so than pearls, although I have at present no reason to complain on that score.”

“I am requested to give you notice, captain, that at the end of your lease my Government intend to take over the island and lagoon,” said Kusima. “It was thought fair to give you ample notice.”

The words gave Heritage an ugly shock. He had hardly expected this. Work as he might, it would be flatly impossible to gather even the half of the great sum which he required for the purchase of the battleship within the next year.

But his voice was quite under control as he replied:

“I was given to understand that there would be no difficulty about the renewal of the lease on the same terms as before.”

Kusima shrugged his shoulders.

“I am sorry,” he said. “That is, however, the message I have to give. Let me see—that gives you until the end of April next.”

“Pardon me,” said Heritage, quickly. “The end of June.”

Kusima glanced at a paper which he drew from his pocket.

“You are wrong, captain—April is the date. I have it here from our own archives.”

“But my agreement says June!” returned Heritage, sharply, and getting up he unlocked an iron deed-box and showed his visitor the draft.

Kusima glanced through it.

“A mistake of the translator, I fear,” he said, suavely.

Heritage suppressed a groan. He knew that it was not of the slightest use to argue. It would be mere waste of breath. The Japanese is the Yankee of the Pacific, and notorious for his sharp dealing.

It amounted to this: He had only ten months’ working time left, and as that included the typhoon season it was probably not really more than eight. So far from getting the million which he needed, he would be lucky if he succeeded in acquiring pearls of the value of half that sum.

“I should be willing to pay an increased rent for a renewal of the concession,” he said after a short pause.

“And I should be glad to oblige you if it were in my power,” replied Kusima. “I am greatly in your debt.”

Heritage glanced sharply at his visitor. The words sounded genuine enough, and he believed that the man really meant what he said.

“Is there any possible way of arranging it?” he asked, quietly.

The other hesitated.

“There is just one chance,” he said, thoughtfully. “But I fear it is one which is quite outside the possibility of your acceptance.”

“At any rate let me hear it.”

“This man Stark is giving us very serious trouble,” said Kusima.

For the moment Heritage did not see what bearing this remark had upon the subject which they were discussing.

“We have made several attempts to capture him already,” went on Kusima, “but he absolutely defies us. Batol is practically impregnable. The heaviest guns have no effect upon its great cliffs, and landing is, of course, impossible. He is inflicting great harm upon our trade, and has already cost us much money and many lives.”

Light suddenly flashed upon Heritage.

“You mean that the capture of Stark would be accepted by your Government as the price of a renewal of my lease?” he said, sharply.

“I think that I might safely promise that,” said the Japanese.

“You would give it me in writing?”

“Yes.”

“Will you permit me a short consultation with my friends? You will understand that this is a serious matter, and one which I cannot decide upon without their consent.”

“By all means,” answered Kusima.

Heritage left him and went into the messroom, where the others were gathered talking eagerly together.

At sight of their chief’s troubled face silence fell in the room. Every eye was fixed upon Heritage. They all felt instinctively that he had something of great importance to tell them.

In a few brief words he related his conversation with the Japanese envoy, and the latter’s astonishing proposal.

The others listened in silence.

“Begor, he’s got a foine cheek!” said O’Rourke, when Heritage had finished. “The spalpeen wants us to take on a job which is too big for his whole country.”

“It’s a pretty large order, I admit,” said Heritage, with a grim smile.

“Sure ye’d need your Dreadnought to tackle Batol,” continued O’Rourke, thoughtfully. “I’m wid ye, captain, to the last kick, but I’m thinking we’d be biting off more than we could chew if we tuk on this pirate king in his native mountain.”

“We might possibly manage to catch him at sea,” suggested Austin.

“True,” said Pagan. “But even then we’d only get a part of the gang. It seems to me that what the Japs want is for us to clear out Batol itself.”

Heritage nodded.

“You are right, Pagan. It is Batol or nothing.”

Pagan shook his great head.

“Like O’Rourke, I’m game to follow you anywhere, captain. But I own I don’t see any way of managing this job. We should only throw away our lives for nothing.”

A slight shade crossed Heritage’s grave face.

“Very well, gentlemen,” he said, in his quietest manner. “I have no doubt you are right. I told Mr. Kusima that the decision would be with you.”

He was turning to leave the room when suddenly Clive, who up to now had not opened his mouth, spoke up sharply.

“There’s one way we haven’t yet thought of.”

Heritage stopped short. The others all turned and looked at the boy.

Clive flushed a little, but went on.

“We can’t tackle Batol from the sea, but we might from the air.”

“From the air?” repeated Heritage.

“Yes, sir. By means of an aeroplane.”

“Begor, I niver thought of that,” exclaimed O’Rourke, and a buzz of eager talk burst out.

Heritage held up his hand for silence.



“I don’t quite understand, Denham. An aeroplane might, of course, reach the summit of Batol; but such a machine carries one or at most two men. What use would they be against the forces under Stark’s command?”

“Well, sir,” said Clive, hesitatingly. “Even if there was only one man he could carry enough high explosives to smash everything on top of a small place like that into flinders. If the pirates haven’t got caves or bomb-proof shelters he could fly round and round and wipe out every mother’s son of them.”

“Bedad, so he could!” exclaimed O’Rourke, slapping his knee with a sound like the report of a pistol.

“There’s another thing to be considered,” went on Clive, gaining confidence. “Most of these Black Flag chaps are Chinese—about the most ignorant and superstitious crowd in existence. It’s my idea that the very sight of an aeroplane would scare them out of their wits.”

“’Deed, the lad’s right,” declared the irrepressible O’Rourke. “They’d think ’twas a fiery dhragon come to take thim all to the bad place.”

Heritage nodded.

“The moral effect is certainly to be considered,” he said. “And Denham’s idea may possibly be feasible. But granted that we could obtain the necessary machine and the explosives, where are we going to find an aeronaut who will risk his life in such a desperate enterprise?”

“I can fly, sir,” said Clive, simply. “I was out almost every fine day last summer in my father’s new machine.”

“I beg your pardon, Denham,” said Heritage. “I had quite forgotten that you were a flying man. And would you take this risk?”

“Of course I would, sir,” said Clive, opening his eyes in surprise.

O’Rourke clapped his big hands.

“’Tis the broth of a boy, ye are, Misther Denham.”

Clive coloured again.

“Nonsense, Mr. O’Rourke, there’s no risk to speak of. Flying over the sea is always easier than over the land, and once I’m well up there’s precious little danger. An aeroplane takes a lot of hitting, and I could simply choose my own height, and sail round and round, dropping bombs till not a single pirate would dare to show his nose. Then, if the schooner was lying by, her boats could land a good strong force, and as there’d be no opposition they

could certainly find the way up the cliffs, and soon polish off the whole gang.”

While Clive was speaking Heritage had listened with deep attention.

“Denham,” he said. “I am very deeply indebted to you for your suggestion. And if the rest of you agree I shall at any rate try your plan.”

“Sure, ’twas only a plan we wanted, sorr,” declared O’Rourke. “Now we’ve got wan, I’m game to work it wid any man.”

“And so am I,” said Pagan.

Heritage looked as though a great weight had been lifted from his mind.

“That’s settled then. The next question is how to obtain the aeroplane?”

“There’s an uncle of mine in charge of our works, sir,” said Clive. “If I cabled him the necessary credit he would see that the machine which my father was working at before his death was completed and sent out at once. I’d rather have that than any other, because I know exactly how to manage it.”

“How long would that take?” asked Heritage.

“Say a fortnight to finish, and a month by steamer to Hong-Kong. We should have it here within eight or nine weeks.”

Heritage nodded.

“That would suit very well, for it would be no use trying to use it until the typhoon season is over. I propose then, gentlemen, that as soon as the shell can be loaded aboard the *Brilliant* she shall sail for Hong-Kong. Denham and I will go in her, and we will send the necessary cables as soon as we reach Hong-Kong. O’Rourke and Pagan will remain here in charge, O’Rourke looking after the defences and Pagan the fishing.”

“Go ahead, sorr,” said the big Irishman, energetically. “We’ll kape this end up.”

## CHAPTER XVI

### STARK SHOWS HIS HAND

“’Tis pretty nigh time for the boss to be getting back,” observed O’Rourke, as he sat in the stern of the diving scow, and steadily turned the wheel of the pump.

The scow lay about half-way between the island and the reef, and one of the men was below, busily engaged in collecting the precious shell.

Austin, who was mending some fishing tackle, glanced up at the sky. It was covered with a thin haze which lay like a fog on the sea beyond the reef, and through which the sun burnt down with a coppery glare.

“If he’s coming I hope he’s not far off,” he answered. “I don’t like the look of the weather, and the glass was tumbling in a very ugly way when I looked at it this morning.”

“Aye, lad, there’s wind brewing, and I’d not wondher if ’twas a typhoon, though sure ’tis a bit late in the season for thim kind of storms.”

“We’ve been jolly lucky so far,” said Austin. “We haven’t had a real bad blow yet, and only lost about a dozen days through bad weather the whole time that the chief’s been away.”

“Another thing to be grateful for,” he went on, after a minute’s pause. “We haven’t had that visit from Stark yet.”

“Bedad, but I’m thankful for that same,” said O’Rourke. “Wid only ten men on the island ’tis a mighty poor chance we’d have against that murdering villain.”

“Perhaps he knows that the skipper took the pearls away with him,” suggested Austin. “And he’s waiting till we’ve got a fresh stock to tempt him with.”

“’Deed then, there’s a good few in the safe this same minnit, Mистер Chesney,” said O’Rourke. “Mesilf, I can’t size up what they’re worth, but there’s some mighty fine jools that we’ve tuk in the last two months.”

“Yes, I don’t think we’ve done badly,” replied Austin, in a satisfied tone. “The skipper will be pleased when he sees them. But it will be a long job to fish out the lagoon.”

“Aye, ’tis a terrible dale of money the captain wants,” said O’Rourke, gravely. “ ’Twill be a million for the ship, and at laste half as much more for expenses, and for the rest of us. And with him ’tis all or nothing.”

“I know that,” said Austin. “And it’s a big price we have to pay for the extension of the lease. I don’t mind telling you that I’m a lot worried about this Batol business. Any way you put it, Clive is running a fearful risk, venturing up over the pirate island alone. Suppose they manage to put a bullet through him, or suppose he gets caught in a gust of wind and upset?”

“Faith, I’ll suppose nothing of the sort,” retorted O’Rourke. “I’ll not count troubles until they’re upon us.”

Before Austin could answer a dull boom came out of the mist seaward and made them both start violently.

“A gun!” exclaimed Austin, straining his eyes through the fog, but seeing nothing. “Is it Stark?”

O’Rourke laughed scornfully.

“Would any pirate be fool enough to advertise himself like that?” he demanded. “Sure, if Stark was aafter raiding us I’m thinking he’d come in the middle of the night. I belave ’tis the masther.”

Austin’s eyes flashed.

“By Jove! I hope it is. That would be his signal-gun.”

As he spoke he got up, and with one arm round the mast stood staring out seawards.

“We’ll have Hayman up, anyway, so as to be ready for all emergencies,” said O’Rourke, giving the rope two sharp tugs.

They were at once answered from below, and the ladder began to vibrate as the diver put his weight upon it.

Just as his great copper helmet came gleaming up out of the blue water Austin gave a joyful shout.

“It’s the *Brilliant*. I see her.”

O’Rourke helped Hayman over the side and glanced round.

“Ye’re right, lad,” he said, delightedly. “ ’Tis the schooner hersilf. Up anchor, and we’ll be at the landing-place in time to mate her.”

Through the haze, about a mile from the channel, appeared the masts of the schooner. There was little wind, and every sail was set, even to the spinnaker and big balloon jib topsail. Evidently, too, her engines were at work, for she was moving briskly through the water.

O'Rourke rapidly helped Hayman out of his suit, while Austin began to get up the kedge, and when this was done the three together got sail on the scow and turned her bow landwards.

"There go her colours," cried Austin, as the Union Jack was broken out from the schooner. "By Jove! I'm looking forward to seeing old Clive again."

"Aye, we'll have a foine time this evening," chuckled O'Rourke.

By this time the schooner was clear of the belt of fog and quite close to the channel.

"I suppose Coot has spotted her all right," said Austin, with sudden anxiety. "He won't go loosing off the mine."

O'Rourke gave a great bellow of laughter.

"Trust Sam Coot. He's got eyes in his head. Aye, watch there! Isn't he running up the answering signal over the stockade?"

Austin opened the locker in the stern-sheets and took out the case containing his glasses. They were the powerful prismatics which Captain Heritage had given him, and with which he had detected the men moving on the top of Batol.

"I ought to be able to see the skipper," he said, as he wiped the object glasses with his handkerchief and adjusted the screw.

"Aye, he'll be on the bridge," answered O'Rourke, who was steering.

Austin focused the glasses and took a long stare at the schooner. O'Rourke, watching him saw an expression of doubt and surprise cross his face.

"I can't see the skipper," he said, presently. "There's only one man on the quarter-deck, and he's a stranger."

"The captain said he would be shipping a few more hands," said O'Rourke.

"No sign of Clive either," went on Austin in puzzled tones. "Why, there's hardly a soul on deck. That's a bit odd, surely."

“No one on deck?” repeated O’Rourke. “’Deed, but that’s a quare thing intoirely. It’s hoping I am there’s nothing wrong.”

Austin was still examining the approaching schooner through his glasses.

Suddenly he turned to O’Rourke.

“O’Rourke, you remember the *Brilliant’s* foremast being shot away?”

“I do.”

“And how we stepped a new spar before she left?”

“Av coorse.”

“Well, this ship’s got an old foremast. What’s more, she’s got a different suit of sails and her six-pounders have grown.”

“Is it crazy ye are?” exclaimed the big Irishman, sharply.

“Take the glasses and look.”

O’Rourke did so.

He focused them carefully and stared hard at the schooner for quite a minute. The latter was now little more than a mile away. She had just passed the channel and was inside the lagoon.

There was a scared look on the Irishman’s face as he lowered the glasses.

“’Tis not the *Brilliant* at all,” he said, in a strange voice.

“That was my notion, though I didn’t dare say so,” replied Austin.

“Thin what in hiven’s name is she?” demanded O’Rourke.

“If you ask me, I should say she was a pirate, and that this is a dodge of Stark’s to sneak into the lagoon without chancing the mines,” replied Austin, with tight-set lips.

“Begor, but I wouldn’t wondher if you’re right, lad,” replied O’Rourke. “And if ’tis so, it’s throuble we’re in for, and no mistake.”

“Hadn’t we better get out the oars, sir?” asked Hayman, the diver, who had been listening with deep anxiety.

O’Rourke glanced at the schooner.

“No,” he said, shortly, “we mustn’t let thim divvies think we smell a rat. Kape her as she’s going. Wid this breeze, we’ll be in before they rache the

moorings.”

“What do you intend to do, O’Rourke?” asked Austin.

“Git to the stockade, and hould it like grim death.”

So long as he lives Austin will never forget that journey across the lagoon. The scow, though moving at about four knots with a following breeze, seemed to crawl like a snail across the rippling surface of the lagoon, while every minute the strange schooner that was so treacherously like the *Brilliant* loomed larger and nearer.

The Union Jack still floated from her jackyard, and the same ominous stillness pervaded her decks. The more Austin looked at her the more amazed he was at the care with which she had been rigged out to resemble the *Brilliant*, and for the first time he began to realise the cunning and boldness of the Tiger of Batol.

Long before the scow reached the shore the schooner was within easy rifle range. Austin marvelled that she did not open fire, and said so to O’Rourke.

“Why would they?” growled the Irishman. “Sure, they don’t want to rouse the stockade. They know as well as you and I that we’ve got guns there, and they’re thinking they’ll humbug the lot of us properly.”

“Great ghost!” muttered Austin. “Look at that. Two of the chaps from the stockade are coming down to the beach. Now if the schooner begins to shoot she’ll have the half of us at one clip.”

“ ’Tis not the half, but the whole lot of us she wants,” said O’Rourke, coolly. “ ’Tis no bad thing those chaps have come down, for ’twill show Masther Stark that they don’t suspect him.”

“If we could only warn them,” groaned Austin.

“Be aisy, Misther Denham. And if ye could just flutter a handkerchief to the schooner ’twould do no harm.”

It went horribly against the grain, but Austin did so, and one of the scoundrels behind the rail actually had the cheek to respond to the signal.

O’Rourke grinned.

“ ’Tis something betther than a wave of a handkerchief that chap will be getting in a few minutes,” he remarked, coolly.

It did Austin good to see how quietly the big Irishman took things, but his own heart was beating desperately hard, and he felt as though he could hardly breathe, while the scow covered the last few yards which separated her from the shore.

“Take it aisy,” advised O’Rourke, calmly. “Pull the old scow well up on the beach. The longer we can fool thim the bettther chanst we’ll have of gitting safe to th’ stockade.”

The sham *Brilliant* reached the moorings just as O’Rourke and Austin and Hayman finished pulling up the scow. Already half her sails were off her and those on shore heard the rumble of her anchor chain through the hawse-hole.

The lagoon was shallow inshore, and the moorings were between 200 and 300 yards from the beach.

O’Rourke walked rapidly, yet without any appearance of haste, to the landing stage on which Sam Coot, the boatswain, and a man named Vincent were standing.

From Coot’s expression it was plain that, if he did not actually smell a rat, he was at least puzzled.

He looked round as O’Rourke approached.

“What in blazes is the matter with the *Brilliant*?” he demanded, with a frown on his hairy face. “Has the captain lost all his crew overboard, and hired niggers instead of ’em?”

O’Rourke looked him straight in the eyes.

“Can ye kape quiet and not jump, Sam Coot, av I tell yez something that’ll frighten ye?”

“Choke it up. I ain’t no babby in long clothes,” retorted Coot.

“’Tis that this ship is not the *Brilliant* at all.”

Coot’s jaw dropped slightly, but he showed no other sign of surprise.

“Not the schooner! Then for any sake, what is it?” he growled.

“’Tis Stark—Burnett that was.”

“The Black Flag chap?” gasped the other man, Vincent.

“Shut your head!” ordered Coot, fiercely.

He turned to O’Rourke.



“The question is, will they start shooting if we make a bolt for the stockade?” he said, coolly.

“Av coorse they will,” answered O’Rourke. “ ’Tis because they think we don’t suspicion thim that they haven’t started already.”

“Then what the mischief are we to do—stand here and wait till the beggars come ashore and lay their black hands on us?”

“No; what we’ll do is this—you and Vincent and Hayman will turn round, and sthroll quietly up the bache. Misther Denham and I will stay here till ye rache the scrub. Thin we’ll run for it.”

Coot started to protest, but O’Rourke cut him short.

“Obey ordhers, Sam,” he said, with a fierceness Austin had never heard from him. “ ’Tis aisier for thim spalpeens to be hitting five than two. Marrch, I tell ye.”

Coot obeyed. He walked quietly away, back across the sandy strip of beach, and Vincent and Hayman followed him. O’Rourke and Austin were left alone on the little wharf.

“There’s a chap with a rifle just behind the rail forrard,” said Austin, speaking with a coolness which surprised himself. “I saw the sun glint on the barrel.”

“The more fool him for not shooting,” replied O’Rourke, in the calmest fashion imaginable. “If he doesn’t pull soon ’twill be too late intoirely. Sam’s near rached the bushes already.”

“They’re launching a boat,” said Austin.

“Aye, and on the starboard side, so that we won’t be seeing it till it pulls round the starn.”

Then with a sudden change of tone:

“Coot’s safe. Run for your life!”

He spun round as he spoke, and dashed away up the beach at a speed surprising for such a big man.

It seemed to Austin that he himself had hardly turned to follow before a rifle cracked viciously from the schooner, and a bullet sang so close to his head that he felt its wind on his cheek.

He heard a babel of voices, shouted orders, and as he darted away across the blazing white beach a heavy crash of firing sent the echoes ringing

across the wide lagoon, and the air was full of the scream and whistle of nickel-pointed projectiles.

He saw little puffs of sand rise from the hard strand on this side and that—saw O'Rourke's big figure flying along just in front of him.

He had just time to wonder how it was that they were neither of them hit when suddenly the big Irishman stumbled forward and pitched flat on his face.

Austin had no time to be frightened, or to consider the consequences of stopping under fire.

Instinctively he stooped, seized O'Rourke, and with an almost superhuman effort lifted him, and, carrying him over his shoulder, staggered across the last few yards which separated him from the thicket of grey-green palmettoes fringing the open beach.

Dragging his burden a few steps into cover, he laid him down behind the bulwark of thick creeping stems, and dropped, breathless and exhausted, beside him.

Bullets crackled through the stiff foliage above them, and from seawards they could hear the shouts of their enemies; but for the moment, at any rate, they were safe.

Austin rose gasping to his hands and knees. His face was white as he bent over O'Rourke. He forgot his own danger in anxiety for his friend. By the way in which the big Irishman had gone down all in a heap, without a sound or a cry, he feared the worst.

To his intense relief, though O'Rourke's face was purple, his eyes were wide open.

"Where are you hit?" demanded Austin.

"Hit, is it?" said O'Rourke, feeling his left side tenderly, about the region of the waist. "Bedad, I feel as if someone had kicked me harrd in the wind."

He fumbled a moment and then thrust his hand into the pocket of his trousers, and brought out a silver tobacco-box which Heritage had given him. It was absolutely flattened.

He looked at it ruefully.

"Och, the murtherin' villains! They bruk me baccy-box!"

Austin burst out laughing. For the very life of him he could not help it.

O'Rourke gave him a comical look.

“ 'Tis laughing the other side of your face ye'll be in, about two twos,” he said. “Come on wid ye before thim niggers catches us.”

And, scrambling to his feet, he set off full tilt in the direction of the stockade.

There was cover all the way, and though the shooting was constant they reached the camp in safety and hurled themselves through the gate.

Sam Coot met them, and by the look on his face it was plain there was something seriously wrong.

“We've forgot the other boat,” he said. “She's round the far side of the island, and Pagan and his chaps won't have a dog's chance of getting in.”

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE BATTLE IN THE BUSH

O'Rourke and Austin exchanged glances of dismay. In the excitement of the moment they had all completely forgotten Pagan's men, who had been working the far side of the lagoon. There they would lie, peacefully fishing away, and, unless the sound of firing had alarmed them, quite ignorant of the terrible danger which threatened.

Austin was the first to speak.

"I'll go," he said.

"No, sorr. The captain would niver forgive me if ye tuk harrm," said O'Rourke. "I'll sind wan of the min."

Austin looked him full in the face.

"You'll let me go. I'm a better runner than any of them, and the scrub gives good cover. With any luck I'll be back inside of half an hour."

O'Rourke hesitated a moment.

"Go thin, if ye must," he said, in a curious, husky voice. "And the blissed saints be good to yez, and bring ye safe back!"

"Give me a rifle," said Austin.

Sam Coot handed him one of the Winchester repeaters with which the camp was armed, and a belt of cartridges, and he darted away. As he plunged into the thick scrub he heard shouts from the beach.

Stark's crew had landed.

The island was not much more than half a mile across from beach to beach, and under the palms in the centre the scrub was high enough to hide a man.

Austin knew every foot of the ground, and he ran as he had seldom run before, ducking in and out between the prickly thickets.

Within five minutes he had crossed the worst of it and was in sight of the beach. The broad stretch of snowy sand lay baking in the fierce heat, and the sunlight glittered on the wide lagoon, just ruffled by the gentle breeze, with

the gulls flying white against the blue sky. Beyond, the smooth hills of surf broke in solemn thunder upon the reef.

The whole scene was so quiet and peaceful that for the moment Austin almost fancied the past hour had been an evil dream from which he was only now awaking.

But at that moment an angry crackle of firing burst out in the distance behind him, and he saw Pagan's pearly scow pulling hard for the shore.

It was no good exposing himself until it was necessary. He waited under the shade of a bushy hibiscus covered with brilliant crimson blooms until the big, flat-bottomed craft reached the shore.

Then he stepped out into the open and waved a handkerchief to attract the attention of the crew.

Pagan waved back, and Austin rapidly signalled him in Morse code to leave the boat and join him at once.

Pagan, evidently alarmed by the firing which was now becoming heavier every minute, came running up the beach towards Austin with his two men behind him.

"What's up?" he cried, as he came near enough.

Austin put his fingers to his lips for silence.

Pagan took the hint, and waited till he was quite close before he spoke again.

Austin in a few rapid sentences told him what had happened, and Pagan's expression showed plainly how desperate he considered the situation.

"Not a gun among the lot of us," he muttered. "Is there any chance of getting through to the stockade, Mr. Denham?"

"Yes, if they didn't see me start," replied Austin, quickly.

"Whether they saw you or not, they're mighty apt to have spotted us," said Pagan, frowning. "We saw the schooner's topmasts over the trees, and reckoned she was the *Brilliant*. Then when the shooting began we were fair puzzled. Are the pirate chaps landed yet?"

"Must be by this time. They were getting out a boat twenty minutes ago. And by the sound of it, they're tackling the stockade right now."

“That’ll give ’em something to chew on,” said Pagan, grimly. “If O’Rourke gets to work on ’em with that Maxim I pity ’em. Aye, by the sound of it that’s her at work now. Well, I reckon the sooner we get back and take a hand the better. There’s not too many of us to tackle a crew like that.”

He turned to his two men.

“Step lively, you chaps, and keep your thick heads below the bushes, or you’ll be mighty apt to get ’em filled with lead.”

For such a big, heavy man, Pagan moved wonderfully lightly and rapidly, and Austin was pleased to see the clever way in which his men copied him. In front the rifles cracked unceasingly, and the rattle of the Maxim was like a giant running a stick along a row of palings.

Insensibly Austin’s spirits rose, and he began to hope that Stark and Co. were too busy with their frontal attack on the stockade to have leisure left to think of anything else.

But his experience of the ruler of the Black Flags was still young, and he was destined to be bitterly undeceived. Stark might have made one mistake in thinking he had fooled the islanders, but he was not likely to make a second.

The little party of four were barely half-way across the island when a slight rustle behind him reached Austin’s quick ears, and looking back over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of a yellow face peering round a tree-trunk.

Without the slightest hesitation he flung up his rifle and fired. The head vanished abruptly, but instantly, with shrill cries, half a dozen villainous-looking ruffians came charging after them through the bushes.

“Run!” roared Austin, as he saw Pagan stop and face round. “Run! I’ll keep ’em off. They need you in the stockade.”

Pagan knew that it was his duty to go on. Knew, too, that for him and his men to await the rush of the attacking party would be sheer suicide, for they had no weapons of any sort but their clasp-knives. With a sharp order to his men he dashed forward.

Austin sprang behind a tree for cover. Only just in time, for bullets came pinging through the trees, shredding down twigs and small branches in a shower. One scored the bark not a foot from his head.

Dropping on one knee, he began firing coolly yet rapidly.

The foremost of the Black Flags flung up his arms and went down without a sound, and a second spun round screaming, with a smashed shoulder.

The rest ducked back into cover, and for a moment all was quiet except for the firing around the stockade.

Austin's heart beat quickly, but he had no feeling of fear. On the contrary, a fierce exultation possessed him, and his eyes roved here and there, watching for the least movement that might betray the position of his enemies.

But not a leaf stirred, and he began to wonder whether the survivors had taken fright and cleared out.

If so, the best thing he could do would be to make a bolt for the stockade; but as he did not want to run the risk of a bullet through his back he tried the old ruse of sticking his felt hat on the end of his rifle barrel, and raising it above the bushes.

This, however, produced no result, and after one more searching inspection of the spot where the Black Flags had vanished, he left his post of vantage, and, bent double, darted away towards the stockade.

He had ten or fifteen yards of almost open ground to cover before he reached the next palmetto clump, but still there was no sign of his hidden foes, and repressing a strong desire to give a shout of triumph he dashed headlong into the thick of the stiff, grey-green foliage, felt his leg clutched by an unseen hand, pitched forward on his head, and next moment was lying perfectly helpless, flat on his face, with two short and squat, but powerfully built fellows on top of him.

Another wrenched his rifle from his hand, and at the same time a hard fist caught him by the scruff of the neck, jamming his face close against the ground, so that he could not move his head an inch or see the faces of his captors.

But if he could not see he could hear, and gathering his scattered senses by degrees he realised that a lively discussion was in progress between the pirates. Though he could not understand a word, yet somehow he felt quite certain that the bone of contention was himself, and that while some were anxious to finish him out of hand—probably by sticking a krees between his ribs—at least one of the party desired to keep him alive as prisoner.

“You no killee that man. Boss him pletty angly if you do.”

The voice broke in sharply upon the discussion, but Austin, who ought to have been relieved at this interposition on his behalf, felt a cold chill of horror as he recognised the queer hissing accents of Kwala, the Malay.

Better, he thought, to be stabbed and finished outright than fall alive into the hands of this little fiend. Over the supper-table in camp he had heard many a story of the coldblooded cruelty of the head-hunting Malay pirates, and Kwala, he knew well, bore him the most bitter of grudges. His blood ran cold, and he made a sudden and frantic effort to release himself.

Quite useless. The weight of the two men who held him was beyond his power to move, and the only result was that the grip on the back of his neck tightened until it was agonising, while the man who held him burst into a hoarse and cruel laugh.

“Puttee lope lound him, and bling him along,” came Kwala’s voice again in the pidgin-English which the others seemed to understand, for next moment Austin’s wrists were seized, forced together behind his back, and tied tightly with a bit of coir or cocoanut fibre, so hard and rough that it fairly bit into his flesh.

Next he was jerked to his feet, and found himself the centre of a group of five men, four being pig-tailed Chinamen, with yellow faces, almond eyes, and high cheek-bones, the fifth the Malay Kwala, whose wizened face bore an ugly grin of triumph.

“You velly solly you stluck me before boss done with you,” he observed, fixing his glittering eyes on Austin.

“Sorry, you miserable little reptile!” retorted Austin. “You’d be the one to be sorry if I had my hands free.”

Kwala’s brown face went livid, his deep-set eyes seemed to flash fire. He stepped forward and struck Austin full in the mouth with his leathery hand, splitting his lips so that they bled.

“Teachee you keep civil tongue,” he growled, spitting like an angry cat.

Austin ground his teeth with rage, but with an effort remained silent. He was perfectly helpless, and it was mere foolishness to aggravate his captors into ill-treating him without having the slightest power to retaliate.

“Bling him along,” ordered Kwala again. “Boss him plenty pleased catchee this one.”

One of the Chinese seized the end of the cord dangling from Austin’s bound wrists, and giving him a brutal kick drove him forward.



Right through the thickest of the brush they drove him. Twigs lashed his face, insects bit and stung, but he could not raise a hand to help himself. When he stumbled—which was often—the yellow men evidently found his falls a subject of excellent jest, for they laughed consumedly.

What added to Austin's misery was his intense anxiety as to the fate of his friends.

The firing was as heavy as ever, but the brush was too thick to see anything of what was going on, and Kwala, with evident purpose, kept well back among the scrub.

At last, after an eternity of stumbling helplessly through the thickets, Kwala turned abruptly to the right, and Austin found himself out on the open beach almost opposite the landing-place.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE TENDER MERCIES OF STARK

The Malay gave Austin no time to look round and see how his friends were faring, but drove him at a run across the blazing beach.

Several boats were pulled up on shore. One was quickly launched, Austin was forced into it, the others sprang in after and rowed rapidly to the schooner.

Austin stared at the vessel, marvelling at her extraordinary resemblance to the *Brilliant*. But for the difference in the fore-topmast, and the fact that her guns were eight-pounders instead of the sixes which the real *Brilliant* carried, she might have been the same ship.

Kwala noticed the direction of Austin's gaze, and grinned maliciously, showing teeth blackened by betel nut.

"Boss he fool you plover," he chuckled. "Englishman tink him clebber, but no can tell own ship. Me tink you know dat ship better pletty soon."

Austin bit his lips to crush down the angry retort which arose to them. His silence annoyed the ugly little Malay, who snarlingly ordered his men to hurry their prisoner aboard.

Half a dozen flat-faced, blue-bloused Chinamen stared at Austin as he was driven up over the rail, but he was not given time to take in any details. He was roughly hustled down the forward companion into the lower hold, the hatch was slammed down, and he was left to his own reflections.

Anything more nerve-trying than the long wait in the hot, stuffy darkness of his airless prison could hardly be imagined.

The brutes had not even had the decency to untie his hands, and the boy crouched there on the dirty planking with the cords biting into his wrists like hot irons, and cramp racking his shoulder-blades.

But anxiety racked him even worse than pain. Through the thick timbers of the schooner's sides he could still hear the sound of firing.

It seemed to go on for an interminable time, and Austin felt as if he would willingly give ten years of life to know what was happening. Strong as the stockade was, he could hardly hope that O'Rourke, with at most eight

men, even if Pagan and his two had got in safely, would be able to hold it against Stark's horde of pirates.

He had horrible visions of the camp being rushed by the savage crew of Black Flags, and every mother's son inside murdered.

At last the sound of firing slackened, then ceased entirely. There followed some minutes of utter silence, and his worst fears seemed justified, when all of a sudden he heard the Maxim break out again with its merry rattle. Yes, there was no doubt about it. It was the Maxim, and in spite of his miserable plight, Austin absolutely shouted with relief and joy, for the sound told him that his own people, or some of them at least, were still alive to fire it.

Presently he heard bumpings alongside. Boats were coming off. There was a low, growling hum of voices, but no words were distinguishable. Then came the sound of feet on the deck above.

A sharp order, and with a bang that shook the ship one of her eight-pounders spoke. Then the other began, and for half an hour or more the two kept up a deafening bombardment.

In spite of the pain he was suffering, Austin almost laughed. Putting two and two together, he felt practically certain that Stark's party had been repulsed, and that the leader was venting his spite by shelling the camp.

Well, the shells might do damage, no doubt they would, but the defenders would not be harmed. Safe in their deep trenches, they could withstand siege guns if necessary.

Thirty or forty shots were fired, then silence fell again.

All of a sudden the hatch above was flung open, and a shaft of light streamed down into the dusky darkness, making Austin blink.

"You comee long topside," came Kwala's voice, sharp and angry. "Boss him wantee see you."

Austin rose with difficulty to his feet.

"I can't climb the ladder with my hands tied like this," he answered, coolly.

Spitting and snarling like an angry cat, Kwala came down. He had his big crooked knife in his hand, an ugly weapon with a blade as keen as a razor.

“You stlike me, me stlikee you,” he growled, holding up the knife threateningly.

“Don’t worry yourself, I’ll wait till I’ve got something to hit you with, you brown-faced baboon,” replied Austin, recklessly.

For a moment he thought the Malay was going to spring at him, but the man was evidently under orders, and muttering fiercely to himself he cut the cords round Austin’s wrists and followed him closely up the ladder, and so to the deck.

The fierce sun made Austin blink after his long imprisonment in the darkness below, but as his eyes became accustomed to the glare he saw two things—first that the deck was full of men, many of whom were wounded; secondly, that up in the north-west a bank of blue-black cloud was rising slowly out of the sea lying like a patch of night across the azure sky.

He glanced towards the stockade, of which the outer banks were visible from the sea. They were scarred and torn with shell, and the roofs of the wooden houses had vanished, but his heart leaped as he saw the old flag still flying above the smouldering ruins.

Next minute he was standing in front of Stark.

Yes, it was the same man who had called himself Burnett, the same scowling giant with features that looked as though carved out of solid mahogany.

Towering a full head above Austin, he stood frowning fiercely down upon the boy. A formidable figure, with the gnarled muscles of his enormous arms and chest swelling under his flannel shirt, and his shaggy eyebrows almost hiding his deep-set, sullen eyes.

Austin, for his part, looked the giant full in the face. He felt that the other was trying to frighten him, but the only result was to stiffen his own resolution to show no sign of funk, and to carry off matters with a high hand.

“Wal, I fooled one of yew, anyways,” said Stark, with a sneer. His accent was nasal American, of the type known as “Down East.”

“Not much fooling about it,” retorted Austin, briskly. “If you ask me, I think the boot’s on the other foot.”

A violent expression burst from Stark, but he checked himself.

“Yew infernal impudent brat!” he exclaimed. “The sooner yew recollect ez you’re my prisoner the better it’ll be for yew.”

“The sooner you learn to treat your prisoners decently the better,” returned Austin, sharply. “Even if you are a Black Flag, or a pirate, or whatever you choose to call yourself, you ought to know better than to leave a white man in the hands of a thing like that.” And he pointed scornfully at Kwala.

“Ef yew’re wanting to git a knife in your innards yew’re going the right way to work,” said Stark, ominously.

“I’d rather have half a dozen knives in me than be treated as that coffee-coloured sweep has treated me,” answered Austin, boldly. “Shoving me down in that filthy black hold, to be half suffocated.”

“I reckon yew’ll hev company down there before long,” sneered Stark. “So ef it’s dark it won’t be lonely.”

“Company,” repeated Austin. “Where’s it coming from?”

“Out of that there camp o’ yourn, Britisher.”

Austin laughed outright.

“Take you some time to collect it,” he said, scornfully.

Stark, who was plainly very sore at the failure of his first attack, burst out into violent abuse of Austin, Heritage, and the rest of the pearling party.

“I don’t keer ef it takes a week,” he declared, violently. “I’ll hev ’em. I’ll starve ’em out ef I can’t get ’em no other way. How many men hev ye got there?” he demanded, threateningly.

“Enough to beat you and your whole crowd of yellow-skinned thieves,” said Austin, coolly.

Stark’s huge fists clenched convulsively. For a moment Austin believed that the giant would strike him to the deck. But he did not budge an inch, and kept his eyes fixed upon the man’s fierce face.

With an effort Stark controlled his rising passion.

“Air yew going to answer my question, or air yew not?” he asked, in a deep, rumbling tone.

“No,” said Austin, plump and plain. “I’m not going to give you any information at all, except that Captain Heritage will make things precious hot for you when he comes back.”

Kwala, who had been standing by listening scowlingly to the conversation, broke in:

“You lettee me talk to white boy, boss. Me soon makee him speak. One little piecee stling round him head. He talkee pletty klick.”

Austin shuddered inwardly. He had heard of the torture of the knotted cord, and knew that he might just as well expect mercy from a shark or a tiger as from the malevolent little brown man.

“Yew hear what Kwala says?” said Stark. “I guess yew’d cough up all yew know mighty quick once he gets to work on yew. Now then, how many chaps are there in your camp, and how much grub have they got?”

Austin remained disdainfully silent.

“Yew’d jest ez well speak naow ez later,” continued Stark, glowering down at Austin. “Plucky yew may be, but I’ve yet to see the feller ez cud stand a knotted cord twisted around his forehead. Ez soon ez his eyeballs begins to bulge he can’t git it out quick enough.”

Austin’s blood ran cold. So they meant to torture him after all. Well, if that was their intention they should have some good cause to do so.

Like a flash he spun round, drove his fist full into Kwala’s ugly, wizened face, knocking him half-way across the deck, and springing across his prostrate body made a dash for the rail.

He meant to fling himself overboard, and take his chance of being drowned or shot, or seized by a shark. Anything was better than to be delivered into the hands of the Malay with his knotted cord.

But the deck was crowded with Chinamen. One thrust out his foot and tripped Austin. In another moment Stark had him by the collar and dragged him back.

“Try that game, would ye?” he roared, shaking Austin till his teeth rattled. “Smart, yew think yerself? By crimony, I’ll make you smart! Here, Kwala, he’s your meat.”

But Kwala lay where he had fallen. Austin’s knuckles had caught him exactly on the point of the chin, giving his spine the jolt which boxers know as a “knock-out.” For some minutes, at any rate, neither Austin nor anything else would interest his black soul.

“Knocked silly, is he?” continued Stark. “Wal, I reckon he’ll come round in a little while, and the Britisher will keep. Jeerusalem, I wouldn’t be in his shoes when Kwala gets to work. Here, some o’ yew, bling lope, makee tie white man.”

A couple of ruffianly looking fellows sprang forward, and in a minute Austin was triced up so that he could not move, and flung down like a sack on the hot planks of the deck.

Stark, now thoroughly roused, glared round.

His eyes fell upon the Union Jack faintly fluttering in the dying breeze over the battered but unbeaten stockade.

“Wing Loo!” he shouted.

A squat, broad-shouldered fellow, with a hideous face deeply pitted with smallpox scars, stepped forward.

“You makee shoot dat flag. Me gib you five dollar you blow him away.”

As Wing Loo hurried off to his gun a low, hoarse rumble rolled across the sea. It was like the trampling of horses at a great distance. The hot air reverberated with the sound.

Austin, screwing his head round, saw that the cloud which he had noticed when he first came on deck was spreading rapidly. It now covered nearly a quarter of the sky with a blue-black pall. Its upper edge was fringed with great masses of snowy white vapour which rolled and boiled like surf on a hidden reef.

In spite of the fact that the sun was still shining brilliantly, the lightning which seamed the heart of the great storm-cloud was plainly visible.

It flickered and danced ceaselessly in and out amongst the gigantic folds of the vaporous curtain, and even as Austin watched, the low, sullen note of the still distant thunder came muttering again over the still water.

The air had become perceptibly closer during the past few minutes, the breeze had fallen, and the sun burned with an almost intolerable sting.

Stark, in his fury, seemed not to notice the coming storm.

“Sharp with that there gun!” he bellowed. “Git the other one to work, some o’ yew. I’ll lay we’ll pound them Britishers into cod-roe afore we’re done with ’em.”

A third time the thunder boomed. Louder now and longer than before. It was so heavy that it seemed to shake the stagnant air. The storm-cloud was lifting more and more rapidly up. Its shadow turned the northern sea to lead, and its fleecy edge was fast nearing the great red globe of the sun.

A man whom Austin had not noticed before came up out of the main hatch, and walked aft to where Stark stood. He looked as if he might once have been white, but his leathery face was burnt with sun and wind till it was as dark as Kwala's. He was long and lean, with arms like an ape's, and a great white scar ran from one corner of his left eye almost to his ear.

He went straight up to Stark and spoke to him.

His words were drowned in the crash of Wing Loo's gun, but he pointed to the sky with a lean forefinger, and Austin understood that he was drawing Stark's attention to the approaching tempest.

Stark gave a snarl of rage, strongly reminding Austin of a dog that sees its bone snatched away from it.

For a few seconds he stood apparently undecided, then he stalked back to the middle of the quarter-deck, and in a voice rivalling that of the thunder itself gave orders to cease firing and get up the anchor.

Instantly the decks were a scene of bustle and confusion, and in less than five minutes the schooner, with every sail furled, was making back for the entrance to the reef under her motor power. By the way they drove her Austin fully realised that their object was to get sea room before the storm broke.

Austin himself lay helpless on the deck. His wrists and feet were so firmly tied that he could not move one way or the other.

From where he lay he could just see the tops of the palms on the island, and the Union Jack still hanging motionless on its staff above the stockade. But very soon these both faded away, and all that was left was the sky—turquoise blue to the south, black as ink and seamed with electric fire to the north.

With her engine driving her at its utmost the schooner soon reached the reef, and by the rise and fall of the deck beneath him Austin knew that she was making the passage to the open sea.

He remembered the mines set in the entrance, and for a moment thrilled with wonder as to whether his friends ashore would touch the button that fired them, and so destroy the schooner. The thought did not frighten him. He was almost beyond the sensation of fear. Indeed, he would cheerfully have given his own life if Stark and his ruffianly crew could have shared the same fate.



But nothing happened. Either the wires had been cut by Stark's people, or O'Rourke, knowing he was aboard, had refrained from exploding the mines, and the schooner ran quietly through the channel and reached the open sea.

By this time the edge of the storm-cloud had crossed the face of the sun, and the hot glare had given way to a dull, slaty twilight, which, however, was constantly illuminated by the steely flicker of the lightning.

But there was no breath of wind, and the sea lay sullen as oil beneath the leaden pall.

Stark was at the wheel. It was plain that he knew something out of the way in the shape of weather was coming, for his grim face was set and his hard eyes fixed on the monstrous cloud.

Apparently he had forgotten Austin.

His men were all at their stations ready to get what sail was needed on the schooner as soon as they saw from what quarter the wind would come. The hatches were all battened down.

In the deathly stillness Austin heard a rustling sound to one side of him. Rolling over painfully, he looked round to see what had caused it.

What he saw was this—Kwala, who had recovered his senses, was creeping on hands and knees along the deck towards him. On his face was an expression of absolutely diabolical hatred and rage, and in his right hand he gripped hard the crooked kreesse.

Plainly he meant instant and deadly vengeance, and Austin, fettered as he was, was utterly unable either to defend himself or to escape.

## CHAPTER XIX

### WHEN THE STORM BROKE

In the thick storm dust the Malay's eyes glowed red like smouldering coals. He came crawling like a snake across the planking—so slowly that Austin at first believed that he was doing it on purpose, in order to more thoroughly gloat over his vengeance.

A white blaze of electric fire stabbed the gloom, throwing out the whole scene in intense relief, and Austin saw that he was mistaken. Kwala was hurt. The blow that had been dealt him, and his fall on the hard planking, had evidently damaged him considerably. He was dragging his left leg as if it was either broken or sprained.

This was the reason why he could not move faster.

But it was only a moment's respite. His purpose was evident. There was no mistaking the fiendish desire for vengeance in his cruel brown face.

Austin glanced despairingly around. Men there were in plenty on the deck, but every single one of them running in frantic haste to obey the orders which Stark was bellowing in a voice which rivalled the pealing thunder.

The storm was very close. Already the air was full of that strange moaning sound which precedes the worst type of electric tempest.

Austin opened his mouth to shout for help, but at that moment the thunder-clap following the last flash smote sea and sky with a deafening roar.

The Malay, dragging his injured leg behind him, crawled steadily nearer. Movement was evidently intensely painful, for his lips were twisted crookedly, and huge drops of perspiration had started from his lean, brown forehead.

Austin struggled convulsively to free himself, but the effort was quite useless. The strands of coir which were knotted round his wrists were tough as raw hide, and the only result of his attempt was to cut the flesh till it bled.

The Malay saw the hopelessness of Austin's struggles, and an evil grin contorted his face. He gripped the crooked-bladed knife more firmly, and dragged himself obstinately nearer to his intended victim.

Austin gave up hope, and lay still, breathing heavily. If he had to die, at any rate he would not show the white feather.

The moaning had increased to a sound like the hoot of a thousand fog-horns. The thick hot air was full of glittering flashes of lightning, which struck the sea in a dozen places at once, and twisted across the gloomy heavens like fiery snakes, while the thunder was no longer separate peals, but one continual ear-splitting roar.

Kwala was almost within arm's reach. Austin saw his lips moving, but the bellow of the thunder entirely drowned his words.

Another foot. Austin held his breath. Kwala was raising his knife. The bright steel gleamed blue in the fiery blaze of the lightning.

Then, without warning, the first blast of the storm struck the ship, like a blow from a giant's fist. The wind, rushing along the surface of the sea like a solid wall, caught the schooner broadside on, and literally hurled her on to her beam ends.

What happened Austin hardly knew. He had a vague idea that some dark object flew right over him, and then he himself was rolling over and over like a barrel down the deck, which lay at an angle resembling that of the roof of a house, and next moment brought up heavily against the rails.

Here he lay helpless and half stunned. Salt water dashed over him in sheets, the din was terrific, and he fully believed that the ship was done for, and that under the incredible force of the gale she would presently heel right over and capsize.

So without doubt she would have done, but for Stark's precautions. Whatever the huge ruffian's moral deficiencies, he was at any rate a splendid seaman, and his crew of cut-throats backed him ably.

Presently Austin felt the deck rise beneath him, and the schooner's head came up into the wind, and she lay to while the great gale roared across her and the thunder bellowed and crackled overhead.

The weight of the wind was so tremendous that at first there was no sea at all. But the air was full of sheets of spray picked up by the gale and carried horizontally across the surface of the water.

Also it was as dark as night except for the constant and vivid blaze of lightning.

Presently Austin recovered himself sufficiently to look round. The lightning showed him the giant form of Stark at the wheel. The Black Flag

chief stood facing the storm, a towering and impressive figure, controlling the bucking wheel with an ease which was amazing even in one of his tremendous strength.

Of Kwala he could at first see nothing. But presently he made out a shapeless bundle lying in the scuppers a dozen feet away, and another flash made him sure that it was the Malay.

Powerless for harm for the moment, at any rate; and for the first time for many minutes Austin had a gleam of hope that his own life would be spared.

But it was a gleam which passed almost as quickly as it had come. Though the first furious blast had passed, it was now blowing with a steady fury that Austin had never seen equalled, and the sea rose every moment.

The motion of the schooner became terrific. Now her bow seemed to point straight to the lurid sky, next moment she stood almost on her head, and as she dropped bow foremost down a huge hill of black water it seemed that she could never recover herself, but must drive straight down into the depths that yawned to receive her.

The seas began to break aboard in cataracts, and presently a rush of lukewarm water gushed over Austin, nearly drowning him.

With a violent struggle which left him breathless and panting, he got his back against the rail, but without hands to help himself he was presently flung down again on his back, and another surge swept across him, rolling him over and over towards the stern.

Plucky as he was, Austin gave way to despair. There was no help for him. If he was not drowned first it was only a question of time before the decks were swept, and he, with everything else movable, washed overboard.

Ah, here it came!

A terrific pitch, and a curling comber, its great crest livid white against the lowering sky, reared itself over the bow, and fell with a crash that made every timber quiver. It swept aft, and a roaring blackness swallowed up Austin and he felt himself lifted bodily and carried away at dizzy speed towards the stern.

Then came a thud that racked every bone and sinew in his tortured body. A spray of brilliant stars seemed to break and drift before his eyes, and he knew no more.

If Austin had been able to feel any emotion when he awoke again it would have been one of intense surprise to find himself alive.

But, as a matter of fact, he had been so badly damaged by his collision with the gun mountings which had saved him from being swept overboard by the great wave that when he began to regain his senses his mind was for a time a perfect blank, and he lay quite still with his eyes closed.

Slowly the power of thought came back, and the first thing that he realised was that the place he was lying in was comparatively still. He was still aboard ship, for he could feel a gentle heaving beneath him, but either the storm was over or the schooner lay in some sort of harbour.

The next idea that came to him was that the air was unpleasantly close and musty. Also by degrees he realised that he was in the same clothes which he had worn at the time of the storm, for they were still wet and sticky with salt.

Presently he managed to open his eyes. There was just light enough to see his surroundings. It came from a thick glass scuttle overhead, and he found that he was the solitary occupant of a small and abominably dirty and untidy cabin—a cabin which resembled a cell rather than anything else.

He was lying on a filthy straw mattress on the floor of this little square prison, and to make the resemblance to a prison cell more perfect he saw nothing else in the way of furniture except a common tin jug full of water.

His hands were no longer tied, and he reached out for the jug and drank greedily. His throat was like a lime-kiln, and though the fluid was tepid and stagnant it was the most refreshing draught he ever remembered.

The movement sent a stab of pain through his head, and reaching up he found his hair matted with blood. He had evidently had a bad cut on the scalp. Slowly and carefully he straightened his legs and arms. Every muscle in his body was so sore and stiff that movement was agony, but he was grateful to find that no bones were broken.

Too utterly weary to care much what happened, he dropped back on his mattress, and almost instantly fell asleep.

How long he slept he had no idea, but he was wakened by the click of a key in the lock. The door opened, and Stark, stooping to avoid striking his head against the lintel, entered the cabin.

As he straightened himself the crown of the peaked cap he wore almost brushed the ceiling.

He stared down at Austin with a curious expression in his hard grey eyes.

“Wal, I’m hanged!” he remarked in his harsh American drawl. “The critter’s alive.”

“No thanks to you,” returned Austin, shortly.

“What are ye kicking about, sonny?” said Stark, with a grim smile. “Ain’t your quarters good enough?”

“I’m not kicking about my quarters, but about the way you left me lying tied on the deck at the mercy of that Malay brute.”

“Ho, so that’s your trouble, is it?” chuckled Stark, with horrible mirth. “Aye, Kwala don’t love you anything to speak of. I reckon he’d hev put a couple of inches o’ cold iron between your ribs if he’d had a chance.”

“You gave him the chance,” retorted Austin. “If it hadn’t been for the storm coming when it did I should have been cold meat by now.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. You’ll be cold meat time enough if Heritage don’t fork up the dollars, and don’t you forget it.”

“So that’s your little game?” said Austin, scornfully. “Then the sooner you murder me the better, for you’ll wait a long time before you get a brass farthing as ransom for me.”

“I kin wait, pardner,” said Stark, with a significant grin. “Wait a sight easier than yew can, I reckon.”

“There won’t be much waiting about it if you don’t send me some food pretty soon,” said Austin, staring coolly at the giant. “That is, if you think I’m worth more alive than dead.”

Stark gave a hoarse laugh.

“Yew’ve got grit right enough, sonny,” he said. “Yew’d ought to be one of us. All right; I’ll send ye along some victuals. And arter that we’ll hev a talk about this here matter o’ ransom.”

Austin breathed more freely when the Black Flag chief had left the cabin. The man was brute right through, yet with the one human virtue—he appreciated pluck. And Austin, realising this from the first, congratulated himself that he had managed to play the part which he had set himself to play, and only hoped that he would be able to carry it through.

One thing he had made up his mind about—that, if he could help it, Heritage should not pay a penny-piece of ransom to this gang of robbers and cut-throats.

Stark kept his word about the food. A few minutes later a Chinese steward came in with a tray on which was a good chunk of bully beef, some ship's biscuit, a tin pot of hot coffee, and—better still—a couple of ripe bananas.

Austin thanked the man civilly, but the Chinaman's expression did not change in the least.

Austin was surprised to find how hungry he was. He finished every scrap of the rough meal, and felt a hundred per cent. better. He thought that, if he could only get a wash he would be almost his own self again.

The schooner, he was sure, was lying at anchor. He could hear steps on the deck overhead, and occasionally shouted orders, but where they were or what was happening he had no means of finding out, for his prison had no porthole.

Presently he lay down and deliberately went to sleep again. He felt fairly certain that he had a rough time ahead, and that it would be as well to store up as much energy as possible against it.

Once more he was roused by the click of the lock, and as before Stark was his visitor.

“Wal, Britisher, if yew've had your sleep out, yew'd best come ashore. I'm doing yew the honour of introducing yew to my island. It ain't got pearls, like yourn, but it ain't without its advantages, as yew'll see before long.”

“I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you,” said Austin, drily. “I only hope that your islanders will treat me better than ours did you.”

Stark scowled. Plainly he was still sore at his recent defeat.

“I reckon they'll teach yew to keep a civil tongue between your teeth afore they're done with yew,” he growled. “Now yew follow me. And don't go trying any of your tricks, like yew did before, or there'll be gun-play this time.”

“There would, if you gave me anything to shoot with,” remarked Austin, as coolly as ever.

Stark made no reply. He opened the cabin door and walked out into the alley-way. Austin followed him, and they passed through the main cabin, where the remains of a meal lay on the table, and up the companion on to the deck.

The first thing that struck Austin was the curiously deep shadow which lay upon the ship. He glanced round quickly.

The vessel lay at anchor in what appeared to be the bottom of a crater. Gigantic cliffs of ragged black rock towered skywards on every side. At a rough estimate Austin judged them to be at least a thousand feet high.

The area of the lake in which the schooner lay was not more than three or four acres, and at first Austin could not conceive how she had got there.

But glancing round astern he saw an opening in the lofty cliffs, a rift so narrow that it hardly appeared possible for a vessel the size of the schooner to pass through it.

This channel curved so that it was impossible to get a sight of the open sea. But the slight swell that rolled inwards was plain proof that there was communication between the lake and the ocean.

Stark saw Austin's expression of surprise, and gave a deep chuckle.

"Mighty snug little harbour, ain't it? I reckon it 'ud take more than a Dreadnought to tackle this here outfit."

Austin made no reply.

"Now yew'll come ashore, young feller. And jest in case of accidents we'll put a bandage over your eyes. Though fer that matter, ef your boss don't fork out the dollars, yew'll be apt to come down the cliff a mighty sight quicker than yew go up."

Austin fully understood the threat. Stark meant that, if he was not ransomed, he would be pitched over the cliff into the sea.

However, it was no use bandying words with the brute. He submitted quietly to being blindfolded, and was then taken ashore in a boat.

As soon as his feet touched firm ground a rope was put round his body, and he was lifted into the air.

He heard the creaking of a winch, and after a long interval of swinging in mid-air again found his feet. Two men took hold of him, and he was half driven, half dragged up a long, steep slope.



When his bandage was removed he found himself in a small, stone-built cell. The door was locked upon him and he was left alone.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE ORDEAL BY ROPE

It was about an hour after sunrise next morning that Stark entered Austin's prison and dumped down on the rough wooden bench, which, with a hammock, was the only furniture of the place, a common little writing-case, together with an ink-pot and pen.

"Naow, Mr. Chesney, I'll hev to trouble yew to do a bit of writing fer me," he observed, with mock politeness. "Yew'll be good enough to set right down and send a letter to Captain Heritage, saying ez yew is enjoying my hospitality fer the time being, and thet ef he wants yew back at Sunshine Island it's going to cost him a little trifle in the way of pearls."

Austin looked up calmly into the leering face of the brigand.

"You can do your own dirty work, Mr. Stark, or Burnett, or whatever your name is. I'm not going to write a word."

A gleam of fury crossed Stark's face, making its expression absolutely terrifying. In that moment Austin fully realised why he had been named the "Tiger of Batol."

"It ain't no manner of use your trying to bluff me," growled Stark. "What yew got to recollect is thet yew're in my power, and thet what I sez goes. Set down now, and write as I tells yew."

"When you've known me a little longer," said Austin, smoothly, "you will realise that when I say a thing I mean it."

"I reckon our acquaintance will come to a mighty sudden end if yew don't obey orders," answered Stark, controlling his anger with an evident effort. "It don't pay to try tricks with Captain Stark, and so yew'll find afore yew're much older."

As he spoke he took out a sheet of paper and spread it on the stool, and dipping the pen in the ink handed it to Austin.

Austin took it, and dropping it on the floor deliberately put his foot on it, smashing the nib to fragments.

Stark gave a growl like a wild beast, and seizing Austin in his enormous arms lifted him high in the air, as easily as though he had been a twelve months' old child.

Austin fully believed that the next moment he would be dashed down upon the rock floor of the cell and killed.

But like a flash Stark's mood changed.

"That's too quick a way o' doing things," he said, with a grating laugh. "It's your spirit I'm a-going to break, not your body. Naow I'll lay ye a dozen of them best pearls as yew write that letter afore yew're an hour older."

He dropped Austin on his feet and moved to the door.

"I'll be back right soon," he said, with ugly significance, as he left the cell.

Austin heard the key click in the lock, and dropped on the bench.

Exactly what was going to happen he could not know, but he was very certain that something particularly unpleasant was before him, and he sat quite still, drawing deep breaths, and endeavouring to steady his nerves for the coming ordeal.

He set his teeth and vowed to himself that—come what might—he would not do Stark's bidding. He knew Heritage well enough to be certain that, if he did write the letter which Stark demanded, Heritage would think no sacrifice too great to obtain his freedom. He would even give up his great ambition of purchasing the new cruiser, and so regaining his place in the service which he loved.

Stark did not leave him much time for meditation. In less than five minutes he was back, and with him two of his squat, yellow-faced, almond-eyed satellites.

"Tie him tight," said Stark to the Chinamen. "No lettee him loose, or me blow your heads off one time."

With stolid faces the fellows made Austin's wrists fast behind his back and marched him out.

Having been blindfolded when brought in this was his first sight of the top of Batol Island. He found himself on a breezy tableland, which might have been a couple of miles in length, and nearly the same in breadth.

It was as bare and desolate a spot as he had ever set eyes on. Hardly a blade of grass, and the only vegetation which clothed the bare volcanic rocks was tufts of some greenish grey shrub, the tough leaves of which rustled harshly in the wind.

Towards the middle of the island the ground fell away steeply, making a huge cup, the centre of which was no doubt the harbour into which led the passage from the open sea. Plainly, the whole island was simply the top of some long-extinct volcano, the roots of which lay deep in the surrounding ocean.

A more perfect natural stronghold could not well have been imagined. Without knowing the secret of the passage into the central lake no enemy could approach, and if a hostile ship did try to force its way in, the pirates would have nothing to do but to fling down explosives upon its decks from the overhanging cliff-tops.

And as for bombardment, all the navies in the world might have laid off and hurled shells from their great guns on to the summit of the barren, blasted tableland without doing any harm to the inhabitants, for the latter all lived in the caves which honeycombed the rim of the crater. The only buildings that Austin could see were the little prison that he himself had occupied and a sort of signal-house on the highest ground.

Austin was not given much opportunity for inspection. He was marched rapidly across the stony summit of the island, until presently he saw a crowd of men in front. There were a hundred or more, and a more unpicturesque and squalid assortment could hardly have been conceived.

Nine out of ten were Chinamen. Squat, strongly built, pig-tailed men with high cheek-bones and narrow eyes, and wearing the blue blouse which is the usual dress of the Chinese coolie, whether he be pedlar or pirate. The rest were mostly brown-skinned, vicious-looking Malays.

As he came nearer Austin saw that they were gathered upon the extreme edge of the cliff, and that some of them were busy erecting something which strongly resembled a gallows.

The boy's heart beat a little more rapidly than usual, and he drew a quick, hard breath. But his face was as composed and his eyes as steady as ever as his guard pulled him up close beside the ominous wooden erection, which he now saw was so built that the cross-beam actually overhung the verge of the tremendous precipice.

"Yew see that, sonny?" said Stark, in his harshest tones, as he pointed to the gallows.

"I see it," replied Austin, quietly.

"Yew'll feel it ef yew don't obey orders. Sun Ling, you takee plisoner topside cliff."

Austin was forced forward till he stood on the extreme verge of the precipice. In the great empty spaces below sea-birds whirled and screamed, and at an incredible depth beneath he saw the white-rimmed surf crawl and break on the base of the tremendous headland.

For a moment a shiver ran through him, and his heart seemed to cease beating. But only for a moment. His long experience in his father's mine and on the Cornish cliffs had given him a head like iron, and the feeling of dizziness passed.

Stark saw by his face that he was not frightened, and that the knowledge annoyed him was evident by the snarl in his voice as he spoke again.

“See here, air yew going to write that letter?”

“I thought I'd told you,” said Austin, patiently.

Stark uttered a violent expression.

“You puttee lope round him, Sun Ling,” he ordered, furiously.

The Chinaman obeyed stolidly.

It was at this moment that Austin, taking what he believed to be his last look at sea and sky, caught sight of the white sails of a large schooner which was coming up from the southward at a great pace.

He gave a slight gasp. Distant as she still was, he could not be mistaken. She was the *Brilliant*.

Stark, however, did not notice her. He was too much occupied with Austin.

Sun Ling adjusted the rope around Austin's neck. The other end was rove through a pulley in the cross-bar above.

“Now, see here,” said Stark. “Either yew writes that letter or off yew swings. They gives yew a nine-foot drop in your own country. This'll be a little matter of nine hundred. I reckon it'll stretch your neck right enough. Now what's it to be? Speak quick.”

“You waste a lot of time, Mr. Stark,” said Austin, scornfully. “If you're going to hang me, get along with the job.”

Stark ground his strong white teeth. He stepped forward, and Austin fully believed that he meant to fling him off into eternity.

But Stark had other intentions.

With his great hands he loosened the rope from round Austin's neck, and instead adjusted it round his waist. Then he gave his men the order to hoist, with the result that Austin was swung off his feet, and next moment found himself dangling in mid-air, spinning like a joint on a spit over the awful depths below.

Now for the first time his head failed. His brain seemed to turn to water, and a deadly sickness seized him. But fearing above all things to betray his feelings to the ruffians behind him, he closed his eyes tightly, and after a few moments the sick sensation passed and he was his own man again.

"Enjoying yerself?" asked Start, brutally. "View's real pretty, ain't it? Had enough yet, pardner?"

Austin did not answer at first. His eyes were on the *Brilliant*, which was coming up hand over fist, making straight for the island.

Austin's powers of sight were out of the common, and he saw that on her after-deck lay some large white object, resembling a huge dragon-fly with outspread wings. Like a flash it came to him that this was Clive's aeroplane, and that, as it was ready rigged, it must be meant for immediate use. He remembered that Clive had said that this new type which his father had invented could rise with hardly any run, and could therefore be used from the deck of a ship.

So Clive intended an immediate attack. For a moment the idea staggered Austin. Then a gleam of hope shot across the black despair which enveloped him, and he determined to make a last desperate bid for life and liberty.

To do so he must pretend to give way to Stark. Such hypocrisy went strongly against the grain, but it was his only chance. Perhaps, too, it was the only chance for the success of his chum's daring plan.

Comforting himself with the old saying that "All's fair in love and war," he answered in a gasping voice:

"Yes, I've had enough."

Stark gave a horrible chuckle.

"I reckoned that 'ud fetch him. Yank him in, Sun Ling."

Someone slackened the rope, another caught it with a boat-hook. In a minute Austin's feet were once more on firm ground.

Austin had hoped that there might be delay in obtaining pen and paper, but Stark had them ready, and without waste of time Austin's wrists were

untied.

“See here, Britisher,” said Stark, in his harshest tones, “yew’ll write jest what I say. Else over yew goes again, and this time there ain’t no coming back.”

Austin nodded, and slowly and clumsily took up the pen. The *Brilliant* was still a long way off, and he was racking his brains how to make sufficient delay. He marvelled that no one seemed to have noticed her, but the whole rascally crew were so intent on the doings of their leader and his prisoner that they had no eyes for anything else.

“You must let me rub my wrists,” he said. “My hands are so stiff from your beastly rope that I can’t hold the pen.”

“Be smart about it, then,” growled Stark.

Austin began deliberately to rub his right wrist with the other hand.

It was at this moment that another voice broke in. Austin knew the spitting, hissing tones even before he glanced up and saw the vicious, monkey-like face of Kwala.

“Looke see, captain. Piecee ship coming!”

Stark started up to his full height, and following the direction of the Malay’s pointing finger, saw the *Brilliant* bowling along towards the island before the stiff breeze. She was making nearly twelve knots, and already the fountain of white foam flung up by her plunging bows was plainly visible.

“Great guns!” cried Stark. “Here’s luck! I’m a nigger ef it ain’t the *Brilliant*—and coming right in! Geewhiz, but the Britishers must hev gone plumb crazy! Here yew, Wun Lung, skip off and tell them to git the big guns ready. Chong, you go down to the harbour, and hev the schooner hove off her moorings. Say, I’ll be along myself in about two twos.”

In his excitement he forgot to give his orders in the usual pidgin-English, but the men he addressed seemed to understand, and hurried off to obey.

“Naow, sonny,” said Stark, turning to Austin. “Yew’ll jest hurry up, and write that there letter. I’ve a kind of fancy to turn postman and deliver it myself.”

Austin cast another quick glance at the *Brilliant*. She had suddenly come to at a distance of about three miles from the island, and all hands were busy getting sail off her.

A thrill of fierce excitement ran through his veins. The time was come. In another few moments the aeroplane would start on her desperate mission.

Calming himself with a strong effort, he took the pen from Stark and began to write.



## CHAPTER XXI

### HOW THE TABLES WERE TURNED

“‘Dear Sir,’” dictated Stark, “‘or yew can say ‘dear captain’ if yew’ve a mind to. ‘I’m enjoying a little picnic along of Captain Stark on the top of Batol Island. The captain enjoys my sassiety to that extent he don’t want to part with me, and he says that, ez compensation, he’ll hev to ask fer a few of them there pearls yew’ve been a-getting out of your lagoon.’”

“Got thet?” he asked.

Austin, who had been scribbling industriously with the paper on his knee, glanced up and nodded with a queer look in his face. He took the opportunity of casting a lightning glance at the *Brilliant*. All sail was off her, but the aeroplane had not yet risen.

“‘The price he sets on me is a million dollars,’” went on Stark, “‘which is two hunderd and fifty thousand pound English money; and he sez that if the cash or pearls don’t come in a week he’ll be that worked up he’ll be apt to do something desperit, sech as chucking me over the edge of the cliff, which is a mighty high one.’”

“Thet down all right?” said Stark, with an evil chuckle. “Naow yew can sign it ‘yours truly,’ and your name in full.”

Austin finished writing, and Stark put out his great hand for the paper.

Austin let him have it, and Stark, screwing up his mahogany countenance, began to read.

As he read his expression changed first to unbelief, then to rage.

Small wonder, for Austin’s letter was anything but what he had dictated.

It ran as follows:

“DEAR CAPTAIN HERITAGE,—Stark and his gang of pirates tried to raid Sunshine Island, and got badly left. He was beaten off with loss, and though he unluckily caught me, you needn’t worry about that, for I am quite safe and happy. He may try to get you to ransom me, but if he does don’t pay any attention, for he dare not do anything to me——”

This was as far as Stark got.

Then he fairly choked with rage, and with a furious exclamation tore the letter into fragments, which he scattered on the ground and trampled on like a madman.

“Daren’t do anything to yew? By the great Horn Spoon, I’ll show yew what Stark kin do when he’s a mind to. Here, gimme thet knife,” turning to Kwala, who stood by with a twisted grin on his monkey-like countenance.

It was at this moment that Austin heard a sound which gave him courage. It was the crackling roar of a high-powered aeroplane engine.

Quick as light he sprang between Stark and the Malay, and as the latter was in the act of drawing his krees from his belt he snatched it from his hand and made a lunge at the Black Flag chief, which forced him to leap back with amazing activity.

Kwala, with a shrill scream, dashed at Austin, to stagger back with three fingers of his right hand missing.

Before either of his adversaries could recover himself Austin was off inland, running as he had never run before, the krees tight gripped in his right hand.

Not one of Stark’s men attempted to touch him. In fact they paid no attention at all to him. The eyes of every mother’s son among them were fixed on the great aeroplane which had now risen to a height equal to that of Batol’s lofty cliffs, and was hurtling like an avenging eagle straight towards the island.

“Stop him!” roared Stark. “Catch him alive! A hunderd dollars to any of yew who catches him!”

Not a man paid the slightest attention. More than half were flat on their faces on the ground, worse frightened than they had ever been in their murdering lives. Not one of them had ever before seen or even heard of an aeroplane, and their superstitious souls quaked with terror, believing the great white shape that clove the air with such fearful speed, and so terrible a sound, to be the “roc,” the giant bird of Eastern fable, which picks up men and devours them as a chicken does grains of corn.

Austin’s goal was the prison which he had so lately left. Once he could get inside it he believed that he could bar the door, and hold off his pursuers long enough to give Clive a chance of coming to his help.

Crack! crack! Bullets sang over his head. He glanced back over his shoulder.

Stark had pulled his great, long-barrelled navy revolver, and was firing as he ran. He was coming at a fearful pace, his long legs carrying him across the rugged ground with amazing speed and certainty.

Behind came Kwala, like a ferret on the trail of a rabbit. When the Malay's blood is up he is insensible to pain, and although he must have been losing blood fast from his wounded hand, Austin felt more fear of the vicious little brown man than of the giant Stark himself.

Ping! A bullet struck a rock a yard from Austin's side and splashed into hissing fragments of lead.

It was still a long way to the prison building, and Austin's heart sank as he felt his strength beginning to fail. He had been so badly knocked about in the storm that he was not himself by any means.

His head was beginning to spin, there was a nasty dryness in his throat, and his legs began to feel like lead.

Stark was gaining, and a horrible fear seized Austin lest he might trip and fall, in which case he would be caught before Clive had a chance of rescuing him.

Stark had fired four times in all. Instinctively Austin knew that he was keeping his fifth cartridge until he was near enough to make certain of his aim.

Out of the sky above came the metallic roar of the aeroplane's throbbing cylinders; but Austin dared not look back again to see how near it was.

With bursting lungs and throbbing heart he strained onwards. Behind him, closer and ever closer, he could hear the clatter of Stark's boot-soles and the rattle of displaced pebbles as the giant sprang from rock to rock.

Another hundred yards. The prison was still more than double that distance away, and a groan burst from Austin's lips, for he realised that it was beyond his powers to reach it. He was utterly spent, and reeling as he ran.

But even in this desperate pass his presence of mind did not desert him, and, catching sight of a thick tuft of the stiff, grey-green scrub growing just to the left of his path, he suddenly doubled and hurled himself down behind it.

It was the merest desperate chance, and he knew it. Stark was almost on him, and Stark had a cartridge in his pistol. He himself had nothing but the knife.

He had just time to take three long breaths when Stark reached the spot, and, making a great spring over the clump of bush, landed within a yard of the spot where Austin was crouching.

Before Austin could regain his feet the long, blue barrel was pointing straight at his head, and Stark's thick forefinger was twitching on the trigger.

"So yew thought yew'd fool me?" grated the pirate, his cold grey eyes glaring down at the boy. "But yew got left, ez every feller does ez tries to fool Cap'n Stark. Drop thet there knife, and put your hands up!

"Sharp, now!" as Austin hesitated.

"Crash!" The explosion resembled that of a heavy gun, and was so close that, even in the hot sunlight, the flash was almost blinding, while the shock was so violent that it nearly flung them both to the ground.

A geyser of rocks and stones leaped from the stony surface close by, and fell with a series of heavy thuds around them.

"Great Cæsar!" gasped Stark, spinning round.

Austin saw his chance, and took it.

Springing to his feet, he put all his strength into the blow, and brought the blunt edge of the kreesse down upon Stark's skull.

The great brute flung up his arms straight above his head, reeled a moment, then fell with a crash like that of a falling tree.

For a moment Austin stood over the body of his gigantic foe, hardly able to believe in his success. But Stark did not move.

The rattle and roar of the aeroplane engine just overhead recalled him to a sense of his surroundings.

"Look out! I'm coming down for you," came Clive's voice, high and thin.

Austin looked up. The aeroplane was circling exactly overhead. Clive, seeing that he had attracted Austin's attention, waved his hand with a forward motion, and swept onwards.

For a moment Austin was puzzled. Why did not Clive come down at once?

Then it suddenly occurred to him that the ground was too rough for the aeroplane, once down, to rise again. Clive was no doubt looking for a smooth spot on which to descend.

Up to this moment Austin had had no time to consider the situation. Now he suddenly remembered Kwala.

He looked round, but could see nothing of the Malay.

He had vanished as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

But, knowing the implacable nature of this little fiend in human form, Austin was not any easier in his mind. He more than suspected that the brown man had dropped down into hiding behind a bush or stone, and was biding his time. Or perhaps he had gone back to the main body of Stark's bandits on the edge of the cliff to rouse them from their trance of terror and gather them to attack the aeroplane.

All this passed through his mind like a flash, and meantime he stood where he was, keeping guard over Stark, and watching Clive circling in search of an alighting place. Presently he saw the great white-winged machine swoop earthwards, while the roar of its engine ceased with startling suddenness.

The place Clive had selected was the better part of a quarter of a mile from where Austin stood—a flat, rocky plateau not far from the prison building.

Lightly as an albatross the plane landed, and, running forward a few yards, remained still. Clive at once sprang out, and proceeded to make the machine fast. The breeze, though luckily it was falling, was still fresh, and it would have been dangerous to leave the broad wings free to be caught by any wandering gust.

Austin was now in a dilemma. He hardly knew what to do next—whether to run and join Clive, or wait for him where he was.

By joining Clive at once he himself could make certain of getting away from this nightmare island of rocks and pirates. But, on the other hand, by doing so he was risking the great opportunity of capturing Stark, for at any minute the Black Flags might recover from their panic and come up at a run to rescue their leader.

To capture Stark would be a triumph indeed. Once Heritage had him safe, the Black Flags would very soon go to pieces. It was Stark whom the

Japanese Government wanted. Dead or alive, he was the price of the extension of the lease of Sunshine Island.

Looking down at the huge brute stretched at full length upon the black pebbles, Austin ground his teeth to think of the puzzle in which he was plunged.

An older man and one less scrupulous than Austin might have solved the difficulty in very short order by killing the scoundrel outright.

But although he knew well that death was a mild punishment to what the ruffian deserved, he could not find it in his heart to carry out the sentence in cold blood.

Yet to let the man escape was equally out of the question.

Once more he glanced at the grisly giant. His eyelids were flickering. Evidently his scattered senses were beginning to return. Like a hawk Austin swooped upon him, turned him over on his face, and, tearing off his own necktie, made the thick wrists fast behind his back.

Then with his own and Stark's handkerchiefs he tied his ankles, and finished by gagging him securely.

He was just finishing the task when Clive himself came tearing up.

"My dear old chap!" he cried, joyfully. Then, as his eyes fell upon Stark, "Jupiter! You don't mean to say you've bagged that beauty!"

His tones and face expressed such amazement that, in spite of the desperate nature of the situation, Austin laughed outright.

"It was your sky-rocket did the trick, Clive," he replied. "Made him jump just as he was going to pot me, and I took the chance and got him a wipe over the head. The question is what we're to do with him. If O'Rourke was here he'd probably chop his head off, and take that with him; but, brute as he is, I can't slay him in cold blood."

Clive shook his head.

"No, we can't do that. We must take all of him or nothing. Catch hold of him. We must carry him to the machine."

"But your plane won't carry the three of us," said Austin, quickly. "And he weighs as much as two."

"Don't worry about that. Gaudin took up four passengers in a jolly sight smaller machine than mine. If we can get him there I'll do the rest. But you

look badly crocked, Austin. Are you up to carrying one end of him?"

"I'll do it or bust," said Austin between set teeth. "Hurry up, for those yellow-faced beggars may be on us any minute now, and that beauty Kwala isn't a mile away."

"Kwala! Great Scot! Then the sooner we make tracks the better."

Six months earlier Clive could hardly have lifted Stark's giant head and shoulders. But the outdoor life and the sea air, together with good food and freedom from anxiety, had filled him out, and hardened his muscles till he was almost Austin's equal in physical strength.

At present, indeed, he was very much his superior, for Austin had suffered severely during the past few days, and his hardships had told upon him.

But he took a long breath, set his teeth, seized Stark by the legs, and lifted them.

Now, to carry a sixteen-stone man across some four hundred yards of rough ground is no mean task for two strong men. For two boys not yet come to their full strength it requires a Herculean effort. Add to it that they had to do it at top speed, and with the knowledge that at any minute they might be a target for a volley of rifle bullets, and the job was absolutely terrifying.

Before they had covered a quarter of the distance the perspiration was pouring down their faces in streams; their clothes clung to them, saturated; they were panting for breath, and the body of the gigantic pirate felt as though it weighed a ton.

But they were full half-way before Clive, noticing how white Austin's face had gone beneath its tan, stopped, and said quickly:

"Lay him down a minute, Austin. We've got to have a rest or we shall both crock up."

Austin dropped Stark's legs with a bump, and slipped down on the nearest rock, gasping and sobbing for breath. Black specks danced before his eyes, and he felt as if he could never face the last half of the journey.

Clive saw his friend's exhaustion, and it frightened him.

Suddenly he put his hand into his pocket.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed; "I'd clean forgotten. I've got some beaten egg in milk in a medicine bottle. Just the thing for you. Drink it down, old chap."

It'll pull you round like winking.”

Austin obeyed without a word, and swallowed a good half of the thick, tepid stuff.

“Ripping!” he said. “Done me heaps of good. You finish it, Clive.”

But Clive refused more than a swallow, and forced Austin to drink down the rest.

It was nearly ten minutes since Clive had dropped his bomb, and so far they had seen nothing of the rest of Stark’s gang.

Now, just as they were lifting Stark again, the heavy thud of a gun shook the air.

Clive started.

“It’s all right,” said Austin, reassuringly. “They’re potting at the schooner, that’s all. Whoop her up. I’m like a two-year-old after that drink of yours.”

With Stork’s great carcass swinging between them they toiled onwards over the rods and brush. Presently the ground became a trifle smoother, and Austin gave a sigh of relief as he thought that the worst of their troubles were over.

But they were still fifty yards from their goal when a hoarse shouting made itself heard, and glancing back over his shoulder Austin saw about half a dozen of the Malays coming at a run from the cliff edge.

They were led by a monkey-like figure which flourished a gleaming kreese and yelled shrill encouragement to his followers.

“Here they come!” he gasped. “We shall never do it.”



## CHAPTER XXII

### THE LAST CHAPTER

It was not like Austin to give way to despair, but he was very nearly at the end of his tether, in spite of his brave words to Clive a minute earlier.

“One more spurt,” cried Clive. “We’ll beat ’em yet.”

Ashamed of his momentary cowardice, Austin set his teeth and braced every nerve for a last effort. The two boys broke into a sort of jog, and, with hearts pounding as if they would burst, stumbled along over the baking rocks towards the aeroplane.

Each moment they expected a volley about their ears, but, for some reason or other, Kwala and his crew had no guns with them.

But they ran two feet to the others’ one, and when at last Clive and Austin reached the aeroplane Kwala was only a hundred yards away.

“Sling him in here, back of the driving seat,” gasped Clive. And with an effort which took their last ounce of reserve strength they lifted the giant on to the framework back of the seat.

“Now make him fast while I crank her up.”

Austin’s fingers flew as he feverishly knotted the rope round Stark’s great body.

The Malays were almost on him.

He ground his teeth. Were they to lose everything at the last moment?

“Look out!” shouted Clive.

Austin whirled round.

Kwala’s crooked blade flashed in the hot sunlight as he aimed a furious blow at the white boy. Austin ducked, and the kreese missed his head by an inch. The point struck the metal framework of the aeroplane, and with a sharp *kling* the weapon snapped in two.

Austin snatched up his own knife, which he had dropped on the ground, and drove at Kwala, who gave back with a snarl, showing his teeth like an angry cat.

His followers, five in number, were almost up. Brandishing their wicked-looking weapons they came on at a run.

The odds were hopeless. Austin glanced round despairingly; but there was no help in sight. On the other hand, more of the pirates, who had now got over their first spasm of superstitious terror, were streaming up from the distance, uttering savage cries.

Clive was still cranking hard. Apparently he was having difficulty in starting the engine.

Suddenly he let go the handle, and, springing into the machine, reached down under the seat.

“Look out, Austin!” he shouted. “Get behind the plane.”

Austin ducked in under the wheels.

As he did so Clive straightened himself, and with all his force flung a small round object, black in colour and about the size of a cricket ball, straight at the oncoming pirates.

There was a crashing report, a blaze of flame, and stones and jagged fragments of rock flew upwards in a fountain.

The bomb had struck a rock a few feet short of the foremost of the pursuers, and they scattered with shrill cries of terror.

“Give ’em another if they come up,” said Clive, as he handed a second of the deadly missiles to Austin. “I’ll have another shot at starting her.”

He began to turn the crank again.

Austin, bomb in hand, lips tight set, stood facing the savage crew.

None of the latter had been killed, but some were injured by flying stones. They kept back out of reach, and Kwala was shouting and signalling to the men in the background.

Austin saw the reason. Some of these had rifles.

His spirits, which had risen for the moment, dropped again. He and Clive had no firearms, and once the riflemen got within range their last chance was gone. They would be shot down where they stood.

Would the engine never start? Clive now had his head among the machinery, and was making some adjustment in the engine.

The first of the riflemen topped the rise a couple of hundred yards away. One stopped and put his carbine to his shoulder, but hesitated and dropped it again.

Austin understood. The man was afraid of hitting Stark.

Kwala yelled at him. What he said Austin could not understand, but apparently he was urging him to shoot and take the chances.

Once more Clive was at the crank, and next moment the air was rent by the rattling, maxim-like roar of the great six-cylinder engine.

“Hurray!” cried Clive, shrilly. “Tumble in, old man! She’s started!”

“You first!” answered Austin. “I’ll keep ’em off till you’re ready.”

Clive made one leap into his driving seat, and warped the planes for rising. Austin scrambled wildly after.

Instantly Austin let in the clutch, and the great white-winged plane shot forward, its rubber-shod wheels bumping over the rough ground.

With a scream of rage Kwala rushed forward. Fury at the escape of his prey drove him mad.

The plane was in the very act of rising from the ground when Austin felt a slight jar as though it had run over something, and there pealed out a hoarse and terrible scream.

Glancing over sideways he saw a sight which made him sick. Blood-soaked fragments of what had a moment before been a man lay scattered upon the black rock. The phosphor-bronze propeller, spinning at over a thousand revolutions per minute, had caught the Malay, and shattered him like the shock of a bursting shell.

Luckily no damage was done to the propeller itself, and with an easy leap the huge plane cleared the ground and rushed upwards at a steep angle.

Austin felt the wind whip his face, and saw the rocks and scrub of the pirate stronghold dwindle beneath him.

For a moment the strangeness of the sensation kept him silent, and involuntarily he gripped the rail beside him with both hands.

Clive noticed.

“It’s all right, old man,” he said, reassuringly. “Feels a bit funny at first, I know, but you’re safe as houses. She’s running like a clock in spite of the weight she’s carrying.”

Before Austin could answer there was a whiplike crack in the depths below, and looking over the side he saw a tiny jet of smoke rise.

Crack! crack! again, and with a ping and a hum two bullets passed close to the machine.

“Put it on, Clive!” said Austin, sharply. “The beggars are firing at us.”

“Don’t worry. They’re not likely to hit us,” answered Clive, but all the same he pushed a lever over, and the great plane leaped forward like a wild duck scared by a punt-man’s gun.

Crash! a regular volley burst below, and the air sang with bullets. Austin heard a little click behind.

“One’s got home!” he said, sharply.

“Didn’t hit us, anyhow,” replied Clive. “Only the machine. And unless a stay was cut a dozen bullets wouldn’t hurt us.”

He looked over.

“We’re safe now,” he said. “We’re clear of the land. Look, the sea is below us.”

“What are you going to do—make for the schooner?”

“Only wish I could. But that’s out of the question. The platform on her deck is too small to land on without chancing an utter smash. No, we’ll have to make straight for Sunshine Island. It’s only fifty miles away, and we ought to do it in an hour.”

“There’s the schooner!” cried Austin. “See, she’s signalling!”

“Wishing us luck,” said Clive, with a grin. “I say, Austin, it will be worth something to see the skipper’s face when he realises that we’ve got Stark.”

“By Jove! it’s too good to be true,” said Austin, heaving a deep sigh of relief. “Five minutes ago I never thought we’d get out of it with whole skins.”

“More did I,” responded Clive, as he warped the planes, and the white-winged machine rose higher and higher into the blue. “I say, you might have a squint at Stark, and see if he’s alive or dead.”

Austin turned round in his seat.

“He’s still got his pretty eyes shut, anyhow,” he said. “But, halloa, what’s the matter? There’s something running out behind. Great Scot, it’s the petrol! That bullet’s chipped the tank.”

Clive gave a gasp.

“Where?” he asked.

“About half-way up.”

“For any sake plug the hole if you can! We’re gone coons if we haven’t got enough left to take us to the island.”

Austin was already at work. Rolling up a corner of his handkerchief, he was stuffing it into the hole made by the bullet.

“That’s stopped it for the minute; but I’ll have to hold it in,” he said

He remained in a kneeling position, holding the plug in the leak while Clive sent the plane hurtling through space high above the waste of waters.

Her speed was tremendous, for, luckily, the wind was a following one. In a very few minutes the schooner was hull down, and then in a little while even her white sails vanished.

Batol’s huge, gloomy bulk still remained above the horizon, but it rapidly dwindled.

The minutes dragged by, each filled with desperate anxiety. It was impossible for Austin to tell whether enough of the precious petrol remained in the pierced tank to carry them to their destination, and Clive, of course, could not for one moment take his attention from the task of steering the great machine.

He was driving her at the very top of her tremendous speed, and keeping at a height of fully two thousand feet.

Austin, as he knelt in his seat, holding his handkerchief tightly against the leak, was almost numbed with cold from the terrific rush through the air. As he looked down at the crawling wavelets in the abyss below he shuddered to think of what would happen if their fuel gave out and they were forced to drop into the sea.

Presently he found that the handkerchief was quite dry, and he knew that the petrol was now below the level of the leak. The bullet-hole was about six inches from the bottom of the tank, and it seemed hopeless to expect that there would be enough spirit left to carry them to their destination.

He turned, and his eyes roved the open spaces of sea and sky.

A cry of delight burst from him, for right in front lay a dark-green blot.

“The Island, Clive!”

“I spotted it five minutes ago,” said Clive, coolly. “Another twelve minutes does it, if the petrol holds out that long.”

Silence fell, broken only by the never-ceasing rattle of the 100 horse-power engine.

Sunshine Island grew and took shape. They could see the white line of creamy foam upon the black reef. The air grew colder. Clive was driving higher and higher.

Ten minutes passed, and they were barely a mile from the reef when, with startling suddenness, the reports of the exhaust ceased. The engine had stopped.

“Done at the post!” said Austin, sharply.

“Not yet, old man,” replied Clive, whose hands were busy with the warping levers. “Thanks be, we’re nearly a mile up. It’s hard if we can’t glide down inside the lagoon.”

Austin held his breath as the aeroplane sped onwards in a magnificent volplane.

Sea and island seemed to rise before them, but almost before he knew it the sea had vanished behind them, and they were over the lagoon.

On and on! It was like the shoot of a toboggan down a slope of Alpine ice. And then, before Austin knew it, they had crossed the lagoon, the front wheels struck the hard sand just above tide-mark, and, shooting forward a few yards, the aeroplane came to rest safe on firm ground.

“Nip and tuck!” said Clive, as he scrambled out of his driving seat. “Hulloa, hold up, old chap!”

For Austin, now that the long strain was over, had gone white as a sheet, and if Clive had not seized him would have collapsed completely.

Next moment came a joyful roar, and O’Rourke, followed by Pagan and the rest of the pearl-fishers, came charging down the beach.

Some eighteen months later a party of five sat in the same private room in the same Plymouth hotel which four of them had occupied on the evening of their first meeting. They were Heritage, O'Rourke, Pagan, and the two boys.

The remains of an excellent supper were on the table, but the five had finished eating, and were all looking at the captain, who had just risen from his chair at the top of the table.

"My friends," he said, looking round affectionately at his four faithful followers, "last time we met here we drank to the future. To-night we drink to the successful past. As you all know, we have accomplished what we set out to do. We have gathered a great fortune. Our pearls and shells have sold for over a million and a half. I have here"—producing some papers from his pocket—"cheques made out to each of you for your respective shares. But I want to say this—that money is no recompense for the devotion and pluck which you all have given proof of, and especially the two youngest here—Clive Denham and Austin Chesney."

"Hurray for the bhoys!" burst out O'Rourke, waving his glass in his big fist. "Their health, sorr, and yours."

Heritage smiled.

"It was they who, between them, captured Stark, and enabled me to hand him over to the Japanese Government, and so gain the necessary extension of my lease, and without that I could never have raised the money I required for the purpose you all know of. I may say in conclusion that I have approached the Admiralty, and that I am in hopes of having a favourable reply from them."

"Favourable reply, is it, sorr?" exclaimed the irrepressible Irishman, bounding to his feet. "Haven't ye seen the evening paper, sorr?" And he pulled a crumpled green sheet from his pocket.

Heritage started slightly.

"No, I have not seen it."

"Then, begorra, I'll rade it! Here it is:

"We understand that the King, with the advice of his ministers, has been pleased to approve of the amazing gift offered to the nation by Captain Heritage, R.N. This gift consists of a first-class cruiser of twelve thousand tons burden, and twenty-seven knots speed. It is the first time in history that any such gift has been made to his country by a private individual, and when

we say that the cost of the new vessel complete, with guns and engines, will be over a million sterling, its magnitude may be appreciated by our readers.

“‘It is rumoured that His Majesty’s Government intend to mark their sense of gratitude to Captain Heritage by restoring him to the position which he lost some years ago by an unfortunate accident, which those who know him best cannot believe to have been due to any fault of his own.’”

The rumour was correct, and to-day Captain Sir John Heritage, K.C.B., commands one of the newest Dreadnoughts, and Terence O’Rourke is afloat with him in his old capacity of boatswain.

Austin has not only set his father’s mine to rights, but has opened out new veins of tin ore, and at the present price of that metal is in a fair way of becoming a millionaire.

Clive still lives for the conquest of the air, and his newest machine, which he calls a gyroplane, is being favourably considered by the Admiralty. It has the great advantage over all other similar machines that it can slow down to a speed of under twenty miles an hour, and is thus able to alight on the deck of a warship.

“You don’t catch me having to fly fifty miles with a leaking petrol tank a second time,” says Clive, who has not forgotten the lesson learnt on the day that he and Austin carried away the Tiger of Batol from his stronghold in the Far Eastern seas.

THE END



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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 *A Fight for Fortune* by Thomas Charles Bridges]