

***The Pearl of  
Price***

**H. Bedford-Jones**

**Illustrated  
by  
L.R. Gustavson**

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# The Pearl of Price

*An action-crammed novelette of the frontier Pacific islands, by the able author of "The Bamboo Jewel" and "Three Piece Dollar."*

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Illustrations by L. R. Gustavson

**D**uring five days the *Nautilus* had been whirled like a chip before the blast of the typhoon. Carson had obtained no sight of sun or stars since the blow first hit. Driven far off the course from Manila to Honolulu, blown somewhere into the northwest, he had not the slightest idea where he was. Somewhere, he guessed, near the almost unknown Hermes reefs.

Not that the *Nautilus* minded the weather a bit. She was a trig little schooner, almost a miniature, spotless and beautiful in each detail. A yacht, said most men, and they were not far amiss. Carson, a quiet, deep-eyed alert man, had found pearls after many a weary year, and had found the schooner as well. Then luck had come still faster, since he had no need of it.

There were not many in the crew. Looye, the wrinkled, sharp-eyed Chinese cook. Klang, the mate, a Malay of princely blood, as his fine, regular features testified, who had taken this name of "wanderer" to avoid using his own. Three other Malays, and his faithful man Sumbing, "the Scarred One." Not many, but every man worth while.

When Carson fell heir to the *Nautilus*, he inherited her secrets also. She had ever been careless about the law. Carson was careless about it himself, though he did not run counter to it. There were things aboard, however, best kept out of sight, and he had left them alone.

On the sixth morning the clouds broke, and a ray of sunlight sifted down from the east, almost level. The ray picked up a chip tossing off to starboard; a boat, whirling on the face of the rising waters. The huge seas were slow, tremendous, impossible to imagine unless one has experienced such things, with an elemental force almost beyond conception. With so short a crew, it were madness to launch a boat. Klang, who had the helm, sent for Carson and bore down on the drifting craft. She was half swamped. Two bodies drifted face down in her, and a figure was in the stern, erect.

Somehow, Klang managed it. When Carson came on deck, the line had been flung and caught. The single figure was just coming aboard, the schooner falling away again before the wind. The boat was drifting away down the seas. A glance told everything; Carson turned to the figure now lying face down on the deck, senseless.

Klang joined him. Together they lifted the limp figure down the companion into the cabin. Then Carson sent the Malay to order coffee. He threw aside the lashed-down oilskin hat, exposing a coil of braided golden hair. A woman! He stared incredulously for an instant; then he poured brandy between the pale lips, and drew blankets about the roughly clad, splendid figure. After a moment the eyes opened—blue, vivid eyes.

“You’re all right,” said Carson awkwardly. “Here are clothes. Dress when you feel like it. Hurt?”

“No,” said a deep, calm voice. “Just—cold.”

“Warm up, then. . . . Ah, here we are.” The yellow steward brought coffee in a pannikin. Carson helped the woman swallow it, then rose and went on deck, leaving her to sleep, as he thought.

“Good Lord! Now we’re in for it,” he muttered with distaste. “A woman! That’s the devil’s own luck. No place aboard here for a woman. And what a beauty!”

He was still thinking of her when suddenly she appeared before him, wearing the clothes he had laid out, holding the deck with feet as steady as his own, swaying a little to the rush and thrust of the long rollers.

“Why—thought you’d sleep for a bit!” he exclaimed. She smiled.

“I’m all right, Cap’n. Thank you for saving me.”

She glanced about the schooner’s decks, and her fine eyes lighted up. She could appreciate a craft like this. Carson said nothing. Yes, she was a beauty. Slim and slender, with a calm, poised look in her face, a quiet

strength in every line of it. Wide-browed, wide of mouth and chin, thin of nostril; her shoulders wide, too, strength in her arms and the fine slim lines of her figure. Then she turned to him, her blue eyes alight and vibrant.

“What a splendid schooner this is! Cap’n—”

“Carson, ma’am.”

She put out her hand. “Thank you again. I’m Helga Skyborg. My father was Cap’n Nels Skyborg of—”

“Of the *Arafura Lass*?” exclaimed Carson. Swift interest came into his face; his steely eyes quickened. “Why, I knew him well, years ago! We were pearling together all one season off the nor’-west coast! Where is he now? What’s happened?”

“He’s dead,” she replied calmly. He saw a sudden sharp hurt in her deep blue eyes, but they did not falter, held his steely gaze calmly. “Two days ago. You were his friend? Carson. . . . He has spoken of you. I have heard of you more than once, Cap’n.”

“We quarreled,” said Carson. “I had a bad temper in those days. We weren’t friends after.”

“But he spoke well of you,” she returned, to his surprise. “He said you were a just man. The quarrel was his fault.”

They were silent for a little. Carson was astonished anew, that she should have spoken so of her father, so lately dead. He was amazed at such a meeting, at the woman herself.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty-four.” She looked at him gravely. “You will help me now?”

“Of course.” Carson did not get her meaning. He thought she meant to aid her as a castaway, to see her safe ashore, cared for. “I’m bound for the islands, but this blow has knocked us galley-west, quite literally. You bet, Helga. I’ll see that you’re taken care of.”

“That’s good,” she answered quietly. “We’re not so far from the reefs now. I got away with two men, but they were both shot, dead. I was hit over the head—”

“Eh?” Carson came alive suddenly. “What are you talking about? What’s happened?”

“Murder,” she said. “They murdered him, and tried to carry me off!”

“Oh!” said Carson, and swallowed hard. “Who? Mutiny?”

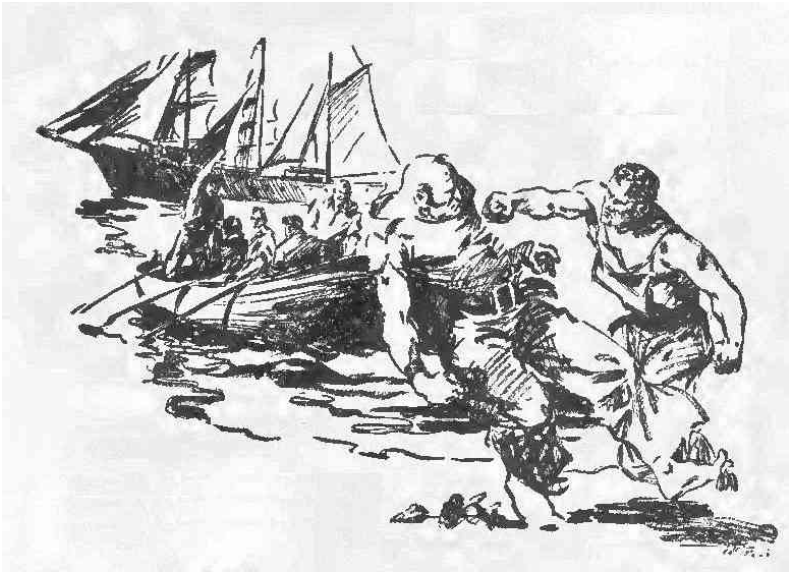
“No. Two men. They got my father to bring them to the reefs. They knew where pearls were, and we were going to fish on shares—”

“Where was all this?”

“The Hermes reefs.”

“But no pearls are there,” said Carson, frowning. “No beds. Those are American waters—”

“They’ve been found there, last year,” she broke in. “Japanese pearlers began to strip the beds. These two men were kicked out by them, their schooner burned. That part was all true enough. They engaged my father on shares. We got there and found the beds and set to work. They had bribed some of our men.”



“Come down to the cabin,” said Carson abruptly. “Time for breakfast. Looks as though it were clearing off.”

Her story gave him a jolt, sure enough, wakened him, rid him of self-consciousness. He forgot he was dealing with a woman. She caught the changed voice, the changed manner, and gave him a swift, curious glance.

Pearls in the Hermes reefs? That was a surprise, sure enough, but Carson had been out of touch with the pearling business for a year or more, since taking over the *Nautilus* and making the strike that had enriched him.

Fifteen hundred miles northwest of Honolulu—he knew the reefs, had even been there once, years ago. Few men knew of those inhospitable, dreaded coral shoals, unsurveyed since a United States ship had charted them and placed them under the Stars and Stripes nearly a hundred years before. They were off the beaten track, desolate, waterless, unvisited and unknown.

Looy had breakfast ready and waiting. Carson, eyeing the woman, saw that she had been through a good deal, but it meant little to her sturdy Norse blood. What would have shattered another woman left her calm-eyed, unmoved, well-poised as ever. He began to admire her secretly. With her, he was more at his ease now. One could forget—sometimes—that she was not a man. Carson, at least, was the sort who could forget.

“Let’s have it, now,” he said casually, as they ate, while the *Nautilus* swung up the seas and went skidding down the long descents. “Who are these two chaps?”

“Maguire and Benders are the names.”

“Hm!” The steely eyes narrowed. “I’ve heard of Maguire. Old-fashioned bullying type. Good pearler, and little good said of him. Who’s this Benders?”

“More dangerous,” she replied. “It was he who shot my father. He’s a small man, smooth-faced, looks like a boy. He wanted me.”

That gave Carson a mental picture of Benders, sure enough, and put a bad taste in his mouth to boot. He asked for no details, then or later. They were unimportant, as against the facts.

**H**e shifted the subject, spoke of the *Nautilus*, and she nodded quickly. Easy to see how Carson loved this little trim schooner of his, how she was his whole life, his world.

“Nothing like her afloat,” he said, a glow of pride in his eyes. “You’re safe enough now, so cheer up. Nothing with sails can catch us. Later on, I’ll show you some pearls, maybe. Real pearls. This is no pearling lugger, but she’s made the grade all the same. I know every plank in her, every bit of teak and brass, every line and spar, like I’d built ’em.”

“She’s a lovely craft,” said Helga, and looked him in the face. “And you’re the right man to own her, Cap’n. But about those two men, now, Maguire and Benders—”

“Who’s with ’em?” he asked. “How many?”

She made a gesture. “All of them. You see, Maguire furnished the crew. His own men.”

“How did your father take you on such a cruise, with a crowd like that?”

“Why not?” she asked, giving him a level look. “I have a master’s license.”

“You!”

A smile touched her eyes and lips, a fleeting smile at his astonishment. And Carson found her abruptly transformed. He had not seen her smile previously; it changed her whole expression, reminded him suddenly and powerfully that she was a woman, a very lovely woman.

“Are you one of the old-time seamen who snort at the idea of a woman master?” she asked gayly. “But there’s got to be a Skyborg with a master’s ticket, you know. That’s what Father always said,”—and her face changed at mention of him. “I’ve sailed with him often, the past few years, and got my master’s ticket only three months ago.”

“Why aren’t you married?” asked Carson.

“Why aren’t you?” she shot back. “Or are you?”

He shook his head and got out his pipe. “Never clicked, somehow.”

“Same with me. I’m not worried about it. A lot of women just want to marry a man; seems cheap to me, somehow. I want to marry more than that. It’s hard to explain—”

“I get you,” and Carson nodded quickly. Then he subsided. He was amazed at himself for discussing such things. “Pearls in the Hermes reefs? Are you sure about it?”

“A ten-per-cent yield,” she said. “We’ve been there two weeks.”

Carson whistled. The usual percentage was one pearl to every thousand shell.

“Virgin bed, eh?” he exclaimed. “Deep?”

“No. Beyond fifty feet there’s coral mud. Oysters can’t live there.”



Carson got out his charts and presently discovered one showing the Hermes reef, or what was known of it. The atoll was nearly twenty miles long by twelve wide and was formed by a series of reefs, most of them covered at high water, two or three being dignified by the name of islands. All were of living coral.

“The beds are all inside the lagoon,” said Helga, pointing. “There’s about fifteen fathom, in the deepest part, and most of the reefs are steep-to. The oysters are among the coral. The reefs outside the atoll are dangerous, with bad currents. We had to anchor fourteen miles off—and here, at Southeast Island, we had a camp. No big shell. The largest was about seven pounds.”

“How many men are there now?” asked Carson again. “Kanakas?”

“No, whites. Two Filipino divers, Maguire and Benders; six hands forward, including the cook.”

“What d’you expect me to do?” demanded Carson. “Walk in and tell them to hand over the lugger and the babies?”

“Why not?” Her direct gaze was fearless, simple as that of a child. “They’ve committed piracy, mutiny, murder! They don’t dream any other ship is in these seas. And some of those babies are around fifty grains. It’s worth while, isn’t it?”

Carson shrugged, and pointed to the wall safe.

“If you’re interested in pearls, there’s a box full of ’em. I’m not.”

She surveyed him with a puzzled expression.

“I don’t understand. You wouldn’t help me get those pearls?”

“No,” said Carson. “I tell you, I’ve seen too much blood spilled over those babies. I don’t like it. I don’t like fighting. And let me tell you, those chaps won’t knuckle down like lambs! Not a bit of it.”

She said nothing for a long moment, but studied him as he sat smoking moodily.

“It means a good deal to me,” she said, at last, gently.

Carson looked up.

“What does? The pearls?”

“Of course not. The lugger.”

“Oh!” said Carson. His face changed subtly. He could understand this, entirely. This schooner of his had come to mean more than pearls or anything else to him. “Yes, I suppose the lugger’s yours now. Yes. That’s true. Is she much of a craft?”

Her deep eyes brightened. “Nothing like this one, of course. It’s not what she is, but what she stands for. She’s ours—I mean, mine. That is, if we can get her back.”

“Sure,” said Carson, with a nod. “A poor thing, sir, but mine own—as somebody said. Yes, we’ll have to do it.”

“You will?” Her hand went out, caught his wrist in a quick, impulsive grip. “Promise?”

“No.” Carson met her gaze, and his whimsical smile softened the hard-cut lines of his face. “No, Helga—I never promise.”

“But—but I thought you said—”

“I said we’d get her back for you. That’s enough.” He patted her hand, then drew back. “And we’ll do it, somehow. Sure!”

**W**ith the sail pulling her forward in the light, steady wind, the whaleboat threaded her way among the reefs. Klang was in the bow, watching for coral, his four men ready to take to the oars if necessary. Carson was at the tiller, alert, vigilant. Steering a whaleboat before the wind, even if she be a light, smaller than ordinary craft, requires care.

Oddly enough, he had caught no sight of the *Arafura Lass*. He had carefully come up on the reefs in order to surprise her at her old anchorage, but she was gone. Whether she had changed positions deliberately, or had run off to sea before the recent blow, he could not tell. It was not likely that Helga Skyborg had been mistaken about her position, however.

In order to determine matters, Carson was forced to take to the whaleboat and visit the lagoon island. He disliked to do it. He hated to leave the *Nautilus*, even for an hour. Much worse, he hated to leave her with no one except the woman and Looey to guard her. He must have the men with him, for if becalmed in that lagoon without oars, the whaleboat would be helpless.

The whole thing was distasteful to him, abhorrent. He was more than anxious to wash his hands of it entirely. He cursed the hour that had brought

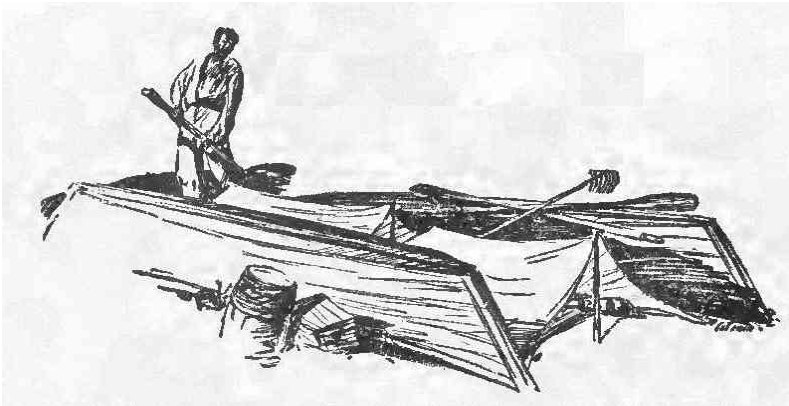
the woman aboard him, and then ashamedly took back his curses and damned destiny instead. Having given her his word to get back her lugger, he was bound to it. By good luck, however, he found a steady breeze and the whaleboat swept on toward Southeast Island, which commanded the entire lagoon. He would be back aboard the schooner long before night, he figured, and his uneasiness wore away.

“Damned bad luck we couldn’t come on the lugger and grab her!” he muttered, not for the first time. “If they’ve moved her position, she may be anywhere within a forty-mile radius, and as they’re at the center of the circle and the *Nautilus* is at the circumference—blast it all! I don’t like it a bit.”

The sun struck down steady, warm, glittering. There was scarcely a wave breaking the surface of the shallow lagoon, protected as it was by miles of outflung reefs. The islets that rimmed its long oval rose only a few feet above the water. The *Nautilus* was long since out of sight, and Carson was not worried by his inability to sight the *Arafura Lass*. He knew that from a small boat, in a calm sea, the horizon is limited to three miles.

Southeast Island, for which he was making, lifted ahead, a mass of coral and glittering sand. Carson lifted his glasses and again inspected the islet. It appeared deserted. But Klang turned his head and grinned.

“They are there, tuan!” he called aft. He had, without glasses, detected something which Carson had missed, some indication that the islet was not deserted.



*Two boats were drawn up on the sand. . . . A pile of stores at one side, two small low tents. A man arose from the jagged coral, a rifle in his hands.*

The whaleboat swung out a little, headed around a promontory of the islet, luffed, sped straight for the curve of beach now visible. Two boats

were drawn up high on the white sand. A pile of stores at one side, two small, low tents, no sign of any man, greeted them. Now, with the wind no longer abaft, the nauseating reek of rotting shell smote them full force. There was the shell itself laid out on the sand to rot and open—a mass of it, over to the left. The islet, jagged with white coral upcrops above the sand, seemed deserted.

**T**hen, without warning, a man arose from the jagged coral, coolly strode down to the pile of stores and stood there, waiting for them to land. The sun glinted on the rifle in his hands. He was a tall, brawny figure, clad in tattered shirt and trousers, a mop of red hair flaming above a square, aggressive countenance. His appearance, thus, was a silent menace that Carson did not miss. Other men were hidden along the coral, no doubt, rifles ready. Carson stood up and waved his hand. Then he spoke softly, in Malay.

“Keep your guns down, out of sight! Push off as soon as I land. Klang! The lugger will be either at the northwest channel or off the western reefs. If I take off my hat, go at once. Try the western reefs first. If you see her, take her. Shoot anyone you find aboard. Leave two men to work her around, then come back to pick me up. Understand?”

“I understand, tuan,” said Klang, in the bow.

**F**inding the islet occupied had changed things in a flash. Until now, Carson’s plans had been indeterminate, unsettled, formless. Now that he had found them here, it was certain that the lugger was not far away, probably unguarded. He dared not sheer off and go in search of her, lest those two boats on the shore come after him, get ahead of him—for she had to be found first. Better to chance things, throw these rascals off guard if possible. They would never dream that he had picked up Helga or knew the truth about them.

The oars were put out; the sail flapped idly, the sheet let fly. The red-haired man beside the pile of stores made no move, but stood grimly watching. The little whaleboat slid in, her nose touching the sand, and Carson went forward. Klang came aft to the tiller, passing him. The boat careened; then Carson stepped off and stooped, shoving her out. This would be construed as a mark of confidence by the watching man, and evidently was so construed. Carson waved his hand to the Malays and spoke in English, loudly.

“Go on back to the schooner. Take your time looking for likely ground. No hurry.”

The sheet was drawn home. The boat leaned over, slipped away through the water as the sail caught. Carson turned to the man facing him, and gambled heavily.

“Didn’t know you were around here,” he observed. “Thought the place was deserted. Came in by the nor’-west channel and have been poking about.”

There were three places the *Arafura Lass* might be found. One to the southwest, one to the west, one to the northwest. She was not in the first sheltered anchorage, and now—

The other grinned. “That channel is no good this monsoon,” he said. “Should ‘a’ left your craft off the west reefs. Maguire is my name.”

Carson removed the sun-helmet he had donned for this trip among the hot reefs, and ran his fingers through his hair, not offering to shake hands. Klang would get that signal.

“Maguire, eh?” he said. “Glad to meet you, Cap’n. My name’s Carson.”

The other started slightly. His pale gray eyes narrowed, and his weather-seamed, aggressive features hardened.

“Carson!” he said slowly. “Well, I’ll be hanged! I’ve heard of you, sure. Glad to meet you, Cap’n. I s’pose you smelled this shell clear down to Brisbane, huh? Always heard you had a nose for shell, and I guess it’s true. Thought only the Japs knew about this place.”

“That’s how I learned,” said Carson amiably. He got out pipe and pouch, and glanced around. “To judge from the shell, rumor spoke truth,” he added. “I never supposed there was any shell about here.”

“Nobody else did neither,” returned Maguire, “until some Jap dropped in and tried, and got the truth. I s’pose it’s all over the seven seas, now,” he added glumly. “And we’ll have a fleet o’ luggers bearing down in no time. There was a Jap lugger here when we come, but she was in among the reefs. That blow we had the last three days got her. Drove her over there to the east and finished her among the reefs. Not a man got clear.”

“Hm!” said Carson, and met the other’s gaze. “Sure it was the blow?”

“Yes,” said Maguire, and laid down his rifle. “Oh, I know what’s in your mind, blast you! But it aint so. No use fighting over this. There’s enough for

them that comes first, and then the game's up. We're here ahead of the season, and it's been damned unsafe, let me tell you; no place for a lugger to lay up in the bad monsoon. Well, you aint figuring on running anybody out of here, I hope?"

Carson shook his head and laughed.

"Do I look like it, Cap'n?" he said mildly, with an amused air.

"Well, I've heard of you," retorted Maguire. "You're nobody's fool."

"Neither are you, by all accounts," and Carson chuckled. "My boys are taking a look at the ground, cruising about the lagoon. I won't touch any beds you're working. If we can come to a friendly understanding, why not?"

"Fair enough," said Maguire, and turned. "Benders! Come along, you chaps." He gave Carson a look. "See anything of any other craft?"

"Not a sign of any lugger the whole way. From Manila."

Maguire nodded. It was clear that he had fears of Japanese Intrusion.

Six hands forward, Helga had said, and two divers. Here were the divers, then—two small, slender brown men, first to come down from among the coral outcrop. Four other men with them. Unshaven, furtive-eyed rascals, these, typical scum of the waterfront. Last came Benders, whom Maguire deigned to introduce as his partner. He was a small man, little over five feet in height, but Carson knew instantly he was twice as dangerous as the burly Maguire. His pock-marked features, his brilliant black eyes, his lithe and agile step, all expressed the pugnacity which certain men of small size affect, as though only too ready to prove themselves better men than their larger companions. And the degenerate, boyish look of those features!

Benders showed more than this in his manner, however; it held a virulence, a reptilian venom, whose force astonished Carson. The man nodded to him and stroked a frayed black mustache.

"Heard of you, Cap'n. Tryin' to run us off, are you?"

"Now, Ben, lay off o' that!" said Maguire warningly. "Cap'n Carson aint that sort. We're all friendly. You, Steve, get to work and fix up grub. Gettin' on to noon, and the Cap'n joins us. Ben, you change your tone—"

"You mind your own business and I'll 'tend to mine," snapped Benders viciously. "No offense meant, Carson. We got a good thing and I don't aim

to see nobody do us out of it, that's all."

"Don't blame you a bit," said Carson amiably. "You have a lugger of your own?"

"Aye," said Maguire, seating himself in the sand. Carson's whaleboat had disappeared, and apparently no one had paid it further attention. . . . Two men aboard the *Arafura Lass*, he reflected. Klang should be able to take care of them.

"Aye, an old craft we found at Manila," went on Maguire, watching his men, who had drifted down near the boats, with the exception of the cook, and were shaking dice. "The *Jenny J.*, and not much of a craft either, but good enough for this job."

"I suppose you've got your beds buoyed?" said Carson. "If so, we'll know where not to go. Don't want any trouble if we can avoid it."

"Sure, sure," agreed Maguire heartily. Benders lit a cigarette and gave Carson a look.

"Don't care about whether we found any babies, huh?" he inquired. "Ain't interested in it a bit, huh?"

Carson's eyes dwelt upon him for a slow moment—a steady scrutiny that brought the angry blood into the man's face.

"Not a bit," he responded lazily. "I'm not interested in your property. If you want to pick a quarrel, you'll have a hard job."

"That's just his way, Cap'n," said Maguire. "He don't mean—"

"You blasted fool, will you speak for yourself?" snarled Benders, whirling on him for one blazing instant. Maguire's shaggy red brows drew down. His pale and unlovely eyes filled with a gust of hot passion; then he laughed and mastered himself. But his fingers clenched and clenched again as he sat.

"I'll tell ye flat out what I mean," said Benders, turning to Carson again. "We've struck a good thing, and now you come barging in. There's enough for two or for six; there's more'n we can touch, before the whole Jap fleet will be along to strip the reefs. But who's to know that you're on the level, huh? You aint no saint, Carson. I've heard things of you, sure. You don't pull the wool over my eyes, then cut my throat some dark night! Not much. You might's well know from the start that we're on the lookout, and you can be the same."

Carson laughed a little.

“That’s fair enough, Benders,” he returned. “I’ll be the same, you bet! So you’re serving notice on me, are you? Warning me that you’ll be along some night to jump me, eh?”

**M**aguire exploded in an oath of exasperation. “No!” he bellowed. “Damn it, Carson, don’t listen to that little fool! Why’d we want to jump you? Nothing of the kind! We got enough right now without wanting more. Ben, you’re a cursed spitfire—”

Benders leaned forward like a flash and struck him across the mouth.

Maguire did not strike back. He reached out one foot, hooked Benders about the ankle, and threw him off balance. Then his bulk heaved forward. It reminded Carson of an octopus catching an open tridacna with one tentacle and then hitching himself forward on the giant clam bodily. The men came and stood around, grinning.

Maguire’s tactics puzzled Carson. He had caught Benders by both wrists, held the man’s arms out, and despite struggles and squirming, planted his knees on the smaller man’s body. A torrent of foul curses poured from both men.

“Listen, you rat!” roared Maguire. “I’ve taken a lot off you, and I’m done! If you were any other man, I’d rip your damned black heart out, understand? None of your cussed tricks with me either! You pull a knife and I’ll blow the top of your head off. Get me?”

“All right, Cap’n,” said Benders, with surprising meekness. He ceased to struggle. “But we’re splitting up here and now. Divvy up the babies that’s my share. I’m quitting.”

“Quit and be damned,” retorted Maguire, rising. “Suits me right enough. I can sleep nights if you aint around. You can take your share and walk away. Where’ll you go?”

“With Carson,” said Benders, getting to his feet and shaking off the sand. “Carson, you give me passage with you. Don’t care where. I’ll pay you, pay you well!”

“Sure,” said Carson. “But suppose we let the whole thing drop right now. I see Steve has some grub ready, and I’m hungry. Fresh fish, eh? That’s



good. Have to get some myself next low tide. Suppose we eat, and let everything else slide.”

**T**here was no driftwood to be found; Steve did his cooking over a spirit lamp, and made a good job of it. Carson enjoyed his meal. He had quite recovered his usual good spirits by this time.

To his astonishment, he found that Benders was apparently firm in his purpose to break off with Maguire, nor did the latter oppose the break. Between the two men existed a deep-seated enmity, although the seamen were all with Maguire. The man Benders, to tell the truth, was utterly alien to all these others. Carson put him down for some crafty waterfront shark, who had perhaps rigged the whole game as regarded Skyborg and the *Arafura Lass*.

“Mind you,” said Benders, “I’m takin’ passage with you, Carson, but we’re not partners, see? I’m satisfied with what I got already. Maguire, you can have the rest of the takings here, and we quit complete. No more fishin’ for me.”

Carson chuckled. “How do you know I won’t cut your throat some dark night, Benders?”

The little man gave him a vicious glance, as Maguire guffawed at this.

“I can take care o’ myself, Cap’n. And you’re better to trust than this hunk of cheese here. How much do you want for passage? Where you bound?”

“Honolulu. Won’t charge you anything,” said Carson, and gave Maguire a wink. “Cap’n Maguire will pay me to get you off his hands—eh, Cap’n?”

“You’re damned right,” said Maguire. Benders loosed a torrent of oaths at him.

“Watch your step, Maguire,” he concluded. “Or else, I’ll do some talking.”

“You try it, Ben, you try it,” said Maguire calmly, but with a certain ferocity in his look that startled Carson. “Two can talk. And these men o’ mine know a few things.”

Benders glared around the circle of faces. Carson intervened smoothly.

“All hands pipe down. If you’re going to break up, do it friendly, with no threats. Benders, you can tell me what you’ve learned about the pearl beds

here, and where Maguire's fishing, and that'll more than pay your passage. Suit you, Cap'n?"

"Oh, sure," responded Maguire. "Long as you aint aiming to conflict with me, anything's agreeable. We'll split up the babies here and now. A third to you, Ben, a third to me, a third to the men. That's what we agreed."

He produced a chamois bag, and all hands fell to dividing the take of pearls, with much oath-starred wrangling.

From what he saw of those pearls, without making any close examination, Carson was again surprised. Some were large. All were apparently of exceptional luster. That virgin, untouched beds had been found here, was evident. He perceived that both Maguire and Benders knew pearls, also, and as the partition went on, it was clear that a fortune had been snatched from the hand of the luckless Cap'n Skyborg.

**T**ime passed; although he watched sharply, Carson saw nothing of his returning boat. The four men ran out one of their two boats and departed with the Filipino divers, heading across the atoll to one of the reefs just awash as the tide ran out. The division of pearls came to a snarling conclusion. Benders tucked his share into the pockets of a belt which he donned under his shirt.

"That your craft?" asked Maguire, pointing to a fleck of sail just visible off to the westward. Carson, who had just picked it up, nodded.

"Probably."

"Well, I'll open some shell," said Maguire, and grinned at Benders. "You aint in on this take, neither! You can set there and see what you missed."

Benders curled his lip in a snarl.

Maguire went over to the rotting shell, filled a bucket with water, got out his big clasp-knife, and fell to work opening shell. Carson watched the boat, tacking down toward the islet, and presently made out that she held but two men. This showed that Klang had found the *Arafura Lass*, had taken the lugger and sent her around to join the *Nautilus*.

He could see clearly enough why Maguire was glad to be rid of Benders. The vicious little murderer of Cap'n Skyborg was no household pet. He was out for trouble all the time, he was irresponsible, one could not predict what he would say or do. Probably Maguire himself feared a knife in the throat some dark night.

Suddenly Carson was aware of Benders mouthing low words to him.  
“Cap’n! That your boat coming?”

“Aye,” said Carson.

“We’re here alone with him,” said Benders, jerking his head toward the broad back of Cap’n Maguire. “What say? He’s got the babies in his shirt. You and me—split ’em. Huh?”

Carson felt a little sick as he met the venomous eyes, read their glittering message. Barely in time, he checked his impulsive words, remembered that both these rascals had been concerned in murder and worse. Thought of Helga Skyborg killed any chance sympathy for Maguire.

“Not me,” he said calmly. “I won’t interfere, if that’s what you mean. It’s not my show. If you carry it off, I won’t claim any of the babies.”

“You won’t help him, huh?” muttered Benders.

Carson shrugged. “Nor you. That’s fair enough.”

Benders left him, strode across the sand toward the outspread shell. Maguire glanced around and held up one hand.

“Twenty-grain baby, Ben! See what you lost now, damn you!”

“Don’t matter,” said Benders. He took out a cigarette and lighted it, then snarled down at the seated Maguire: “Soon’s that boat gets in, I’m gone. Looks like a lot o’ men in her, too. More than we seen before.”

Startled, Maguire turned to glance at the approaching whaleboat.

Like a flash, Benders fell upon him. His agility was incredible. The knife in his hand drove up and down, again and again, every stroke deep into the broad back of Maguire. Carson could not have interfered if he would.



*The knife drove up and down. Maguire flung out his arms. The pearl glinted in the air, falling to the sand.*

**A** frightful cry burst from Maguire. He flung out his arms. The pearl flew from his hand and glinted in the air, falling to the sand. Benders hurled himself at it. Maguire came to his feet. Streaming with blood, he caught up the water-bucket and hurled it. Struck full across the head, Benders pitched forward. Maguire took a step, then crumpled; he was dead as he struck the sand.

It had all happened swiftly, in the fraction of an instant.

Carson rose, looked out at his whaleboat. She was standing in for the beach, Klang and Sumbing alone in her. Maguire's boat was off across the lagoon, a couple of miles distant, still fishing.

Going to Benders, he stooped over the man, who was unconscious, and removed the money-belt with its pearls. Then he turned to the dead Maguire, and from the body took the chamois bag. Here in his hand was everything for which men had sinned and died, everything for which these ruffians had

brought crime and terror into a woman's life. An ironic grimace twisted Carson's features.

"So much death, so much suffering, for so little!" he murmured. "Well, you go with the lugger, to her. After all, what better destination? You belong to her, you can insure her future, you can repay her for what you've done to her, damned glittering baubles!"

Carson, having devoted most of his life to pearls, had come to hate them.

The boat was in now, her nose scraping the sand, Klang leaping ashore. Carson turned again to Benders, reflectively, making a decision which was to mean much to him. He had intended taking Benders along, had intended it from the start, to let him face Helga and later a court for the murder of her father.

But now he changed his mind. Who was he, to drag the little reptile to the bar of justice? Far better to leave him here, marooned with his latest victim, their lugger gone, only a small boat for him and his scoundrelly companions. The Japanese pearlery would be along soon enough. They would not starve. And loss of the pearls would be more bitter punishment to Benders than any the law could bring upon him.

So, with a nod of decision, Carson turned to face the eager Klang.

"You found the other schooner?"

"Yes, tuan," said Klang, his aquiline features, so different from the usual dish-faced Malay countenance, all alive with active thought. "We found her and did not waste cartridges. We put the steel into those two men aboard her. She is now circling around the outermost reefs and they'll bring her to our own ship."

"Very well," Carson pointed to the other boat, updrawn above high water mark. "Knock a hole in that boat, and we depart."

In his pocket was a stub of pencil. He went to the pile of stores, from an opened box took a tin of tomatoes, and tore off the paper wrapper. On the inside of this he wrote briefly:

*For murder of Cap'n Skyborg, payment received.*

*Carson, agent for Helga Skyborg,  
Master of Arafura Lass.*

This paper he tucked under the hand of the still senseless Benders, then turned to his own whaleboat. Klang had knocked a gaping hole in the other boat, and now joined him. The whaleboat was shoved out, the sheet was hauled in. Carson settled down at the tiller as she heeled over and took the breeze, running to the southward across the lagoon. He looked back once at the two figures sprawled in the sand, and smiled thinly. At his feet were three rifles. The three men who had gone aboard the *Arafura Lass* had taken their rifles with them.

Sumbing, the scarred one, lifted his dog-face and sniffed the air.

"I smell fog, tuan," he said. Carson frowned, glanced around.

"Fog, with the wind blowing? Has Allah smitten your senses?"

"That is as may be, tuan. But here are reefs, far and wide, and the tide out, and I can smell fog."

Carson grunted, but was uneasy none the less. The whaleboat drove on, gathering speed, with Klang perched in the bow, watching for coral pinnacles ahead. Sumbing chewed his betel-paste and spat scarlet over the leeward rail, and Carson watched the canvas, the tiny outflung reefs ahead, stretching on across the horizon toward the waiting *Nautilus*.

Behind them, on the sand, Benders sat up and caught sight of their rag of sail as he came to a cursing awakening, and saw whither they were heading.

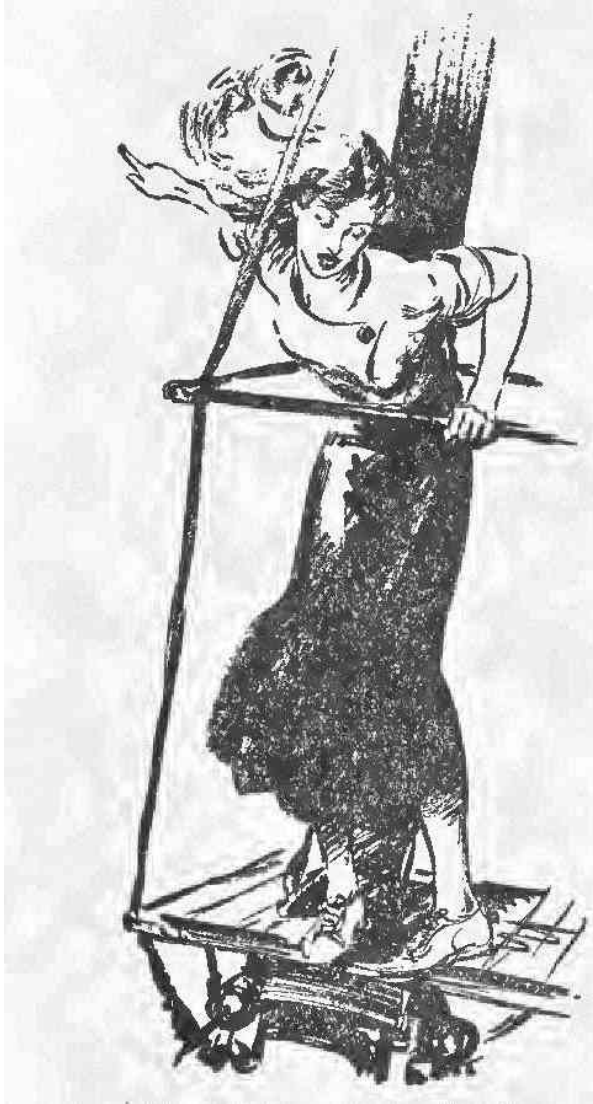
It was a little after this that the wind failed altogether, and a bank of fog swept down and closed in opaquely upon the atoll, as it frequently does in those reef-thick waters.

For Helga Skyborg, the day passed monotonously. Wrinkled old Looey told her tales of Cap'n Carson, and the bright horizon remained unflecked and undimmed until mid-afternoon.

Then, as she went aloft with the glasses for the tenth time, Helga discerned two things. Off to the northeast lifted a grayish dimness; she knew it for fog, such as she had seen twice since coming to these reefs, and her heart contracted. She had forgotten to warn Carson of this peril, for in these waters it was a very real peril.

Off to the westward, however, she saw something else that made her forget the fog entirely. A tiny scrap of sail showed there, was gone, showed again. Watching it steadily, she knew it at last for the topsail of her own

lugger—recognized it, indeed, where anyone else would have been uncertain whether it was a sail or a distant gull. She called down to Looney, exultantly.



*She called down exultantly: "It's the lugger. He's got her, Looney! They're coming with her!"*

"It's the lugger! He's got her, Looney! They're coming with her!"

Both of them took for granted that Carson was coming with the lugger. So they paid little heed to the fog-bank that so swiftly enclosed and hid the reefs. The lugger had circled well out of it, and held the faint breeze, and the

fog did not quite come to the *Nautilus*, for she lay moored in the south channel where the wide rush of water broke the fog and checked its course. The *Arafura Lass* closed in gradually, the wind dying out by degrees, but it was a long while before she drew down within hail.

By this time, Helga had discovered only the three Malays aboard her. When she hailed them, she had no luck whatever, for she knew no Malay and they little English. Then Looey took a hand, when they had let drop the lugger's anchor and were swinging close by. Looey spoke Malay excellently; he was one of those Chinese from Gunning Api who have forgotten their own tongue across the centuries.

He learned what had taken place, so far as the three knew it and passed the information to Helga. At her command, he ordered the three to lower a boat, but there were none remaining on the lugger. Perforce she and Looey got the cutter of the *Nautilus* into the water and rowed it across the gap, and so Helga came to the deck of her own lugger again.

She sent Looey and the three Malays back to the *Nautilus* in the boat, and would listen to no protest. She wanted to be alone on this lugger, alone with her memories, alone with the sense of ownership and possession. She had much to do aboard here, before it could be cleansed of every last trace left by its recent occupants.

Accordingly, she fell to work down in the after-cabins, where the presence of her dead father lingered strongly. Maguire and his men had respected nothing aboard here, had not even respected her own cabin and her belongings,—but she wasted no futile tears over this. She made the best of things as they were, and from her father's old plundered sea-chest took what Maguire had disdained—an old-fashioned revolver. She loaded it and put it to one side, and went on with her work.

**W**ith the cabins in such shape as contented her orderly soul, she suddenly noticed that darkness was drawing down. She hurried on deck. The afternoon had nearly sped, and the edges of the fog had sent out tentacles to enclose the two schooners. She hailed the *Nautilus* and Looey made answer. The three Malays had gone off in their boat, taking the fog-horn, to try and find Carson. Occasionally Helga caught the thin, distant note of the horn, or thought she did. It was hard to make certain. . . .

She got a lantern alight and set to work in the galley, after breaking out some cabin stores, and soon had a meal ready. The fog, she knew from experience, might last for a full day or more, until a breeze came up to dispel



it. No lights showed aboard the *Nautilus*, and Looney was incapable of rigging any, so she rigged an oakum flare and replenished it from time to time, to guide Carson or the Malays if they showed up.

It was while doing this that she found the three rifles on the transom of the cabins, where the Malays had left them in their hurry to get aboard the other craft. So the three men had gone off unarmed! Not that it mattered greatly; possession of the two schooners was the chief thing.

Then the voice of Benders came to her out of the mist.

She was standing at the rail when she heard it, plainly, clearly, uplifted in a curse. For an instant, paralyzed by it, she stood peering down at the water.

There was no boat, there were no other voices. She broke into a shaky laugh, listened again, but heard nothing. Beyond doubt, her ears had deceived her. A squeaking block, a rasp of anchor-chain, the cry of a bird—her subconscious fears had translated some such sound into the voice of Benders. She straightened up, resolutely throwing off her anxiety, and went to replenish the flare.

Time passed, with only the dull booming of surf on distant reefs to mark its going. After a long while, Helga went down into the after cabin, lit the lamp slung in gimbals, and began to enter up the rough log left by her father. She became absorbed in this, entering what had happened, her rescue by Carson, and their return to the reefs.

As she was writing the last words, she distinctly caught the thump of a boat against the lugger's side, followed by the clump of a booted foot on the deck overhead. It flashed across her instantly that the Malays wore no footgear. Therefore, Carson must have returned. Carson—or another!

Swiftly she rose, caught up the old revolver, darted into the passage and started up the ladder.

**S**he was nearly at the deck, when a voice halted her like a shot, and held her aghast, dismayed, paralyzed for a moment. It was the voice of Sandy, one of Maguire's crew.

"Not a soul in sight," it said. "Decks clear empty, Benders. Light in the after cabin."

"Somebody's down there, huh?" This was the voice of Benders. It wakened fear and horror in the crouching girl. She was incredulous. She

could not realize how the man had come here. "I'll just take a look. Question is, who lit that flare, huh? Where's our two men gone?"

"Clear enough now," broke in another voice. This was Limey, a rat-toothed little ruffian. "Blimey, that chap Carson fooled us proper! His boat went off and copped the lugger, and his men fetched her around! The fog got him and he aint back yet, like you figured—"

"You there, Steve?" said Benders, a quick, rising thrill of excitement in his voice. "Get into the boat again, all of you except Limey—go grab that other schooner, quick! Before they wake up. Must be some one aboard her. Limey! You stop here with me. Don't go down. Wait!"

Hasty feet pounded the deck in obedience.

Helga crouched, her breath coming fast, a thousand expedients flitting across her brain—all of them useless. She was trapped here. There was only old Looey aboard the *Nautilus*, and none to warn him. They were going aboard her now, to take her by stealth. That was why Benders and Limey were waiting on deck above, until Steve and the others had the *Nautilus*, before descending and causing any commotion here.

There was none to warn Looey—except herself.

She straightened up, crept up the steps, peered around the coaming. A mutter of voices, two dark shapes close by, at the rail, one of them her father's murderer. It was just such a night as this that Benders had put two bullets into her father's back. The thought of it steadied her, brought her to herself. She could not tell which of these two was Benders. No matter!

The old revolver swung up, leveled. She pressed the trigger. There was a click and a snap—the old cartridge had missed fire. A sharp exclamation from the rail, a low cry of warning.

Desperately she pressed the trigger again. A shot this time, a burst of fire, but the bullet went wild. She had missed her chance. A figure leaped at her, as the hammer fell again. Limey caught that bullet squarely. It blew off the top of his head. None the less, his body pitched against her with all its dead weight, carried her off her feet, sprawled with her at the bottom of the companionway. She dragged herself upright, just as the ray of a flashlight from above struck full upon her.

"You!"

The yell of recognition burst from the man above. She flung up the revolver—it snapped, and snapped again. In this awful instant she

remembered, for the first time, that her father had said something about getting the firing-pin repaired. Then Benders was coming down the ladder like a fury, swift to realize his advantage.

He was upon her. A cry burst from Helga—a wild scream of anger, of panic, of horror. She struck out with the useless weapon in her hand. Benders was already smashing at her with the long, heavy flashlight. It struck her over the eyes; dazed her. She slipped in the blood of Limey, at her feet. As she did so, Benders brought down the flashlight, full across her head, and she pitched forward senseless.

**D**isregarding a commotion, a spatter of shots, from the other schooner, Benders flung open the cabin door, saw it was empty, then turned and dragged Helga into the light. He pounced upon her eagerly, his eyes aflame beneath the bandage around his head. With his knife, he slit the breeches of the dead Limey into strips, and bound the wrists and ankles of the girl.

Then, rising, looking around, Benders caught sight of the logbook on the table. He went to it, saw the entries she had made, and devoured them greedily. Thus, he came to a perfect comprehension of all that had taken place. And as he read, he laughed softly.

“This cinches it!” he muttered. “They believe already that Carson murdered Cap’n Maguire, and when they read this, they’ll never believe anything else! Neither will anyone. This clears away everything for us all, gives us an out! We’ll loot Carson’s ship, pick him up and get back the pearls, set fire to his ruddy craft—and sail into any harbor as cool as you please! Lay the piracy on him. Aye! With his reputation, he can stand it. And he won’t be able to do any talking back, neither—not when we get done with him! Carson, by glory, we’ve got you and we’re sitting on top of the world this minute!”

A hail drifted across from the *Nautilus*, a hail in the voice of Steve the cook, to let him know that his exultant statement was correct.

**E**ven after the fog closed down, the breeze lasted—no new experience to Carson. He had seen the heaviest fogs come at the same time with a stiff breeze.

With coral underfoot, however, the sail must come down. Otherwise, it was suicide, for coral pinnacles were everywhere, and with no sun to reveal

them, watching were vain. So the canvas came in, Klang and Sumbing put out the oars, and Carson steered their slow progress entirely by compass.

Slow or not, their first intimation of coral was when they ground into it.

They got off again, water streaming into the boat. Carson abandoned the tiller and worked with the bailer, grimly. Progress had to be abandoned, however. It was impossible to see twenty feet away from the boat. Twice they barely missed submerged reefs, which would have torn out the frail bottom of the whaleboat. Carson gave up, and drifted with the current, which at least tended in the right direction.

So the afternoon dragged on into darkness, maddening in its slowness.

Carson found that the *Arafura Lass* had been taken with grim simplicity. Klang had sailed up to her, Sumbing had gone aboard with him, and the curved knives had done the rest. He shrugged and made no comment. The other three men could take her around the reefs and join the schooner, had probably done so long ere this.

Night closed down. Twice the note of a fog-horn reached them, only to recede and vanish in the thickness. Then, with startling clarity, the muffled crack of a shot whipped across the fog, followed by others. After that, silence.

“As Allah liveth!” exclaimed Klang. “Those shots were not far away, tuan!”

Carson made no reply. He knew the futility of trying for direction in this fog. A horrible uneasiness had beset him. It had been criminal to leave the *Nautilus* defenseless, he told himself, not to mention the girl Helga. His mind went back to those men who had been with Maguire. He knew at once that they must have out-smarted him, must have stolen past while he lay there idle and helpless in the fog. An agony of apprehension seethed within him, but he gave no sign of it. He sat staring into the blackness, a stricken man. There was almost no sea at all, and the ceaseless long thunder-roll of surf had sunk to a distant rumble. The boat swayed on the slowly heaving water, and Klang, taking the bailer, fell to work.

“We are not far from the ships,” spoke up Sumbing abruptly, and lifted his face. “I can smell men, tuan.”

Carson wakened. He was roused from his abstraction not by these words, which he recalled only after a moment or two, but by a coolness on his cheek, a breath. He came to himself, and straightened up.

“Unstep the mast!” he ordered abruptly, but kept his voice low. “Give me the bailer. Pass back the mast along the thwarts. Both of you spread out the sail like a tarpaulin for’ard, and get beneath it. Quickly, now!”

They must have thought him mad, must have stared blankly toward him there in the darkness. This concealment looked utterly asinine, at such an hour, under such conditions.

“Aye, tuan,” said Klang, and the boat rocked as he moved forward.

“Take the rifles with you,” said Carson. “All three of them. Be ready if I speak.”

**T**he fog rushed past them; though they could not see it, they could feel the breeze. It spurred them, and they realized why Carson had spoken.

They did not know his reason, nor did he himself, save that he was on the alert, vigilant, filled with dread and forebodings. Then a star, and another, glimmered overhead, though the fog still closed them in like a moving, rushing wall, fleeing silently as the wind drove it in swirls and eddies.

Carson moved to the ’midships thwart and began to bail, for the water was gaining fast. The two Malays were lying covered by the canvas, just forward of him. At this moment the mist was gone as though cleft by some unseen knife. An uncanny golden light was spread over the sea, for the moon was just rising, and stars gleamed down coldly. The fog went sweeping away in two high gray walls, farther and farther.

Not two hundred feet away was the *Arafura Lass*, her lanterns glimmering. The *Nautilus* lay more distant, dark and apparently deserted.

**C**arson started half erect, then sank back again. Swift, eager commands leaped to his lips, only to be checked. Imperceptibly but steadily the moon was rising, flooding everything with clear golden light, revealing his boat and his every action with startling distinctness. And from the lugger, not from his *Nautilus*, came a clear sharp cry in a woman’s voice.

“Carson! Look out! They—”

The cry was checked, cut off short.

“Lie quiet,” ordered Carson in Malay, softly.

He was perplexed, bewildered, one would have said frightened, had his nature been subject to fright. A light glimmered on the deck of the *Nautilus* and was gone again. Men were there, then. Not his own men, or they would have hailed him. And Helga was aboard the lugger, had tried to warn him! Benders, then, had taken both craft.

All this passed in the flash of an instant. Water came about his feet. He bent with the bailer, flung it over the gunwale in steady spurts of flashing phosphorescence, heard the two men under the canvas stir a little as the water reached them. He looked up toward the lugger, saw a man leap to her rail, and knew him for Benders.

“Ahoy, Carson!” came the voice, thinly in its exultation. “Come aboard, Cap’n, and finish our talk! Hit the coral, did you? Where’s your other boat and your men?”

The other boat? For an instant hope thrilled Carson. He stood up, looked around, but saw nothing of the other boat.

He was safe enough for the moment, and knew it. The pearls! Benders wanted them first, his life next. And now he had his choice. He could make for the *Nautilus*, or for this lugger where the girl Helga was plainly held captive. One wrench at his heart and soul; this was all. He did not hesitate, did not consider anything else possible, but turned toward Benders.

“Looks like you’ve got the best of me,” he answered. “Yes, hit the coral, hit hard. Both men gone. Where’s the other boat, then?”

**B**enders uttered a cackle of derisive laughter.

“Gone looking for you in the fog, the fools!” he answered. “We got rifles trained on you. Don’t try any tricks, Cap’n. You come aboard and hand over them babies.”

Carson stooped, bailed furiously for a moment, thinking hard and fast. Aboard the *Nautilus* a flame leaped out; the bullet sang overhead, and the whiplike rifle-crack echoed. Benders hurled a wrathful yell at the schooner.

“Steve! Quit shooting, you fool! It’s all right, Cap’n—you come along here.”

“I’m not doing so badly, thanks,” returned Carson, again standing up. He knew that his occupation had been clearly discerned. “Might run up the sail, now that I’ve a breeze, and clear out. Thanks for telling about my other boat.”

Benders let loose a volley of startled oaths.

“You try it, and we’ll drill you!” he yelled, then calmed down. “Tryin’ a bluff, are you? Bailing your head off. Yah! Don’t come anything like that over me, Cap’n! You’ll do no running with a hole punched in your boat! We’ve got both craft, and I’ve got your pearls right here—your pearls, savvy that? Out of your cabin safe behind the panel! You step along here and hand over them babies you got off me and Maguire, and I’ll let you take your ruddy schooner and clear out! That’s a fair offer, aint it?”

“Aye,” said Carson, “if you mean it.”

He stooped again, bailing rapidly, but faster than was necessary. Again a low word in Malay:

“After I go aboard, follow quickly but quietly.”

“I mean it, all right,” hailed Benders with eager volubility. “You run for it, and we’ll fill you full o’ lead before you get your mast stepped! Come aboard and hand over the pearls, and you can have your schooner. Give you my word of honor, Cap’n!”

“Aye?” returned Carson. “How about the men with you? They agree?”

Benders turned and spoke. Voices broke out around him in quick assent. Carson listened, his senses set to distinguish them. The two Filipinos and another. Three men with Benders, then, on the lugger. Probably three on the lugger, since there had been six in all. He scarcely heard what the little murderer had said about his pearls, although the words showed that Benders was speaking the truth and had found them.

“All right, then,” said Carson, and leaned over, bailing hard.

“Four aboard there,” he muttered in Malay. “Come quietly.”

“Throw your gun overboard!” ordered Benders. Carson stood up, threw out his hands.

“Haven’t any gun, you idiot! If I had, I’d drill you here and now!”

Benders laughed. “I believe you would at that, Cap’n! All right. Come on.”

Under the ladder another boat swung, empty, on the dark side away from the *Nautilus*. Carson got out an oar, tugged at it clumsily, moved his craft through the water by degrees. He broke off to bail again, then resumed the oar. Little by little, his whaleboat edged in, until a man at the rail heaved out

a coil of light line, and Carson caught it. They drew him in, and he edged his craft between the lugger and the boat, to the ladder.

**A**t the rail above stood Benders; leaning over, peering down at him. “Ye needn’t do no more bailing, Cap’n,” he said mockingly. “Come along.”

Carson reached out for the ladder, then checked himself. Across the moonlight from the *Nautilus*, now hidden from him by the bulk of the lugger, came a sound that he recognized on the instant, with incredulous dread; the rattle of chain going out through the hawse. The men there had knocked out the shackle, the chain was running out, the schooner was adrift. He knew he was right when he heard a vitriolic oath from Benders.

In a flash it all came to Carson. A low cry was wrenched from him, a cry of deep hurt, of wordless agony. He knew what they meant, knew they were turning the schooner adrift, meant to keep this lugger themselves, get rid of him.

“What are you up to?” he exclaimed, to cover his one sharp cry. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, you fool,” retorted Benders, furious at seeing him standing below at the ladder. If he shot Carson there, the pearls would be gone. “Come along. They’re fetching your craft alongside it. Hand over the pearls, then take her and clear out.”

“All right,” he said, and reaching out for the ladder, swung his weight to it. He went up with swift, lithe steps, then paused at the rail. Benders had stepped back, a pistol in his hand. Carson looked at him in the moonlight.

“Careful, you little rat!” he exclaimed sharply. “Don’t be tempted to use that gun on me, understand? Shoot me, and you’ll never see those pearls of yours.”

**C**arson swung himself over the rail, dropped to the deck, and turned aft. A glance had shown him that the two Filipino divers and Benders’ other man were slightly forward.

“What d’ye mean by that?” snapped Benders, his voice startled. “Hey, Cap’n! Where you think you’re going? Halt, there!”



Carson chuckled and obeyed. He had found what he was seeking among the confusion of gear and litter that strewed the deck—the bight of a two-inch hawser. He stopped beside it, and turned to Benders. The latter and his three men were all intent upon him. One glance he cast at the *Nautilus*, and heart-sickness gripped at him. She was a little farther now, evidently in the grip of the swiftly running current. Well, no matter! He had made his choice and must abide by it. The fools!

“Give me a cigarette,” he said calmly, alert for the first sign of a brown shape coming over the rail. “Then I’ll tell you where to find those pearls. Fair enough?”

“You bet, Cap’n,” said Benders. “Watch him, you men!”

Carson slipped his foot under the end of the hawser.

“That schooner of mine isn’t coming closer,” he said. Benders, fumbling in his pocket, looked toward the *Nautilus*, and a grin touched his lips.

“She aint, for a fact,” he said. “You might’s well make up your mind to it, Cap’n. You don’t get that schooner till I’ve got the babies—”

A silent dark shape came over the rail like a shadow, was followed by a second. The seaman, Sandy, uttered a startled exclamation. Carson’s foot jerked up the end of the hawser, and catching it, he lashed Benders across the face with the hemp, flung himself bodily at the little man, bore him to the deck before Benders could realize what was happening.

A wild shriek from Sandy was echoed by terrified yells from the two Filipinos. A rifle cracked out, and Carson felt the thud as the bullet plowed into the deck beside him. He could see nothing of what was going on, however. Benders was fighting like a thrashing snake to get his pistol clear of Carson’s grip, to get himself clear, to writhe away and reach his feet. And Carson had his hands full.

There was no second shot. The two Filipinos ran for it, screaming horribly, terrorized by those two leaping shadows whose knives flashed in the moonlight. Presently only one was screaming. Then he, too, fell silent.



*In that frenzied whirl of battle Carson felt a sudden stab of pain. Benders had loosed a knife.*

**I**n his day Carson had gone through his share of rough-and-tumble fighting, but never had he encountered an opponent like Benders. The little man fought with demoniac intensity. The pistol went clattering, unregarded. The two men thrashed across the deck, intertwined. Presently Klang and Sumbing, their keen-bladed knives red, darted up and attempted to take a hand, but dared not, lest they harm Carson. Over and over went the two. In that mad and frenzied whirl of battle, Carson felt a sudden stab of pain, caught a yell of warning from Klang. Too late! Benders had loosed a knife.

He felt it bite into him, again and again. A thumb had wrenched at one eye, nearly blinding him. Then, suddenly, he had the knife-wrist in his left hand, bending it back as they twisted and fought, and his right drove in again and again with frantic fury. Benders uttered a terrific scream, but it was choked as Carson's right hand closed about his throat. One wild spasmodic effort, one violent convulsion that hurled both men headlong against the rail with its frenzied, mad ferocity.

Then Carson realized that he was fighting a limp object, that the two Malays were dragging at him. He came to his feet, panting deeply, half blinded, and against the rail lay Benders with head and arm oddly twisted, grinning horribly in a set, unchanging grimace.

Carson tried to speak, but the stars whirled and he plunged into darkness. Klang caught him, lowered him to the deck, and the two brown men leaned over him.

**W**hen he came to himself, Carson was alone, in the streaming moonlight.

He lifted himself painfully, sat up, leaned back against the rail. He was bewildered, very weak, but found that his arm and side had been hastily bandaged. Benders must have cut him up badly, then. He caught at the rail, lifted himself half erect, flung one long, agonized glance around the waters.

The *Nautilus* had disappeared.

He dropped back again and sat with his head drooping, all the bitterness of loss wrenching at him. A moment later there was a light, firm step and he looked up to see Helga coming to him, leaning over him with a cup.

“Here is coffee,” she said. “Put it down, Cap’n.”

He obeyed dumbly. She was wearing woman's clothes now, a white blouse and a skirt; the moonlight brought out the strength of her splendid features, her wide-shouldered body. She stooped, and took a little bundle from the deck and laid it in his lap—a large bandanna kerchief, knotted compactly.

“What's that?” asked Carson.

“Your pearls. From the schooner. Klang took them from Benders before he went.”

“He went? Where?” Carson looked up, shoved aside the pearls.

“He and the other Malay. In the boat—”

She sprang quickly to the rail, as the distant crepitation of rifles came to them, a whole burst of shots. Then she turned and shook her head.

“Nothing visible. There’s still fog over the reefs.” Helga came and sat down beside him and took his hand. “Cap’n, I want to thank you. Not for this alone, but for—for everything,” she said, in her low, rich voice. “From the very beginning, when you picked me up.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Carson in a toneless, dead response. “The schooner’s gone. I know it. I can feel it. Nothing matters. Everything’s gone, with her.”

She was silent for a moment. Then her words startled him.

“Don’t be a whining boy, Carson. That’s not like you.”

His head lifted under the sting.

“You don’t know what that craft meant to me!” he said with swift, hoarse passion. “She was my life, everything I had. I loved her, do you understand? She’s pulled me out of hard places, stood by me, worked for me, given me beauty and something beyond, something—”

“You talk like a beachcomber who has just lost his woman,” she said.

Carson choked down an oath, sat silent. The comparison was apt. It hit him like a blow. He remembered suddenly that when he had picked up this girl she had just lost her father, her own lugger, everything she had—and she had not whined.

“By God, you’re right!” he said. And for Carson, who never took the name of his creator in vain, these words spelled tremendous feeling.

“You have your pearls, at least,” she said after a moment. “And there were others in your pockets—those you took from Maguire and Benders, I suppose. I found them when I was binding you up; they’re safe, in the galley. I’ll give you my share of them. Keep them. Take this lugger, if you like. Keep her. She’s not a beauty, but she’s good. I owe you everything. I want to make up to you—what you’ve lost was lost for me.”

“Don’t be a fool,” said Carson roughly. “Pearls be damned!”

They sat for a long while in silence. Presently she rose and looked across the waters. Carson heard the creak of oars, but did not look up.

“Both boats,” she said. “Klang in the first. The other three in the second.”

**T**hen indeed Carson knew the *Nautilus* was gone, or those men would not have returned. He sat unmoving, but presently asked for a cigarette. His jacket lay at one side. Helga found a cigarette, gave it to him, struck a match. Klang and the other Malays came up over the side and stood before him, then squatted in the Malay fashion of respect—even Klang, who rarely showed respect to any man.

“Well, what news?” asked Carson in the customary Malay phrase.

“The news is bad, tuan,” returned Klang, regarding him stoically. “At the edge of the fog, those men put your ship on a coral ledge. They were drunk, all of them; they had broken into the liquor store. We went aboard and slew them, but the ship was sinking. We tried to get her papers, your things, but she went down very swiftly, slid off the ledge. She is gone.”

**A**ll of them watched Carson fearfully, and the girl Helga, standing there straight and slim in the moonlight, held her gaze steadily upon him. He puffed at his cigarette for a space, then tossed it away, up and over the rail. In the silence, they heard the hiss as it struck the water. Carson held up his hand.

“Give me a lift, Helga, will you?”

She helped him to his feet. He looked out over the water, then turned to Klang and smiled.

“Good!” he exclaimed. “As Allah liveth, ye are true men. Better that the ship is lost, than you. Get to work here; bring in the boats, lift the anchor, send up canvas.”

Klang leaped to his feet. “Tuan-ki,” he cried, giving Carson the title of royalty, “only God knows the destiny of man! We who follow you, are proud to be your men.”

He made a gesture to the others, and they leaped into action. But Carson turned to the girl and laughed a little, and pressed her hand.

“Helga, thanks for waking me to sense,” he said abruptly. “What a fool a man can be at times! Shake.”

She gave him a quick, strong grip, and her eyes were suddenly glorious and starry as she looked at him, but when she laughed, there was a catch in her throat.

“Fifteen hundred miles to Honolulu!” said Carson. “Let’s go, Mister.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” she responded, and saluted smartly.

After all, there are better things in life than ships, and better friends to love, and better company in which to go questing across the horizon of the years. Fifteen hundred miles is a long way, but sometimes all too short.

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.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Pearl of Price* by Henry Bedford-Jones]