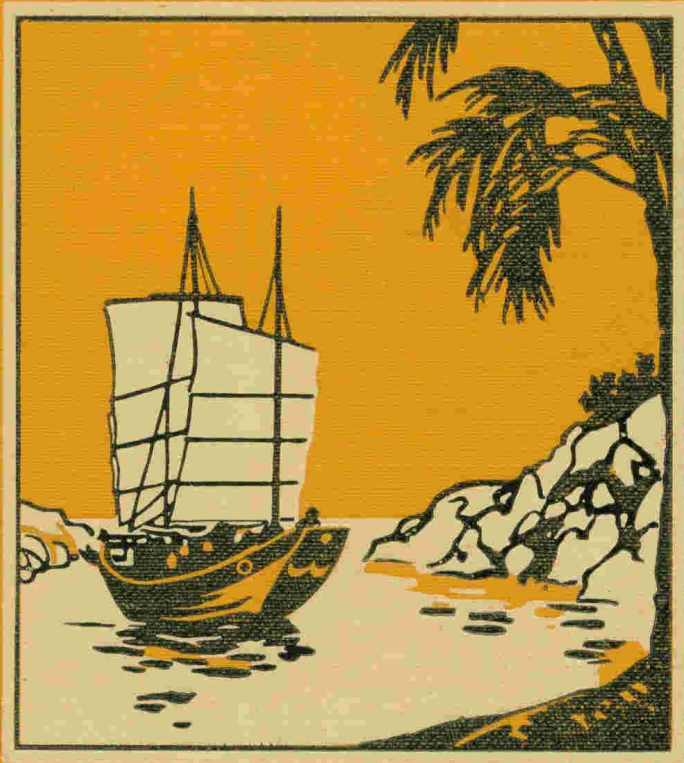


COLIN THE SCOUT



LIEUT-COL. BRERETON

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COLIN THE SCOUT

BY

LT.-COLONEL BRERETON

Author of "On the Field of Waterloo"
"With French at the Front" &c.

Illustrated by Cyril Holloway

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Colin the Scout

CHAPTER I

The Blowmoor Scouts

Blowmoor was in a state of ferment. The infection had spread a couple of miles to the village of Hazel Heath. Roads usually deserted or almost so were thronged with gossipers. Little boys ran hither and thither, shouting. Nurse-maids seemed to have concentrated on Blowmoor with their charges, so that heads were nodding and tongues wagging. Altogether, these usually placid, not to say dull, surroundings were distinctly enlivened. And why?

“Blest if I do know,” muttered Jimmy Stiles, Squire’s bailiff, as he removed a ponderous billycock hat and mopped his forehead. “What’s the to do, Tom?”

“To do, sir? To do?” Tom wasn’t remarkable for any particular sort of brilliance. He was a countryman born and bred, and changes which had swept since the War across the face of England, bringing a tide of new ideas, an up-to-dateness hitherto undreamt of, had surged over and round Tom Taylor and left him unchanged. Still the same slow speaking, slow thinking rustic, marooned as it were, while all about him the younger generation were absorbing those new ideas.

“Yes, to do,” growled Jimmy. “There’s people about. What’s the racket over? What are they boys shouting for?”

He waved a disapproving arm and stared down the road.

“Boy Scouts. Perhaps it’s them. They’re always up to summat,” said Tom.

“What! Mr. Bignall’s lot? Him they call Scoutmaster Bignall?”

They turned to stare at a large house standing in its own extensive grounds at the very entrance of Blowmoor. It had been in the hands of the Bignall family for two or three generations. Everyone knew the family, just as everyone knew that the son of the house was the leader of the local Scouts.

“Ay, Maister Bignall’s lot. The Blowmoor Scouts,” grunted Tom. “Not as they gets up to any particular mischief. They’re good ’uns, they are, ready to lend a hand or do some’un a good turn. I likes them Scouts. Pity there should be any lads that don’t join ’em. If this to do ain’t them, then what’s the racket?”

It didn’t seem to be in the remotest way connected with the house of Bignall. It stood there disinterested, as it were, sturdy, surveying its surroundings with indifference. Its gates stood wide open, and as if to emphasize the connection between the house and the Boy Scouts movement, Scouts were moving in and out, though even they, usually so practical, phlegmatic even, appeared a little bustled and excited.

“I wish all these people wouldn’t jam themselves together and stare and stare,” said one of the Scouts, Tony Purchase, fretfully: “One would imagine we had taken on a job that was quite impossible, whereas it’s easy.”

He spoke loftily, with an air of superiority typical of Tony Purchase. For he was one of the most dashing, impulsive and impatient of beings, filled with a terrific enthusiasm for everything, hot headed, kind hearted, given to the making of sudden resolutions, and, as is the case with youths of such an impulsive nature, given at times to the making of errors of judgment, which were apt to land himself and his comrades too in difficulties.

“It’s easy,” he growled, leaning on his stave and glaring under the brim of his hat at the assortment of rustics, serving maids, butchers’ boys, loungers, and others congregated along the roads. “Easy as falling off a house.”

“Oh! Easy?” came from Bingo—Fat Bingo they called him. “Do you think so?”

“Think? Me? Don’t I know? Ain’t I sure?” exclaimed Tony, working himself into a heat. But that was his own particular way. And to speak truth, Tony was trying to throw dust in the eyes of Bingo. For Tony was bothered. This matter they had in hand, whatever it might be, wasn’t quite so easy as Tony wished to impress upon the mind of the less astute Bingo. It was puzzling Tony. The solution was not to be found in a flash. It was elusive, and it had begun to fret and nettle the impulsive Scout.

“A fellow wouldn’t mind,” he said, after a long pause, “if it weren’t for this cablegram. It’s come from Japan, at least that’s what the telegraph office says; and it’s important. Look! ‘For Colin Field’—and we haven’t found him.”

He produced the familiar orange coloured envelope and read the address. "Field, Care of Bignall, Blowmoor." Bingo stared at it and then back at the house. He went out of the gateway and looked along the road, peering in every direction.

"And no one knows where he and Scoutmaster have got to," he told the impatient Tony.

"As if I didn't know that!" snapped Tony. "We've got to hunt for them. It would be easy enough and jolly good sport, too, if it weren't that this cablegram makes one in a hurry. Here, you Scouts, have you seen anything?"

"Nothing!" The group of Scouts, half a dozen of them, who had collected to listen to Tony, looked puzzled and disappointed. "Not a sign," said one. "It's three o'clock. They're supposed to be back at head-quarters at three-thirty—that is, if they succeed."

"If they succeed!" growled Tony. "Is it likely! Who's going to get through our patrols?"

Who indeed! The Blowmoor Scouts prided themselves on their astuteness, and had in fact earned more than a local reputation. If a problem in scouting presented itself, these lads, instructed by their Scoutmaster, were more than likely to get to the bottom of it. And to test their capabilities Scoutmaster Bignall had on this very day set them a task which Tony had proclaimed as easy, indeed, as easy as falling off a house.

"Splendid game!" laughed the Scoutmaster. "Colin and I clear off. You see us go. Tony escorts us away from head-quarters, right outside Blowmoor. Then he takes charge while Colin and I make our preparations to slip back. You've got to spot us. Our job is to get back to head-quarters undetected, and by three-thirty. You think it easy, eh Tony? That is, easy for you to spot us. Good! Keep your eyes open, Scouts. Come on, Colin."

They climbed into the Scoutmaster's car, waved cheerily to the Scouts and were gone, watched eagerly by the remainder of the Troop. They disappeared in a cloud of dust, at two o'clock precisely, and here it was three o'clock, no one had seen them, and only half an hour remained before they must fail in their project, and—and here was a telegram for Colin waiting to be delivered, the contents of which were stated to be important.

"Supposing we ask the police to help," said Bingo, flushing scarlet at the suggestion.

“Police!” shouted Tony, waving his stave. “Go to them for assistance? Us! Scouts!”

“I say, they’ve got ’em! Hooray!”

A shrill call of one of the Scouts’ patrols broke up the gathering. Forgetting his indignation at mention of the police, Tony dashed away from the gateway of the Bignall mansion, and went at a fast run down the road. There was a hubbub at a point a quarter of a mile away. A couple of young Scouts could be seen there in conversation with two individuals. A mob of curious persons were bearing down upon them; a little crowd was gathering.

“What’s it all about?” demanded Stiles, still engaged in conversation with Tom. “Let’s see for ourselves. Hi! Scout, what’s the racket?”

“Racket, sir? We’ve found the Scoutmaster and Colin!”

“Found ’em? They’ve been lost, then?”

“Lost! Not they!” came the impatient answer. “It’s a game. They went off at two, and their job was to get back to head-quarters, unspotted, by three-thirty. We’ve nabbed ’em. Hooray!”

He couldn’t wait for more, this ardent Scout, but went off with a rush, leaving Jim and Tom hurrying after, their curiosity whetted, interested to be in at this Scout triumph.

“Well?” demanded Tony, arriving breathless upon the scene and eyeing the two strangers, whom his fellow Scouts had accosted. “You’ve nabbed ’em—eh?”

“Nabbed what? Who are you? Scouts! What’s all this tomfoolery mean?”

These two strangers appeared to be more amused than angry, though to be sure the Scout patrol posted on the road at this point had, without doubt, given them occasion for annoyance. For here were a couple of perfectly innocent-looking people trudging their way to Blowmoor, when two Scouts—the one short, stocky, ruddy of face and most determined in appearance; and the other tall, thin, not to say scraggy, yet withal, not by any means an ill-looking fellow—had thrown themselves in their path and with swinging staves had brought them to an abrupt halt.

“That’s Scoutmaster,” shouted the shorter one, pointing at one of the strangers who was bearded, “Got you, sir! Whip off that beard.”

“And—and you’re Colin, in spite of your moustache and spats,” yelled the tall Scout, peering hard at the other. “Hooray for the Blowmoor Scouts!”

“Oh! So I’m Scoutmaster, am I? and I’ve got to pull off my beard,” grinned the man. “See! Comes off easily, don’t it?”

He tugged at the growth on his chin, whereat the patrol looked a little less triumphant. They hated the fellow’s grin.

“And you’re Colin, you are,” shouted the man, pointing to the young fellow who accompanied him. “You haven’t got a right to that moustache, whip it off!”

More and more onlookers, amused and interested, were gathering round, boys of every description were hurtling towards the spot. Tony and his fellow Scouts arrived like an avalanche.

“So you’ve spotted ’em, eh?” he shouted, pushing forward. “You’re _____”

The man with the beard was vastly entertained. A native of Hazel Heath, he had a friend whose son was a member of the Blowmoor Scouts, and was aware of the particular game Mr. Bignall’s troop were playing on this occasion. He grinned expansively at Tony.

“I’m, can’t you see?” he roared—“I’m the Scoutmaster. This—this—fellow with the moustache——”

“Hi! there! D’you want to get rode over? Out of the way, please?”

It was old Craven, the carrier, who plied between Blowmoor, Hazel Heath, and the nearest township. Time was when he was content to ride behind a shaggy-looking horse as ancient as himself. But competition and common sense had forced a change on Mr. Craven. The march of events had led to his indulging in a motor-van. He had mastered its vagaries and intricacies with no little difficulty. Even now he sat at the wheel in almost the same attitude that he had adopted when driving old Ned, the horse. But those were placid days. Mr. Craven wore a worried look when at the wheel. People on the road caused him anxiety. He blew his hooter with unusual vehemence and shouted.

“Some o’ you Scouts’ll get killed one o’ these ’ere fine days. Git out of the road.”

He went by in a swirl of dirt. They caught a fleeting glimpse of his bearded, ruddy face, and of the figure of his grandson beside him. Then cast

a swift glance at the tail of the hooded van, before the dust cloud closed in behind it.

“Well,” began Tony, then stared very hard at the two strangers.

“I’m—I’m Scoutmaster Bignall,” grinned the bearded fellow.

The man was enjoying this immensely. Tony glowered upon him. That grin enraged him; the stranger was laughing at the Troop! He flushed the colour of crimson and swung round on the patrol who had made the capture. He was positively bursting with rage and indignation.

“What? You mugs! Can’t see with half an eye that these men aren’t our fellows! This isn’t the Scoutmaster—even if he is about the same height. Call this Colin—eh? He’s too tall, too stout, too——”

He didn’t wait to hear the grinning suggestion of the bearded man, to the effect that his companion was too handsome to represent Colin, for a shrill whistle reached his ears, shouts were coming from the Scouts near Mr. Bignall’s house, where were the head-quarters of the Blowmoor Troop. Without doubt, there was something exciting over there.

“Sorry,” shouted Tony. “Apologize, you know. Hope you won’t mind. Please excuse us.”

He was off in a flash. Yet it said something for the impulsive boy, and for Scout training, that he had, in a moment, controlled himself and his vexation. This was a game. He must play it as a game, win or lose, and no Scout must be rude or offensive.

He and his friends went off at their fastest pace, and so reached the entrance gates. Bingo, the fat Bingo, came forward, his face moist and red, evidently perplexed.

“That carrier man, Mr. Craven, stopped here,” he said. “He shouted to us to get out of the way, drove in through the gates, and I’m blowed if he hasn’t gone into our head-quarters, he and his grandson. Do you think——?”

“Think what? That he’s the Scoutmaster—the fellow driving that car,” guffawed Tony. “Rot! And he’s had the cheek to go into our huts. We’ll see what he’s up to.”

It meant that the impulsive, red-hot Tony would have something to say to Mr. Craven. He pushed the door of the head-quarters’ hut open and went in, followed by his comrades. Tony positively gasped. This Mr. Craven and his grandson were seated, and, as if to add insult to injury, the old carrier had pushed his chair back, had his feet on the table, and was smoking.

“Hallo, boys,” he said, amiably puffing a cloud of smoke at them. “We’ve called to see Mr. Bignall.”

“You’ve—you’ve called to see the Scoutmaster! You’ve——” began Tony, almost choked by indignation.

“It’s—it’s—it *is* the Scoutmaster!” yelled Bingo, dashing forward. “And this fellow’s Colin!”

How they laughed! How Tony joined in the merriment, once he had overcome his disappointment.

Then he remembered the cablegram.

“For you, Colin,” he said. “Important!”

All eyes were turned on Colin Field, most popular of Blowmoor Scouts. He tore the envelope open and smoothed out the contents.

“Sail for Japan at once. Urgent. Grandfather seriously ill,” he read. The cablegram was signed “Grandmother”.

He tossed it across to Mr. Bignall, who read it thoughtfully. “I’ve expected it,” he said at last. “You’re badly wanted to learn the business. We’ll have to get a move on. Just fancy your luck. I wish I were just sailing for the land of Nippon.”

Colin Field was indeed, as his comrades viewed it, in luck’s way. Despite the regrets he felt at the reason for his forthcoming hasty departure, he could not help dreaming of the possibilities opened up by a voyage to Japan. Yet it is safe to say that neither Colin nor any other member of the Blowmoor Troop had the remotest idea of the wildly fantastic adventures into which this pending trip was to lead him.

“It’ll be interesting and all that,” he told them. “I shall enjoy the voyage. Afterwards I shall have to get down to work, you know. Get my nose on the grindstone.”

It was going to be more than interesting. The weeks to follow were going to provide such excitement to the members of the Blowmoor Troop, that this particular day’s exercise was to prove as nothing. That had been a game where scouting, wits, observation and quickness were called into question. The other was to be a sterner business, where pluck, a Scout’s training, all the finest virtues would be required and even then failure and disaster might easily follow.

CHAPTER II

An Amazing Suggestion

“First thing to do is to find out when a boat leaves England for Yokohama,” said the practical Scoutmaster Bignall, when all but Tony of the Scouts had removed themselves from head-quarters, and he and Colin Field were left to themselves. “Then we’ll get a move on, see!”

Brisk, to the point, energetic, the speech was characteristic of Mr. Bignall. He was the sort of man who gives confidence to other men, and produces in the younger generation an enthusiasm and a regard which are wonderful. This active, lean, well-built Scoutmaster—with his keen face, his quick eyes, his judgment, common sense, and enthusiasm for knowledge: for sport, for the outdoor life, for work for others, for discipline and all that appertained to the well-being and joy of the Scouts—radiated that particular class of magnetism which made of him quite one of the best leaders of boys the Scout Movement had as yet brought into being. He wasn’t handsome. Not a bit! But you looked at him and instantly liked the man, felt confidence in him, smiled, because he had a cheery smile for everyone. You knew him to be a good fellow, you somehow felt trust in the man, though you barely knew him, and almost at once you registered yourself as his friend. Boys did. The Scouts adored him. In Blowmoor and Hazel Heath they swore by Scoutmaster Bignall.

“Ay, him as runs the Scouts. A rare ’un, to be sure,” you’d hear down at the “King’s Arms”.

“Straight as an arrow. The boys’ll do everything he tells ’em. It ain’t always the case with other folks.”

“And did his bit in the War, mark you. Did his bit well.” The ribbon on the Scoutmaster’s tunic told something of the tale. But wild horses wouldn’t drag from this merry, popular leader of the Blowmoor Scouts even a whisper of the night when he had won that ribbon which told that he’d gained the Military Cross.

“Couldn’t stop scouting, you see,” old Benson, at the “King’s Arms”, before mentioned, liked to tell his customers. “Believe me, it’s in his bones and blood, this here scouting. What do you think he got after?”

Much wagging of heads ensued. Many pairs of eyes opened wide, and questioning looks were cast on the host.

“Well, what, Maister Benson?” demanded one of the rustics. “He’s a rare ’un he is. Tell you, them Scouts noses into most things. Last week I loses me bill hook. ‘Where’s it got, George?’ I asks. ‘Dunno,’ ’e says, testy like. ‘I ain’t took it.’ ‘It was by here a moment ago,’ I says, ‘and now it ain’t in sight.’ Nor it wasn’t. We hunted this way and that for a couple of hours. Then two of them Scouts turns up.”

“Ah? Eh? Yes?” came from his audience.

“Seemed to know as we wanted ’em. They was lookin’ fer a job to give someone a help. They was like ferrits. ‘Used the bill hook here,’ they says, pointin’ to chips. ‘Two hours ago, you say? And you ain’t either of you moved away since then, have you? And neither you nor George has got it?’

“‘Do you think we wouldn’t know it,’ grunts George. He’s a crusty feller some days. ‘Do you think we’ve eaten it?’

“‘Then it’s close by,’ them Scouts declares. ‘You ain’t covered it up?’ No. ‘You ain’t left it t’other side of the hedge? No. Quite sure?’ In course they hops over to see. Then they noses about. ‘You was cuttin’ the hedge just ’ere,’ they says. ‘You stopped to pick up and bundle faggots. Here’s your trail. Here’s George’s big footmarks, see! deep and wide with big hobnails. Fine! Why’s the water higher in this ditch just here and lower three yards to the left?’ It was there, friends, that bill hook, tumbled in the water, damming the stream in the ditch, and them cute ’uns spotted it in just two minutes when me and George had looked around for a couple of hours.”

Mugs were banged on the old oak table. Then questioning glances were cast towards “Maister” Benson.

“This ’ere Scoutmaster and the War. Couldn’t stop scouting, you said, well?”

“Got straying in no-man’s-land after nightfall. Heard sounds and spotted a German sniper. Stunned the man before he could shout, and crept on to the enemy trenches, and went back dragging the sniper with him and reported. Then led a party of men over, raided the enemy trenches and blew in the head of a sap they were digging towards our trenches. That isn’t all,” declared the owner of the “King’s Arms” triumphantly. “One of our men was wounded. Scoutmaster Bignall found he was one short when half-way home. He turned back, drove a party of Germans under cover, picked up his man and carried him to cover. He’s got a nice little pink scar from the point

of his shoulder way down to his waist, where a German bayonet ripped him. Only you can't see it. He don't mention it no more than he tells folks how he got that M.C."

"First find the boat, and then get a move on. See?" declared Scoutmaster Bignall. "Getting a move on means getting kit. What will you want, Colin?"

"Want? Well—er—'pon my word, I haven't an idea. Thin things, I suppose. White drill—perhaps a couple of suits."

"Bosh! A couple of dozen, more like. Fellows out East wear a suit a day. Then it goes to the wash. You'll go first-class on the boat, of course, and equally of course, you'll have to dress for dinner. The usual dinner jacket suit will do you in home waters, but out East it'll be all white. You'll want grey flannels too. We'll take you to the tailor's to-morrow for that, and a decent suit made of a cloth of medium weight. Then we'll sail down into the City, somewhere near the shipping office, and find a tailor that'll make you a few drill suits. Others you can get run together by a native out Singapore way. They'll do it for you in an hour or two—while the boat waits, perhaps! Tony, what's the best way of getting to Japan? Don't jump at it now; think!"

The impulsive Tony would have launched into a brilliant description without a moment's hesitation. More than likely he would have been wrong. It was Tony's way—he wanted ballast. Impulse and enthusiasm were apt to carry him away.

"Let's see," he grinned, "Japan."

"Yes, Nippon."

"Quickest route?"

"That's it."

"Liverpool or Southampton to New York. Across to San Francisco by express train. Then ship again via Honolulu."

"Good! But expensive. Besides, there's not all that hurry. Colin's grandfather may have had a stroke. A few days more or less on the journey will make very little difference. If we can arrange it he'll go via the Canal and Suez to Singapore, and so via Hong-Kong to Yokohama. Blest if you aren't a lucky beggar, Colin."

Colin Field was more than that. If misfortune had dogged his younger days there was very much to make up for it, for only the best of good

fortune could have brought him in contact with Scoutmaster Bignall. It had been pure chance, a happy chance. Just about eighteen years ago Colin had been born out in those Eastern parts to which he was now to sail. Long before that day Field had been a name to conjure with in the neighbourhood of Yokohama and Tokio: for Field's Bank was already an institution, and old Mr. Field was looking forward to the day when his only son, Colin's father, would succeed him. Then the crash had come. Cholera had swept the young Mr. Field and his wife away in a matter of twenty-four hours, leaving the elder Mr. Field and his wife with wealth, and interests which must be watched and nursed until their grandchild and heir, Colin Field, then only a baby, came to maturity. An old college friend of Colin's father, young Mr. Bignall and his sister happened to be in Tokio at that very time. They took Colin home with them. For nearly seventeen years he had known the big house at Blowmoor as home, had looked to Miss Bignall as to a mother, and had regarded the Scoutmaster as a wonderful elder brother, full of understanding and sympathy, the fount of all knowledge, patient, long-suffering, severe-if-need-be, absolutely just and the most jovial of comrades.

"And what about weapons? He'll want a revolver," suggested Tony.

"Oh, will he? Eighteen and carrying a huge Webley? And why, pray, O learned Tony?"

Faced with the question the volatile Scout found it difficult to discover an answer.

"What about pirates?" he asked. "I thought they indulged in those sort of gentry in the direction of China."

"Certainly they do," laughed Mr. Bignall. "But Colin is going on a liner. She'll be a big one too—perhaps fifteen thousand tons or more. Where do pirates come in then? What's the use of revolvers? Take it from me, Colin will live a very normal life, won't even see a pirate through a pair of binoculars, and will reach Yokohama without one untoward incident. All the same, Tony boy, there are pirates, lots of 'em too, lying in the mouths of Chinese rivers, waiting to pounce upon any unwary and poorly armed ship of the tramp class that happens to pass. You see reports of them in the newspapers every now and again. But for Europeans on their way through the China seas they simply don't exist."

Busy days followed. Trips to London to order clothes, visits to the boot-makers, to shops specializing in ties, socks and such like articles appertaining particularly to men and youths, and, of course, just the thing no one really enjoys, a visit to the dentist.

“Grin and bear it,” laughed the Scoutmaster. “It’s better to put up with a little inconvenience and pain here in England, than to get away thousands of miles from home in some outlandish part, and suffer the tortures of a toothache for want of care now. Not that dentists don’t exist out East——”

“Europeans?” asked Colin.

“Some. Not many. In Japan, for instance, you will find highly skilled Japanese doctors and dentists, some of whom have been educated in England. But, bless you, the Japanese have their own universities. They have little now to learn from us. They have absorbed all the Western learning they require, and are very much civilized.”

Piles of clothing, boots, and other articles reached the big house at Blowmoor, and a crowd of admiring Scouts examined the collection with something approaching envy. Colin was made to dress up for the edification of the Scouts, his old chums, and then returned, with a sigh of relief, to his Scout uniform.

“Nothing like it,” he said. “It’s fit for any sort of work, and always fit for parade.”

“And you’ll take it with you,” said Mr. Bignall. “You’ll find Scouts out East, and I hope you’ll become one of their Scoutmasters. You’ll want to grow an inch or so yet, Colin, and there’s room for a little filling out. Then you’ll be a man, at least in size, and, I hope, in other ways too.”

Even at about eighteen Colin wasn’t such a bad specimen of the English boy. Like the Scoutmaster, he was not particularly handsome. His face was too freckled for that and his hair too fair, and perhaps a trifle too closely cut. But he was attractive. To use the language of the East he looked a Sahib.

“And that’s better than a whole heap,” said Mr. Bignall. “If a fellow is weighed up by his comrades and declared to be a ‘white man’ or a ‘Sahib’, he’s got good in him. I’d rather be that than a millionaire.”

More than that, Colin was no whipper-snapper. True, he was still a little “reedy”. He wanted a lot more flesh on his bones, and the latter required to spread quite a little. But what do you expect of a youngster only lately turned eighteen who never seemed to rest, who could trek all day long and come in fresh and jolly, who could swim with the best, and who never knew when he was beaten. That was one of the curious traits about him. Compared with the voluble, the impulsive, the energetic and most excellent Tony, Colin was somewhat reserved, inclined to be retiring, a little dour in that he was silent at times, often took seconds to fashion a reply and was the

reverse of impulsive. As to energy, he displayed it in quite a different form from that which oozed from every pore of the popular Tony. Colin was dogged. He said comparatively little, reflected in his own peculiar way, quite a lot—and stuck to his purpose like a leach. Yet with it all, he was a light-hearted, sporting young fellow, apparently less brilliant than many of the Scouts, not making himself noticed, but perhaps a force to be reckoned with in later days, and certainly a resourceful and staunch comrade.

“And will do well in Japan, or I’m much mistaken,” thought the Scoutmaster.

“Mind you, Colin,” he said, with just a touch of severity about him, “mind you, you aren’t going out for a picnic, are you? You’ve got a job, a serious one before you. You have to study banking from every point of view, which means that you will have, as it were, to start at the very bottom and work your way up. If you stick to it, and succeed—as I feel sure you will—why, you’ll carry on the tradition of Field’s Bank. Don’t let people lead you astray by stuffing your head full of the idea that you will be wealthy. That’s plain—if—mind you—if you play the game. You’ll succeed your grandfather. But you’ll have to work like a kaffir to satisfy him and yourself, and even then, nothing in this world is gained or kept unless one puts one’s back into it. Lad, I shall be sad when the day comes for you to go.”

All was in readiness for Colin’s departure. The vast trunks packed and closed with difficulty, and a smaller cabin trunk filled and duly labelled. The Blowmoor Scouts assembled in their head-quarters, feeling quaintly dull and unhappy. They trundled their trek cart round to the front door, with a bitterness that anyone might remark, and stowed the trunks in it as if reluctantly. Colin was at the door, smartly rigged out in a tweed suit, looking a gentleman every inch of him. He stopped, turned to embrace Miss Bignall again, dashed tears from his eyes, and then returned the Scout salute.

“March!” ordered the Scoutmaster hoarsely. “To the station.”

They sent Colin and Mr. Bignall off with ringing cheers, and then, as if that were their last effort, turned and marched back despondently.

“Shan’t see him again, I suppose, for years,” reflected Tony. “Then he’ll have forgotten the Scouts, forgotten that he ever belonged to us. He’ll come back a swell—rich—and all that. It’s—well—rotten!”

“Bosh! Colin forget us! Colin become a snob! Rubbish!” declared Bingo, his face a violent red. “You know it’s rubbish! If you don’t, you ought to.”

For a moment or so there was almost a battle. The voluble Tony, as is so often the case with such natures, would be up, simply effervescing, bubbling over one moment, and then—very seldom, it is true—despondent, down-hearted the next. And it said something for his warm heart and generosity of feeling that the loss of his chum Colin had grieved him. Bingo's reproof was just what was wanted. Tony went off into a red-hot temper. Then pulled himself together. Smiled. Then laughed outright, and ended up by shaking hands with Bingo. A minute later he began a Scout song, and so they returned to head-quarters.

Colin and Mr. Bignall reached Liverpool in due course, and soon our hero was aboard the vessel.

“So long, old boy,” said the Scoutmaster. “Scout's luck.”

“Good-bye, sir. Good-bye.”

The ship swung away from the quay side. People became mere dots in the distance. The new Cathedral stood up wonderfully in the sun's rays, overtopping the busy city, and then faded away in mist and cloud. They were off. Colin was on his way to Yokohama. Yet, below decks, on this very ship, there was hatching almost already a plot likely to thwart and change his plans, and certainly to plunge him into an adventure so wild and so strange that few would be able to believe it. Within less than a week that plot had matured.

“What do you think of it, eh?”

“Fine! brilliant! can't fail, but, let's understand one another.”

Two men were closeted together on the lower deck of the steamer, jammed in a narrow cabin, the door of which was fast closed, while the rays from an electric lamp shone down upon them. The first speaker was young, very young, one would have said, perhaps barely twenty-two, yet looking at times hardly eighteen. He was moderately tall, about Colin's colour, more loosely made and of more ample proportions. You would have said at once that he was Colin's double. He had the same features—and yet not the same, for his were of coarser mould, while the eyes were never still and gave him a cunning expression. Yet he was absurdly like our hero. For the rest, his companion was perhaps twenty-five years of age or even more, a moderately tall, uncouth person, with a leering mouth, a pasty face, and an unsavoury appearance generally, to which a coarse voice and ill manners added anything but improvement.

“Well, then,” began the first. “The Purser started me thinking; Barnes, he says, in that nasty way he has of talking, you’re almost the image of that young passenger Mr. Colin Field. Don’t you wish you were him? Going out to Yokohama to join the Bank. You don’t know of Field’s Bank! But you’ve never been to Japan, I remember. This shaver, Colin Field, goes to join his old grandfather, who’s ill from a stroke, and in less than a year perhaps, he’ll succeed, he’ll *be* the Bank—be the richest man in all Japan, and him still only a youngster.”

They looked at one another. Then Barnes ran his eyes down the passenger list which lay on the side of his bunk, and underlined Colin’s name with a pencil.

“Then you began to think, eh?” asked the other, Short by name.

“Yes.”

“Began to wonder why, if you’re so like this youngster you shouldn’t—” Short stopped and looked suggestively at the other. A cunning smile played round the corners of his ugly mouth. “I should say it was easy,” he said. “Only you’d want help.”

“That’s it. I can’t do it alone. That’s why I asked you to talk it over. If you’d——”

Short tipped the camp seat back until his head rested against the wall of the cabin and his feet dangled in the air. He stared up at the electric light, which showed craft, greed, something else indefinable in his evil countenance.

“If I—yes, we get down to business here,” he smiled. “You know this thing might lead to trouble. We might be laid by the heels. The police——”

Barnes started and turned pale. He mopped his forehead and wiped his sticky hands on a dirty handkerchief. “You don’t think,” he stuttered. “You _____”

“Let’s look the thing in the face,” grinned Short. “Here’s a young fool on board, who’s on the way to Yokohama and wealth. You’re his cabin steward and can get to know lots about him, put hands on his papers and so on. You’re him to a T. Dress in his things and you’re Mr. Colin Field. You’re the heir to this bank. You’ll be a millionaire in less than a year if you’ve got the pluck and play the game properly. And you’ve learned that there’s not a soul in Yokohama who has met him since he was a baby. But you’ve got to get rid of the shaver. How? You can’t do a sort of conjuring trick and spirit him away. He’s solid flesh. You’ve—you’ve got to clear him out of the road.”

“Yes, out of the road,” murmured Barnes, mopping his hands again. “That’s where I want help.”

“*Precisely! Precisely*, my boy. My help. And I want to know where I come in. I’m not like this Colin Field, mind you. My mug don’t resemble his in the slightest. Besides, I’m too old; you ain’t. I’ve said already, you’re like him to a T. It’s you who will win out in this affair. You’re the lad who will be known as Field’s Bank, the chap with boxes of money. What’s it worth? Half, eh? Half of everything you get? And mind you, we won’t run risks. We clear this Colin fellow out of the road, and go on to Yokohama. You play the long absent, loving grandchild. You get on the right side of the old folks. Then you watch your chance to clean up the bank and—we go—melt away, disappear. See! Disappear before the fraud is discovered. Half, eh?”

They shook hands on the deal. Short rolled a cigarette and lit it, while his cunning eyes were still fixed on the lamp. Barnes stared hard at him. His face was twitching nervously. At that moment he showed anything but a likeness to Colin. He looked an evil, dangerous, and unscrupulous person. Short set a lighted match to his cigarette and puffed smoke at the lamp.

“That’s settled then,” he said. “In three months we’ll have earned more than we are likely to get by staying at sea for the rest of our lives. The thing’s bound to come off. It’s a cert, if ever there was one.”

“But—but, how do we start? How do we clear this fellow out?” asked Barnes, nervously digging his pencil deeply into the line beneath Colin’s name. “He’s here on board. He mustn’t land at Yokohama. Do we throw him _____”

Short grinned. He looked like a dangerous gorilla. He coughed a cloud of smoke into Barnes’s face, and heaved himself forward.

“Throw him overboard?” he smiled, as if such an act were nothing out of the common. “Not us! It’s too difficult. It might fail. I know a way that’s safer and easier.”

He dropped his voice to little above a whisper. The pair of them sat with their heads close together, and when at length they left the cabin they had settled the matter. By then Barnes’s pencil operated unconsciously by his restless, nervous fingers had completely erased Colin’s name from the passenger list. It was as if he had already disappeared, as if these two young ruffians had already sprung their sinister plot upon him.

CHAPTER III

Colin Meets with Violence

No one ever enjoyed an ocean trip more than did Colin, and that, perhaps, because a few days of calm weather allowed of his getting his "sea legs" as it were, of becoming used to his unaccustomed surroundings, and to the sounds and smells—yes, smells, which even in these advanced days are to be discovered, with no particular difficulty between decks on board even Atlantic leviathans.

"Just think of the first trip your grandfather took out to Japan," laughed Mr. Nesbit, Colin's cabin companion, between whom there was already mutual attachment. "You say he went there sixty years ago, when, I suppose, he would be just about your age. Well, I suppose he sailed on a wind-jammer, and took three months, perhaps, to get there. The ship will have been a dwarf compared with this twelve thousand ton steamer, and cabins such as we have and often complain of, will have been few. Men passengers were packed into one or more large cabins, and had precious little room. Electric light, radiators, washing basins and other luxuries of to-day, which we call essentials, were hardly dreamed of, while on deck there was not much space for deck cricket, deck billiards, races, and so forth which give us such scope for exercise. As for food, present day menus are a revelation, thanks generally to refrigerators. Why, in those old days, fresh meat was carried slung in the rigging just above the deck, under shade of an awning, in the hope that cooling breezes would help it to retain its freshness. Let's have a turn at quoits."

Colin indulged in every game with zest. Always in the habit of keeping himself in training, he had the sense to know that the life of a passenger on a modern liner is apt to be softening unless every opportunity is made use of for exercise. He played quoits, cricket, and skittles with his fellow-passengers, and when the decks were clear gave his lungs and muscle some work in running and with the skipping-rope. He went ashore at Port Said with Mr. Nesbit, and found this, his first taste of the middle east since he was a babe, quite fascinating.

"One of these days you'll have to find time to go to Cairo and then up the Nile," said his companion. "It is a great trip and a great education to anyone. Every British born lad should see with his own eyes what his countrymen have done to rescue this country of Egypt from poverty and

mismanagement, and the Soudan from barbarism, so that where, twenty years ago, fanatical tribesmen held sway, and rapine and slavery and tyrannical rule existed, there is now peace and increasing plenty; while thousands and thousands of acres of hitherto infertile and useless land are now irrigated and producing rich crops. But here we are. The whistle has gone, and we shall be off in a jiffy.”

Two pairs of eyes watched them as they came aboard. Barnes, in his steward’s white drill, his hair neatly brushed and his person tidied generally, for it was nearly time for dinner, looked ridiculously like Colin.

“S’t ruth! You might be his twin, you might,” guffawed Short, the stump of a stained cigarette dangling from one corner of his loose, capacious mouth. “His own mother might be took in—for just a bit. You might dress up in his togs, come along up the gangway, same as he’s done just now, and pass to your cabin without a soul guessing you were the wrong ’un. Of course, given time, they’d spot the difference.”

“Ah! What difference?” snapped Barnes. He hated to feel that there could be any difference at all, any particular point which would lead to ready detection should he ever attempt to take the place of the young fellow on whose cabin he waited.

“Difference! Of course there’s that, to those who know this shaver thoroughly. You’re bigger—a bit, you know, and more than that, you don’t carry yourself like him. You’d have to ginger yourself up a bit, my boy.”

Short took his cigarette from his lips between two nicotine-stained fingers and stepped a few paces away from Barnes. He treated him to a serious and close inspection. A leering grin spread over his face as he popped the cigarette back into position, though there was no sort of merriment in his eyes. They were hard, staring, cunning, cruel, all that was unattractive.

“Bigger. Yes,” murmured Barnes. “Then?”

“A trifle wider—more beef on your bones, you know, and—yes, certain—older!”

“Older! Then—then you think,” began Barnes anxiously.

“No I don’t. I don’t think anything of the sort, ’cos I know the thing’s easy, but not here—not yet. And besides, there’s this to remember. When this youngster goes——”

“Goes?”

“Well, disappears, hooks it, don’t turn up for muster, eh?”

It was a cunning cruel smile which Short turned on his fellow plotter.

“Ah—er, is absent.”

“Just that, in your polite language. When he’s posted as missing, it’s because he ain’t there. You haven’t taken his place, see? You’re still his cabin steward, wringing your hands for fear of what’s happened to him. He! He! He!”

Short snapped his fingers. This was an excellent joke, and in a minute Barnes saw it too and giggled in company with the other rascal.

“Nearly shedding tears for this shaver,” guffawed Short. “You go on shedding tears till we reach Yokohama. We leave that very same night and you’ve already learned that Mr. Field lives right away out of the city. How’s he to know you ain’t his grandson. He ain’t seen you since you were a baby. You’re like the photos he’s had from time to time. He’ll know you for his grandson right off, and there won’t be a soul to make him wiser.”

They had thought the whole thing out. Even as Barnes waited on Colin Field and Mr. Nesbit, listening to their conversation and gathering and noting all he could from it, he would think of the day, now getting very near, when he, Barnes, would be Colin Field and the latter would be——?

It was always at that point that Barnes felt a twinge. It might have been of conscience, for he was fully young for such a piece of rascality. But certainly some portion of his hesitation was caused by fear—fear of discovery, fear of something worse.

“But—look here,” he suddenly began—“we’ve missed a point. I—we—are stewards on the ship and she leaves Yokohama——”

Short laughed at that, a cynical, mirthless, silent laugh.

“Oh, are we? We’ve taken all this trouble to fix things up; the youngster has—well, disappeared, and we’re as you might say outside the front door of your—your loving and longing grandparents. You don’t mean to tell me that you—you are going to be so cruel and hard hearted as to go on in the ship? You’re going to hook it,” declared Short. “We’re going to take the first chance to drop into a sampan and get ashore, and before the ship’s out of sight of the harbour, you’ll be Mr. Colin Field, hurrying to join your long lost folks, who’ve waited all these years for you.”

The ship steamed slowly through the canal, gained the Red Sea and so to the Indian Ocean. She called in at Colombo, where her passengers spent two

whole days ashore, and then turned her bows for the Far East, towards Chinese waters. Singapore would be her next port of call, and there she would remain for three days. In no time at all, it seemed, they came in sight of the boat-surrounded port and steamed towards the base, which, one of these fine days, will have developed into an important airship centre—a link in the chain which will unite the uttermost ends of the empire.

“It’ll just give you a sight of the Malay Peninsula,” said Mr. Nesbit. “You’ll come ashore with me and we’ll drive straight to my bungalow; you will get a glimpse of how we people of the East live, and perhaps learn something of our difficulties and pleasures; there’s nothing like seeing new places when you have the chance. Pack a few things into a small bag; we’ll go ashore in the launch, and my syce will be waiting for us.”

What pandemonium! What a rushing to and fro of dusky individuals—native porters, Indians, Chinese, every race under the sun, white, yellow, and almost black, crowding upon the quay, shouting, some in the shrill falsetto of the East and others in the deeper notes adopted by white people.

Colin was enchanted with all he saw, and with the bungalow, some miles inland, to which Mr. Nesbit took him. Two days passed with astonishing swiftness, and then he packed his bag again, said good-bye to this friend who had been so good to him, and leaped into the car which was to take him down into the busy port.

“I’ll get out near the docks and have a walk round, Mr. Nesbit,” said Colin. “I’d like awfully to find out for myself what the place is like; and as I’ve heaps of time, I can walk on to the docks.”

With a hearty shake of the hand and a shout of farewell, Mr. Nesbit went back into the bungalow, while Colin settled himself comfortably in the car behind the native chauffeur, so picturesquely attired and looking so very magnificent and important that Colin hardly dared to speak to him. A murmured word of thanks for the small gift Colin made him, and the syce brought the car to a halt in the crowded thoroughfare of the port. Colin picked up his bag, pushed his topee back on his head, for even when driving it was hot enough, and sauntered along towards the water-side. He was thoroughly enjoying himself, and feasting his eyes and his mind on the strange and interesting sights around him; wishing that Tony and Bingo were there to share his delights, and making a mental note of those things which, as a Scout, he knew would be most likely to amuse and interest them in the letters he would write when he was back on board.

Soon he came amongst the shipping, and as darkness fell—and it falls with astonishing swiftness in those parts—he caught sight of the mast-head lights of the vessel which was to take him on to his destination. And then, of a sudden, there came blankness. A couple of natives brushed close to him as they passed, their bare feet making no sound on the pavement. Then they swung round, and one of them raised an arm and swiftly brought down a narrow hard sandbag upon the head of our hero.

“That’s the man—that’s the one we’re after. Now, do as you’ve agreed, and when you’ve got the receipt for him, come down and see me and you shall have your reward.”

The man who had spoken, a short, stout, olive-complexioned individual, who might have been a Spaniard, Greek, even an Asiatic, turned and walked off with his hands in his pockets, and presently dived into a little office situated just off the quayside. The natives carried Colin’s limp figure through the darkness to a little shanty near at hand. Stripping his light tropical suit from him they dressed him in the still lighter and coarser outfit worn by native seamen. He was already sunburned enough to pass almost for a native, and a little colouring matter quickly covered up any exposed parts which might have attracted attention. Then they bundled his still unconscious body down to the water-side, threw him without ceremony into the bottom of a sampan and ferried him across the water to a steamer of some thousand tons lying at a buoy.

A whistle brought a man’s figure to the side of the ship.

“Hallo!” he hailed them.

“New crew man,” called out one of the rascals. “We’re bringing him same as promised.”

“Then wait a minute!” The head disappeared, they heard a whistle, and presently there was the sound of a rope passing through blocks. The end dangled over the side of the ship, Colin’s form was secured in a noose at the end, and in a twinkling he was hoisted on board. Then one of the natives followed, and produced a piece of folded paper on which just these few brief words were written: “Acknowledge to have received one deck hand”. That was all, and at the foot, the date, and the hour. The man took it to a swaying lantern hanging near the binnacle, read the words and attached his signature.

“There you are, Chink,” he said gruffly. “Off you go. Forget all about it.”

He took the lantern and showed the native over the side into the sampan and then, walking back, turned the light upon our hero.

“Lor!” he gasped, “only a youngster. This isn’t the kind of chap I expected. Looks like very dirty business. Stunned ’im—eh! Let’s see.”

He went on his knees beside Colin, and ran his hands over his body. Then he carefully lifted one of the boy’s eyelids with a surprisingly delicate touch, and holding the lamp close with his other hand, he inspected the eye carefully.

“Sandbagged, sure enough!” he said, “just the smallest bruise on his scalp; badly stunned, that’s all. Of course the blackguards have taken everything that belonged to him and have stripped him of his clothing. Well, it’s not my business, anyway, and I’m paid for it. A bucket of water will do him no end of good.”

No one could have said what was the nationality of this mariner, nor what his rank. As a matter of fact he was the skipper of the tiny craft to which Colin had been brought. That he was not English was quite certain. That he did not hail from France or Germany, in fact, from any European country, seemed equally so. He was one of those many thousands of cosmopolitan individuals born far away in the East—a half-caste more than likely—speaking English as his native tongue, and understanding the queer medley of native dialects to be encountered in the Eastern hemisphere. Hardened by his calling, hardened too, perhaps, by the fact that he was always dealing with natives, this skipper who had accepted money to remove our hero was, for all that, not entirely devoid of compassion.

He dropped over the side of the ship a bucket to the handle of which a rope was attached, and presently dashed the contents in Colin’s face; a second bucket swamped his whole figure, when the skipper fetched a coil of rope and tucked it under his head.

“He’ll feel more comfortable like that,” he said. “As the water evaporates it’ll cool him down and that will bring him to his senses. By then I reckon we shall be well away from Singapore.”

Within less than half an hour there was a stir aboard the vessel, and the hawser by which she was secured to the buoy was cast off. A throb told that the engine was running, and presently she was heading out into the open with her nose turned towards the China Sea.

CHAPTER IV

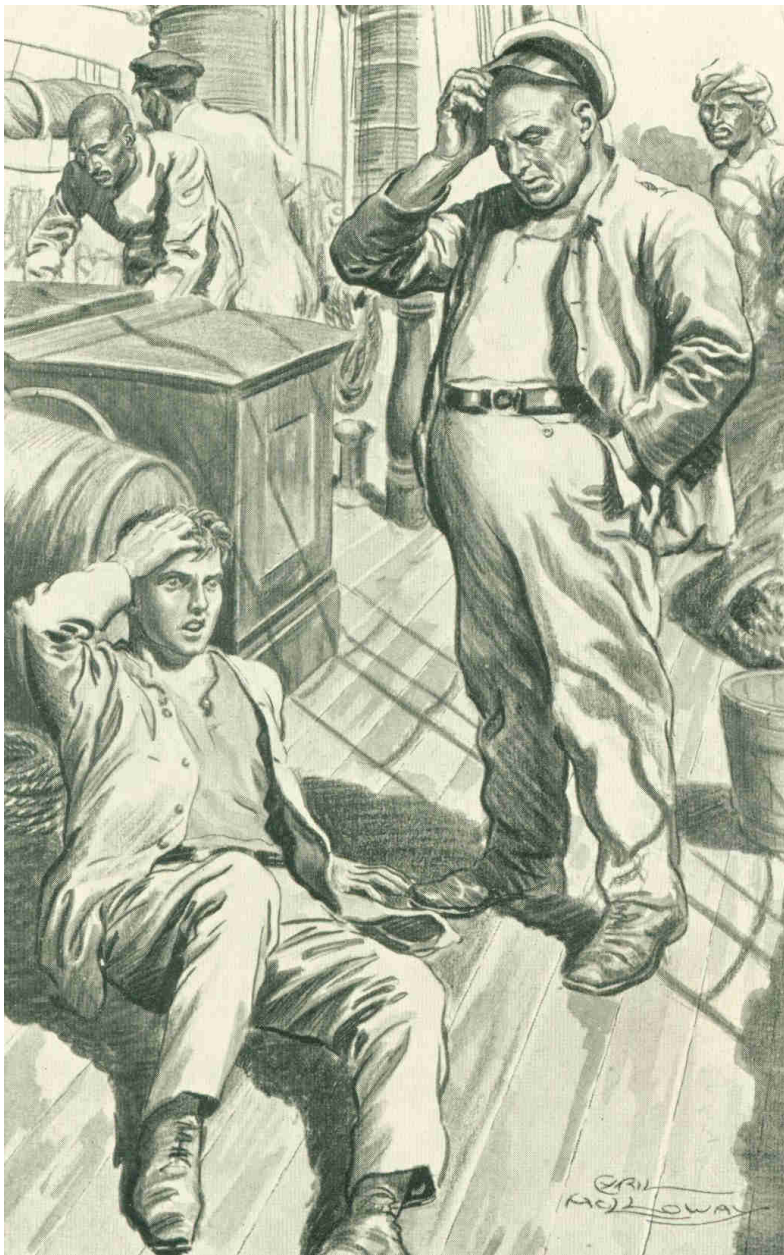
In China Seas

“How’s that? Feel better? Where are you? Why, open your eyes and see!”

The skipper stood over his new deck hand. Now that the light of a tropical morning had come and he was able to see him better, we speak the truth when we say that even the heart of this hardened mariner was touched by the youth and bewilderment of the lad lying prostrate on his deck.

“Gosh!” he exclaimed, “no more than eighteen I should say, and—yes—English. Well, it’s an unpleasant sort of business, it makes a man feel rough that money could make him give a hand in a thing like this. And what’s it mean? If he’d been grown up—a full grown man—he might have deserved it—been a cad or a thief, hurt someone, or even stood in their way. But a lad—a mere boy—and an honest, clean one at that, I’ll bet! Crikey!”

He pushed his sea-farer’s hat back on his head, and scratched and scratched a bald poll, while he stared down at the youngster. It was beyond him altogether, and the more he looked at Colin and the more he realized his youth and innocence, the more he felt ashamed of his own action and was puzzled.



A PROBLEM

“It just beats me, it do! That stout rascal, Jacobs, that supplies men to ships at so much a head, comes and asks me if I want a hand yesterday mornin’ as ever was. He steps aboard as gay and jovial as yer please, and asks me ‘How’s trade?’ and then it ain’t long afore he comes to the question

of men. ‘Want a young hand, lively and strong?’ he says. ‘Not I—full up!’ I answers. ‘There’s ten pounds for the skipper who’ll take the man and ask no questions,’ he fires off in that jolly way he’s got. ‘Ten pounds,’ I says, ‘and no questions?’ ‘None,’ he answers. And this is what I get with my ten pounds.”

The fingers went within the cap again, and scratched the top of his head in amazement and annoyance. And from annoyance it did not take long for the skipper’s thoughts to change to regret as he watched the light of realization beginning to show itself in Colin’s face. He had no home of his own, this mariner—no wife—no children, and lived his lonely life on this ship, fighting to make a mere pittance. Ten pounds to him, the skipper of this ocean tramp, working hard in the midst of the dangers and perils of the islands of the China Sea, was a month’s pay—riches in fact. But riches which, the longer he looked at Colin, attracted him less and less. He stooped, caught the lad up in his arms, and carried him up the companion to the deckhouse in which were his own quarters.

“Hi!” he called loudly, and then as a somewhat dirty native appeared, “pull out a mattress; put it down there under the awning, and get down below and see if there’s such a thing as a bit of ice. We ain’t used to carrying luxuries, but meat’s got to be kept somehow, when one’s lucky enough to get a bit aboard.”

Colin, still confused and only just conscious of his surroundings, found himself lifted gently on to a mattress, and laid just where the sea breeze blew in under the awning, which protected him from the sun. Then the cabin steward appeared with a basin in which was a block of ice.

“That’s the stuff,” cried the skipper. “Now we want a bit of rubber sheeting, and that ain’t the cargo we carry aboard a tramp, but the corner of my mackintosh will do just as well—bring along my raincoat, Sing.”

The native went swiftly into the cabin and presently returned bringing the coat. His deft hands turned over a corner, and breaking the block of ice he filled it with the pieces, and tied the waterproof into a bag with a short piece of string.

“This will do your head good, lad,” the skipper called out, not unkindly. “A little ice to cool it and keep it cool will make you feel better in next to no time. Then we’ll give you something to drink—cold tea would be the ticket.”

It was all a nightmare to Colin. Why was he up there lying stretched out on a mattress which had seen better days, and on a deck which he was near enough to see was none too clean, and beneath an awning which should have been glistening white, and would have been had it been stretched upon the ocean liner, but which here was dragged and coal-stained? Who was this stout mariner, with this harsh clean-shaven face and bald pate, dressed in somewhat tarnished white drill, who might have been a pirate to judge from his whole appearance, but who, nevertheless, could be kind? and where? where? was Mr. Nesbit—where was he—Colin?

“I say,” he began, struggling to sit up.

“You just lie down there—flat!” came from the skipper in harsh tones, “mind, flat! and no axin’ questions.”

“I say,” began Colin again, “I am not on our ship. We’re at sea, aren’t we?”

“You’ll be somewhere where you don’t like yet,” shouted the skipper. “You just do as you’re told—lie still—say nothing—and—here, drink this! It’s hot when I meant it to be cold—ice cold—but it’ll keep you silent.”

The voice was rough. It was the harsh, hoarse voice he was accustomed to use when dealing with his native crew—a crew often obstreperous enough and almost mutinous—yet the hand which went beneath Colin’s head was gentle and the movement by which he lifted Colin’s shoulders was essentially careful. Then, raising the cup, he first touched the rim with his own lips to make sure that it was not too hot, and then gently poured the contents between Colin’s.

“That’ll do it,” he said, helping the boy to lie back on to the mattress, and tucking the pillow, which the steward had brought, beneath his head, “now get to sleep, and mind, that bag of ice must stay there.”

It was wonderful how the scene changed for Colin. A moment before his mind, wandering and confused, was filled with forebodings. He wanted to stand up, to look about him, to see and learn what had happened, to protect himself if need be; and now, that cup of tea, the kind if firm tones of this man standing over him, the sense that he was in no particular danger though feeling lifeless and ill, but that people were doing their best for him, caused him to shut his eyes, the cold bag at his head eased the pain, his mind wandered a trifle, his breath came more slowly and deeper still, and presently he fell into a sleep which cleared his head entirely, so that when he awoke he felt infinitely better.

“And more like yerself—eh?” said the skipper, as he seated himself on an overturned box and stared at the youngster. “Feel like sitting up—eh? and eating? I shouldn’t wonder! Well, grub aboard a tub like this isn’t the sort of thing you’ll get on a liner, but it’s grub, and you’ll be thankful for that. Sing, bring along that bread and stuff.”

It came—on a battered tray—a dish of bread and gravy, and a cup of hot tea. If it had been served on a silver or gold plate it could not have tasted better. The aroma alone gave a sudden stimulus to Colin’s appetite, which had been sadly flagging. He sat up with a jerk, and then gripped his head, for pain swept right through it. He felt giddy—almost sick—and then there was the tray almost beneath his nose, the hot steaming gravy within easy reach of him.

“By George! I’m hungry!” he exclaimed. “Bread and gravy! Sort of stuff you give to invalids and infants—but my! it’s good!”

“And now you’ll just lie down again and take another sleep,” came the commanding voice of the skipper, “no dodging about yet, youngster. I know better! I’ve seen men knocked down same as you were and able after a time to get about. But they forgot they were out in the far East—forgot the heat of the sun—and gettin’ about too soon didn’t do ’em any good. You’ll just lie still, you will! Now, no words—sleep!”

And Colin slept—obediently, gladly in fact, for the food seemed to have soothed him. And so the hours passed until on the following day he awoke to feel quite himself again.

“And now you can tell me all about it,” said the skipper. “Who are you? What are you? Who’s got a grudge against you?”

“Against me? Me!” exclaimed Colin. “I don’t understand—a grudge? Where am I?”

“Aboard a nasty, dirty little tramp that trades amongst the islands of the China Sea, aboard a ship of a thousand tons that’s fit for nothing better—a ship that’s skippered by a man who, if he’d been careful when a youngster, would have seen better days and have climbed higher.”

The skipper stopped abruptly and drawing a pipe from his pocket crammed it with weed. There was a scowl on his face. At such moments he looked almost hideous, certainly anything but attractive.

“A tramp?” said Colin, “but where? And why on a tramp? I was on a liner on my way to Japan.”

“That’s just it. And now you are on a tramp; and why?” exclaimed the skipper. “That’s what I’m trying to find out. See here, lad, you put in at Singapore—eh?”

“And went to stay a couple of days with Mr. Nesbit, who lives outside the city.”

“Right. And then?” demanded the skipper, watching him acutely.

“And then—and then——” said Colin, holding his head and trying to recollect what had happened. “Ah! I remember. I got into Mr. Nesbit’s car, and had a drive into the city. Then I wandered about, getting nearer and nearer to the docks. I got amongst the shipping, and quite suddenly—no—not suddenly—gradually—I woke up to find myself here, on a tramp as you say. But why?”

“That’s just what beats me,” declared the skipper vehemently. “See here, a man came aboard my vessel as we lay at Singapore, and asks whether I want a deck hand, whether I was ready to take one. I agreed.”

He screwed up his lips, while the scowl appeared again on his features. The ugly memory of what he had done, of the reward he had accepted, troubled him exceedingly.

“I agreed to take a man,” he said. “That evening after dark, two natives came alongside with a deck hand—with you. I signed a note saying that you had come aboard, and dismissed ’em. Then I found it was a boy, a mere lad, and stunned, unconscious. We were tied up at a buoy outside the harbour ready to go to sea, and I’d no time to send ashore and find out why my man had arrived in this condition. That’s my side of it, lad, now for yours. Who wanted to hit you over the head in Singapore? Who was interested in getting you put away to sea aboard a strange tramp? You didn’t ask to come; then what’s the grudge someone owes you, and why?”

“Grudge! Against me!” Colin was staggered, utterly bewildered. “Who could have wanted to hit me over the head in Singapore,” he pondered, “who was interested in getting me put away? Why, no one,” he blurted out.

But then, how could he be expected to explain? Neither he nor any other person aboard the steamer on which he had been a passenger—with the exception, of course, of those two individuals, Barnes and Short—had the smallest reason to suspect an intrigue, a plot against Colin. The thing was too utterly impossible and unlikely. For, even supposing Barnes to bear such a close resemblance to our hero that the fact should have been remarked, how could such an idea as barefaced imposture have occurred to him, or to

Short, or to both of them, and how supremely unlikely that anyone aboard—in particular the unassuming and unsuspecting Colin—would imagine for a moment that any such hare-brained scheme was in contemplation. Colin was nonplussed.

He shook his head. How could he possibly suggest a reason?

“There must be some mistake,” he told the skipper. “Someone else may have aroused the enmity of a rascal in Singapore, and the natives told off to do the sandbagging made an error and bagged the wrong fellow. It’s good luck for him, I dare say, and bad for me; though it’s a fine experience.”

A fine experience indeed! But the remark pleased the skipper, and there was genuine relief in the smile he bestowed on Colin.

“Well, there’s not many young fellows who’d look at it that way,” he said, “and anyway I’m glad to know you call it a ‘fine experience’.”

But it was likely to prove more than that, for that evening there was trouble down in the engine-room, steam rushed up through the open hatch, and belched from the funnel. Then the engineer appeared—a grimy sweating native.

“She’s broken a piston ring in her low-pressure cylinder,” he reported. “That means a job in a port. You’ll have to put canvas on her.”

But sails are a sorry makeshift for steam in the part of the world where flat calms are of fairly constant occurrence. The tramp drifted idly to and fro—sometimes a breath of wind filled the canvas which had been hoisted and carried her on her way for an hour or so, and then sails flapped listlessly, the vessel lay becalmed, with the terrible tropical sun pouring down upon her. So for three days they drifted almost helpless, sighting land now and again, and now in sight of a group of islands.

Of a sudden the skipper swung his glasses to his eyes, and peered towards the edge of one of the islands.

“That’s a big boat coming out from there,” he said in a voice which was quite changed. “Why, there must be thirty men at the oars—see ’em, Colin?”

They were on terms of friendship now, Colin and the skipper. In fact, filled with remorse at what had happened, the commander of this tramp had installed the Scout in his own cabin and treated him as a guest and certainly not as a deck hand.

“Take a look,” he said, “Chinese I should call ’em.” There was a troubled note in his voice which caused Colin to glance swiftly at him.

“Chinese? Yes, I should think so. Rough and ragged looking lot, anyhow. Seem to be making straight for us.”

As the boat drew nearer it was possible to see the crew with the naked eye, and it became more and more apparent that they were far from friendly mariners coming to their assistance. By then the somewhat meagre crew of the tramp had come on deck, and not a few looked thoroughly frightened.

“There’s islands along here that even in these days harbour pirates,” said the skipper, as he peered at the oncoming boat. “Of course, there’s just the chance that these fellows may be comin’ out to see if they can lend us a hand, having spotted us out here makin’ no headway; but it’s not like ’em! I suspect ’em!”

A man, squatting in the stern of the huge native craft which was coming swiftly towards them, stood up at that moment and waved an evil-looking weapon. Then, as he gripped the tiller with his other hand, he took deliberate aim and fired a shot in their direction.

“That’s told their tale,” said the skipper, as the shot hummed over the bridge. “There’s gettin’ on for sixty men aboard that boat, Colin, and only fourteen here. It’s a case for givin’ in and making the best terms we can. But it’s likely to be a bad business altogether.”

To Colin, as the moments flew, it looked likely to be the end of everything for those upon the tramp. For a bigger set of cut-throats he could not imagine than those aboard the native vessel swooping down upon them. The weird shouts of the rowers, the strange tortuous-looking weapons being brandished by others, and shots already being fired at them, spoke of violence of the most merciless form; and almost baffled, he was unable to think, unable to make up his mind what to do in these strange circumstances. Long before he had made up his mind the boat surged alongside the drifting steamer. Poles, with hooks attached, were made fast to the rail, and in less than a minute some thirty natives, dressed in every sort of raiment and armed to the teeth, had swarmed on deck.

They were pirates indeed! Colin was not likely to reach Japan yet awhile, and it looked as though the rascal Barnes would have everything in his favour. The wicked act by means of which he had sent Colin aboard the tramp, was likely to leave him the only claimant for the wealth owned by the grandparents awaiting the arrival of our hero.

CHAPTER V

A Nest of Pirates

Swift and complete disaster had overtaken the skipper and crew of the tramp ship in which Colin was now a passenger. That native boat—a huge, high-prowed affair—carrying some sixty shouting and gesticulating people, had surged beside the drifting tramp, and its crew had gained the decks in a twinkling. Opposition would not only have been futile—it would have been suicidal.

“To begin with, there are only a couple of old revolvers aboard,” the skipper had told Colin, as he anxiously watched the oncoming boat. “If we show fight, we shall be butchered. You men,” he called to the tiny collection of mixed Eurasians and natives, “hold up your hands as they swarm aboard. Don’t try to oppose them.”

It was un-British perhaps, but absolutely sensible. A crew of British tars might have risked all in an encounter. But the skipper, of mixed descent himself, though courageous enough, had but a handful of men under his command, and some of these, even, none too courageous.

A giant in stature, a Chinese without doubt, he who had steered the piratic vessel came over the gunwale first, a long knife gripped between his teeth, and his smoking pistol still in his hand. A glance told him that the ship was captured.

“Halt!” he shouted to his men, as they tumbled over the rail and surged on to the deck of the tramp. “Hurt no one. We will win a ransom for them. Go forward, some of you, and make ready to tow the vessel. You——” and he addressed the skipper and his men in no gentle manner, so that, though they could not understand all that he said, they could easily comprehend his meaning—“Down below with you, and stay there. Make no effort to retake the ship—or——”

He began to ram a new charge into his antique weapon, while he nodded peremptorily to the hatch leading to the lower decks. And at the signal, Colin, the skipper, all hurriedly departed.

“A nasty fix,” said the skipper, as they stood grouped below in the stifling heat of the “’tween” decks. “I understood a few of the words spoken. We are to be held for ransom. That’s a concession, for often enough

they murder their captives. But that sort of thing brings retaliation. When more than one ship's crew has been killed a warship is sent to hunt the pirates—and they know it. Well, what next?"

"They've passed a hawser to their boat," said Colin, squinting through one of the ports. "Men are dropping into her and taking to the oars."

"Which means they'll haul us into some cove over yonder, search the ship, and take all they want from her. After that—well, after that," said the skipper, "anything may happen."

They were a sinister group of cut-throats who poured over the rail of the tramp and dropped into the native boat. A mixture of Chinese, Malaysians, men of Borneo, and the native sweepings of that part of the China Seas. Colin and his comrades had ample opportunity now of watching them and taking stock of each member as the oars were manned and the boat pulled ahead of the tramp.

"I daresay people in your country imagine that pirates have ceased to exist," observed the skipper, as he stared grimly through one of the ports. "But they're still to be found in these parts, though your countrymen suppressed them years ago off the coast of Borneo. China is the chief source of supply, and the insurrections which have taken place in that country since the Great War have added to their number. Every month there are reports of their doings. Why, it was only last voyage that we narrowly escaped them. China's so unsettled nowadays that this kind of thing goes on without any interference almost. Now they have us in their clutches, thanks to a breakdown in our engine. Chief, do you think if you were hard put to it you could patch us up so as to get the propeller going?"

It was perhaps a couple of minutes before the engineer ventured upon a reply. He squinted through the porthole, went to the hatch leading to the stoke hole, and then returned scratching his head. He had all the caution of the Scot—and indeed proudly claimed Scottish descent—and some of the *laissez faire* of the East.

"At a pinch, yes," he said, a little doubtfully, "if all hands worked hard—really hard. Even then, she'd be like a lame duck."

"But faster than a native boat—eh?" demanded the skipper. "But there, where's the chance of doing a repair? Those ruffians will put us ashore, surround us with armed men and keep us close prisoners while they send off to the owners to demand a ransom. There are rough times before us for a

month and more to come, and we'll be lucky if we get out of this mess with whole skins."

A month or more! The news filled Colin almost with dismay. What of the people aboard the ship he had been sailing on to Japan? What of his grandparents, anxiously awaiting his arrival? Then he shrugged his shoulders. Not the sort of thing your Scout does, but a curious habit of Colin's.

"Can't be helped," he thought. "In any case I've no cause to grumble. I might have been killed by those ruffians in Singapore. Queer that! I wonder how the mistake came about. Anyway, the poor beggar who was to have been shanghaied—as I believe they call that sort of rascality—has something to be thankful for."

Little did he guess that there was no mistake. There was nothing to make him suspect that it was actually he, Colin Field, whose capture and removal had been intended. But then, how could he even guess, even allow himself to credit for an instant that his own cabin steward, a pleasant fellow, said to be strangely like him, was the instigator of the plot against him?

Yet Barnes was in truth and in deed responsible for this piece of rascality. As the steamer in which Colin had been a passenger finally left Singapore, having reported his absence, Barnes and the evil-looking crony he had made a confidant of, hugged themselves in their cabin.

"Sandbagged. Knocked out with one blow. Saw it myself," observed Short, lighting a cigarette. He blew a wisp of smoke up at the electric lamp, and watched as air entering by the port wind-shoot whisked it into filmy clouds.

"Just one whack. Went down flat. They bundled him into a cabin, pulled off his togs, dressed him in shabby stuff, and went off. Not a sound. Not a struggle. No alarm."

Barnes mopped his forehead. It was hot enough down there in that tiny cabin on the lower deck—in spite of an open port and a wind-shoot—in spite too of the fact that he was dressed merely in a thin singlet and a pair of cotton trousers. But it was not altogether a question of the thermometer with Barnes. He was not yet a hardened criminal. He came from a country town not unlike Blowmoor—had lived there practically all his life—where folks were mostly simple and unsophisticated. Theft was not a common crime. Violence to the person rare indeed. Save for an occasional drunken brawl, deliberate violence, like murder, was something almost beyond the ken of

the oldest inhabitants, and associated in their minds only with the cities and large towns.

Yet here was a youth who intended to pose as Colin Field and who had instigated the crime of abduction, with the risk of murder attendant on the attempt. Sweat poured from his forehead. He tried to appear at his ease. But the fingers holding his cigarette trembled.

“You’re sure—no alarm?” he stuttered. “Is there any way the thing could be traced to us?”

“Alarm! Pooh! Nothing like it.”

“And no one suspected?”

“No one here, you bet. The fat little man at Singapore, yes. But he’s paid to hold his tongue. Most likely he’s already forgotten the whole affair; he’s accustomed to that kind of little job.”

Barnes was relieved. He pulled harder at his cigarette. Then another doubt assailed him.

“But he was reported missing—what does that mean?”

“Serve him right, that’s all,” came the grinning answer. “Others have missed sailings. Passengers who don’t turn up to time get left and have to come on by the next boat. It’s nothing new, tho’ it don’t often happen. The skipper aboard this ship notifies the agents, and both of ’em imagine the young idiot having managed to miss his boat will put up with that chap he was so friendly with—Nesbit.”

“Ah, of course!” Barnes drew in a breath of relief. His companion grinned.

“We know he won’t. We know he’s just as likely never to turn up,” he said again, admiring the particular smoke cloud for which he was responsible. “Anyway he’s fixed up for a long while yet. So the sky’s clear for you—eh? You go right ahead. Meet the old folks, pitch ’em your yarn, and stand by. By all accounts they’re old and won’t last long. Then you come in for every dollar.”

Barnes nodded. He smiled triumphantly. Things were going splendidly. How glad he was that he had had the sense to go on with this matter. The idea was an inspiration. See how things were running for him. With Colin swept aside, sandbagged, abducted, perhaps killed, in any case removed for the time being, Barnes could land at Yokohama and announce his arrival openly. Why not? The ship was due to stay only for one night. She would be

gone by the time he sought the Fields. Well, wasn't he certainly Colin Field? His coming had been announced by cablegram. He had arrived on the ship mentioned in that cablegram. He had the whole story at his fingers'-ends, and knew exactly what story to tell about himself. He could speak of Blowmoor, of which he had heard Colin talk; he had all Colin's correspondence in his possession, and thanks to the fact that Colin had chatted about his home life freely, and sometimes to Barnes, why, the latter knew quite a deal about Blowmoor, the Scouts, Hazel Heath, Mr. Bignall, Tony, and Bingo.

"Even know all about the wealthy old grandfather in Japan," he grinned. "Been ill. A stroke. Very sad. Very!"

"Eh!" demanded his companion, for Barnes had spoken aloud. "Sad? You mean glad! You'll be a rich man inside a year. I've been thinking things over. I shall get off at Yokohama."

"Desert?" said Barnes, his brows puckered.

"Certainly."

"But surely," began Barnes. He was not so anxious to have this individual as a companion in Japan. He might become a nuisance. "Supposing——"

The young man seated barely two feet from him stretched out a powerful hand and gripped the steward's shoulder with a grasp that was anything but gentle.

"Don't like the idea—eh?" he demanded with a savage sneer. "Find me precious useful up to a point, and then be glad to shunt me. Is that the game?"

"Game?" Barnes shrank from the man. He felt afraid of him. He began to stutter an answer.

"Game? Yes! Think I can't read you like a book? But look here. There is our agreement, signed and delivered. For assistance rendered, Benjamin Barnes, if he succeeds in passing himself off as Colin Field, divides all he gets with—with me. Agree you signed that—eh?"

Barnes nodded and looked askance at the ruffian in front of him. "Of course I do," he quavered. "And you've helped."

"And I'm going to stand by to help more, to see you succeed, because if and when you succeed, I do too, see? And none of your hesitating. Not wanting me at hand, thinking of throwing me over. I've got that"—and he

thumped his fist on to the sheet he had unfolded on the cabin table—"and I've got something more"—he leaned forward till close to Barnes and lowered his voice—"I've got evidence that you instigated people—yes, I'm one of them—to murder the real Colin Field."

No use to follow the squabbles, the reconciliations, the hopes, and, in the case of Barnes the occasional qualms of conscience and the dread fears which sometimes assailed him. As their ship—Colin's ship—approached the shores of Japan they became almost jubilant. For none aboard suspected. Why should they? As Short had said, and very truly, a missed passenger was not such an uncommon event. Passengers were occasionally delayed for this reason or for that. Sometimes they made frantic efforts to reach their boat as she steamed away from port. In other cases they sent frantic telegrams, or rather marconigrams, explaining their absence and giving instructions as to their baggage. Usually, they followed on the next steamer. Rarely, they sent no message at all, as in the case of Colin.

"Mr. Colin Field not come aboard," the purser reported when the ship had cleared the land.

"Ah! Ill?" asked the Captain, his glasses fixed to his eyes, as he surveyed the course he was steering, and his attention concentrated on his task.

"No information yet, sir. Perhaps we shall get a wireless."

"Well, mark him absent. Let me know when you hear."

On the following day they wirelessly their agents at Singapore, stating that Colin was missing. And with that the affair concluded, so far as this particular boat was concerned. The passengers regretted our hero's absence, imagined that he had lost the boat through carelessness, or by reason of illness, and dismissed the matter easily, knowing he had set off to stay for a while with his particular friend, Mr. Nesbit. There was nothing to make anybody suppose that the boy was in danger. Not one imagined for an instant that two members of the crew were responsible, that a wicked, cunning plot had been hatched, of which Colin was the victim. Least of all did they guess that the young fellow they had liked so well was even then in the China Seas, recovering from a ruffianly attack, and soon to be immersed in a piratical adventure.

For there he was aboard the old tramp, down in the 'tween decks, sweating in the heat of the China Seas, surrounded by a group of half-castes, peering through a dingy porthole at a boat-load of murderous-looking

pirates, whose long sweeps were steadily taking their boat and the tramp steamer they had captured towards one of the islands. They pulled in due course round a distant headland, and steered into a narrow bay, entering between two steep coral cliffs which looked barely more than a stone's throw from one another.

“Narrow entrance,” observed Colin.

“Safe anchorage on a dirty day,” responded the skipper. “But not the kind of place I should like to have to make on a dark night.”

“And a handful of men posted on those rocks on either side could hold the bay secure from attack,” thought Colin.

They swept slowly through the entrance, steered to port and came in sight of a hutted settlement.

“Hardly looks permanent,” said the skipper, as he peered through the port. “These rascals wouldn't be likely to settle for long in any one place. They've stopped rowing.”

The sweeps were taken inboard, except for two of them, and the hawser was cast loose. Then the pirate vessel swung round, and the leader and a few of his men clambered aboard the captured steamer and came to the hatchway.

“Below there,” he banged with the butt of his pistol on the hatch of the companion. “Cap'n he come up and one more.”

“Speaks pidgin-English; thought as much,” said the skipper. “Come along, youngster, this Chinaman has seen white men before.”

They found the pirate standing beside the hatch staring hard at them.

“This ship—she full?” he asked, in his queer English.

“Full—bound from Singapore to coast ports.”

“And engine—she broken?”

“Piston ring broke. No moovee,” answered the skipper.

“Yes, but workee, and same, she better—eh? You workee—see! You live aboard likee to-day. You workee engine. You makee go. Good! Den me ready!”

“Wants us to do a repair,” observed the skipper. “That means he'll take us out to sea and run us into some port where he has friends. They'll sack the ship then, put to sea and scuttle her. This is going to be a picnic.”

“And you livee all timee, see?” said the pirate coming nearer, “you try get away—eh? You see. Samee likee dis——”

He gripped the skipper by the shoulder, then caught him by the nape of his neck and pulled his own long knife from his belt. It looked for a moment as if he would commit murder there and then. For a moment he maintained this threatening attitude, then pushed the skipper aside, and thrust the knife back into its place.

“You knowee now,” he said. “You havee care. Now leave men aboard, and go ashore. You workee. You makee all men workee, or——” he left them with a sinister smile, one of those inscrutable smiles of which few are capable but the Chinese, and went over the side, leaving half a dozen of his men on board. Then the native boat was rowed ashore, where the pirates disembarked and retired to the huts.

“Not the pleasantest job,” said the skipper. “Here are we ordered to get the engine going and steam up, only for what? To get to another port and see her scuttled. But it’s better than being butchered. Done work on an engine, lad?”

Colin hadn’t, though, like every young fellow, he took an interest in mechanics, in internal combustion engines, steamers, aeroplanes, tanks, and such like. A piston ring was no more than a name to him then. But in the week that was beginning it became a back-breaking fact, and his knowledge of mechanics and steam-engines was considerably advanced. For the whole of the none-too-numerous crew of the tramp was driven to work. Sweltering in the engine-room, with heavily-armed men of the pirate band always watching them, they lifted one of the cylinder covers, disconnected the piston rod and hauled the piston out through the head. It was none too easy a job in the circumstances to fit a spare piston ring. And when that was done there was the reassembling, the bolting up of the big end bearings, the hoisting into position of the cylinder cover, packing the joint and bolting down.

But at length it was done. Smoke belched from the funnel, steam was given to the engine, and the propeller rotated.

“Goodee. Now we puttee to sea. To-morrow.”

“And then?” asked the skipper desperately, as he watched the pirate leader depart once more. “As like as not they’ll scuttle the tramp under our feet.”

“Why take ’em?” asked Colin, curtly. There was a grin on his face—a grin of excitement.

“Eh?” The skipper looked his amazement. The feeble youngster whose helpless form had been dumped aboard his vessel had been the life and soul of the ship during the past week of slavery. He had worked like a horse. He had jibbed at nothing, and always he was cheery and smiling.

“Eh?” demanded the skipper again. This youth puzzled him. From the frail youngster he had appeared at first, Colin had been transformed into an able-bodied, almost commanding personality. “Why take ’em?” he asked incredulously.

Colin nodded. “Yes, why?”

“But——”

“I’ve been watching. The men left aboard are no longer alert, for we have worked from dawn to dark and have caused them no uneasiness. We’ve steam on her now. That means we can leave the pirate boat behind. Let’s throw these guards overboard and be going.”

“Crikey!” a whistle of astonishment escaped the skipper. “But it’ll take time to squeeze through the heads. They’d be aboard us long before we were clear.”

“Just so, if you let ’em board and man their own boat. But we won’t,” said Colin. “I’ve been on the look-out. These fellows aboard have modern rifles. They leave ’em for the guards who come to relieve ’em every morning and evening. Supposing we collar the rifles and ammunition. I’ve had no great amount of shooting, but I could keep a man from showing on that native boat, for it’s only three hundred yards distant. That would give us time.”

The skipper stared hard at Colin. He looked half frightened at first, then a grim smile swept over his none too handsome countenance.

“We’ll do it,” he said. “The men are weary of the fix we’re in, scared of what’ll follow. I’ll talk to them.”

He returned in ten minutes. “They’re not great at fighting,” he said, “but they are more or less desperate. They’ve agreed. What then?”

“There are fourteen of us—eh?”

“Fourteen, counting the cook.”

“Good. Find out who can use a rifle. Then divide into two lots. One to pounce upon the guards. The others to seize the rifles and make ready. Of course they must not be wanted for running the ship, as we shall have to cut the hawser and get her going instantly. I’ll lead the attack on the guard.”

It took very few minutes to arrange the detail. It was Colin who gave the signal by suddenly flooring the nearest Chinese guard. Not a sound was made by the attackers. The motley group of pirates were seized, their rifles torn from them, and they themselves flung into the bay without ceremony.

The mate meanwhile ran forward with an axe and severed the hawser. The skipper clambered to the bridge.

“Give her steam,” he telegraphed to the engineer.

The propeller turned. She backed from her moorings. Her head began to swing round ever so slowly. Presently she was heading away from the shore for the narrow exit. Could she get clear? For pandemonium had broken out in the pirates’ quarters. Men were racing down to the beach. Shots were already whistling across the deck of the tramp upon which Colin had in such strange fashion put in an appearance.

CHAPTER VI

A Time of Peril

The good quiet folk of Blowmoor would have been vastly excited could they have seen Colin, crouching behind the rail of the tramp to which he had been abducted, with violence, and which had so recently been captured by Chinese pirates. To begin with, they would not, even in their most fanciful flights of imagination have believed such an adventure possible. To the majority of them, even to Scoutmaster Bignall and his Troop, Colin was only quite recently a junior, still a youngster, obediently accepting orders and not venturing to give them. But circumstances test men. Opportunity is the source of impulse. Had Colin been associated with a British crew, a resourceful skipper and mate, he would no doubt still have acted a subordinate part.

But the little we have said of the skipper of this tramp, and of his crew, will have indicated their value. A mixed body of uncertain nationality, with eastern blood flowing in their veins, they were, without exception, men of no initiative, almost without ambition; else, would they have been content to man the slow old coaster on which Colin found himself? Some of them, too, could boast of no large share of courage. Spurred by the English lad who had joined them, and fearful of their ultimate fate at the hands of the pirates, they had nerved themselves and succeeded in throwing their guards overboard, after seizing their rifles.

“And now we’ve got to get clear,” sang out Colin, who, to his own astonishment, was enjoying the affair amazingly, “those pirates are getting aboard a small boat so as to row out to the large one. They’ll be tackling us next.”

“Hi!” came a hail from the skipper on his diminutive bridge, “we’re round. I’ll leave those fellows yonder to you.”

Colin waved to him. “You run the boat,” he shouted, “we’ll keep them away from the only thing that can help them to take us.”

There was the distant splash of oars. A throb shook the tramp gently from stem to stern, while the sunlit water of the bay swirled to her revolving propeller.

“Come right aft,” Colin ordered the half-dozen men told off to him, the cook, a fat, rotund, olive-complexioned fellow, the skipper’s unkempt native steward, a deck hand who might have hailed from any eastern port, Chips, the carpenter, odd man about the vessel, whose eyes slanted, and whose yellow skin, smooth face, and high cheek bones made one guess he hailed from one of the free ports of China. The remaining two were dusky, lightly built fellows, lascars from their appearance, who as a matter of fact claimed Portuguese India as their native country. Of such a mixture was the crew of the tramp composed—not ideal material to weld into a fighting force against heavy odds!

“Now post yourselves behind the rail, and be careful with your weapons. What about ammunition? And, one moment, let’s look at all the rifles. Good! All one pattern—German without a doubt.”

“And plenty of ammunition, sahib,” said one of the men. The “sahib” came naturally from him. To these men aboard the tramp Colin was a white man, and therefore a leader. “See!” the man went on. “A big case of cartridges. The pirates brought it aboard.”

“Better still! They’ve pushed off in their boat. We’ll fire by turns so that if one misses, the next shot may get home. Hold on.”

Colin hadn’t often pulled a trigger before. To be exact he hadn’t fired a full-sized rifle more than half a dozen times. But he knew all about miniature rifles. Scoutmaster Bignall had seen to that. And he could make quite reasonable practice on a miniature range. All that was different here was the weight of the weapon, its more pronounced recoil, and its very much greater range. Colin understood the desperate circumstances of himself and his party too well to flinch from the thought of firing on a living target. Colin pushed the muzzle of his weapon over the rail, bent a trifle and took aim at the boat in which some ten of the pirates were pulling out to their bigger craft. A second boat-load was just then pushing out from the shore, while dotted about on the palm-covered beach were some dozen marksmen, whose bullets were already shrieking about the steamer.

“Steady! Do you want to kill one of us?” Colin gripped the rifle of one of his party, one of the dusky deck hands, and took it from him, for sudden terror had seized upon him. His teeth were chattering, his knees knocking, while in his terror he had managed to pull his trigger, sending a bullet crashing into the deck at his feet. “Get for’ard,” shouted Colin, “go and help with the ship. Now, men, one at a time! We’ve got to prevent those fellows reaching their boat.”

A long steady sighting shot caused a flutter amongst the pirates aboard the small boat now crossing the bay. In fact commotion would be a better term to apply.

“One hit certainly, perhaps two,” said Colin, watching the effect of his shot closely. “Now, Cook.”

Each one in turn fired at the boat, causing four of the pirates to flop into the bottom, while the way in which the oars thrashed the water and the fact that the boat lost way and began to drift showed that the bullets had affected the others. A shout came from the shore, and almost at once the survivors aboard the boat dived overboard and began to strike out for the other vessel.

“Very well, we’ll see what we can do with the second boat and with those sharp-shooters ashore,” said Colin. “Cook, take the deck hand and Chips and fire at those fellows ashore who are putting bullets in this direction. Jingo! that was a close one!”

Colin had not had time or opportunity before to take much note of the doings of those marksmen ashore. Things were happening so swiftly. The moments were so tense, that the crackle of shots in the distance, the crisp note of a bullet striking the tramp, and the whine of a shot ricocheting from her sides, or from her dirty steel mast, scarcely attracted attention. But when a bullet cut its way through the hard wood rail, hissed past his head and flew onward, why, one had to take notice. A gentle thud behind caused him to turn. One of his little party had fallen to the deck. Blood was dribbling from one corner of his mouth, and there was a widening red patch on the singlet he wore.

“Shot through the body, sahib,” gasped the cook. His eyes were dilated, he looked scared as if he was on the point of losing control of himself.

“Get on with your job,” commanded Colin. “Stop those men ashore firing.”

There was more than enough for all hands to do: for Colin and one man to fire at those figures in the water and drive them from the pirate vessel; for the cook and his little band to suppress the marksmen; and for the skipper and his crew to urge the tramp out through the headlands.

“Getting along nicely,” thought Colin. “Very few shots coming now, and the second boat has turned back to the shore. There, too, goes the last of the swimmers. In a quarter of an hour, with any luck, we shall be out.”

The skipper waved to him. He was standing at the far extremity of the bridge, his figure clear cut against the golden sunlight. Then he turned to fix

his eye on the narrow exit, now only some two hundred yards distant. The telegraph rang, Colin heard it distinctly. Of a sudden the throb, throb of the engine ceased. The tramp pushed her ugly nose towards the outlet, as if feeling her way cautiously to freedom. Colin could see the steersman, too, his thin overalls flapping in the breeze, his head conspicuous because of a red turban. Two minutes passed, the bows of the tramp were almost abreast of the headland.

“Think we have stopped those men ashore with the rifles,” said the cook. “Not a shot come for several minutes.”

Almost as he spoke a rifle crashed from the direction of the shore. Then came a fusillade, bullets shrieking over the rail of the tramp and howling above the heads of Colin and his party. Cries from the band of pirates ashore came echoing over the water. Instantly the tramp’s course was changed. Just a moment earlier, when Colin caught the eye of the skipper and waved to him, the steamer was heading direct between the headlands. In five minutes at least she would have been clear of the outlet, in open water, and the telegraph would ring again for steam. Now she was running direct towards one of the headlands, while the skipper and the steersman lay crumpled up on the bridge, put out of action by that last volley. Colin leapt to the companion. He was on the bridge in less than a minute. Seizing the wheel he swung it over in the vain effort to save the catastrophe, which common sense told him must follow. There was a dull grating noise for’ard. The stem of the tramp lifted. A tearing crashing sound came from the headland, and of a sudden Colin was thrown violently against the wheel, while the tramp came to an abrupt stop half-way through the outlet. Had he had another minute he might have saved the situation. If only he had been on the bridge when that last volley was fired by the pirates, he could have leapt to the wheel and kept the tramp on her correct course.

Just one brief minute had seen success changed to disaster and had sent the ship hard and fast on to the coral headland. He was stunned. He stood gripping the wheel, staring at the reef and then at the body of the skipper. Shrill yells from the shore brought him to his senses, however. The engine staff was rushing up through the hatch, grimed with dirt, sweating, their eyes bulging as they realized what had happened. Men began to whimper. If it had been possible for the crew to get away from the tramp there would have been a stampede.

Colin pulled himself together and swung himself down on to the deck. “Stop that noise,” he commanded. “Cook, go aft again and open fire on the pirates. You others come here.”

The Blowmooor Scouts would have been dumbfounded. This Colin, the youngster, never known to have spoken sharply! This, one of their Troop, somewhere about eighteen years of age, though tall enough and strong, and in size a match for any of the crew of the tramp! But it was simply incredible. He had suddenly leapt from the position of a mere passenger—an unwilling one, we must admit—to commander of the vessel. The emergency had arisen, and Colin had been able to rise to it. A native deck hand ran whimpering, uttering shrill cries of fear, making for the hatchway. Colin seized him by the arm.

“Stand still and stop that whining,” he commanded sternly. “Listen to me! Will whining save your lives? What will those pirates do if they come aboard us?”

Men looked at one another. The deck hand suddenly stopped his whimpers. The mate, a poor creature enough, and for the moment quite unnerved, and just then contemplating a sudden rush below where he would seek the most favourable hiding-place, came to an abrupt halt. How long could any place aboard the tramp give him secure shelter? The pirates would hunt in every corner. Sooner or later it would mean the same. Sweat drops—the sweat of apprehension—poured from his forehead, down the sides of his nose, and dripped from his cheeks.

“It means—it means slaughter for all of us,” he gasped. “Death! We have killed some of their men. They will kill us.”

“Then let us defend our lives,” said Colin, beckoning them to him. “We still have the ship, and we have rifles and ammunition. Those who have no weapons, get off and find them, and, Chief——”

The engineer came up to him. His eyes were shining—of all the men aboard he looked perhaps the most determined.

“Can you rig a hose?” asked Colin, “and feed hot water to it? If so, set to at once, for that will help us. I’m going to the bridge now, join me there and report, as swiftly as possible.”

Yes, indeed, it was a different Colin. He had suddenly jumped to man’s estate. Fear of a cruel death had, perhaps, helped to stimulate him. But at the bottom of it all, of this sudden masterfulness, was breeding. He was doing no more than thousands of other good Scouts of his age might do under similar stress and circumstances. And after all, he was only following in the footsteps of a noble band of Britons who have gone before him; men like Clive, who while still only a young man wielded an influence and a power

amongst the natives of India that was phenomenal. Men such as sprang to the fore in the days of Armageddon, but just ended. Then truth was found far stranger than fiction. Then deeds were accomplished the description of which, in earlier days, would have been considered a fabrication.

Well, youthful though he was, this member of the Blowmooor Troop, Colin, had taken command of the situation. He crossed the deck and went up the companion three steps at a time. Round the corner of the opposite headland it was possible to see the pirate encampment. Men there were racing to and fro. Some were hurrying down to the water, while a group, in the centre of which stood a tall man, no doubt their leader, sheltered under some palms and discussed the situation.

Colin, with steady eyes, traced the shore of the bay to either side of the encampment. It swung in a wide, shining, yellowish-white circle, till it reached the headlands, palm trees dotted thickly along it and actually overhanging the water. Behind lay the mass of the island—a forest of waving green, glistening under a tropical sun.

There was a sound at his elbow. It was the cook. The man was actually smiling.

“Not killed yet, sahib,” he said. “At first the men thought nothing could save them. Now they think the sahib will find a means and they are saying that they would rather be killed fighting if they are to be killed at all.”

Colin’s heart swelled within him to hear the words. It had seemed a parlous business a minute or so earlier, but this sudden change in the demeanour of the crew heartened him wonderfully. He cast a glance down at them. Every man was armed now, those few with rifles, the remainder with axes, trimming hammers, shovels, anything handy. They lifted the motley collection and sent a cheer up to him. And then the chief came up the companion with a stolid calm and such a determined aspect that Colin’s hopes soared.

“Well?” he asked.

“Hose connected up. Being run up through the hatch. Oceans of boiling water.”

Yells came floating across the water. Men were swarming out of the shelter of the palms towards the yellow strand. They tumbled aboard the two small boats, pushed off and made for the larger craft. But not all. Some twenty individuals made their way beside the strand, under the green palms towards the headland on which the tramp had grounded.

“Looks as if they were going to attempt a combined attack,” said Colin.

“By sea and land,” chimed in the cook.

“So as to make us divide forces. Hum!”

Colin was no fool. Nor so young that he could not appreciate the gravity of their new position. To be attacked was one thing, and must be faced, but to have two separate and distinct bodies attacking simultaneously from opposite quarters was quite another and more serious affair.

“How long do you think they will be in reaching us?” he asked.

“Twenty minutes, perhaps,” said the chief.

“Or even longer,” added the cook.

“See that headland,” demanded Colin, pointing to the one opposite that on which the tramp had grounded.

“Well?” asked the two.

“Stands alone. An island by itself. Separated by a narrow channel here and there, and by a wider one beyond. But the inlet to the bay is on this side because there is deep water. Anyone can see with half an eye that there are reefs crossing the channel.”

“Yes, clear as daylight,” said the chief, “what then?”

“That’s where we’re going,” declared Colin, as if he had been used to command all his life. “We’ve got a boat towing aft. Get to it at once. Cram her with all the food and water she can possibly carry and take three of the men armed with rifles. Quick about it.”

There was movement aboard the tramp. While the pirates paddled out to their larger craft, and made leisurely preparations to capture the stranded steamer and wreak vengeance on her crew, and as the second party made their way round the bay for a similar purpose, the cook dived into his pantry, natives hurried through the hatch, sweating with their exertions. The boat towing aft was hastily filled with quantities of food and water, and in ten minutes the party had pushed off.

“Send the boat back at once,” said Colin, still posted on the bridge. “Tell off your men with the rifles so as to help those who follow.”

The men had had much experience in navigating small boats amongst the rocky fringes of the islands of the China Sea, and in less than half an hour the whole crew had been ferried over, together with ample supplies.

They had brought with them the wounded skipper, leaving the unfortunate steersman, who was dead, as was also the deck hand shot so close to Colin.

“Now seek shelter. A good sized palm tree will do,” said Colin. “We’ll wait for these beggars. I don’t believe they suspect we’ve left the ship. From their position in the bay I should imagine the headland hid our movements. In any case, whether they think we’re there or not, they don’t board her.”

If the cook and the chief were becoming determined, so also was Colin. “They don’t board her,” he repeated. “This is a case of their lives or ours, eh?”

The olive-complexioned chief screwed up his eyes till his face was deeply wrinkled.

“It is not only a question of our lives, sahib. If we fall into their hands they will kill us in most disagreeable manner.”

Though perspiration was streaming from every pore of the man, carrying with every drop streaks of grime which soiled a duck suit already none too tidy, he visibly shivered. He had not spent years watching the engines of a tramp ship plying to the coastal ports of the Sea of China without hearing something of the doings of pirates. People in comfortable, safe England might be incredulous, might even scout the very idea of the existence in these days of such beings as pirates; the chief knew that they still infested odd creeks and bays, and had had tales first hand of the barbarous treatment of the crews of ships captured by such marauders.

“Kill us, butcher us cruelly, sahib,” he cried. “Therefore every man here, encouraged by the sahib, will sell his life dearly, and will take the lives of pirates before they go.”

“Good!” Colin wasn’t bloodthirsty, but he could easily sum up the situation. It was nothing less than desperate. “Good!” he repeated. “Then we’ll do our best to teach them a lesson.”

For a few moments he busied himself with the condition of the unfortunate skipper. He was unconscious and breathing stertorously. But there was no sign of bleeding, and in fact the first hurried examination produced no evidence that he was wounded. Then Colin came across an ugly gash at the back of his head and guessed that a flying bullet had struck some portion of the vessel, and later had hit the skipper. How severely wounded he was he could not guess, but feared badly. He had been placed in the shade of a palm, in shelter from any bullets that might be fired by the pirates.

Then Colin moved about amongst the men. They had pulled their boat well above tide-mark on to the coral headland, so that there was no fear of it being washed away, and had then scrambled up amongst the rocks till they gained the palms some twenty yards above. The headland was perhaps some hundred feet in height, perhaps a little more, for it overtopped the one immediately opposite on to which their tramp had run. One could look down on to her decks from this point of vantage and could see every little item; the bridge, the steering wheel, her decks, the body of the steersman sprawled on the bridge, and the other unfortunate deck hand lying right aft where a pirate bullet had found him. The ship was backed as it were by the headland on which she had run—a mass of soft coral breaking up under the action of sun and wind, sparsely covered with vegetation on that side, but crowned higher up with masses of palm just as was the rocky elevation on which he and his men had taken shelter.

“The land party will collect there,” Colin thought, “amongst those palms, and will make a rush downward to the ship. It won’t help ’em much, because the rocks are exceedingly rough and the going will be slow. A couple of our men should make good enough shooting to drive ’em back. Now about the pirate boat.” He turned his head and looked over into the bay. From that position the whole of this diminutive waterway was visible, just as was the stranded steamer. He could see the glistening, yellowish-white strand beyond, with the blue waters of the bay lapping right up to the feet of the giant palms which shaded it; the huts, but temporary affairs roofed with palm leaves, just beyond the edge of the water; two small native craft lying close to a mooring buoy, and much nearer at hand, surging across the bay propelled by the powerful arms of some thirty rowers, the high-prowed piratical craft which had first captured the broken-down tramp steamer. To the left, moving amongst the trees and already approaching the headland, were some twenty men, many of whom carried rifles. For the rest, the stranded steamer lay partly across the exit from the bay, obstructing the passage to some extent, but leaving a gap through which the piratical craft or in fact any craft of reasonable proportions could easily make her passage. In ten minutes perhaps the attack would begin.

Colin called the cook and the chief to him. “We want our two best shots,” he said, “and, by the way, we must be careful of our ammunition. The men will be told off to prevent any of the attackers coming down the opposite headland to the steamer. The rest will lie down behind shelter, while the four of us who have the remaining rifles will wait till the pirate boat gets almost alongside the tramp. After that we will await events!”

It was difficult to keep cool in such circumstances. The odds against the little band manning the headland were so great that it appeared that they must succumb to the pirates. Then, too, they were so ill-armed in comparison, for without doubt these marauders had an abundance of firearms. Yet, position is at times of far more importance than a multiplicity of weapons, and one good marksman well posted under cover may do more than a dozen indifferent riflemen out in the open.

But look at it whichever way Colin and his friends might, the position was wellnigh desperate. They waited with throbbing hearts for the oncoming attack, stretching their necks and peering out from the shelter of the palm trees. From this position they watched the land party reach the fringe of the opposite palms, and a few moments later they saw the high prow of the pirate boat suddenly come into evidence. She surged along towards the exit from the bay. That tall figure standing in the stern, the captain of the marauders, shouted, and at once the rowers swung their oars inboard. Then the whole crew stood up, and brandishing every class of weapon, gave vent to shouts which sent a quiver of consternation through some, at least, of the defenders.

CHAPTER VII

Fighting for Freedom

It was a tense moment for Colin and the crew of the tramp as they waited amongst those palms high up on the rocky headland, which gave access to the inland bay. The word of command to his marksmen trembled on the lips of our hero, as the pirate boat with her tall prow surged into view, and then with an effort he remained silent. He realized at that moment what every soldier knows—that the periods of waiting are a harder test than action.

“Wait until they get a little nearer,” he told himself. “Then——”

The moment came within the space of a few seconds. Colin leant forward, made sure that the men told off to fire at the opposite headland thoroughly understood the business expected of them, and gave a sharp word of command: “Fire!”

Instantly rifles cracked in an irregular volley. Its effect was instantaneous. A huge Chinese, leaping down from boulder to boulder on the opposite coral headland in a mad rush to be first aboard the stranded steamer, suddenly doubled up and came slithering and rolling down the face of the hillside, till he was brought up with a crash against a mass of coral and lay with the breath shaken out of his body, unable to move for a few moments. Then he struggled to his feet, and they saw him clamber on to the slope of coral and gaze across the inlet. He waved a huge cutlass defiantly in their direction, bellowed a threat, and then collapsed even more suddenly than before; crashing over the edge of the mass on which he had been standing, he slid helplessly into the water as it flowed between the headlands. The sunlit blue expanse closed over him.

Aboard the pirate ship worse than pandemonium had broken out. As the sweeps were drawn in, men seized their weapons and crowded forward to make ready for the moment when the boat would come within easy reach of the stranded tramp. A yellow man, dressed in faded blue baggy trousers, barefooted and with naked shoulders and arms, stood poised on the prow with a long boat-hook ready to make contact.

On the tramp steamer, the eye of the olive-complexioned cook dropped to his sights. This curious man, who, but a few days ago, had laboured in the stuffy, smelly galley of the tramp, preparing food that was none too good for

its crew, of such mixed nationality, and who was certainly the least pugnacious of a band of whom none could have been accused of possessing vast resources of dash and daring, this man was as cool now as an icicle. Somehow the tenseness of the moment which affected each one of his companions in a different way, had steadied his nerves, and brought into action all those latent powers of self-control for which hitherto there had been practically no call at all. Perhaps, and we would say more likely, it was the influence of the white-skinned youth amongst them which helped him. In any case, his cheek went to the butt of his rifle, the muzzle of which rested on a convenient heap of coral.

The trunk of a gigantic palm stood up immediately in front, and to the left of him, so that he had excellent protection, and just round the side of the trunk he could see over his sights the pirate ship, the lusty captain of the marauders gripping the tiller, and right for'ard, beyond the crowd of shouting fanatics, the figure of the man who, if he succeeded in making fast to the tramp, would materially assist his comrades to capture the vessel.

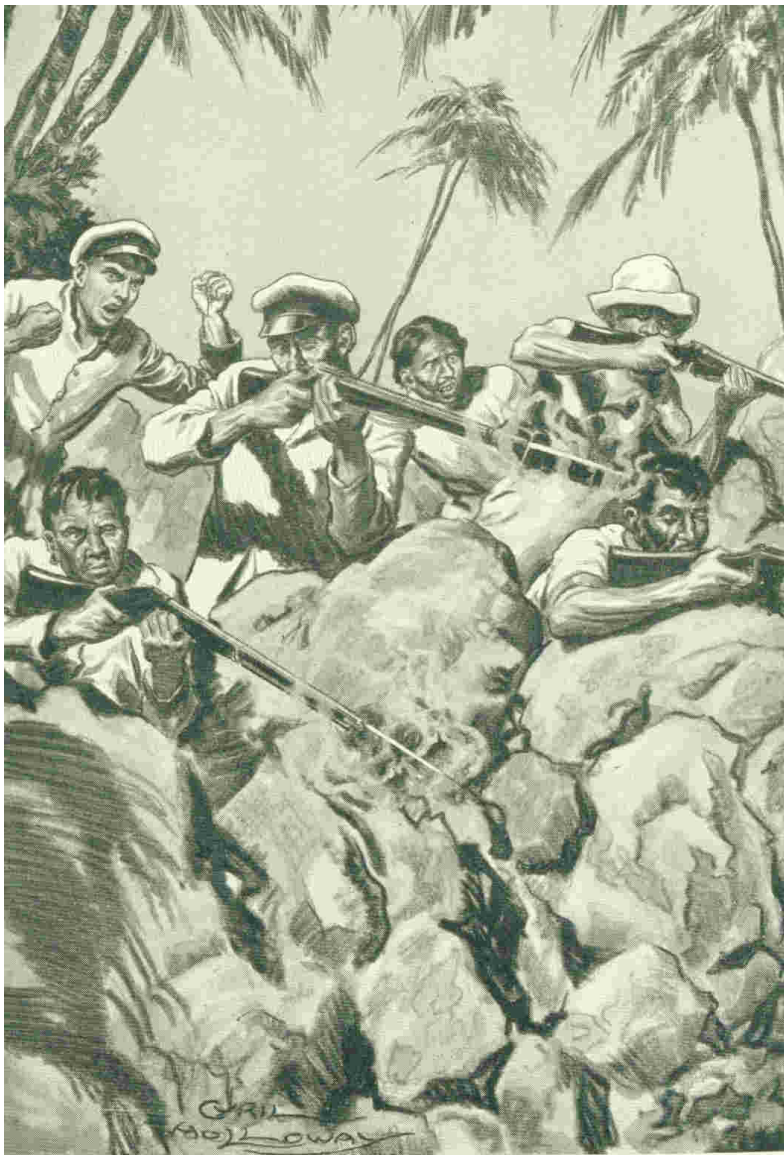
The cook's finger closed very deliberately yet calmly over his trigger, a spurt of fire leapt from the muzzle, and instantly the Chinaman with the faded, baggy, blue breeches fell against the low gunwale of the prow and remained there, dangling head downwards, balanced precariously, as if about to dive into the ocean, while his boat-hook plunged into the water and was lost.

If there were shouts and pandemonium before, they were doubled now. Heads turned in the direction of the defenders. Men swung their weapons round, and within half a minute shots were being fired at Colin and his party. Luckily the firing was hasty and wild in the extreme.

"Steady," he called. "Keep well under cover. I don't suppose they even know where we are. They are firing at random. Well done, Cook, now another."

Those marksmen told off to assist the cook had meanwhile planted bullets amongst the crowded pirates, not without useful effect. The cook swung open the lock of his rifle, pushed another cartridge in, slammed the lock to, and jerked his plump figure into a more suitable position. Down went his cheek again, while he directed the weapon, and on this occasion the sights fell upon the pirate captain—that huge, lank fellow with a red turban about his head, who still gripped the old muzzle-loader which he had used a week before, and who now brandished it in their direction, while he still directed the course of the vessel.

Heading straight towards the tramp, she would inevitably strike the side of the steamer within a couple of minutes unless— The cook saw to that. His sights dropped on the captain. Steadying himself carefully, he pressed his trigger again, and in a moment the pirate ship ploughed suddenly wide of her course, just as the tramp had done a moment or more before her stranding. The Chinese captain staggered backwards on his narrow poop. One hand dropped to his chest, and he gripped it as if to quell the pain of his wound. Then his old ferocious fighting spirit helped him. Dropping the pistol he seized a huge cutlass, shouted to his friends and made a dive at the tiller. With a thrust to port he swung the head of the vessel over till once more she headed towards the tramp, and then the tiller flew from his nerveless fingers. He slid to the deck, struggled a moment, and then lay still, while the vessel he piloted swung from her course, and then sliding along, for the way had not left her, ran gently on the rocky headland. She was within fifty yards of the tramp, almost as helpless, with a pack of raving, shouting individuals aboard her.



COLIN IN COMMAND

“Now fire steadily into them,” shouted Colin, “so as to increase the confusion. Aim every shot. Of course they won’t be long there; she grounded very gently, and if only one of their number has the sense to command them, he’ll send them aft, take the weight off the prow, and with a couple of sweeps get her off. Keep at it, Cook; we’ve no reason to be friendly to them, and the more bitter the lesson, the better our chance of getting away. How’s the other party going?”

The other party had come to an abrupt halt. Reaching the fringe of palms clinging to the opposite headland, they had emerged into the open with the full intention of gaining possession of the tramp before their comrades who had come by water. It was, in fact, to be a sort of race between them, and the land party had made up its mind to be the victor. But the sudden snap of that rifle, the slithering body of the man who led them, his disappearance in the water, had taken the ardour out of them. More than that, shots were steadily dropping amongst them. One man received a bullet through the shoulder, while a ricocheting shot from one of the rifles hit a pirate on the shin, causing exquisite agony, and making it difficult for him to retreat. Those who could dashed up the slope even more swiftly than they had attempted to descend it, and, by the time the pirate ship had grounded, were lost to view amongst the distant palms.

“We can leave them alone and ignore them for the time being,” said Colin, cool like the cook, and master of the situation. “Of course they are firing at us. You can hear the crack of their rifles and the swish of the bullets in the palms overhead. But I don’t believe they’ve yet spotted exactly where we are, and, as our ammunition is none too plentiful, we won’t reply, but leave them to their own devices. Now for the ship.”

There was intense confusion on the pirate vessel. Men rushed at first hither and thither, colliding with one another in the narrow well; some attempted to land, and a couple of them dived overboard, and scrambling ashore, went up the rocks to join the land party. Then a short, stout individual, dressed in a mere strip of yellow cotton, naked to the waist, whose brutish features were discernible even at that distance, thrust his companions aside and by sheer force fought his way to the poop of the vessel. They heard him shrieking at his companions. He drew a pistol, and as Colin and his friends watched, they saw him present it at the men below him. The shouts ceased. Men cowered under the shelter of the vessel’s sides, through which bullets from Colin’s party ripped their way every half-minute. Then two of the pirates seized their oars and pushed them over the side; moving forward they clambered on to the prow, and were able to drop the end of their oars on the rocks on which the ship was held. The rest, at the order of their new commander, came aft, cowering still, till their weight sank the stern and raised the prow a little. The oars did the rest. A lusty push sent the vessel into deep water. Then more oars were thrust over her side, and presently she got under way, headed about, and was rowed into the bay at furious pace, a bullet now and again following her from the rifles of the cook’s party.

It had been a great occasion, and the victory of the crew of the tramp almost as magnificent as it was unexpected. To speak the truth, with the exception of the chief, the cook, Colin, and the few handling rifles, the party had had many misgivings. To the majority, for the first time in their lives under the fire of rifles as they had been since attempting to escape from the pirates, the experience was still too novel, too terrifying to be pleasant, or even bearable. To expect disaster was, perhaps, a natural thought. To give way to depression, to become helpless and desperate was what one might anticipate, bearing in mind their upbringing, their mixed and doubtful stock and the humdrum lives they lived.

But that was all changed by this last affair. They were hilarious, every one of them, with the exception of the chief and the cook. Even Colin, with a vast sense of relief, was laughing a little recklessly, almost hysterically, and finding it hard to get a grip of himself.

“But, of course,” he said at length, when the pirate boat had surged out of sight. “Of course, that doesn’t end the matter. We’ve killed and wounded a few.”

“A dozen perhaps, sahib,” from the chief.

“At least,” urged the cook, looking very solemn and determined.

“Anyway there are plenty of them left.”

“Plenty,” declared the cook, “three times our number and smarting because of our success. They will try again, somehow.”

The chief nodded his agreement. “They will want revenge,” he said with a jerk of his head, while he searched for his tobacco tin. Colin watched him absentmindedly, and yet conscious that here before him he saw something of importance. The chief had not smoked for hours. Events had been too strenuous altogether and his frame of mind far too disturbed. Now he stuffed his pipe with determination, struck a match, sheltered the flame, and puffed with obvious satisfaction and contentment. It was a sign of assurance, of faith in the future.

“They will make another attempt, sahib,” he grunted between the puffs. “Listen to their chattering.”

Shouts reached the ears of the defenders. One of the crew posted on the highest point of the headland called out that the land and sea parties had come together.

“And by land in all probability,” ventured Colin. “I think they’ll wait for nightfall, creep along the opposite headland and steal on board the tramp. We shan’t be able to see them.”

The chief suddenly pulled his pipe from his mouth, and struck one thigh with his palm.

“Unless,” he cried, “unless we provide ourselves with rockets. There is a store on the tramp in a locker—off the chart-room. In ten minutes I’d be there. In half an hour I could be back here and not a pirate the wiser.”

He plugged the bowl of his pipe with a stubby, dusky finger, and returned the pipe to his pocket. “Why not?” he asked.

“Ah! Why not?” interjected the cook eagerly. “Why, we could make sure of their doings. By letting a rocket go every ten minutes, say, we could keep the tramp in sight. If they came by way of the water, we’d hear ’em, shouldn’t we? Then a rocket would let us send ’em a volley. The thought of that will keep ’em from using their boat.”

“And will make them hide up amongst the palms on the headland over there,” said Colin. “Supposing they managed to slip aboard the tramp between the rockets, where are they? No better off, because they’ve still to cross the inlet to reach us. It’s a fine idea, Chief. If you don’t fancy going over to the tramp——”

“Don’t fancy it! I’m volunteering, sahib.”

The olive-complexioned engineer stole away through the palms, while the cook went back to his marksmen. Colin crossed to the shady spot where the skipper was lying. He found him just as they had left him, but with his eyes wide open. He peered at Colin as the latter leaned over him.

“Hallo! What’s doing?” he smiled.

“Go to sleep,” Colin told him. “Your head aches.”

“Aches!” there was a grin on the skipper’s face. “Aches!” he repeated in a voice strangely weak and thin for him. “It feels like bursting, like yours must have done when you first came aboard. How are you doing? What’s happened? What about those pirates?”

“We’re doing splendidly. We’ve beaten off one attack and are making preparations to beat off another. How’s that, Skipper? Now go to sleep.”

The eyelids drooped heavily. As if satisfied with the information the skipper let his head fall back, and presently he was snoring. Colin crept

carefully through the palms to the spot where their look-out was posted. From that point of vantage he could see the stranded steamer, the blue waters of the China Sea washing the bases of the two headlands, the bay within and the pirate encampment. It was swarming with dusky individuals. They were gathering in front of one of the huts about the figure of the stout Chinaman who had taken the post of leader.

“Going to talk it over,” thought Colin. “I don’t imagine they’ll make an attempt at once. They’ll talk and eat, and wait till nightfall. Keep a careful eye on them,” he warned the man. “Shout to us if anything is happening.”

Turning towards the tramp he caught sight of the boat which had brought the crew across the narrow strip of water to the spot they had chosen. It came into view from behind the shelter of a bluff of coral, and, propelled by the powerful arms of the chief, danced across the sunlit surface. Colin watched till the chief reached the tramp, made fast to it and swarmed over her rail. He saw him clamber on to the bridge, disappear and then come into view again, staggering beneath the weight of a large wooden case. He reached the rail, sought for a rope, and securing it about the case, lowered that into the boat. A quarter of an hour later he was back at the headland, and Colin and one of the men helped him to land the rockets.

“We’ll have to select a spot from which to send them,” said Colin. “If we take them up to our position up there, the flares as they are sent will draw fire. Let’s find a sheltered site, a hollow if there is one, where a man can light the fuse without being seen from over there.”

There was no particular difficulty about the matter. This coral headland pushing up from the ocean provided a host of pitfalls for the unwary. There were excrescences in all directions, huge fissures and cracks, and plenty of deep holes and hollows. Colin selected one.

“How’s this?”

“Splendid, sahib! I will post one of my engine-room staff. He is a steady fellow and will obey orders. I shall point out to him that down in this hole no one can possibly see him, and no bullet can come near. And then, sahib!”

The chief was pleased with life: pleased with himself. If Colin’s presence and coolness had been an inspiration and a help to this crew of mixed nationality, the chief was now proving himself a valuable follower. “We send a rocket up, say every ten minutes,” he said. “More often if there are sounds. And we break the intervals, eh, sometimes ten minutes,

sometimes five or six, sometimes longer. That will help to keep them off to-night.”

“And then?” asked Colin. “There will be to-morrow, to-morrow night, and so on. Where does it end?”

“End, sahib?”

“Yes, end.”

“Er—end?” The question hadn’t occurred to the chief. It was the coming night which occupied his attention. Dusk would be falling in an hour, perhaps, and then, quite suddenly as it does in the tropics, there would be darkness. He was immensely pleased to feel that it was at his suggestion and by his hand alone that the party had been able to make preparations to outwit the enemy. Beyond that he had had no thought. But—yes, certainly, there would be the morrow, if the pirates were not successful during the night. They would have to continue their defence. Someone must win, and the pirates had the advantage of arms and numbers.

“End, sahib? Who knows? It will come to an end if and when the pirates break down our defence, or when we get away from the island.”

“Aboard the tramp?” asked Colin curtly.

The chief swung round to look at the stranded steamer.

“Impossible! She is hard and fast. She will need to have her cargo shifted aft, and a hawser passed to the biggest tree over here. Then she would slip off the rocks and be fit for a voyage, for I do not think her plates are damaged. That means time and opportunity and men, more men than we have.”

Colin took him up to the highest point. They looked down into the bay, flashing emerald hues under a sinking sun, backed by waving palms, blue-green in colour now that the day was fading. The hutments were not so easily seen now. The yellowish-white strand was less prominent. The pirate boat, with her high prow, was silhouetted against the light reflected from the water as she lay dead still at her mooring.

“I’m going to make a suggestion,” said Colin. “I’m little more than eighteen years of age and not so used to being taken by pirates. But Boy Scouts—ever heard of them?”

The chief thought, and then shook his head. How was the engineer aboard an insignificant tramp trading in the far East to be expected to know of such an organization?

“Well, anyway, it’s a movement started in England by a great Englishman, Sir Robert Baden-Powell. Boys are enrolled for membership in every city, town, village, and hamlet. They’re taught discipline, obedience, to be useful, to be handy, to be able to look after themselves and others, to read signs, to cook, to sew, a hundred other matters, and mainly to be loyal and decent fellows. The movement has spread to every quarter of the globe. It has met with the greatest support from every class of people. Boys who are Scouts love their job. There’s a movement of the same sort for girls, too. But I was saying, Boy Scouts are taught to face difficulties and to get out of them. I want to get away from these rascals. We can’t hope to beat the pirates off every time. Therefore we’ve got to leave the place.”

“True,” the chief grunted.

“And the tramp’s out of the question.”

“Undoubtedly, sahib.”

“Then there’s the pirate boat.”

The chief stared at Colin in amazement. “Yes,” he said, “but——”

“A fellow could tow her slowly if she was made fast to a boat—eh?”

“Slowly, yes,” agreed the chief. “But she lies out there——”

“I’m going for her the instant darkness falls. You’ll take charge here,” said Colin. “Warn the men not to fire once you’ve had my signal.”

“Signal, sahib? But how can you——”

Colin told him. “Keep an eye on the pirate boat every time you send up a rocket. If you see a boat lying this side of her, that’s mine; don’t fire another rocket.”

Colin repeated the warning, slid down to the men, and within the hour left the party and crawled down to the water. Lowering himself into the sea, he struck out for the other headland.

CHAPTER VIII

The Old Muzzle-loader

A million stars looked down upon the coral islet, upon the narrow waterway between the headlands, and upon the palm-girt bay of this pirate stronghold, from which Colin and his companions desired to make their escape. As he lowered himself into the water and floated for a moment or two on his back, he peered up into the deep blue-black of the heavens, sown with glistening emeralds which twinkled and which cast so much brilliance that he wondered whether it would be possible to go about the business he had in hand without being discovered. And then a glance at the headland he had just left reassured him: a gloomy, indefinite mass stood up out of the water; no single object was distinguishable; the coral rock, the palms, the crew of the stranded tramp, everything was merged into that big black shadow, while the bay, lying beyond the waterway in which he floated, was clouded in inky blackness.

“Good!” thought Colin, “Splendid night for a show like this, only it’ll be rather a job finding one’s way over new country. But that’s where the Scout comes in.”

He struck out boldly for the opposite headland, touched the coral shore under shadow of the stranded steamer, hoisted himself out, and let the water drain away from his clothing. Perhaps had he been a little more imaginative he would have shivered at the thought of dangers already escaped, for probably the sea just outside the bay swarmed with sharks, and without doubt Colin had run no little risk in venturing into the water.

“He is bold, this young leader,” the olive-complexioned chief was saying to the cook, as the two crouched behind their palm-tree retreat on the headland, “and when he is full-grown he will make as good a leader as any of these white men. For myself, nothing would have forced me to trust my body to the water. Ugh!”

He knew the dangers, in any case. Indeed he had not been sailing the China Sea all these monotonous years without learning something about the fish that swam in it. The cook, too, well knew the danger.

“But there’s been no sound from him,” he said, and there was an anxious note in his voice. “That is well. Let us give him another ten minutes and then we will send up one of our rockets. What say you, Chief?”

The two clambered down the side of the headland till they found the deep hollow selected for their rocket-firing, and dropped at the feet of the man told off for that duty. He already had a rocket set up on its stick, the lower end of which was thrust between two suitably placed boulders. Then the thoughtful fellow had erected, by means of a few branches torn from the palms and half a dozen palm leaves, a sort of roof under which he could strike the match to set fire to the fuse, so cutting off all rays from the outside.

“In ten minutes,” said the chief.

“I’m ready,” came the whispered answer from the man.

“Hush!” The cook stood on tiptoe, raising his head just above the lip of the hollow. “I heard a sound like the splashing of water, as if someone were dragging himself out of the sea—listen!”

There was silence among them. Yes, very faint sounds came to their ears from the opposite headland, or was it only the never-ending boom and splash of the surf? Straining their eyes, they were able to make out its dull outline, with the mass of the piled-up steamer hugging it closely. Ten minutes later a sudden trail of light shot up from the hollow. Its point soared to a dizzy height and then a magnesium star burst from its container and hung poised in the air, lighting up the whole island, the bay, the headlands, the water inlet, the stranded steamer, every palm and every object with a distinctness that was startling.

Yonder was the pirate boat. From his post of observation to which the chief had sent the cook, the latter could see the hutments fringing the beach, and caught a glimpse of a group of the marauders. They were seated round the entrance to one of the huts, and the group was so large that no doubt the majority were present.

“Not thinking of doing anything at the moment, then,” he told himself, noticing that as the star burst every pirate head was swung round in their direction. “It’ll make ’em think, that rocket will. We’ll give them another presently.”

It made other people think; to wit, Colin. Although he knew that he might expect the firing of a rocket at any moment, that fiery trail and the sudden burst of magnesium light took him unawares. He was crawling his way up the steep declivity on which he had landed, and had just reached the palms when the thing occurred. Instantly he flung himself flat beneath a

boulder, and lay quite still until the light floated away over the centre of the island and slowly subsided.

“That will give me at least five minutes interval, probably more,” he thought. “I’ll get going.”

It did a good deal more, as a matter of fact, because the star had enabled our hero to see also what had attracted the cook’s attention. For from this headland the whole bay, the pirate boat and the encampment beyond were easily within view, and Colin’s quick eye had instantly detected the crowd of pirates.

“Talking it over,” he thought to himself, “making plans. Possibly wondering what they will do. Determined to get the better of us, but don’t know quite how to do it. On we get!”

It was a task to occupy all the care and attention of a Scout. For all Colin knew, the palm grove, into which he had now made his way, might harbour pirate sentries—men posted there to watch the opposite headland. Caution, therefore, was necessary. On hands and knees he crept forward, feeling his way, removing loose stones from his path, worming his way between the trunks of the palms and leafy undergrowth. And then—he suddenly came to an abrupt stop when he had been progressing for some ten minutes. For his hand dropped on a man’s face, causing him to start back and almost to give vent to a cry of fear. Then the discipline and self-control of the true Scout came to his help.

“Dead! Face almost cold! Fellow didn’t move! And—he’s not breathing,” he said, putting out his hand again and letting it lie upon the man’s chest. “Must have been killed by one of our fellows and left behind by his own people. A Chinnee, I expect.”

Crash! A second serpent of fire soared into the air, another magnesium star floated high overhead and lit every object. Colin lay flat; then, feeling secure, for palm trees surrounded him, he lifted his head and took a good look at the gruesome object lying beside him. It was a Chinaman without doubt, dressed in a loose blue coat and baggy trousers of the same colour, with Chinese shoes upon his feet, and, half tumbled from his head, a blue turban. A huge knife was thrust through a red cotton belt, and lying half across the man’s body was a rifle of modern manufacture.

The star floated away and died down. Colin sat up abruptly.

“Supposing,” he said, “supposing I was to barge into any of these fellows, they’d know me at once. But supposing I borrowed this chap’s

outfit. Jingo! I'll do it."

It wasn't extremely pleasant work. But then, the task upon which he was engaged was one that perhaps meant life or death to himself and his comrades. Colin knew this, and did not expect to have his path made smooth; and besides that, would any Boy Scout hesitate in such circumstances?

He cast off the clothing with which the skipper had provided him—white drill such as is worn aboard ship in the tropics, that is to say, drill that had once been white and was now sadly soiled after his adventures. To speak the truth, when handed over to him it had been none too good to look at. It was patched and tattered, though reasonably clean. In any case it took but a few moments to discard the draggled garments, from which water was still oozing. With a heave, Colin rolled the dead pirate over, pulled his coat from him and likewise the baggy breeches. Pulling them on, he put the belt round his waist and pushed the knife into it. The turban was safely wound round his head, and in a twinkling the Chinese boots were on his feet, beautifully soft affairs, with thick cotton soles, which would make a great deal of difference to his going when compared with the old leather boots which had once belonged to the skipper. A rapid search discovered a pouch hanging round one shoulder of the Chinaman by means of a leather strap. Colin unhitched the strap and took possession. Then swinging the rifle on his shoulder he set off, only to halt again and open the lock to make sure that the weapon was loaded. After that his progress was rapid enough. Those clothes made him fearless; unless he were actually accosted and spoken to, he felt that he might walk in sight of all the pirates and not attract suspicion and attention.

All, therefore, that he had to be careful of was the rough ground and the unknown path that he must follow, and as a matter of fact it was not without many a tumble and striking his head more than once against a swaying trunk that he finally reached the smooth stretch of beach which bounded the inland waterway.

Palms surged overhead, their huge leaves dipping toward the water. The bay itself was like some huge pool of ink, a black expanse backed by the sheen of reflected light, and throwing from its limpid depths the glimmer of a thousand stars.

S-s-shrush! A rocket soared. A dozen men, perhaps more of them, coming soft-footed across the sands, ducked and threw themselves face downwards not two yards from Colin, who, the instant that fiery snake had

cut its way across the sky, had dived for the shade of the nearest palm. Then the star burst, flooding the surroundings, casting weird black shadows, lighting the coral strand, the inky depths of the inland pool, the headlands, and every rocky excrescence. The star-splashed sky was, as it were, immersed in the brilliant glow, while the rigging of the old steam tramp, so forlorn and helpless, cut clean and sharp against a silver background.

Colin caught his breath. "One, two, three, a round dozen of them," he counted, staring at the figures prostrated so close to him. "Armed to the teeth and on the way to the headland. I'll——"

The glow died down, a scintillating string of fire melted into blackness. Stars peeped out again. Headlands, the exit from the bay, the beach, palm trees, and the stranded tramp were swallowed in an all-pervading blackness. There came the slither of feet. One of the men dropped his rifle, while another moving forward banged heavily into the tree behind which Colin sheltered. Then they were all about him.

"Caught! They must know that I am not one of themselves." They jostled against Colin. One of the men said something in a low sing-song voice, and at once hands clutched about Colin until his own were seized. He found himself forming a link in a human chain which those pirates had formed. The chain moved off in silence. It crossed the sand and presently plunged amongst the palm trees and rocks, the leader making direct for the headland.

What was Colin to do? Break away of a sudden and dash into the darkness?

"They'd know at once that one of the crew of the tramp was ashore," he thought. "No, I'll wait for the next rocket, and as the men cower, I'll sneak in amongst the palms, and squeeze my body as close as possible behind a trunk until they have moved on without me." Yes, that was the correct plan to follow. In a little while a rocket would soar. Sooner or later the island would be again illuminated.

Sooner or later; the minutes dragged, while this human chain stumbled on through the darkness. It seemed hours before Colin heard that distant, tell-tale s-s-shrush! Then, without an instant's delay, the chain broke, and the men squatted on the ground amongst the rocks and tree trunks.

"My chance. Now behind this palm."

Colin crept away, and reaching a neighbouring tree, stood up behind it. "In two minutes the light will die down, and then I'll be off."

Something touched his sleeve. It was one of the pirates. He seemed to have risen from the ground itself, and as the magnesium star broke into radiance and flooded the world with light, he turned, and clapping a hand on Colin's shoulder, grinned at him.

"So, brother," he gurgled, "we are together then? And you would wish to leave this happy band and return to safety at the huts. Not yet! No, not yet!"

"Silence! Who is chattering? To Hi, get close to the ground and cease your noise!"

Colin could hardly understand a word. This man's action mystified him. Did the fellow suspect that in Colin he had discovered one of the crew of the tramp, or—or—what? The ruffian sank on his knees at once, dragging our hero with him, and squatted there clinging to one of Colin's hands.

"Seems to want to make sure that I don't give him the slip. And yet does not appear to suspect me. What's it mean?" Colin asked himself, and then half guessed the riddle. "And what are these men after? They know we have left the ship; surely they don't mean to get aboard her again? For what's the use? They will be no better off, and only a little nearer to our headland, where there is ample cover even if marksmen are on the tramp. Ah, that's the last of the rocket, and on we go."

It was a troublesome journey for Colin. Linked in this extraordinary chain, an unwilling recruit of these pirates. He stumbled over the rocky ground, banging his shins from time to time, crashing now and then into the huge, rough trunk of a palm, or half burying himself in foliage. And the silence and taciturnity of this strange band worried him. He began to wish almost that he were suspect, and more than once was on the point of attempting to break free. But the rascal who gripped one of his hands held to him like a limpet, so that escape was impossible.

It may have been ten minutes later that a sudden lighting of the gloom warned him that he had left the shelter and the shadow of the palms. A brilliant sky shone down upon them, and it became possible to see his companions dimly.

"Halt!" called the same sing-song voice. "Lie down and wait for the next rocket. Then set to work in haste. Ling, you have the powder?"

One of the men chirruped an answer. "Yes, the powder, here, in this satchel."

"And you, So Ling, and the rest, you have the bags of shot I handed to you?"

Heads nodded. Colin could see them quite clearly against the sky. “Yes, the bullets,” one voice replied, deep-toned, almost bass, in contrast to the falsetto of the inquirer.

“Then wait for the rocket. We are close to our post, and the instant the light goes make ready. When the second rocket soars we shall have the gun charged and can lay it on the headland. Then——”

The speaker chuckled. Titters of amusement came from the members of this little band. The rascal seated beside Colin clapped him on the shoulder, and whispered something in his ear. “So. You are still here, my brother. Good then! You are ready for the fight, and moreover, you dare not now return alone through the palm trees. You will fight.”

Fight! This was the meaning of the journey undertaken by the pirates whom he had been forced to accompany. Colin began to understand. He had picked up a few odd Chinese words, which helped him to comprehend this novel and difficult situation.

“So they’ve got a gun hidden somewhere here on the headland,” he thought. “Why didn’t they use it at the very beginning?”

He sat back on his heels to cudgel his brains as to the reason. “Because they thought we were still aboard the tramp and wanted to capture us with the vessel. Now they know we’re ashore the thing is different. They’ll send charges of small shot into our retreat, and—and—they must be stopped.”

Stopped. Yes, certainly! But how? It was all as clear as daylight now. The pirates had in the first instance deliberately chosen not to use their gun—whatever class of cannon it might prove to be. Then, without doubt, Colin’s watchful sharp-shooters on the opposite headland had made the training of the gun impossible during daytime. But at night, with those rockets to help, a weapon might be crammed to the nozzle with shot, and, however ancient, would spatter the site where the chief, and the cook, and the others waited for the young white sahib who had left them a bare half-hour before.

“Our headland is right under the palm trees,” reflected Colin. “Of course, men posted here with rifles wouldn’t be of any use. But showers of grape would probe every hollow yonder, and—and—I’ve got to put my oar in.”

Yes, he had to do something, but what? He hadn’t seen the gun yet. Where was it? Close at hand? And ancient or modern?

The answer came almost at once. That native housed so cosily on the far headland set up his next rocket with care and deliberation. Then he touched it off with the air of an artist. It hissed its way upward and belched its gleaming magnesium star. Colin stared. The man who had held so fast to one of his hands dropped it, and slithered forward on his stomach. As if in a flash our hero took in his surroundings. Immediately in front of him some dozen cotton-clad Chinamen, stretched in every sort of attitude, hiding behind piles of rough coral rock, clustered high up close to the palms on this headland. A dozen feet in front of him, perhaps, a roughly constructed platform, with a barrier of rocks in front, and on it a cannon—an ancient muzzle-loader, yet a dangerous weapon when discharged at an enemy at close quarters. That magnesium star showed the indented edge of the opposite headland, the broken coral reefs surrounding that on which Colin crouched, the tramp, and all the details of this pirate haunt now becoming so familiar. The light went out with a suddenness that was disconcerting.

“Now, comrades, the powder and the bullets. We will see whether we can kill some few of these men yonder. Load the gun and make ready for the next rocket. Then we shall see.”

It was the same sing-song voice. The leader of the band was already beside the gun, and at once his men joined him.

“Sponge her out. She may be damp. Now in with the bag of powder. Gently! Gently! lest you spill it. Good! Now a wad of cotton and then the bullets.”

Colin could hear their grunts as they worked. A buzz of conversation rose from this dusky crew, and was silenced a while later by a sharp order from their leader.

“Be quiet. Cease chattering. Voices carry far on a night so still as this.”

“Going to fire a broadside almost at point-blank range, into the chief and his men,” Colin thought, and ran reflective fingers through his damp and tangled hair. “Suppose I get near and sweep the powder from the vent. That would do. That would prevent her going off.”

Would it? In five seconds he had decided that the attempt might easily prove abortive, for a single grain of powder would be sufficient to fire the charge. Then, without a doubt, the result would be deadly, for from this height, the crew of the gun, even though it was only an ancient muzzle-loader, and therefore much to be despised by those possessed of up-to-date weapons, would command the inlet and the far headland, and where rifle fire

might be, and in fact had proved to be, useless, a shower of leaden missiles would certainly discover holes and crevices amongst the piled up coral rocks and the palm trees yonder, and perhaps would wipe out Colin's companions.

“Won't do! Must think of something better.”

“Now the bullets! In with them, in with them! More. We will sweep these mongrel seamen off the rocks.” It was the same sing-song voice, followed by the dull rumble of leaden bullets at the vent of the cannon, and by chuckles from the gun crew.

Colin stepped back and, as it were, disentangled himself from the men about the gun. His hand had come in contact with the belt and its pouch, of which he had so recently obtained possession. The pouch stirred some impulse, prompted an idea, while the recollection of his immediate surroundings as viewed a couple of minutes earlier under the brilliant beams of the magnesium star completed the movement. He went on hands and knees and turned away.

“Hold! My comrade who wished to return to the huts, to food and comfort and safety.”

It was the Chinaman who had taken upon himself to act as Colin's nurse, who, suspecting him of lukewarmness in this affair, or of lack of courage, for it meant precisely the same, had determined to bring this unwilling pirate along with him. But the interest attached to uncovering and preparing the gun had been too much for him. He had dropped Colin's hand, much to our hero's relief, and had gone to assist his comrades. But all was ready now. The weapon was charged almost to the muzzle. Indeed, any self-respecting individual would have fought shy of such an antique affair, and, fearful of its bursting, would have been glad to give it the widest berth possible. But not so your Chinaman. Ignorant of the danger of such a happening, or deliciously careless of it, the crew crowded about the gun, waiting for the next rocket to burst.

“See you, Leng, the moment the fire snake goes up make ready with your bar to swivel the cannon to left or to right. To Hi, you will give it the correct elevation. Then lie flat all. I will strike the match which shall send those curs yonder to perdition.”

The voice and the instructions distracted the attention of the individual bent on rediscovering Colin. The man turned back to the gun, and, lying flat, stared at the opposite headland. There it was, dark, ill-defined, nebulous, as it were, floating in a sea of indigo spangled with the reflection of a host of

brilliant stars. A curiously-shaped blot cutting athwart that streak of indigo would be the stranded tramp, and the blur filling the immediate foreground would be the ground descending to the water, down which this band of pirates had not so many hours before attempted to rush the crew of the tramp.

Colin rolled down a slope, losing his rifle. He got on to his hands and knees and moved away, downhill, as fast and as silently as possible. Old Scout games, experiences back in old England, helped him not a little. Yet there was no time to exercise all that care and caution dear to the heart of any tracker worth his salt. If there had been time, he would not have dared to move hand or foot until quite sure that the ground ahead was clear; for at night-time in particular, sounds carry. To the man in Colin's anxious position, the snap of a dried twig sounds like the noise of a pistol shot. A stone set rolling appears to awake a thousand echoes. Time pressed. Time was everything, and the lives of at least some of those mixed sons of the East, whom he knew as comrades, were hanging by a thread. And mercifully for him the ocean all about this rocky islet, selected as a home by the pirates, sang a musical refrain as its rollers came in over the coral barrier, broke into seething foam, and sent clouds of warm, salt spray drifting inland. The dull roar of the surf gave enormous assistance, while the interest of every man of the band assembled round the gun was so attracted by the work in hand that none gave a thought to other matters, not even he who had taken so firm a grip of Colin.

A slither down a steep bank, a hurried scramble over a mass of coral rock, as rough and as hard as any file, and—water. Colin's feet splashed into it. He was up to his knees already. Already he had detached the leather pouch from its sling, and had cast a dozen or more cartridges from it. To fill it to the brim was an easy matter. To make quite sure of a supply, and in case he should spill the contents of the pouch on his return journey, a not unlikely matter, he dropped full length in the sea till he was soused from head to foot.

Then began the return journey, still against time, more urgently against it than before, and a task far more difficult, seeing the need to carry his burden carefully. Also it was uphill—steeply uphill at times, with the need to avoid obstructing masses of coral, and, an unforeseen problem, the vital need to take the right direction and return direct to the gun.

“Forgot that!” he gasped, coming to an abrupt halt, “supposing I miss them altogether. It would be the easiest thing possible.”

But the very steepness of the ground helped him. As he looked upwards, every object was silhouetted against that brilliant sky, powdered with its millions of scintillating points. Palm trees stood out black and shapely. There were figures above there, crouching figures. “Got ’em. Can see their heads nodding. Wonder how long I’ve got before the next rocket goes?”

It might soar at any second. The chief had agreed on the wisdom of making the intervals between them uneven. Then the pirates would not be able to count on some definite period of darkness. It might be turned into brilliance at any second, and that was where the value of these rockets came in.

“It’s time, more than time now,” grumbled one of the gun crew as he stared across the water.

“Not so, there is no fixed moment,” another answered. “And, there, why any haste? The gun is charged. We are ready. Then why let us wish to hasten the moment. It will come. Patience is a great virtue, O my brother!”

S-s-shrush! The hissing rush of that fiery snake startled every one of these usually stolid Chinamen. They bounced to their feet and bent over the cannon.

“So! So! A little to the right, eh, Leng, just a little more.”

The sing-song voice told that it was the leader. He squatted immediately behind the weapon, while a lusty fellow armed with a strong wooden bar altered the position of the cannon as directed.

“Now depress the muzzle. To Hi! Quick! Quick! The star is bursting. More! More, I tell you. Easy! Easy at that! Now, let every man lie flat.”

The island stood out clear in every feature. The clumsy sights of the antique weapon were trained on the opposite headland. The leader of the pirate gang poured powder from a horn over the touch-hole and struck a match.

A figure—a Chinaman—darted towards him. A man’s hand was stretched out, and, just as the pirate got his match alight, a deluge of water fell on the touch-hole, swamping the train and wetting the charge inside. The magnesium flare showed it all. Showed the Chinaman, who had so suddenly put a stop to the firing of the gun, turn to break away, and still shed its light on the spot as the pirate captain and his men hurled themselves on this intruder.

The light went out with unusual suddenness. A calm, radiant tropical night covered the island, while the surge and music of the surf went on unbroken.

CHAPTER IX

The Chief takes a Hand

Heads were close together amidst the palms and the piled up coral rocks on the headland opposite that on which the pirates had made ready their gun. Since the departure of Colin on his perilous enterprise, his party were suffering badly from nerves, so badly did they miss the leadership of the English boy. The chief, his olive complexion blanched, gripped the cook with a suddenness and a nervousness that were disconcerting.

“You saw?” he gasped. “Yonder! Over there. On the rocks? Right opposite, and just before the fringe of palms.”

He stood with his face in that direction, and, turning, the cook stared at the blur of the other headland, and could see the masts of the steamer cutting across the sky.

“Saw? Saw what?” he demanded.

“People! Heads bobbing. A group of them, and, I thought, a gun. Then a great commotion. The star went out suddenly so that I could not be sure. Yet there were men there.”

“You—you think perhaps that the sahib——” the cook stuttered anxiously. “You believe that he was there?”

“No! Impossible! Those men—there were men I am sure—must have been a band of pirates. If the sahib had plunged amongst them we should have known. There would have been shouts. There would have been more commotion. Signal for another rocket, and let one of our marksmen make ready to fire in that direction.”

The flare showed nothing that was any help. A rocky barrier, skilfully placed, just hid the gun, and not a head showed.

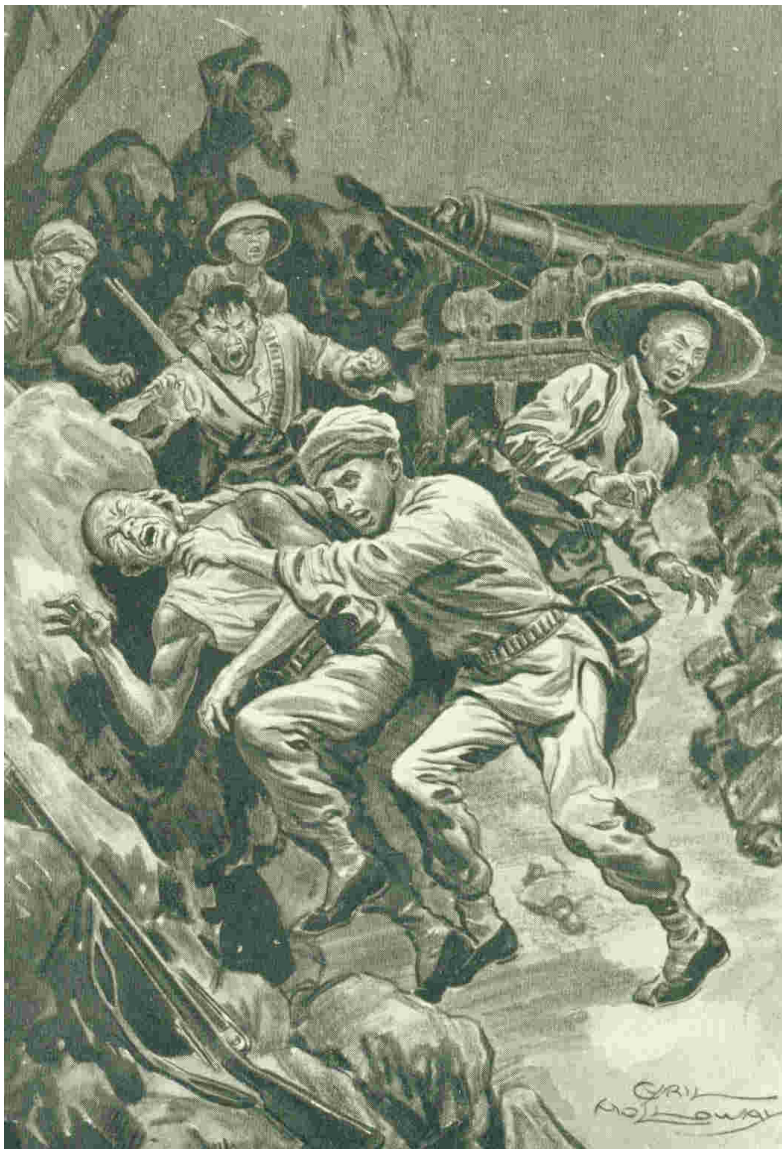
“Perhaps imagination, Chief,” ventured the cook diffidently. “On a night like this, when there is—what d’you call it?”

“Tension?”

“Yes, when there is tension in the air, one’s ideas run away. Rocks look like men. Trees appear as regiments. Empty ground is peopled. It is on such occasions, so I have heard, that sentries fire at shadows and so raise an alarm, waking the sleeping camp, when hundreds rush to arms and send

bullets hurtling into the darkness at—at nothing! We've got to keep steady and do nothing rash.”

What if these two had known more about that hidden gun and about the part Colin had been forced to play in regard to it? The chief had undoubtedly seen something, and perhaps imagined more. The absence of noise, of shouts, had, however, reassured him, and the cook's opinion, coupled with the absolute absence of any suspicious objects opposite on the firing of that second rocket, had helped to banish his fears.



THE CHINESE CAPTAIN IS VANQUISHED

“It must be as you say,” he told the cook. “One is all nerves on a night like this. One listens for sounds, and watches, anxious all the while for the sahib. If all is well, he will now be over by the pirate encampment.”

That uncanny silence needed explanation. On such an occasion, when a gun’s crew had all in readiness, and when the match was on the very point of being applied, the intervention of any individual might be expected to result

in shouts, in shrill cries of anger and hatred. Yet no sound escaped the crew as Colin dashed water over the vent. And no cry escaped our hero as the pirate captain and his men hurled themselves upon him. And at that precise instant, the magnesium star went out. Colin gripped the Chinese captain of this gun crew by the neck, swung him round, and banged his head on the rocks. Then with a rapid movement he rolled to one side. The rascal who had previously taken such an interest in him dived for the spot where he had been a moment before, and meeting there a comrade, they fell on the figure of their captain, locked in one another's arms and fighting for mastery.

"Here! Quick! I have him," grunted the first of them. "Bring ropes." Colin rolled still farther away. He got to his feet and at once collided with another man.

"This way," the fellow whispered hoarsely. "You are going in the wrong direction. They have captured the ruffian. You saw him—eh? Splashed water over the vent and rendered the gun useless. This way! This way!"

He clutched Colin by the arm and hurried towards the group of men whose heads could be seen against the sky line. Our hero followed without hesitation, and for a few yards kept up with his companion stride for stride. But a moment or so later he brought his fist round with a swing which was intended to strike the man's face. The blow missed, and its full force was wasted in the air. But the surprise of it caused the pirate to lose his grip. Colin kicked his legs from under him, bent low, and throwing himself on the ground again, rolled to one side. Exclamations of anger and amazement followed him. He rolled again, and reaching steep ground slithered to a lower elevation. He was brought up short by a mass of rock, and found himself lying on something hard. It was a rifle. Perhaps the very one he had dropped some little while before. Or it may have belonged to one of the attackers.

"That's more likely," he thought, lying there gasping for breath, trying so hard to still the thumping of his heart, and listening intently for every sound. "What's the good of it without cartridges, and—what's this?"

It was another dead Chinaman—killed in the first attack—lying stiff and stark. Colin searched him. The dread of touching a dead man seemed to have gone now. He slipped a cartridge belt from the man's shoulders and donned it. All the while he was listening and watching. The sky formed a luminous background above him and heads were bobbing. Figures came and went, black, almost formless, yet visible against the background. He could hear the

voices of the crew as they searched for him, and those voices were coming nearer.

“The next rocket will show me up at once if I stay here,” he thought. “The best I can do is to make for the water.”

He stole round a mass of rock and found the ground sloping steeply below him. Turning round, he went down on hands and knees, sliding from rock to rock, slipping a few feet here, clinging to a rough piece of coral there, always descending, and always with his eyes turned to the sky-line above. Presently his cotton-soled shoes met the water, and as a rocket soared he dropped full length into the sea, and lay with only his head above the level of the water—too small an object to arrest the eye of an observer however keen.

Perhaps a dozen pirates up above him lay flat on the ground, peering eagerly in every direction. At the tail end of the gun lay their captain, his head dizzy, unable as yet to get to his feet, while just beside him stretched the lifeless form of one of his companions, slain by the knife of the man who had taken such an unpleasant interest in Colin. A more bewildered and a more enraged crew it would have been difficult to discover.

“You saw him? A man wetted the fuse. We were upon him at once. Where did he get to, for this, surely, is not he? It is Feng, killed by one of our comrades in error——”

“Yes, Feng, our brother!”

“Slain by To Hi, by you, To Hi?”

They collected about the dead man, sliding over the ground, out of sight of the chief away on the far headland, yet, at moments visible to Colin. Their eyes gleamed under the magnesium flare, and angry glances were flung at the ruffian who had so clumsily killed a comrade.

“Stopping quite still,” Colin told himself. “They don’t like the light any more than I do, which is fortunate. Wonder what sort of beasts swim in these waters. I’ll chance it. If I keep close to the rocks I ought to be out of sight, and the swish of the tide should cover the sounds I make. But—wonder whether sharks come in here? I’ve always understood they keep out in the open. But crocodiles don’t. Well, can’t help all that. I’ve got to get out of this and take some more chances.”

There was shallow water just there. He lifted his newly acquired rifle from the bank where he had tossed it on entering the water, and waded along under the fringe of rocks. Perhaps a minute later he plunged suddenly into a

deep pool, and dropping his weapon was forced to swim. Taking care to splash as little as possible, and keeping always very close to the rocky line of the bay, he presently found himself entering dense shadows. Palms hung overhead, and peering up, he could see the broad leaves between himself and the sky.

“Time to get ashore, I think I am ahead of those fellows, that is, if they are returning. But I hope they’ll stay near the gun for a while so as to give the place a thorough search. Here we are. Only a few rocks and lots of sand and trees. Jingo! I’m glad to get ashore!”

He waded from the water, and squeezed as much of the moisture as possible out of his clothing, cast off the useless magazine with its cartridges and made sure that his knife was still in his belt. Then he cautiously felt his way forward amongst the trees, stopping every two minutes to listen, and cowering once as a rocket lit the landscape. Rocks were becoming fewer. The palms seemed to grow in more regular order, forming as it were a fringe, which bordered the bay, and crept right down to within a few feet of the water, leaving a bare, glistening strand where walking became far more easy.

Right on beyond him a light twinkled. Perhaps it was a camp-fire, or merely a lantern; figures moved between it and him; while a third star rocket, suddenly lighting up all the surroundings, showed him that the pirates were still there, but not in a group. Now they were moving about as if intent upon some business, though for the most part they were within easy distance of their hutments. Colin plunged on, as darkness closed down again, and then suddenly a hand seized him by the shoulder.

It was dark then, for the star had dwindled into nothing. A voice whispered in his ear. The breath of this individual stirred in his hair. It was a critical situation. For a brief moment Colin felt as though his legs would fail beneath him, felt terrified, almost lost his self-control, and then a new happening came to his aid.

Those figures flitting before the lamp, silhouetted against it one second and then plunged into darkness, showing perhaps a retreating leg or an arm and rarely more than a portion of their bodies, those figures were massing together and were advancing towards the water. Colin put his lips together. He must get rid of this unwelcome companionship.

“Hist!” he whispered, and throwing the grip from his shoulder, plunged on into the darkness. Then he darted behind the massive trunk of a palm, and stood bolt upright without movement. What the individual thought of the

incident he could not guess. The man had made a step in his direction, and now stood quite still like Colin. Then he too plunged into darkness, and our hero listened to him as he went on over the rocky path.

“A scout of some sort, I imagine,” he told himself. “Next time a star rocket goes up I must take cover on the instant. Of course that fellow may have been acting quite alone. What’s that down by the water?” he said, staring at the lamp placed in front of the pirate encampment, casting its feeble gleams in a narrow radius, though some of them reached the shore. By their feeble help he was able to see men congregated at the water’s edge. “They appear to be climbing aboard the two boats,” he said to himself, and in a moment he was quite sure of the fact, for the boats were pushed off and once on the surface of the bay stood out a trifle more prominently.

He heard rather than saw the splash of oars, and then lost sight of the boats.

“Ah!” suddenly that trail of light shot up from the headland. The chief was giving a far shorter interval this time. Colin squatted at the base of the tree, and covered his face with his turban. But that did not prevent his peering round the side of it and seeing all that he required: those two boats, their gunwales almost awash with the weight they carried, were within a few yards of the pirate vessel, and quite obviously the enemy meant to board her, and use her in another attempt upon the crew of the tramp. Every detail of the scene stood out clearly in the brilliant rays of that magnesium star, every line of the ship was sharply drawn, and her masts and cordage were plainly visible. The rowers ceased their efforts as the star blazed overhead, then from a far off point—it seemed much farther than it actually was—two red splashes of flame dotted the headland and two bullets cut their way crisply in the direction of the pirates. One struck the water ten yards to one side of the boats and ricocheted over without even splashing those aboard. The other must have struck one of the rowers, for a shriek pierced the silence, a man holding an oar stood up, making the boat rock dangerously. There was a splash as he fell into the water. And after that commotion, shouts, cries of alarm, and many orders. The two boats were turned, and as the magnesium flare died down, their rowers pulled frantically to bring them back to the encampment.

“That ends the present attempt by water.” Colin smiled to himself. “Those rockets were a clever suggestion. Now they’ll have to turn their attention to the land, and that means that I must get out of this place somewhere where I am not likely to be run into.”

He peered about him and struck off down to the beach, taking the utmost precaution to make no sound, and yet, in spite of that, sending a boulder rolling now and then. Presently he was on the glistening, sandy beach, and keeping just within the fringe of palms, strode on towards the settlement. Five minutes brought him to within a couple of hundred yards. He could see the pirates bunched together again: gesticulating, shouting angrily, doubtful what to do. He watched as the fat figure of their new leader suddenly rose up in their midst and silenced them with a gesture, and then heard his stentorian voice addressing them.

In the interval between his words, the only sound came from the leaves of the palms as they swayed in the night breeze, and from the water of the bay as it lapped gently against the sandy beach. That and the very gentle bump now and again as one of the boats lying just off the shore, grounded.

Colin gripped his knife in one hand, bent low, and hurried along over the sand. A minute later he had reached one of the boats—that one lying off the shore. Her painter had been carried on to the sand, and to its end was attached a heavy boulder, the weight of which kept it from drifting away.

“Cut it adrift, that’s the thing,” thought Colin, “then step aboard and give her a push until she’s out in deep water.”

Very thankful that he had the dead pirate’s knife—a clumsy weapon, but razor-edged—he severed the rope with one slash, returned the weapon to his belt, and seizing the painter waded ever so gently into the water. A moment later he was aboard, giving a lusty push off as he leapt into the craft. Then he lay at full length, his face presented towards the shore, not so much as a hand showing. A minute passed, in a couple more the impetus of his thrust from the shore was exhausted, and the boat was stationary. The pirates seemed quite a long way off now, and taking courage, Colin sought for an oar, dropped it gently over the stern, and began to paddle the boat farther out into the bay. Then he caught a glimpse of the vessel standing black against the tropical sky, and pushing on, was presently alongside her.

“Now we’ll tie her up somehow to the prow, and make ready to tow her away. Wonder whether there’s anyone on board.”

Quite obviously, it was necessary to make sure of this point, and having made fast the remaining length of painter to the rope by which the vessel was moored, he let his bobbing craft drift down against that side farthest from the pirate encampment, where also the rail of the vessel was very much lower. He could almost reach it as he stood up in the boat, and with an active spring he gripped the rail and swarmed on board.

An instant later a streak of flame went shrieking up from the headland, a magnesium flare burst in the sky, while Colin, gaining the poop deck of the vessel, found himself confronted by a man. They stared at one another, each equally startled, for a few seconds. Then with a snarl the pirate threw himself upon our hero, and as the magnesium light died down, they came to desperate grips on the deck, within a yard of that edge which overlooked the well, their figures hidden for the moment by the rail, which guarded the high prow of the vessel.

Back on the headland, anxious eyes searched the bay as that last rocket soared.

“It’s the pirate ship we want to look at,” said the Chief, his pipe trembling between his teeth. “If he has been lucky he should be there by now, only perhaps he was unable to get a boat. In one moment the rocket will go—look, Cook! Keep close watch. Ah! There she goes, now!”

They stared as though their eyes would burst from their sockets. In one brief glance they took in the wide circle of the bay, its fringe of sandy shore, its waving palms, the pirate settlement and the figures grouped before the huts. The focus of their search was the pirate vessel, lying at her moorings. There she was—stark, black, floating motionless on the water, and on that side presented to them lay a boat tied to her hawser. Just clambering over the rail was the figure of a man—a Chinaman—and aboard the vessel on the high prow, another figure—a gigantic fellow, the flare showed them up distinctly. They were facing one another. Then they closed, and as the flare died down, they fell, struggling together.

“What do you make of that?” gasped the chief. “There was his signal—a boat against the vessel—and——”

“And a Chinaman climbing on board. The sahib was dressed in white drill—ordinary sea-going clothes,” the cook reminded him.

“Ah!” It was a sigh of relief that the chief gave. “Yes,” he said, “dirty white drill, and that man was dressed so far as the light showed me, in blue—blue Chinese togs.”

“Yes, but——” the cook scratched his head thoughtfully; the position that suddenly presented itself to him was a puzzling and anxious one. “But why did they start fighting—those two? Surely——”

The chief was a man of decision, that is to say he had become so since the pirates first put in an appearance. To speak the truth, a week or more before he would have submitted calmly to any circumstances that might

have arisen, but the past week had taught him much, had braced him wonderfully, and the cool daring and example of the sahib had helped him to find himself.

“Stop here and watch,” he said. “Don’t send another rocket until I give you a signal. A shot from my rifle will tell you that I want light. Till then, watch and wait and be sure not to fire if you hear noise on the water.”

He slid away from the hillock, scrambled down the rocky path to the waterway, found the boat which had brought them from the steamer, and getting aboard, pushed off and pulled lustily into the bay.

Yet would he be in time, if his objective was the pirate vessel? Colin was a mere youth, not yet fully grown, tall and slim, and not too powerfully built, while his opponent was a huge, lusty Chinaman. What chance could Colin stand against such a man and in such an unequal encounter. And if he were too weak, what prospect was there of the chief reaching the scene of the conflict in time to bring assistance? Again, was it not possible that the pirates themselves had seen the strange happening on board their vessel, even as the flare had revealed it to them? And might they not even now be hastening to the spot?

The little boat rocked under the powerful efforts of the chief, and surged across the waters of the bay. It seemed ages before he came within distance. Turning his head for a few seconds, he finally caught sight of the vessel, pulled directly towards her, and flinging his oars into the bottom of the boat, hastily made fast, and leapt over the rail. Even then he was not certain that he would arrive in time to be of assistance to Colin.

CHAPTER X

Onward to China

“Crew ahoy! Ahoy there!”

It was the first sound that had greeted the men of the stranded tramp steamer since the chief had raced away so precipitately to the assistance of Colin. Indeed it was the first since the latter had left the summit of the headland on which the crew had taken up position. And such a lot had happened in the meanwhile, and yet so little. For Colin the moments had been packed with movement. For the men he left behind they had passed on leaden wings, dragging their weary anxious way, with the firing of those rockets alone to provide interest.

“He’s there! I saw him. The sahib!” a man would gulp as a rocket burst and lit the island surroundings. “See!”

“Fool! Be silent! It is only a tree.” The chief had been very severe.

His eyes were fixed on the pirate vessel, and watched for Colin’s signal. It had come at last. That final rocket had shown the boat tied up on the near side of the vessel, and someone—he looked like a native at that distance and in that dazzling light—someone clambering aboard. And its brilliance had lasted long enough to show a hulking man aboard throw himself upon the intruder.

It was proof positive to the chief that the latter was Colin, and promptly, he had taken the tramp’s boat and had rowed off to give assistance.

“Crew ahoy! Ahoy!”

There it was again, clear, distinct, in the curious high-pitched tone of natives of the East.

“Ahoy! Ahoy!” sang out the cook. One would have thought that a stout, lusty fellow such as he would have possessed a deep bass voice. But the response was in falsetto. It almost reached a squeak, and would certainly have grated on the tense-strung nerves of a European.

“Silence!” ordered the cook. “Listen, there is the splash of oars, and—ah! the pirates!”

A roar came from the settlement. There was the sharp report of a rifle. A lantern borne by some frantic individual, a mere spot of light at that

distance, moved rapidly to and fro, here and there, in the most aimless manner.

“Ahoy!” came from the bay. “Stand ready to fire a rocket, and tell the man we shall want others.”

“Ready!” shouted the cook. “And then?”

The splash of oars was getting nearer.

“Let every man pick up a load of provisions and water. Tell two of them off to carry the skipper. Come down to the water’s edge and be prepared to fend the pirate skiff off as we bring her in.”

“And the sahib?” called the cook, an anxious note added to the falsetto of his voice.

“Safe, but hurt. He is pulling an oar but has no breath to shout. Stand by with the rocket.”

The defenders of the headland, staring out into the bay, could see the rigging of the pirate vessel now, cutting sharply against the star-lit sky. She stood out, some little while later, every line of her, with wonderful distinctness, as a magnesium star burst into brilliance overhead, distinct to all upon the headland, clear and visible to the rascals at the settlement hardly yet fully aware of the loss they had suffered.

Uttering yells of hatred and execration, they rushed hither and thither. Some fired their rifles. Men rushed into the water swinging cutlasses and knives. Only the ponderous fellow who had constituted himself their leader kept his head and tried to find a means of defeating this wholly unexpected movement of the small body of men whom he, like his comrades, had scorned a few hours earlier.

“Stand by! Now another rocket! Cook, stand by to catch my painter!”

The next magnesium star showed the pirate vessel just rounding the headland and entering the narrow exit from the bay leading to the open sea. Ahead of her was the boat belonging to the tramp, the chief in her bows, pulling lustily, the figure of a Chinaman in tattered blue, a little huddled it seemed, tugging at an oar amidships. The tall prow of the vessel was bearing directly for the stranded tramp. The rope by which she was attached to the boat ahead was as taut as a bow string. The weight and the way of the larger boat was dragging the smaller athwart the strip of water running between the headlands. But muscle told. As the flare died down the tall prow swung round. The pirate vessel now headed direct for the open.

“Another rocket,” yelled the chief. They saw him standing in the bows of the boat with a coil of rope in his hand. Then he heaved, and sent the coil sailing over the heads of the cook and the men nearest him. They caught it, took firm hold and pulled steadily. As the light died down they drew the boat close in shore, swiftly cast loose the hawser, by means of which she had been able to tow the pirate vessel, and hauling gently drew the latter closer. Meanwhile two men had taken the place of the chief and Colin and had paddled the boat to the stern of the vessel, where they made her fast, and promptly clambered on board.

“They’ll find poles or something, no doubt, with which to keep her off the rocks. Now tow her round the headland.”

It was Colin’s voice, weak, gasping, its brisk tone astonishingly altered.

“The sahib is hurt?” the cook asked anxiously.

“Nothing to speak of. Let’s have another flare. Then swing her round as close to the rocks as possible. Fifty yards round the headland there’s a recess in which she can lie securely, and will be out of sight of the pirates. Listen to ’em.”

Colin sat down and gasped. He felt faint and giddy and yet wonderfully elated. Listen to them! The island rang with the shouts of the enemy. Members of the crew stopped to listen, some still a trifle nervously, the majority with a queer disdain, queer, that is to say, when compared with the abject fear they had shown not so long before.

Rocket after rocket soared, while the rascals who had made the island a rendezvous rushed to the opposite headland, helped on their way not a little by the magnesium stars fired by the man told off for that purpose; the crew of the tramp towed the captured vessel out through the gap between the two headlands, round the shoulder of the one they occupied, and so brought her beyond an abrupt corner.

“They’ll have to swim to this side to reach us,” chuckled Colin, still seated. Then he coughed and spluttered.

“Blood here. See, sahib. You are wounded.”

The cook was deeply concerned, for the flare overhead had shown a blood-stained froth oozing from Colin’s mouth and nostrils, while there was a wide red patch staining the blue coat he wore.

“Wounded, sahib?”

“It’s nothing. Just a stab. Now take the skipper aboard. There’s deep water here, so the craft can be brought in very close. Tell the rocket man to send ’em off in quick succession. Chief, you see to food and water and arms going aboard.”

What frantic cheers they gave within just a short space of time as the last man came aboard! It was the swarthy fellow who had taken charge of the rockets, and had performed his task with a coolness and an exactness which were most praiseworthy. He placed the case containing his remaining store of rockets in the boat, pushed off, and handing the case up, swarmed aboard the vessel.

“All aboard, sahib!” reported the chief, coming to Colin where he was seated aft near the tiller.

“You have counted them?”

“Certainly.”

“Then post as many men as you can spare to the sweeps, and let us get out to sea. We’ll search for canvas in the morning, and set a course for the nearest port. That would be Singapore, eh, Chief?”

“Perhaps, sahib.” To speak the truth the chief was not certain. His knowledge of the sea began and ended with the handling of a steam-engine. He knew all that there was to know of the smaller reciprocating engines. He had occasionally visited a liner fitted with turbines. His sphere was the engine-room and the stokehole and bunkers. When he came to navigation he was at a loss, quite helpless. “Perhaps, sahib,” he repeated. “But, to-morrow—yes.”

Men clambered into the well of the vessel, sought for and found sweeps, and soon had them in operation. Presently they were under way, and very soon could distinguish the outline of the island, lying black and grim under the brilliant stars.

“Send ’em another rocket,” gasped Colin. “Look at ’em.”

The silver-white star threw into startling brilliance the dual headlands, the irregular threads of reef connecting that on the right to the mainland, and the surf surging in creaming breakers ceaselessly over them. It outlined the tramp steamer—looking so stalwart, such a strong refuge and yet so helplessly inert—piled up on the opposite coral hillock. And above the latter, it threw into vivid relief the palms, surging to the night breeze, the huge leafy foliage casting dense black shadows, and at their fringe a medley of furious and frantic individuals.

The chief doffed his cap and grinned. He sought for his blackened pipe and filled it. He groped for a match and—Colin crashed to the deck of the captured vessel.

“And what’s this one? Chinese stuff, eh? One o’ the pirates?”

Our hero found himself looking into a face curiously familiar, and yet that of an entire stranger. Other faces were peering at him, clean shaven for the most part, though one or two were bearded. These men hovered about him. One was kneeling at his side—a young fellow whose blue eyes peered down at him.

“Chinese stuff?” he asked again. “You’d think so by the cut of his jib, mates, wouldn’t you? But this ain’t a China boy. Bless you, he’s English, or _____”

“Stand away. Who’s this?”

It was a more cultured voice. There was braid on the drill cuff of the interrogator. Colin regarded him inertly.

“China boy, sir. P’raps one o’ the pirates.”

That roused our hero. “What’s that?” he demanded, and sat up. Then a violent fit of coughing shook him, while a blood-stained froth oozed from his lips. “China boy yourself. I’m British!”

“And the leader of our party, sahib!” It was the chief’s voice. There he was too, as large as life, larger in fact, looking enormous, out of proportion, more olive-skinned than ever.

Colin glimpsed him in a casual, puzzled sort of way. He couldn’t quite understand. He knew this man. Yet who was he? Who was the person with gold braid, and who the others crowding about him. His head fell back. He lost all account of his surroundings, and vaguely felt himself lifted on to something—it was a stretcher—and being carried somewhere. Then oblivion.

“It was the rockets that caught our attention,” a British naval officer was saying to the chief. “We were thirty miles away, I imagine, and caught the glare of your magnesium stars. We steamed in this direction wondering what was happening. You said pirates!”

“Certainly, pirates, sahib. We were captured close to the island when our engine had broken down. We tried to escape, but our steamer grounded.

Then we captured the pirate vessel, thanks to the splendid leading of the young sahib. Who is he? I cannot say. You must ask the skipper.”

Sunrise on the following morning discovered a British gunboat of the Chinese squadron steaming direct for the pirate island. Behind her she left the captured pirate vessel, hove-to, awaiting developments. The gunboat stole in through the headland, swung into the bay, and turned its machine-guns on the pirate encampment. She hove-to at the old moorings, lowered a boat and sent a party of armed men ashore. Some three hours later she embarked that party with forty-three prisoners, and steaming towards the outlet of the bay, dropped her anchor. A steel rope was passed to the stern of the tramp, tackle was carried to the headland on which Colin and his party had taken shelter, and the majority of the prisoners were sent ashore to haul at the tackle. By then the chief and some of the old crew were aboard the tramp, and smoke was issuing from her funnel. She swayed as the hawser tautened. She careened at a sharp angle. Then she slid off the coral strand into deep water.

Ten days later she headed into the harbour of Hong-Kong, followed by the gunboat. Prisoners were handed over to the civil authorities, the wounded skipper was carried to the civil hospital, while Colin, wasted beyond recognition, the wound between his ribs not yet half-healed, was conveyed to the naval hospital.

He had arrived in China. He was within reach of Japan and his destination. And yet he was a prisoner, at death's door almost, while his rival, the unworthy Barnes, unknown to him was at that very moment actually at his port of arrival. Moreover he had already succeeded in his attempted usurpation of Colin's rightful position. In fact, for the time being the ruffianly Barnes was to all intents and purposes Colin Field. Yet, would he ultimately succeed in carrying to a successful conclusion the wicked plot which had caused him to desert his ship at Yokohama? And, if danger threatened the success of his intrigue, would Barnes, the scoundrel who had not hesitated already to seek Colin's undoing, attempt some other act of violence to keep our hero from taking his rightful position?

CHAPTER XI

Barnes the Impostor

Barnes had rehearsed his part till he knew it to perfection. He left the ship at Yokohama surreptitiously, sought a general store, bought himself a grey flannel suit made by Japanese tailors, which together with a slouch hat, brown shoes, a dark tie, and a few other etceteras, transformed him. He emerged as a presentable, not entirely ill-looking young fellow.

“And I’m Colin Field! Lucky I kept my ears open and learned so much. I’m Colin right enough. Ah! Here’s the Agent’s Office. Anything for Colin Field, please?” he asked brazenly. Yet his eyelids flickered. Suppose the fact of the real Colin’s disappearance had been reported? “Pooh! It won’t have been. Why should it be? He was missed at Singapore. What’s that got to do with Yokohama?”

It was all very well to reassure himself, but this scoundrel was not too confident. The Japanese behind the counter cast a pair of intelligent almond eyes on him.

“Colin Field. What ship?” he piped in a squeaky voice.

Barnes gave his information. “Docked this morning. Leaving in an hour.”

The man went to a high nest of pigeon holes, and reached for the contents of the one labelled F. Returning to the counter he swiftly ran through a pile of letters. “What name?” he asked.

“Colin Field.”

“Yes. Colin Field. Here! A letter!”

Barnes seized it. The address was written in the neat educated hand of a woman. “Colin Field. To be delivered on arrival.”

Barnes pocketed the envelope, murmured his thanks and hurried away. He met his fellow rascal, Short, at a restaurant a few hundred yards away.

“Well?” asked Short. He, too, was transformed. But no sort of garments could disguise this ruffian, just as no apparel—not even the smartest of such, cut by a Bond Street tailor—could make a gentleman of Barnes. Short looked furtive, bad-tempered, untrustworthy, distinctly unattractive. “Common” would be the more correct term to apply to his accomplice. He

held himself badly. A suit which on another young man, on Colin for instance, would have appeared smart, looked dowdy with Barnes's ungainly form in it. His hat was too far back on his head, his tie awry, and—yes, his hands were atrocious, dirty, uncared for, with broken nails and fingers stained deep-brown from much cigarette smoking.

“Well?”

“A letter. Here. For Colin Field.”

“That's you. Open it.” It came like an order. Short had difficulty in suppressing his own impetuosity. “Open it,” he snapped, and leaned across the table as Barnes tore it open. “What's it say? Who's it from? Any money in it?”

“Only a letter. Here we are. ‘Dearest Colin——’” Barnes didn't much like Short's dictatorial methods, and had felt more than a trifle nettled. But the opening words of the letter appeased him—“Dearest Colin,” he grinned.

“Splendid! Means that they are going to be easy. Go on.”

“‘This is just a short note to send you warmest greetings on your arrival. Your grandfather is on the tiptoe of expectation. And I, your grandmother, count the hours till you arrive.’”

“Crikey!” gasped Barnes, lifting his eyes to stare at Short. “Count the hours—eh!”

Short grinned, and rubbed the palms of his hands together, “Couldn't be better. Get along with it.”

Barnes slowly deciphered the contents. Instructions were given as to his best means of reaching the country district lying between Yokohama and Tokio, where the Fields lived, and directions for finding the house. The letter, bearing in every line evidence of the anxiety of these aged, saddened grandparents, closed with fond love to the grandson so much desired, and so soon to be present with them.

“You've got the ball at your feet,” grinned Short. “Loving grandparents waiting for you. Nearest of kin, you know. Sole heir to the fortune of the Fields. Oh, yes, fortune. I'm not slow, I'm not. I wasn't ashore an hour without getting busy. The Fields are bankers. He came out here when he was a boy. He's the richest Englishman in Japan and—and you're the only relative he's got—the only what's its name?”

“Descendant,” suggested Barnes, his eyes shining.

“That’s the word. To a T. Descendant. Heir. Natural heir, you know, and these people are really old. Your grandfather can’t walk—he’s an invalid. The old lady’s not much better.”

Was there ever a more malevolent, calculating, debased creature than this ruffian Short? He was one of those idle ne’er-do-wells, always envious of the good fortune of others. His chance meeting with Barnes had set his wits working faster than they had done in a lifetime. Here was an opportunity—his opportunity—to gain riches and escape toil. Thereafter Short had secured a hold over his more simple accomplice, which he determined to maintain.

“So the crib’s ready and waiting for you,” he coughed. “You carry out instructions, go to the house, and take your position. I——”

“Yes, you?” asked Barnes anxiously.

“Oh, don’t you worry. I take care to remain in the background. Of course, a man must live, and you’ll have to find the cash to make that possible. Soon the old man will die. That’ll be worth waiting for, er, that is if it don’t take too long. If so, well——”

The other eyed him askance. He wished beyond everything that he had never taken Short into his confidence. He detested the man. Putting aside the mean fact that he grudged his assistant a share in his coming triumph, he feared this man. He had seen sufficient of him to realize that Short would stop at nothing. His suggestion that Colin should be sandbagged proved it. His callous indifference to the result of that detestable piece of violence and rascality stamped him as a cold-blooded rogue. Well, Barnes was not quite that—not yet. He was a mean, contemptible rotter and an impostor. He was an accessory to that act of ruffianism, but a hesitating one. What would this man Short suggest next, what would he demand of Barnes?

Short leaned back in his basket-work chair and hummed a tune, while he stared up at the sky through the open front of the restaurant.

“If so, well, we can discuss the matter,” he said. “No use looking trouble in the face—eh? All’s well that starts well. Let’s order coffee.”

In a wonderful garden filled with English flowers sat a single-storied bungalow, pink and white, neat and trim, its shaded lawns shaven as smooth as any in old England. Japanese servants bustled about the place. The old lodge-keeper and his wife stood at the gate of the garden entrance on the edge of expectation. And on the veranda, in his wheeled chair, his long white

locks trailing over his collar, sat Mr. Field, the highly-respected Mr. Field, the oldest European inhabitant of Japan, tall, slim, bent double now, with lined features to which Colin's—the real Colin's—face bore the strongest resemblance. Standing at his side was his wife, slightly built too, aged, her eyes glowing with excitement. For a telegram had arrived that morning.

“Arrived early. Received your letter. A thousand thanks,” it said. “Expect me to-morrow.”

This was the morrow. Not so many trains run from Yokohama to the outskirts where the Fields lived, and surely he would come by the very first, this long-cherished, oh, so urgently wished-for grandson.

There was dust on the road outside. A rickshaw was approaching. It stopped outside the gates, which were thrown open with a fine flourish. And Barnes arrived, stepped out of his rickshaw, and acting his part with consummate skill and craft, returned the warm greetings of the Fields.

No need to follow the course of events from that precise moment till some time later. Barnes was duly installed as grandson and heir, and—being the impostor he was—worked hard to secure his position. Then he grew careless. His visits to Yokohama became more frequent, his extravagance quite noticeable, while his lack of refinement, his coarseness indeed, his uncouthness and lack of even the smallest pretensions to gentility struck even his aged and unobservant benefactors.

“There's something not quite right,” quavered Mr. Field, as he sat with his wife on the veranda, and looked out over the vast expanse his house and garden commanded. It was a second England, to this exiled Englishman, that expanse of hill and dale, and the ocean washing its shores. The green woods, the autumn tints, the riot of gorgeous colour in spring time, they were the best reminders of old England. “Something wrong, the boy doesn't ring true. He's not a sahib. He's—I regret to say it, he's mean——”

“And he's so unlike what our Colin was. He's so ungainly, so unattractive. I—I don't know what to think,” confessed Mrs. Field.

The suspicion that all was not as it should be grew as the days passed. Mr. Field sat for long hours and pondered. Suspicion grew until it became doubled. He cabled his fears to England.

“Describe Colin,” he wired. “Is he slim or broad. Fair or dark. Not too favourably impressed by new arrival.”

The receipt of that quite unexpected telegram set suspicion loose in England.

Scoutmaster Bignall was at first indignant, and then altogether flabbergasted.

“What’s it mean? What’s happened?” he demanded of the astounded Tony. “Not too favourably impressed by new arrival! Mr. Field wires as if his grandson were so much baggage! And why haven’t I had a letter from Colin for five whole weeks? Why didn’t he write me from Singapore? He wrote wonderful letters—reams of stuff—from other ports. What’s it mean?”

Tony didn’t know. He, too, was altogether at sea. The thing was so unexpected, so unforeseen, somehow so unnecessary. “I—” he began, “you know—perhaps——”

“Don’t talk! Come on! Let’s walk.” That was Scoutmaster Bignall’s way. The harder the exercise the better his wits worked. He crammed a pipe, lighted the weed and set off—anywhere—at furious speed, so that Tony had difficulty in keeping up with him.

“Well?” demanded Mr. Bignall, when they had raced along a good half-hour. “Got it?”

“What, sir?”

“Drat the fellow! A solution.”

“Yes.”

“You have! What?”

“It isn’t Colin—not our Colin. He hasn’t reached Japan.”

Tony might be impetuous, hare-brained—what you will—but hard facts brought him down to commonsense thinking. He had a queerly analytical mind, seldom employed, it is true, but there, if called into action.

“Not reached Japan! How do you guess that?”

“Because everyone likes him. He’s what you termed a ‘sahib’. Then there’s no letter from him all these weeks. Someone had plotted to take his place.”

“Take his place! That sort of thing isn’t done nowadays,” rasped the Scoutmaster. “Why his place?”

“Because——”

“Wait!” Mr. Bignall drew furiously at his pipe.

“You see,” began Tony.

“Let’s get back to head-quarters,” said Mr. Bignall, sternly. “I begin to see things. The Fields are very well known in Japan—eh?”

“And out of it, too, sir,” reflected Tony.

“Quite so, their wealth is known to many thousands. Therefore people on board that boat will soon have heard that Colin was the grandson and would have weighed up his prospects. Now, if—but it’s no use guessing. Let’s get home.”

They called in at the telegraph office at Blowmoor and despatched a cable—“Colin slim, fair, merry, attractive, thoughtful. Your cable causes uneasiness. No letter from Colin for five weeks.”

“Get aboard the car,” Mr. Bignall ordered, once they were back at head-quarters. “I’m going to the office of the company who run the liner on which Colin sailed. Perhaps they may have some information.”

It was there when he reached the office.

“Failed to rejoin ship at Singapore. Supposed to have gone to stay with a Mr. Nesbit. Latter reports that Mr. Colin Field left his bungalow to rejoin the ship, and that he had seen or heard nothing from him since.”

“That’s the report, sir,” said the clerk. “Would you like to see our passenger manager?”

Scoutmaster Bignall started and turned pale when he read the cable which the latter put in his hands.

“Just received from our Hong-Kong office,” he said. “States that young Mr. Colin Field, missing at Singapore, was rescued from pirates in China Sea by British warship. We don’t know any more. Of course, he must have gone to sea on some ship. He may have made a mistake and boarded the wrong vessel. Anyway, our managers out there aren’t given to romancing, and this cable obviously gives the latest news of your young friend. You see, it states he was wounded severely, but is doing well. Can I assist you, Mr. Bignall?”

The Eastern Telegraph Cable Company’s transmitter became exceedingly busy from that moment: the identity of the Colin Field at Hong-Kong, lying in the Naval Hospital, was fully established and satisfactory news of his progress received. More than that, his discovery coincided with a lengthy and vivid description of the affair with the pirates, which was

published in English papers, and which made free mention of Colin's name and behaviour.

"Boy Scout leads Eurasian crew," ran the heading. "Wonderful escape from pirates. British gunboat exterminates pests of China Seas."

Scoutmaster Bignall packed a kit-bag, rammed some belongings in a trunk, and sent a message to Tony.

"I'm going out to Colin," he said curtly. "Want to come?"

Tony's eyes almost bulged. "W-w-want to go to Japan! I——"

"Pack your kit. I'm going to my bankers."

They caught the Dover Express, ran through to Marseilles, and then boarded their steamer. Colin, the real Colin, gasped and turned pallid with pleasure, when the sick-berth attendant brought him the message.

"Coming out with Tony. Arrive three weeks. Bignall."

Still Colin did not comprehend the situation. But then, he had no knowledge of Barnes's movements, and no suspicion of the rascally attempt he was making. His "shanghaiing" at Singapore was, in Colin's mind, a mere incident, inexplicable to be sure. A mistake, no doubt. His cabin steward was the very last individual he would have connected with it. All that followed was natural enough, and really most diverting. That adventure with the pirates had been a wonderful experience, and since then—well, he had been too ill, that knife thrust between his ribs had very nearly proved his undoing. For days he had been oblivious of his surroundings, unable to recognize the chief and the cook of the tramp, who anxiously inquired for the young sahib they had come to honour and admire, forgetful of the Scouts of Blowmoor, Mr. Bignall, Tony, even his grandparents. On this, the first day of remembrance, came this message.

"Awfully good of them," he thought. "They're coming to help on account of my illness."

Still he didn't even suspect a plot. Why should he? Why give even a passing thought to Barnes, an apparently harmless individual? And he—what of the wretch who had seized Colin's place as grandson, and had caused himself to be installed in the very comfortable house of the Fields, not so far from Yokohama?

CHAPTER XII

The Scouts Forgather

“Hallo! So that’s you! And they tell me you’ve been catching pirates!”

It was Scoutmaster Bignall, rubicund, bursting with good health, looking spick and span in his white drill suit. And behind him, in Scout kit, no less a person than Tony. A very earnest, serious Tony.

Colin sat up in bed, he tried to lift his hand to give his Chief the Scout salute, and—and ended by giggling, an excited, hysterical giggle.

“I can’t believe it’s you,” he gulped, tears welling into his eyes. “And Tony too!”

It wasn’t weakness on Colin’s part, that is, not the class of weakness which usually gives rise to tears. It was just reaction following a long and serious illness brought about by his wound. Cry! Goodness! It was the last thing Colin would have done. Not a tear had he shed when the hospital surgeon dressed his wound, and caused him excruciating agony. Not even a cry of anguish had escaped him. Colin merely clenched his teeth and “stuck it” then till beads of perspiration welled on to his forehead.

“Hurt?” grunted the surgeon, as if to console him.

“N-n-no!”

“Then that’s the end of the pain, lad, and you’ve borne it splendidly.”

Yet here he was losing that grip of himself which had roused the envy and admiration of the chief and the cook—of every member of the crew of the tramp. That self assurance and control, strange in one so young, that solidity and evenness of temper which had increased in Colin’s case as he got farther from England, and developed and became so remarkably apparent during his adventure with the pirates—all the many virtues he had displayed when fit and well, the one white youth among so many nondescript, coloured people, just slipped away from Colin Field sick and weak after a long stay in bed, and left him nervous, faltering, almost tearful at the coming of these two old friends.

Scoutmaster Bignall sat down beside him and gripped his hand.

“There you are,” he said heartily enough, as he gently pressed his hand. “Doing splendidly, they tell me. Be out and about in a few days now. We’re

jolly glad to see you, Colin. Now we're off!"

"Off!" ejaculated Colin.

"Doctor's orders, lad. In an hour we return. Now, Tony!"

By then Colin was himself again, and indeed the coming of his two friends served as a stimulant.

"He's doing splendidly," said the surgeon. "The wound is now almost closed, and there is no longer any temperature. But it was a near thing. That Chinaman stabbed him between his ribs, perforated his lung, and severed one of the intercostal arteries. It was a very near thing indeed. But he'll mend fast. He is, in fact, mending fast."

Colin made lightning progress. Soon he was up and about, and enjoying the open air from a rickshaw. Finally, such is the elasticity and recuperative power of youth, he was as strong and as fit as ever.

"So we push ahead," said the Scoutmaster. "I'll tell you what has been passing during the long weeks you've been dallying with pirates or lying in this hospital. You've arrived at Yokohama."

"I've—I've arrived at—I've arrived at Yokohama!" gasped Colin.

"Yes, you're there," replied Mr. Bignall grimly. "Isn't he, Tony?"

Colin looked from one to the other in amazement. They must be joking, laughing at him. But look at their serious faces.

"I've arrived—arrived," he stuttered.

"Arrived. You're installed. Your grandparents don't like you."

Were they mad, these two? Colin stared at them in bewilderment.

"Don't like me, my grandparents? But I'm here, in Hong-Kong."

Scoutmaster Bignall told him the tale. "I've learned more since we came here," he said. "Someone formed the idea of usurping your place in Japan. Of course he coveted your grandfather's wealth. Who is he? I don't know. But someone sailing on the same ship as you. It's significant that two stewards deserted at Yokohama, and the skipper of your ship reports by wireless that one, Barnes, your cabin steward, one of the missing two, was absurdly like you."

The news made Colin start. It was fantastic, unbelievable, unlikely, stupidly improbable, yet, it was a fact that Barnes resembled him amazingly.

It had been the talk of the ship. The accident of Barnes being his cabin steward had led to their being dubbed “The Heavenly Twins”.

“The other missing steward is Short, a man with a bad record. He’s living in Yokohama,” said Mr. Bignall. “I have definite information of that. You, Colin, are at your grandfather’s country house, and, as I stated, not too popular.”

Fantastic! The very idea of the whole thing took Colin’s breath away. It seemed too ridiculous to suggest that anyone would wish to represent him. Such things might happen in a play, in some work of fiction, but in real life, now, in this prosaic, practical, twentieth century, it was ludicrous.

“Yet real enough,” smiled Mr. Bignall. “It nearly cost you your life. But the worst is over now. This interloper is already suspect. The plot has failed to hatch, and, well, we’re for Yokohama.”

They bade farewell to their numerous friends, boarded a Japanese steamer of small tonnage—coaster in fact—and in the course of a few days sighted Japan. Creeping along within sight of a gorgeous coast, the steamer finally steered between the outlying headlands, and bore up direct for the busy port of Yokohama. She dropped her anchor some distance from the shore, giving Colin and his friends a wonderful opportunity of admiring the city. The vast bay was dotted with shipping of every conceivable description, from ocean liners—some lying off the shore, one was moored alongside the quay close to the pier—to tramps innumerable, sailing ships bound for a year’s cruise, native craft of queer construction, busy, bustling launches and open boats. Above all gleamed a cloudless blue sky, while the waters of the bay, the shipping and the land on either side, were bathed in a wonderful sunlight and an intense heat.

“Magnificent!” exclaimed the Scoutmaster. “Makes one long to get ashore in the shade of those mysterious-looking trees and see what Japan is really like. We shan’t be long, either, for that is our boat approaching.”

A tiny steam launch was puffing its way towards them, and presently came alongside and made fast. Then Colin and his two friends bade farewell to the skipper—a smiling, taciturn, enigmatic Japanese—saw their baggage carried down the gangway, and finally stepped aboard the launch. It was just five minutes to twelve.

“We’ll leave our baggage at the Agent’s on the quay, and go up town for lunch,” suggested Scoutmaster Bignall. “Then we’ll find an hotel, settle

ourselves, and make ready to find Mr. and Mrs. Field. See that peak yonder?"

They looked to their left, and caught a distinct glimpse of Japan's sacred mountain, the upper portion of its steep-sloping sides clad in a mantle of brilliantly white snow, its peak flushed golden pink in the rays of the noon-tide sun.

"Fujiyama!" exclaimed Mr. Bignall. "An active volcano! Magnificent sight, eh?"

They were near the quay now. A clock ashore chimed the quarters. In a few seconds it would be twelve o'clock noon. The Japanese at the tiller gave a sharp order, and at once the thud of the engine ceased, while the boat glided on in silence. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, with unbelievable rapidity, the launch sank and rose again. It was as if she had been sucked into a hole in the water. The movement was staggering, alarming, and ended in one brief second.

"Look! Look!" The man at the tiller was staring wildly at the massed houses of the city. Scoutmaster Bignall started to his feet, shouted, and was tossed into a heap. Colin watched spellbound, amazed, as if in a dream, unable to believe that what he saw was a reality.

For the houses along the quayside of Yokohama and on the cliff above—every edifice within vision—all were rocking, swaying drunkenly, breaking asunder as his eyes were fixed upon them. A tram-car running along parallel with the quay suddenly up-ended, swayed to one side and rolled over. Then, only then, after a perceptible fearful interval came the sound of falling masonry—a dull, grinding, sonorous roar, mingled with the shrieks of a startled multitude. A second later the scene was blotted out by a dense, all-pervading dust cloud which floated over the once beautiful and now totally destroyed city of Yokohama.

"Earthquake!" gasped Colin.

"Look at the ships," shouted Tony, swinging his gaze round the bay, still glistening in the sunlight, and unclouded as yet by the dust cloud hanging over Yokohama.

"Put her ashore! Get your engine going," roared the Scoutmaster. "Shove her along as fast as you can."

The startled Japanese sailor was staring in open-mouthed horror at the vast cloud of dust hanging above the wide space which had once been Yokohama—the proud and picturesque city of Yokohama. That shout

brought him to his senses. He grasped the tiller, and swung round towards the bay, giving a deep grunt which might have been expressive of astonishment, fear, anything, for not a feature of his inscrutable face altered, and then gave vent to a sharp word of command. The launch was bobbing actively then. A swirl caught her and twisted her round on three separate occasions, and all within a minute. The round-faced sailor in her cock-pit mastered his own particular emotions and gave her steam, and in a little while she checked the spin and headed for the shore.

“But look at the bay and the ships! Look!” shouted Tony.

“They’ll be swamped,” declared Colin, almost in a whisper.

“Tidal wave, or something like it,” grunted the Scoutmaster. “Sooner we’re ashore the better I shall like it, even if there are to be more quakes.”

The invisible force which had spun the launch round was operating elsewhere. A huge ocean liner, lying out in the bay, shimmering in the sunshine, her white awnings trim and taut and everything peaceful and shipshape about her just five minutes ago, was rolling now till her decks were almost awash. She heaved her bows out of the water, soused back with a mighty splash, and breaking her hawser—and impelled by that same incomprehensible, invisible force, bore down upon adjacent shipping. The crash of the resulting collision reached Colin and his friends, as the launch steadied on her course and surged towards the quay, that and the distant shouts of men aboard the various ships reeling in the bay. Standing beside the steersman, casting their eyes this way and that, Colin, Tony, and the Scoutmaster, made ready to spring ashore at the first opportunity.

“We’ll stick to the open places, remember that,” cautioned Scoutmaster Bignall. “Earthquakes are not by any means unknown in and near Yokohama, and in the old days, before Japan began to copy the works of western people, the damage was not so very great, for all the buildings were mere frame houses, of wood and oiled paper, and such things as ferro-concrete erections were unheard of. Now they employ western methods, and run their banks, hotels, clubs, and other buildings to several storeys. What’s that?”

There was an anxious note in his voice. The dense cloud enveloping the ruins, and now rising and drifting out over the quay and across the water, was rent for a few brief moments. The gap was filled with the glare of flames.

“Fire!” cried Tony.

“It is always so,” said the Japanese at the tiller, his voice quite unchanged. “First earthquake; then fire. Many lives will be lost.”

Perhaps Colin and his friends would be drawn into the disaster. For the waters of the bay were heaving under the influence of some vast disturbance. Ships were rocking and plunging, while numbers were now adrift and helpless. At the quayside the hawsers of ships moored to the quay had been cut adrift as rapidly as possible, and all possible efforts and every available means were being employed in the frantic attempt to get clear of the quaking land and seek sea room and perhaps safety in the open water of the bay.

It was all bewildering. There was so much to watch. So much to attract attention. A feeling of impending disaster lay over everyone. Even the stoical, taciturn skipper of the launch felt the subtle influence of it all. His face was puckered, his brow lined, and sweat stood in beads between his eyes.

“Stop her!” he coughed. “Make ready to go alongside.”

But that invisible foe seized upon the launch within a stone’s throw of the quayside. She floundered in the trough of a sudden deep depression. She rolled till her gunwale was awash and shipped quite a lot of water. Then she rose to the summit of the mass of water, swung head-on to the shore, and breaking in two as if she were a mere eggshell, sank with a suddenness which was simply overwhelming. Colin was sucked into a watery abyss and felt himself gasping for breath. Then he fought his way to the surface.

That dust cloud was all about him. The quay, the shipping, the bay, even the sun was obliterated, and of his friends there was no trace. He bobbed up and down like a cork, now under, now above the water. He struck out, in what direction he had not the slightest notion. Then he was hoisted upwards with incredible force and speed, swept to one side and finally dropped with a painful crash upon something hard and unyielding.

“Ashore!” he gasped. “Japan! Wonder where the Scoutmaster and Tony have got to.” And then he knew no more.

Yes, Colin had arrived at Yokohama, at his journey’s ending. But what an arrival and what a changed Yokohama! Ten minutes ago, a smiling, wealthy, happy Japanese city—a gem set beside the shimmering waters of the sea. Now a wreck, hardly a single house standing of all those thousands, and already the crackle and roar of a giant conflagration was deafening his ears.

Yes, Colin had arrived. But what of his grandparents? What too of Barnes and that dissolute youth who had taken it upon himself to guide his fortunes?

CHAPTER XIII

A Question of Identity

“Colin, slim, fair, merry, attractive. Your cable causes uneasiness. No letter from Colin for five weeks.”

Seated in his wheeled chair on the wide veranda of his enchanting bungalow, the aged Mr. Field toyed with the telegram received from England. His eyes looked out unconsciously across the smooth green lawns and over the hedges of roses and honeysuckle encircling them, till they rested on the shimmering blue of the ocean and the far distant shore of the inland waterway on the borders of which rested the great city of Yokohama. There the city was, a conglomeration of dull-grey roofs, of waving trees, of banks, hotels, business houses, many of stone, towering above the more ancient dwellings of the city. Yet not one single object attracted his attention at that moment, so deep was his abstraction. Even Fujiyama, a trail of smoke at its summit, the unresting volcanic neighbour of Yokohama, failed to attract a thought. The imposing spectacle of its snow-clad heights, its vast mass, the jets of steam issuing from its crater, passed altogether unnoticed.

“Slim! But this youth is scarcely that. Fair! Well, yes,” Mr. Field told himself. “Merry. Pshaw! He is cold, ill-tempered, vicious. There’s more than a mystery here. Stop!”

He clapped his hands and almost instantly a native boy stood bowing close beside him. “Master!” he murmured.

“The youth—my grandson—fetch him!”

Barnes sauntered on to the veranda at the summons, and sprawled, in slovenly fashion, into a near-by basket-chair.

“Yes?” he asked abruptly, rudely. “I’m here.”

The old man turned a penetrating gaze upon him, but for several moments spoke no word. The young man endured this silent scrutiny with perfect stolidity.

“Listen,” said the banker at last, still with his gaze fixed on his companion, “you are entirely unlike the grandson I had expected.”

Barnes exploded. As the days passed he had become more and more dissatisfied with his position. The glamour—if glamour one might term it—

of this adventure had departed. Even the comparative luxury of his new life palled. He felt that he had so far failed in achieving any particular object, and always he was haunted by the fear that Colin Field—the real Colin Field—might, by hook or by crook, put in an appearance. “Unlike!” he grunted. “Is that my fault? What next?”



MR. FIELD VOICES HIS SUSPICION

“This!” Mr. Field held up a warning hand and shook his forefinger at Barnes. “This,” he repeated, reaching slowly for the paper lying on a stool beside his chair. “My friend, this is the best of Tokio’s numerous journals. It is famous for the excellence, the completeness, and the accuracy of its foreign news. Listen, then!”

Barnes shrugged his shoulders and thrust a cigarette between his lips. If ever there were an uncouth person it was he. Common decency would, one imagines, have prompted him to show some sign of respect for the man he called grandfather, even though he had failed to realize that the success of his scheme might depend very largely on his demeanour. Mr. Field’s age, his white locks, his infirmity and feebleness of frame called for a gentleness foreign to this supposed grandson. Even then, politeness comes naturally to men and women. To Barnes, when not under compulsion, it was a quality he did not study. He lounged in his chair, flung his legs over the arms, and puffed a cloud of smoke in Mr. Field’s direction. “Go on,” he said rudely, “oldest journal of Tokio. What’s that to do with me?”

The deep-set eyes of the aged banker glistened. He clapped his hands once more, and bade the Japanese servant stand beside him. Then “Listen again,” he repeated. “You say this journal has no concern for you. But wait. Here is the news. It is cabled from Hong-Kong.”

“Eh? Oh, Hong-Kong,” said Barnes, in a lazy drawl, though for a moment his brows had contracted. “If it had been Singapore, now, I might have had the wind up,” he was muttering to himself. “Pshaw! He’s dead.”

“Yes, Hong-Kong.”

“Well then, Hong-Kong, what then?”

“It describes the destruction of a nest of Chinese marauders by the British navy, by a gunboat of the China Squadron.”

“Marauders, eh? Pirates?” asked Barnes, lazily. He was just slightly interested, that was all.

“Precisely. Pirates.”

“Well?” came harshly from Mr. Field’s ungracious listener.

“They occupied an island. They had captured a coastal steamer with all hands.”

Barnes turned to look hard at the old man. He had never ventured to read any extract from a local paper, nor to offer any item of news before this occasion. What was he attempting? What was in Mr. Field’s mind? Barnes

already had the unpleasant suspicion that all was not well, even that Mr. Field was doubtful as to the *bona fides* of his grandson. Why was he talking about pirates?

“I don’t follow,” he grunted, drawing hard at his cigarette. “What steamer?”

The aged banker lifted his hand again, as if to signal an excuse for the rudeness of this English youth lounging in the basket-chair.

“A coaster,” he said, “manned by half-castes. With only one white man aboard, and he, I am proud to say, an Englishman. He led the crew, defied the pirates, and thanks to shrewdness and bravery, brought them all safely away.”

“Good! Something in being an Englishman,” the uncouth rascal guffawed. “Saved ’em all. Sent the British navy to mop ’em up?”

“Well, not exactly. Rockets fired by the coaster’s crew attracted the attention of a gunboat. Besides, this Englishman was by then dangerously wounded. But he had behaved in heroic manner. All sing his praises highly, and, the wonderful part of it all, he is hardly more than a boy.”

“A boy!” Barnes sat up abruptly. “An English boy?”

“Yes, certainly.” Not once had Mr. Field changed from the cultured, quiet tones he was wont to employ. “Fresh from home, too,” he proceeded. “Arrived at Singapore only a few weeks ago.”

“Singapore!”

“Singapore,” repeated Mr. Field. The deep-set eyes were fixed sternly upon Barnes, noting the effect that this news was having upon him. “He landed and went to a fellow-passenger’s bungalow. He disappeared. It now leaks out that he was set upon, sandbagged and sent aboard the coaster. Do you know his name?”

“Kno-o-ow his name! Me?” gasped Barnes, turning livid and mopping beads of perspiration from his forehead. “W-w-why should I?”

“Listen still farther,” the quiet voice proceeded. “This youth was entered in the passenger’s list of the liner as Colin Field.”

Barnes got hurriedly to his feet. His knees felt too weak to sustain him. His lips were trembling. And yet he was not, he thought, defeated. There was still the old bluster, the old cunning which had helped him so far.

“As Colin Field,” he stuttered, “that’s me!”

“Precisely! You, Colin Field, disembarked from this same liner at Yokohama. This other Colin Field lies wounded at Hong-Kong. Which of the two is my grandson? Answer me, sir, which?”

Barnes gripped the supporting post of the veranda. For a moment or so he glared threateningly at Mr. Field. Then he forced a smile, and pulling himself together with an effort, seated himself again and sucked once more at his cigarette.

“One would imagine I was not your grandson,” he said, laughing in a manner which set the old man’s nerves on edge. “Just because a Japanese paper publishes a cock-and-bull story about pirates, and manages to get its names all jumbled up, you start to accuse me, your grandson, of being an impostor. I’m tired of all this. I’m beginning to wish I had remained in England. I’ll——”

The frail hand was lifted again, and at the sign Barnes stopped short. He had meant to browbeat the aged banker, to simulate indignation and anger at his treatment. He felt that if he could only play the part half as well as he had done on his arrival, he could win Mr. Field’s support and sympathy. After that there was Colin. Ah! Colin! But he was gravely wounded and lying at Hong-Kong. Well, that gave him time. Before Colin would be strong enough to look after himself, he could think of some way out of the difficulty. Besides, Colin might not recover. Even if he were to, Barnes might put a stop to his intervention. Swift as lightning the thoughts chased through his mind, and meanwhile he forced a smile and attempted to appear, if not at ease, just ruffled and upset by what had happened.

“Come, Grandfather,” he said, “this is hard on me. I come out all this way, settle down here, and then, because a beggarly paper publishes a yarn and somehow introduces my name, you want to make things uncomfortable. I——”

The stern eyes were fixed upon him. The frail hand was lifted again. “You will have every opportunity of clearing yourself of all suspicion, and of proving your title to the name of Field,” said the banker. “Till then it will be better that you should live in Yokohama. I will arrange for funds to meet your requirements. You will be happy in the city, for I am quite aware that life out here is irksome to you. Now go, for I am weary.”

The young ruffian jammed his soft felt hat hard down on his head, leaped into a rickshaw and made for the station. In an hour he and Short, the undesirable, who had clung to him like a leech since his arrival at Yokohama, were in close discussion at the house that rascal inhabited in the

city. In his shirt sleeves, lolling back in a chair made of basket-work, sipping beer from a mug, Short regarded Barnes critically and with a suspicion of superciliousness.

“Found out, eh?” he said. “Been clumsy. Roused their suspicion.”

His fellow conspirator grew red with rage. He banged an indignant fist on the table till the mug of beer danced and jingled and the contents splashed over the edge.

“Found out, be hanged!” he shouted. “Colin Field has turned up.”

Short whistled. He was one of those cool, astute rascals. He still lolled in his chair, and, with an expression of injury rather than of anger, seized the mug and raised it to his lips. “Beer’s extra dear in Yokohama,” he growled. “Wish you’d be careful. So Colin Field—the real ’un of course, has come to life? Here already, eh?”

“No, at Hong-Kong. Wounded.”

“Wounded? That’s queer.”

“The boat they put him on was captured by pirates—Chinese pirates.”

“And a murdering brand at that,” grunted Short, betraying some interest. “Go on.”

“Colin Field led the crew. Fought the pirates; put up a great show, it seems. Got clear away and put the British navy on to them. The papers are full of the yarn. Colin’s at Hong-Kong.”

“And the old folks, the Fields?” asked Short. “They’ve seen the report?”

“Mr. Field has. He suspects me. That’s clear. Cut up mighty rough. Ordered me to remain in Yokohama until he knows which of the two Colins is his grandson.”

Short regaled himself with a lengthy and copious draught of beer.

“What’ll you do?” he asked at length, after a long pause.

“Do? That’s it. How am I to stop him? Sandbagging at Singapore wasn’t enough. Besides, he may suspect me too.”

Short sniggered into his mug. He put it down on the table very gently and tapped it with one finger.

“No more banging fists,” he said. “I can’t afford more than two in a day. So be careful. Now then,” he went on, “why worry with this shaver?”

“With Colin?”

“Who else? Who’s he? Grandson to old Field. Lying wounded at Hong-Kong. Supposing he’s fit in a few days and comes along to Yokohama, what’s he to gain?”

Barnes stared at his companion. “Don’t follow,” he grunted in an ill-tempered voice. “What’s he to gain? Well, you should know.”

“Of course! He’s welcomed by the old folks. He’s proclaimed grandson and heir. But, supposing,” said Short, leering into the mug and tapping it again with his finger, “supposing now, there wasn’t a grandfather, no grandparents?”

There was a long silence. Barnes groped unconsciously for a cigarette and lit it. He was staring hard at Short.

“No grandparents,” he muttered. “You—you mean?”

Short grinned. “Simple, eh? Colin turns up. You can’t stop him. Yokohama ain’t Singapore. There are too many dock police here. But the old folks live in the country. They ain’t at home when your dear namesake arrives. They’ve mysteriously disappeared.”

“Disappeared,” Barnes echoed, his jaw dropping.

“That’s it! Can’t be found. Gone to earth as they say when speaking of foxes.”

“But—but you can’t mean dead,” gasped the other.

Short swilled the beer in his mug. He sniffed the contents with appreciation. There was a wickedly sardonic smile on his lips.

“Dead,” he grinned. “Depends. Alive, they’re valuable. Dead, they’re—well, dead.”

Barnes mopped his sweltering forehead. He was far too simple for this ruffian Short. Indeed, he was but a child when matched with the rascal who sat near him.

“Dead?” he asked anxiously.

“Depends. If they pay up handsome, no. If they don’t—well.”

“Never!” exclaimed Barnes. He swept the drops of perspiration from his forehead with nervous fingers and stood erect. “Never!” he cried again, and there was an unusual determination in the tone of his voice. “You mean you would threaten them. They are old. They have been good to me. Their

servants and their friends adore them. I refuse to listen. I won't agree even to the suggestion. I may be a sweep, but I'm not so bad as that. I——”

Short drank placidly. He set the mug down with studied gentleness on the table, and very deliberately produced a letter case from a pocket. From it he took a document.

“My diary!” he said. “I'll read an extract. Here we are, Singapore. You'll remember, won't you? Singapore. B.—that's you, Barnes. B. fixed it with agent to get Colin sandbagged. Lent B. one pound. Remember that?” he asked with a curl of his lips. “Then I'll go on. B. paid over £5 to agent. Heard later sandbagging carried out as arranged and Colin Field removed to a coastal steamer. Any corrections?” asked Short with a sneer. “No, I thought not. Now supposing—only supposing, you know, I were to go to the Chief of Police here and show him this interesting document. Eh?”

The younger man clenched his fists. He hated and feared Short. “You—you wouldn't—because you yourself——”

“Oh, wouldn't I?” said Short. “Where do I come in? What interest had I in removing the real Colin Field? None! None at all. Now you—well, aren't you passing yourself off as Colin Field? And why? Because old Field is sick and you hope to come in for a pile of money.”

Short heard the disagreeable sound of teeth being gritted together. He stole a sidelong glance at Barnes. The latter sat hunched up on his chair, his face streaming with perspiration, his teeth clenched, a look of bitter hatred in his eyes. If a weapon had been at hand Barnes might have used it. For he was in a corner. This man Short was too clever for him. Slow of movement, cool, unscrupulous, he was too strong for his accomplice. The notes from that diary read like an indictment. It was true—too true, that he, Barnes was the one most likely and most directly to profit by the disappearance of Colin Field. And yet, the thought of more intrigue, of further violence, was nauseating. It was not only that he was frightened. To be but grudgingly just Barnes was not all bad. He still possessed a conscience. Besides, he had some of the Englishman's loathing for violence, particularly when it applied to aged and helpless people. Yet, he was undoubtedly in a very tight corner. This ruffian had the whip hand.

“Well then,” he faltered.

“That's your sort, want to talk common sense, eh?” said Short. “Now, it's logic, ain't it? Operations now concern the grandparents and not Colin. What's to prevent our kidnapping them? I've a place close here, where

they'd be safe and could be hidden. Once our prisoner the old man will sign anything to get his freedom. It can be done. We'll work the business so quietly that no one will know. We'll force him to sign a cheque for a sum that will pay us handsomely. We'll draw the money, slip aboard a ship, and—that'll be the end of worry."

"And—and you won't hurt him?—you swear?"

"I swear," said Short, shaking his beer mug, "honour bright!"

They kept the conversation up for a couple of hours, and for weeks following were busy with their plans. It was on the very evening preceding the arrival of Colin, Tony, and Mr. Bignall, that Mr. and Mrs. Field disappeared. No one was aware of their going. The earthquake, the tidal wave and the fearful conflagration that followed banished all thoughts of them from the minds of their numerous friends in Yokohama and Tokio.

Was Barnes after all to win? Were the rascally plans of Short to bring fortune to this couple?

CHAPTER XIV

A Japanese Disaster

Caught on the lip of a gigantic wave, Colin had soared to a giddy height after the foundering of the launch. Then he came down again with alarming swiftness. Not that that would have mattered had water continued to form his cradle. As it was, he fell on the hard, stone-paved quay of Yokohama's water front, and for a while he lay half-stunned, breathless, forgetful of everything.

He recovered his senses, or rather became alive to the fact that someone was near him. He was being dragged over the hard pavement of the quay, away from the water front. Whoever it was who had gripped his collar, let his burden drop with little ceremony. Then Colin felt and half-saw someone kneeling beside him, and presently became aware that his pockets were being searched. He sat up abruptly.

"Hallo!" he cried. "What's up? You're a Japanese."

Undoubtedly the man was a Japanese coolie—a dock-side labourer. He pressed Colin flat upon the pavement and continued the search.

"Stop that," said Colin, gripping his hand. "I—you're a thief."

The hand was snatched away. In a twinkling there was the gleam of a knife blade. It stimulated Colin's somewhat wandering and dormant sensibilities. Just of late he had had need to be very wide awake, and his adventures with the pirates had quickened his actions not a little. He rolled over, sprang to his feet, and, employing a skill taught him in the Scout headquarters at Blowmoor, dodged the rush of the coolie, and floored him with a swift blow from the shoulder.

"Oh! Well done! Oh, very fine! Oh, I say, fancy!"

It was Tony, bedraggled, dripping, with blood oozing from a cut across his forehead, but Tony without a doubt running along the quayside, with another individual following him. Colin hardly heard the words. The stimulus provided by the danger, sudden rage at the attack, and his desire to teach this marauder a lesson had seized upon him. He shot forward, seized the coolie by the wrist and swiftly disarmed him. Then, quite deliberately, using a strength which made Tony gape, he hurled the offender over the quayside into the water.

“Well I never!” gasped Tony. “Just fancy, Colin!”

It was bewildering. Such a little time ago the Scout they had known as Colin, then so retiring, would no more have thought of violence than of flying.

“My word!” cried the Scoutmaster. “That’s quick justice.”

“It’s what these people understand. It’s what I’ve learned. If a man attempts my life, I retaliate instantly. The beggar will be none the worse. A ducking and a scare will do him a world of good.”

Verily it was a new Colin. He stood facing the two, his old comrades. Not a heated, excited Colin. But a cool, matter-of-fact, rather commanding person.

“Crikey!” spluttered Tony. He looked askance at his old crony. He was just a little bit afraid of him already. Who’d have thought this youngster capable of knocking a man down? He ought to be bubbling over with excitement, all of a tremble, immensely upset at the event. Instead——

“What do we do?” he was asking the Scoutmaster. “We’ve arrived in the midst of a catastrophe. Looks as if Yokohama were destroyed, and—and the city is on fire—in flames.”

Scoutmaster Bignall was staring at him. Like Tony he was amazed at the transformation. Those few weeks, such a little time it seemed, had transformed this boy into a man.

“Do!” he stuttered. “Do?”

“Yes, sir. We shall be wanted. If one rascal gets to work so quickly after the disaster, there’ll be many others. But what of our crew?”

“Thrown ashore with us. The after part of the launch was washed on to the edge of the quay and allowed us to get a footing. But what do you suggest we should do, Colin?”

“Strike up into the city. People will have been pinned down under the ruins of houses. Suppose we pick up anything likely to help us and call for volunteers?”

“Listen! Listen!”

Tony clutched Mr. Bignall by the sleeve. The unearthly silence of the earthquake which had in a few brief seconds shattered not only Yokohama alone, but the capital city, Tokio, and many another Japanese settlement, had been followed by the dull roar of falling buildings and then by that all-

embracing pall of dust, split a little later here and there by the red gleam of flames. Now shrieks rent the air. Figures appeared out of the dust cloud, running hither and thither, to be swallowed again in the cloud, and always the silence was punctuated by shrieks. Soon they became almost continuous, high pitched, accompanied by a deep wailing sound—the cry of a city's agony.

“Awful,” declared Mr. Bignall, solemnly. “This is a terrible disaster, the extent of which one cannot fathom at the moment. But it is no time for inaction. You said—you suggested, Colin?”

“That we should leave the water front and strike up into the heart of the city. From the suddenness of it all one imagines that many thousands will have been crushed to death by the fall of their houses, others will be pinned down in the ruins.”

“Horrible!” ejaculated the Scoutmaster, “And perhaps burned to death, caught by the flames before rescue comes.”

Colin nodded. “That's what I had in mind, sir. Let's get volunteers. These eastern folk will follow a white leader without hesitation. Let's get some of them together.”

“And provide ourselves with crowbars and other implements if we can find them. Men were working on the tram-lines as we steamed in. Let's make for the spot.”

It was not a time for talk. The fearful catastrophe in which they were placed demanded action. It called for cool heads and brave hearts. For when the full facts were made known to the world, it was learned that very many thousands of Japanese people in Yokohama had lost their lives at the first quake, while a host more were scorched to death in the devastating fire which followed. Heart-rending tales of destruction and of loss of life came from Tokio and a large number of other places. This earthquake was indeed the greatest disaster in a century, and as Colin and his friends stood dripping on the quayside, the choked, blood-curdling shrieks of the helpless and the injured told of the thousands needing their assistance.

“This way. Here are the tram-rails. Turn right. Now look out for obstructions.”

One barred their way before they had gone fifty yards. It was a tram-car tilted on one side, its wheels broken, its stern half-buried in a sudden and unexpected crevasse in the road, and its fore part in flames.

“People inside,” shouted Tony. “Let's help.”

They caught a glimpse of frightened, frantic people heaped in the stern of the car, their escape cut off. The Scoutmaster raced ahead as if endeavouring to get beyond the blazing car.

“This way,” he bellowed. “The gang were working over here. Jump!”

They saw him leap across the wide crevasse cutting across the quayside. Colin and Tony followed without hesitation. A man lay on the far side, huddled in a heap, the iron support of one of the overhead cables across his body. Then came a mound of stones, a native barrow, another man, apparently dead, and finally tools scattered about the place. Colin seized an axe. Tony secured a pick, and Mr. Bignall dived for a crowbar. They were back beside the tram-car in the space of a few seconds.

“Windows already smashed,” shouted Mr. Bignall. “Clear the bits of glass from this one. Now in we go. Wait, though. Someone must stay outside to handle them.”

Colin eased the situation. He sprang to the window, clambered in, and clutched at the nearest figure. It was a Japanese woman, in whose arms was huddled an infant. Petrified by fear, in a fainting condition, the poor soul lay helpless, with flames roaring not six feet from her. Colin hoisted her to the window.

“Look out,” he shouted. “Catch hold!”

It was strenuous work while it lasted. Dripping with perspiration, blackened by smoke, and half-roasted by the heat, Colin at length beat a retreat.

“All out,” he reported.

“Grand!” came from the Scoutmaster. “A splendid performance. Tired, Colin? Remember, you’ve not been long out of bed.”

“Fit as a fiddle, sir. Just the sort of exercise I wanted. Now let’s get off into the city.”

“And collect volunteers?”

“Certainly.”

“Then come!”

What an inferno it was! Walls still falling. Masonry crashing on every side. The crackle and roar of the conflagration, those awful shrieks, and people, a frantic mob rushing this way and that, madly, without purpose, without plan, some already half-raving, some weeping and moaning, and the

rest silent, like spectres, flitting hither and thither, searching hopelessly for missing friends and relations through the clouds of smoke and dust, now staring into tumbled buildings, groping wildly among the debris, and then lost to view behind blinding clouds which covered the ruined city.

“Shouts coming from here. Looks as if it might have been a bank.”

The Scoutmaster halted abruptly in front of the remnant of what had been doubtless a palatial building. Its top storeys had gone. The road in front was piled high with shattered stone and debris. Here and there a steel girder stuck gauntly into the smoke-filled air, while lurid flame belched from the lower windows and licked hungrily at the massive wooden frame of the entrance.

“Work together,” commanded Scoutmaster Bignall. “Don’t separate. We shall want all hands.”

A little man—small even for a Japanese—ran towards them. He was in the uniform of the police.

“You go in there?” he asked in quaint English. “To help, eh?”

“Certainly! Why not?”

“Then great honour,” said the officer. “I come too.”

“Better still, you call for helpers. See! Blow that whistle. Rouse up a few volunteers. We want as many as you can get together.”

They left the little man and darted through the blazing entrance. A blast of blinding, suffocating smoke met them. Colin groped for his handkerchief, found it gone, and deliberately dragged out the tail of his shirt. There was a sharp ripping sound as he tore a broad strip from it. Then he wound the strip round his head.

“It’ll help,” he shouted. “It’s dripping wet and will keep the smoke out.”

Scoutmaster Bignall tore the pugaree from his helmet. Tony boasted a huge handkerchief. Muffled to the eyes, carrying the implements they had selected, dripping still after their immersion, and already blackened from head to foot, the trio advanced again into the ruined building.

Crash! A mass of stone fell and splintered at their feet.

“On!” commanded Mr. Bignall. “Now in here. This is where the shrieks came from.”

They dived into what had been the main office of the ground floor, the reception office. A broad counter ran its entire length, and at one time—how long ago it seemed already—and yet not twenty minutes had elapsed since the earthquake—at one time that counter had been decked with ornate gilded rails and other elaborate fittings. They were there still, but smashed, twisted, pulverized, while much of the counter had been crushed under a weight of fallen masonry. Groans and shrieks came from behind it.

Colin scrambled over the obstruction and dropped on the far side.

“Come quick,” he shouted.

It was a terrible scene to look upon, even though half-obscured by drifting smoke and by the pall of dust still overhanging everything. Here, behind the counter, had been situated the desks of the clerks, a dozen or more of them. Overhead light had reached the place through a huge dome. It was gone now, though the fractured ends of its metal girders stuck twisted and warped across the space, wrecked by the fall of ironwork from above. There it was on the floor, a steel girder, bent and out of shape, with broken and twisted metal excrescences attached to it and the remains of plaster. It had crashed on to the desks and on to the hapless clerks, killing some of them, and pinning the others to the floor. They lay in every posture, in a shambles, with tongues of fire licking their way steadily towards them.

Scoutmaster Bignall summed up the situation in a flash.

“We’ll prise up this end of the girder first,” he said. “Collect anything you can find that will support the weight; books, bits of furniture, anything—here, Tony, lend a hand.”

They got to work with the crowbar. A block of fallen stone acted as a convenient fulcrum. With a heave the girder was lifted a matter of six inches. Colin jabbed a couple of ponderous ledgers beneath the beam.

“Again,” said Mr. Bignall. “Up she goes! Now the other end.”

They worked like furies. The little Japanese policeman joined them, and with him came a motley throng, mostly Japanese, a Chinese coolie, a lascar from one of the ships, and a white man.

“Hallo! That’s good! Some of you already at work. Strangers, eh?”

“Yes. Just landed. Washed ashore,” grunted Colin.

“Speak the language?”

“Not a word. Want an interpreter badly. We could do good work with a big gang of volunteers.”

Colin dashed the sweat from his brow and went on with the work of rescue. The Englishman—for Englishman he was—who had just joined them spoke to the Japanese policeman. Then the two raced out of the building. In five minutes they were back again.

“We’ve collared a couple of dozen fellows,” said the Englishman. “They’re coming along with doors torn from wrecked houses, and others have gone in search of crowbars and tools. Anything I can do?”

Mr. Bignall looked at him acutely. If anyone could sum up a man in a glance it was the Scoutmaster. He smiled a grim smile of welcome.

“Take charge of the bearers, please,” he said. “We’ve released four of the poor fellows already, and there are perhaps a dozen more. Find some sheltered spot for them on the quay, and—yes, tell off a few of the helpers to fight the fire.”

They heard, above the crackle and roar of the flames, sharp orders issued by their new friend, and presently became conscious of the fact that a number of Japanese volunteers had joined them. Twenty or more, with the help of sacks taken from a heap close to the water front, were vainly attempting to beat back the flames which were advancing toward the centre of the building. Other means did not exist, for the earthquake which had wrecked nearly every one of the many thousands of buildings in Yokohama, had wrecked also water mains and electric mains. In fact, as might be expected, it had thrown out of gear each and every one of the public services. And as a consequence, gas mains had released their contents in volumes, and fires had begun in all directions. But willing men could do something.

“They’ve soaked their sacks, and may be able to keep the flames back,” shouted the Englishman. “Hurry! Hurry!”

It was worse than pandemonium in that devastated building. Enveloped in dust, with swirling, blinding clouds of smoke half-suffocating them, and in a heat which became rapidly more intense and almost unbearable, Colin, the Scoutmaster, and Tony, with two dozen volunteers, levered metal girders from the crushed limbs of Japanese who had been caught in the building. The moment a man was free, bearers placed him on a door and bore him to the open air. Then the rescue party turned to the rest.

“You’ll have to leave soon,” shouted the Englishman, flitting from group to group. “The fire is within six feet of us.”

“And there are still three to release. Heave!” bellowed the Scoutmaster.

What a grand fellow he was! How magnificent he looked; so big, so powerful, as the smoke clouds eddied about him. Long since he had discarded his coat and bared his arms. Blackened from head to foot, with dirty white streaks showing where the perspiration poured from him, he was as good as two men, half a dozen men. And Colin and Tony backed him up magnificently.

“Heave!” up went the girder. Half a dozen helpers snatched the poor wretch from beneath. “Heave!” bellowed Colin.

“Out! For your lives! Run! The building is crumbling.”

The Englishman was frantic. He stood at the doorway beckoning, and then rushed forward to seize Colin by the sleeve.

“Out!” he roared. “The place is caving in.”

Colin dug a crowbar beneath a beam. “Lend a hand. This is the very last,” he said. “Now, up she goes. Hi! Bearers!”

It was all over within a minute. As helpers bore the man away and Colin and his friends turned to depart, the remaining walls of the bank fell with a crash. The floor beneath their feet was rent asunder, and they were precipitated into the space below. Flames roared over their heads. The volunteer band outside looked on horrified as girders and walls piled themselves into a sliding heap covering the spot where the Englishmen had been working.

CHAPTER XV

Hemmed in by Fire

There seemed no end to mishaps on this fateful day when Colin and his friends arrived at Yokohama. Yet what else could one expect? Yokohama lay shattered by a sudden earthquake. Men, women, and children had been killed in huge numbers, and falling ruins, a terrible conflagration and a thousand resulting dangers were swallowing hundreds more.

It was Scoutmaster Bignall who first comprehended events, after he and his two Scouts and the Englishman had gone with a crash through the floor of the burning building in which they had been carrying out rescue work. It was dark where he lay, yet lit fitfully by flames of fire.

“We’re down in the basement,” he thought. “Heavens, what a tumble! I’m sore all over. Hallo! You, Tony?”

A grimy object stood before him, eyes blood-shot, hair dishevelled, blackened, blood still oozing from his injured forehead.

“Yes, sir!” It was Tony, still the same Tony, however, smart, alert, full of confidence, if terribly shaken by his experiences.

“And Colin?”

“Present, sir. I’m trying to help our comrade. Lend a hand, please.”

The voice, a little shaky, came from a distant corner, and it needed care to reach Colin, for debris was piled high, large blocks of stone or concrete lay in disordered array, and smoke swept in choking gusts through the basement. They found him bending over the Englishman.

“We landed together in a heap,” he said. “He’s stunned, and one leg is crushed. We’ve got to find tools of some sort to lift these blocks of stone.”

They hunted for them. It was only reasonable to suppose that if they themselves had been thrown into the basement, so also would be their implements. A crowbar was discovered and after a few moments’ strenuous toil the man was freed.

“Then?” asked Mr. Bignall, looking about him desperately, for the heat of the fire was terrible. His mouth was parched. His eyes were smarting.

“Got to fight our way out, sir,” said Colin. “Look round for a door or window. There’s nearly sure to be a basement entry. I’ll stand by this poor fellow. Ah, that’s what’s wanted.”

Even then, in the midst of such a situation, Mr. Bignall felt a thrill of pride pass through him. For had he not trained these boys, youths, young men now he must consider them? And see the result of taking hold, as the saying is, of youngsters and the terrific and enthusiastic loyalty that youth gives; and giving them of one’s best, of a life’s experience, teaching them to be thoughtful, considerate, reasonable beings, quick, smart, confident, and yet not conceited. Teaching youth to be helpful to others is one of the first duties of those who control Scout Patrols. Look at Colin then!

“Eh?” asked Mr. Bignall, staring at him. “What for?”

The question was prompted by Colin’s actions. The fitful light showed him kicking debris aside. He unearthed a splintered rail, a highly polished affair which had been some portion of the counter fittings upstairs.

“Just about six feet long,” cried Colin. “I’ll make use of my coat and his too. There we are. Pad the end where it’s splintered and under his armpit with it. Lend a hand, Tony. Now, off with his coat and tear it into strips.”

They worked in feverish haste at their first aid, while the Scoutmaster went off, feeling his way over the debris, searching for a means of escape. He ought to have been worried and unable to think of anything but his own danger. But that wouldn’t have been the leader of the Blowmoor Scouts. He just felt conscious of the desperate position in which he found himself, and then wonderfully proud of his young companions.

“To know these youngsters can act like men! To see them cool, collected, helping, helping! And they might have grown up helpless, ne’er-do-wells, perhaps, even wasters. And—and—fine!”

“Ready! We’ve got the splint fastened to his body and his damaged leg, and the two legs tied together. We could move him without causing him fearful pain. Found anything, sir?”

“Nothing! There doesn’t seem any way out.”

“But—but——” coughed Colin.

“But what? You think——” asked Mr. Bignall.

“I fancy I can feel a draught of air coming from that direction.”

Colin pointed into the murk which filled the basement. Whirls of smoke eddied across it, masonry crashed into it every few minutes. Then a sudden gust swept the place clear and made breathing easier for one brief second. Tony darted across the place immediately beneath the centre of the building through which they had been so suddenly and unexpectedly projected into the basement below. A clear blue sky stared down at him, and then was obscured by dense smoke clouds, while long tongues of flame licked hungrily at the edges. A blast of cold air struck his sweating face. Dodging amongst the fallen stonework he hurried to the far corner, and then came back shouting.

“An opening,” he bellowed. Rather, he opened his mouth to its full capacity, and in ordinary times his shout would have been heard at a distance, for Tony was no weakling. But it was a cracked, husky crowing sound which escaped him. For the heat had told. His tongue was dry and swollen. His lips were parched, and already bleeding. “An opening over here, come along.”

Mr. Bignall and Colin picked up, as carefully as possible, their still half-conscious patient. Tony seized a crowbar and went ahead. They hurried across their prison, escaped by a narrow margin a huge fall of masonry and ironwork, and plunged through a narrow opening on the far side of the basement, into a long, cool passage.

“All concrete,” gasped Mr. Bignall. “That’s a good thing to know. And cool. Get ahead, Tony, and investigate. If there’s a draught of cold air it comes from somewhere.”

It did. A hurricane was blowing through an iron grating, beyond which there was inky darkness. The passage turned at this point at an abrupt angle, and beyond not a ray of light was to be seen. Lowering their unfortunate comrade to the floor, the three sat down to breathe and rest, while that cool draught pouring through the grid into the heated basement was like a refreshing bath of cold water, as it played over their blackened and sweating bodies.

“Better quarters than we had a few minutes ago,” reflected Mr. Bignall, trying vainly to moisten his cracking lips. “And perhaps it’s secure from fire. But we mustn’t think of staying here. A breather and then on.”

Colin got to his feet. It was strange that he should feel so strong and energetic, considering that he had so lately emerged from a sick bed. But youth is elastic. Its recuperative powers are enormous. And then that trip in the coaster from Hong-Kong had done him a world of good.

“I’ll take a look round,” he said. “Anyone got a box of matches?”

Tony had. Without any display of surprise that the little metal box had withstood the inrush of water when the tidal wave had overtaken them, he picked it listlessly from his pocket. For however energetic Colin might feel, the usually impulsive Tony felt limp, played out, as if the heat of the fire had robbed him of every ounce of strength.

Colin struck a match, and turning the corner, plunged into the continuation of the passage. Massive concrete walls hemmed him in on either side, and no doubt the roof was of the same material.

“All the better,” he thought, reaching up to rap it with his knuckles. “It will stop all but the heaviest falls of stone coming in on us. Ah! That must have been one.”

A dull, rumbling sound reached his ears, and then a succession of deep thuds overhead.

“Something more to be thankful for,” he told himself. “Now, another match, and on we go. What’s this? A door. An electric switch beside it and, of course, no current and therefore no light. No doubt the generating station is destroyed and the cables fractured. Perhaps that is one of the causes of the many fires. What’s inside? A huge cellar place. It’s—I’m sure it is—it’s the bank’s strong-room!”

He stumbled over something lying on the floor, and then struck another match. The flickering flame showed him a bank attendant: he might have been an attendant or a clerk in any office in any part of Europe, for his clothes were similar, of Western cut, and certainly not those worn by the natives of this country. A bunch of keys lay beside him, while only a couple of feet away, its lid burst open and its contents bulging on to the concrete floor, was a metal box of large proportions.

Colin took in the situation swiftly. “Plain as a pikestaff! Box on that shelf up there. The clerk was lifting it down when the earthquake occurred. The box fell on him and killed him on the spot. See how the concrete walls are cracked! And what stacks of notes!”

The lighted match burnt short and scorched his fingers. He lit another and stared. For about him lay a goodly part of the wealth of Yokohama. He was standing in the strong-room of one of its most important banks, and its walls were fitted with steel racks on which were piled in neat array a vast number of labelled packets, each containing notes. Colin glanced at them. Dollar notes. One-hundred-pound English notes, paper money issued by

every known country. There were boxes, too—small, strongly made, compact, exceedingly heavy.

“Gold!” thought Colin. “An emperor’s ransom. What a sight!” A dull roar from overhead reached his ears. “Voices. Men shouting. That was a pistol shot.”

Yes, he knew the sound well enough, for had he not seen active service?

Then came a crash and the sound of splintering wood.

Colin turned from the sight of all that wealth to the doorway. Swiftly picking his steps—for no one likes to kick a dead man—he stepped over the clerk and turned into the passage. Sounds were coming from a point somewhere beyond and at a higher elevation. He could hear the rip and tear of wood, and the jar of some implement being used in desperate haste. Voices came down to him. The voices of excited, eager men; dull shouts, the falsetto of some overwrought individual, and then the screams of those whom anger, fear or exasperation had roused beyond control. It was all startling, inexplicable. Could it be another rescue party?

“Doesn’t sound like it. Then what? I’ll investigate. Hallo! That you, sir?”

It was the Scoutmaster, looming big and rather ghost-like into the flickering beam of Colin’s match.

“Anything good to report?”

“Look here!” Colin took him through the door of the strong-room and struck another match. “The wealth of the Indies, sir. Aladdin’s cave!”

“Stop. A dead man at our feet. Poor chap. Strike another light, Colin. I thought I glimpsed a lamp over on the left. Look yourself. It is. A candle lantern. Let’s get it going. Ah! It is a sight. Thousands of pounds worth of notes, and gold, too, no doubt. And here’s the inner gate. See?”

Scoutmaster Bignall held his tiny lamp aloft, and thanks to the light it gave, far superior to the uncertain flicker of a burning match, Colin was able to inspect his surroundings more thoroughly. There was a table near the centre of the strong-room, and bundles of notes upon it, besides a ledger. The shelves round the walls he had already seen groaning under the weight of bundles of notes, boxes of specie and other wealth. He could detect now, far more clearly, the crack which the earthquake had caused. It ran diagonally across the immensely thick concrete of the floor and ceiling, and split the wall on either side till one could get one’s fingers into it. But the

room was still proof against burglars, and even against fire, except for the entry, and there, swung back flat against the inner wall was a massively built gate of steel bar work.

“And outside there’s an ordinary door. Here it is,” said Mr. Bignall. “No doubt during business hours the outer door is kept open and the grill closed. This clerk must be the strong-room attendant. What’s that?”

The crisp sound of ripping wood came to their ears. Then resounding thuds echoed down the passage. A hoarse angry roar swelling to a defiant scream reached their ears.

“Heard it before, sir,” said Colin. “Don’t like it one little bit. Sounds as if there was a mob of roughs outside. I thought and hoped when I heard it a few moments ago that it was a rescue party trying to break a way down to help us. But shots were fired. I thought I heard an order given, as if men in authority were trying to control the crowd. Then there were screams of defiance. Probably there’s bound to be some rioting at a time like this. Supposing we get along and see.”

They turned out of the strong-room and raced along the concrete corridor, Scoutmaster Bignall holding the lamp well in advance. Steps rose in front of them and gave access to a narrow landing, against the wall of which hung another steel gateway, which had been opened no doubt by one of the keys on the bunch lying beside the dead clerk. There were more steps beyond, and at their summit a doorway, silhouetted against the daylight, with gusts of smoke blowing across it.

“The way out,” shouted Mr. Bignall. “It may be the manager’s room, for the entry to the vaults would certainly be kept constantly under his notice. Scout ahead, Colin. I’ll get back to Tony, and we’ll bring our Englishman along. Sing out if you’ve found the way clear for us.”

Crash! Someone must have delivered a mighty blow, for the sound of splintering wood became clearer than ever. A dull roar of delight from the road outside followed immediately. Colin and Mr. Bignall looked at one another.

“What—what do you make of it?” asked the latter, peering into the Scout’s face. “A rescue party—eh?”

“Or bandits, sir. Can’t forget that coolie fellow who got to work within a few minutes of the earthquake. It doesn’t look promising, and we’d better be careful. But I’ll hop along and see while you bring along our patient.”

There it was again. A roar of exultant voices. No note of anger now, no screams, but yells of triumph and anticipation. Colin hopped up the concrete steps two at a time. He gained the doorway and peered cautiously through. He was looking into a room, which, but half an hour before, had been without doubt the elaborately decorated and furnished sanctum of the manager of the bank, the heart of one of Yokohama's most important business concerns. There was the manager, olive-complexioned, stout, very small, bunched in his chair, his head and arms sprawled on his desk and a mass of fallen stonework all about him. Overhead, a chasm in the ceiling showed the blue sky, with smoke clouds whirling over. Immediately opposite was a polished mahogany door, and beyond that, when Colin opened it, lay the empty hall.

Colin darted to a window. Every pane of glass was broken. The frame was twisted and shattered. Flames were licking their way towards it. At a lower level, seen fitfully because of the smoke, lay the roadway, packed with frantic human beings, the scum of Yokohama, while outside the entry door itself was a gang of desperadoes, one swinging a huge hammer, while others prised at the door with iron bars and pieces of broken girders cast from the building by the earthquake. Not a policeman was in sight. The mob had it to themselves, and without a doubt were bent on reaching the store of wealth hidden in the bank's strong-room.

It was an awe-inspiring, fearful sight. Yet it was a fact. Not in Yokohama alone, but in Tokio and other cities too, the earthquake was followed instantly by an outbreak of theft and violence. Every slum emptied its rascals. Those who had escaped with their lives—and many of them undoubtedly had lost everything else—set to work instantly to enrich themselves and to make the most of a time when all the public services were hopelessly disorganized. What better place to raid than a bank? The few police available were helpless. True, the front of the building was wrecked and on fire. But walls were still standing on this side, windows high up and out of reach had been shattered, it was true, and some of the roof had been penetrated by masonry from some higher portions of the building crashing on to it. Doubtless there were vaults below to which no fire could reach. And only a massive outer door lay between the mob and its purpose.

Thud! The hammer crashed against the door. There was a moment's silence, and then an ear-splitting, terrifying roar. For the thing was down, the last obstruction was gone. The mob crushed forward to the entrance.

Colin shut the door of the manager's room, tore a glass-fronted cupboard open and took possession of three miniature weapons of German

manufacture, and gained the stairs. The handle of the door turned as he descended to the landing, and when there a swift glance backward disclosed figures framed against the daylight. He coolly pulled the open-work steel door to after him, made sure that the lock was fast, and then descended to the strong-room. Tony, Mr. Bignall, and their patient were there. Colin swung the steel door to with a clang. The place had become a fort. Would the mob be able to force their way into it?

CHAPTER XVI

Mob Law

“Quick! Get into the far corner. The mob’s trying to get in.”

It was a breathless Colin who returned to join Tony and Mr. Bignall, a blackened, dishevelled, tattered object. Yet Colin without a doubt, impassive as they had never seen him at home, collected, and—no—not cool, for who could be cool in such circumstances?

“So that’s it, is it? Well, we’ve got to prevent them if we can.” The Scoutmaster spoke boldly, but for the moment without the faintest idea how the three of them—himself and these two youngsters—could possibly hope to resist the attack of an infuriated mob of roughs. But he had heard those crashing blows upstairs, the shouts and shrieks of a frantic mob outside, and he had also seen the riches lying in the strong-room. They were there all round him, tier on tier of shelves, all of steel (for your Japanese is modern and up-to-date) laden with neatly parcelled notes and boxes of specie. Why, a casual glance at one of the bundles of notes, all of English origin, disclosed a sum sufficient to keep the average person in comfort—even in luxury—for a lifetime. There was no need to ask Colin for an explanation, for the staircase and the corridor already rang and echoed with the shouts of a mob. It was a sound to shake the courage of many a brave man, and the Scoutmaster did not underestimate the danger they were in.

“Thieves?” he continued. “The scum of Yokohama, eh? They’re after loot, of course. Making hay while the sun shines, and taking advantage of this terrible earthquake.”

Colin nodded. “A huge mob. They must know this is the strong-room down here, for immediately the entrance door went they rushed to the manager’s office. I closed the steel door half-way down the stairs and—er—here are three pistols. Pretty good luck. Found ’em in a glass case in the manager’s office, with ammunition handy. German automatics, sir. Thought we might want ’em.”

They stared at one another in the feeble rays of the candle lantern. The wits of all three were working swifter and more strenuously than ever before. It was all very well for the Scoutmaster to set his Patrols some exercise demanding thought, consideration and reasoning power. Pshaw! That had been child’s play. This was worse than a predicament. It was a

desperate position; nevertheless the old training was standing them all in good stead.

“We couldn’t strike back into the basement?” asked Tony, his eyes prominent and shining.

“Impossible! The place is swept by fire. I went to see after leaving Colin. There’s no escape that way,” declared Mr. Bignall.

“And—and none by means of this staircase?” queried the persistent Tony.

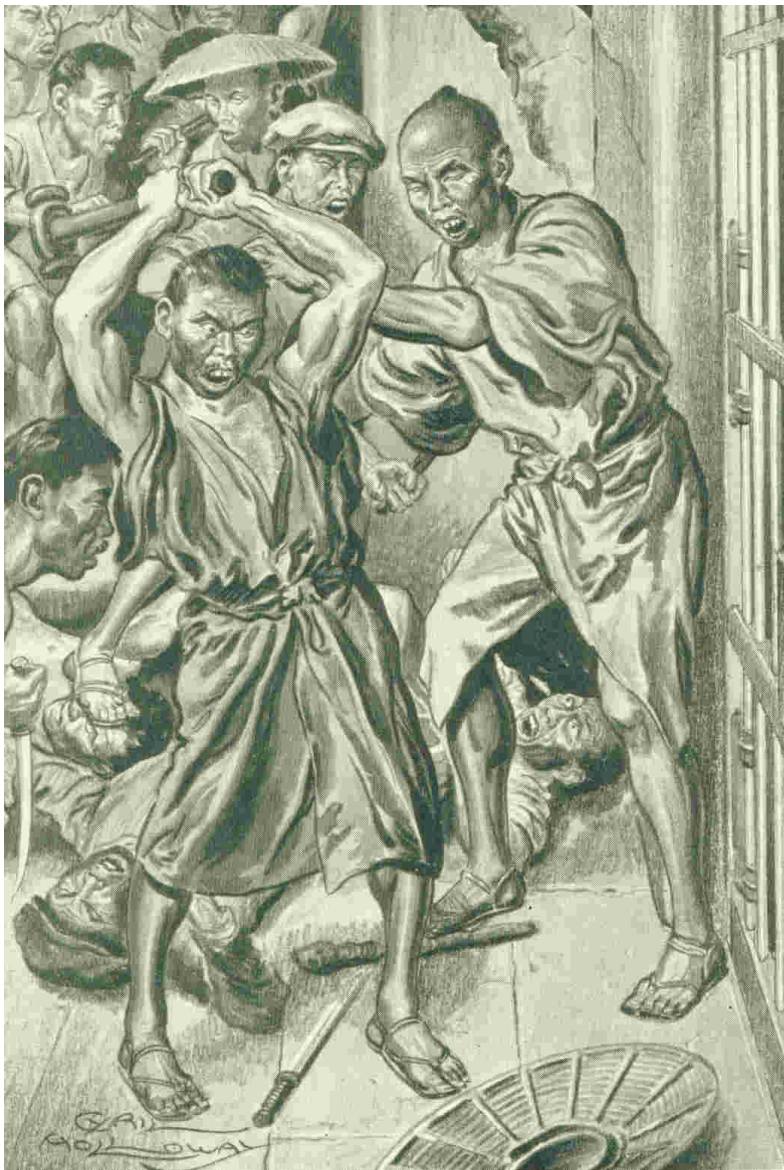
“Listen! Hear them! They are crushing into the place. They are beating against the steel gateway. The place is jammed. If the gate gives, only the steel door lies between them and us.”

“Them and the treasure,” corrected Tony. “They don’t know of our existence even, as far as we can tell. Supposing——”

Colin cut him short. “We’re not going to think of that,” he declared, with an abruptness new to him. “We might buy our safety, I know. But we’re in charge here, eh, Mr. Bignall? We’ve come by force of circumstances to be custodians of this treasure. We protect it.”

Even then, in that queer spot, the Scoutmaster found himself marvelling. This, Colin? He caught his breath at the realization, and then became the old, cheery, resourceful Scoutmaster Tony and Colin knew so well.

“It’s our duty to protect this stuff,” he said. “Help to bring our patient into this corner. Now, let’s build a barricade. We’ll keep the lamp burning till all’s ready. Drag this poor Japanese out of the way. Now carry those boxes to the door and build ’em into a wall.”



“ONCE MORE! STRIKE HARDER!”

Considering all that they had done already since the coastal steamer had dropped anchor in the bay off Yokohama, it was wonderful that they had energy left to work as they did. For think of all that had happened. What had begun as a peaceful journey towards the port had ended in shipwreck. That, in itself, had demanded a deal of effort, and they were fortunate to have escaped with their lives. Then recollect what followed. An attempt on

Colin's life. Rescue of hapless passengers from a tram-car, and later a plunge into an inferno. But this experience was not exceptional. To the average stay-at-home person the tale may appear improbable, even impossible, for earthquakes are almost an unknown quantity in England. But in Japan they are relatively frequent. Not for the first time had cities been destroyed; though on this occasion, the disaster was the greatest that had ever happened in the recorded history of the country. What had happened to Colin and his friends had befallen, with variations, thousands of others.

An earthquake is one of the most terrifying experiences any man can pass through, and Colin and his friends were bound to feel the reaction later. But in the meantime the need for action, the instinct of self-preservation, and the determination if possible to preserve the property of the bank from the hands of the mob, were keeping them up.

Men throughout the cities of Yokohama and Tokio and many another place were fleeing for their lives, or were already banding together to fight for the lives of others, to suppress disorder, and to save what was left after the cataclysm. Tired? Why, the imminence of danger and this new sense of responsibility stimulated Mr. Bignall and his Scouts.

"Quick's the word!" he shouted, cheerily.

"And here goes for a wall of gold," laughed Colin, hauling at the boxes. "Listen to that! They're banging at the steel gate. A few more blows as heavy will smash the lock."

"All the more reason to get our wall built. Don't stand the boxes against the gate, for then they'll be smashed with it. Pile them a good yard away. If there are sufficient we'll build a second. Slippy with it!"

Yes, it was the old, cheery, confident Scoutmaster, and Tony and Colin flew to carry out his orders. Dragging the boxes from their shelves, they drew a line with them across the entrance, a good yard back, and soon had a wall five feet high and two boxes thick.

"A good ton of metal," declared the Scoutmaster, "and gold at that! Queer stuff to make a barricade! Listen to those rascals."

Pandemonium reigned outside. Behind the steel gate on the landing a crew of desperadoes was gathered. Indeed the crush there was so great and the pressure so constantly increased that for a while it looked as though there would be a catastrophe. But a leader was at hand. A tall, smoke-stained individual, whose shouts and whose violence—for he cuffed his followers without mercy—at length restrained the impetuosity of those behind. Then

only could force be brought to bear against the gate. The man with the hammer, a short, broad, bandy-legged Japanese, swung the implement over his shoulder and rained blows upon the lock.

“Once more! Strike harder. Quick with it.”

“Quick!” echoed the mob, packed on the staircase and filling the manager’s room. Then there was silence, except for the crackle and roar of flames from the burning building.

“Get along with the job,” commanded Mr. Bignall, dragging more boxes to the door. “We’ll build a second wall another yard back, and have an aperture through which we can slip away. What are we going to do to drive ’em off?”

Colin tapped the automatic in his pocket. A month or so ago he would have hesitated to make such a suggestion. But that tussle with the pirates had taught him a great deal. “We could beat off the most determined,” he said.

“Kill them? I hate the thought,” declared the Scoutmaster.

“And so do I, sir. Only—think—it’s our lives or theirs. Once they get to the gate and learn that we’re preventing them raiding these shelves they’ll be like a pack of madmen. And of what use is a gate, even of steel, if determined men are armed with hammers? Listen to that! The other gate has given. Cover the light, quick!”

The roars of a triumphant mob swept down the stairs and along the concrete corridor. Shouts came from the manager’s office, while a pack of hungry, covetous people, hovering in the street outside, made no effort at further restraint, but dived through the eddying clouds of smoke, dodged the flames, and crushed into the manager’s office. By then the staircase was jammed with people. To advance was wellnigh impossible. To retire almost out of the question. It took the frantic efforts of a dozen or more of the leaders to press back those immediately behind them so as to enable the gate, its locks now shattered, to be swung back against the wall. Then indeed the pressure was lessened. Those in advance dashed down the steps. One who followed tripped in his haste and fell headlong. He was trampled underfoot by an eager host of followers, and the life stamped out of him.

“Where’s the strong-room? To the left, you said. Let’s have that lantern burning.”

There was a momentary pause, while the roar behind grew ever louder, and finally the glimmer of a match. Then a paper lantern was lighted, and held in a cleft stick at the head of this rabble.

“The gate! The strong-room. Look within!”

Colin and his friends lay prone on the ground behind their first barricade, while the hot breath of twenty or more individuals was blown into their stronghold, and hungry eyes peered into the dim recesses, barely lit by the feeble illumination provided by the single native lantern. A man groaned. It was someone inside the strong-room.

“What’s that?” the bearer of the lantern started back, as the sound came from the darkness, for your Japanese is prone to superstition.

“Tush! Nothing but a clerk injured by the earthquake. Break in! Give room to our worthy friend with the hammer.”

“The Englishman!” whispered Colin. “I’ll go over to him.”

He found his patient stirring. “Where am I?” he asked. “There was an earthquake. Then a fire. I joined some English people—then—then——”

“We were thrown into the basement all together,” whispered Colin. “Now we’ve got into the strong-room of the bank.”

“What’s that? Men shouting. That was a hammer blow.”

Colin knelt beside him and told him rapidly what had happened. “You speak Japanese, I know,” he said. “Are you able to call out to these people? They are attacking the strong-room, meaning to sack the place. Warn them that the place is closed and guarded, and the guard armed.”

It cost this injured stranger an effort to speak. Yet he contrived to steady his voice and call to the attackers.

“Stand back!” he cried. “The guard is within and armed.”

The thud of hammer blows on the lock of the gate came as an answer, and then a shout of execration, which echoed along the corridor.

“I’m going to shoot that fellow with the hammer, that may check the rest,” said Mr. Bignall. “Keep under cover.”

He stood up behind the barricade of boxes and fired deliberately as the Japanese swung his hammer once more. The effect was startling, awe-inspiring indeed. For, as the man tumbled forward and crashed against the gate, a dozen of his comrades flung themselves against the bars, and shook and pulled at them with a ferocity that was appalling. It might have frightened and unnerved the boldest. It certainly went far to show what would happen if the gate gave and the mob entered.

“Their lives or ours,” said Mr. Bignall solemnly. “We’ve got to keep that gate shut at whatever cost.”

Colin stretched over the barrier. A man, short, slim, very active and armed with an ancient weapon had pushed his way to the front, and was thrusting the muzzle against the lock of the gate. Crack! He pitched forward on to the body of the hammer man, while the crew outside fled from the entrance. But some of them were back in less than a minute, shrieking at the defenders, maddened with rage and beyond themselves with exasperation. One seized the hammer from the hand of the man who had wielded it, while a second reached for the weapon with which his comrade had hoped to blow open the lock.

“Fire!” shouted Mr. Bignall. “Now take cover. They’ve run for it. Listen to the row on the stairs! Let’s hope the lesson will have been sufficient.”

For a while it did appear as if the attackers had abandoned their object, for not one was to be seen, while the noise of a multitude fighting their way up the stairs rose like the sound of an angry sea. Panic and fury were mingled in that wild clamour. But not many minutes later the slither of shoes was heard on the stairway, followed by whispering. A glimmer of light showed, and finally there was a queer grating sound as of something being dragged along the concrete floor. An instant later a square tin was seen, thrust forward at the end of a bamboo of which only a foot was visible. Not a man could be detected. Not even so much as a finger was shown.

Mr. Bignall stared open-mouthed at the object, and blanched.

“A bomb! The ruffians! Look at the fuse!”

“Under cover, sir. Back behind the second barricade. Lie flat on the floor right in the centre of the room, away from the shelves so that nothing can fall on us.”

Colin gripped his sleeve and clutched at Tony. Dragging him through the aperture they had left in their second line of defence, he threw himself flat upon the ground.

“Open your mouths wide,” shouted Mr. Bignall. “The explosion down here might crack the drums of your ears. Steady!”

The seconds went like hours. Time dragged, while they waited for the explosion. The suspense was worse, far worse than had been their fears of the attackers. Then a mighty, deafening crash. A huge sheet of flame filling the place. A sense of suffocation and—and then a voice, Mr. Bignall’s.

“Anyone hurt?” he asked anxiously.

“Half a splintered box of gold landed on me,” laughed Colin. “Not hurt.”

“Chunk of concrete fell within a foot,” reported Tony. “Fit for duty, sir.”

“And what about the injured fellow?” sang out the Scoutmaster.

“Splendid! You fellows are making a game fight for it. What about the gate?”

Colin was there already. “Barricade broken down. Gate shattered!” he called out.

“Then all hands to repair our wall,” commanded Mr. Bignall. “Don’t worry about the two. Throw boxes into a heap, so as to get cover. Quick! I can hear men coming!”

That quick slither of many feet on the concrete stairs came to their ears, and much whispering. Rays from a lamp cast shadows along the corridor. Then an adventurous spirit ran past the entrance, casting a swift glance at the gate.

“See him?” asked Mr. Bignall. “Not a Japanese I should say—too big. A foreigner. He’s shouting!”

What a roar followed. The corridor, empty a moment before, filled to overflowing. A host of frantic individuals fought to get in through the shattered entrance of the strong-room. Men dragged at those in front of them, pulled them back, and were themselves hurled aside by others stronger than themselves. The narrow entrance, the pack of people, the very frenzy of this mob made their task more difficult. And then there was the barricade, a tumbled heap of boxes, many shattered. The gold coinage pouring in a glittering stream from them was an obstruction which added to the difficulties of the attackers. Yet numbers must tell. Colin and his friends might shelter behind the barricade and fire into the throng. But what mattered? What difference did it make, when the press behind pushed dead and living through the entrance?

Hark! What new uproar is this? Shrill cries from above. The sharp crackle of musketry; or was it fire penetrating to some part hitherto unburned? The mob swayed. The pressure grew of a sudden less. Men fought now to get away from the entrance to the strong-room. Then as swiftly as they had come the attackers melted away, leaving the Scoutmaster and his two Scouts gasping for breath, unable even to suspect what had happened. Colin sought for the lamp and set the wick alight.

“Make the most of the interval,” he gasped; “chuck more boxes on to the heap and—look at the entrance!”

It was choked with human debris. Men crushed by their fellows during that mad attack. Men shot down by the defenders. All tumbled together, wedged against the bars of the shattered gate, with a stream of gold coins glittering about them. They had died literally within reach of the booty for which they had fought. The flickering light, too, showed the condition of the strong-room. Huge blocks of concrete had fallen. Not a single shelf remained intact. The floor was littered with bundled notes, boxes of gold, wealth for which the robbers of Yokohama would willingly have slain Colin and his companions.

There were steps again. Men were approaching. Colin extinguished the lamp. Then rays swept the corridor, and presently a figure appeared. It was that of the diminutive policeman who had joined Colin and his friends in their rescue work, and with him a dozen others. One held a lantern overhead so that all could see the wrecked gate and the entrance choked with bodies. Then he swung the light nearer to the doorway till the beams fell upon the Scoutmaster, Colin, and Tony. Little wonder that for a moment or so these newcomers were bewildered, for never before was seen such a dishevelled trio. Suddenly, however, they were recognized.

“The English,” shouted the first comer and exchanged notes with his comrades. A man—a policeman like the rest—stepped to the front.

“Please explain,” he said, in excellent English. “This is the strong-room of the bank.”

“Certainly. We have defended it against the people. Please take charge, and send for an ambulance for this poor fellow.”

It needed no further words of explanation. Assisted by the police, for all were shaken by their experience, Colin and his friends were led into the open, and were finally taken to an adjacent hut, where refreshments were given to them. There all three fell asleep, worn out by their exertions, and did not waken till another day was half completed.

Yokohama was then still in flames. Buildings were falling in every direction, while occasional tremors still shook the land.

And the Fields, and Barnes and Short? Read on and you will learn! Colin was not yet at the end of the quest which had brought him all those miles from England.

CHAPTER XVII

In Search of a Clue

Several hours had passed since Yokohama, and other large areas in Japan, had been thus shaken by the violence of the earthquake. Cities and villages over a wide circle had been entirely or almost entirely wrecked. Public services had suffered, like the houses, so that the railways had ceased to function, tram-cars were for the most part in splinters or in flames, while the rails and the overhead wires were twisted into fantastic curves, or were down and out of action. Water mains were broken, and reservoirs cracked and useless. Gas mains had been fractured in every direction, while sewers, telegraph apparatus, telephones, so inconspicuous in these days of advancement, yet so essential to modern life, were hopelessly ruined or deranged.

And in Yokohama, as in Tokio and elsewhere, this cataclysm threw out of gear and altogether deranged that law and order which are noticeable features in the ancient Kingdom of Nippon. In the midst of one of the greatest tragedies, with dead and dying and bereaved on every side, hooligans and ruffians, as we have seen, made the most of a brief opportunity.

The ruffian Short, with his unwilling assistant, Barnes, had escaped the first shocks of the earthquake, and fortunate in the fact that their own temporary abode had remained undamaged, set out to see what had happened. Merging with a throng of frantic people, it was not long before they reached the sea front. Crowds were collecting. Rescue work was in operation. The scum of the city were forgathering.

“What are you after?” demanded Short, of a seedy-looking rascal against whom he jostled. Short was an astute individual, and not altogether idle. Numerous visits to Japanese waters had enabled him to pick up some few words of the language, and the weeks he had now spent in Yokohama waiting for Barnes to make good his position had not been wasted. He could get along, could ask for and obtain what he wanted. Then, too, in the ports of Japan there is quite a numerous population able to speak a species of pidgin-English.

“What? Bank! Lots of money there. People try to beat the flames.” The man pointed. Short noticed his eyes, dilated with greed, shining in the rays

cast by the burning building.

“Beat the flames. How?”

The Japanese grimaced. An ugly look crossed his face. “How? This how. Policemen too weak. You see? Come long.”

Short’s beady eyes took on the same glitter, an avaricious, cruel glitter. “Where’s the gold?” he demanded breathlessly. “Come along, Barnes.”

“Where? Not there, surely.” His comrade drew back. The awful scenes surrounding him appalled this youth so fresh from England, so unused to the East. Short cast a glance of contempt at him.

“Where else?” he exclaimed curtly. “That’s a bank, ain’t it? Here you, where’s the money kept?”

The man pointed to the ground. “Underneath. Behind locked doors. But you wait.”

He picked up a huge paving-stone dislodged by the earthquake and pressed on into the throng surging about the entrance to the smoking and partially destroyed building. Short did likewise.

“If there’s gold there, now’s the time,” he breathed. “Here, Barnes, get hold of one of these stones. We shall want them to heave at the police.”

The mob surged to and fro. A dull roar of anger came from it. The report of shots reached the ears of those behind. Then the crowd seemed to writhe, while shrieks of hatred escaped it. It lurched forward. Its leaders entered the doors of the bank, while columns of smoke curled over the heads of the people.

“Come on,” shouted Short. “They’ve trampled the police under. Shove your way to the front. There’s gold below. Money for nothing! Better than waiting for your grandfather.”

“No!” Barnes drew back. He had already seen too many horrors. The last few weeks had been a positive nightmare. It was not only that he feared what might happen to him and to his accomplice. This young ruffian’s conscience was beginning to stir. He began to hate himself. To despise himself for his rascally actions. And how he hated and feared the man Short!

“If—if only the purser hadn’t made such a song of my likeness to Colin Field,” he had moaned, starting up in the middle of the night, his fists clenched, sweat on his forehead. “If only I had thought—waited a little—

reflected—gone carefully into the matter and kept it to myself. But—but Short saw the chance and egged me on—and—and now——”

The clenched fists relaxed. He buried his face in his hands and shuddered. Shuddered to think of the horrible conspiracy he had started. Yes, it was he, Barnes, who had allowed that wicked plot first of all to simmer in his brain. It was no use blaming the purser or Short—or—or anyone else. It was he—Barnes—who was most to be reprehended. And see the result!

“Thank God! He is alive. We failed to kill Colin Field. And see what a popular hero he has become!”

He dared not mention the matter to Short, for had he done so there would have been an explosion. Indeed, this sudden and unforeseen resurrection, as it were, of Colin had been a constant source of ill-temper to Barnes’s accomplice.

“What did those fools do?” he would ask, fixing a pair of evil, glittering, malevolent eyes on Barnes. “Didn’t we—that is—you—pay them to kill our man, to silence him for good! And here are all the papers full of the fellow. He’s come to life! He’s—well—I suppose one must admit that he behaved pluckily, though I don’t suppose those pirates will bless him. By the way, they’ve been handed over to the Chinese authorities, and you know what that means.”

Short was something of an artist. He rehearsed in picturesque form for his comrade’s edification a Chinese execution, kneeling on the floor, clutching his own shock head of hair and extending his head.

“And the beggar’s on his way here! Well, the game isn’t over, eh?”

It wasn’t. Barnes loathed himself more and more every day. It wasn’t now so much fear for himself that moved him. It was horror of that which he had done, pity for those whom he had injured. And all the while he was consumed with dread of his accomplice. Short was like a barnacle. He clung tight to the youth whose weak nature he had been so easily able to dominate. He had found the young, inexperienced cabin steward a docile subject. He was just a mere tool in Short’s hands, and might have remained so had all gone well with their plans. But those weeks at Mr. Field’s house had told. Barnes’s small stock of bravado had soon evaporated, and, besides, his conscience was stirring.

“They suspect me,” he told Short, time and again.

“Ah! Shouldn’t wonder!—well?”

“And—and—the thing is getting on my nerves.”

“Nerves! Pooh!” Short blew a cloud of tobacco smoke at him.

“Yes, nerves,” cried Barnes, a note of anguish in his voice. “If only they’d say something outright.”

“Well, they have, haven’t they?” came the satirical answer. “They’ve said you ain’t their grandson and have packed you off. What’s it matter? Why nerves?”

But, that was just the difference. Short was a cool, cynical ruffian. Barnes was a mere fledgling. And Barnes, once the novelty of the situation had worn off, had been vastly influenced by his surroundings. He knew he had placed himself in a false position. Mr. Field’s calm, unflinching, watchful old eyes, appeared to bore right through him. They dissected Barnes, till the fellow shivered, and shivered the more because the old banker never spoke, never reprimanded, never even protested.

Yet, conscience or no conscience, Barnes had allowed Short to drag him still deeper into the mire. The tale of their villainy had been increased by kidnapping Mr. and Mrs. Field. Was the affair never to end? It grew worse and worse. Short was urging him now to join a shouting mob bent upon looting a bank.

“No!” Barnes ejaculated. “Enough! We can’t act like thieving murderers in the midst of all these horrors.”

“What! Hold back now? When there is gold within reach?”

Short freed himself from the throng. His eyes were blazing. For quite a while he had longed to rid himself of this weakling. Where was the wealth he had promised? The fool had failed to convince old Mr. Field. He had failed to get rid of Colin. If he were out of the way, he, Short, could still deal with Mr. and Mrs. Field, and—and there was the bank.

“You won’t? You funk it? You——!”

Short hurled the paving block at his accomplice, saw it strike him square and fell him to the ground. Then he elbowed his way to the front. It was he, this sinister, unworthy Englishman, who urged the mob on. Tearing the clothes from a man trampled underfoot on the stairway of the bank, it was Short, now a Japanese coolie in appearance, who thought of that bomb as a means of subduing the garrison of the strong-room. And it was this same coolie who, driven from the blazing building, broke his way through the cordon of police, and with a surging and disappointed crowd about him,

escaped from the neighbourhood. He stumbled breathless and exhausted into the cool of one of the streets which had as yet escaped the flames.

“Baffled! Done! Failed!” He gripped his sweating temples in both hands. Then he lifted his head. “But—but there are still the Fields. Under safe lock and key too, and that fool Barnes out of the way. We’ll see.”

Authority had contrived already to arrange centres for the distribution of food, and Short availed himself of a neighbouring hut, where food and drink, collected from possible sources, were being given to all and sundry. Refreshed and rested he hurried along the roadways, with their fringe of wrecked and often blazing dwellings, and at length reached the modest building of wood and oiled paper which had provided him with lodgings. Entering, he clapped his hands.

“Sito!” he shouted, but received no answer. “Sito!” he yelled, for Short was autocratic and fiery tempered where natives of Japan were concerned. He made his way to the living quarters, to find them vacated.

“Gone! Scared away by the earthquake, or out to see what they can pick up,” he reflected. “All the better, for I’ve got the place to myself. Now for these old people.”

He went across the yard to an outhouse, opened the door with a key of European manufacture, which he kept suspended from his neck, beneath his garments, and entering, banged the door to. He was in a small room with wooden walls, lit by paper-covered windows high up in the walls. A wheeled chair stood in a far corner, and in it sat Mr. Field, while his wife knelt beside him, one hand on his sleeve, pale, expectant, as if stunned and fearing some further dreadful happening. Short sat down abruptly, drew a native table to him, and plumped a revolver on it. The mild intelligent eyes of his elderly prisoner regarded him wisely.

“See that?” Short tapped the revolver with one finger. “Then mind out. I’m desperate.”

Mr. Field shrugged his shoulders.

“You’ve not heard of me before—eh? Well, I’m Short. I’m in with the fellow Barnes—Colin—Colin Field.”

“My grandson!” The wizened features of the aged gentleman moved. A wry smile seamed his lips. “My grandson?” he repeated. Was there a note of banter in his voice? Short regarded him shrewdly.

“Humbug!” he declared. “You know as well as I do that he is a fraud. He’s stolen information which gave him a clue, and he’s done his best to cheat you. He was after your money.”

“Ah? My money. Yes—and you?”

“I am, too. That’s why you’re here,” cried Short. “We fixed it all. Lured your servants away, and kidnapped you proper. We’d decided to make you sign a cheque in our favour, and to get it cashed at your bank in Tokio.”

The mild eyes still regarded him critically, without animosity. “I follow the plan—quite simple, of course,” said Mr. Field, and again there was a suspicion of banter in his tone. “But you delay.”

“Because we didn’t reckon on this earthquake. Yokohama’s destroyed. There are precious few buildings left like this is. Tokio’s laid flat. Thousands of people have been killed. The cities are in flames.”

“Then—then your plans are disturbed, no doubt. My cheque on the bank at Tokio would be useless.”

Were the old eyes twinkling? Short stared hard at his prisoner. Hardened ruffian though he was, he could not help but admire the calmness of Mr. Field, and the fearlessness of the couple. He seemed to make no impression on them. He banged his fist on the table till the revolver jumped.

“Bank at Tokio!” he yelled. “It’s almost certainly destroyed, or guarded by the police. In any case all business has stopped. But there’s your own house. You had money there: a safe?”

“Certainly. I had!” came the placid answer.

“And the key? You have that with you?” Short had risen to his feet. His greedy eyes glittered as they had done earlier in the day. “Where?” he demanded. “Hand it over—and—and—don’t play with me. No giving me a key used for something else. I want money. I must and will have it. If you won’t——”

He reached out for the revolver. Mr. Field watched his fingers as they gripped it. But his features did not change in the slightest. There was even the same quizzical smile in his eyes. He merely lifted a frail and shapely hand to restrain the ruffian standing over him.

“There is no need for violence,” he said smoothly. “I am an old man and useless to this generation. If you kill me you will be no better off. But—but, this key”—and he drew one from his pocket—“this key fits the safe in my house. Go there! Take the contents. They are yours—a free gift to you.”

Was he poking fun at Short. The man suspected the twinkle in those calm old eyes. Was Mr. Field deceiving him—laying a plot to catch him? He seized the key, and pocketed the revolver.

“No tricks,” he grunted breathlessly. “No sending me there for nothing—an empty safe, for instance. Good—I know! You’ll come, too, both of you, and if—if—you wait here till I’ve fixed it.”

He bounded out of the room, banged the door and locked it, and plunged into the blazing city. Tumbled ruins obstructed his path. Gaping walls, doors forced from their hinges, and wide open windows invited to enter. Yokohama had become a species of no-man’s-land. Bodies lay in all directions, twisted, half-covered by fallen stones and timbers. Huddled figures crouched in odd corners watching the flames helplessly. Men lurked in shadowy places. Pilferers groped their way through smouldering buildings in their search for loot. Short directed his steps to a building he knew, where rickshaws were to be obtained. He reached the place at last, found flames roaring from the roof and the front wrecked and fallen in.

“Deserted. No one in charge. I’ll make free to borrow one.”

Who was likely to detect in Short, dressed as a coolie still, the steward who had landed in Yokohama so many weeks ago? Why, the people of Yokohama were demented, frantic, or driven callous by this awful disaster. They took no notice of the coolie painfully struggling to draw an empty rickshaw through the fractured streets, and barely glanced at the conveyance, drawn by the same sweating coolie, as late that night it carried two aged Europeans, forcibly silenced, into the outskirts of the ruined city, by a roundabout route.

“We’ll see whether it’s a game,” gasped Short, as he rested for a while *en route*, and turned towards his prisoners. “Supposing there’s money in the safe, well and good. Supposing not—eh?”

He treated the aged Mr. Field to a sinister look, which caused the unhappy lady beside him to tremble. “Supposing not, eh?” He tapped the revolver, hidden under his clothing. “We’ll see. We’re getting near to the place now. You’ll know soon enough.”

One turns with relief to people of a pleasanter disposition. Bruised and sore from head to foot, yet vigorous, fit, full of life, Colin awakened and rubbed his eyes to find himself in a shelter in Yokohama.

“Or what’s left of it,” said Tony, who lay beside him. “Blowmoor feels a long way off, don’t it?”

It really meant, this observation of the gallant Tony, that he found his present surroundings peculiarly and distinctly altered from those of their native part.

Scoutmaster Bignall, tattered and dishevelled, looking very stern, limped towards them. “This place is a refuge for all and sundry,” he told them. “Come over here, Colin, and see an Englishman who’s badly hurt.”

The sick, the sorry, men and women terribly injured or burned, and others merely exhausted with their labours, lay in the vast hut taken over as a shelter by the city authorities. The Scoutmaster led Colin to a figure lying in a far corner, and lifted the tattered sheet which covered him.

“Chest badly damaged,” said Mr. Bignall. “I expect some portion of a house fell on him. The curious part is that he keeps moaning and repeating the name, Colin Field!”

“Colin Field! Oh, if only I hadn’t.” The young man stretched on the floor at their feet moaned, and clenched his hands. His eyes opened, and for a while he stared half-anxiously at our hero and his friends. Then, of a sudden, he made frantic efforts to sit up.

“It—it—it *is* Colin Field!” he almost shrieked. “Here! Safe! And I——”

He fell back moaning and clenching his fists. Then, with another effort he sat up, staring wildly at Colin.

“It’s my cabin steward, Barnes,” said the latter. “I’m sure of it. Barnes,” he called, kneeling beside the injured man. “What’s wrong? How do you come to be here? You’re hurt.”

Barnes clutched his arm with frantic fingers. He wanted to say so much that the words tripped over one another and left him stuttering and breathless.

“Steady!” said Mr. Bignall, putting an arm round his shoulders so as to support him, “take your time. You want to tell us something.”

Barnes was in frantic haste to unburden himself. He wanted so badly to get rid of a portion of that horrible nightmare. He told his story disjointedly, in gasps, lines of anguish developing on his face when he saw that Colin and his friends were incredulous.

“It’s true,” he said, with something approaching a sob, clenching his fists as if to emphasize his words. “I’m like Mr. Field. Awfully like him. Everyone remarked on it.”

Colin nodded. “That’s true,” he said. “I had more than one joke with the purser about it.”

“With him! The purser! It was he who set me planning—thinking, intriguing. I settled to take your place. A steward named Short——”

“Short! Don’t remember him,” Colin murmured.

“Dark. Moderately tall. Sallow features. A cruel, wicked fellow,” gasped Barnes. “But no more wicked than I. Listen!”

The tale was gradually unfolded. Colin and his friends learned of that rascally sandbagging; of Barnes’s arrival at Yokohama, and of Mr. Field’s suspicions.

“So that’s the mystery,” Mr. Bignall reflected. “I suspected an attempt to usurp Colin’s place, and here are the details. Well?”

He looked severely at the young man lying on his arm. “And then? You have more to tell?”

Barnes had. He told them in a whisper of that last piece of rascality.

“We kidnapped the two of them—the old folks—just before the earthquake. We took them away from their country house and brought them here—they’re here now, in Yokohama, unless—unless Short——”

The fingers contracted. Barnes fell back upon the Scoutmaster’s arm, while his head lolled helplessly.

“Fainted! He’s badly hurt, and telling his story has been too much for him,” said Mr. Bignall, placing the unconscious figure gently on the floor. He signalled to a Japanese doctor, and leaving Barnes in his hands, beckoned Colin and Tony to follow him.

“Well?” asked Mr. Bignall, looking at them both.

“I can hardly believe it all,” said Colin. “It seems too improbable. I never heard of anything quite similar. Still, it must be true. Then there’s that fellow Short. I think I recollect him now.”

“An out and out rascal,” snapped Mr. Bignall. “You heard young Barnes tell us that they both went to the bank, and how Short threw a stone at him because he wouldn’t help in the attack?”

Colin nodded. Tony gave vent to an exclamation.

“Why—! Dark, sallow. Could that fellow with the bomb have been this man?”

The Scoutmaster brought his hand down on Tony’s shoulder. “Little doubt about it,” he said. “I got a fair glimpse of the ruffian and remember thinking how like an Englishman he seemed. Besides he was fairly tall—too tall for a Japanese. And the ruffian has nearly killed this young chap who was his accomplice, and has gone off to squeeze his captives. What are we going to do?”

“Do?” Tony stared at them both in turn.

“Yes, do,” snapped Mr. Bignall. “We don’t stand still, do we? Colin’s grandparents have been kidnapped. Where are they? Where’s this rascal hidden them? We’ve got to find out at once, and Barnes can’t help us.”

Barnes lay, indeed, breathing feebly, barely conscious and gravely injured.

“Several ribs broken,” said the Japanese surgeon. “He may live. He may die. We will do our best to care for him.”

Which way were Colin and his friends to turn? Standing outside the door of that shed, with the afternoon sun streaming down upon them, through gaps in the smoke clouds, they looked in every direction only to discover ruin. And somewhere in this shattered Yokohama, Mr. and Mrs. Field were held prisoner. Where? Close at hand or in the outskirts of the ruined city? Which way should they turn? How could they possibly discover even a chance clue to guide them.

CHAPTER XVIII

The End of a Ruffian

“One moment. Let’s consider. Which way do we turn?”

Scoutmaster Bignall stood outside the hut which the Japanese authorities had taken over as a refuge for some of the stricken inhabitants of Yokohama, and scratched a puzzled head. If the people of Blowmoor could have seen him, we do not overstate the case when we suggest that they would have been horrified at this apparition.

Recollect that Mr. Bignall, Tony, and Colin had led an adventurous life since they were projected on to the quay at Yokohama; to fight one’s way into an upturned tram-car, with flames roaring about it, is of itself a sufficiently alarming experience to content the majority of people; but think of what had followed: that rescue work done so magnificently in the blazing bank, the terrible situation in which they had soon found themselves when the floor gave way and deposited them in the basement, that attack on the strong-room and the experiences it led to.

If the people of Blowmoor could have known of that they would certainly have appreciated the position. But this, Scoutmaster Bignall, the alert, immaculate, jovial, popular man who lived in the big house on the hill and devoted himself and his surroundings to the training of Boy Scouts? This fellow who looked a ruffian and a scarecrow!

Hatless, his hair unbrushed, it seemed, for a week past, his hands and arms and face blackened, with dirty white streaks spreading hither and thither where beads of perspiration had drained from him. His collar gone, his tie awry, his coat discarded and now lying somewhere in the depths of the wrecked bank. Boots, with the sole of one coming away from the upper—a tattered, dilapidated, forlorn-looking creature. And yet, not forlorn, standing erect, alert, strong, full of vitality.

“One moment,” he held out a hand to check Colin and Tony, two equally tattered objects. “Don’t let us rush along on this business without consideration. What’s the object? We’ve got to find Mr. and Mrs. Field.”

“And this ruffian, Short—eh?” queried Tony.

“Precisely; a steward deserted from his ship, a rascal who seems to have got the unhappy Barnes into his clutches. We believe them to be in

Yokohama. Where?"

The Scoutmaster threw out his arms as if to bid the Scouts to cast their eyes on their surroundings. What surroundings too! Sheets of flame all around, clouds of suffocating smoke blowing across the streets, vast fissures in the ground breaking their way here and there, pavements upheaved, masses of debris choking the roads. A dead horse at one point, with the cart he had been drawing piled on his lifeless body, and half beneath the beast the figure of the driver, motionless, inert, a victim of the earthquake. A sea front torn and rent by this cataclysm, wrecks piled on the quay, a boat which only a few hours before had been floating gracefully at her moorings some yards away, now high and dry, heaped on to the roof of a building all tumbled and wrecked. Lamp posts, electric standards, fallen, bent, twisted, lying prone; motor-cars, vehicles of every sort and description, claiming proud owners a day before, now derelict, smashed, contorted, one or two burnt, the majority quite useless. And behind, a tumbled vista of wrecked buildings, tattered walls, ironwork bent in fantastic form; smoke, dust, debris, and destruction.

"Where?" demanded Scoutmaster Bignall, as though he had only just at that moment appreciated the difficulty of the task before them.

"Where?" echoed Colin, staring blankly about. "In Yokohama," he said.

"And this—this—is Yokohama," exclaimed Tony. "Look at it. This is the city of which the Japanese boasted."

"But—but—where shall we begin to look?" Colin continued hesitatingly. "Of course, if Barnes had been able to give us the address we should have had something to go on and might have found our way to that quarter of the city."

Scoutmaster Bignall banged a broad palm down upon his thigh.

"Idiot!" he cried, addressing no one in particular. "Why didn't I think of it before."

They found their way into the far corner of the hut again without much difficulty, passing amongst the throngs of anxious relatives seeking their friends and others lost in the upheaval. Barnes lay inert, almost breathless it seemed, only semi-conscious. An overworked attendant knelt beside him, lifted his head and forced a few drops of water between his lips. But the injured man did not stir, his eyes were closed fast.

Then Mr. Bignall knelt beside him and rapidly searched his pockets.

“Here,” he cried in triumph, “a letter addressed to ‘Colin Field’.”

“That’s you,” said Tony, nodding at Colin.

“No, not he, it’s this Colin Field—Barnes! This gives us his address at any rate—the address at which he was staying in Yokohama. It gives us something to work upon.”

They made their way out of the hut as rapidly as possible, and sought for that quarter of the city to which the letter had been addressed. A solitary policeman, parading along the street on the look out for pilferers, marauders and outlaws, willingly gave them what assistance he could.

“But it will be difficult,” he said in his quaint English, “this search for a certain house in a certain street, and that a part where scarcely a house now exists. In many cases it is hard to discover the street. Yet, this is the direction.”

No truer description could have been given. The three bent on the rescue of Mr. and Mrs. Field fought their way through clouds of choking smoke and dust, escaped a fall of buildings, shaken by the earthquake, evaded huge crevasses which might easily have swallowed them; for tremors still shook the ground, fissures appeared one moment and closed the next, and Yokohama presented at this time dangers beyond those offered by the fires which still raged and by the falling of shaken buildings.

They reached what they thought must be the street in which Barnes and Short had lived, but to find the house was an impossibility, and what else could they expect? It might be one of the many lying heaped in dust about them; it might be one, on the other hand, of the very few isolated houses where little destruction had occurred. How could they tell? How could they search each one? When to reach any was always a fight, always a struggle, an endeavour to get over or under a hundred and one different obstructions and to avoid dangers underfoot and overhead. But they continued their task desperately.

“Hopeless,” said Mr. Bignall at length, mopping his heated face with a tattered sleeve. “Hopeless.”



THE CAPTURE OF SHORT

They looked at one another despairingly. Time pressed. All realized that if they were to bring assistance to the Fields it must be at once. This rascal Short, whom they had never met, might even then be attempting violence. What were they to do? Continue the search? That gave no promise of success. Then return to Barnes? But he lay apparently unconscious and, they knew, was severely injured.

“Then give up?” cried Colin. “Never! We’ve got to find them.”

“If only we could hit upon someone to guide us,” suggested Tony, gazing around on the ruins where no others seemed to be venturing.

“If—” chimed in the Scoutmaster, a note almost of bitterness in his voice. “If only one could meet someone. But we can’t expect a multitude to be following us round to help us out of our difficulties, particularly in these parts, with buildings crashing still and flames spurting across the streets, not to mention the earthquake still rending the ground under our feet. I fear, my dear young friends, that this quest is hopeless. Who knows? This rascal Short may have been killed himself. In any case, can you imagine an aged couple surviving in the midst of this? Let us go back to the hut. We can do nothing further here. We have done all that is humanly possible.”

They had turned disconsolate, dispirited and disappointed to retrace their steps, but there was such a return to its old cheerful confidence in the Scoutmaster’s voice, that they were stimulated and instantly caught the infection of his smile. Fighting their way as before, taking advantage of every open street, they had gone perhaps some five hundred yards when a solitary figure appeared coming towards them, a man who limped and drooped, who staggered and dropped as they looked at him, and then struggled to his feet again—a wild, tattered person.

They recognized him instantly, and hurried forward. It was Barnes, with eyes protruding from his head, bright and glittering; the cabin steward deathly pale, a bloodless corpse he looked, yet with eyes shining with a great determination. He leaned against a shaking house as they drew near to him, and stretched out one clenched fist.

“I followed you,” he said breathlessly. “They told me you went in search of an address you found on a letter sent to me. I knew that you could not possibly find the place now and that if you did it would be no use. They were not there—they were at the place where Short lived. I will lead you. I must—must lead you.” He had spoken hurriedly, as though fearful of not having strength to finish all he had to say. He waited a second to regain his breath, pulled himself together with a great effort, and continued falteringly. “Give me a help—give me a helping hand. If it kills me I must put matters right and do something to make good the injuries I have done.”

It was indeed a different Barnes from the one who had sailed on that ship with Colin—a different young man from the one who had so brazenly announced his arrival in Yokohama, and given out that he was the real Colin Field.

This Barnes, shaken, badly hurt, a scarecrow like every other survivor in Yokohama, had been through the fire, the bitter school of experience, and had begun to find himself. He had forgotten his own woes, though the shaming sense of his guilt had not departed. He was filled now with unselfish thoughts and with the determination to help other people; a burning zeal filled him, making good the strength which he had lost.

“This way,” he stuttered. “It is in this direction—the house escaped destruction.”

It took an hour perhaps to reach the spot, for Barnes had to be carried—one of those isolated spots undamaged by the catastrophe. They burst the door in and entered.

“Empty!” cried Mr. Bignall. “Empty!”

“Then—then—where?” demanded Barnes. “Wait! I can see the plan. I can guess what Short would do. The man dreamed of money. His plan was to kidnap the Fields and force the old man under the muzzle of his revolver to write a cheque, which the bank at Tokio would honour.”

“But—but—Tokio is destroyed,” said Colin.

Barnes lifted a shaking finger to ask for silence.

“I know! I know!” he said, a little above a whisper. “Short will have guessed that too, perhaps he had full information about it. Then his plans will have had to be altered. There’s no money and no chance of getting any in Tokio, but there is Mr. Field’s house a few miles outside this city. Doubtless he kept money there. He had a safe, I know. Depend upon it, that is their destination.”

“What’s this?” Tony interjected, less than a minute later as they stood considering the problem. “A lady’s handkerchief, see! and—and marked—Field. I found it at the gate. Stand away, keep clear of the gate posts. Let’s investigate.”

The three of them, practised scouts, stood away from the path, and going on their knees searched about like dogs endeavouring to pick up a scent, and little by little they were able to read the signs spread out before them in the thick dust which covered Yokohama and its surroundings.

“A man came in here,” said Colin, “look! an English boot. He went out again in the opposite direction, and here are wheel marks.”

“A rickshaw,” declared Tony, “just the right width of track and just the right thickness of tyre. The fellow had hold of the shafts—here are his

footmarks between the wheels.”

Little by little they unearthed it all. The footprints of three individuals who had left the house; one smaller than the others and probably left by Mrs. Field; a second, spread out, indefinitely impressed, the sort of imprints one would expect of an aged and infirm individual, and mingled with these two the firm, more definite impressions of those boots, which had left their mark between the wheel tracks of the rickshaw.

“Plain as possible,” said Mr. Bignall. “The fellow, this Short, went off to get a rickshaw. He forced the old couple to get into it and then took them away. Keep your eyes glued on the tracks. Here, Colin, stand on the other side of Barnes and we’ll take him along with us.”

They followed the marks for several miles, conveying the helpless figure of Barnes on a native wheelbarrow discovered in Yokohama, and at last reached the neighbourhood in which the Fields had lived.

As in the city, the earthquake had wrought its havoc here. Villas had tumbled into their gardens, a stark chimney standing up here and there, fences wrecked and broken, streets upheaved, the contour of the countryside changed and vastly altered.

Nor had the country house, that delightful retreat in which Mr. Field gloried, escaped entirely. A chimney had crashed on to the roof and found its way to the floors below. One wing had collapsed entirely, but the bulk of the house had escaped. They crept past the lodge, up the drive fringed with its delightful lawns and flower beds looking so peaceful and so pretty; and behind was havoc, chaos, wreck. Here, if one closed one’s eyes for a moment, and did not observe the wing standing aslant, ready to fall down, and the broken fragments of the chimney, one was in a paradise of beautiful flowers of every hue, and the scent of a growing garden. Beyond the hedges of honeysuckle and roses, the blue of the sea was visible, and Fujiyama, looking so innocent, so picturesque in the distance. Beneath, Yokohama, with those black clouds of smoke still enveloping it, its dust, filtering in every direction, and its ruins crowding towards the quay side.

“Stay here,” commanded Mr. Bignall, as he put Barnes on to a chair in the centre of one of the lawns, “we’ll go up and see what’s happening.”

Breathless, amidst a deathly silence, they made their way to the front door and entered. Turning to the right, they found themselves in a room which was evidently used as a lounge. The figure of a lady lay helpless upon a settee. It was Mrs. Field, fortunately unconscious of her surroundings.

Another figure, tall, gaunt, drawn, yet calm, sat in a chair in the centre of the room with ropes tied about him, and in the far corner was a third individual, his back turned to the door, while he busied himself with a steel safe, the door of which lay open.

“Papers, papers, only papers!” they heard the man say as they entered. “Where’s the money? Where’s the money? What’s the use of paper to me—d’you hear? I want gold.”

He turned with a snarl and reached a hand for the revolver, which he had placed on a neighbouring table. But Colin was too swift for him. Leaping forward, he brushed the revolver from the table and kicked it into a corner. Then he closed with Short. The Scoutmaster was at hand in less time than it takes to describe the incident, and Tony followed. Together they secured their man, released Mr. Field, and using the same ropes lashed Short to one of the posts of the veranda. Then they carried the aged couple into the open, and seeking for brandy and water, did their utmost to revive them.

There came a crash. Another tremor shook the ground, a bed of roses within ten yards of them suddenly disappeared into a crevasse and then was vomited from the opening. A dense cloud of dust covered them, a roar of falling stones was heard, and when the dust had cleared away the house was gone—fallen into a disordered mass, and Short, the rascal who would have shot Mr. Field in cold blood, and who had connived at the death of Colin, lay crushed to death, justly punished for his villainy.

There is little more to say. Colin had arrived, and there could be no doubt about his welcome. The home he had come so far to see was now a heap of ruins. But his grandparents were alive, and he and his friends had been instrumental in saving them. It had been a great adventure, out of which they had all emerged stronger and happier and better equipped for the life that was yet before them.

Colin and his grandparents soon found themselves able to sail for England, and with them went Mr. Bignall and Tony and Barnes—who had made amends for his misdoings.

Colin is at the bank in London, learning the business. In a year or two he will sail for Japan to take up his rightful position. Meanwhile, he is still a familiar figure in Blowmoor, though when he is in the neighbourhood now he resides with his grandparents, who are enjoying a peaceful holiday in the heart of a gorgeous English county. But the Scouts’ head-quarters, and the home that Colin knew so well, are still among his favourite haunts, while his

week-end treks with the Scouts are eagerly looked forward to during his days in the city.

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 *Colin the Scout* by Frederick Sadleir Brereton]