

**THE GOLD SKULL
MURDERS**



Frank L. Packard

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FRANK L. PACKARD

THE GOLD SKULL MURDERS
JIMMIE DALE AND THE BLUE ENVELOPE MURDER
THE BIG SHOT
TIGER CLAWS
SHANGHAI JIM
THE DEVIL'S MANTLE
TWO STOLEN IDOLS
THE RED LEDGER
BROKEN WATERS
RUNNING SPECIAL
THE LOCKED BOOK
THE FOUR STRAGGLERS
JIMMIE DALE AND THE PHANTOM CLUE
DOORS OF THE NIGHT
PAWNED
THE WHITE MOLL
FROM NOW ON
THE NIGHT OPERATOR
THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE
THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE
THE WIRE DEVILS
THE SIN THAT WAS HIS
THE BELOVED TRAITOR
GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN
THE MIRACLE MAN

FRANK L. PACKARD

THE GOLD SKULL MURDERS

What was the secret of the Gold Skull and the hideous death-presaging laugh? What hidden power in the Far East reached halfway around the world for its victims? Ronald Ward, alone in Malaysia, set himself to find the answer, veiled in the black mystery of the East . . . the search went badly—until a dying man spoke one word too many. . . .



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THE GOLD SKULL MURDERS

CHAPTER I

LIKE A SNAKE

THE clock in the bungalow's living room struck two. Ronald Ward tossed restlessly in his bed. He had turned in at midnight with a tepid gin and tonic for a nightcap—and had heard the clock strike the hours and the half hours ever since. But it wasn't the nightcap that had kept him awake: it was the heat.

It was hot, insufferably hot. Talettee, lone isle, was always hot, but to-night it was like an inferno. Every door and window in the bungalow was wide open, and there was a night breeze—but it was from landward, coming across the island. It brought no relief; rather, it seemed to gather up from the soil all the heat of the day, and, heavy with odor from the copra sheds, which were in its path, became only a thing of added and sticky discomfort.

Apart from the striking of the clock, which was intermittent, there was another sound that was definitely and irritably continuous—and the thin, tropical partitions, like so many sounding-boards, accentuated it. In his room on the other side of the living room, Gourlay, the plantation manager, was snoring with vigor and determination.

"Damn Gourlay!" complained Ronald fervently for the fiftieth time.

How could anyone sleep in heat like this? Incredible! And yet one got used to it—obviously. Witness Gourlay. Damn Gourlay! He swung himself over on his elbow and stared out of the window. It was a beautiful night. A full moon. Like mellow daylight. The foliage was in soft tints. The palm fronds were etched against the sky in delicate lace-like patterns, and— — Oh, bunk! That wouldn't get him to sleep!

He dropped back on his pillow. No good counting sheep! If sleep wouldn't come and his mind persisted in remaining active, the Lord knew there were matters enough of real moment to think about without resorting to inanities. But that was what he had been trying to do for better than the last two hours, wasn't it?

What about Gourlay, for instance? He did not know very much about Gourlay. He had heard of Gourlay for the last year or so—his father, Michael Ward, had mentioned Gourlay in his letters—but he had never met the man until less than a month ago. Had he done the right thing in the tentative arrangements he had already made with Gourlay? What else could he have done?

It all went back a long way—back to the time when his mother had died. There had been just his father and himself left. He had been twelve years old then. His father had sent him to school in England, then Cambridge, and three years ago he had taken his medical degree at Edinburgh. Dr. Ronald Ward! Quite! But to date with no very extended practice; and certainly with no very definite plans for the future.

Ronald flirted the sweat beads petulantly from his forehead.

Singapore? Would he settle down there and start a practice? Was he ready for that? Or what? He had seen a bit of the world, been more or less all over the lot in the last three years—as a ship's surgeon. He had not intended that as a career; he did not so intend it now. He had been prompted by a spirit of adventure more than anything else, a wanderlust that was in his blood and no doubt legitimately inherited from his father. Had he had enough of it? There was the estate to settle first, of course. But after that—what? He was still only twenty-seven. Would he go to sea again for two or three more years?

His mind shot suddenly off at a tangent. It would always be a source of poignant regret to him that he had not reached Talettee here before his father died. He had been two weeks too late. Not that he could in anyway blame himself for that—it was Talettee's isolation that was alone responsible. Talettee was—

He sat bolt upright in bed and listened intently. It seemed as though he had heard a peculiar sort of sound out there in the living room. Imagination, probably. No—there it was again! A very queer sound. Very faint—but he could define it better now. As though something were *slithering* across the floor. Like a snake. But there were no snakes in Talettee. At least, so Gourlay had said. Perhaps it was only the breeze chivvying a piece of paper about, but whatever it was, he would have to investigate it now; otherwise, if it continued, it would be as sleep-disturbing as Gourlay's snores.

He got out of bed, crossed the room, stepped out into the wide, airy passage that led off from the living room, and, in another moment was standing in the living room itself. The sound had ceased. Only Gourlay trumpeting! The moonlight, streaming in through the open door that gave onto the veranda, lay bright across the floor, and even where the room was in

shadow familiar objects were easily discernible; but he could see nothing, as he stared about him, that would in any way account for what he had heard.

“Dashed queer!” he muttered irritably. “There was something moving about in here a minute ago. There’s no mistake about that!”

He stepped out on the veranda—and stood suddenly still as something white flitting in the moonlight down along the tree-fringed roadway, some fifty yards or more away, caught his eye. So that was it! One of the natives! Thieving! It couldn’t be anyone else, because there wasn’t anyone else living on Taletee except Williamson, whose plantation was away over on the other side of the island. And wholly apart from the fact that he had visited Williamson only the day before and had found the old man down with quite a sharp attack of dengue fever, Williamson wouldn’t be sneaking around here, or anywhere else for that matter, at this hour in the morning.

A glint of steel came into Ronald’s gray eyes, and his lips tightened in a grim smile as he ran down the veranda steps and started in pursuit. If he could catch the beggar and make an example of him it would have a decidedly salutary effect on the lot of them. There had been too much petty pilfering going on—more annoying than serious, of course, but Gourlay was always complaining about it and so far had never been able to stop it!

Ronald made a sudden grimace of discomfort. He was the possessor of six feet of muscular development without an ounce of superfluous fat upon him, and he had been an athlete all his life, but he was barefooted now, and, being a white man, his feet were tender—on a roadway paved with broken coral! Instead of catching up with the other, the fellow was increasing his lead; and, furthermore, seemed to have discovered the fact that he was being followed, for he was apparently running now at top speed. Well, no matter! The native quarters weren’t so far away but that he could at least keep the chap in view until then, and see where the fellow eventually tucked himself out of sight. Get the beggar’s street and number as it were!

No! Instead of turning off to the left and heading for the native quarters, the other was keeping straight on. Wily bird! He wasn’t going to give himself away like that! Two hundred yards on, the road debouched on the beach. Well, no matter again! Perhaps the fellow was a little too confident of his own prowess when he banked on long-distance running to shake off pursuit! Even a white man could run in bare feet on the sand—and it would be a bit interesting to see how a Cambridge “miler” came out in the contest!

But there was a gap between them now of a hundred yards. Ronald sprinted—gingerly. No use! Broken coral was unpleasant. He would have to wait for the sand to make it up. No doubt whatever about the man knowing he was being followed. He was glancing back over his shoulder now, as he

swung out of the road onto the beach. And now for the moment the other was hidden from view.

Impossible, of course, to get any idea of what the man's face looked like. Too shadowy here in the road. It might even have been a white man's face—if that were not an impossibility. With any luck, however, Ronald promised himself that he'd get a much *better* look at the fellow in the next few minutes! Not a nice night for running, though. Worse than gasping for breath in bed. It hadn't grown any cooler. The jacket of his pajamas was sticking to his back. Yes! Quite! He was aware of mounting temper. The account he had to settle with this infernal sneak thief was becoming personal!

And then Ronald came out in turn on the beach and into the full moonlight—but though the sand was soft now beneath his feet he did not run any more. He stood like a man dazed, then mechanically swept his hand across his eyes as though to clear his vision. At the water's edge, a hundred yards away, the figure in white was clambering into a boat manned by four or five half-naked oarsmen—and just out beyond the reefs a black-hulled, two-masted schooner was hove to.

And now the figure in white stood up in the boat, as it pulled away from the shore, and gesticulated with both hands, evidently in derisive farewell, for there reached Ronald's ears a peal of mocking laughter. This was repeated several times. It was the strangest laugh he had ever heard. It ran up and down the scale, now shrill, now guttural. There was something ugly, diabolical, and distinctly unnatural about it. It did not seem as though it could have emanated from a human throat.

Ronald neither moved nor made any reply. Either would have been futile. The figure in white had seated himself in the boat now, and the boat was speeding toward the schooner. He watched the boat. He did not quite know why. He was conscious of a sort of stunned amazement. He stood there a long while—until the boat reached the schooner, and the schooner's sails filled as she stood away from the island.

Then he turned and began to walk slowly back to the bungalow. His mind was in confusion. There was a sense of unreality about it all—the sort of thing one might wake up to find had been no more than a vivid dream. But the broken coral beneath his bare feet reminded him in no uncertain way that he had been very far from dreaming.

What was at the bottom of it? What did it all mean? What had brought that schooner on a stealthy night visit to Talettee? What had that man, who laughed like no other human being, wanted in the living room of the bungalow?

Ronald's brows were puckered, his face hard, as he regained the bungalow and mounted the steps to the veranda. No answer to those questions, of course. But one thing was certain. Whatever the man's purpose was in coming here, it had undoubtedly been accomplished. And the proof of that lay in the fact that the man, having been neither interrupted nor disturbed, must of his own accord have already been on his way out of the living room again before he, Ronald, had got out of bed. Also the man's purpose must have been one that could be easily and swiftly accomplished. Not more than two minutes could possibly have elapsed between the time that he, Ronald, had first heard the sound of what he now knew to be the marauder's cautious movements and the time that he had reached the living room only to find it empty.

Gourlay was still snoring. Ronald crossed the veranda, entered the living room, and for a moment stared around him again. What was it the man had been after in here? *Something*—beyond question. But the moonlight disclosed nothing that it had not disclosed before. A light, then.

He stepped across the room to the table, removed the shade and chimney from a large reading lamp and struck a match. But he did not light the lamp. The match burned down until it scorched his fingers. He was staring at a small package that lay on the edge of the table, and that was addressed in printed characters to his father, Michael Ward.

CHAPTER II

OUT OF THE PAST

RONALD struck another match, and this time lighted the lamp. So this was the reason why that figure in white had crept so stealthily into the bungalow, was it? Rather strange that a schooner should make a surreptitious call in the dead of night at a lonely island far off the beaten track—to leave a package for a man who was already dead!

He picked up the package and examined it curiously, turning it over and over in his hand. It was scarcely more than three inches square, paper-wrapped, and tied with a fine, strong string. There was no other marking on it save the printed characters that spelled out his father's name.

“For a man already dead”—the phrase reiterated itself in his mind. And then suddenly he shook his head. No, that part of it might not be so strange after all. The explanation might easily be, and indeed almost certainly was, the same one that accounted for his own failure to reach his father before the end—Taletee's isolation. No vessel, except that mysterious schooner tonight, had touched at the island since his father had died. No news had reached the outside world of Michael Ward's death. It seemed rather obvious then that, however strange the manner of its coming, whoever had sent the package had done so believing that Michael Ward was still alive.

“Yes, quite!” Ronald muttered grimly. “But that's the only thing that *isn't* queer about it! Well, let's see what it is.”

A pair of scissors lay upon the table. He cut the string and unwrapped the package, disclosing a small wooden box with a sliding cover. He pushed back the cover. Resting on a bed of cotton was a gold skull, and tucked under the skull was a folded slip of paper.

He took out the gold skull, appraising it with suddenly narrowed eyes. It was very small, roughly an inch high and proportionate in its other dimensions. It was an ugly and unpleasant little object and its expression, if a skull could be said to be possessed of expression, was peculiarly repulsive. It was devoid of several of its teeth, five to be exact, and its grin was unmistakably a leer. The beastly thing seemed both to exude and induce antipathy!

The slip of paper next occupied his attention. He unfolded it. A single line of scrawled, printed characters, identical with the penmanship on the wrapper, met his eye:

“The shadows grow long, O Tuan!”

Ronald’s hand ruffled through his fair hair; and then his fingers began to pluck at the lobe of his left ear—a trick of his, when in perplexity, of which he was scarcely conscious. Then he reached out mechanically for a tin of cigarettes that was on the table, and, selecting one, lighted it. What the devil did it all mean? What was it? Some Malay nursing a grudge? A threat? It couldn’t be anything else, could it? Both the wording of the message and the manner of its coming were too damned sinister to admit of any other interpretation. Something out of the past. Something out of Michael Ward’s past. But he knew very little of his father’s past.

He flung himself into the cane lounge chair beside the table. The little gold skull that he placed on the arm of the chair grinned at him in malevolent contemplation; the ink-scrawled characters, as he now studied them, again brought his brows together in a puckered scowl.

Yes, it was quite true that he knew very little about his father’s past; less indeed, now that it seemed to possess a special significance, than he had ever realized before.

His mind went back over the years. About all he knew was that, before marriage, Michael Ward had owned a schooner and had traded amongst the islands on his own account in copra, spices, gums, and all that sort of thing—and had apparently done very well by himself financially. After marriage, Michael Ward had sold his schooner and had set himself up in business in Singapore—gums, spices, copra, all that sort of thing, the same as before—and had apparently done well by himself financially again.

Ronald, frowning, nodded. Even as a youngster he remembered there had never been any scarcity of money about the home—and at the end, as he now knew, his father had died a moderately rich man, leaving him, Ronald, an estate of something in the neighborhood of fifty thousand pounds.

The gold skull seemed to grin more expansively than ever. Ronald quite understood! He had inherited everything from his father. The infernal little skull was obviously suggesting that it, too, should not be overlooked as part of that inheritance!

For not the first time that night, Ronald flirted away the sweat beads from his forehead. Gourlay was still snoring as resonantly as ever. Perhaps Gourlay would know something about this.

His mind picked up the broken threads again. It was all very sketchy. It was only as a child that he had known his father—up to the age of twelve—the time of his mother’s death. Then his father had taken to the sea again, bought another schooner; and he, Ronald, had been sent to school in

England. This had seemed natural enough, still seemed so. There were no relatives, and the home had been broken up; and he had always understood that it was his mother's loss that had driven his father into the more active life of the sea again—to forget. They had been wrapped up in each other, his mother and father—he had been old enough to realize that. His mother's death had turned his father overnight into a stern and silent brooding man.

The little gold skull's grin was now derisive. Not very much to go on! No, nor was there much of anything more that might help to fit this sinister little relic of the past into its own particular niche! His father had continued at sea, roving with his schooner through the countless islands of the Malay Archipelago, unheard of for months on end, until about a year ago he had quit the sea for good and had bought a plantation here on Talettee, where, he had written, he had decided to spend the rest of his days.

Ronald reached for another cigarette. In all these years he had only seen his father two or three times—the fault of neither of them that they had not been more together—and accounted for by his father's wandering life, his own studies at first, then his own subsequent life at sea, and in the immediate past the inaccessibility of Talettee.

For instance, he had been in Liverpool when his father's last letter, in which for the first time his father had ever mentioned ill health, had reached him. The letter had alarmed him. He had resigned his position as ship's surgeon and had sailed at the first opportunity for the East. There was a trading steamer that touched at Talettee every two or three months, but he had missed connections at Surabaya. He had taken a Dutch trader there and had gone to Kaluta—as near, under the circumstances, as he could get to Talettee by steamer. Thereafter he had chartered a large proa. More than three months had elapsed between the time his father had written the letter, and he, Ronald, had finally reached Talettee—only to find his father dead. Heart. Gourlay had managed to get hold of a medical missionary at the end. Talettee! Why, in heaven's name, had his father chosen to isolate himself in this God-forsaken spot! Ronald's gray eyes clouded as he stared at the gold skull. The damned thing seemed almost able to talk! Talettee was not so isolated after all!

The thought recurred to him that Gourlay might possibly be able to throw some light on what had happened. Gourlay had come to Talettee with Michael Ward and had been here ever since. Two men could hardly live alone together for a year without gaining at least some intimate knowledge of each other. He had never questioned Gourlay closely about such matters. There had been no reason why he should—until now.

He rose abruptly from the lounge chair, placed the slip of paper and the gold skull on the table, and, crossing the room, banged upon the wall. The snores ceased.

“Come in here, Gourlay,” he called. “I want to talk to you.”

“Right!” The voice was heavy with sleep, but its owner in action was instantly alert. A moment later Gourlay, a big hulk of a man, bald-headed, though still in his early fifties, his pajamas, where buttons were missing, gaping open over a hairy chest, his black eyes, deep-set, blinking in the light, stood framed in the doorway. “Anything wrong?” he demanded in a startled way. “What’s up?”

Ronald jerked his hand toward the table.

“Take a look at what’s there,” he invited.

Gourlay crossed over to the table, picked up the gold skull, stared at it, picked up the slip of paper, stared at it—and then stared inquiringly at Ronald Ward.

“Where’d you dig these up?” he asked in a puzzled voice. “I thought you had gone to bed.”

“I didn’t dig them up, and I had gone to bed,” Ronald answered. “They were left here.”

“Left here!” echoed Gourlay incredulously. “Who left them? How? When?”

“Roughly, about an hour ago, perhaps less. But that’s of no consequence. I envy you your ability to sleep in this cursed heat. I couldn’t. I was wide awake. I thought I heard something moving about out here in the living room, and I got up to see what it was; but by the time I got here the sound had ceased, and there was nothing in the room, so far as I could make out, to account for what I had heard. Then I stepped out on the veranda, and I saw a figure running along the plantation road. I thought it was one of the natives who had sneaked in here to steal something, and I started after him.”

“Sure!” Gourlay grunted in understanding. “I get you!”

“He ran faster than I did—thanks to the coral on the road and the fact that my feet were bare,” said Ronald quietly. “Anyway, Gourlay, in as few words as possible, there was a boat waiting for him on the beach and he was rowed off to a schooner that was hove to just outside the reefs.”

Gourlay’s eyes reverted to the gold skull on the table. He mopped his bald head with the sleeve of his pajamas.

“And when you got back here,” he said, a curious hoarseness in his voice, “this is what you found?”

“Yes, in a package addressed to Father—there’s the wrapper—‘Michael Ward.’ The fellow had left it there on the table. I naturally didn’t see it until I got back and started to light the lamp to have a look around.”

Gourlay nodded.

“I don’t like the looks of this,” he growled. “It’s a bit of dirty Malay work, of course. Would you know the fellow you chased if you saw him again?”

“No,” Ronald admitted. “As a matter of fact, I couldn’t so much as have told whether he was a white or a native—I never got near enough to him even for that. He was in the shadows while on the road, of course; and when he was getting into the boat the width of the beach was still between us, and the moonlight is deceptive. The only thing distinctive about him was his laugh. I never heard a human being, black or white, laugh the way he did as the boat pulled away from the shore, and— — What’s the matter, Gourlay?”

There was a twisted smile on Gourlay’s lips.

“The laugh,” he said a little unsteadily. “I was just going to ask you if you had heard anyone laugh. What did it sound like?”

Ronald’s brows drew sharply together.

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded. “What are you driving at?”

“Wait! What did it sound like?”

“I don’t know that I can describe it. It was more like a screech that ran up and down the scale in a long-drawn-out jeer than anything else I can think of.”

“Yes; that’s it!” Gourlay’s voice had dropped to a whisper. “My God! It links this up all right. But I don’t know what it means. I heard that laugh once myself. Listen! It was just after your father and I had come to Taletee, not more than a week or so after we had settled down on this plantation here, you understand? It was about two o’clock in the morning. I had been sound asleep, but I suddenly found myself sitting up in bed listening to a series of queer noises. When you said ‘screech’ a minute ago, you nailed it on the head. Half awake, I thought at first it was the call of some bird, say, of the cockatoo family, that I’d never heard before; and then I realized that it was human laughter—and the horrid sound of it sent the chills chasing up and down my spine. It came from outside, of course, but I couldn’t tell from which direction. I got out of bed and went to the window. There was no moon, like to-night. It was pitch black. I couldn’t see anything. Then I lighted my candle and stepped out here into the living room. But by this time the blasted thing had stopped, you understand?”

Gourlay paused, and mopped at his head again with the sleeve of his pajamas.

“Well?” prompted Ronald laconically.

Gourlay smiled queerly.

“The veranda door was open just as it is now, and when I stepped into the room here with my candle, your father was standing there in the doorway with a revolver in his hand. His face was as hard as a bucko mate’s. ‘Gourlay, you damned fool,’ he snapped at me, ‘put out that light!’ That’s all.”

“All!” exclaimed Ronald tensely. “What do you mean—all? What happened then?”

“Nothing,” said Gourlay. “Your father flatly refused to discuss the matter, and told me to go back to bed. It was never mentioned again—and that’s a year ago. And in that year nothing ever happened until to-night. I had practically forgotten about it; but that it has got something to do with this ratty little skull is a certainty; and that’s why I’ve told you now about that other night. But, as I said to begin with, I don’t know what it all means any more than you do.”

Ronald, tight lipped, crossed the room abruptly to the veranda doorway and stood for a minute staring somberly out into the moonlight; then, as abruptly, he returned again to Gourlay.

“You take it as a threat, don’t you?” he inquired grimly.

Gourlay’s jaws clamped together.

“I do—and it is!” he said gruffly. “There’s no blooming error about that!”

“And that whoever sent it thought that my father was still here; in other words, that the news of his death had not yet reached whoever was responsible for the visit of that schooner to the island here to-night?”

Gourlay pondered this for an instant.

“My word!” he ejaculated. “I hadn’t thought of that end of it; but that’s the answer all right. I’d lay a quid to a tanner on it.”

Ronald stepped over to the table, helped himself to still another cigarette, and tapped it thoughtfully on his thumb nail.

“Look here, Gourlay,” he said after a moment’s silence, “when I first came here you told me in response to my questions that the only reason you knew why my father had decided to leave the sea was because he was getting on in years, and the old life was becoming too hard for him, and that he wanted to settle down quietly somewhere—and I might say those were

the only reasons he ever gave me in his letters. But in the light of what has happened since, are you sure you cannot add anything to that?"

Gourlay shook his head.

"Not a thing," he said. "That's all he ever told me."

Ronald Ward lighted his cigarette and stared speculatively at Gourlay through a spiral of blue smoke.

"It seems strange," he observed, "that Father should have chosen about the most isolated spot in the whole Archipelago. I think I mentioned that to you when I came here—but in view of to-night it seems stranger than ever."

But again Gourlay shook his head.

"My answer's the same," he said. "I don't see anything particularly strange in it. Your father probably knew these parts better than any other man out here. This is a good plantation—a money maker. Parkins had made his bit, and wanted to sell it and go home; but you can't sell a plantation like this every day in the week, no matter how much you want to pull up stakes and ride on the top of a London bus again. Parkins offered it at a bargain price—and your father bought it. That's all I see to it."

Ronald flicked away the ash from his cigarette.

"Well, perhaps," he conceded dubiously. "But it seems strange, just the same. Take your own case, for instance. Here's a question I never asked you. How is it that you are willing to bury yourself away from everything and everybody in a place like this? You're a comparatively young man yet."

Gourlay shrugged his shoulders.

"It's the old story," he said with a forced grin. "No man ever comes out to the tropics and this sort of life who isn't going home to-morrow. But for a lot of us to-morrow never comes. Parkins is one of the few exceptions. I'm not grouching about my luck, but it hasn't been so good. A few years ago I was counting on my own to-morrow. I had a little plantation of my own—used to trade with your father. I quit trading with anybody because a tidal wave washed me out and left me stranded. Hand to mouth, after that. I was on the loose when your father offered me this job. He made me a good offer—a fair screw and a share of the profits, as you know. I took it. Here I am." He hesitated for a moment. "But now—what? Is what has happened to-night going to make any change in our arrangements—I mean the idea of carrying on the plantation here in Talettee?"

"No," said Ronald decisively. "Why should it? I can't see that it has any bearing on the plantation—and Father's dead. No, certainly not! When the *Watabi* shows up I'll go back to civilization, and you'll remain in charge

according to our agreement—unless, of course, to-night may make you want to change your own mind.”

Gourlay laughed shortly.

“Not me!” he affirmed. “There won’t be any more schooners sneaking around here, because whoever is putting up this little game is bound to hear before long that your father is dead. And, anyway, it hasn’t anything to do with me. So far as I am concerned, the deal is on.”

“Right!” said Ronald. He glanced at the clock—and crushed his cigarette in an ash tray. “Well, we might as well turn in. It will soon be daylight, and we could talk for hours without getting any further, so far as I can see. What do you say?”

“Might as well,” agreed Gourlay. “It’s a damned queer piece of business, but I’m stumped.”

“All right, then. I’ll put out the lamp. Good-night!”

“Good-night!” replied Gourlay—and disappeared into his room.

But Ronald did not immediately put out the lamp; instead, he picked up the little gold skull again and stood there, tight lipped, puzzling over it.

The isolation of Talettee stuck in his mind in spite of Gourlay’s explanation. Was there any other explanation? His father had suddenly given up his old seafaring life. He hadn’t come here to *hide*, had he? Ronald shook his head in savage denial. The thought was an insult to his father’s memory. Michael Ward wasn’t the man to hide from anyone for any cause whatsoever. And, besides, Gourlay’s story utterly disposed of any such theory. Michael Ward had remained for a year on Talettee, though he had known that the mysterious visitor of to-night had been aware of his presence there almost from the time of his arrival.

What the devil did it all mean? He shrugged his shoulders helplessly as, carrying the gold skull and its accompanying message with him, he finally blew out the lamp and started toward his room. It was not likely he would ever know. His father was dead now. That was probably the end of it.

The end of it! It was imagination, of course—but he stood suddenly stock still. It seemed as though from somewhere out in the night he heard again that screech of hideous laughter—mocking him.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST MURDER

THE *Watabi* had a route, which in itself was more or less elastic; but she had no time-table. The duration of her voyage was, in the very nature of things, represented by a question mark, for on a round trip from Singapore she touched for indefinite periods at innumerable islands, her course now east, now west, now north, now south, as she dodged in and out among the countless little black dots that sprinkled the charts of the Malay Archipelago. She absorbed and disgorged passengers of all colors and degrees, from Chinese coolies to Malay rajahs, which latter were of some state and importance in their own immediate environment; and these shared her decks with live stock of equal diversity that ran the gamut from crated pigs to birds of rare plumage. She took on freight, and was not particular whether it consisted of copra or edible nests; and she discharged freight that in variety would have put to shame the catalogue of a mail-order house. She smelt not nice. Under her awnings she was a mass of chattering humanity whose multiplicity of dialects would have rivaled that of the Tower of Babel. She was not young; in fact, she was in her dotage—her engines had pulsed through many years and put many thousand leagues of service behind them and were not as sprightly as they once had been. Nor was she pretty to look upon; her rusty plates and patched awnings gave her the appearance of being always in frowsy dishabille. But no crack liner berthing anywhere on the Seven Seas was accorded the welcome that the *Watabi* received daily as a matter of course at her every port of call—which was fitting, for she was the link and liaison between worlds that lay far apart.

In due course she reached Talettee—on an evening of threatening weather. Talettee had no wharf, and the *Watabi* lay at anchor—and the anchorage was bad. A stiff breeze was blowing, a bit of a sea running, and, with the scudding clouds blanketing moon and stars, it was pitch black. An air of uneasiness seemed to pervade her activities. Under flood lights she was loading with frantic haste, her own boats complementing the work of the copra barges from the shore.

Ronald Ward came aboard with one of the last loads. As he reached the deck, a figure, brushing by him, halted abruptly.

“You’re Dr. Ward, aren’t you—old Michael’s son?” inquired the other.

“Yes,” said Ronald, as he returned the grip of a suddenly outstretched hand.

“I’m Captain Barnley. Knew your father well. I hadn’t heard the news until we put in here. It gave me a nasty shock. Come along to my room after we get under way.” Captain Barnley was speaking in hurried, jerky sentences. “I’m getting out of here at once. I think we’re in for a bit of a blow. Nothing to speak of. But I prefer sea room to a mud-hook. Kattu’ll fix you up below. The cabin’s the only place where we’re not crowded. Give him a shout. I’ll have a yarn with you later.”

“Right!” said Ronald heartily. “Thanks!”

Kattu proved to be the steward, a little wizened Malay in a many-flowered *sarong*, his lips and teeth eloquently proclaiming him to be a devoted addict to betel nut, a not very prepossessing personage; but Kattu, who spoke English of a sort fluently, was gracious in his attentions. The *Tuan* could, of course, have a cabin to himself, for were there not eight cabins, and only three other *Tuans* on the ship? Would the *Tuan* choose one for himself?

The cabins were all alike. The *Watabi* being ancient in design, they opened in a row, four on the port and four on the starboard side of the so-called saloon into which was crowded two long dining tables flanked with swivel chairs bolted into the deck. Ronald had no preference; and, leaving the selection to Kattu with instructions to see that his gear was brought down and stowed away, he made his way up to the boat deck and stood watching the scene around him.

The *Watabi* was hoisting in her boats and getting under way, her screw easing the anchorage pull as the steam winch, tugging at the chain, clattered and sputtered noisily. With the flood lights off, the ship was in comparative darkness. Dim figures, the native crew, most of them naked from the waist up, scurried here and there. The live stock, that shared the fore and after decks with the native passengers, having endured confusion and had their rest disturbed for the last two hours, and unconscious that their tribulations were now about to end at least temporarily, made angry noises. Pigs squealed their annoyance in unison. High above the din a cockatoo screeched defiance at God knew what. A voice bellowed from the fo’c’sle head. It was answered from the bridge. A bell tinkled in the engine room. The *Watabi* thrust forward into the night.

Ronald turned his attention to the receding shore, a ragged irregular outline, just a little blacker than the night. He did not know when he would see Taletee again. He was not particularly anxious about ever seeing it again. It brought no pleasant memories. Apart from its loneliness and isolation, which he hated, it was coupled with his father’s death—and the night, now

nearly two weeks old, when that uncanny little memento of some unknown phase of his father's past had made its sinister and mysterious appearance.

He shook his head. He had no desire to return to Taletee. Nor was there any reason, in the ordinary course of events, why he should. Gourlay was on shares. He knew Gourlay to be capable, and believed him to be thoroughly trustworthy and conscientious. Gourlay would continue to transact the business through the same agent in Singapore who had heretofore represented Michael Ward. He, Ronald, would attend to those details when he got to Singapore.

A figure in a *sarong*, carrying a tray and glasses, not Kattu, another steward obviously, passed by him. A gleam of light came across the deck from the opening door of what appeared to be a small smoking or lounge room. Inside he could see two men sitting at a table playing cards. Two of his fellow passengers. Kattu had said there were three. The third was not in evidence. Quite inconsequential, of course! He was prompted for the moment to join them and then decided against it. There would be time enough for that later on, days on days of it if they, too, were bound for Singapore; and besides, he was waiting now for Captain Barnley to come down from the bridge.

His thoughts returned to Gourlay, and suddenly he frowned. Unconsciously his fingers sought the lobe of his ear. That infernal little gold skull! At first Gourlay and he had discussed the affair frequently, until, with no further light resulting, discussion had become useless, and they had tacitly allowed the subject to drop, and so, during the past week, it had scarcely been mentioned between them. He, Ronald, had carefully gone through his father's papers again, and had found nothing that had helped in any way to clear up the matter. But, then, of course, not all of his father's papers had been in Taletee; a great many were in Singapore—and that was another thing he would attend to when he got there. Still, as the days had gone by and nothing further had occurred, it had seemed that he was more and more justified in the conclusion he had come to on the night the gold skull had been left on the table in the bungalow's living room—that his father's death had probably ended it all, anyhow. Gourlay, in these discussions, had said little on that score, though he had evidently thought otherwise, for ashore there to-night, a little while ago, at parting, he had abruptly brought up the subject again and as a final word had expressed himself in no uncertain way.

“You know what a skull stands for!” Gourlay had growled. “Death! That's what it is! Just bloody murder! There's no gainsaying that. You look out for yourself, sonny!”

“But you can’t murder a dead man,” Ronald had answered. “And father’s dead. This was his affair. It’s the same old argument. Logically that ends the whole business, doesn’t it? How could I possibly be involved in it?”

“I don’t know,” Gourlay had admitted gruffly. “If I did, I’d tell you. But I’ll tell you this—if I were you I’d keep my eyes peeled, and I’d pack a gun good and handy wherever I went.”

Ronald smiled faintly to himself now; he had smiled broadly, if tolerantly, at Gourlay then.

“I’m going to Europe; I’m not staying out here in the East,” he had reminded the other.

His smile had brought all of Gourlay’s pessimism to the fore.

“It don’t matter!” Gourlay had asserted doggedly. “I haven’t said anything about it lately, but I’ve been thinking a lot. And I haven’t forgotten that damned laugh that once I heard myself. Listen here! I’d lay a good few quid that there’s something bigger back of this than you or me are even guessing at. If the bird that’s running this can come sneaking down here to Taletee in a schooner, neither Europe nor anywhere else is going to stand in his way if he wants to go there. No, sir! You don’t know the Malay—he’s got a streak of pure hell in him when he has it in for you, and he doesn’t ever let go. If he had a reason for it, he’d follow you from here to Piccadilly, stick a knife into you there in broad daylight, if he couldn’t get you any other way, and take the consequences without batting an eye.”

Ronald had laughed outright then.

“Nonsense!” he had said. “In a minute you’ll have me doing a marathon around the world with a screaming, kris-brandishing band of Malays running amuck at my heels. You’re letting your imagination get away with you.”

“Am I?” Gourlay had ended stubbornly. “Don’t you be too sure! Neither you nor I know what’s at the bottom of this, but there’s lots of ways you could be pulled into the mess. Maybe nothing more’ll ever come of it, and I hope to God there won’t; but all I’m saying is that if I was you I’d keep looking over my shoulder every once in a while.”

Ronald began to pace the deck. The steward, emerging from the smoking room, closed the door behind him and vanished into unknown regions. The *Watabi*, meeting the swells from the more open sea, was beginning to wallow and pitch a bit. Small matter! Confound Gourlay! He had scoffed good-naturedly at the man; but, in spite of himself, he was conscious that the other’s words had had a disquieting effect upon him. All nonsense, of course

—as he had told Gourlay. Years on, he would be relating the tale as one of those queer things that happen in the Far East—without any answer to it! But he most certainly did not propose to allow it to become an obsession with him to-night or at any other time—and, anyway, there was the skipper coming down the bridge ladder now.

Ronald moved forward and joined the other as Captain Barnley crossed the few feet of deck from the foot of the ladder to his cabin door.

“Oh, that you, Doc? Come along in!” invited Captain Barnley cordially, as he opened the cabin door and switched on the light. “I never like those shore reefs of yours at Talettee when there’s any sign of a blow coming on, but we’re well away from them now. And speaking of blows, I shouldn’t be surprised if the old tub was sticking her nose into it before morning. I hope you’re a good sailor.”

“Fair,” Ronald smiled, as he accepted the settee. “I’ve spent the last three years at sea as a ship’s surgeon.”

“Yes, that’s so! Come to think of it, your father mentioned it to me once,” said Captain Barnley, as, brushing aside some charts and papers from the top of a locker that served as desk, he produced a bottle and glasses. “I’m a Scotch drinker myself—Scotch and *water*. A doctor I was shipmates with when I first went to sea told me never to bubble my innards out with soda and I’d put ten years on my life. I don’t know what you’ve got to say about that, being a medico yourself, but I’ve stuck to it ever since. Maybe, though, you’d prefer the soda anyway, or perhaps a spot of gin and tonic?”

“I subscribe to the treatment!” laughed Ronald. “Scotch please—and water for the reasons given! It’s sound advice and worth a big fee.”

Captain Barnley, gray haired, gray eyed, mahogany faced, a short, wiry little figure in an undress uniform which consisted mainly of pajamas, beamed as the rites were performed.

“Glad to hear you say so,” he said heartily. “Here’s how! And now about your father. He’ll be missed, my lad—missed by all who knew him. And there are mighty few who have lived down here in this part of the world for any time who didn’t know him. When Baker, my second, came off with the news it sort of crumpled me up inside. When you get along to my time of life old friends mean something, and here was an old and a staunch one gone. I had a chin-chin with him the last time I made Talettee, a few months ago, and I knew he was a bit seedy, but I didn’t think there was anything much wrong with him—and I don’t think he did, either. Tell me about it.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Ronald answered quietly; “or, at least, not much that I can tell. I had a letter from father in which he said he wasn’t

feeling quite up to the mark. He had never written anything like that before, and it alarmed me. I came out at once; but, between the letter having followed me about a bit before I got it, and connections missed afterwards, I didn't reach Taletee until two weeks after father died. Gourlay, however, had managed to get hold of a medical missionary before the end. It was his heart."

Captain Barnley nodded gravely—and sat for a moment in silence staring solemnly in front of him.

"I had something for him," he said abruptly. "It's a queer business—enough to give you the shivers. I'll show it to you." He opened one of the drawers of the locker, produced a pocketbook, and from the pocketbook extracted a small newspaper clipping. "I cut it out of a Singapore paper before I left," he explained, "so it's around six weeks old. But that doesn't make it any the less a ruddy go, does it?"

Ronald took the clipping and read it. The words seemed to dance strangely before his eyes. He read it again:

NOTED ENGLISH EXPLORER MURDERED IN LONDON

WELL KNOWN IN SINGAPORE

A dispatch from London states that Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne was murdered last night in his home in London, where he was found in bed with a knife stab in his heart. Two strange and mysterious facts are connected with the crime. One is that a member of the household was awakened during the night by what was described as a burst of unearthly laughter. The other is that, clasped in Sir Henry's left hand, as though it had been thrust there and the fingers afterwards forced over it, was discovered a small gold skull. The motive for the murder is unknown, and as yet no clue to the identity of the murderer has been found. London is agog over what is described as one of the most eerie and atrocious crimes in its history. The case is in charge of Inspector Mallory of Scotland Yard.

Ronald's hand was steady as he returned the clipping, but his brain was racing. What was it Gourlay had said about Piccadilly? This was even worse in its deviltry. Subtle! Cunning! Here was the gold skull again thrust suddenly under his nose—and he hadn't been gone an hour from Taletee. Was the thing ubiquitous that it should crop up even in the skipper's cabin of a shabby old trading boat? What did Captain Barnley, nodding momentarily as he sat there sucking at his Scotch and water, know about the gold skull? It was a far cry from Taletee to London! And yet the two were indubitably linked together now—with a gold skull. Murder—and a long, ugly reach that hand had! Not a pleasant thought. Ronald took a mental grip upon himself. Impulse urged him to tell the story of that Taletee night; but an

inner voice, prompted perhaps by Gourlay's warning, bade him keep his counsel.

"Creepy!" pronounced Captain Barnley, as he restored the clipping to his pocketbook. "That's what I call it—creepy!"

Ronald's voice was quiet and dispassionate as he answered.

"Yes," he agreed; "but what I am wondering about more than anything else is why you particularly clipped that out for Father's benefit. It hasn't got anything to do with Father, has it?"

Captain Barnley threw back his head and laughed.

"Good Lord, no!" he ejaculated. "It's just that he'd want to know about it, that's all, seeing that he knew Sir Henry well."

"I wasn't aware of that," said Ronald.

Captain Barnley stared.

"You weren't! Why, you knew, didn't you, that Sir Henry was aboard on the last voyage your father made with the *Hawk* before he sold her and settled down in Talettee?"

"No, I didn't know that either," said Ronald. "You see, I hadn't seen my father for two years, and he didn't write many letters. He used to say that, cruising months on end in the islands, he was never where he could post letters anyhow; but the truth was that he hated writing, and what I would get from him would always be the briefest sort of thing. Anyway, he never mentioned Sir Henry. What was Sir Henry doing aboard the *Hawk*?"

"Why, Sir Henry chartered her," explained Captain Barnley. "That's no secret in Singapore."

"What for?" persisted Ronald quietly.

Captain Barnley shrugged his shoulders.

"Bugs, beetles, and what-not," he grinned. "Native customs, and all that sort of thing! Can't see it myself, but Sir Henry was a pretty big man in his own line."

"But how did Sir Henry come to select the *Hawk*? Had he known father previously?"

"No; he hadn't," replied Captain Barnley. "I was in Singapore just before the *Hawk* sailed, and your father told me about the 'exploring' voyage he was going to make. There were a couple of planters out here who were backing Sir Henry and going along with him on the expedition. I never met them myself, but your father knew them—Tom Gresham and Andrew Robb, their names are. Both of them rich, and both of them rather keen on the same sort of thing, as Sir Henry was. It seems they had met Sir Henry in England

a few years ago, and that's how the whole thing started. They put the Malay Archipelago up to him as a stamping ground, and I fancy they didn't have any trouble in getting him enthusiastic about it. You've only got to take a look at the chart, my lad, to figure out for yourself that there's a heap of islands and places that no white man likely ever put his foot on—yes, and some of them that no white man ever saw, for I'll lay my davey there's more than a few that have never been charted. But if there was one man in these parts who knew the islands and natives better than any other, it was Michael Ward, your father. Gresham and Robb knew that, and they put the proposal up to him. Your father wasn't any bug hunter himself, and I'd say he thought the whole thing was a bit of tosh; but they offered him a good whack for the job, and he took it."

"I see," Ronald nodded. "And was the voyage a success?"

"Yes, so far as I know," said Captain Barnley. "The only out I ever heard anything about was that the *Hawk* came back without her mate—Bob Rankin, I think his name was."

Ronald was still probing quietly.

"What happened to Rankin?" he inquired.

"I couldn't say," Captain Barnley shook his head. "I've only seen your father twice since then, and I didn't think to ask him about it. Took sick and died on the voyage, I suppose. It's happened before, of course."

"Of course!" agreed Ronald.

Captain Barnley hospitably pushed a box of stub-nosed Manila cigars in Ronald's direction. Ronald refused politely—the one already between the skipper's teeth stunk abominably.

"I suppose," observed Ronald, "that those two chaps you spoke about, Gresham and Robb, live in Singapore, don't they?"

"No, they're planters, as I told you. They live on different islands somewhere. I don't know what islands, but there'd be no trouble finding that out in Singapore. I don't know what your plans are; but, if you wanted to take the time to look up either or both of them, you'd be welcome, I'm sure." Captain Barnley chuckled suddenly over the rim of his glass. "Whether there's anything intimate they could tell you about your dad that you'd like to hear, I can't say; but from their reputations you'd certainly get buttonholed for an earful about bug hunting in Malaysia whether you were interested or not!"

In lieu of the Manila which he had refused, Ronald took a cigarette from his case and lighted it deliberately. He was very much interested indeed. The two men in the world he most earnestly desired to talk to now were Gresham

and Robb, no matter how far apart they lived or how difficult it might be to reach them!

“Well, we’ll see,” he said—and switched the conversation casually. “Kattu, below there, tells me there are only three in the cabin beside myself. I saw two of them in the smoking room when I was out there on deck. Are they going to Singapore?”

“Yes. That’ll be Grayson and Hillwood. The tall chap is Hillwood, a pearl buyer; and Grayson’s got a bit of a plantation back on Motu. They’ve sailed with me before. Very decent chaps. You’ll like them.”

“Good news!” applauded Ronald. “And who is the third man?”

Captain Barnley made a grimace.

“Oh, him! Well, I’d say he’s a potential patient of yours!”

Ronald raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

“Gin!” pronounced Captain Barnley sourly. “Wallows in it! If we don’t have a time with him before we’re through I miss my guess. All I know about him is that his name is Trecham. Came aboard three days ago at Pabao and hasn’t shown his face outside his cabin since. Keeps his door locked. I fancy he’s paid Kattu handsomely. Nobody but a native steward would stand for it. Must be an awful mess in there!”

“What about daily inspection at four bells?” asked Ronald slyly.

Captain Barnley choked over his Scotch and water.

“We’re not a liner!” he growled. “If there are no complaints and the blighter wants to lock himself up and drink himself blind, what can I do about it?”

Ronald made no comment. Later on, if the captain’s prognostication was correct, he might come to have a professional interest in one Trecham; but, with a passing curiosity now satisfied, Trecham mattered not at all. Besides, there was something that he wanted to ask Captain Barnley, only the production of that newspaper clipping and the conversation that had ensued incident thereto had put it out of his mind.

“By the way, Captain,” he said, “in going into Father’s affairs as well as I could at Taletee, I found that a lot of his papers were in the safe keeping of his agent, a man named Peter Sarlow, in Singapore. Can you tell me anything about him? Father seems to have put no end of faith in him, for according to a draft copy of the will Sarlow is named as co-executor with me.”

“And he couldn’t have named a better!” declared Captain Barnley heartily. “You’ll get on with him famously.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Ronald. “Who is he?”

“He’s a lot of things!” Captain Barnley removed his cigar from his teeth and studied a blue spiral of smoke as though seeking inspiration. “To begin with, I’d say he was one of the richest men in Singapore. I don’t know whether he was born out here or not; but I can remember when he started in business as a young man, and that must be over thirty years ago. And he’s not so old yet. I’d say he was around fifty-four or five. He’s a trader himself—on a big scale now. Owns a lot of schooners and that sort of thing. He’s a queer-looking little beggar—brown as a berry, with a pair of black eyes sharp enough to look through a bulkhead, and as active as a monkey. He still goes on trading trips himself once in a while. Also he represents several big English houses; and besides all this he acts as agent for a number of men like your father, but that’s pretty well confined to old friends, I fancy, who have done business with him for years. He’s one of the best. There isn’t a man in these parts who stands higher in public regard and has more influence than— —”

The two men were on their feet, faces blanched, staring into each other’s eyes. Over the ship’s noises, from somewhere below, there had come a sudden peal of wild, inhuman laughter. It was followed now by a piercing scream.

“Good God, what’s that!” Captain Barnley cried out hoarsely—and, followed by Ronald, sprang through the cabin door.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WHO SCREAMED

THAT peal of crazed, unnatural laughter! Once heard, it could never be mistaken. Ronald's lips were tight as he raced at Captain Barnley's heels. It was the same ghoulish sound he had heard that night in Taletee; the same that Gourlay had heard; the same undoubtedly that had echoed through that home in London, thousands of miles away, on the night Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne had met his death. And now here on the *Watabi*!

The door of the smoking room was wrenched open. A murky ray fell across the deck. Two men craned their necks out through the doorway. Hillwood and Grayson, of course!

"That you, Captain?" one of them shouted. "What's happened? Who screamed like that?"

The questions were inane. A matter of seconds only had elapsed. How could Captain Barnley know? What else was he racing along the deck for except to find out? But the questions were natural enough—what anyone would shout out under the circumstances. Ronald smiled queerly. Strange that the inanity of *anything* should strike him at this time!

Captain Barnley, heading for the companionway, made no answer. Ronald kept close to the other. A moment later he heard Grayson and Hillwood come tumbling down the companionway behind him.

The saloon was in darkness.

"Kattu!" bawled Captain Barnley. "Where in hell are you? And what's the meaning of these lights being out?"

There was no answer.

Captain Barnley swore as he groped about for the electric light switch.

The lights went on. The four men stared around them. There was no sign of disorder in the saloon. It was the taller of the two men who had been in the smoking room, and therefore identified by Ronald as Hillwood, the pearl buyer, who spoke.

"It couldn't have come from here," Hillwood said.

"I didn't think it did," said Grayson, his companion. "I thought it came from out on the lower deck; but with the wind, of course, the sound might have seemed to come from anywhere."

And then Ronald's eye caught sight of a bit of gayly flowered cloth protruding from beneath a swivel chair at the upper end of one of the long

tables. It seemed somehow to be familiar. Yes, of course! Kattu's *sarong*! He touched Captain Barnley on the arm—and the next instant he was crawling between the swivel chairs and in underneath the table.

It wasn't only Kattu's *sarong*—it was Kattu. For better light in the shadows under the table, Ronald struck a match. It wasn't a pleasant sight. A moment's examination sufficed. He crawled out again.

"It's Kattu!" he said tersely. "Dead. The back of his skull has been crushed in."

"So that's it, is it!" exploded Captain Barnley. "One of these damned Malay rows—or one of 'em running amuck! By God, I'll show 'em what it means to bloody up my ship!"

"It wasn't Kattu who screamed," said Ronald quietly.

Captain Barnley stared.

"What d'you mean?" he demanded.

Ronald smiled grimly.

"Obviously Kattu couldn't have screamed *after* he was killed. In the few seconds that transpired between the time we heard the scream and the time we got down here it would have been a physical impossibility for anyone to have both killed and dragged Kattu in between these chairs for the purpose of hiding the body under the table. Kattu was already dead when we heard the scream."

"Dead long?" Grayson thrust in quickly.

Ronald shook his head.

"No," he answered. "It's impossible to say exactly, but my opinion would be that he had been killed not more than a very short while ago. The body is still warm."

No one spoke for a moment.

Grayson broke the silence.

"Then he must have been killed here in the saloon," he suggested.

"Yes," said Ronald laconically. "I should say so."

Grayson jerked his hand in the direction of one of the cabins across the saloon.

"Well, anyway," he observed, "that chap—what's his name?—Trecham?—doesn't appear to have heard anything."

"Wouldn't be likely to!" rasped Captain Barnley. "Blind drunk, he'll be, with his door locked. Kattu reported that he was hitting it up heavier than ever to-day. I'll rouse him up, though, on the off chance, if I have to break

in.” Captain Barnley stepped over to the cabin in question and banged with his fist upon the door.

There was no response.

Captain Barnley’s hand fell to the door knob, rattling it savagely—and the door swung inward.

“My word,” he grunted in surprise, “for once it isn’t locked! You, there, Mr. Trecham!”

No answer.

Ronald’s face was suddenly hard as he moved to the skipper’s side. Was it prescience—or what? There was something ominous about this, something he didn’t like.

Captain Barnley felt for the switch and snapped on the light. On the slip of carpet, and just over the threshold, lay the door key. Captain Barnley stooped and picked it up.

“Hey! Mr. Trecham!” he called again, as he stepped forward into the cabin. “Rouse up there, and— —”

Captain Barnley did not complete his sentence; instead, he drew back and bumped heavily into Ronald. Then he turned and looked at Ronald. There was horror in his eyes. His hand passed hurriedly over them.

The in-swung door almost completely hid the bunk.

“What is it?” Ronald asked.

“Look!” said Captain Barnley hoarsely.

Ronald brushed past the other. He had seen death too often ever to lose his professional poise, however gruesome the sight it might present, but there was more than death here, and for a moment he stood unnerved. That newspaper clipping! It wasn’t the murder of Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne that had been described—it was the murder of this man Trecham here! That peal of unearthly laughter! The knife wound! *That closed left hand!* He pulled himself together and bent over the bunk. The body lay in a welter of blood, and the face was still contorted by an expression that was unmistakably one of abject terror. The left arm with the clenched hand had been drawn straight out from the bunk.

Ronald looked up at Captain Barnley.

“A knife stab in the heart,” he said, unconsciously employing the exact phraseology of the clipping.

Captain Barnley’s eyes were riveted on the hand that stuck out over the bunk.

Ronald nodded. He had no doubt as to what he would find. He was conscious of being strangely cold and unmoved now. He unclasped the dead man's fingers and removed a small gold skull. A glance was sufficient. It was a replica of the one that had been left on the living-room table in the bungalow at Taletee. He extended it to the *Watabi's* commander.

Captain Barnley took it reluctantly and put it in his pocket. He touched his lips with the tip of his tongue and mechanically stood aside as Hillwood and Grayson now edged forward into the cabin.

"My God!" breathed Hillwood, and with a single glance turned instantly away.

But Grayson leaned suddenly over the bunk.

"I thought you said this man's name was Trecham!" he exclaimed.

"Yes." Captain Barnley cleared his throat. "Trecham."

"Well, it's not!" asserted Grayson sharply. "It's no more Trecham than mine is. It's Gresham—Tom Gresham."

Gresham! Tom Gresham! The *Hawk*! Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne! Ronald glanced at Captain Barnley. It had registered with Captain Barnley too. Captain Barnley's jaw had sagged a little as he stared in a startled way at Grayson.

Ronald turned to Grayson.

"Are you sure?" he asked. His voice sounded flat in his own ears. "Are you sure?" he repeated.

"Of course, I'm sure," Grayson stated emphatically. "I can't say I ever knew him intimately, but I first became acquainted with him a good many years ago, and since then I've bumped into him occasionally in Singapore."

Ronald probed quickly:

"Where was his home?"

Grayson shook his head.

"I can't say," he replied. "As I told you, he was no more than an acquaintance. I know he used to be on an island, somewhere, but if I ever knew the name of it I've forgotten what it is. Besides I haven't seen him for two years or more. I heard he'd gone away on an expedition up North with a Sir Somebody-or-other from England; but I haven't the foggiest idea what he's done with himself since." He glanced at the bunk again, this time as though his eyes were drawn there against his will, and turned abruptly toward the door. "And, if you don't mind," he ended, "I'll get out of here."

He was followed by Ronald and Captain Barnley.

“Gentlemen,” said Captain Barnley gruffly, addressing Grayson and Hillwood as he locked the cabin door, “I don’t want this to get around among the native passengers. I can’t turn the ship inside out with any hope at all of success until daylight, and about the only chance to-night of getting our hands on the swine who did this is to make him believe for the next few hours, if that’s possible, that nothing has been discovered. So I’ll thank you not to let any of the stewards overhear you talking about it. And”—he turned to Ronald—“if you’ll come on top in a little while, Doctor, after I’ve had a talk with my officers and seen about sending along for Kattu, I’d like a word or two with you.”

“Yes,” said Ronald; “and meanwhile I’ll look up my cabin. I don’t know where Kattu put me.”

“Ours are the two over there,” Hillwood pointed out helpfully.

“Thanks,” acknowledged Ronald—and watched the two men depart in the captain’s wake with the frankly avowed intention of getting a much needed “stiff one” in the smoking room without delay.

By the further process of elimination Ronald found his cabin to be next but one to Gresham’s. He entered it, switched on the light, and shut the door behind him. His brain was active and alert, cool and balanced enough, groping into the unknown without hysteria; but now, away from the others, there was a twisted smile upon his lips. For the second time that night Gourlay’s parting words had thrust themselves upon him. He unlocked a handbag, took out a revolver, broke it, examined the cartridges, and, satisfied, dropped the weapon into his pocket. Then he reached into the handbag again, and this time took out the little wooden box that was addressed to Michael Ward.

A little later, he returned to the captain’s cabin. Captain Barnley, his brows knotted, his jaws clamped, was holding the newspaper clipping in his hand as Ronald entered.

“This is bad business aboard here, lad,” he flung out with a savage smile; “and don’t think I’ve been idle because I’m sitting here as though nothing had happened. As I told you below, that’s the impression I want to create. I’ve taken the *serang*^[A], along with the white officers, into my confidence, and he’s making a quiet search fore and aft now among the natives. He’s as sharp as they make them, and I shouldn’t be surprised if he nailed the beggar off guard. If nothing comes of it by daylight we’ll play another tune. But that isn’t what I wanted to talk to you about. A little while back I laughed about that voyage of the *Hawk* having anything to do with Sir Henry getting

knifed. I've changed my mind. With that chap below turning out to be Tom Gresham and getting it in the same way, there isn't a doubt of it now."

[A] Native Boatswain.

Ronald appropriated the settee.

"I am afraid I was quite certain of that from the moment you told me Sir Henry had sailed with Father," he admitted, as he seated himself.

Captain Barnley blinked in perplexity.

"I don't get the bearings," he confessed.

Ronald took the little package from his pocket and handed it to the other.

Captain Barnley, frowning over the inscription, opened the box.

"God A'mighty!" he whispered, as he stared with suddenly dilated eyes at the contents.

"I didn't say anything about this before," said Ronald, "because—well, because I didn't. But what has happened on board here to-night changes everything. Listen! Here's the story of what happened at Taletee."

Captain Barnley listened.

"Boy," he said hoarsely at the end of the recital, "they meant to get your father, too, sooner or later. I wonder why they didn't in the beginning?"

"The only answer I've got to that," said Ronald bitterly, "is that it was to drive in the coffin nails one by one and break Dad's spirit by making his life a hell—before death struck."

The skipper's hand clenched.

"Yes, I'd say so too!" he agreed; and then bluntly: "It looks, then, as though Andrew Robb was also mixed up in this!"

Ronald nodded.

"And there's Bob Rankin—the mate who never came back."

Ronald's fingers had crept to the lobe of his ear.

"Yes," he said. "The *Hawk's* in it—but why?"

The two men looked at each other somberly.

"Look here!" said Ronald after a moment. "When you were telling me about the *Hawk's* voyage you said you didn't know where either Gresham or Robb lived. Let's take Gresham. He came aboard at Pabao. Do you think he

could have been living there under the name of Trecham without your knowing it?"

"Whether he could or not," stated Captain Barnley with a hard smile, "I know he hadn't. I got the story from one of the planters. About two or three hours before I put in with the *Watabi*, a big native proa deposited Trecham or Gresham, whichever name you like, on the beach with his baggage and then sailed away again. Nobody knew where the proa had come from—and Trecham sat on his baggage too tight to talk. He had to be helped aboard us."

"I see," said Ronald. "That disposes of Pabao, then, and leaves us where we were. Did the *Watabi* have any other cabin passengers at that time?"

"No," replied Captain Barnley. "Grayson and Hillwood didn't join the ship until the next day, when we got to Motu."

"And meanwhile—I think we'll stick to his right name now—Gresham had gone to his cabin which from then on he never left?"

"Right!"

"And you never got anything out of him except that he said his name was Trecham?"

"He was in no condition to talk when he came aboard—and less so afterwards!" Captain Barnley grunted in disgust. "Kattu said that the man was in a drunken stupor most of the time."

"Or pretended to be," amended Ronald quietly.

The *Watabi's* commander leaned sharply forward.

"What d'ye mean?" he demanded.

"Well," said Ronald soberly, "he certainly wasn't drunk to the state of insensibility when he was killed. He knew what was going to happen to him. Witness the look of terror stamped on his face, even in death. Gresham was the man who screamed. I don't say he wasn't drinking hard, but it is beginning to look to me as though that was only as an excuse to hide himself away from everybody and cover up his tracks. Look at the way he came to Pabao—nobody knew from where. Too drunk to talk! He gave a false name, and that's all! We know now that this gold skull killer, or killers, had him marked down for death, and from what has transpired I would say without hesitation that Gresham knew it, too, and was making a desperate, though what proved to be a futile, effort to escape. He might have received one of those gold skulls just as Father did, and possibly just as Sir Henry did too. Anyway, I'd say he had the wind up and cut and ran for it in a blue funk."

Captain Barnley struck the locker top with his fist.

“Well, if that’s so, and I fancy you’re right, I don’t blame him!” he exclaimed savagely. “The whole thing’s hellish! Here’s two men murdered, and each of them found with one of these damned skulls in his hand. And put there after he’s dead according to that newspaper account! Do you think that’s right? You’re a doctor. Would a hand stay closed like that?”

“Unquestionably,” Ronald answered instantly. “The flexor muscles are stronger than the extensors, and if a hand were forcibly closed it would remain so.” He smiled mirthlessly. “Just why a gold skull was chosen, and what its peculiar significance is, of course, I can’t say; but it’s a pleasant little way of spreading the doctrine of terrorization, isn’t it? It would seem to indicate that there are others who will meet the same fate. I agree with you that Father would undoubtedly have been one of them if he had not died a natural death before his turn came.”

Captain Barnley took from his pocket the gold skull that had been found in Gresham’s hand and compared it with the one that Ronald had just shown him. They were identical. He weighed them in his hand.

“They aren’t handing around pure gold, are they?” He laughed hollowly. “These’re heavy enough.”

“Lead—gilded,” said Ronald tersely. “Made from a mould. I examined the thing pretty carefully before I got through with it in Taletee.”

Captain Barnley returned the box and one of the gold skulls to Ronald; the other he replaced in his pocket.

“There are two things I’d like to know,” he growled. “If you’re right about Gresham, which I don’t doubt, how did the blighter that killed him know that Gresham had got aboard the *Watabi*, and how did the said blighter get here himself?”

“Answers unknown!” Ronald’s lips were set. “I’ll ask another. Was it the same man who killed Sir Henry in London—there’s enough lapsed time, mind you—or is there a gang of them, an unholy organization of some kind, at work?”

“Hell!” snapped Captain Barnley viciously. “I don’t know! But I’d give a year’s screw to lay my hand on whoever filthied up my boat like this tonight. Chose a nice time for it, too, with everybody busy working out of Taletee, eh! Nobody but Kattu below there, and Kattu gets his skull crushed in, and gets dragged out of sight under the table! A blind man could figure that out—gave the killer time to work the key out of the lock. You remember where we found it? It wouldn’t have made any noise falling on the carpet. That’s the way you size it up, too, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” assented Ronald briefly.

The skipper's jaws clamped.

"Well, whoever did it," he said menacingly, "is still aboard here, that's certain. And with the only whites on the *Watabi* being you and me, Grayson, Hillwood, and my officers, another thing that's certain is, as I've already intimated, that this man-killing swine is a native."

"Or a white man disguised as one," suggested Ronald, with a forced laugh.

"What?" ejaculated Captain Barnley sharply. "You think that's so?"

Ronald shook his head.

"No—a possibility, that's all."

Captain Barnley's eyes narrowed to slits.

"I'd hate to be him if it turned out that way," he threatened. "You said something back before this business started about ship's inspection. Well, if the *serang* doesn't have any luck to-night, I'm going to hold one as soon as it gets daylight that'll make any you ever saw when you were tailing a gold-laced skipper look like a dead calm alongside of a typhoon. And, son, if there's any white skin beneath a brown one, so help me God, I promise you, you'll see it!" Captain Barnley rose impulsively from his chair, and paced stormily up and down the cabin for several minutes, then halted abruptly, facing Ronald again. "Out of Talettee is one of our longest runs," he said grimly, "and we shan't be making land for the next forty-eight hours or so, which is maybe just as well for, if the *serang* draws a blank, there's going to be an overhauling on this hooker that'll make somebody willing to sell his soul for a chance to slip ashore—which chance he isn't going to get! You and I have dug out a fact or two, but I fancy we've got about as far as we can to-night with what we have to go on, so you barge along to your cabin and get some sleep. If we get our man during the night, I'll let you know at once—otherwise I'll call you at daybreak."

Ronald rose from the settee.

"Right!" he said.

Captain Barnley waved his hand toward bottle and glasses.

The two men drank in silence.

"'Night!" said Captain Barnley.

"'Night!" said Ronald.

Out on the boat deck, Ronald paused for a moment. The breeze had stiffened a little, there was a fair sea running, and the *Watabi*, as the skipper had foretold, was "sticking her nose into it." If the lighted portholes of the smoking room were any criterion, Hillwood and Grayson were still there,

but he was in no mood to talk to them. He went down to his cabin and prepared to turn in.

His mind was frankly in chaos now. The whole thing was incredible, absolutely unreal—except that within the last hour two men had been murdered here. That was far from unreal! But the same two questions again! How had the killer ever tracked Gresham in his flight, and how had he got aboard the *Watabi* himself? Nevertheless he *had* got here—and his work was done. *Was it?* Was there anything in Gourlay's warning anent an ugly inheritance? A man who could follow and trap another as Gresham had been followed and trapped wouldn't take long to find out that the son of Michael Ward was aboard here, too. And then—what? Preposterous! What had he, Ronald, to do with what had happened aboard the *Hawk*? He had never even seen the *Hawk* in all his life! It was far-fetched! Unthinkable!

He smiled a little apologetically to himself as he opened the porthole only wide enough for a breath of air and satisfied himself that it was firmly screwed into place, and further that the opening was not in line with the bunk—under the pillow of which he placed his revolver! And he smiled again a little angrily now, self-irritated, as he reassured himself that the door was locked.

He'd read for a bit. He wasn't sleepy. He took a book from his bag and got into his bunk.

But sleep came more readily than he had expected. It came upon him with his light still burning.

He slept until well on toward morning, and then he awoke suddenly to find himself already in the act of springing out of his bunk. It must have been a dream, of course. That peal of laughter or whatever fiendish sound it was! No, it wasn't a dream! He *had* heard it. It had come from the porthole. His eyes blinking in the light saw something yellow come through the porthole and roll upon the floor. A gold skull!

And then a voice from outside the porthole, a native voice, jeering, malignant, the English flamboyant:

“The father escaped, but the son shall not do likewise.”

Ronald snatched his revolver from under his pillow, and with a single bound reached the door, unlocked it, and dashed out into the saloon. He was conscious suddenly of a heavy acrid smell. Queer! But that had nothing to do with getting his hands on that murdering hound out there.

He gained the deck. A figure in white, dimly seen in the half light, was running toward the forward end of the ship. But Ronald, silent in his bare feet, ran the faster, and in half a dozen yards he had overtaken the other. The

next instant he had the man by the nape of the neck, and his revolver bored into the small of the other's back.

“What the hell!” bellowed a voice.

Ronald let go his hold, and brushed his hand across his eyes.

“Who are you?” he gasped a little helplessly.

“I'm the second engineer, and we're afire, that's who I am!” the man answered somewhat incoherently. “It's that damned thatching—a hold full of it. Can't stick the smoke below. The stokers are running like rats from it. Had to drag the chief up. Can't talk to the bridge from the engine room any more—got to see the old man—get t'hell out of the way!”

CHAPTER V

WHEN PANIC CAME

THE *serang*'s search was never concluded, nor was Captain Barnley's contemplated inspection at daybreak ever held. At daybreak the native passengers milled about the fore and after decks, restless, terror-stricken, and queer sounds came from them—mutterings, the sobbing of women, the cries of affrighted children. At daybreak, with the engine and boiler rooms long since untenable, the steam was down, the engines were lifeless, there was no pressure for the fire hose, the hand pumps had proved ineffective, and the *Watabi* lay helpless in a heavy sea. At daybreak the smoldering thatch, whose smoke and acrid fumes seeping through cracks and crevices in the bulkheads of the aged craft had brought disaster upon her, broke in a lurid flame through the after hatch.

And panic came.

What man could do, Captain Barnley had done from the moment the fire had been discovered. Again and again, backed by the *serang*, the two mates, and the two engineers, he had gone among the native passengers, striving to quiet their fears. With improvised smoke masks he and his officers, and joined too by Ronald, Hillwood and Grayson, had essayed the stokehole in an effort to feed the boilers—only to be dragged back each in turn with choking lungs and near to unconsciousness. He had foreseen the possibility of panic and, facing the probable necessity of eventually abandoning the ship, had prepared for every contingency as best he could.

To the little group of white men, already half exhausted from their efforts, that he had called around him on the boat deck as the dawn broke, he had laid bare his heart.

“So far as the ship herself is concerned, we could stick it for hours to come,” he had said grimly. “The immediate danger lies in that muttering lot below there. The *serang* says they're fast getting out of hand and are screaming for the boats now. That's madness. At best the boats would be overcrowded. They'd be near down to the gunwales, and they wouldn't live in this sea. Time enough for the boats several hours from now, as a last resort, and I'm hoping the sea will quiet down a bit by then. You know what to do. You're armed. If they rush the companion ladders, shoot to kill. It's better that a few should die than that all should commit suicide. Our one chance is to maintain discipline and order. I shall have to depend on you for

that. With the exception of the *serang*, I don't trust any of the native crew. That's all."

And Ronald had listened, leaning a little unsteadily against the handrail of the bridge ladder just outside the captain's cabin. His eyes were red and smarting, a blotch of blood stained the left shoulder of his pajama jacket, his head was giddy, swirling. He had understood perfectly what Captain Barnley had said, the words were entirely comprehensible—but it was queer. Captain Barnley seemed to have lost sight of the most momentous thing of all. Queer that the skipper should have forgotten! What about turning the ship inside out for that gold-skull killer? It was daylight now. Damned unpleasant having a knife jabbed at you unexpectedly. It wasn't anything serious—just a flesh wound. Narrow squeak, though. Lost some blood, of course. Made him feel faint. The beggar had come suddenly out of the shadows on that last trip to the stokehole. Persistent brute! Meant business! Disappeared in the darkness before anyone could grab him. Queer the skipper should— —

And then Ronald, in a fogged way, had taken the post allotted to him beside Captain Barnley at the head of the starboard companion ladder just beneath the bridge.

And panic came.

A swarm of dark faces rose before Ronald's eyes. He was conscious of Captain Barnley's voice, now admonishing and pleading as though with children, now stern and cold in imperative command; but the swarming faces drew nearer—and with the sudden bark of the captain's revolver Ronald's brain cleared.

The ladder was thronged with an insensate mob, screaming, yelling. Knives were brandished in the air. They came surging upward. Captain Barnley's shot, fired over their heads, had given them no pause whatever. It was all senseless. There was no reason in it. But terror had them in its grip. Jungle instincts. God help them if they ever reached the boats!

They packed the ladder from rail to rail, so tightly that they impeded their own progress—Chinamen, Lascars, Malays, a ruck of yellow, brown, distorted faces. And already the leaders were near the top. From halfway down the ladder a swarthy arm rose in the air—and a knife came hurtling upward. Aimed at Ronald, it missed him by barely a hair's breadth. For an instant his eyes singled out and held on the man who had thrown it—a Malay, naked to the waist, in whose working face and glaring, malignant eyes Ronald, as their glances clashed for the space of time it would take a watch to tick, read a fanatical hate and fury that was unmistakably directed against himself alone. Intuitively he knew. The killer! One of them, anyway. He leveled his revolver to fire, but Captain Barnley fired the first—and the

man spun halfway around, screamed above his fellows, crumpled up, and was engulfed in the onsurging rush.

“There’s one that’ll never throw another!” Captain Barnley spoke through set teeth. “Let ’em have it, lad! There’s no other way.”

Knives glittered, thrusting from the topmost step of the ladder now. Again and again Captain Barnley and Ronald fired. Forms collapsed and wriggled at their feet. But still they came on, tripping, stumbling, and pitching over the fallen. What did those far down the ladder care? Immune from hurt themselves by reason of the human shields in front that protected them from harm, they pushed the foremost ranks forward by sheer weight of numbers.

It could not last. All told, there were seven white men and the *serang* attempting to hold the boat deck against almost an equal number of vulnerable points of attack.

A tongue of flame from aft rose skyward. Ronald got it by reflection. He dared not turn his head. From behind him shots still sounded from those defending the after companion ladders. Baker and Hillwood were still fighting desperately over there at the head of the forward port ladder. Pandemonium reigned. Fools fighting that they might not be denied their own shambles! Shrieks, cries, yells, revolver shots, the crackle of flames dinned the air. And then the skipper went down beside Ronald with arms outspread, with a long-drawn sigh. Queer that one could hear a sound like that over hell’s inferno!

The hammer of Ronald’s revolver clicked on an empty shell.

Fury seized upon him. He clubbed his revolver and flung himself at the mob in front of him, fighting with the frenzy of a maniac. He was conscious that it was a tall, gaunt form, near naked, dancing on its toes in ridiculous fashion, that struck him on the head, in lieu of a knife, with a handspike. His knees sagged under him. The mob passed over him, trampling him underfoot — and darkness came upon him.

Consciousness, when it returned, came slowly. He was aware at first of an intolerable pain in his head, and next that in some strange paradoxical way, though there were sounds around him, he was, nevertheless, surrounded by silence.

He opened his eyes and stared about him in a dazed way. Then he began to understand. An immense volume of smoke was rising skyward like a vast black pall, and the pall was flecked with flames, red-tongued, that kept licking at it as though to devour it ravenously. The sounds he heard were the roar of the flames, of course, and the hideous squealing of crated pigs; the

silence was because there were no longer any shouts and cries, or shrieks of maddened wretches scrambling frantically for their own destruction while in horrible irony they sought for life.

Was he the only one left? That seemed incredible. He raised himself on his elbow. He was apparently on the lower forward deck. Certainly he was no longer on the boat deck. How had he got down here? There was the companion ladder at the top of which Captain Barnley and he had fought. The ladder was littered with forms, sprawled grotesquely, that did not move. The flames, too, now that his vision began to clear, seemed to have reached the boat deck itself and appeared to be making rapid progress forward. He was too low down to see any of the boats from where he lay, but it looked as if that davit tackle there just aft of the bridge were swinging loosely with the roll of the ship.

An ugly mental picture rose suddenly before him. He closed his eyes for a moment. His period of unconsciousness, for however long or short a time it had lasted, had perhaps been the most merciful thing that could have happened to him.

The pain in his head, though still intense, was diminishing slightly. A nasty crack, but no fracture, of course. He'd be all right. He'd *have* to be all right. He couldn't lie here, anyway, or else — —

He rubbed his eyes. This wasn't a trick, was it, that was being played upon him by a sick mind that proposed to revel in ghostly apparitions? He rose groggily to his feet. A few yards away from him, unless he were laboring under some hallucination, lay the half-naked form of the Malay who had flung the knife at him up the companionway. He had thought the man was dead, that Captain Barnley had killed him. But this man was alive. His eyes were closed, but his lips were moving, and he seemed to be muttering something.

Ronald staggered nearer to the other and finally knelt down on the deck beside the Malay. The man lay on his back with face upturned. There was no mistake, no hallucination. He recognized the other beyond any question of doubt. The killer!

Something glittering on the deck attracted Ronald's eyes. Just within a few inches of the other's hand, as though it had fallen from nerveless fingers, lay a knife. He stared at it, conscious of a strange fascination. It was no knife such as he had ever seen before. It was like no Malay kris that he had ever heard of, many and varied as he knew the forms of the kris to be. It had a stone guard and handle, and a short blade squat at the hilt that tapered to a vicious needle point. There was something peculiarly cruel and murderous about the look of it. It was no plaything—his own shoulder bore

testimony to that. A sudden rush of abhorrence upon him, Ronald flung the thing out of sight along the deck. Tom Gresham had died under it!

Ronald leaned over the other. The Malay was bleeding from a fresh bullet wound just above the heart, and was obviously near the end. The constant mutterings were merely induced by delirium, of course, but Ronald became suddenly aware that if there was one thing he desired more than another at that moment, it was to know what the man was saying. He placed his ear close to the other's mouth and listened. The man was muttering in his native tongue. Ronald jeered at himself even as he turned his head away in bitter disappointment. Naturally! He might have known that. And he, Ronald, did not understand a word of Malay!

A voice from behind him spoke suddenly, calling his name. Ronald looked sharply around. In spite of a face that was half-swathed in a bloodstained makeshift bandage, he recognized Baker, the second officer.

"Hello!" said Baker with a faint grin. "So you've come around, have you? I was wondering whether you would or not—and not betting heavy on your chances!"

Ronald nodded.

"I'm all right," he said; "or at least I will be presently. And I'm the better off of the two of us, I'm afraid, from the looks of you." And then abruptly: "Do you speak Malay?"

Baker looked his astonishment.

"Why, yes, a bit," he answered. "Why?"

Ronald pointed to the Malay.

"I'd like to know what that man is saying."

Baker grunted savagely.

"What t'hell does it matter what he's saying?" he growled. "He's as good as dead—and serves him proper! I fancy he was pretty badly wounded to begin with, but anyway, I caught him crawling along the deck toward you with a knife in his hand about five minutes ago. I stopped him with a bullet."

"Oh!" said Ronald quietly. "Well, that's all the more reason then why I want to know what he's talking about. See if you can make it out, will you?"

Baker bent down obligingly and listened. After a minute or two he looked up and shrugged his shoulders.

"Gibberish!" he said. "He thinks he's talking to some blighter in Singapore by the name of Jahal—first name Bittie or Vittie or Wittie, I can't quite make it out. He just keeps on repeating the same thing. Translated, it's something like this: 'One is dead, but the son lives.' Pure gibberish!"

Ronald shook his head.

“It’s not gibberish,” he said grimly. “He’s the man who killed Gresham and Kattu last night.”

“What!” Baker shouted. “How do you know?” Then quickly: “But never mind now. There’s still plenty else to do. I’ll listen to the yarn later. It’ll help pass the time”—he laughed shortly—“which is likely to hang heavy on a raft. I’ve got one pretty well knocked together that will hold the four of us.”

“The four of us?” Ronald echoed dully. “I don’t understand.”

“No,” said Baker gruffly, “of course, you don’t. But that’ll keep too—except to say that, apart from this swine here who doesn’t count, there’s only you and me, an old Lascar, and one of the Malay crew left. A fit lot! All of us wounded! Do you feel up to lending a hand yet?”

“Yes,” said Ronald tersely.

“Right! Then I’ll turn over the commissariat to you. You can’t get down to the galley or saloon. There’s more than smoke there now. The fire’s eaten through. You’ll have to rummage around as best as you can. Water, biscuits, whatever you can find anywhere. Understand?”

Ronald gnawed at his lips. His head was swimming.

“Yes,” he said tersely again.

Baker was gone.

A sound of hammering that he had not noticed before attracted Ronald’s attention. He looked in that direction. Up near the fo’c’sle head, half hidden by a torn and flapping awning, he could make out two figures at work over what appeared to be some casks and pieces of grating.

Only four left! A holocaust! He swung his hand across his eyes. No; that could not be true. There were the boats. The boats must have got away with a lot of people in them. Baker wouldn’t be building a raft if the boats hadn’t got away.

He looked down at the Malay at his feet. “Bittie, Vittie, Wittie Jahal.” He repeated the words several times to himself in singsong fashion. Damn it, he must pull himself together. The man’s lips weren’t moving any more. He looked closer.

The Malay was dead.

Near noon, with the aid of the tackle rigged by the second officer, and the strength induced by the knowledge that their lives were at stake, four wounded men swung the raft over the ill-fated *Watabi’s* side and embarked

upon it. But though they had delayed their departure until the last moment, until indeed the *Watabi* was little more than a blazing hulk, the gale, rather than diminishing, had increased in force, and the sea was running higher than ever.

All through that afternoon the wave-swept raft battled for existence. In spite of lashings, some of the food and, more precious still, a large share of the water were carried overboard. The sail improvised out of an awning was blown away. The four men, buried constantly by the combers, could do no more than cling desperately to the life lines that Baker's foresight had provided. That night the aged Lascar died.

The gale blew itself out. There followed two days of fiery tropical sun. The sea became a burning-glass. There came intolerable thirst. Baker rationed the scant supply of water in pitifully inadequate drops. The Malay, sullenly deaf both to exhortation and angry remonstrance, began to drink sea water. On the third night, raving, he attacked Baker for what was left of the drinking water. Baker fired without compunction—but the Malay's kris too had done its work. That night Ronald was alone upon the raft.

And for a long time that night Ronald sat there, motionless, a hunched figure, his chin upon his knees, a prey to horror and abysmal loneliness. But gradually this passed, and his mind became active, taking stock of his position. He was not conscious of even disquietude on his own account; on the contrary, he seemed to be strangely assured of his ultimate safety. The raft might drift to the shore of some one of the many islands that could not be so far away, or he might be picked up by some vessel. Furthermore, his physical condition, despite that first twenty-four hours upon the raft when every moment had been literally a fight with death, was far from being at a low ebb. It surprised even himself. His shoulder was still sore and stiff, but the wound was healing nicely. His head was distinctly better. Thirst? Yes! But there was a little water left. Where before it had been doled out to three men, there was only one now to subsist upon it. He could hold out for a long time yet.

And then a thought struck him, and he laughed out into the night ironically. What was the good of being probably the sole survivor of the *Watabi* if he had to spend the rest of his life, apparently in no matter what quarter of the globe, trying to evade a knife thrust in the heart, and only to end up by being found with one of those hell-hatched gold skulls clenched in his left hand?

“Why should you?” an inner voice demanded suddenly. “If, as you have reason to believe now, the killer on the *Watabi* was only a hired thug and that there is some implacable agency behind him, why not fight back with

the same weapons? It is your one chance. Will you destroy that agency or be destroyed yourself? You have the clue in your hands. Who is Jahal? You know where to find him. There is no one in Singapore to recognize you—you have not been there since you were a child. Why play into their hands? You are alone now on the raft. Why proclaim the fact that *anyone* survived? And above all that it was *Ronald Ward*?”

Ronald stared out into the darkness. He saw Gresham. He saw that figure on the beach at Taletee. He saw a knife hurtling toward him over the heads of the screaming mob that came surging up the companion ladder. His hands clenched fiercely. The blood pounded at his temples. *Yes!* That was the way out! Destroy or be destroyed! They would not seek a dead man—but a dead man would seek them. Ronald Ward, the *Watabi*'s sole survivor, was dead.

But wait! His brain became cool, incisive, analytical. Impulse or rush of passion had no place here. Was he, after all, the sole survivor from the *Watabi*, granting that he himself eventually survived? Yesterday Baker had described the final scenes that had taken place on the *Watabi*'s boat deck. Ronald rehearsed them now in his mind. Two of the boats, crowded to the gunwales, had been smashed against the ship's hull; others had swamped before they had scarcely got clear away. By this time only Grayson, one of the engineers, and Baker were left to carry on the fight. They had made a desperate stand around the last boat. Grayson and the engineer had been killed; a glancing blow from a kris that had cut across his forehead had rendered Baker temporarily unconscious. It was not a pretty picture. Baker had told the story, moistening already parched lips with the tip of his tongue. The mind recoiled from it. But that was not the point. Of the seven white men and the *serang* all had died there on the boat deck except Baker and himself. Baker had made sure of that. He, Ronald, was the only one Baker had found alive, and Baker had carried him down to the lower deck.

“There were too many of them even for that last boat,” Baker had ended; “and what with the gale that night, I don't think that there's a chance a soul of them is left.”

Ronald's brows contracted. But there *might* be some who would have come through alive. There was no proof that all of the boats had met disaster. He pondered this for several minutes—and then his face cleared. Well, suppose that were so, it would not materially affect the issue, would it? There had been no one in the boats but natives; and, to begin with, the chances were infinitesimal that, even if any of these were saved, their paths would ever cross his again. Secondly, he had come aboard at dark at Taletee; he had had no personal contact with anyone who had taken to the boats—except for those few grim moments at the head of the companion ladder—

and under those circumstances the chances were still infinitesimal that any one of them would recognize him again. But so far as that went, no one, according to the plan that was vaguely forming in his mind now, would ever be at all likely to recognize him again. No, there was no one to say that Ronald Ward had survived.

“Quite right!” approved that inner voice. “But don’t forget another point. You’ve got to cut all links between yourself and the *Watabi*. There were only seven white men on the *Watabi*, and it will eventually be known in Singapore that Ronald Ward was one of them. Otherwise, how could you establish the *fact* that you are dead? Change your name, call yourself what you like; but, if it is discovered that you are a survivor from the *Watabi*, by the process of elimination you inevitably become Ronald Ward again. How are you going to account for this raft if you are found upon it? Or how are you going to account for yourself, raft or no raft, no matter in what way you eventually reach civilization again?”

But Ronald’s brain was virile now; the inspiration that had flashed upon him, a strange, unholy urge to come to physical grips with whoever was behind these fiendish murders, a tigerish determination to fight for his own existence, swept difficulties and obstacles incontinently aside. And after a moment he laughed out harshly into the night.

“Yes!” he said aloud. “That will fill the bill! No one will question it. Who could? And the name’s Curle—Bob Curle. That’s as good as any.”

The raft rose and fell on the long, undulating oily swells. An hour passed. And then Ronald spoke again.

“Only one man need know,” he said, “and according to Captain Barnley he’s to be trusted. Sarlow will have to keep me in funds. And besides, the estate mustn’t be mussed up by my”—he smiled grimly—“premature death, and all that sort of thing—God knows how long I’ll be at this little job!”

A little later he spoke again, but his voice was drowsy now.

“Bittie, Vittie, Wittie Jahal,” he said.

And presently, as a light breeze began to ripple across the water, Bob Curle, sometime known as Ronald Ward, licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons, fell into fitful slumber.

CHAPTER VI

OF HIGH ESTATE

RONALD opened his eyes to the rising sun and, staring around him as he got to his feet, gave vent to a sudden and bitter laugh. It was only another mirage, of course! During the past two days he had been the victim of too many of these optical illusions to be fooled again. He had seen so many that even the cruelty of them had lost its sting. He had seen islands, and mountains, and cool rivers, and houses fronted by white beaches nestling in groves of palms whose waving tops beckoned him, and ships upon the sea that seemed almost within hailing distance of the raft but which eventually became suspended in air. And here was another one!

This one took the form of what appeared to be a sailing vessel, and, like all the others, seemed to be at no great distance away. Presently it would ascend like a balloon. He turned his back upon it. He had no desire to watch its perverted antics.

But nevertheless, from time to time, he looked in that direction again. It was always there; and always, a most strange performance, it floated naturally on the surface of the water.

At the end of an hour his eyes were glued upon it, and there was a queer throbbing in his heart. This one was real. This was no mirage. The breeze was so light that it scarcely stirred the water; but the vessel was appreciably nearer, in spite of the fact that she moved so slowly, and he could make her out now to be a large three-masted schooner. Would those on board sight the raft? Would they see him? At best, if she held her present course, she would still be more than a mile away when she came abreast of him. No use trying to signal her yet, she was still too far off.

The breeze died almost to a calm. Another hour passed. Ronald's eyes ached with the strain. Hope and fear alternately possessed him. The schooner was as near now as she would ever be unless he were sighted and she headed toward him. He took off the jacket of his pajamas and began to wave it above his head. Five, ten minutes went by in an agony of suspense—and then suddenly a great shout came from Ronald. He had been seen! The schooner was swinging toward him. He commenced to laugh immoderately.

He checked himself presently. A bit hysterical, eh? That sort of thing was no good. He perhaps wasn't in what might be called the pink of condition, but he was far too fit both mentally and physically to give way like that on any plea of weakness. Sob stuff! Sympathy tears from the pit! The hero of a

melodrama! He was irritated with himself. He moved about on the raft, flexing his muscles in proof of his own assertion of fitness. Something to eat besides dry biscuits that stuck in his throat, water beyond a few niggardly drops to drink, a few hours of good sleep, and he would be as right as ever he'd been. No excuse for not keeping a grip on himself!

The schooner drew closer, hove to, and lowered a boat. Ronald snatched up what was left of the water and downed it with royal abandon. That schooner out there was the most graceful and beautiful vessel of her kind that he had ever seen. Perhaps the existing circumstances provided a very natural reason for that impression—any man who had been days afloat on a raft might very well have placed the most woebegone-looking craft in the same category! But, that apart, she *was* strikingly trim and neat, with her tapering spars, her snowy canvas, and her spotless white hull that glistened in the sunlight. Essentially his one concern was that she meant life and safety for him, but a vague wonder as to what she was came upon him.

His eyes reverted to the approaching boat—and suddenly he rubbed them in an amazed fashion as though to assure himself that he had seen aright. The boat was wholly manned by Chinamen, all of whom seemed to be in a sort of uniform which, with the exception of the young Chinese officer in the stern-sheets, who wore a very English-looking naval cap and tunic, consisted of white native blouses piped and trimmed with blue. Perhaps the schooner out there was a government vessel of some sort. There were enough governments in China to account for any sort of uniform! What did it matter?

The boat came smartly alongside the raft, oars up-ended, man-o'-war's fashion, and the officer, gesturing, made room for Ronald in the stern-sheets. A flood of unintelligible Chinese followed. Ronald replied in English. Neither understood the other. The boat pushed off again.

The officer pointed to the schooner.

“*Sen-Chu*,” he said—and repeated it several times.

Obviously that was the schooner's name. Ronald pointed to himself.

“Bob Curle,” he said.

The young officer introduced himself by aid of the same pantomime.

“Hang-Lu,” he said.

Ronald nodded—but made no further attempt at conversation. What was the use? He stared at the schooner which they were now fast approaching. He had just taken the plunge and definitely created Bob Curle. There might be only Chinamen aboard the *Sen-Chu*, but even Chinamen were inquisitive. He could not afford to create suspicion. Somebody on board was bound to

speaking English. Would the story he had concocted hold water? He went over it again in his mind. It decidedly seemed plausible enough to be accepted at its face value. It was all right—unless, of course, it was put to the acid test of investigation. But who could possibly have any incentive for investigating it? There was practically no chance at all that anyone would do so. Yes, he was quite prepared to stand by it.

They were alongside now—and a moment later Ronald was standing on the schooner's deck. He glanced around him. The rail had been crowded with sailors who had watched him as he had come aboard, and these, breaking up into groups now, still eyed him curiously. It struck him that, for a vessel of her size, the *Sen-Chu* appeared to be strongly manned!

A middle-aged Chinaman, in cap and tunic similar to that worn by the young officer in the boat, approached him. The Chinaman smiled and held out his hand.

"I am Captain Tao-Ming," he said.

"Oh, you speak English!" Ronald exclaimed.

"To one of limited intelligence," Captain Tao-Ming replied modestly, "the English language is not readily acquired. It has been said of me that I speak Chinese in English—a little."

Ronald, somewhat puzzled over the other's phraseology, was disconcerted for an instant.

"Oh!" he said again; and then, earnestly: "Well, anyway, I want to tell you I'm no end grateful to you for this. That last hour was the worst of all. I was afraid you wouldn't see me."

"That might well have been so," admitted Captain Tao-Ming gravely, "but the eye sees what the gods decree. It is your good fortune to have been favored by them. Your thanks belong to them and not to me. You have been long upon the raft?"

"Yes," said Ronald, conscious now that the other was surveying him critically from head to foot; "quite a few days. I'm not sure but that I have lost the exact reckoning."

"To my observant eye," returned Captain Tao-Ming pleasantly, "your station in life is not one that would accustom you to hardship, yet you have supported it well, for you have still strength. But the body now cries out for food and repose. Is that not so?"

"Well," Ronald smiled, "I could decidedly do with a bit of both."

Captain Tao-Ming beckoned to one of the crew, who was standing near by, and spoke to the other rapidly for a moment in his native tongue; then he turned to Ronald again.

“Go with this man,” he said. “It is ill-fitting to my sympathetic mind that we should talk further until you have eaten and slept. My attentive ear will then listen while you relate your adventures.”

“Right!” said Ronald gratefully.

But it was twenty-four hours before he saw the skipper of the *Sen-Chu* again. He had been nearer the breaking point than he had imagined, or, at least, had admitted to himself. He had been almost too played out to eat, and he had eaten sparingly, which he had told himself professionally was the only thing to do anyhow—but he had slept unsparingly. He had slept the clock around.

He awoke to a new day, and to the attentions of an excellent Chinese steward—a bath, a shave, a breakfast tray, and clean clothes. And as he dressed he whistled cheerily. He was tremendously refreshed. Also he had been done very well by indeed. It was as though somebody had rubbed an Aladdin’s lamp for him. Luxury! The cabin exuded it. So did everything else he had noted aboard the vessel. Wealth! Whatever else she was, the *Sen-Chu* was no ordinary craft! A queer little beggar, too, that Captain Tao-Ming with his top-heavy phrases! A very decent sort, though! He liked Captain Tao-Ming. Too bad after the treatment he had received to have to spoof the other with a cock-and-bull story. His face clouded for an instant, and then he shrugged his shoulders. It could work no injury or make any possible difference to Captain Tao-Ming or anybody else aboard the *Sen-Chu* whether it was Bob Curle or Ronald Ward who had been picked up at sea.

Ronald went up on deck. The *Sen-Chu* was nodding listlessly to the long, smooth swells. It had fallen a flat calm again. His glance, searching around the deck, rested on the figure of Captain Tao-Ming, who was standing by the taffrail with his back turned, and he at once made his way aft toward the other.

“Good-morning, Captain!” he said buoyantly.

Captain Tao-Ming turned slowly around.

“The English greeting is strange to the uncomprehending ear,” he said soberly. “Even if it is a ‘bad’ morning it is always ‘good.’”

Ronald stared. What the devil had prompted that remark? He was conscious that, as on his first meeting with the other, Captain Tao-Ming was studying him critically; but now, in turn, he studied Captain Tao-Ming. A change seemed to have come over the man. Captain Tao-Ming appeared to be as listless as his own ship; the two thin strands of mustache pendant from the corners of his lips seemed to have a peculiarly despondent droop; his face had a strained look; and his eyes were heavy as though from a sleepless

night. What was it? A case of the morning after? Was that what was at the bottom of the other's remark, and, by inference, why this "good" morning was a particularly "bad" one? But Captain Tao-Ming did not impress him as being that sort of a man.

"You don't look well, Captain," he said bluntly. "You're not ill, I hope?" Captain Tao-Ming shook his head.

"It may be," he said remorsefully, "that I have unpardonably permitted you to see the visible signs of an overburdened mind; but in no way am I ill. You, I perceive, have gained strength and color."

"Like a new man—thanks to you!" said Ronald heartily. "The only trouble is that I could never express those thanks adequately, or tell you — —"

Captain Tao-Ming interrupted with a deprecating wave of his hand.

"Why should the lips attempt to make more clearly understandable that which the heart so plainly expresses without words?" he smiled. "Tell me, instead, now that your weariness has passed, how you, who are still nameless to my inquiring ears because of the twisted tongue of the unversatile Hang-Lu, came to be upon that raft."

Ronald leaned against the taffrail. Below, in the cabin, his every want had seemed to be anticipated. He had found cigarettes there. He took one from his pocket now and lighted it. This was a bit rough—but he had to see it through.

"Right!" he said. "Fortunately, the story isn't a long one. First of all my name's Curle—Bob Curle. I'm a bit of a wanderer, I'm afraid, and have tried my hand at about everything; but for the last two years I had more or less settled down and had a small plantation on one of the islands in the Marshall Group, and — —"

"That," interrupted Captain Tao-Ming with an apologetic smile, "excites my unimble mind to still greater curiosity, for according to my wholly inadequate knowledge of geography a great distance separates us from there."

Ronald smiled inwardly. Captain Tao-Ming was quite right. It *was* a great distance—so great, and the islands themselves from the standpoint of communication so inaccessible, that investigation, unless inspired by some unusual incentive, was too impracticable to be given a second thought.

"But I didn't come from there on a raft," he laughed quietly. "I left there on a small trading schooner, the *Aurora*, that was owned by a chap named Burke that I'd got to know pretty well because he had called at the island several times since I had been there. I was getting fed up with the deadly

monotony and wanted a change, so when Burke showed up on his last visit about six weeks ago and said that he was eventually heading for Singapore, I jumped at the chance of going with him. That suited me down to the ground, I had a good man to leave in charge, and I could afford to be away for a year if I liked. So I went with him. We traded along here and there, and finally worked down into these parts. About ten days ago we ran into what I'd call a hurricane blow—anyway that was the end of us. The *Aurora* was only a small boat, as I've said—Burke handled her with a crew of three natives. So there were only five of us all told aboard. Also, she was an old boat, and I fancy Burke didn't spend any more money on her than he could help. We were a wreck almost from the start. Burke was killed when the mainmast was carried away. One of the natives was swept overboard. The two boats were smashed to bits. The schooner began to leak badly. The three of us that were left spelled at the pump. I don't know how we kept her afloat as long as we did. We had two nights and two days of it. She was sinking under us when we got away on that raft we had knocked together."

Ronald paused. The yarn had come so glibly through constant mental rehearsal that he was afraid he had been a bit too long-winded.

Captain Tao-Ming, however, was apparently of another mind.

"The story is one of inspiring interest," he said. "Continue and make known what became of the two who were with you on the raft since you alone remain."

Ronald drew deeply on his cigarette. He needed no imagination to supply that detail—the essence of it came only too realistically out of his own actual experience.

"A flat calm," he said. "Days of burning heat. In spite of all I could do the two natives began to drink sea water. One night, having first attacked me"—he opened his tunic and showed the wound on his shoulder—"they fought each other with knives for what was left of the drinking water while I was powerless to interfere. One was killed within a few minutes, the other died before morning. That's all."

Captain Tao-Ming nodded gravely.

"Your adventures as you have related them are poignantly shared by my receptive mind," he said. "You have endured much. May the gods hereafter show you only favor. If ever there be any wind again to blow us there, we too are going to Singapore. Until then your presence honors us."

"It's very decent of you to say so," said Ronald, not without a prick of conscience. "And now I wonder if you'd mind my asking you a few questions. I've been puzzling my head over just what sort of a craft this is. If

I understood your officer aright in the boat, she's called the *Sen-Chu*, isn't she? Yes! I thought so. What does that mean in English?"

"Sen-Chu," explained Captain Tao-Ming, "is the name of the ancestral town in China of the illustrious owner which is still his home, though he now spends much time at sea, and much in visits to Singapore and the larger cities of China where his business calls him."

Owner! A light broke in on Ronald. Under ordinary circumstances he might have guessed it at once. As it was, he had perhaps not been over-bright. The schooner's luxurious fittings—her spick-and-span appearance! A yacht! The hobby of a multi-millionaire. He had read of the Chinese millionaires in Singapore, for instance, who had amassed enormous fortunes in tin. This quite possibly was one of them.

"I think I begin to see," he said. "The *Sen-Chu* is a yacht?"

"Yes," said Captain Tao-Ming. "It belongs to the Wealthy and Beneficent Li Yuan, who, being confined to his cabin below, would otherwise have extended to you in person the insignificant hospitality that unworthily in his place I have been able to offer you."

"Oh!" exclaimed Ronald. "I am very sorry indeed to hear that. Will you please give him my compliments and say that I would be very happy to pay my respects to him whenever he feels able to see me."

"The High-born and Illustrious Li Yuan," replied Captain Tao-Ming after an instant's silence, "suffers such agony that even so courteous a message would be unintelligible to his ears."

A sudden sense of disquiet descended upon Ronald.

"How long has he been ill?" he asked.

"It came upon him three days ago," answered Captain Tao-Ming, "and with each day and night his courageous suffering has grown worse. Since then there has been but little wind, and the unrepairable breaking of our engine shaft upon which ten days of unrequited labor has been spent now renders us incapable of movement. Shall it be said that this is a 'good' morning? Singapore is yet many days away even if the wind blew always from behind, but there are islands where, if the gods willed, a doctor might have been found. But even that, to my distracted mind, would now be too late, for the end appears not far off."

Ronald's brows drew together.

"What seems to be the matter with him?" he demanded.

Captain Tao-Ming laid his hand upon his stomach.

“The agony that twists the body and brings the sweat to the forehead lies here,” he said; “and there is great vomiting.”

“And you say he grew worse during last night?”

“As I sat beside him without sleep even my untutored eye could discern the change,” said Captain Tao-Ming somberly, “for the skin of his exalted face is now of another color.”

Ronald’s professional ear did not like the sound of this at all. He turned abruptly to the rail and stood for a moment staring unseeingly before him. His fingers pulled at the lobe of his left ear. What was he to do? Call himself by any fictitious name he liked, it would not deceive that gold skull knife-sticking crowd for a single instant if it became known that it was a *doctor* who had been picked up by the *Sen-Chu*. On the other hand, here was a man who obviously was dangerously ill—whose life was probably at stake. He hadn’t any choice, had he? Perhaps, though, if he could persuade Captain Tao-Ming to let him see the patient on some other pretext, it wouldn’t be necessary to go so far as actually to declare himself a doctor. He turned again to Captain Tao-Ming.

“Look here,” he said, “I’ve seen a lot of sick men in my day, and I’ve even had to dabble about a bit with medicine. Living out here on the island plantations where you have to depend on yourself, you have to do a lot of things. I think you’d better let me see him. I may not be able to do him any good; but, on the other hand, I may be able to suggest something. If he is as sick as you say he is, it’s worth the chance anyhow.”

Captain Tao-Ming considered this for a full minute.

“When death hovers outside the door,” he said finally, “even the frailest of bolts inspires hope. Come!” he ended tersely—and led the way toward the cabin companionway.

“Does he speak English?” Ronald asked, as he followed the other.

“The Cultured and Illustrious Li Yuan,” replied Captain Tao-Ming over his shoulder, “having studied for many years in England, is the possessor of a degree from one of the high colleges there; but in no language has his melodious tongue rejoiced our ears for many hours.”

“As bad as that, is it?” Ronald muttered to himself—but he made no comment aloud.

A gaunt-faced, hollow-cheeked Chinaman of indeterminate age opened the door before which Captain Tao-Ming eventually halted. A few low words in Chinese passed between the two, and then the Chinaman, though with undisguised reluctance, stepped aside, permitting Ronald to enter. Captain Tao-Ming followed. The door was softly closed.

Ronald cast a swift glance around him. He was standing in a spacious cabin that was, however, in almost semi-darkness. Across from the door was the bed, the indistinct outline of a form upon it.

Ronald pointed to the darkened portholes.

“I think we’ll have a little more light, please,” he said to the Chinaman who had admitted him.

The Chinaman scowled, but at a corroborative nod from Captain Tao-Ming drew back the curtains and allowed the sunlight to flood in.

Ronald moved over to the edge of the bed. The face that confronted him, that of a comparatively young man, looked blue and pinched, the eyes were closed, the breathing shallow. Li Yuan was obviously in an advanced toxic condition.

He felt for the other’s pulse—and a pair of dark eyes out of hollow sockets opened and held his in a puzzled gaze.

“Don’t try to talk,” said Ronald pleasantly.

Li Yuan nodded.

Outwardly, Ronald smiled encouragement; but inwardly it was as though he had pursed his lips—the man’s pulse was in the neighborhood of one hundred and twenty. He turned down the covering. The abdomen was markedly distended. As he pressed upon it, a moan burst from Li Yuan’s lips—and a snarl sounded at Ronald’s elbow. Ronald looked up. It was the Chinese attendant, teeth bared like a beast’s, glaring at him savagely.

“The unfavorably inclined Ah-tang, whose fathers before him have been faithful retainers in the venerable and ancient house of Li Yuan,” interposed Captain Tao-Ming softly, “does not understand that no harm is intended his exalted master.”

“Allee same understand English,” growled Ah-tang. “What he do?”

Captain Tao-Ming quieted Ah-tang in Chinese.

Ronald resumed his examination. Li Yuan’s reaction to pain was distinctly pronounced when pressure was put upon the right side near the thigh. The abdominal muscles were as rigid as a board. Presently he replaced the bed cover, and stepped abruptly over to one of the portholes, his back turned to the others.

The game was up! Bob Curle’s brief, promising, and cherished existence was at an end. A fond illusion dispelled! A bubble pricked—to dissolve into thin air. Whatever happened to that man there on the bed, Ronald Ward was doomed to have a pack of unknown murderers on his heels—like Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne—like Tom Gresham. Just a moment, though!

He swung around to face Captain Tao-Ming.

“Have you got such a thing as ether or chloroform aboard here?” he inquired curtly.

“Of the latter,” replied Captain Tao-Ming, “there is some among the medicines provided.”

“All right, then! That settles it!” said Ronald crisply. “I’m a doctor.”

Captain Tao-Ming’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“To my befuddled mind,” he said, a sudden harshness in his voice, “your story as you related it— —”

“Never mind about that now,” Ronald interrupted brusquely. “Explanations can come later. The point is, there is a decision to be made, and that man on the bed will have to make it providing he can understand me clearly enough; if not, you’ll have to make it for him. Come over here with me.” He stepped to the bedside, and leaned over Li Yuan. “I am a doctor. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Li Yuan nodded.

“You are suffering from peritonitis, probably induced by a ruptured appendix.” Ronald’s voice was quiet, grave now. “Your only hope lies in an immediate operation; failing that it is certain death. You must decide what — —”

It was Captain Tao-Ming who interrupted now.

“Necessary to such a procedure,” he said in a studied monotone, “are certain scientific appliances, of which there are none.”

Ronald’s lips firmed.

“I hardly expected there would be,” he answered, with a grim smile. “I asked you only if you had ether or chloroform aboard. Without an anesthetic an operation of this kind would be impossible. If there are no instruments we will manufacture them. It is that or death.” He leaned again over Li Yuan. “You must not make any mistake about what I am saying. I cannot promise anything. I can only tell you that it is the one chance against a certainty. Shall I operate?”

Again Li Yuan nodded.

“You understand perfectly?” Ronald insisted.

And then Li Yuan spoke.

“Oh, perfectly,” he said. “Please carry on.”

Ronald started. In spite of the labored effort at speech, there was a drawl so pronounced in the other’s voice that it might have come from Oxford itself. Well, perhaps it had! He looked at Captain Tao-Ming. Captain Tao-

Ming was staring moodily at Li Yuan, but now in turn he leaned over the bed as Li Yuan lifted his hand and beckoned feebly. There was a short exchange of words in Chinese, and then Captain Tao-Ming turned to Ronald.

“It is the order of the Illustrious and High-born Li Yuan,” he said heavily. “May the gods assist!”

“Amen!” said Ronald fervently beneath his breath; and then, aloud: “Very well, then—don’t let us lose any time about it.”

“I have yet a word to say to his High Excellence,” said Captain Tao-Ming. “In a moment I will confer with you outside.”

“Very good,” agreed Ronald briefly.

Ah-tang opened the door for him—but Ah-tang also blocked the way. The man’s little black eyes were murderous.

“Him say allee light,” said Ah-tang in a vicious whisper, “you say allee light; me say, him die, you die!”

Ronald studied the man for an instant. Indicative perhaps of personality, there were evidently three kinds of Chinese-English spoken: That of Li Yuan, who could probably throw discredit in that respect on many a native-born Englishman; that of Captain Tao-Ming, who translated his usually involved and sometimes flowery Chinese conventions literally into English; and that of this man here who spoke as from the gutter—and threatened in like manner.

Ronald answered in American—that he had picked up on transatlantic voyages. Its translation was entirely a matter of voice inflexion.

“Oh, yeah?” he said—and stepped out into the yacht’s saloon.

CHAPTER VII

THE THROW OF THE DICE

RONALD'S eyes roved grimly over his surroundings. The saloon of the *Sen-Chu*, that he had metamorphosed into an operating theater, presented a grotesque and not altogether reassuring appearance. The rich oriental rug had been removed, and on the floor, in its stead, stood several buckets of boiled water, now cooled, that contained salt in the proportion of a teaspoonful to a pint; a blanket was spread upon a long table. There were two smaller tables placed, at his direction, beside the long one. On one of these was a vessel containing strips of sheeting that had been cut into various lengths and sizes and boiled in a weak solution of baking soda; on the other, a tray containing his "surgical instruments" that had been rendered aseptic in like manner.

His eyes gloomed a little as he surveyed the latter. These were the least reassuring of all. It was a gamble with death. There had been nothing on board that even faintly resembled a surgical instrument. Those knives there had been selected from a collection submitted by the crew; his retractors were bent spoons of various sizes; his artery forceps were several pairs of pincers from the carpenter's and engineer's chests which he had fitted with little wire rings that would slip up the curves of the handles and hold them tightly clamped; and for his sutures those sailmakers' needles and ordinary silk thread. His inventory ended with a pair of scissors and a piece of rubber tubing in which latter he had cut several lateral openings. It would be a case requiring drainage. He had taken the tubing from a syringe he had found in the medicine chest. He was grateful to the medicine chest for that and some iodine—and, of course, the chloroform. He shrugged his shoulders philosophically. At least everything was aseptic. The rest lay with fate.

His eyes, lifting from his tray of "instruments," held now on Ah-tang, who, save for the young officer, Hang-Lu, standing near the door leading into the alleyway, was the only other occupant of the saloon. He had ordered Ah-tang to remove his wide-sleeved blouse, and the man's arms were bare to the shoulder. Ah-tang was washing his hands in one of the buckets of boiled salt solution.

"*Scrub* them!" Ronald, who had already done the like, directed tersely.

Ah-tang, muttering under his breath, obeyed.

Ronald stepped nearer to the other.

"I'd like to have you repeat what you said to me back there in the cabin a while ago," he said crisply.

Ah-tang's face was ugly with sudden menace.

"Him say allee light," he said sullenly; "you say allee light; me say, him die, you die."

"And I fancy you mean it!" observed Ronald grimly. "Now, you listen to me, Ah-tang! I've chosen you for my assistant for two reasons. The first is that you are obviously enough of a gore-thirsty and cold-blooded devil to stand up under what you are going to see. The second is that you are beyond question fanatically devoted to your master. Whether I eventually die or not at your hands is one matter; but whether the Illustrious Li Yuan dies or not is quite another, and one that, I take it, concerns you a great deal more. Therefore I would like to impress upon that untamed mind of yours the fact that the result of what I am going to do will in some measure depend upon you. From this moment you are to touch absolutely nothing except what I tell you to touch; and you are to do in all other respects exactly what you are told to do. And here's a last word for you: Your master may die afterwards, but he won't die here on this table, so you can compose your mind on that score and devote yourself to whatever instructions I give. Understand?"

Ah-tang nodded unwillingly. The scowl had not left his face.

Ronald's lips drew together in a straight line. He wondered, if Li Yuan died, whether it would be this Chinaman here or a Malay with a gold skull who got one Dr. Ronald Ward first! A pleasant thought! Li Yuan's chances were perhaps one in ten! He watched Ah-tang for another minute or so—until he was satisfied with the other's performance over the bucket—and then he nodded to Hang-Lu.

"I'm ready," he said.

Hang-Lu disappeared—and presently Li Yuan was brought in and laid upon the table, Captain Tao-Ming bringing up the rear of the procession. The bearers departed, leaving only Captain Tao-Ming standing at the head of the table, and Hang-Lu again at the closed door to act as a sort of liaison between the improvised operating theater and the rest of the ship.

Ronald's brows contracted. In the hour that had been occupied in the necessary preparations since he had made his diagnosis, the patient's toxic condition had become more pronounced. Li Yuan's eyes were closed; he gave no sign of being conscious of anything that was taking place around him. Ronald's eyes traveled to Captain Tao-Ming. Captain Tao-Ming's face was downcast, but Captain Tao-Ming possessed the saving grace of intelligence. Captain Tao-Ming, who had been carefully rehearsed in his

part, was to administer the anesthetic. A bit of a ticklish job! There was no specialist with his stethoscope to safeguard the patient through every second of the operation. And he, Ronald, with his sterilized hands, dared not even check the patient's pulse.

Ronald nodded to Captain Tao-Ming—and for a moment his eyes held on the other, as Captain Tao-Ming, following out his instructions meticulously, held a cone-shaped napkin lightly suspended over Li Yuan's face and began to let the chloroform fall upon it drop by drop. Ronald nodded again, this time approvingly—and wringing out several pieces of the sheeting began to "drape" his patient, leaving exposed only the line of intended incision where the skin had already been sterilized with iodine.

This done he looked up again at Captain Tao-Ming. Perhaps two, perhaps three minutes had passed. Once more he nodded.

Captain Tao-Ming had been well drilled. He laid aside the napkin for a moment; and, drawing back one of Li Yuan's eyelids, gently touched the ball of the eye with his finger.

"The Illustrious One gives no sign," Captain Tao-Ming reported in a low voice.

Ronald reached out to the tray, picked up an "operating" knife, and augmented the test with a slight skin prick. There was no reaction. Li Yuan was under.

"All right!" he said laconically. "Continue with the chloroform!"

And then Ronald was at work and instantly immersed in it, all the technique he knew thrown into the scales, working coolly, methodically, without haste, but with swift precision.

A deft incision that divided the skin and fat for a distance of three inches brought the sheath of the right rectus muscle into view; and this he in turn immediately divided near its external border for the full length of the skin incision.

"A pair of pincers, Ah-tang!" he said quietly.

He glanced at Ah-tang's face as the other handed him the pincers. Ah-tang's face was perhaps a little white, but it was imperturbable now.

"Now," he directed as, seizing the external border of the rectus sheath with the pincers, he pulled it outward, "hold these pincers with your left hand."

Ah-tang held the pincers impassively.

"And now this with your other hand," Ronald directed again as, selecting one of the bent spoons, he inserted his improvised retractor under

the edge of the rectus muscle and retracted it inwards.

Again Ah-tang obeyed—holding the retractor with his right hand.

Ronald reached for another pair of pincers, and, seizing the peritoneum, which was now clearly exposed at the bottom of the wound, lifted it up and away from one of the underlying intestines and cautiously made a small cut through it. His lips tightened slightly. There was pus in large quantity—a foul odor. Protecting the intestines now with his left forefinger, he divided the peritoneum for the entire length of the wound; and, feeling for it, drew out the appendix and also the head of the cæcum.

He suddenly heard his own voice breaking through a silence that seemed to have become strangely tense.

“Easy there, Captain, with that chloroform! Those last three drops followed each other a little too closely.”

The appendix was ruptured and gangrenous, as he had expected. He wrapped it in a piece of sterilized linen.

“Lay your pincers and spoon aside now, Ah-tang,” he instructed, “and hold this instead with your fingers.”

Ah-tang took hold of the wrapped-up appendix—still imperturbable.

Mentally Ronald applauded himself for his choice of an assistant. A trained attendant could scarcely have done better than Ah-tang was doing. Cold-blooded! Yes! Murder without a qualm or the slightest hesitation! Quite so! But Li Yuan’s chances were certainly none too good. Peritonitis all over the lot!

With a stitch of needle and silk Ronald tied off the blood supply of the appendix, tied a ligature tightly around its base with another piece of silk thread, and with his scissors snipped away the appendix itself. He pushed back the cæcum and the stump of the appendix into the abdomen, cleaned the wound with his sterilized linen swabs, and inserted the rubber drainage tube to the bottom of the pelvis. Then, with three strong sutures, taking in all layers of the abdominal wall, he closed the upper part of the wound, and over this placed several layers of the sterilized sheeting, wrung dry.

It was over.

“Carry him back to his cabin,” Ronald ordered quietly.

Hang-Lu opened the door, and the bearers came in; but as they went out with their burden Captain Tao-Ming lingered behind.

“Well?” asked Captain Tao-Ming anxiously.

Ronald looked up from the bucket in which he was scrubbing his hands. He smiled queerly.

“The operation was eminently successful,” he said.

A knot came between Captain Tao-Ming’s brows, and he swallowed hard.

“To my retentive ears,” he said heavily, “those words have a strangely familiar sound.”

“They come down from the ages,” Ronald answered with the same queer smile. “From time immemorial *all* operations have been successful.”

“And yet,” murmured Captain Tao-Ming, “the thought occurs to my bewildered mind that many die.”

“Quite!” Ronald nodded.

Captain Tao-Ming’s face was bleak. His eyes still questioned.

“I do not know,” said Ronald grimly.

A cot had been placed in Li Yuan’s cabin, and Ronald began a dogged fight for his patient’s life. For three days and nights, save to snatch a few minutes of sunshine and exercise on deck, he never left the cabin. Hope came and went. He grew haggard from what was practically a ceaseless vigil. A pall seemed to overhang the whole ship—a strange, unbroken silence. No movement even of the vessel itself except for the gentle, noiseless dipping to the swells, for the calm continued—as though the elements too were awe-struck, awaiting the outcome with bated breath.

Came then the fourth day—and Li Yuan’s life still hanging by the merest thread. But by evening a change for the better set in, and as the night hours passed the improvement continued—and at dawn Ronald smiled gravely at Ah-tang, who with dog-like fidelity had steadfastly refused to leave his master’s side, and whose services indeed had been indispensable.

“He will get well, Ah-tang,” he said, “so it would appear that I have saved my own life, too, so far as you are concerned.”

Ah-tang turned away for a moment. When he faced around again Ronald saw something that he had never seen before—tears in a Chinaman’s eyes.

“You glate liar,” said Ah-tang in a low voice; “but you allee same glate doctor. You save him life. Evelybody on ship give him life for High Excellence Li Yuan; evelybody on ship now give him life for you. Ah-tang give first, you want it.”

It was a bit flowery, of course; but obviously Ah-tang was extending the olive branch in all sincerity. Ronald laid his hand in friendly fashion on the other’s shoulder to seal the pact.

“That’s all right,” he said heartily. “But a lot of it has been due to you, Ah-tang; and as soon as your master gets around a bit I’ll see that you get full credit for it, too.”

Ah-tang shook his head.

“That all velly well,” he said; “but you not here, him die. You see.”

Ronald did not quite see, or altogether gather Ah-tang’s meaning; but as more days went by it began to dawn upon him that what he had designated as merely Ah-tang’s “flowery” way of expressing himself might possibly contain a grain or two of literal truth. Certainly the crew to a man seemed strangely devoted to the *Sen-Chu*’s owner, and he, Ronald, was left in no doubt as to their feelings of gratitude toward him. Officers and men alike paid him an almost embarrassing deference. It was, to say the least of it, quite extraordinary. That there should be a general uplift and relief, yes, quite natural; but, among so many, that there should have been those who, except superficially, were more or less indifferent would have been quite natural too. Singular!

This was all very well while it lasted; but in due course, whether it be a matter of two or even three weeks, he must eventually land at Singapore. Captain Tao-Ming had asked for no explanation of that fictitious tale he, Ronald, had so glibly told; but the reason for this restraint was fairly obvious. Captain Tao-Ming’s attitude toward the matter was plainly to the effect that he, Ronald, had earned the right to indulge in all the fiction about himself that he wanted to, and, though it might not be believed, it would never be questioned. Very decent of Captain Tao-Ming! But the game was up, anyway. So one day he had told Captain Tao-Ming the true story. He had little or no idea what effect this had had on the other. Captain Tao-Ming had merely said something about being the wholly unworthy recipient of the confidence that had been poured into his highly honored ears. But Captain Tao-Ming had still continued to address him as Curle.

This had bothered Ronald. It bothered him now on this afternoon, a little over a week after the operation, as he leaned against the rail, his eyes on the cot near by. Li Yuan had been brought on deck and, as he lay there apparently asleep, Ronald studied the other. Li Yuan still called him Curle too. A bit queer! He had allowed Captain Tao-Ming a few short visits to Li Yuan’s cabin of late, and he was morally convinced there would have been no reticence on the former’s part where Li Yuan was concerned. Quite all right! He had imposed no ban of secrecy on Captain Tao-Ming. Perhaps he should have told Li Yuan himself. But Li Yuan was only now in the first stages of convalescence, and there had been no hurry about it. Still, if Captain Tao-Ming had said anything, it *was* queer that Li Yuan had made no

comment upon it. But Li Yuan was a strange sort of chap. There was something curiously inscrutable about the man. As well attempt to read a closed book as read Li Yuan's face—unless Li Yuan intentionally permitted it. That trait of the Oriental Li Yuan possessed in a marked degree.

Also the man appeared to be as devoid of sentiment as a graven image. Only once had Li Yuan expressed any thanks for his, Ronald's, services, and then as unemotionally as though he were politely acknowledging a cup of tea that might have been passed to him.

Ronald shrugged his shoulders. Well, after all, why not? What was there to make a fuss about? He had had a professional job to do, and he had got on with it to the best of his ability. Li Yuan seemed to be more indifferent to the result than any of the *Sen-Chu's* officers and crew, that was all.

Yes, a unique character! Li Yuan, in reply to one of the first questions he, Ronald, had asked professionally, had stated that he was forty years of age—but he did not look it. He looked much younger. Also an Oxford graduate! That fact had come out too. And the melting pot had produced an enigma in the person of this Li Yuan.

But there must be something more to this millionaire Chinaman who, according to Captain Tao-Ming, spent months at a time cruising on his big schooner-yacht, than appeared on the surface. How else account for the indisputable devotion of all on board? How account for the great number of men that he now knew the *Sen-Chu* carried? What was it? Where did— —

“‘Bittie, Vittie, Wittie’ is as near as the Malay could get to the pronunciation,” observed Li Yuan casually. “The man you are seeking in Singapore is known as Whitie Jahal.”

Ronald came out of his reverie with a start. Li Yuan's face was as usual unemotional; the black eyes, suddenly opened, unfathomable.

“Oh!” Ronald exclaimed. “I thought you were asleep. Captain Tao-Ming has told you?”

“Of course,” said Li Yuan.

“I would have told you myself,” Ronald stated quietly, “as soon as I thought you felt up to talking about it.”

“Exactly,” agreed Li Yuan. “That is obvious, since you voluntarily told Captain Tao-Ming. For my part, I did not mention the matter until, as I hoped, I might have a little information to give you.”

Ronald's fingers strayed to the lobe of his ear.

“I'm afraid I do not quite follow you,” he admitted in a puzzled way.

“And yet,” Li Yuan replied, “it is quite simple after all, isn’t it? There are many aboard here who know Singapore well, and the native quarters intimately. Someone, then, might know or have heard, of this Bittie, Vittie, Wittie Jahal of yours. Captain Tao-Ming made inquiries among the officers; and Ah-tang made inquiries among the crew. Ah-tang was successful.”

Ronald dug into his pocket for a cigarette and lighted it. A week or so ago the identification of this Jahal would have thrilled him and sent the blood whipping through his veins; but to-day the information was no longer of any value to him—except that, knowing definitely now who Jahal was, he would be on his guard against one at least of the gold skull killers. Bob Curle, the potential hunter, had become again Ronald Ward the hunted.

“I see,” he said mechanically. “That’s very kind of you.”

“He is a half-caste,” said Li Yuan, his voice as colorless as though he were discussing the weather. “Malay on one side. And he is quite white in color—hence ‘Whitie.’ He has a shockingly bad history. His activities appear to embrace more than a fair share of the major iniquities. He is a crimp, runs a sailors’ boarding house, and there are ugly tales about him in that connection. He also runs a vile pipe den and gambling hell that is frequented by low whites and natives of all origins. He is a go-between in the opium trade. In short, he is a murderer, a thief, and wholly a pervert; but above all he is obviously an exceedingly clever scoundrel, for he has succeeded so well in covering his tracks that he has never got into any serious difficulties with the authorities.”

Ronald drew grimly on his cigarette.

“A pleasant biography!” he commented.

Li Yuan permitted a smile to flicker across his lips.

“And a pleasant companion for anyone,” he added. “I understand that it was your intention to cultivate him as such.”

Ronald shrugged his shoulders.

“Captain Tao-Ming doesn’t appear to have omitted anything,” he answered; “so he must have told you that I’ve chucked the idea.”

Li Yuan was in pajamas. He reached into the pocket and produced a small object which he handed to Ronald.

“Quite so,” he said calmly. “I brought this up with me to show you. Will you please examine it carefully?”

It was a small plaque of jade about two inches square, its color distinctly on the deep olive shade. Ronald, somewhat taken aback, nevertheless complied with Li Yuan’s request and examined the plaque minutely. He was by no means a connoisseur, but he knew enough about jade carving to

appreciate that the workmanship on the plaque was outstanding in its excellence—a dragon rampant, a Chinaman barring the way over a bridge with pointed sword.

“It is an exquisite bit of work,” he said with genuine admiration, as he returned the plaque.

“It is only,” said Li Yuan, as he replaced the piece of jade in his pocket, “that you will recognize it when you see it again and know that it came from me.”

Ronald drew his brows together in frank bewilderment.

“Look here,” he confessed, “I must admit I don’t understand what you — —”

Li Yuan interrupted with a wave of his hand—and again the faint smile flickered on his lips.

“Just a mo’!” he said. “I believe that is the expression, isn’t it?—a classical heritage from the war. There is nothing to prevent you from carrying out your original plan.”

“Nothing to prevent it!” ejaculated Ronald. “Why, if I— —”

But again Li Yuan interrupted.

“Every member of this crew,” he said, “is a picked man. There are times when the *Sen-Chu* does not cruise altogether for pleasure. We will not discuss that—now. It will never be known that *anyone*, much less a doctor, was picked up at sea. There was no survivor from the *Watabi* so far as the *Sen-Chu* knows. Also, I can procure for you, under the most favorable auspices, an entrée to Whitie Jahal’s dive—or, should I say, to his heart and confidence?”

The color came into Ronald’s face. His hands clenched.

“By God!” he whispered. “Do you mean that?”

“In spite of Oxford,” replied Li Yuan phlegmatically, “I still possess the Oriental mind. Shall I rehearse the details of the debt I owe you? My life—my most valued asset. My life—under circumstances that you believed virtually entailed the sacrifice of your own. And incidentally I pass over Ah-tang’s threat, though I can assure you it was no idle one. The score is large. But so, too, are my reserves. Let us hope that they are adequate. I have many sources of information—a thousand eyes that I can command. You go ahead and fraternize with the delectable Whitie Jahal and carry out your original intention of secretly letting your co-executor—Sarlow was the name, wasn’t it?—know that your demise is premature. I’ll have a go at a few other angles. And remember that bit of jade. I’ll be in touch with you when perhaps you least expect it.”

Ronald leaned tensely forward. A vision of Gresham in the *Watabi's* cabin swam before his eyes.

“You’ll do this?” he cried out fiercely.

But Li Yuan did not answer immediately. Li Yuan had closed his eyes. When he spoke presently it was as though he were communing with himself.

“Yes,” drawled Li Yuan of Oxford, “rather damned sporting, you know. Quite a spiffing set of tools to dig a chap’s insides out with! What?”

CHAPTER VIII

UNDER COVER

LIKE all Gaul, Whitie Jahal's domain was divided into three parts; one of which was inhabited by the scum of the earth, brown, yellow, black, and white alike, that frequented his gambling hell; another by the devotees, of racial origin quite as diversified, who breathed out their vital organs by way of incense on the altar of the God of Poppy; and the third by sailors for dubious reasons without a ship, beachcombers whose frailties might be turned to good account, and refugees from justice of equal potential value, all of whom enjoyed, temporarily, the benign protection of his boarding-house department—the unhallowed portal of which latter, incidentally, opened on a narrow alleyway as evil smelling and of as ill repute as Singapore could boast!

It was early evening, and Ronald, who, to those who did not know him, had been in a deplorable state of intoxication since his introduction to Whitie Jahal in the late hours of the night before, raised his head and looked around him. Half a dozen nondescript characters, intensively down-and-outers, sat at a meal that could be designated as neither supper nor dinner; it was simply food—of a sort. His eyes fixed on the unkempt and disheveled figure of a young man opposite him.

“Awful chow!” exploded the other. “My God! My name's Smith—Percival Smith. Member of the House of Lords and all that, you know. Just making a little hurried trip around the world before the next session. What? I don't think I've met you before.”

Ronald hiccupped.

“Curle's my name,” he stated. “Bob Curle.”

The self-styled Percival Smith became immersed in a newspaper that he dug out of his pocket. Ronald resumed a valiant attack on the unsavory dish of component parts unknown that lay before him.

Presently Smith jerked his eyes up from the newspaper.

“I say, my word!” he exclaimed. “What do you think of this *Watabi* mess, anyway?”

Ronald had learned in the school of Li Yuan. He shook his head.

“Whash thash?” he inquired thickly. “Thish stuff I'm eating?”

The man opposite smiled brightly.

“My dear stewed one,” he explained patiently, “the *Watabi* was a trading steamer that was burned at sea about a month ago with a catastrophic loss of life—I think that was the term used, if my memory fails me not. Apart from a few native survivors that were picked up, nothing has been heard of her since. But in the paper to-day appear the names of at least some of the white passengers who were aboard, none of which were known before, and all of whom are now given up for lost.”

“Thash all right,” said Ronald with heavy approval.

But Ronald’s immediate neighbor on his right leaned eagerly across the table. Ronald glanced at the other. This man was well on in years, gray-haired, unshorn, and unshaven; and his attire consisted of a singlet and cotton trousers that had once been white. Hidden behind a hiccough, Ronald smiled grimly and pityingly. This man must have started his downward career late in life, or gin and the tropics would have finished him long ago.

“I’m Marty Taggat,” said the dissolute one. “Old Marty. You’ve all heard of me. Lived out here all my life, though I ain’t what I once was. Know everybody. Read us about it.”

The “Member of the House of Lords” eyed the other speculatively.

“It’s a longish bit of writing,” he objected. “A couple of columns of it. It would make *dry* reading. Have you got the price?”

Old Marty slumped back in his seat.

“’Ave a heart!” he pleaded.

Percival Smith relented.

“Oh, right-o!” he said. “But having read it to myself once, I won’t read it again. I’ll give you the gist of it.”

“Nobody gives a damn about it!” observed a nasal voice from the extreme end of the table. “But shoot just the same! Any port in a storm! You sound like a good talker.”

Mr. Percival Smith looked pained.

“You do me an injustice,” he complained. “I’m brilliant.”

“And I’m from Boston, and I don’t care who knows it,” stated the owner of the nasal voice with modest irrelevance. “I’ll tell the world! Mate on the *Sarah J.* till the old man got to raising hell just because— —”

“Aw, stow it!” interjected another voice in blatant Cockney. “Give ’is lordship ’arf a chance!”

A lull fell upon the noisy mastication of food.

Percival Smith smiled blandly around upon his audience.

“Well, it’s like this,” he said. “From what’s here, and so far as is now known, the last place the *Watabi* touched at was Taletee. The news that’s in the paper to-day comes from there. It seems that a chap named Gourlay, the manager of a plantation there, wrote a letter that has just arrived by devious ways and has come into the hands of one Peter Sarlow here in Singapore, who— —”

Old Marty nodded.

“That’s right!” he announced. “Know ’em both. Pete Sarlow an’ me is good friends, though I ain’t seen him lately. He staked me to a quid a couple of years ago.”

“He must be an easy mark!” commented Smith sweetly. “Well, to continue. It seems that a few weeks before the *Watabi* put in at Taletee, the owner of the plantation of which Gourlay was the manager, a man named Michael Ward died and— —”

“Knew him!” broke in Old Marty triumphantly. “Knew him well. So he’s dead, is he? Well, what d’ye know about that!”

“Nothing!” protested Smith plaintively. “Not a thing! Take my word for it—and, if it’s not asking the impossible, will you bloody well close your face? Now, where was I? It seems that this Peter Sarlow is Michael Ward’s agent and general man of affairs here. Hence Gourlay’s letter to him. Well, in his letter Gourlay mentions having met two of the *Watabi*’s passengers on the night the fated ship sailed from Taletee. He does not mention any others, so the presumption is that there were no others then on board. The names of these two men—” he consulted the newspaper—“were Grayson and Hillwood, and— —”

Old Marty was irrepressible. He sucked in his breath.

“Knew both of them!” he declared. “So they’re gone, too. Gawd!”

“Blimy!” ejaculated the Cockney. “I asks you to tike a look at ’im! A bloomin’ hencyclopedia on two legs!”

“Very neatly put,” approved Percival Smith. “I was about to say an animated Who’s Who, but that fades into insignificance. Might I, however, suggest, my worthy Marty, that you ought to be in print? And again that you do not interrupt the flow of my discourse?”

“Broiled swordfish, or maybe mackerel, with a pot of baked beans and honest-to-God brown bread,” mentioned the man from Boston, entirely out of order and licking his lips reminiscently; “and to hell with Chicago and the racketeers! Also this swill of Whitie Jahal’s!”

“It seems,” resumed Percival Smith with commendable forbearance, “that on the night in question, the night that the *Watabi* sailed from Taletee,

there also embarked upon her one Dr. Ronald Ward, the son of the plantation owner, who had been summoned to his father's bedside, or words to that effect, so that— —”

“Turned out to be a doctor, did he?” Old Marty broke in anew. He wagged his head sagely. “I always said he'd go in for some kind of learning.”

Percival Smith smiled thinly.

“I take it,” he observed politely, “that you were quite well acquainted with him, too.”

“Sure!” asserted Old Marty. “Didn't I say so?”

“By implication, certainly,” admitted Percival Smith blandly. “And so, perhaps, you'll tell us a little something about what he looked like. It's always interesting to get first-hand information about celebrities. What?”

Old Marty scratched his head.

“Well,” he said, “he had blue eyes or gray eyes, I ain't sure which, but it was one or the other, an' he had lightish hair, an' —an' I dunno but that's all.”

Ronald stole a glance at the old down-and-outer beside him. Was the man merely a consummate liar? He had no recollection of the other.

“Excellent!” approved Percival Smith heartily. “So, naturally, you'd know him again if ever you saw him.”

“Ain't no doubt about it,” declared Old Marty. “Him an' me was good friends.”

Percival Smith stuck his tongue in his cheek, and leered at Old Marty.

“Then you must have carried the dear little chap's image graven on your heart this many a year,” he chuckled, “because this paper states that he left here when he was a kid of ten or so and has never been back since.”

A guffaw went up from around the sumptuous board.

Old Marty scowled.

“You think you're smart, don't you?” he snarled. “Well, you can go to hell! I didn't say I'd seen him for a long time. All I said was that I'd know him again if ever I did, an' I'll tell you why. Back in those days his dad was living ashore an' had a sort of warehouse, an' I was a clerk in one alongside. The kid used to come down often, an' I saw a lot of him. Maybe to-day I wouldn't recognize him by his face, an' of course he'd have forgotten me; but I'd know him again after I'd been with him ten minutes, an' I'll tell you why. He had a trick even then that I'll bet has grown up with him. He got it from his dad, I reckon, 'cause the old man always used to kind of pull at his

ear every time he got to wonderin' about anything, an' the kid did the same. Say, we used to talk about it. See?"

Ronald's hand, instinctively halfway to the lobe of his left ear, dropped back to the table. Again he glanced at the other. Out of the past came a hazy memory. The man hadn't been "Old Marty" then; he had been Martin—Martin something—Martin Taggat, of course. The man hadn't been lying after all. It was equally certain, however, that Old Marty had not recognized Ronald Ward in the man who sat beside him.

"Blimy!" murmured the Cockney. "'E tells it well. Hi'd almost 'arf believe 'im."

Percival Smith cocked a solemn eye at Old Marty.

"Yes, very well done," he agreed. "Imagination when it is quick on the uptake is a superlative art that — —"

"It ain't imagination!" snapped Old Marty angrily. "It's the truth, an' I can prove it. Anybody that knew the kid 'ud tell you — —"

"Oh, all right, all right!" interrupted Percival Smith hastily. "Anyway, there being no other names mentioned here, except of course those of the captain and officers, that ends the story. *Requiescat in pace.*"

"What the hell is that?" demanded the man from Boston.

"I'm sorry!" apologized Percival Smith. "It was merely an obsolete way of saying that they are all now damned well dead."

"Blimy!" murmured the Cockney.

"All dead!" said Old Marty mournfully.

"Once on the *Sarah J.*," began the man from Boston, "I — —"

Ronald lurched heavily up from his seat and began to make unsteady progress across the room toward a tier of bunks at the farther end.

"That's the boy, Curle!" applauded Percival Smith, cutting in on the Bostonian's loquacity. "Go on and sleep it off."

Ronald swung ponderously around.

"Thash whash I'm going to do," he replied with owlsh gravity—and continued on his way.

He crawled into the ill-favored bunk that had been allotted to him. There was no such thing as privacy in Whitie Jahal's establishment, where, for instance, the boarding-house guests ate, slept, and sometimes washed, all in the same room, the filth of which had accumulated, apparently undisturbed, for many a year. But the guests as a rule were not fastidious. They could not afford to be—and Whitie Jahal was no philanthropist!

Ronald turned his face to the wall. This was the nearest approach to privacy he could hope for. It was too early to put his plans for the night into execution for a little while yet—and Old Marty had given him food for serious consideration. He was thankful to Old Marty. He had never before given even a passing thought to that little mannerism of his. He was acutely conscious of it now. It did not take much to betray a man—or identify him, either! He would be extremely careful in that little particular hereafter!

But there was a great deal more than Old Marty's unexpected and somewhat startling appearance on the stage that he wanted to think over now. There was that letter from Gourlay—that account in the newspaper. Every white man on board given up for dead—and Dr. Ronald Ward among them. Yes, that was what he was counting on. Gresham's name naturally hadn't been mentioned, but the gold skull killers had been only too well aware that Gresham was aboard, and, though they might never really know whether he had been murdered or not, since the actual killer himself had perished, Gresham would, *ipso facto*, in their minds be added to the list of those who were lost. That took care of Gresham. So far, everything was going well.

His immediate concern now was with Peter Sarlow and Andrew Robb—and, of course, Whitie Jahal. Of the two former, he planned to see Sarlow tonight—when it got a little later, since obviously he had to reach Sarlow by stealth—and through Sarlow he would be able naturally to get into touch with Robb. Sarlow would have suggestions to make as to the best way of warning Robb—providing, of course, that Andrew Robb was not already aware of his peril, and had not already even taken flight just as Gresham had done. That remained to be seen. There were a lot of things to be discussed with Sarlow. Perhaps his father might in some measure at least have confided in Sarlow—perhaps his father might even have told Sarlow the whole inside story of what had happened on that last voyage he had made on the *Hawk*.

And then, of course, there was Whitie Jahal.

Ronald turned slightly over in his bunk at the sound of a sudden disturbance from the far end of the room. The "Member of the House of Lords" and Old Marty had got hold of a bottle somehow. Perhaps Old Marty had a few hidden coins after all; perhaps Smith had paid. It didn't matter. The others who had been at the table were gone. Smith was teasing the old man and seemed to be enjoying it hugely, the while Old Marty pounded violently on the table and gave voice to earnest profanity.

Ronald could not make out what was being said, nor was he at all interested; but, his mind diverted for the moment from his own problems, he

found himself speculating mechanically about Percival Smith. The man certainly aroused curiosity. Smith was unquestionably well educated—and, backed up by that education, was as smooth and sharp a stick as could be found anywhere among the driftwood of the East! Probably clever, too—presumably a crook. But there was something likable about the chap! Where had he fallen from the heights? Where had he come from? Did Whitie Jahal know who he was? Not likely. Whitie Jahal did not ask many questions. Why should he—while the cash held out? And even when that failed, Smith, like everybody else in the fold, was always a potential asset. Smith would probably wake up some morning with a head like a barrel to find himself shanghaied—and Whitie Jahal would have got his money back! That was Whitie Jahal's way of doing things, if the inside information supplied through Li Yuan was correct—which it undoubtedly was.

Ronald turned over to face the wall again. That brought him back to Whitie Jahal and his own introduction to that worthy. His mind rehearsed the happenings of the last few days. He had been surreptitiously transferred from the *Sen-Chu* to the Chinese boat colony here in Singapore. He did not know whether the *Sen-Chu* had sailed away again or not, or even if Li Yuan himself had landed. Li Yuan had not been communicative. But there had been something in Li Yuan's eyes and the parting clasp of his hand that had been more eloquent than words.

"I am quite sure," Li Yuan had drawled, "that our paths will cross again in the near future. Trust the sampan man, and remember that piece of jade. Carry on—and good luck!"

Ronald smiled grimly to himself. Li Yuan had supplied him with a well filled money belt, an excellent automatic—and a reputation even more disreputable than the clothes he now wore, the which he had donned just before leaving the *Sen-Chu*.

For a night and a day he had lain doggo beneath the mat canopy of a sampan in that strange floating colony of several thousand Chinese, some of whom never put foot on shore. But the time so passed had not been irksome. Apart from the interest and lure involved by the novelty of his surroundings, he had had plenty to occupy his mind. Li Yuan had lost no time. The sampan owner, one Weng-Kow by name, had brought him several clippings from the Singapore papers dated some weeks before. A passenger liner bound for Brisbane had picked up one of the *Watabi's* boats containing a few native survivors and had wirelessly the somewhat incoherent story that had thus been obtained. But the story embraced the essentials—the fire, the fight in which all the white men besides many of the natives had died, the swamping of many boats, and the almost total loss of life.

Ronald nodded to himself. The disaster that had overtaken the *Watabi* had been known within a few days of the time it had occurred; and that, plus Gourlay's letter establishing the fact that Dr. Ronald Ward had been on board, now definitely disposed of—Dr. Ronald Ward. Quite so! Nothing could be better.

And then again Li Yuan had shown his hand. He, Ronald, could probably on his own have become one of Whitie Jahal's boarders with the same facility as Smith, or Old Marty, or the Cockney, or the Boston mate who had been fired out of his job, or any of the other human hulks who had found an unholy haven here; but he would then have been on exactly the same footing as all the others, and the cultivation of Whitie Jahal to the point of intimacy, which was the main object he had in view, would have been extremely difficult. As it was now, the way toward establishing confidential relations with Whitie Jahal had been made smooth. Last night in the sampan, or, rather, in the early morning hours, he had been awakened to find a strange Chinaman bending over him.

"You know me," the other had said in excellent English. "I am Chinese Johnnie. We have done much crooked work against the law together—in Shanghai, in Hong-Kong."

Bewildered, Ronald had shaken his head.

Chinese Johnnie had lighted a match—to disclose Li Yuan's jade plaque lying in the palm of his other hand.

Again the grim smile twitched at Ronald's lips. They had talked together for an hour. Li Yuan's power appeared to be limitless! Chinese Johnnie, it seemed, was, like Whitie Jahal, a man of substance in the underworld of Singapore, and for perhaps the first time in his life was playing a part approaching that of a stool pigeon. Chinese Johnnie had vouched for the fact to Whitie Jahal that Bob Curle was a versatile and accomplished crook and one whose valuable criminal propensities could be turned to good account for the mutual benefit of all three concerned. It was all quite simple, coming from Chinese Johnnie, and Whitie Jahal had fallen for it without hesitation. He, Ronald, it was made to appear, had helped Chinese Johnnie in several questionable ventures, mainly in the opium trade; and recently in Hong-Kong, afraid that his activities were beginning to attract police attention, had thought it advisable to leave. He had come to Singapore. Chinese Johnnie would have been glad to take him entirely under his own wing, but if the two were known to be together, the connection might seem too pointed. Had Whitie Jahal understood? Whitie Jahal had! Also Whitie Jahal had many questionable irons of his own in the fire, and to have a whole-hearted scoundrel at his elbow who could be trusted to be neither squeamish nor

disloyal was worth many pounds, shillings, and pence to him. And on those points Chinese Johnnie's eulogy and assurance had left no room for doubt in Whitie Jahal's mind.

Ronald heard Percival Smith and Old Marty leave the room, but he now paid no further attention to them. Chinese Johnnie had supplied him with all the intimate details that were necessary anent their supposed dealings together in Shanghai and Hong-Kong, and he was going over these again now in his mind. It was quite all right. That hour together on the sampan had been fruitful!

And then Chinese Johnnie's last words:

"Whitie is expecting you to-night. Weng-Kow will show you the way. I told Whitie that sometimes you drank much, so, if you are a good actor, go to him in that fuddled way to-night."

"Why?" Ronald had asked.

"Because," Chinese Johnnie had answered phlegmatically, "you will have no questions to answer until you have had a chance to look around you; and afterward such a condition from time to time may be of service to you. To the eyes and ears of a drunken man who is not drunk, many things may be seen and heard that would otherwise be cautiously hidden from him."

The advice had been excellent. Chinese Johnnie was a man of crafty wisdom. Not only had the introduction to Whitie Jahal passed off without mishap; but his, Ronald's, sustained state of insobriety through the day was standing him in good stead now. To-night he wanted to devote entirely to Peter Sarlow. To-night he wanted no contact with Whitie Jahal that might interfere with his plans—and, being seemingly still more than mildly intoxicated, Whitie Jahal would certainly leave him alone. Afterward, after his conference with Sarlow to-night, he and Whitie Jahal would see a great deal more of each other!

Ronald's thoughts swung off at a tangent and became sketchy. It ought to be pretty nearly time to go. . . . Weng-Kow was probably waiting out there in the alleyway to show him the way to Sarlow's house. . . . Sarlow lived somewhere outside the city. . . . A powerful brute Whitie Jahal! . . . And ugly as sin, with one side of his nose laid almost flat on that pasty-yellow face of his. . . . Cruel, cunning, a physical mountain of moral putrescence, but not the head and brains of these gold skull killers. . . . Not enough intelligence to have engineered the murder of Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne in London. . . . Undoubtedly a lieutenant, though, high up in the service, and —

A hand fell heavily on Ronald's shoulder. He had heard no footsteps cross the room. He lurched up in his bunk and blinked his eyes in inebriated

fashion. Here was Whitie Jahal himself. Stealthy as a cat in his approach! Ronald's blinking eyes noted the other's bare feet.

"Oh, 'ello, Whitie!" he said thickly. "Whash matter?"

Whitie Jahal scowled.

"You damned well got to sober up, that's what the matter!" he snarled. "Savvy? There's mabbe a little job or two to do—mabbe to-morrow or the next day. Get that?"

Ronald gained unsteady feet on the floor.

"I shay," he said earnestly, "thash all right." He glanced furtively around him and lowered his voice. "I getsh you. Never touch—hic—a drop when I'm working. You ask Chinese Johnnie. Sign the pledge—hic—right now. Be all right in the morning. Think I'll—hic—go out now and get a little fresh air."

Whitie Jahal smirked threateningly.

"Well, see that you don't get anything else!" he growled as he turned away. "You mind what I say!"

CHAPTER IX

THE IMPOSTOR

PETER SARLOW'S residence, on the outskirts of the city, was surrounded by grounds luxuriant with tropical growth.

Weng-Kow pointed from the roadway to where some lights showed through the trees.

"That him house," he said.

Ronald glanced up and down the road. There appeared to be no one in sight.

But instead of following the well kept drive, Ronald dodged in among the trees, and, with Weng-Kow at his heels, made his way cautiously forward to within some few yards of the house, where, still hidden by the foliage and trees, he could take stock of his surroundings. The house, he now saw, was extensive in size and built in bungalow style. A wide veranda, onto which a number of rooms opened directly by means of latticed doors, faced him. Some of these doors were open. He nodded approval. Airy and cool!

Sarlow, he knew, was not away from Singapore. Weng-Kow had established that fact the day before. But whether Sarlow was in the house yonder at this precise moment was another question. Well, what did it matter? He had the whole night before him and could afford to wait if necessary. The really vital factor involved was the means he employed in making contact with Sarlow.

Ronald's mind swiftly reviewed the situation. His business with Sarlow, to put it mildly, was of a strictly private nature, and both for the sake of his own safety and the success of his plans it was essential that his interview with the other be surrounded by the utmost secrecy. He could not afford to apply for admittance to the house in the usual manner and so risk future recognition by any of the servants; but, that quite apart, he did not want to talk to Sarlow in there at all. That was the greatest risk of all—the risk of being overheard. The tropics were renowned for thin partitions! He would have to inveigle Sarlow into coming out here. That was why he had kept Weng-Kow with him. After he had got hold of Sarlow he would send Weng-Kow back to his sampan again.

His eyes still searched the house. Though some of the rooms were lighted and some of the doors open, there did not seem to be anyone about. That large room just opposite where he stood and into which he could see

quite distinctly was evidently the living room, and the fact that it in particular was unoccupied was not at all promising. He turned to Weng-Kow.

“Well, carry on!” he said in an undertone. “From the looks of things I’m inclined to think Mr. Sarlow either hasn’t come home yet or else has gone out for the evening. If he’s not in, find out what time he’ll be back. If he’s there, give him the message I’ve told you to give him. You remember? Tell him there’s a man out here wants to see him about the voyage of the *Hawk*. That’ll fetch him. But mind you give it to him privately and that you’re not overheard. I don’t want —”

“Listen!” Weng-Kow interrupted in a whisper. “Somebody come. Mabbe that him now.”

Footsteps approaching the house sounded from the drive near at hand. A man’s form passed by, but it was too dark and there were too many intervening trees to permit of anything in the way of identification save that he wore European clothes. Ronald watched the other. Presently the man stepped out into the open space between the edge of the trees and the house. The man’s back was of course turned, but he had come into clearer view.

“Him not Sarlow,” stated Weng-Kow abruptly. “Him six-foot man. Too high. Him visitor.”

“Damn!” Ronald muttered irritably. “Well, I suppose we’ll have to wait, that’s all.”

Ronald mechanically watched the newcomer. The man mounted the veranda steps and went to the front door. After a moment the door was opened by a Malay servant. A whimsical smile crossed Ronald’s lips. It was as though he were occupying a choice seat at a talkie. He could see everything, and he was so close that he had quite plainly heard the other ask for Mr. Sarlow. And now the man was admitted and the door was closed again.

So Peter Sarlow was in the house! Well, that was something. The wait would at least be no longer than this chap’s stay.

The figurative motion picture again! The next scene was being shown on the screen. The Malay servant was ushering the visitor into the living room. This was a much better view. A close-up, as it were. He could almost have reached out and touched the veranda, and, with the latticed door wide open, he would, if he chose to enact the rôle of eavesdropper, be able to hear every word that was said in the living room. He would mention that to Sarlow later on. It was all very well to grow trees and thick foliage to practically the edge

of one's veranda; they were doubtless shady and picturesque, but there might come a time when— —

Ronald gave a sudden start. The Malay servant had departed, and the visitor had turned now full face to the veranda. Ronald rubbed his eyes incredulously. No, there wasn't any mistake. Percival Smith! The "Member of the House of Lords!"

Ronald's brows drew together as he stared at the unkempt and disheveled figure before him. What had brought the man here? What had Percival Smith to do with Peter Sarlow? Who was he, anyhow? That newspaper report! Had Whitie Jahal anything to do with Smith's visit? Whitie Jahal was interested in the *Watabi* disaster both on Gresham's and his, Ronald's, account. Sarlow was the source of information. Was this smooth and facile-tongued Percival Smith by any chance an established tool of Whitie Jahal—of the same status, for instance, that he, Ronald, was about to assume, with that worthy? Or was he even more than that? One of those on the inside—hiding his identity behind the rôle he played at Whitie Jahal's? One of the links that he, Ronald, had hoped to pick up through his association with Whitie Jahal? A long shot, perhaps! But why not? It was quite possible. This so-called Smith, back there in Whitie Jahal's this evening, had shown himself possessed of more than enough mental agility to make such a theory at least tenable.

Ronald placed his lips close to Weng-Kow's ear. Weng-Kow, he was convinced, was a lot more than the mere owner of a sampan in the floating Chinese colony.

"You know a good deal, I fancy, about what goes on underneath around here in Singapore," he said. "Did you ever see that man before? Do you know who he is?"

Weng-Kow shook his head.

"No him know," he whispered back.

Ronald's eyes fixed again on the interior of the living room. Another man was just entering. Peter Sarlow, of course. He must have met Sarlow many times as a child, but he did not recognize the other now any more than he supposed Sarlow would recognize him. But he remembered Captain Barnley's description of the man: "I'd say he was around fifty-four or five—a queer-looking little beggar, brown as a berry, with a pair of black eyes sharp enough to look through a bulkhead, and as active as a monkey." Sarlow *was* a queer-looking little beggar, almost dwarf-like in stature, with an uncommonly large head perched on uncommonly wide shoulders, and

Percival Smith had swung around to face the other.

“Mr. Peter Sarlow?” he inquired politely.

Peter Sarlow’s sharp black eyes—quite in accordance with Captain Barnley’s description—seemed to dance up and down over the bedraggled figure that confronted him.

“Yes,” he answered. “And you?”

“I did not give my name,” Smith smiled, “because I was wondering if you would recognize me. Do you?”

Sarlow shook his head.

“No, I do not,” he replied. “As a matter of fact, I am quite sure I have never seen you before in my life.”

Smith laughed pleasantly.

“Oh, yes, you have,” he said. “Many times—many years ago.”

Again Sarlow shook his head.

“I do not know you,” he said.

“I am Ronald Ward,” said Smith.

Ronald, his jaw dropped, stared across the intervening space in a sort of stunned amazement. And then his eyes narrowed slightly. This was a bit thick! What was the man up to? What was coming next?

Sarlow was leaning forward and staring tensely up into the taller man’s face.

“Ronald Ward!” he ejaculated heavily. “But— —”

Smith laughed pleasantly again.

“Yes, I know!” he interrupted. “I suppose you must have heard from Gourlay. Lost on the *Watabi* and all that—only, instead, I’m here, thank God! And, if you’ve heard from Gourlay, you’ll know that Father’s dead.”

Sarlow’s face had softened.

“Yes, I know that,” he said.

“I was rather hoping,” said Smith a little wistfully, “that you would remember me.”

“But you were only a child when I last saw you,” Sarlow returned in a kindly tone.

“Yes, of course,” admitted Smith. He pulled thoughtfully at the lobe of his ear. “I don’t suppose it really makes any difference, after all. The question of identity is— —”

Sarlow reached out suddenly and clasped one of Smith’s hands in both his own.

“My dear boy,” he broke in heartily. “Don’t say another word about that. Of course you’re Ronald Ward! Who else would you be, coming to me like this? And besides, that little habit which I see you have inherited from your father is more than enough in itself.”

Smith looked puzzled.

“Habit?” he inquired.

“Yes, tugging at your ear, the way your father always did. I’ve seen him do it thousands of times. And now I come to think of it, Ronald did too.”

“Oh!” said Smith. “I didn’t know.”

“Well, well!” beamed Sarlow. “And now?”

“Of course, it’s a longish story,” said Smith. “I don’t know whether any news has come in, or if you know anything about it.”

“A few native survivors were picked up,” Sarlow explained, “and from their accounts we know pretty well what happened. But we were led to believe that the captain and officers and all the white passengers aboard were killed.”

Smith nodded.

“In the fight around the boats, you mean? The whole of it is rather a ghastly bit of business. So far as I know I’m the only white man that came through—and that’s little short of a miracle. I was knocked out myself. I dare say I was taken for dead. But I got my senses back while they were getting the last boat away. I piled in somehow—I don’t know how. I won’t go into details now. They were all natives in the boat except myself. There were too many of them; but, as the days went by without food or water, the boat lightened fast enough. They began to die off like flies.”

“Good God!” Sarlow cried out in a shocked voice.

“Yes,” said Smith grimly, “I shan’t forget it. After that everything was more or less of a blank to me for—well, I don’t know how long. When I really got my bearings again I was in a Malay *campong* on an island somewhere. I suppose the boat drifted ashore. I don’t know how else it could have got there, for there wasn’t strength enough among the few who were left alive to pull an oar. I can’t say how long I was there, either. I fancy I was delirious at first. But finally a proa brought me here to Singapore. I only got here an hour or so ago, and I came at once to you.”

“Well, I should think you would!” exclaimed Sarlow. “Where else would you go?”

“Exactly!” smiled Smith. “Very decent of you! But the point is”—he waved his hand whimsically over his clothing—“I haven’t a stiver, and I

have a horrible suspicion that the Europa would hardly welcome me as an honored guest in this rig. So I am afraid you will have to stake me to a few pounds.”

“My dear boy!” expostulated Sarlow. “Of course! But this is not a matter of mere pounds, shillings, and pence. This is amazing. This is one of the most eventful and happy evenings of my life! Back from the dead, as the old saying has it, eh? I wish to God that old Michael were here to share it with me! But just a moment. There is someone here that you must meet.” He stepped out into what was obviously the hall beyond the living room. “Joan!” he called. “Joan, dear, please come at once! I have a marvelous surprise for you.”

Gradually there had been settling upon Ronald a sense of grim amusement; and now, as the specious Smith glanced furtively at the open doorway leading to the veranda as though not knowing what to expect and prepared if necessary for a hasty exit due to the introduction of someone who might possibly denounce him, the climax was reached, and Ronald laughed inwardly. Percival Smith was no tool of Whitie Jahal, much less had he the slightest connection with the gold skull murderers. Percival Smith was merely a brilliant opportunist and an accomplished liar. If he could get away with, say, ten pounds, though he probably hoped for more, he would be exceedingly pleased with himself for his night’s work. Quite so! And everything was in the plausible Mr. Percival Smith’s favor. Smith had fair hair and, as per Old Marty, “either blue or gray eyes.” The newspapers, with the valued additional if unwitting aid of Old Marty, had supplied Smith with all the information he required—and he had undoubtedly pumped Old Marty dry. It was rather apparent now that was what Smith had been up to when he had been drinking with Old Marty! It was all very obvious now! He, Ronald, remembered Smith’s comment to the effect that Sarlow must be an easy mark to have parted with a quid to Old Marty; also he remembered Smith’s reference to imagination as being a superlative art if it were quick on the uptake—and in that qualification at least Smith’s imagination left nothing to be desired.

Ronald’s lips hardened, and yet there still remained a whimsical droop at the corners of his mouth. It was a relief in one way to know just where Smith stood; but, on the other hand, Mr. Percival Smith’s cool impersonation of Dr. Ronald Ward complicated matters very materially. Of course, the blighter couldn’t be allowed to get away with it—but that was where some of the complications came in. Percival Smith was no fool. None better than Percival Smith understood that he could go just so far and no farther, and that eventually exposure would overtake him. He was merely playing the

market for a quick turn. What he could grab while the grabbing was good was that much in his pocket, and at the first sign of danger the curtain would ring down and Mr. Percival Smith would be heard of no more; but — —

Weng-Kow's elbow was digging into Ronald's ribs.

"She damn pretty girl!" whispered Weng-Kow judiciously.

"Yes," Ronald admitted to himself as his eyes held for an instant on the shapely little figure in a simple evening frock that had just entered the room, "a very pretty girl indeed." He liked the fresh out-of-door tan on her cheeks, and the sheen in her black hair, and he was rather sure there was nothing artificial in the rich color of her smiling lips; but, since she was a complete stranger to him, he was a great deal more interested in who she was, and why, in particular, her meeting with Dr. Ronald Ward should afford her, according to Sarlow, a marvelous surprise.

Peter Sarlow answered the questions for him.

"Joan," he said, "this is Dr. Ronald Ward—er—back from the dead, as it were. Ronald, this is Joan Robb—Andrew Robb's daughter."

Ronald drew in his breath. Andrew Robb's daughter! The cinema show was beginning to pile up the thrills. He hoped the dénouement would not be flat.

The girl was advancing toward Smith with both hands outstretched.

"Oh, this is wonderful!" she exclaimed happily. "And just as Mr. Sarlow says, for we had given you up for lost."

Smith, treading on uncertain ground now, was for the first time apparently not so sure of himself.

"It's—it's very good of you to take it like this," he said a little awkwardly as he shook hands. "Of course, I had no end of luck, and—and all that."

"Kiddies together, you said, Joan, when that letter from Gourlay about Ronald here came in," smiled Sarlow. "An amazing reunion! Never heard anything like it!"

Joan Robb shook an admonitory finger playfully at Sarlow.

"We were only tots then," she said. "Tea parties and all that sort of thing. The four-to-seven age, you know. And then, of course, I went away from Singapore. I would no more have known Dr. Ward again, I am sure, than he would have known me."

Ronald chuckled to himself. He could quite appreciate Smith's relief and gratitude at finding the crossroads so plainly marked!

Yes, Smith was entirely at his ease again. There was nothing forced in Smith's wryly humorous little smile.

"I know it is not at all complimentary," he said; "but I am afraid I am obliged to admit that is the case."

"Well, anyway," said Sarlow genially, "your fathers knew each other well, besides being very old friends of mine. Joan here has just come over from Batai, where she has left her father to do a little housekeeping on his own—which serves the old rascal right. She's on her way now for a jaunt in England, and— —"

"Yes," interjected Joan hastily; "but, good gracious, Mr. Sarlow, don't let's talk about poor little me. Just look at Dr. Ward! I don't know where he came from, but he looks half starved, and—and— —" She flushed slightly, hunting for a word.

"And wholly disreputable," supplied Smith with an engaging grin.

Joan's laugh rippled out musically.

"Well, yes, you do—really!" she agreed.

"Of course!" Sarlow joined in. "You are perfectly right, dear! I'm the delinquent. Forgetting my duties as a host. Excitement and all that. Ronald has asked for a few pounds in order to make himself presentable and then intends to go to the hotel."

Joan puckered up her lips.

"Oh!" she demurred.

"Which, of course, I shall not listen to for a moment," asserted Sarlow jovially. "You shall have all the money you want in the morning, Ronald—time enough then to see about outfitting yourself. To-night—yes, and as much longer as I can induce you to do so—you will stay here."

Smith fumbled with the lobe of his ear.

"But I couldn't think of it," he protested. "That's altogether too good of you."

"Nonsense!" returned Sarlow. "Not another word! I want you to consider this as your home in Singapore. And now, Joan, suppose you have the servants prepare a room for Ronald. I suggest the end one, opening on the front veranda, as being the most comfortable. Yes? And meanwhile, Ronald, you come along with me. A tub first, eh, my boy? My clothes won't fit you, but I am sure you won't begrudge Joan a laugh or two. Then the inner man. And after that, if you're not too tired, Joan and I will want to hear all about — —"

They were trooping out into the hall. Sarlow's voice died away. The room was empty. But Ronald, his brows pulled together, did not move. This had to be stopped, of course. But how? There were difficulties. Himself, for instance. Bob Curle couldn't have any hand in this. The minutes passed, and then a plan began to take vague form in his mind. He wanted to think it out. Well, plenty of time. Hours, if he decided that way. He touched Weng-Kow on the shoulder.

"Well, let's go!" he said.

"Then no see him to-night?" inquired Weng-Kow.

"No use!" Ronald answered. "That visitor has not only got center stage, but he is going to stay. We'll try it again to-morrow night, perhaps, or else dope out some other way."

"All right," said Weng-Kow imperturbably.

The two men, with the same caution they had employed in trespassing upon Peter Sarlow's private property, returned to the road and began to make their way back to the city. For the most part they walked in silence. Ronald was in no mood for talk; and besides, there would have been nothing to gain by discussing the matter with Weng-Kow. So far as to-night was concerned, Weng-Kow's services were at an end, and he was out of the picture. Also, perhaps, it might be just as well if Weng-Kow did not know everything. Weng-Kow was to be trusted, of course; but just the same—

The plan that had flashed sketchily into his mind while he had stood staring into Sarlow's emptied living room was beginning to unfold itself in more detail now as he walked along. Time to put in. Yes, of course. And the natural thing to do was to walk back with Weng-Kow and say good-night at Whitie Jahal's door. He didn't know Singapore. That would help him to keep his bearings—find his way back and forth alone. He wouldn't need a guide any more to-night. Then more time to put in—but he hadn't got so far as that yet.

Of course, there had been the obvious thing to do. He could still have managed with Weng-Kow's help to have Sarlow come outside. He would have had very little difficulty in showing Smith up as an impostor, and the probabilities were that instead of spending the night in one of Peter Sarlow's palatial bedrooms, the "Member of the House of Lords" would ignominiously spend it in clink! There was no conclusive reason that he, Ronald, could advance in order to induce Sarlow to take a lenient view of the case, for the fact that a spurious Ronald Ward had been detected and subjected to the treatment he deserved would, of course, in no way affect his, Ronald's, own under-cover relationship with Sarlow, since the *bona-fide*

Dr. Ronald Ward would not appear on the scene anyway. But he was very much inclined to believe that Sarlow would not lightly forgive the trick that had been played upon him, to say nothing of the cold-blooded abuse of his hospitality. Not so good for Mr. Percival Smith!

Ronald smiled a little queerly. In spite of the fact that Smith had completely disarranged his plans for to-night at least, he held no animosity against the other. As a matter of fact, instead of venom, he was conscious of a chuckle. There was something likable about Smith, his grin, and his amazing versatility as a liar! Also he could not help but admire the fellow's wits; and there was something of an appeal in the other's cool audacity and the art with which he played his self-selected rôle. All wrong, of course—but there it was. Smith hadn't got a shilling yet out of Sarlow—and wouldn't. All Smith would have got would be a good meal and a suit of clothes that didn't fit! His original expectations had not gone beyond the few pounds with which he had hoped to walk out of Sarlow's house; but his hopes by now must have risen to undreamed of heights. To have those hopes rudely dispelled before morning would be punishment enough. Yes, give the poor devil a chance to make a quiet get-away and continue his tour of the world before he took his seat again at the next session of the House of Lords!

Well, then—what? He found that his subconscious mind had been at work. That plan he had been mulling over! The details, coming into focus, were rather simple, after all. The main thing was that Smith should not recognize Bob Curle, his fellow boarder at Whitie Jahal's. Well, darkness would take care of that—a few hours from now when all the members of Sarlow's household were sound asleep. Smith was occupying the end room opening on the veranda. There would be no trouble about that, either. Possibly Smith might even leave the door open. Not an uncommon thing in the tropics, where a breath of air was priceless! Witness Talettee! In any case, it would be easy enough to attract the man's attention. Then a few well chosen whispered words, and Mr. Percival Smith would be on the wing!

They were getting into the city. Ronald nodded a final decision. Perhaps he was being a little quixotic, giving Smith a better break than that to which he was entitled. Well, why not? Damn it, he couldn't help liking Smith a little. A cheery sort of a down-and-outer! And all it would cost would be the loss of a few hours' sleep on one of Whitie Jahal's uninviting bunks! Perhaps he might have to make his peace with Sarlow later on for taking matters into his own hands; but that, on the face of it, wasn't a very serious matter. Yes, quite! All set!

He pulled thoughtfully at the lobe of his ear and looked suddenly at the Chinaman beside him. Another idea! He had two or three hours, possibly more, to put in—no use barging back to Sarlow's until it was a dead certainty that everyone there was, as Percival Smith would have said, locked in the arms of Morpheus, or words to that effect. Weng-Kow might still be, after all, of inestimable service to-night!

"Look here, Weng-Kow," he said, "are you in any hurry to get back to that sampan of yours?"

Nothing disturbed Weng-Kow.

"Me no hurry," he answered. "What you want?"

"Well," said Ronald, "I don't want to turn in for a bit yet, and I'd like to learn a few of the ropes. I don't even know where Chinese Johnnie hangs out, and besides, I've an idea that an introduction to some of the other dumps wouldn't do me any harm."

"That very good thing for do," assented Weng-Kow. "Mabbe to-morrow you like duck him nut. No can tell. Me show 'em all."

Ronald clapped Weng-Kow on the shoulder.

"Good!" he applauded. "Carry on!"

It was three o'clock in the morning when Ronald stood again on the roadway where it flanked the grounds of Peter Sarlow's home. But this time he was alone. Weng-Kow, of course, believed that, having seen enough for one night, he had gone to bed. He had left Weng-Kow at Whitie Jahal's door with instructions to return the next evening—and as Weng-Kow had disappeared in the murk of the alleyway, he, Ronald, had come back out here.

He shrugged his shoulders now, as he stepped silently in among the trees. It had all been a bit ugly. In the hours just past he had been in some rather sticky places! He had made many questionable acquaintances; he had hobnobbed with the native scum and the dregs of the white races; degenerates of the lowest types and of all colors had been his boon companions—and the moral stench of it all still hung heavy upon him. However, besides having put in the time, he was satisfied that what he had done had probably been very much worth while. He had established an entrée to half a dozen dens and dives that would perhaps be more than likely to stand him in good stead hereafter!

Again he shrugged his shoulders, and a grim smile came. There was little of the esthetic in the rôle he had cast himself to play! And nothing esthetic, either, in the way that Gresham or Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne had died—or in the way that Ronald Ward would die if ever he fell into the gold skull killers' hands! Well, the fight was on, and no quarter would be asked or given. God alone knew what the end would be—or when or where it would come! But meanwhile, for the immediate present, there was this little affair of Percival Smith.

Ronald was coming close to the house now. There was no light showing anywhere. Exactly! That, of course, was as he had planned this little excursion. Too bad the darkness would prevent him from seeing the expression on Smith's face when his rosy-hued bubble was pricked! He wondered if he would ever see Smith after to-night, since Smith and Singapore would from now on know each other no more. Perhaps somewhere, in some out-of-the-way place he might run across the man again and be able to tell him the inside story of it all. Smith, then, if he had the price, would be sport enough to insist on buying a drink—otherwise he would make no bones about begging one. That was Smith. An engaging sort of a vagabond! Yes, quite! That was why Smith was getting off so easily to-night.

Well, here was the veranda. He stood still and listened. Only the leaves whispering among themselves as the night breeze disturbed them. Nothing else! The end room was, of course, the one farthest away from the main entrance, since the entrance itself made the other end of the veranda. He moved forward again now, skirting the edge of the veranda until he came to the corner of the bungalow.

Again he stood still and listened. Only the leaves in the trees. What confidences were they exchanging with each other? What did they have to talk about? A queer thought! He suddenly felt a little queer himself. Like a thief in the night! He wasn't used to this sort of thing. Damned eerie all of a sudden! Nonsense!

He climbed cautiously up over the veranda railing. In the darkness he could just make out a latticed door directly in front of him. By the sense of touch he discovered that this was ajar. Good! All the easier, though he had more or less expected it, anyhow. Noiselessly he pushed the door a little farther open.

“Hey! Smith!” he whispered.

There was no answer.

“Hey! Smith!” he repeated—and took a chance on raising his voice slightly.

Smith’s slumber was apparently profound. Those rosy dreams!

“Hey! Smith!” he called again.

Not so good! A sudden sense of disquiet descended like a pall upon Ronald. Perhaps he had taken too much for granted. This was the end room, facing on the veranda, but Smith might not be occupying it after all. They might have decided for any number of reasons to have put him somewhere else. But if this wasn’t Smith’s room, what the devil was to be done? He couldn’t meander through the house in the black and rap on every door he came to, could he? No; but, at least, the first thing to do was to assure himself that Smith was not in here. It might not be merely a question of profound slumber. When Smith, at Sarlow’s invitation, had fortified the inner man there would undoubtedly have been a well filled decanter on the table—a sight that Smith had probably not set eyes upon in years. Sarlow would have imposed no restrictions—and Smith might not have denied himself!

Ronald pushed the door wider open, and stepped forward into the room.

“Hey! Smith!” he whispered once more.

There was still no answer.

And then Ronald ran into something. It yielded slightly, and yet at the same time there was rigidity about it. He put out his hand. It came into contact with human flesh—cold. And instantly, professionally, he knew.

“God!” he cried out under his breath.

He stood for an instant motionless, unnerved, his eyes straining through the darkness. There was death here. Indistinct outlines came. A bed . . . something protruding from it . . . the thing he had run into. . . .

He felt out again. It was a man’s arm, and the hand was clenched—*as though it held something*. A cold and merciless fury settled suddenly upon Ronald, displacing all other emotions. He forced the fingers a little apart; and then he struck a match, although he already knew what that death clasp held.

In the half-open hand lay a gold skull; and on the bed, in a welter of blood, like Gresham, lay Percival Smith.

The match burned down to Ronald’s fingers and went out. And again for a moment he stood there motionless in the darkness, but now his jaws were clamped, and his own hands were clenched. It wasn’t Percival Smith who lay there butchered—vicariously it was Dr. Ronald Ward. Smith had paid for his impersonation with his life.

Came then a twisted smile to Ronald's lips. This was the second time that Ronald Ward had died! Well, so be it! He reached out and closed the dead fingers again over the gold skull. Some day either he himself would be found like this, or else there would be an hour of reckoning in which payment from these murderers would be demanded and *made*—in full!

But the flare of the match had disclosed more than Smith lying there on the bed. He realized that he had absorbed other details. The door leading out into the hall was wide open. Why? Well, no matter for the present. There had been something else. A knife lying on the floor. A knife that, he now became aware, had subconsciously registered itself on his mind as being very much like the one the Malay killer had dropped on the *Watabi's* deck. He would rather like to examine that knife.

He dropped on his knees and began to feel out around him. A chair, displaced as his hand came in contact with it, made a slight creaking noise. He couldn't find the knife. No use fumbling around in the dark. He struck another match. Yes, here it was!

He picked up the knife and under the match flame began to examine it. It was practically identical with the one with which Gresham had been murdered! The same stone haft, the same blade tapering to a needle point, the same— —

Someone was standing out there in the hall just at the threshold of the open door. A woman in a dressing gown. The match flame seemed to flood the surroundings with a blazing light. Joan Robb!

There passed the space of time it would take a watch to tick—then her scream rang out and echoed and reëchoed through the house.

And with a bound Ronald reached the veranda, leaped the railing, and, the next instant, with the knife still clasped in his hand, was running through the dark.

CHAPTER X

PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

A HAND fell on Ronald's shoulder—not unexpectedly. It had happened before. This time he had heard that soft stealthy step coming across the floor. It was Whitie Jahal, of course—like a huge repulsive ape—bending over him.

“Where the hell were you last night?” demanded the other.

Ronald sat up in his bunk and grinned sheepishly. His alibi, so far as Whitie Jahal was concerned, was perfect. He had found his way back from the scene of the murder without mishap—but he had not come directly here. He had stopped for a word with Chinese Johnnie. Thereafter, as dawn was breaking he had been “assisted” into his bunk here by one of Chinese Johnnie's henchmen. Thanks to those hours with Weng-Kow and, later, Chinese Johnnie's ready coöperation, the trail of the night led only to one dive after another.

“Lots of places,” he said.

“So I heard!” Whitie Jahal snarled. “Brought in and dumped down here soused to the gills! You can't leave it alone, can you?”

Ronald glanced furtively around him. He had needed sleep, and he had slept late. The other bunks were empty. There was no one in the room save Whitie Jahal and himself.

“Aw, don't get sore, Whitie,” he pleaded. “There wasn't anything doing last night. You said there wouldn't be yourself.”

Whitie Jahal held a newspaper in his hand. He tossed it now on the bunk.

“Is that so!” he snapped. “Well, there was a murder! According to you and Chinese Johnnie, you're pretty well known to the police in Hong Kong and Shanghai, and what I want to know now is whether any of the lot here in Singapore could spot you on sight, too?”

Ronald pulled his hand nervously across his forehead.

“But I didn't commit any murder!” he protested.

A flash, an ugly leer, came and went in Whitie Jahal's eyes.

“I know damn well you didn't,” he growled. “But this ain't any ordinary murder, as you'll see when you read that paper, and the police'll be turning the town inside out. Savvy? How about it? Any of 'em know you if they come nosin' around here? 'Cause if you think they will, mabbe you'd better duck out of this joint and stay away for a week or so.”

Lose contact with Whitie Jahal! Ronald's eyes drifted disarmingly over the bestial countenance that confronted him. What part had this man played in last night's murder? Had he even been the actual killer?

"No fear!" he asserted. "There's none of them know me."

"All right, then!" grunted Whitie Jahal. "I was just giving you a chance, that's all."

"Sure!" said Ronald gratefully. "But I'm not worrying any about that." He circled his lips with his tongue. His voice dropped suddenly to a whisper. "Say, Whitie, what about that little job or two you said you were letting me in on? When do we get going?"

Whitie Jahal laughed unpleasantly.

"Don't worry any about that, either!" he answered shortly. "I'll use you all right when I get around to it. But I got something else to do first now; and it won't be to-night—if that's what you want to know! So you've got time to sober up. And see that you do! I told you that before."

"I won't get another binge on," said Ronald earnestly. "Honest, I won't."

Whitie Jahal spat skeptically on the floor.

"Not till next time, eh?" he sneered. "You're all alike! Smith's another one—only he owes me five quid. Been out all night. If you see him when he comes in, you tell him I want him."

Ronald reached carelessly for the newspaper lying on the bunk beside him, but his fingers tensed as they closed upon it.

"Righto!" he said cheerfully. "I'll tell him."

He watched the half-caste cross the room and disappear in the passage outside. That passage led past a filthy and uninviting bar into Whitie Jahal's gambling hell, where the scum of nations, black, brown, yellow, and white, mulled and swore and gamed and fought and paid tribute to that foul-faced human leech who had just left the room. There was another entrance to the gambling hell itself, of course, farther along the alleyway—camouflaged by a native shop of some kind. And there was an entrance somewhere to Whitie Jahal's pipe dive, but he, Ronald, did not know where it was. He had as yet glimpsed but little of Whitie Jahal's domain—only what cautious wanderings under inspired but intoxicated irresponsibility had afforded him. There was, for instance, a door that opened directly off the rear of the barroom that intrigued him. Yesterday, at various times, he had seen several men—Malays, he thought, in rather good European clothes—come into the bar, and, without stopping for a drink, vanish through that door. Where had they gone? Did that, too, lead into the gambling hell? It hadn't been during the usual hours for gambling. He, Ronald, would like to know more about

that door—and meant to. With Whitie Jahal definitely established as one of at least some authority among these gold skull murderers, it was more than likely that hidden somewhere here was a rendezvous of theirs, that Whitie Jahal's place was one of their lairs. He would very much like to know, for one thing, where Whitie's private quarters were!

His hands clenched suddenly. Tell Smith! So they didn't know they had killed a masquerader. Of course not! How could they? They had probably stabbed the poor devil in the dark; or, if there had been any light, Smith had been murdered by someone who hadn't recognized him—in which case Whitie Jahal himself could not have been the actual killer. A grim smile held for an instant on Ronald's lips. Well, sooner or later, if he won through, they would learn of their mistake in no uncertain way from him!

He reached out and picked up the newspaper. A headline in glaring type was flung full across the front page:

DR. RONALD WARD MURDERED HERE LAST
NIGHT

And then, two columns wide, prefacing the "story:"

SURVIVES WATABI DISASTER
ONLY TO MEET DEATH AT
ASSASSIN'S HANDS

ANOTHER GOLD SKULL ATROCITY

His own obituary!

There were columns of "story." He began to read the account rapidly. Following a brief statement of how, when, and where the murder had been committed, it proceeded to link up the present crime with the murder of Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne in London some two months ago. The two murders were identical. It recalled that Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne had sailed from Singapore the year before on Michael Ward's schooner, the *Hawk*; that Michael Ward had since died, but that Sir Henry had met with a hideous death in London, and now Michael Ward's son had been killed in precisely the same way. Had something happened on that voyage to inspire this unspeakable form of vengeance on the two families? (And here diatribes were not lacking!) Who were these fiends who butchered their victims clear across the world? What was back of this horror that boasted of its work by leaving behind a gold skull clasped in its victims' hands?

Ronald nodded tensely. Questions whose answers he would like to know himself! The diatribes at this point grew in vigor. He skimmed over them. Then the “story” became more descriptive. It detailed Dr. Ronald Ward’s arrival at Peter Sarlow’s home, and Dr. Ward’s own story of his escape from the *Watabi* as supplied by Sarlow; then, in detail, Joan Robb’s account of her discovery of the crime; and finally, in rather lurid realism, a description of the crime itself.

Ronald read only one part of the newspaper account over again, but that part he read and reread until he had absorbed every detail—Joan Robb’s story.

She had retired at about half-past eleven, she stated. Prior to that she and Mr. Sarlow had sat listening to Dr. Ward’s story of the *Watabi* disaster, his own escape and subsequent adventures. Both she and Mr. Sarlow would have liked to listen for hours longer, but Dr. Ward appeared to be rather done in, so they all decided to retire early. She went to her room, and, having prepared for bed, turned out her light and opened her door to supply a current of air. She heard Dr. Ward come along the hall a few minutes later and enter his room, which was almost directly across the hall from her own. Then she fell asleep; but her sleep was restless—she supposed because of the excitement occasioned by Dr. Ward’s return after everyone had given him up for lost. Suddenly she found herself wide awake. She heard a low scraping sound, as of a chair being moved on the floor, but did not at once place the direction from which it came; then she saw what she described as a faint glow, rather than a light, appear in Dr. Ward’s room and realized that his door too must be open. What prompted her to do so, she said, she did not know, but she got out of bed and stepped across the hall to the threshold of Dr. Ward’s room. A man was bending over the bed, a lighted match in one hand and a knife in the other. Dr. Ward lay on the bed covered with blood. And then she screamed—and the man turned and dashed through the opposite doorway giving on the veranda, leaped the veranda railing, and disappeared in the darkness. Asked if she could describe the murderer, her answer had been a rather curious one. It had seemed an eternity to her while she had stood there on the threshold of that room, but it could, of course, have been a matter of little more than a second or two; and the light was no more than the meager gleam of a match. The man, she was certain, wore European clothes, but whether he was a light-colored native or a white man tanned and browned by sun exposure she could not tell. And the face itself she could only describe as one that remained with her as the aftermath of some horrible nightmare. It had no detail. It was just a face. She could not

give it distinctive features, but it was one that she could never forget and would know again if she ever saw it.

Sustaining the rôle of one who had indulged too freely, Ronald had removed none of his clothes when he had been “helped” into his bunk. He felt in his pocket now for a cigarette and lighted it. He knew what she meant. Her description of him would not help the police very much, but *she* would recognize him again. He had wondered about that. He had no doubt of it now. And in her eyes, of course, he was the murderer.

He pushed the newspaper away from him and inhaled deeply on his cigarette. By leaping out of that room last night he had done the only thing he could have done—and still remain Bob Curle. And his one thought thereafter had been to make sure of an ironclad alibi for Whitie Jahal’s benefit. He had had no trouble in reaching Chinese Johnnie and in enlisting the other’s aid. He had merely told Chinese Johnnie that it was to pull the wool over Whitie Jahal’s eyes. And that was wholly sufficient, seeing that Chinese Johnnie was already involved in that respect. Quite! And after that his bunk here—but too brain-fagged and too physically weary to think clearly then. Just vague perplexities and questionings as he had fallen asleep. But now? There was no brain fag now.

Mechanically his fingers stole toward the lobe of his ear—and came to a sudden stop. A dangerous mannerism, that! Its mimicry, in the last analysis, was what had practically cost Percival Smith his life! Well?

A thought flashed upon him, stirring him uneasily. That knife! He had run from that room with the knife in his hand. What had he done with it? He could not for the moment remember. Instinctively he felt in his pockets—and then it all came back to him. The sight and touch of it, the realization that it was in his hand had nauseated him. He had flung a similar one in horror along the deck of the *Watabi*. He had hurled this one away from him—somewhere. Well, it didn’t matter, did it?

Another question! One that he had been dimly conscious of last night; one that the newspaper account revived now but did not answer. Percival Smith had obviously made no confidant of anyone. The “Member of the House of Lords” had, more or less on the spur of the moment, acted on what he had probably considered a brilliant inspiration by means of which he would annex unto himself a few pounds, proposing after that, of course, modestly to obliterate himself again here in Whitie Jahal’s as—Percival Smith. He had put his scheme into effect only in the evening, and yet during the night he had been murdered. How had the gold skull killers become so soon aware that “Dr. Ronald Ward” had, not only arrived in Singapore, but was in Peter Sarlow’s home?

Ronald's cigarette burned itself out while he considered this. Then he shrugged his shoulders. The gold skull killers were certainly not omnipotent, and there seemed to be only one answer—but it was simple and logical and probably the correct one. Inspired by Gourlay's letter, which had been made public by Sarlow, one of the newspapers yesterday had published the fact that Dr. Ronald Ward had been among those who had been aboard the *Watabi* at the time of the disaster. What would have been more natural than that during the course of the evening Sarlow should have telephoned the same paper the news that Dr. Ronald Ward had been saved and was in his, Sarlow's, house at that moment? Yes, there was very little doubt but that this was the explanation. It would not have taken long under those circumstances for the news to spread! Anyway, he would ask Sarlow about it.

Ask Sarlow? Ronald's brows drew sharply together. Here was the root of the perplexity that had assailed him as he had fallen asleep. This murder, his own connection with it, put a very different complexion upon an interview with Sarlow! He had little doubt but that, so far as Sarlow was concerned, he could still establish his identity and that his story would be accepted; but Joan Robb might not be so easy to convince. She would recognize him and would not be able to forget that he was the man she had seen standing over the bed. There was a psychological phase to it here where she was involved. But granted that both Sarlow and Joan Robb accepted him at face value, the police would inevitably have to come into the picture. Sarlow would be obliged to inform the police that the murdered man was not Dr. Ronald Ward. The police would demand Sarlow's reason for that statement, and his, Ronald's, story would come out. What would the police do then? Would *they* believe his story if he was faced with Joan Robb and she positively identified him as the man with the knife? Would they go even farther than that and keep their own counsel and permit him to remain under cover in the character of Bob Curle? If they wouldn't do this, his chances of running his quarry to earth became practically nil; and his own position became precarious in the extreme. Quite apart from the possibility of having the law to contend with, there was the certainty, once his identity was disclosed, that he would be practically at the mercy of the gold skull killers. The attack upon him on the *Watabi*, the swiftness with which death had reached his impersonator, was evidence enough of what he might expect.

Once more Ronald's fingers stole toward the lobe of his ear—and stopped to rub his chin in troubled meditation. He invited all this if he went to Sarlow—and yet it was more imperative than ever that Sarlow be told all the facts. From the standpoint of crass materialism there was the estate. Sarlow was co-executor of the will—and where before there had been only

surmise, Sarlow now would have what he would believe to be ocular proof that Doctor Ronald Ward, the residuary legatee, was dead! But there was something far more vital than that, and this latest murder, the third committed by the gold skull killers, brought the point at issue home to him now more forcibly than ever. It might already be too late, but at least an effort must be made to warn Andrew Robb. He, Ronald, did not know where Batai was except that it was an island somewhere, presumably, in the Archipelago; but Sarlow had, according to Captain Barnley, a fleet of vessels at his command, and would be able to act in this respect without delay.

And then, too, there was Joan Robb herself. Somewhere out of the subconscious there emerged now a sense of disquietude on her account. She was the *daughter* of Andrew Robb, and he was the *son* of Michael Ward. True, the analogy was not perfect, since he had inherited the vengeance that his father had escaped, and this did not apply in her case. Neither, however, did it render her immune! He did not like the thoughts that began to crowd in on him. Not a nice mental picture! However, Sarlow had said that she was on her way to England. Well, the sooner she sailed the better! In any case, here again Sarlow should be warned.

Ronald smiled suddenly at himself—half savagely, half pityingly. Since his course lay so obviously and clearly defined before him, why this hesitation on his part, why this debate with himself? Risking his own skin a bit? Was that it? Not heroic, perhaps, but, after all, not without some justification. Disclosure meant more than merely a matter of personal peril: it meant that his chances of bringing the authors of these vile murders to a final reckoning would be practically at an end.

Some of the “boarders” were coming into the room; the unkempt Chinese attendant was placing dishes on the table. It must be time for the midday meal. They were doing a lot of talking about the murder. Ronald listened. Smith’s name wasn’t mentioned. Smith’s absence apparently wasn’t noticed. Why should it be? In the realm of these down-and-outers, one was here to-day and gone to-morrow. Wholly commonplace! The only permanent abode a beachcomber ever had was his last resting place. Well, Smith, poor devil, had found his!

Ronald swung himself out of his bunk. In the last analysis, he was quite well aware that he had had no choice as to what he must do. He would see Sarlow, of course. But he had the right to tell himself that the secrecy with which it must be done, and the safeguards he had taken last night to preserve the rôle of Bob Curle, were more necessary now than then, and that he was fully entitled to exercise them on his own behalf. There would, however, be no chance of seeing Sarlow in private to-day—there would be too much

excitement out there, too much coming and going around Sarlow's house. He would have to wait till evening—until dark. Weng-Kow would help. Weng-Kow would be on hand again to-night out there in the alleyway. The one disturbing feature of it all, of course, which kept recurring to his mind, was the question of what the attitude of the police would be. But there was a possible way out of that. He could tread warily at first. He could disclose himself as Ronald Ward and pass on the essential warnings to Sarlow without necessarily disclosing himself as Bob Curle. Get Sarlow's reaction first, and, if it seemed advisable, refuse to divulge, on the ground of preventing police interference, the rôle he was playing or where he was to be found. Perhaps Sarlow would be the first to agree to that. Sarlow would, of course, be obliged to inform the police that the murdered man was not Ronald Ward; but if Sarlow were unable to go any further than that, Bob Curle remained an unknown quantity so far as the police were concerned. It remained to be seen. He would have to be governed by circumstances—decide on his course of action as his interview with Sarlow progressed. Meanwhile, there was the rest of the day to put in. Well, how better employ the time than right here? Perhaps a bit of luck would break for him. There was Whitie Jahal to watch—and that door. Those rather well dressed Malays that came and went!

Ronald joined his fellow boarders at table. Smith was the only absentee. Smith's absence still occasioned no surprise and but little interest, and the empty chair provoked only a single comment.

"I guess," said the man from Boston, "that Smith's put one over on Whitie, all right. Whitie was crowding him for the five quid he owed. If you ask me, Smith's flown the coop, and Whitie'll never see that bird or his five quid again—which serves the swine right!"

"Hi'll bloody well say it does!" agreed the Cockney heartily. "Give me 'arf a hope an' Hi'd hook it, too! Gord!"

That was all.

Rising finally from the table with the rest, Ronald crossed the intervening passageway and drifted into the barroom. Not an inviting place to spend the afternoon! In spite of the fact that it opened directly on the alleyway, it was grubby, hot, ill ventilated, and buzzed with flies. It boasted a few small dilapidated tables and a few dilapidated chairs; the bar itself was without ornament, a cheap affair sadly in need of paint. A few daubs, some framed and some unframed, as badly executed as they were suggestive, were plastered here and there around the walls. A fat and sleepy native of mixed origin and unhandsome features, who, Ronald had already learned, answered to the name of Haji, stood, or for the most part sat, behind the bar. But the

place was not without its compensations. Anyone coming in from the alleyway would have to cross the barroom in order to reach a certain door in which he was very much interested—that door there at the rear of the room!

Some of his fellow boarders had adjourned with Ronald to the bar. He stood them a drink. Then for a time he watched Old Marty and the Cockney as they quarreled over a game of cards. Apparently tiring of this, he picked up a discarded newspaper that he found lying on one of the chairs, procured what passed for a gin and tonic from the bar, and, carrying glass and newspaper with him, sat down at a table. But the table he so casually selected stood close against the wall and was within a foot or two of the door that had excited his curiosity. For a time he perused his week-old newspaper and sipped his drink—even Whitie could hardly find fault with such moderation!—then seemingly he became drowsy, and finally, with arms outspread across the table, pillowing his head, he appeared to sleep.

CHAPTER XI

OUTSIDE THE DOOR

PRESENTLY OLD MARTY and the Cockney went out. Occasionally the room was empty save for Haji, who sometimes, napping, snored; occasionally a thirsty one or two, unopulent in appearance, entered and departed. The afternoon dragged along. There had been no sign of Whitie Jahal. There had been no well dressed Malays coming and going through that door. No one had gone near it. It had not once been opened. The vigil grew almost insupportably irksome. Damn Haji! The man's naps never lasted long and weren't to be trusted anyhow. There had been no chance to get even a look through that door. Hours of it now! Was there any use sticking it longer?

And then suddenly Ronald sat up in his chair. Haji behind the bar became alert. Whitie Jahal was coming in through the alleyway entrance.

There was always a scowl on Whitie Jahal's repulsive and nose-flattened face, but it seemed to Ronald that it was deeper than usual now as the half-caste strode straight across the room and halted in front of the table.

Ronald got up on his feet.

"Listen, Whitie!" he said hastily. "I'm only tapering off. Give you my word I'm as straight as a string!" He pointed to his glass. "It's the only one I've had. You can ask Haji."

Whitie Jahal was obviously excited, and obviously for once was wholly uninterested in Ronald's degree of sobriety.

"Heard the news?" he flung out.

Ronald shook his head.

"No," he said. "I haven't heard any news. But then I've been asleep, anyhow."

Whitie Jahal laughed raucously.

"Well, I'll slip it to you, then. Hell of a joke! D'ye hear? Hell of a joke! The fellow that was murdered wasn't Dr. Ward at all."

Ronald stared, open-mouthed.

"Eh?" he asked feebly. "How do you know? Who was he, then?"

Whitie Jahal glowered now.

"Nobody knows," he said shortly. "He ain't been identified."

"Then how do you know he wasn't Dr. Ward?" Ronald demanded innocently.

“‘Cause a man named Bremner says he wasn’t!” said Whitie Jahal curtly.

Bremner! There could be only *one* Bremner qualified to make that statement. Rather queer, though! Still, why not? Dick Bremner was as likely to be in Singapore as anywhere else. Ronald’s face was blank.

“Who’s Bremner?” he inquired.

“Fellow off a ship that used to sail with Dr. Ward. Saw in the papers that Ward had had a knife stuck in him, and went ashore to spill some tears over his dead shipmate. Savvy? Only he found it wasn’t Ward!”

Whitie Jahal reached out suddenly, jerked open the door in front of him, passed through and, with another raucous laugh, slammed the door shut behind him.

Ronald sat down again. There was nothing mysterious on the other side of that door. He had caught a glimpse of a bed, a table and chairs. He had wanted to locate Whitie Jahal’s personal quarters, and he had obviously succeeded. So that was what took those well dressed Malays in there! This was where Whitie Jahal, then, held his private conferences.

Ronald listened. Whitie Jahal was in no good humor. He could hear the other mumbling to himself. These thin partitions of the tropics! He could even catch some of Whitie’s words. Whitie Jahal was indulging in a torrent of foul blasphemy.

Well, what now? He had been here so long that surely a little more patience was worth while. Whitie might have a visitor. This was a most excellent vantage point. He had been able to *hear* Whitie mumbling in there. Whitie had found him sitting here when he had come in, so no suspicions would be aroused in the half-caste’s mind if he continued to sit here; and in the eyes of Haji over there behind the bar the same thing applied. Perhaps, though, it was time to justify his presence a little further so far as Haji was concerned.

He got up from the table, replenished his glass at the bar, and returned to his seat. But, as he sat down again, his chair was closer to the wall than it had been before. On the other side of the partition a bed creaked. Whitie was evidently preparing to indulge in a late afternoon snooze.

So Dick Bremner was in Singapore! He and Bremner had made quite a few voyages together when Bremner had been first officer of the old *Saronia*. He wondered if Bremner had changed his berth, or if even the *Saronia* herself were in port on, say, a round-the-world cruise, perhaps? That didn’t matter, of course. What mattered was that, though Bremner was a most decent chap and a very good friend, he did not want to see Bremner, or,

rather, and which was much more to the point, let Bremner see *him*. Here was an ever present danger that had not occurred to him before. He knew ships' officers by the score. Ships from the world over touched here at the crossroads of the East. Recognition might easily be always just around the next corner. Certainly, promiscuous daylight strolling through the streets of Singapore so far as he was concerned, was decidedly inadvisable!

Ronald drew on a cigarette and sipped at his glass. Curious, this! It changed the whole aspect of things again so far as his proposed meeting with Peter Sarlow was concerned. It was now already known through an outside source that the murdered man was not Dr. Ronald Ward. In other words, he, Ronald, could now tell his story to Sarlow, and Sarlow would be relieved of the necessity of having any contact whatever with the police on that account. Very much better! Exactly the position of last night before the murder—except for Joan Robb. Her probable recognition of the man she had seen standing over the bed! But then she would almost certainly believe the story if it came to her first through Sarlow. Quite! That seemed to be the way out of that. And meanwhile the gold skull killers would still believe that Dr. Ronald Ward was dead, and once again a victim of the *Watabi* disaster! The muddle was beginning to clear a little.

Twilight in the tropics is short-lived. The afternoon was already on the wane. It grew dark. Haji lighted a large pulley lamp that was suspended from the center of the ceiling. Its radiance was not remarkable, but it was probably cheaper than electricity. The place remained more or less murky. A few shabby whites slouched in, and departed wiping their lips with the backs of their hands. Some of the boarders returned from their afternoon excursions to heaven knew where and, crossing the passage, entered the bunkroom. And then, suddenly, Ronald's lips tightened slightly, and for the second time he got up from his chair and carried his glass to the bar.

A well dressed native was coming in from the alleyway. The man approached the bar, but, at a nod from Haji, of which Ronald was apparently unconscious, passed on and without ceremony opened the door of Whitie Jahal's room and disappeared inside, closing the door behind him.

Haji refilled Ronald's glass. Ronald took a gulp from it on the way back to his chair. It was just as well that the newcomer's attention should not have been drawn to the fact that the table nearest the door was occupied. Exaggerated precaution, perhaps, but just as well, nevertheless. An evil-faced looking little beggar, that! A Malay, of course. He'd know him again.

He sat down again, but now he put his feet on the table and tilted his chair back carelessly—but silently. The back of his head rested against the partition, his ear touched it. Voices reached him. The newcomer's, animated

and excited; Whitie Jahal's, a deep growl. It was all quite distinct. He might almost have been in the room itself. Luck!

Ronald's glass, as he raised it to his lips, hid a bitter smile. Luck! They were speaking Malay! It was like that killer dying on the *Watabi's* deck, only there was no Baker here now to translate for him.

And yet he listened. There were two words that he could understand. The names Sarlow and Robb were being constantly mentioned; and there was another word that was repeated frequently: "*Pandak*." He did not know what *Pandak* meant. Again the analogy of the dying Malay! It made him think of "Bittie, Vittie, Wittie!" But who was to tell him what *Pandak* meant; or would it help him any this time if he knew?

In any case, there did not appear to be anything further to be gained by staying here; and it would be better perhaps if he were not still in evidence when that door opened again—especially if Whitie Jahal came out. Also, a little fresh air after the hours spent here in this malodorous atmosphere was something greatly to be desired.

He emptied his glass, carried it across to the bar, interchanged a few friendly words with Haji, sauntered across the room, and stepped outside into the alleyway. He stood for an instant, hesitant. It was quite dark now. There was scarcely anyone about; no one, in fact that he could see, except that figure in white a little way along there where Weng-Kow had waited for him last night and where, later on, he would again join Weng-Kow to-night. Weng-Kow! Yes, it probably was Weng-Kow there. A bit strange, though, at this hour!

He stepped forward in the other's direction—and then suddenly the figure in white moved, or, rather, disappeared in a passageway between two buildings. It was Weng-Kow. That was what Weng-Kow had done last night. A moment later he joined the Chinaman.

"You're way ahead of time, Weng-Kow," he said. "It's far too early yet to go to Sarlow's."

Weng-Kow shook his head.

"No go there to-night," he answered impassively.

Ronald frowned.

"Why not?" he asked. "Had enough of it?"

Again Weng-Kow shook his head.

"Him not there," he said.

Ronald stared sharply into the other's face.

"What do you mean—not there?" he demanded.

“You no hear?” inquired Weng-Kow.

“No.”

“Then me tell. Mabbe two, three hours ago, Sarlow and girl go out for drive in car, and — —”

“You mean Miss Robb?” Ronald interjected.

Weng-Kow nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “Car is drive by Sarlow’s black man same like all the time. After little while out in country car get shoot up in place on road where no houses near. Very bad thing happen. Black man that drive get killed, and Sarlow and girl get stole away.”

For a moment Ronald neither moved nor spoke. Fear, stark and ugly, gripped at him. Joan Robb! He had been afraid of that. Instinctively he closed his eyes for an instant as though to shut out some picture that he dared not look upon.

And then he spoke.

“Let me get this straight,” he said huskily. “Sarlow’s car was held up on a lonely bit of road, his native chauffeur was killed, and both Sarlow and Miss Robb were made prisoners and carried away. Is that right?”

“Yes,” Weng-Kow answered laconically.

“But if the chauffeur was killed,” demanded Ronald quickly, “how does anyone know what happened to the other two?”

“When him found, him not dead. Him die after,” Weng-Kow explained patiently. “Him tell. Him say plenty Malays take car. Sarlow fight, but get cloth with smell stuck on him face.”

“I see!” said Ronald grimly. “Chloroform, I suppose!” And then for a moment again he was silent. That conversation in Whitie Jahal’s room! The repeated mention of Sarlow’s and Joan Robb’s name—and *Pandak*! It was a thousand to one that Malay who was still there had come to make a report of this affair to Whitie Jahal. “Who told you all this, Weng-Kow?” he asked abruptly.

“Chinese Johnnie,” Weng-Kow answered. “Everybody talk about it, and Chinese Johnnie think you know; but him say me come here early and, soon as see you, ask what do now.”

“All right!” said Ronald tersely. “We’ll go there at once.”

But once more Weng-Kow shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Chinese Johnnie say no, that not good thing for do. Too much seen there now very dangerous. You tell me, me tell him.”

Ronald's brain was whirling, but one thing seemed suddenly to clarify itself in his mind. Sarlow could now no longer reach or warn Andrew Robb at Batai. Li Yuan was the one chance—and Chinese Johnnie was the connecting link with Li Yuan. Much better if he could have seen Chinese Johnnie in person, but Chinese Johnnie would not have sent that message, which virtually amounted to a warning, unless he had a very good reason for doing so.

"Very well!" he said through tight lips. "Then you say this to Chinese Johnnie: He is to tell the man who owns the piece of jade that Andrew Robb lives on the island of Batai and must be warned as quickly as it is possible to do so. The man who owns the piece of jade will understand. Then I want you to ask Chinese Johnnie where the man who owns the piece of jade is. I must know. Is that all clear? If so, repeat what I have said."

Weng-Kow nodded.

"Tell jade man give warning to Andrew Robb on island call Batai. Then where can find jade man for you."

"Right! Now, one thing more. A few minutes ago I overheard Whitie Jahal and a Malay talking together. They were speaking Malay, and I did not understand, but I am certain now they were talking about the kidnapping of Sarlow and Miss Robb, for those names were used a lot. And there was another word that was repeated a great many times. *Pandak*. Do you know what *Pandak* means?"

"Me not know. Him not Chinese word, him Malay word."

"So I supposed. Well, then, I want you to find out what it means. Get Chinese Johnnie to help you, if necessary. Then come back here as soon as you can. I'll keep an eye out for you."

"Me find out," stated Weng-Kow with calm assurance. "Me go now? Yes?"

Ronald nodded. He watched the Chinaman depart, then he began to stroll negligently back toward Whitie Jahal's—but his hands hidden in his pockets were tightly clenched. A sort of elemental savagery settled upon him. He had seen two of these filthy murders with his own eyes. It was bad enough when the victims had been men. And now Joan Robb! What had they done with Joan Robb?

CHAPTER XII

THE VACANT HOUSE

IT was near midnight. Intensely black. Only the night sounds made by innumerable insects and the discordant voices of the tiger frogs. All around was almost jungle growth, and the air was heavy and oppressive with the smell of equatorial plants and vines.

Ronald's brows contracted as he stood there waiting. Somewhere ahead of him, Kria, a young Malay endorsed by Chinese Johnnie, was scouting through the darkness; close by, he could just make out the motionless figure of Weng-Kow; somewhere behind him, the car that had brought them from Singapore had been run in from the road and was hidden in the foliage. But Kria had been gone now for what seemed an unconscionable time. Was this trip here to prove itself to be nothing more than the proverbial wild-goose chase? He had never been too sure from the start. Pandak was not a foreign word that in its written form was entitled to italics, and which, when translated, possessed some special significance; Pandak was merely a proper noun—a Malay name. And not a wholly uncommon one! How many Pandaks were there in Singapore—in Malaysia?

And then Ronald's shoulders lifted suddenly in a philosophical shrug. True! Those were the odds he had accepted. But how many Pandaks were there who possessed a house in a rather secluded part of the island that was on the market for sale, and which for several months now had been unoccupied? It had seemed to fit Whitie Jahal's book!

It had taken several hours to run down this information—several conferences, by proxy, through the medium of Weng-Kow, with Chinese Johnnie. Singapore had been surreptitiously scoured for details concerning anyone bearing the name of Pandak. This was the only lead that had not ended in a definite cul-de-sac. He had taken it. He had not the faintest idea where he was now, and neither, he was quite sure, had Weng-Kow. Nor, except that it had taken the best part of an hour to get here, did he know how far he was from Singapore. Chinese Johnnie had supplied the car, with Kria to act as chauffeur and guide. Kria, he had discovered, spoke English fluently; and, for the rest, Chinese Johnnie, besides vouching unreservedly for the Malay, would not have dared for his own sake to have selected a man who could not be trusted implicitly. That was all right, he had no doubts whatever about the Malay's trustworthiness; but what was keeping the man? Kria had said the house was only a short distance away.

Ronald stirred uneasily. There was more than the outcome of to-night to disturb him. There was that message anent Batai to be sent to Li Yuan—the whereabouts of Li Yuan himself. Chinese Johnnie's replies had not been in the highest degree reassuring.

“Him not know,” Weng-Kow had reported. “Jade come through many hands. Message go back same way. Mabbe jade man get message, mabbe not. No can tell. How can say?”

That was just it! He did not know where Li Yuan was, or of any other means of communicating with Li Yuan except through Chinese Johnnie—and immediate success along that line, as it appeared now, was doubtful in the extreme. Weng-Kow was sure the *Sen-Chu* was not in the harbor. A curious sort of chap, Li Yuan—something mysterious about him—something mysterious about the overmanned *Sen-Chu*! Li Yuan gave one the impression, though, of being implacable about anything he set out to do. Beyond any question, Li Yuan would see this affair through to a finish—in his own way. But that way added now to his, Ronald's, difficulties tremendously. Andrew Robb! Batai! Joan Robb! Sarlow! If only he could have got in touch with Li Yuan to-night!

There came a faint rustle through the undergrowth. Here was Kria at last!

“Well?” Ronald demanded in an anxious undertone, as the other came forward and halted beside him. “Did you discover anything?”

“Yes, *Tuan*,” Kria answered quickly. “The house is not empty, for I have seen a light, and I have heard voices. I have been long, for twice I went around the house making no noise, and once I listened to the voices for many minutes.”

“You mean,” asked Ronald swiftly, “that you heard what was being said? That you know whether Miss Robb and Sarlow are being held prisoners in this house or not?”

“No, *Tuan*,” Kria replied. “I could not hear the words that were spoken. Will the *Tuan* listen? It was in this way. I walked once around the house. The windows and the doors are covered with boards, as is fitting for a house that is shut up and not lived in. But through a crack in the boards of one of the windows I saw a light. It was a window at the side of the house, *Tuan*. I crept up to the window, but I could not see in for the crack was too small. It was then that I heard the voices. I put my ear to the crack, but I could not hear the words, only the voices, and— —”

“How many voices?” Ronald interrupted tersely.

“That is not easy to say, *Tuan*, except that there were not more than three; but of the third I am not sure. There might have been only two.”

“All right! And then?”

“And then, *Tuan*, I walked once more around the house and looked and listened at all the other windows to make sure there were no other lights or voices. *Tuan*, there were none. But this I found. When the eye first looks the door at the back is tightly boarded up. But it is not so. The boards have been fixed so that the door can be opened. That is all, *Tuan*.”

Ronald clapped Kria heartily on the shoulder. Elation had replaced doubt. The odds had switched. It was a hundred to one now that Joan Robb and Sarlow were imprisoned in this house. There was always the chance, of course, that some questionable characters, white or black, had merely seized upon opportunity and had helped themselves to temporary residence in the vacated house; but that chance was so remote in the face of what otherwise was almost certainty that it was not to be entertained for an instant.

“You have done well, Kria,” he said. “I haven’t a doubt but that Miss Robb and Sarlow are in there. The point now is to get them out.”

“*Tuan*,” observed Kria calmly, “we are three, and they are no more than three.”

“Stout fellow!” Ronald applauded. “But in order to get a chance to mix it up we’ve got to get in there first ourselves. I can’t say I came expecting to effect an actual rescue. If this proved to be the place, I, somehow or other, had it in the back of my mind that it would be too heavily guarded for us to do anything except to send a tip to the police; but as it stands now, with not more than three to deal with, we’ll take it on ourselves.”

“That very good thing for do,” agreed Weng-Kow placidly. “We go now break down door?”

“Laudable but hardly practical!” commented Ronald grimly. “It would take too long. There are too many things they could do in the meanwhile—to say nothing of taking a few pot shots at us while we were at it. No, my Chinese fire eater, there’s a much simpler way than that. We’ll get them to open the door for us.”

Weng-Kow shuffled his feet in perplexity.

“Will the *Tuan* tell us what is in his mind?” inquired Kria eagerly.

“Yes,” said Ronald deliberately. “The three of us will go to the rear of the house. Weng-Kow and I will crouch against the wall near the door. You, Kria, who will be spokesman because you will talk in Malay, will knock on the door. I do not think they will open it at first, but I think someone will come to the other side of the door. If you get no answer, knock again and

call out that you have been sent to tell them that everything is known and that the police are on the way. I think then that the door will be opened—and we'll barge in."

"The plan is good, *Tuan*," agreed Kria. "But if they ask first who sent me?"

Ronald considered this for a moment. Whitie Jahal's name, of course, would be an "open sesame"; but if word got back to Whitie Jahal that he, Whitie, was known to be connected with the plot—what then? No; that wouldn't do. It was no time to put Whitie Jahal on his guard!

"Get a little excited, Kria," Ronald answered finally with a twisted smile. "Curse them in your choicest Malay and call them fools for wasting time when, if they're not away in the next few moments, they'll be caught. I leave it to you to carry that off. You will name no one; but the mere fact that you knew where to find them and have come with a warning is almost enough in itself to disarm their suspicions."

"It shall be done, *Tuan*," said Kria with a low laugh. "Is the *Tuan* ready?"

"Yes," said Ronald briefly.

"Keep close to me, then," admonished Kria. "But make no noise. We will pass around by the side of the house in which there is no light. Come!"

It was not far, perhaps little more than a hundred yards, but there was practically no clearing—neglected for months, the vegetation and undergrowth had closed in almost on the house itself. It was not easy going in the blackness when caution and silence were vitally essential; but in what Ronald estimated as some five minutes he found himself standing in front of a door whose sill was nearly on a level with the ground. In a shadowy way he had been able to make out that the building was a bungalow of moderate size, and the rather sharp ascent of the last fifty yards told him that it was built against a little hillside—which accounted, of course, for the ground level of the rear door.

He took his handkerchief from his pocket—and in the darkness smiled at himself almost sheepishly. It was melodrama of the most lurid hue, of course; but he could not afford to take any chances, and there was nothing else to which he could resort. What might happen here he had no means of foretelling, but those inside the house, he knew, were allied with Whitie Jahal. He could hardly afford to be pointed out later at Whitie Jahal's as the man who had been here to-night! Kria and Weng-Kow, on the other hand, unknown to and having nothing to do with Whitie Jahal, risked little on the score of recognition, even if it had been blazing daylight. He explained this

in whispers to the two men as he tied his handkerchief over his face, leaving only his eyes exposed.

“It is well, *Tuan*,” said Kria approvingly.

“And now, one other thing,” Ronald continued, as he took his automatic from his pocket. “We are all armed. You’ve got your ubiquitous knives, I know. Knock your men out by all means, but don’t use your weapons unless you have to. If it’s necessary to go the limit in order to get Miss Robb and Mr. Sarlow out of here, that’s another matter—but that’s the only excuse. Understand?”

Both men assented—grudgingly.

Ronald found himself grinning. Not very much to grin about! The zero hour! But a great pair, these two! He drew Weng-Kow back beside him against the side of the bungalow close to the jamb of the door—and the grin faded from his face.

“Knock, Kria!” he whispered.

Kria’s “knock” was a loud and urgent banging of his fist upon the boards that sheathed the door.

There was no answer, no sound from within. Again Kria beat upon the door, and several times again; and in the intervals stood with his ear against the door itself. And a minute passed, and still another. Then suddenly Kria leaned forward with his lips to Ronald’s ear.

“It is as the *Tuan* said,” he breathed. “There is now someone behind the door.”

“Rap again,” Ronald breathed back; “then tell them that the police are coming.”

Kria obeyed. He pounded now more frantically than ever on the boards; and then, as though in mingled panic and desperation, called out loudly in Malay.

And now a voice answered from the other side of the door.

“They are the men we seek, *Tuan*,” Kria whispered hurriedly; then his voice rose again—this time in a flood of words that he poured out in high-pitched and virulent tones.

The door opened.

On the threshold, barely more than discernible in the faint light that came from somewhere in the interior, stood a native wearing a *sarong*. The opening of the door had automatically forced Kria to fall back a pace. But in no longer than the space of time that it would take a watch to tick, Ronald was in action; and as he sprang forward his fist crashed full into the native’s

jaw. A wild yell answered the blow. The man reeled but thrust suddenly and viciously with a knife.

“Your man!” Ronald snapped to his companions, as, evading the knife thrust, he plunged on into the house.

What light there was came from a little ahead of him, through an open door—from the room at the side of the house, of course, where Kria had first seen it through the crack in the boards! But now, suddenly, the light went out.

Ronald pulled himself up sharply. He could see nothing now. The blackness was abysmal. But he could hear someone rushing out of that room, rushing toward him. He clubbed his automatic and struck. There was a grunt, a snarl like that of some wild beast, and Ronald felt a hand snatch at him, then a pair of arms tighten like steel bands around his waist.

But Ronald’s hands were still free. Just the faint outline of a face—and into that face, with all the training and all the strength he knew, his automatic still clubbed in one hand, he pounded a succession of merciless short-arm jabs.

They swirled now together this way and that. The man fought like a rabid dog—and, close-locked now, the other’s slaver was wet on the handkerchief that covered Ronald’s face. Again Ronald got a hand free; and again, and twice again, the butt of his automatic crashed into the other’s face and jaw.

Strange noises were in Ronald’s ears—the sound of a struggle still going on outside there; the constant snarls of his own antagonist; and what seemed like a muffled voice from somewhere overhead accompanied by a thumping on the ceiling.

Ronald’s breath was coming fast. The man was strong; and now, infuriated to frenzy by the punishment he had received, Ronald could sense murder in every flexing of the other’s muscles. The man was clawing now for a throat hold. They lurched in the darkness like drunken men in some insensate dance.

Ronald’s automatic clattered to the floor. It was that—or choke under the strangle hold the man had at last succeeded in fastening on his throat. Using both hands, he tore himself loose.

For a moment they fell apart. Only the sound of their hard breathing! And then Weng-Kow’s voice spoke out of the darkness:

“Look out! Him got knife now!”

Like lightning Ronald sidestepped. With a whistling sound, something cut past his ear. Just the faint outline of a face again—and with everything

he had in him, Ronald swung with both right and left.

Came then something like a curious sigh; then the crash of a heavy body falling on the floor; and then silence—save for that pounding on the ceiling and those muffled calls from overhead.

Ronald readjusted his handkerchief; felt in his pocket for a match, lighted it, and leaned forward over the prostrate form on the floor.

The man, in ring parlance, was fast asleep. His face, battered and lacerated where the clubbed automatic had struck him, was covered with blood; but it was still recognizable. And unholy joy surged upon Ronald. It was the face of Whitie Jahal.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RESCUE

RONALD rose to his feet. His elation was suddenly sobered. Whitie Jahal's presence here was a serious complication. What was he to do with the man? Tie him up, keep him here, and let Sarlow send the police out after him in due course? Hardly! That wouldn't do at all! First, there was the risk that Whitie, once he came to his senses, might, if allowed to remain within earshot, get an inkling that it was Bob Curle, his boarder, who had wrecked both his plans and himself to-night. Second, once in the hands of the police, the one tie he, Ronald, had with the band of killers, of whom he was perfectly sure Whitie Jahal was not the head and front, and it was the head and front he wanted, would be instantly severed. The one play, the one chance of success was to give Whitie Jahal enough of the proverbial rope with which to hang himself and all those connected with him. As it was, Whitie had recognized no one to-night, and he might very conceivably imagine that his own identity was unknown. It might puzzle him somewhat that he had been set at liberty, and he might be puzzled, too, as to who had turned the tables on him; but he would at least be reassured when he saw that the police were not interested in him—and he would probably carry on in the same old way. Yes, decidedly, this was the move to make. The end out here had been gained. That was Sarlow up there, of course, still calling, and still thumping on the ceiling—but Sarlow might not wholly agree with this. Better to get Whitie off the premises first, then, and argue it out with Sarlow afterwards! But also Sarlow's immediate anxiety, which was obviously prompting his efforts to attract attention to himself, must be set at rest.

"Friends, Sarlow!" Ronald called out loudly, cheerily. "Coming in a second!"

The pounding on the ceiling ceased. Ronald turned to Weng-Kow beside him.

"Did you and Kria get that fellow out there?" he demanded tersely.

"Get him, all right," Weng-Kow answered. "But him very quiet now, not make any more fuss."

"Hurt—dead, you mean?" asked Ronald sharply.

"No," replied Weng-Kow calmly. "Mabbe got little crack or two; but now got very bad scare 'cause Kria sit on him and hold knife very close him throat. Him tell Kria only him and this man here keep watch in house."

"All right!" said Ronald crisply. "That accounts for the lot, then."

Whitie Jahal's senses were returning. The man was stirring about on the floor now, and mumbling to himself. Ronald reached down and jerked the other roughly to his feet. The fight was out of Whitie Jahal. He swayed groggily. Ronald pushed him into Weng-Kow's arms.

"Run him out!" he ordered curtly. "We don't want the police in on this yet—so let them both go. I fancy they've had all the trouble they want and will make off as fast as they can; but you and Kria stay out there and see that they do. I'll take care of things in here. Understand?"

"Me understand!" said Weng-Kow in a suddenly unpleasant voice. "Him go plenty quick! Him like knife stick, him know how get it!"

Ronald smiled grimly. He could see little or nothing in the darkness; but from the sounds now Weng-Kow was executing his orders none too gently. Then the back door closed.

He removed the handkerchief from his face and with the aid of a match found and recovered his automatic. And now a light! There had been one of some kind in that side room before Whitie Jahal had put it out. Another match showed him the open door of a room just a few feet from where he stood. He stepped forward. Yes, this was the room. It was bare save for several old boxes that had obviously served as seats for Whitie Jahal and his companion, but on one of the boxes were several pieces of candle—for one of which the neck of a bottle acted as a sconce. He lighted the latter, and as he did so called out reassuringly again to Sarlow; but though a voice answered him at once from somewhere overhead, it was still so muffled that he could not make out a single word.

With the lighted candle he moved quickly now out into the hall and, holding it above his head, peered up and down the length of the hallway. Where were the stairs? The hall, with rooms opening off each side, evidently divided the house, and ran from the front door to the rear, but there was no sign of any stairway. He frowned suddenly. There were no stairs. No, of course not! This was a one-story bungalow. But there was naturally a space between the ceiling and the roof, and there must be some way of getting up there, as witness the fact that Joan Robb and Sarlow were apparently confined there now.

"Sarlow!" he called out at the top of his voice. "How do you get up there?"

It was quite hopeless! He could not make out a word of the reply. He shrugged his shoulders philosophically. Since there must be a way of getting up, and it was not from the hall, then it must be from one of the rooms. He would have to find it for himself, that was all!

He began to go from room to room. The first four, all bare and unfurnished, yielded nothing. There were only two left, if his count was right. He was at the rear of the house now—he could hear Kria and Weng-Kow talking outside. He pushed open the door in front of him and stepped inside. Yes, here it was! The room, as the candlelight disclosed its stationary fittings, was obviously the kitchen, and at the far end against the wall was a ladder that was placed directly beneath a trapdoor in the ceiling.

Ronald set the candle down on the floor; but, as he started up the ladder, a sudden sense of disquiet and confusion of mind came upon him. He had quite forgotten for the time being that his story and explanation were to reach Joan Robb through Sarlow first. Would she recognize him now, before a word could be said by anybody, as the “murderer” of last night? And if so, what then? Would she be so prejudiced from the start that she would waive any story aside as one of pure fabrication? And perhaps even influence Sarlow into adopting a skeptical attitude? He smiled a little wryly. Nothing of all that could be helped or changed now. What he himself would do must necessarily depend wholly on their reactions. The one thing that the immediate present demanded was to get them both out of here.

The candle on the floor gave but sparse light; but, as he reached the top of the ladder, Ronald could see that the trapdoor was securely fastened from beneath with a heavy bolt. Quite an adequate sort of a prison from Whitie Jahal’s standpoint; but not a nice one—particularly for a girl! He drew the bolt and flung back the trap door.

“Here you are!” he called. “Are either of you hurt? Do you need any help in getting down? If not, I’ll back out of your way.”

Sarlow’s head appeared in the opening.

“I heard what I thought sounded like a fight going on, and then somebody shouting my name,” he said huskily. “Who are you—the police?”

“No,” said Ronald quietly; “but all that will wait till we get you down out of there. In any case, you are quite safe now. Need any help?”

“No, none at all,” Sarlow answered.

Ronald descended to the floor. A bit queer! Sarlow was coming down. He had rather expected that Joan Robb would come first. But there was no sign of her even when Sarlow had reached the floor and stepped away from the foot of the ladder.

“What’s keeping Miss Robb?” Ronald asked.

“Miss Robb?” Sarlow’s dwarf-like figure, his huge head wagging, seemed to rock grotesquely in the candlelight. “Yes, that’s it!” His voice

broke suddenly, and his hands clenched. "Where is she? Where is Joan? She is not here."

"*Not here!*" Ronald's lips were tight. The fear that he had known when Weng-Kow had told him of the attack on Sarlow's car surged upon him now with redoubled force. Once he had discovered that Sarlow was here in this house, he had, unwarrantably, it seemed now, assumed that Joan Robb was here too, and presumably as yet unharmed. And relief had come. But now ugly logic reared its head. Was there any other interpretation to put upon this separation—except the worst? "Not here!" he repeated. "But she was with you in the car!"

Sarlow brushed one of his clenched hands heavily across his eyes.

"I have not seen her since," he said hoarsely. "I only know that she was not brought here, and I have been nearly mad with anxiety. They killed my chauffeur because he was of no use to them. And for myself, what does it matter? I happened to be in the car and, I have reason to know now, they carried me off merely in the hope of getting a few pounds out of me. But with Joan it is different. It was Joan they were after. I realize that now. It was that newspaper account this morning that is at the bottom of it all. It should never have been made public that she saw and could recognize again the man who committed the murder in my house last night. It was to stop her from doing so that she was carried off this afternoon."

Ronald shook his head.

"I am afraid that it is even more serious than that," he said gravely. "In any case, you are wrong. I am the man Miss Robb saw last night, but I am not the murderer; therefore the actual murderer knows that *he* was not seen by Miss Robb, and so has nothing to fear on the score of being recognized by her again—indeed, quite the contrary, for, if he were apprehended, Miss Robb would almost certainly say he was *not* the man."

Sarlow's jaw had sagged a little.

"You—you say you are the man Miss Robb saw—in my house—last night?" Stupefaction was in Sarlow's voice and face. "I—I don't understand. Who are you?"

There was a curious quiet in Ronald's voice.

"I'm Ronald Ward," he said.

Sarlow's laugh was almost hysterical.

"Another one, eh!" he cried. "How many of you are there? And what is the meaning of all this? The man who told me last night that he was Ronald Ward was a liar, and—"

"And he was killed," Ronald broke in evenly. "Do you know why?"

Sarlow had evidently regained control of himself. He leaned forward and stared into Ronald's face.

"Yes," he answered curtly, "I agree with the newspaper theory. They believed him to be Michael Ward's son, and he paid for it! So, whether you're telling the truth or not, perhaps you'd better have a care yourself! These gold skull murders seem to center around those who made that last voyage on the *Hawk* with your father—if he was your father!"

"I don't think I shall have any trouble in convincing you of that," said Ronald calmly; "and without resorting to the trick of pulling at the lobe of my ear, either. To begin with, I— —"

"Wait a minute!" Sarlow interrupted uncompromisingly. "I'm thinking of Joan first. Where are the men who were keeping me a prisoner here—the ones you fought with?"

"I let them go."

"You let them go!" Sarlow gasped out his amazement. "But they should have been handed over to the police! We might have found out from them what has become of Joan."

Ronald was silent for a moment.

"I had a very good reason for what I did, as you will see shortly," he said finally. "And besides, at the time I thought Miss Robb was here with you. In any case, I do not think they would have been of any help in that direction. There were two of them. From what I know of one, I am quite sure he could never be made to talk; and I don't think the other could either, even if he knew anything, as it would inevitably, sooner or later, have cost him his life. Anyway, they are gone."

"Yes; but you say you know one of them!" There was a sudden eagerness in Sarlow's voice. "That's better! Who is he?"

Ronald evaded the answer. With Joan Robb missing and her fate unknown the whole aspect of the matter was again changed. He was not at all sure that Sarlow would fall in with his, Ronald's, original plan of keeping away from the police, nor was he himself entirely sure now that it would be the best thing to do. In any event, far better to sound Sarlow out first before coming to a definite decision.

"We'll get to that in the course of my story," he said. "Meanwhile, you take the candle and go into that room across the hall. There are at least some boxes we can sit on, and we might as well thresh the whole business out here. I want to speak to my chaps outside. I won't be a minute."

Without waiting for a reply he handed the candle to Sarlow, made his way to the back door, and opened it. Weng-Kow and Kria were standing just

outside. From them he learned that Whitie Jahal, though still somewhat groggy, had disappeared posthaste in the darkness some ten minutes ago, accompanied by the *sarong*-garbed Malay. He explained rapidly that only Sarlow had been found, enjoined the two to keep a strict watch around the house, and returned inside.

And then a thought struck him. Sarlow, though a prisoner himself, had seemed quite positive that Joan Robb had not been brought here too. Sarlow was in all probability right. He, Ronald, had already searched every room—except one. But how could Sarlow be absolutely sure? Why not check up on that room? It would settle the question beyond any possible doubt.

It was the room next to the kitchen. He opened the door and lighted a match. Well, anyway, he had satisfied himself! The room was empty.

In the candlelight through the open doorway across the hall he could see that Sarlow had acted on his suggestion and had appropriated one of the boxes in the room that had been previously used as a “guard room” by Whitie Jahal and his companion. He rejoined Sarlow, and seated himself so that the candle which Sarlow had placed on one of the boxes burned between them.

“Now,” he said crisply, “I suppose the first item on the agenda is for me to establish my identity.”

Sarlow smiled queerly.

“I am quite open to conviction—even after last night!” he said tersely.

“Very well, then,” Ronald returned. “Here’s the story! Listen!”

The minutes sped by. Ronald spoke in quiet, earnest tones, and as he spoke was conscious that Sarlow’s eyes never left his face, and that at times the other would lean forward to stare the more intently at him in the shadowy candlelight. He began with his father’s letter that had taken him to Taletee where he had arrived only to find that his father had been dead for two weeks. He described Gourlay. He quoted the gist of a number of letters that had passed between his father and Sarlow—letters which he had found among his father’s papers. And then he sketched in rapidly everything that had afterwards transpired, omitting mention only of any names or details that would identify either Whitie Jahal or his dive with the story.

“And that,” he ended, “brings us down to the present moment. Are you satisfied that I am Ronald Ward?”

Through it all Sarlow had not spoken. He reached out suddenly now and wrung Ronald’s hand.

“You have left no room for doubt,” he said, his voice rasping a little as though out of control. “I could not help but be satisfied. But I cannot give

you the whole-hearted welcome I gave that trickster last night. I did not know then what I know now. The whole thing is horrible! Abominable! How can I welcome you back when I know that your peril here in Singapore is greater than any that you have just passed through? My boy, what are you going to do?"

"Carry on," Ronald replied in a level tone. "What else?"

CHAPTER XIV

TWO HEADS TOGETHER

SARLOW sat motionless for a moment, then suddenly his hands clenched.

“Yes, carry on!” he cried out passionately. “Of course! There is no question about that! This hell’s brood must be exterminated! But how? Who are they? You know only this dive keeper, the man who was out here to-night and whose name you forgot to tell me; the man you let go free—the man you said had not recognized you in the darkness.”

Ronald laughed shortly.

“No,” he said, “he didn’t recognize me, or perhaps there would have been a different tale to tell. Nor did I forget to give you his name. I purposely refrained from doing so—for the same reason that I let him go to-night. I don’t want the police mixed up in this.”

“What!” Sarlow cried out incredulously. “You don’t mean that?”

“Certainly, I do.”

“A lone hand? It can’t be done!”

“Playing a lone hand is what enabled me to find you here to-night,” Ronald stated quietly.

“That is true,” Sarlow admitted. “But, nevertheless, it is impossible to keep the police out of this. For instance, how could I account for my reappearance in Singapore?”

“If you agree with my point of view,” Ronald answered, “we can easily invent some story that will hold water; if you don’t agree with me—why, then, I don’t see what you are going to do about it, anyhow. I have given you no names. You can’t tell the police what you don’t know yourself. True, if you make public the story I have told you, the man in question would, of course, hear about it, and my number would be up. In plain English, my finish, and”—he smiled mirthlessly—“a rather gory one, I expect. But that would only be playing into the hands of these killers. Don’t you see that the one thing to do is for me to carry on just as I am doing? I’ve already got in the thin edge of the wedge. The man has no suspicions. What good would it do to have the police crash in and put him behind the bars? Worse than none! It would be disastrous! You can see that. He’s only a pawn. It would snap the one thread of contact we have. It is the guiding spirit, the diabolical brain back of these damnable butcheries that must be found and destroyed.”

Sarlow got up from his box and began to pace up and down the room. He passed and repassed the candle, the shadows from his own strange shape, abnormally magnified, dancing weirdly and specter-like upon the walls. The candle had burned down almost to a stub. Ronald lighted another piece and stuck it in the neck of the bottle.

Sarlow returned to his seat.

“It is impossible!” he declared bluntly. “There is a great deal in what you say; indeed, if it were not for one thing that you seem to have overlooked, I would agree with you fully and do all that I could to help you carry out your plans. But, as it is, I can’t.”

“And what is that?” Ronald demanded.

“Joan Robb!” Sarlow’s voice hardened and rasped again. “Her disappearance alters the whole face of things. You have already pointed out in your story that you believe both she and you were to be included in these killings as an added vengeance on your fathers. If this is true, and I cannot doubt it, where is Joan now? It may already be too late, but we cannot leave a stone unturned to find her. Everything else, every other consideration, for the moment, becomes unimportant. We have no right to place her life in greater jeopardy by keeping a vital piece of information from the police and so deprive her of their aid to that extent.”

“There is no question about that,” Ronald conceded readily. “Not for a moment! But the question is whether my chances are not better than those of the police. The man I am talking about is not suspicious of me; I am in close contact with him, and if Miss Robb is still alive, though frankly I am desperately afraid on her account, I may succeed where no one else could. If I have to duck and run for it instead of staying on the job, what are the police going to do in my stead? Suppose they arrest the man? He isn’t the kind to wilt under any third degree.”

Sarlow nodded his head.

“There is a lot in that, too,” he said slowly. “However, I cannot see that I have any choice in the matter. The police must be told. But here is a compromise. I have some influence with the authorities. I will tell them the whole story, and I will guarantee that no news either of your return or your whereabouts will be allowed to leak out. Between the police and myself we will arrange and publish some sort of a story, as you yourself suggested, to account for my release to-night. If the police arrest your man, which I agree would be perhaps a serious mistake, there will be no suspicion that you had anything to do with it, so that you will still stand in with him, even when the police have got through grueling him. On the other hand, and what is much

more likely, the police may decide that the best thing to do is to let you carry on, as you propose, perhaps supplementing your efforts with a secret surveillance of their own. I quite understand that your own life would go out like a snuffed candle if you were suspected, but this seems to protect you on every side, and for Joan's sake is, I believe, the only thing to do. Surely you agree?"

Ronald thought for a moment. He did not question for an instant Sarlow's "influence" with the authorities. Sarlow stood high in Singapore—and throughout the Malay Archipelago. It might set back the clock a bit so far as his own investigations were concerned, but the plan was feasible, logical, and it at least, he was bound to admit, gave Joan Robb an added chance.

"Yes," he said soberly, "I agree."

"Good! And you will leave the whole matter in my hands, my boy?"

"Yes."

Sarlow leaned forward tensely.

"What is the man's name, then?"

Ronald was clipping off his words now.

"Whitie Jahal," he said.

"The name means nothing to me," said Sarlow, "but I have no doubt the police will know him."

"I have no doubt they will!" acquiesced Ronald grimly.

"And the name of the man who, through this Li Yuan you spoke of, introduced you to Whitie Jahal?"

"Chinese Johnnie—another dive keeper. But he's on our side of the fence."

"I quite understand that. And your own name—I mean, the one that you have assumed?"

"Bob Curle."

"And now just one more question. The chap who was murdered last night? You've told me how he came to impersonate you, but not his name."

"Heaven knows what his real name was—and I don't think it matters," Ronald replied. "He'd said good-bye to his past long ago, I fancy. He called himself Percival Smith."

"Excellent!" Sarlow's face was set in a sort of grim satisfaction. "I think that's all I need to know. The police, of course, may want to talk to you in person—on the quiet."

“Of course!” said Ronald. “And now there’s a question or two I’d like to ask you. From Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne’s murder, the warning at Taletee, Gresham’s murder, and the killing last night, we know it is almost a practical certainty that these crimes are the aftermath of something that happened in my father’s last voyage in the *Hawk*. You, I imagine, would be the one man he would confide in, and I am hoping that he did—at least to the extent that you can throw some light on it.”

“But I can’t!” Sarlow gave a short and savage laugh. “I wish to God I could! As a matter of fact, I never connected the *Hawk* with these gold skull murders until the paper called attention to it this morning. There was no reason why I should. Your father never discussed the voyage with me in any but a most matter-of-fact way. Nor, until within the last few hours, have I ever heard a word from anybody else to indicate that anything had been amiss on the *Hawk*.”

Ronald frowned his disappointment.

“That’s too bad!” he said heavily. “I was counting a lot on what you might be able to tell me. You knew, of course, that the *Hawk* came back without her mate, a chap named Rankin?”

“Yes,” said Sarlow. “I remember your father speaking about that.”

“Did he say what caused Rankin’s death?”

“Yes, sickness of some kind, though I don’t remember now just what. I understood him to say that the man was buried at sea.”

A blank wall! Ronald stared moodily for an instant at the guttering candle—then he shrugged his shoulders.

“There’s Batai!” he said irrelevantly. “Andrew Robb is the only one left alive of the three who chartered the *Hawk*—if he *is* still alive. In any case, a warning must be sent. As I told you, I intended to ask you to see that this was done, and then, when I heard that you had been attacked and carried off, I turned to Li Yuan; but, as you know now, I was not able to get in touch with him. I do not even know whether he is here or not, and much less whether my message ever reached him.”

Sarlow nodded his head sharply.

“I agree with you,” he said, his voice quivering in sudden passion. “Robb next! My God! Even the possibility is monstrous! Of course it’s imperative that a warning should be sent—we can only hope it does not reach him too late. I don’t know Li Yuan, but we’ll take no chances on what happened to that message of yours. We’ll make sure of getting word to Batai in any event. One of my schooners is in now. She will sail to-morrow, and I will send Robb a letter by a man I can trust.”

“That’s one hurdle taken then, thank God!” Ronald breathed fervently.

Sarlow rose to his feet.

“There’s a lot to do!” He smiled without humor. “The police first, of course. I don’t know where we are, or how you got here, or how long it will take to get back, but I think we should be making a start.”

Ronald too stood up.

“I came in a car with those two chaps of mine outside there,” he said. “We’re less than an hour’s run from Singapore. Yes, I think we should be getting along; but another few minutes now are worth more here, where we can talk without fear of being observed or overheard, than anywhere else. It’s a chance we are not likely to get again, and there are still one or two matters I want to speak to you about. I don’t want to go back to Whitie Jahal’s without every bit of inside information I can get.”

“That’s quite right,” Sarlow agreed; “but I’m afraid all the inside information that exists is what you yourself possess and are responsible for. I certainly have none.”

“I think you have—without perhaps realizing it,” said Ronald. “Tell me what happened this afternoon.”

“Oh, I see! Yes, perhaps you might dig something out of that. The actual hold-up was over in a very few minutes. We were crowded to the side of the road by another car—another car with five Malays in it.” Passion was creeping again into Sarlow’s voice, and suddenly he shook his fist in the air. “Before I scarcely realized what was happening, they had shot my chauffeur out of hand and were leaping into my car. I heard Joan scream. I did what I could, fought as best I could, but I was almost instantly overpowered. They thrust a cloth saturated with chloroform into my face, and while I was struggling I saw them do the same to Joan.”

“Yes,” Ronald concurred thoughtfully, “that is the way your chauffeur described it.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Sarlow. “He wasn’t killed, then?”

“Not outright. He died later.”

Sarlow’s face was working, a sweep of fury was racking the man once more.

“Curse them!” he cried out. “It’s blood they want, is it? Well, they shall have it before I’m through with them! Blood for blood—to the last drop!”

Ronald laid his hand on the other’s arm.

“Yes, I know,” he said soothingly. “It’s the way I felt when I first saw Gresham, and again when I saw Smith last night. But this ruffraff doesn’t

count, it's the perverted mind behind it all that we want. What happened next?"

"Next?" Sarlow swept his hand across his eyes. "Oh, yes! The first thing I remember when I began to come to was that Joan and I were in the Malays' car and traveling at what seemed great speed. Joan was still unconscious. Then the car stopped. I was forced to get out, and three of the Malays got out with me. The other two drove off with Joan. I was weak and sick from the effects of the chloroform. The Malays blindfolded me and made me walk. I don't know how far. When they took the blindfold off I was in this house. Here, they made me go up that ladder and through the trapdoor, and I heard them bolt the trapdoor from underneath. That's all. Will it help you any?"

Ronald pulled his brows together.

"I don't know," he admitted; "but, at any rate, I'm afraid it's proof positive that it was Miss Robb they were after. I know Whitie Jahal wasn't one of the five, because I know where he was this afternoon; but"—Ronald's fingers tugged suddenly at the lobe of his ear—"I wonder what brought him out here to-night?"

"I think I can tell you," Sarlow jerked out with a hard smile. "Money! It's what I said to you in the beginning. It was Joan they wanted, though I see now for another reason than the one I had first supposed, while I was merely a fish caught in the same net which they decided was worth keeping. A little while before you got here someone came up the ladder and talked to me through the trapdoor. I couldn't see him, of course—it was too dark. But it wasn't one of the Malays who had brought me here, for this man spoke English as well as you or I do, so undoubtedly it must have been this Whitie Jahal. He wasn't modest in his demands. He said I was a rich man and could afford to pay. He demanded five thousand pounds as the price I was to hand over for my liberty. I refused to treat with him on any basis whatever until I had proof that Joan was safe, and, moreover, had been returned unharmed to my home. He laughed at me. My God!" Sarlow suddenly covered his eyes with his hand and his voice dropped to a low moaning note. "He said the girl wasn't for sale; but that, if I wanted to buy my own life, I could—that was all I was concerned with. I begged and pleaded with him. His only replies were curses and threats. He gave me twenty-four hours. Then he bolted the trapdoor again and went away."

Ronald's hand went mechanically into his pocket for a cigarette, then he stooped to the candle flame and lighted it. His face was white. Joan Robb!
The girl wasn't for sale!

“Yes,” he said in a strained voice, “that was Whitie Jahal beyond question; and that explains why he was out here, all right. There’s just one more thing. I have a theory about it myself which may be quite wrong, but which, on the other hand, you may corroborate. Can you explain how these killers knew so soon, within a very few hours in fact, that Ronald Ward, as both you and they then believed him to be, had reached Singapore and was in your house?”

“The police asked the same question, and I think answered it in the only way it could be answered,” Sarlow replied. “I am afraid I am responsible, though what I did was a most natural thing, and for that reason I cannot conscientiously blame myself. One of the papers that afternoon, as you know, had printed several columns about the loss of the *Watabi* and had reproduced a letter from Gourlay, which I had received, stating that you had taken passage on the ship at Talettee. So then, when Smith turned up last evening and convinced me he was Ronald Ward, I telephoned the newspaper office. The paper wanted to send up a reporter at once, but Smith said that though they could go ahead and print the story they would have to leave the interview until the next day, as he didn’t feel up to seeing anyone that night. I can appreciate now, knowing him to be an impostor, that his reasons for dodging that interview were not wholly physical; but, anyway, it was left that way—and in the meantime Smith was murdered. We are satisfied, both the police and myself, that, unless Smith betrayed himself in some way before coming to me, which seems most unlikely, the news could only have leaked out through the newspaper office. What was your theory?”

“The same,” said Ronald. “I do not think there is any doubt about it. But I also think this: They planned to kill Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne in London, and Gresham on the *Watabi*; but the swiftness with which they acted on the unexpected here in Singapore convinces me that this is their headquarters. From what has happened since last night, they seem to have eyes and ears everywhere here. And, too, the *Hawk* sailed from Singapore, remember.”

Sarlow clamped his jaws.

“It would seem so!” he snapped. “So much the better, then! Those who were responsible will pay the sooner!”

“Let’s hope so!” said Ronald fervidly. “Well, if you’re ready, we’ll go now. I’ll motor you to Singapore, and you can communicate with the police while I go back to nest with Whitie Jahal. You’ll know where to find me hereafter; but, for God’s sake, watch your step if you want to communicate with me!”

“I understand,” said Sarlow gravely. “You need have no fears on that score.”

Ronald leaned over and blew out the candle.

“Come on, then!” he said.

It was in the early hours of the morning, but where it had been dark during the first part of the night, the moon was shining brightly now. Two Malays pulled at the oars. Ronald smiled grimly to himself as he glanced from time to time at the battered face of Whitie Jahal, who sat beside him in the boat's stern. Whitie Jahal was far more than merely puzzled over his release and what had occurred in the preceding hours. Whitie Jahal, sitting there morose and silent now, was afraid. His wind was up. Whitie Jahal was in flight.

But Ronald, too, was silent, immersed in his own thoughts. He wondered what Sarlow and the police would say when they found that both he and Whitie Jahal had decamped? He had had no chance to communicate with Sarlow. And even if that had been possible, he still would have been unable to supply any information as to where he was going. His job, and his only job, was to stick to Whitie Jahal while he could. He could not help the police, or Joan Robb, or himself, in any other way. His introduction to Whitie Jahal and the risks he had taken to “cultivate” the man during the last few days were bearing fruit. Whitie Jahal had offered him the present opportunity, and he had seized upon it, that was all.

A rather full night—and not over yet! He had taken Sarlow home, dismissed Weng-Kow and Kria with instructions to make a full report to Chinese Johnnie, who was to be told to make every effort to pass it on to Li Yuan, and then he had returned to Whitie Jahal's. That must have been nearly three o'clock. He had got into his bunk unobserved, and to his own surprise had fallen asleep. He did not know in what way or when Whitie Jahal had got back from the Pandak house, but he had been awakened by the other bending over him and whispering to him to get up.

His first thought then was that he had been discovered, and his hand, in his pocket, had snuggled around the butt of his automatic as he had followed Whitie Jahal out of the bunkroom, across the passage, and into the barroom. But he had almost instantly dismissed his fears. By no possibility could Whitie Jahal have recognized him at the Pandak house, and the swiftness with which death had reached Percival Smith was proof sufficient that no prior suspicions had been aroused.

The lamp had been lighted in the bar. Haji was standing at the far end of the room. Ronald chuckled quietly now at the remembrance of his first good

look at Whitie Jahal's disfigured face—it had been beyond his wildest hopes.

“For God's sake, Whitie,” he had exclaimed, “what's happened to you?”

“Mind your own blasted business!” Whitie, in apparently a high state of excitement, had snarled. “I've got to get out of here quick, and I've just roused up Haji to tell him about running the joint while I'm away. I'm in trouble. The 'why' don't matter to you. But I've got to beat it for mabbe a month or so till things cool down. Understand? But, by Gawd, I ain't going to lose money while I'm away, damn 'em!” He had lowered his voice then, so that Haji could not hear. “That's what I've got you up for. There's a friend of mine sailing in an hour or so on a little job of his own, and after that we're going to cruise up North off the Chinese coast for our health—and a nice little bit of opium that I've had my eye on, waiting for the chance when I could get away from here on a little holiday. See? Well, I've got to get out of here now, and that's where I'm going! Savvy? Smuggled stuff. About ten thousand pounds' worth that's there for somebody to grab—without paying any cash for it! You know—a blind port! We need a white man who can keep his mouth shut and who isn't known to the swine that's getting fat on the poppy. Mabbe there'll be a little trouble; but, if you've got the guts and all the rest Chinese Johnnie said you had, here's where you can break in on one of them deals we've been talking about. You'll get a fair split.”

Ronald glanced at the battered face beside him. Murder, no doubt, before the affair was over! But he had not hesitated. If it came to that, it would be Whitie Jahal who would have to die. Meanwhile he was here—and so was Whitie Jahal, which was the one thing that counted.

They were approaching a schooner that lay hove-to a little way ahead in the moonlight. And suddenly it recalled to Ronald that moonlight night when he had stood on the beach at Taletee. This, too, was a black, two-masted schooner.

CHAPTER XV

AS A HOUSE OF CARDS

IT was nearing twilight on the second afternoon out from Singapore. Land was abeam. The schooner, heeling to a stiffening breeze, was skirting the shores of an island.

Ronald, sitting on the coaming of the cabin skylight, fixed his eyes speculatively on the mass of black clouds that was banking up to windward. It was obviously not going to be a pleasant night, and the prospect did not please him. The dirty little craft was uncomfortable enough even in fair weather! He shrugged his shoulders. Oh, well, what else was there to do except be philosophical about it? At the worst it meant the smelly cabin instead of the deck where he had chosen by preference to sleep last night.

His glance, traveling aft now, rested on Whitie Jahal, who was talking to the Malay at the wheel. His forehead puckered reminiscently. Two days and one night of it aboard here now. A queer voyage—on queer errands! No—sinister was the word. He knew all about Whitie Jahal's errand now—Whitie Jahal had been unreservedly communicative in that respect. Ugly work! Murder at the end of it, as he had suspected from the first. But of Whitie's "friend" Bûrok, and Bûrok's "little job" to which Whitie Jahal had referred before coming aboard, that was quite another matter! He had very bluntly been told to mind his own business where Bûrok was concerned. He had done so. Bûrok had not interested him at first. Nevertheless, he had stumbled on the fact that Bûrok had someone confined here on board the schooner.

It had been yesterday during the noon meal in the cabin, and he found himself now mentally rehearsing the scene again. The door, opening off the cabin into a narrow alleyway that in turn led forward to the galley, had been left open as the cook had departed after placing some dishes on the table. From where he had sat he had been able to see along the length of the alleyway. Presently the cook had returned carrying a tray of food; but, instead of coming on into the cabin, the man had stopped halfway along the alleyway, taken a key that hung from a hook, unlocked a door, and had disappeared through the doorway. A moment later the man had reappeared minus the tray, had locked the door, replaced the key on its hook again, and had gone back to his galley. He, Ronald, had looked up then at the sound of a savage snarl to find Bûrok glaring at him viciously. Whitie Jahal had intervened. "It's your own damned fault, Bûrok!" Whitie had growled. "What's he care, anyway? And besides, you can take it from me, he's got a

bad memory. I'll see to that! Savvy?" Bûrok had seemed to be appeased, but after that the door between the cabin and the alleyway was always kept shut.

Ronald's lips tightened slightly. What could he have done about it—or do about it now? He couldn't go snooping. He was getting on closer and more intimate terms with Whitie Jahal daily—approaching the confidential stage, almost. He could not afford to invite suspicions. And suppose he even gained access to the prisoner and discovered who it was? What then? There was a crew of twelve ill-favored Malays forward; and aft, besides Bûrok and Whitie Jahal, there was Awang, who acted in the capacity of mate—fifteen in all. He was obviously helpless, and yet he could not callously dismiss the matter from his mind on that score, or even on any other. From what he had already seen of Bûrok, who, according to Whitie Jahal, owned the schooner, plus Bûrok's association with Whitie Jahal, he was uncomfortably aware that he would not care to stand in the prisoner's shoes. Bûrok's forbidding face rose before him—treachery and cruelty was in every line and feature. The man was little more than an untamed savage—one of the *Orang-Laut*, those sea robbers who had made even the name of the decent and peaceful Malays stink among civilized peoples. Not a nice situation! Also, the man was at least a potential murderer. Quite apart from Bûrok's own particular "little job," Bûrok and Whitie Jahal were on a murder quest. Ronald laughed shortly, suddenly, beneath his breath. Well, so was he, for that matter! Up North somewhere off the China coast! A situation still less nice!

Ronald's thoughts, diverted into this new channel, brought disquietude into his suddenly narrowed gray eyes. Yes, what was the end of this to be? How many times had he asked himself that question since Whitie Jahal had explained the plan in detail to him yesterday afternoon? He had agreed to it, of course—enthusiastically. He had even added a suggestion or two of his own. What else was there to do—for the moment?

A hijacking expedition! Opium! He nodded to himself. He quite understood. Whitie, for instance, had not mentioned international interference or even the League of Nations, since Whitie had probably never heard of that august body and its multifarious activities; but Whitie was, nevertheless, acutely aware of the ever increasing difficulty of smuggling opium out of any of the open Eastern ports owing to the stringent regulations that had been put in force—and a Belgian named Haackel, who possessed a small and apparently conveniently situated island, appeared to be even more fully aware of that same fact. In short, Haackel, it appeared, on the principle that it was an ill wind that blew nobody good, had seized upon the difficulties with which the illicit opium trade was beset, to serve his own ends. His island became a blind port for certain tramp steamers of

frayed morals enroute for Europe and America that, being in the know, cared to add to their cargoes and their profits, without endangering their clearance papers, a case or two of his wares. Haackel, in turn, received his supplies through the medium of junks and sailing craft of various kind that sailed surreptitiously and without inspection from the mainland. This had been going on for some time—with growing profits for Haackel. Bûrok knew it; Whitie Jahal knew it—and the opium runners knew it. But Haackel's secret had been well kept from the authorities. The code of the underworld, of course, the world over! But hijacking, dog eat dog—that was entirely a different affair! And the present moment, thanks primarily to Whitie Jahal's enforced absence from Singapore, was opportune!

Ronald smiled grimly. There was something of exquisite irony in the analogy between his own strategy in respect of Whitie Jahal and Whitie Jahal's strategy in respect of Haackel! Whitie Jahal had made it quite clear why he, Ronald, had been brought along and cast for a part in the grisly little drama that was to be enacted. The presence of a white man was necessary. Haackel would have had no dealings socially with such as Bûrok or Whitie Jahal. Haackel obviously would not display his wares openly; Haackel ran a plantation!

The plan was very simple. The schooner would put in for water, or on some other pretext if a better one occurred to any of them in the meanwhile. He, Ronald, was to pass himself off as the owner of the schooner—and accept the hospitality always accorded by white man to white man in far places. He was to observe the daily and particularly the nightly routine of Haackel's establishment, spy out the lay of the land generally, and ascertain where Haackel stored his supply of the drug in question—over the value of which when translated into pounds, shillings, and pence Whitie Jahal had smacked his lips avariciously. Yes, quite so! Whitie Jahal had unconsciously taken a leaf out of his, Ronald's, own book. Haackel was to be cultivated and his confidence gained! It might take a day—or two—or three. A bit of a rest ashore—a *dolce far niente* existence, as it were, lazing innocently around. And then, when the time came, Bûrok and Whitie Jahal and Awang, backed by that murderous pack forward there, would take care of the final dénouement. It might come off without bloodshed, but it was more likely to be a shambles, and there was — —

Ronald's eyes were on Whitie Jahal again. The man was coming along the deck toward him. He watched the other with apparent unconcern. Scabs were beginning to replace the lacerations on the half-caste's face—and they did not enhance the other's appearance. His boon companion now! Inwardly

Ronald laughed savagely. Some day he would mark the man worse than that!

Whitie Jahal seated himself on the coaming of the cabin skylight beside Ronald.

Ronald jerked his head to windward.

“It looks like bad weather coming,” he observed critically. “What do you think?”

Whitie Jahal grunted unconcernedly.

“Let ’er come,” he said. “We won’t be out in it.”

Ronald stared.

“Won’t be out in it?” he repeated. “How’s that?”

Whitie Jahal pointed to the shoreline abeam.

“We’re puttin’ in here for the night,” he said. “An hour or so more along the coast—about the time it gets dark.”

Puzzled, Ronald leaned toward the other.

“But this can’t be Haackel’s place!” he exclaimed. “I thought you said that he — —”

“So I did,” nodded Whitie Jahal. “It’ll take us near a week with good weather to get there. This here’s Batai.”

Batai! Andrew Robb! Whitie Jahal! Into Ronald’s brain flashed a sudden and ugly correlation that for an instant threatened to rob him of his poise. But the school of Li Yuan still stood him in good stead, and he merely shook his head.

“Well, whatever it is, it suits me,” he declared with a grin. “I’d rather be at anchor anywhere than out in the blow I fancy we’re going to get to-night.”

“Sure! Me, too; though that ain’t why we’re going there,” Whitie Jahal agreed readily; and then, after a moment’s hesitation: “Look here, there’s something I got to say to you.”

“Let’s hear it,” invited Ronald.

“Well, it’s like this,” said Whitie Jahal, with an expansive wave of his arms. “Since you’ve come aboard here you’ve had the run of the ship, haven’t you? You’ve gone where you like and done what you like. There being only two cabins, and me having taken Awang’s, you didn’t get one; but you could’ve slept in the main cabin, same as Awang does, if you’d wanted to. Outside of that you’ve had the best there is. You’ve been handed everything just like you was one of us—which you are. Is that right?”

Ronald's eyes widened—innocently.

“Good Lord!” he exclaimed. “Of course, it's right! I haven't made any kick, have I? I'm satisfied.”

“That's the way I figured it, and that's what I'm getting around to now.” Whitie Jahal thrust his face abruptly almost into Ronald's. “So I'm asking you what you'd say if me and Bûrok locked you up to-night?”

Every muscle in Ronald's body tensed, but he made no outward movement.

“Is this a joke?” he demanded.

“I'm asking you,” said Whitie Jahal bluntly.

“Well,” said Ronald coolly, “I'd say that if that's the way you'd treat a pal before the show starts, I'd have my fingers crossed from now on, and you and Bûrok could both go to hell so far as I am concerned on that Haackel job!”

Whitie Jahal leaned back, slapped his knee, and guffawed uproariously.

“That's what I told Bûrok!” he announced triumphantly.

Relief surged upon Ronald—and yet what was the man driving at?

“I don't get you,” he said.

“Well, listen, then, and I'll tell you,” said Whitie Jahal with a self-satisfied grin. “It wasn't no fault of yours, but you found out that Bûrok's got somebody locked up down there in the alleyway. What it's about and who it is ain't no concern of yours and it ain't no concern of mine; but, knowing already that somebody's there, what difference is it going to make if you know whether it's a man or a woman? It ain't going to make none. But unless you was locked up where you couldn't see what was going on you'd know it was a girl Bûrok had there, and that he was taking her ashore here to-night. And that's what Bûrok was going to hand you, but I put it up to him the other way, and he's satisfied so long as you don't get nosey. Savvy?”

Ronald's brain was whirling. Again the correlation—but amplified now in ghastly fashion. A girl! He did not need to be told who it was. There could be only one girl in the hands, not of Bûrok, but of Whitie Jahal, who was going ashore here at Batai to-night. *Joan Robb*. He dared not trust his voice. With an indifferent shrug of his shoulders, he nodded his head.

“All right,” said Whitie Jahal contentedly. “That's settled, then. I didn't want no misunderstanding between you and Bûrok on account of that little visit we're going to make to Haackel. You play the game with Bûrok, and he'll play the game with you; but this is his job, and he's damned touchy

about it. All you got to do is just stay away from the cabin and keep yourself out of the road somewhere up forward, and not pay any attention to what's going on until the boat's gone ashore. So long as he sees you ain't trying to get a look at the girl, so's mabbe you'd know her again, he's satisfied."

Ronald rose to his feet, braced himself against the schooner's lurch, and, stretching his arms, indulged in a yawn.

"If that's the way he feels about it, it's all right with me," he said in a bored tone. "He can take a dozen boats and a dozen girls ashore for all I care! It doesn't put anything in my pocket, either way; but"—as suddenly out of his subconscious mind a thought was born—"what about grub to-night if I'm to keep out of the cabin?"

Whitie Jahal stared—then, getting to his feet, grinned broadly.

"Oh, hell!" he exclaimed, as he started toward the cabin companionway. "So that's all that's worrying you, is it? Well, you know where the galley is!"

Ronald watched the other disappear below, then he made his way forward along the sloping deck—and a twisted smile flickered for an instant on his lips and died away as he passed the galley house amidships. He kept on along the deck, and, a little forward of the foremast, went to the lee rail and stood there staring out at the tumbling waves, white-crested now, as they raced shoreward.

The short almost momentary twilight of the tropics came and went. It grew dark—and the darkness was enhanced by the approaching storm. And still he stood there.

As a house of cards! Ronald's face was white and set. The structure he had so carefully built up around Whitie Jahal had in a single instant collapsed and disintegrated—like a house of cards. The fast ripening intimacy between Whitie Jahal and Bob Curle was at an end—and just at the moment when it was least expected, and least to be desired, for no single suspicion, he was certain, had ever been aroused in Whitie Jahal's mind. From Whitie Jahal's standpoint the casual mention of Batai meant nothing to Bob Curle—but it cut, though the man had not known it, the ground from beneath the feet of Ronald Ward. Batai to-night! Joan Robb aboard here! He fought desperately against the mental turmoil that surged upon him. Whitie Jahal wouldn't have been on board here, of course, except that he had been frightened away from Singapore; but, once here, he was virtually in command. Whitie, naturally, had known that Joan Robb had been put aboard Bûrok's schooner and had seized that chance to make his own escape—that was clear enough. Was Bûrok the man that he, Ronald, had chased that night in Taletee? He did not know. But obviously Bûrok had received his orders to

sail for Batai before Whitie Jahal could have had any thought of joining the schooner; and Bûrok, even if Whitie Jahal were not here, would have carried out alone whatever further orders he had received. Why were these devils bringing Joan Robb back to Batai? What would happen ashore there to-night—to Andrew Robb—to her?

His fingers dug at the rail to which he clung. *He knew!* He was standing again in Gresham's cabin on the *Watabi*; he saw Percival Smith in that room in Sarlow's house. Horror for a moment held him in its grip—and then his mind cleared again. Sarlow would be too late to warn Andrew Robb, for Sarlow's schooner would not have sailed until hours after Bûrok had put to sea; and any hope that Li Yuan might have received and acted instantly on that message, he, Ronald, had given up from the moment he had received Chinese Johnnie's disturbing reply. There was only one thing to be done, one chance left. He could no longer cling to his intimacy with Whitie Jahal in the hope of ultimately unmasking the man's leader—and in the meantime stand passively by while more butcheries were being committed virtually before his eyes.

The wind carried away a burst of low, strange laughter from Ronald's lips. Somehow he must get to Joan Robb. And if he did—what then? God knew! A thread to cling to. Some way of escape. At least an attempt. And somehow, ashore there, Andrew Robb must be warned. He did not know how. Andrew Robb was to die to-night—hideously. Whitie Jahal had unwittingly told him that as plainly as though he had said it in so many words.

One of Ronald's hands left the rail and, mechanically seeking his pocket, closed upon the automatic Li Yuan had given him. Not even a gambling chance, perhaps. No, perhaps not. But if the worst came to the worst, Whitie Jahal, and Bûrok with him, would die first.

CHAPTER XVI

THE "MURDERER"

IT had grown intensely dark. The shoreline was blotted out. The figures of the Malay crew as they stood or moved about the deck were but vague, shadowy outlines. The only glimmer of light that showed anywhere was a faint glow radiating from the cabin skylight aft. It was already blowing half a gale; but, though heeling to the wind, the schooner, close-reefed now, was holding a steady keel.

Ronald left the rail, and, in spite of the somewhat precarious footing, his hands thrust carelessly in his trousers' pockets, began to walk briskly up and down the deck. Several times he passed the galley entrance. The door was open, and there did not appear to be anyone there—certainly there was no light from within. And several times, with apparent indifference, he passed the cabin skylight. The swinging lamp in the cabin had been lighted. Whitie Jahal, Bûrok, and Awang, their heads together, were seated around the table. The door between the cabin and the alleyway was closed. Obviously Maha, the *serang*, had been left to sail the schooner, but there was nothing unusual in that. Last night, for instance, Bûrok and Awang had slept through the night and Maha had done the work—a better sailor, as a matter of fact, than either of the other two. Ronald paused in his walk as some forms suddenly scurried by him and were again lost in the darkness. That was Maha now shrilling out an order from somewhere near by.

Ronald resumed his walk, but presently he came to a halt again—this time hugged close in the shadows against the galley house. The galley still appeared to be empty. Apart from the absence of light, he could hear no sound from within. How long would it be now before the schooner came to anchor and Whitie Jahal and Bûrok began their hell's revel? Not long—it couldn't be long now. Whitie Jahal had said it would be shortly after dark.

He edged closer to the galley entrance. There was only one chance—just one—and that was of the slimmest. It would depend not only on being able to communicate with her, but on Joan Robb herself. And afterwards? That question stabbed ceaselessly at his brain. He had not been wholly idle during the last few minutes when he had been standing there at the rail; but it was not much of a plan—not ingenious—just desperate—a last resort. It would require almost incredible luck to win through. It was just the one throw left against the odds, that was all.

His eyes strained through the darkness. There was no one in his vicinity. Whether it would hold or not, luck at least was with him to begin with. He slipped swiftly through the galley entrance and a moment later was feeling his way in the pitch blackness along the alleyway below.

The groan and creak of the schooner's timbers drowned out the sound of his footsteps. He had no need to be overcautious on that score. He could not even hear Whitie Jahal and his companions talking, as he knew they must be doing, a little away ahead there behind that door that shut off the alleyway from the cabin.

The other door, the door he sought, was on his left-hand side. His fingers rubbed along the wall. The hook on which the key had been hung was shoulder high, he judged. What was this—a sort of panic that had suddenly seized upon him? It was hot down here, and horribly stuffy, but his hand, as it groped along, seemed to have gone strangely cold and numb. Suppose they had taken the key away! Without that key, his one hope, slight as that hope was, was gone. He had only seen the key hung here once. After that the door from the cabin had always been closed. The moment passed. He was cool again—but self-angry. He had been faced with that contingency from the beginning, hadn't he? And then his fingers touched the hook. The key was here.

He felt for the keyhole, unlocked the door, and, withdrawing the key, replaced it on the hook. Safer that way. . . . A little detail. . . . If anyone came along the alleyway and noticed that the key was gone . . . !

He opened the door, stepped through, and closed the door quietly behind him.

“Miss Robb!” he called softly.

There was no answer.

He could see nothing. It was so dark in here that he could not have distinguished his hand even if he had held it in front of his eyes. He called again, but there was no sound save only the creaking of the schooner's timbers.

And then, perplexed, a sudden dismay upon him, he struck a match—and, while the passing seconds measured an eternity, he stood there motionless.

She was standing there against the rear wall of the room, as far away from the door as she could get, a rigid little figure, her hands at her sides tightly clenched. Her face was a dead white, as though every drop of blood had been drained from her cheeks, but there was no fear there; rather, a brave contempt in the compressed lips, and a cold defiance in the dark eyes

as they met his in the matchlight. And then in a flash it seemed to him her whole expression changed. Her lips parted in a low and sudden cry, and her eyes grew wide with horror.

“The murderer!” she cried out. “So you are here, too!”

The match went out. The stub of it dropped from Ronald’s fingers to the floor. Queer that it should have come about like this! Their second meeting! Like the first! In the flame of a match! The parallel had made recognition almost a certainty, of course. His mind groped for words with which to answer and reassure her. If she had only spoken when he had called to her, this would not have happened. He could have talked to her here in the darkness and gained her confidence first. It was not so easy now.

“It is true,” he said quietly, “that I am the man you saw that night, but I am not the murderer. I am the man that poor devil impersonated. I am Ronald Ward.”

“Ronald Ward!” Like Sarlow, at the same disclosure, she laughed now hysterically. “What do you expect to gain by that? I suppose you’re the ship’s doctor, too, aren’t you? That would explain your presence here. Not that any explanation is necessary! You are where you belong!”

“Miss Robb,” Ronald said earnestly, “if there were time, and the story were not so long, I could convince you readily enough. But there is no time, and meanwhile you must take me on trust and believe me when I say that I am telling you the truth.”

“Whether your story were long or short, I would not believe a word you said,” she stated tonelessly. “I saw you with the knife in your hand. Is *it my* turn now?”

“For God’s sake, Miss Robb,” Ronald burst out frantically, “listen to me! There’s just one chance: I’m afraid it’s only a long shot, but— —”

“I’ve been caged in this horrible place like an animal for two days and two nights now!” she broke in passionately. “No light—a filthy piece of matting to sleep on! What have you done with Mr. Sarlow? What is it that you and your fellow beasts want with me? I have not been told yet. Where are you taking me?”

“Please try to understand,” Ronald pleaded anxiously, “that *I* am not taking you anywhere, except to get you out of here if it is possible. As for Mr. Sarlow, he is already safe, thank God!”

“Safe! How do you know?”

“He is back in his own home again,” Ronald replied. “I had the luck to find out where they had taken him and managed to set him free.”

“You!” She flung the word at him with bitter sarcasm. “How splendid of you! And now you have *found* me too! Such amazing—*luck*! Perhaps you could even find out where I am being taken?”

“I can tell you this,” said Ronald soberly, “that at the present moment we are off Batai, and in a very little while a landing will be made on the island.”

“*Batai!*” For the first time fear was in her voice. “I am being taken back to Batai! Why? What does all this mean? What is this ship, or whatever it is, doing at Batai to-night? Tell me! Tell me!”

Ronald gnawed at his lips. There was only one answer—a stark and brutal one. But he hesitated now, seeking for words to soften the horror of it.

And as he hesitated she spoke again.

“You need not tell me,” she said, and her voice broke now in a sudden sob. “I know! The newspaper was right about that voyage of the *Hawk*! It’s —it’s Father—*next!*”

Ronald leaned forward and, in the darkness, found and laid his hand gently on her shoulder. It was impulse that had prompted him; otherwise he would not have acted so, for he could have expected nothing save to have her fling his hand violently away and recoil from his touch. But she made no movement. He did not know why. He was conscious of a sudden emotion that he could not define. She had become transformed in an instant from merely *someone*, to a woman whose peril was an intimate and personal concern of his own.

She spoke again—but so low now that he could scarcely hear her:

“Is—is that it?”

“Yes,” he said hoarsely. “Your father—and you! Though just why they should have brought you back here, I do not know. I had already been afraid that you were— —” He checked himself abruptly. A fool! He was merely a blundering, loose-tongued fool. He removed his hand from her shoulder and allowed it to drop, clenched, at his side. “Your father must be warned. There is only one way. There would be no purpose in deceiving you. If every bit of luck there is breaks our way we will win through; if it breaks against us in a single detail, we won’t—that’s all. Can you swim?”

There was a pause, and then she seemed to answer the question mechanically, subconsciously, as though it were something extraneous to her thoughts.

“I can swim,” she said.

“Thank heaven for that!” Ronald exclaimed fervently. “We should have had to try it, anyway, for it’s the only chance there is; but whether I could have managed to get you ashore would have depended, of course, on the

distance. Now, listen! The plan is simple enough—and thin enough, God knows, as I said. We have to depend on two things—the darkness and the natural scurry and confusion aboard when the schooner swings up to her anchorage, wherever that may be. When that happens we will make a bolt for it and trust to luck for the rest. I've got a rope fastened at the rail so that we can lower ourselves into the water without, at least, making a splash that would attract attention."

She laughed strangely.

"You seem to take a great deal for granted," she challenged. "That I even believe you are Ronald Ward—which I do not! Is this some new form of horror? Is this a trap?"

"If it is," he answered evenly, "it is no worse than the one you are in now. If you force me to put it into ugly words, I do not know of any other way, or of any other chance, of saving either yours or your father's life."

"And—yours?" There was a trace of irony in her voice.

"And mine—now," he acknowledged quietly.

And then it seemed to Ronald, his eyes grown more accustomed to the darkness, that she had covered her face with her hands.

"I—I do not know what to do," she faltered. "I—I do not know what to believe."

"You can at least believe," he told her urgently, "that whether I am Ronald Ward or not, and no matter how I came to be aboard here, you are adding nothing to your risk in trusting me now. And there is no time now for all those explanations. I told you that before. Every minute adds to the greatest risk of all—that of my being found here."

"Yes," she said almost beneath her breath, "if there is any truth at all in what you say, I can quite understand that. Well?"

"What I propose to do is this," he explained rapidly. "I shall go out of here and lock the door again. I do not think anyone will come near you until they are ready to take you ashore, which obviously cannot be for at least some little time after the schooner drops anchor; but, meanwhile, we cannot afford to take any chance, other than the one I have been forced into taking now, of your door being found unlocked. Now, the alleyway outside leads forward to the galley and aft to the cabin. I had the luck to find the galley empty, and I came through that way. I hope it will be just the same now on my return; but, in any case, the cook is bound to come and go, and I shall only have to wait my chance to get back on deck. I want to be seen there as much as possible until I know that the schooner is actually making in for the shore. When I am sure of that, I shall go back into the galley. You see—" he

laughed shortly, grimly—“the regular meal service for the evening has been suspended, and I have been given a sort of *carte blanche* to forage for myself; and besides, I’ve been told to keep out of the road, so my presence in the galley will not excite suspicion. I shall come for you just when the schooner is dropping anchor and everybody on deck is occupied—and if the cook is in the galley at that time, so much the worse for him! It may be an hour from now, or it may be in the next few minutes. I do not know.”

She made no reply.

“You have not answered me,” he prompted tensely.

“I am trying to make myself believe that you are really risking your life for me,” she said, scarcely above a whisper. “I shall be ready.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE THIRD THROW

OUT in the alleyway a moment later, Ronald locked Joan's door and hung the key again upon its hook. Then he turned from the door, and began to feel his way in the darkness back toward the galley—but suddenly he stopped, and, crouched against the wall, stood motionless. The door at the other end of the alleyway, the door leading from the cabin, was being opened. A ray of light stole into the alleyway. For a moment he held his breath—and then he smiled grimly. The swinging lamp in the cabin was not very brilliant; and, though the door was wide open now, the diffused light did not penetrate more than a few feet along the alleyway, not nearly, in fact, even to Joan's door. He was quite safe from observation from anyone in the cabin, but—his hand whipped his automatic from his pocket—Whitie Jahal was coming out of the cabin now and coming along the alleyway.

Ronald began to edge backward, well hidden in the darkness, while the ship's noises, he knew, prevented any sounds he made from being heard. If he could reach the galley, and providing there was still no one there to see him enter, he could quite easily avoid Whitie Jahal; otherwise, if he were caught here in the alleyway, or it became a question of explanations, it would be—

He stopped again. Whitie Jahal had obviously no intention of traversing the alleyway. Against the light from the cabin he could see that the man had halted in front of Joan's door; and now, taking down the key, the half-caste unlocked and flung the door rudely open. And then Ronald heard Whitie Jahal's voice.

“Come out of there, you!” Whitie Jahal ordered roughly.

A sudden sense of disaster settled upon Ronald. The schooner had certainly not yet made land, and he had counted on Joan being left in there until they were ready to take her ashore. And now—what? How could he reach her if she were taken somewhere else—and kept under guard? He felt his face grow white with dread and a miserable impotency, as, his eyes straining through the darkness, he saw her step out through the doorway, and watched while Whitie Jahal, with a foul oath, pushed her violently toward the cabin.

He saw her step into the cabin accompanied by Whitie Jahal, and through the door which Whitie Jahal had left open behind him, saw her suddenly put her hands to her eyes and heard her cry out wildly. And then,

as, over her cry, there came a burst of that inhuman laughter he had heard that night at Talettee, he moved swiftly forward to where just beyond the radius of light he could both see and hear almost as distinctly as though he had been in the cabin itself. She stood there, swaying a little; while grouped around the table, Whitie Jahal, Bûrok, and Awang fronted her with leering and distorted faces.

He could not see Joan's face. Her back was toward him, and she was clutching now with one hand at the edge of the table for support; but, as she moved a little to one side and his eyes followed Whitie Jahal's pointing finger, Ronald saw what had caused her cry of terror. And in that instant savagery came; and the urge to kill swept over him—and then cold reason held him in control. At the last, yes, if there were no other way—but it would be madness now. His arm, unconsciously outflung with leveled automatic, dropped to his side. So this was it! They were merely *amusing* themselves! Feasting on the horror he knew they were reading in her face and eyes! An abominable prelude to whet their insensate appetites for what was to follow ashore! A knife, whose form and pattern once seen could never be forgotten, a knife, with a stone haft and a blade that tapered to a needle point, had been jabbed into the wood of the table so that it stood upright quivering with every motion of the ship. And beside it lay a miniature gold skull.

“Seen those before, eh?” Whitie Jahal jeered. “Don't you like the looks of 'em?”

She made no answer.

“Well, then,” invited Whitie Jahal with an ugly leer, “take a look at us, instead. You told the newspaper you saw the man who killed that fellow in your friend Mr. Sarlow's house the other night. And you said you'd know him if you ever saw him again. We'd like to make sure whether you would or not. Now, take a good long look, that's a nice little girl! Was it one of us that did the killing?”

She shook her head—and shrank back as Whitie Jahal thrust his disfigured face almost into hers.

“Well, you ain't so good!” The half-caste laughed wickedly. “'Cause it was! But mabbe you was so scared that night you only thought you'd know him again. But we don't mind telling you who it was, 'cause we know you won't tell anybody, and that you won't talk to the newspapers about it again either!” He turned and clapped his hand on Awang's shoulder. “It was Awang here. Awang is very clever with a knife. Don't you remember Awang now?”

“What are you going to do?” she cried out. “What do you want with me?”

“Ah, the little bird has found her voice!” smirked Whitie Jahal. “We’re just taking you into our confidence, that’s all. And we thought mabbe you’d like to see one of them knives used again, eh? Sure, you would! Well, you’re going to—to-night.”

“What do you mean?” she asked unsteadily.

There was a sardonic grin on Whitie Jahal’s face.

“Well, it’s like this,” he said. “Your father got a pretty good idea that something might happen to him—and mabbe to you. So he figured he’d send you away to England so’s you’d be safe—only, *somehow*, you didn’t get any farther than Singapore. Savvy? Your father’s very fond of you, ain’t he? He was going to run for it too, only he couldn’t leave Batai all of a sudden like the way you could, and he took a chance on staying awhile to get his business fixed up first, and then— —”

“What has my father ever done to you?” she broke in passionately.

“You can ask him yourself—to-night!” leered Whitie Jahal. “We’re at Batai now. We’ve brought you back to him. We thought it would sweeten his last minutes to have his daughter that he thought was so safe with him.”

“Stop!” she faltered. “This isn’t true! It can’t be true! There are no human beings who could be such monsters!”

“You wait and see whether it’s true or not!” Whitie Jahal was snarling like a beast now. “We’ll be in the lagoon in a few minutes. Then I’m going to lock you up again until we’re ready to take you ashore with us—which will be mabbe along near morning, so’s we won’t disturb any of your father’s neighbors! Savvy, pretty face? Your father’ll be glad to see you, won’t he?”

For a moment she did not speak, and Ronald, watching, saw her cover her face again with her hands—and then her voice reached him in piteous pleading.

“What price is it that you want?” she asked. “I—I will pay anything, give anything that I have. Is it money? Is it—me?”

“You!” Whitie Jahal grinned maliciously. “We got you already, ain’t we? And that’s what we want your father to know—that you’ll be part of the price when your turn comes. That’s what we’ve brought you back for!”

“Is there—nothing—nothing?” she was pleading still, and now with outstretched hands. “My father never did you any harm.”

“He didn’t—eh?” inquired Whitie Jahal viciously. “Well, I’ve told you, you’ll get a chance to ask him for yourself.”

“You mean that you—you are going to—” her words were coming in choked sobs now—“oh, I can’t say it! You mean that there is—is nothing I can say—or do—to save my father?”

“Damn him!” roared Whitie Jahal suddenly. “No!”

Ronald drew his hand across his forehead. It came away dripping wet. She seemed to have recognized the futility of further pleading, for he saw her draw herself erect, and as she spoke now, her voice, though it still quivered, rang through the cabin in brave and bitter defiance.

“I never knew that God had made such creatures as you!” she cried. “So this is what you have brought me into the cabin here to-night for—to torture me with the thought that in a few hours you are going to kill my father! I suppose I should thank you for having left me alone and in ignorance until now, instead of having added that horror to the last two days.”

Whitie Jahal laughed derisively.

“No,” he sneered, “that ain’t what we brought you in here for to-night. If you want to know the truth, we wasn’t going to say nothing to you till we’d put you in your father’s arms. We thought the scene would be more touching if you didn’t know what it was about at first. Savvy? Only we changed our minds, ’cause Bûrok here got an idea. I was just getting around to that.” He paused to laugh again, this time malevolently. “You’re listening, ain’t you? Well, I’ll tell you. One of the three of us here is going to use that knife to-night, only we couldn’t make up our minds which one of us it was going to be. But while we was sitting down here in the cabin talking about it a little while ago, Bûrok got that idea of his which me and Awang fell for, so then I went and fetched you. You’ll like it. We’re going to leave it to Robb’s *daughter* to settle who’s going to do the job on him to-night.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a dice box. “One dice, savvy? You’ll throw once for each of us. The high man wins the knife. Here!”—he held out the dice box to her.

And then she screamed—and, turning, made a frantic effort to reach the door. But Whitie Jahal dragged her back.

“No, you don’t!” he snarled furiously. “Here! Take it, d’ye hear?”

The cabin and its struggling forms seemed to swim dizzily before Ronald’s eyes. The blood was pounding in hammer blows at his temples. But he made no move. An inner voice, cold and disdainful of the impulse that prompted him to make a berserk rush, reminded him that Whitie Jahal had said Joan would be locked up in this room here in the alleyway again

before she was taken ashore. And so he watched—and cursed his better judgment that flamed his cheeks with shame at his inaction as he looked on!

The three men were holding her while she struggled impotently, and now Whitie Jahal forced the dice box into her hand and twisted her arm until the dice rolled out upon the table.

“A five!” he croaked. “That’s yours, Bûrok! And now, here’s yours, Awang!”

He picked up the dice, replaced it in the box, and, with a burst of ribald laughter, jerked Joan’s hand to and fro while the dice rattled in the box. Then, twisting her arm again, he forced her to cast a second throw.

“Another five!” Whitie Jahal rocked on his feet and roared with laughter. “So you think it’s between you two, eh? Well, we’ll see! Now, pretty face, do your best! A six for me!”

He shook her arm and hand until she cried out with pain, and then for the third time the dice tumbled out upon the table.

“By God!” he shrilled. “It is! A six! I win!” He reached out and snatched up the knife and the gold skull that lay on the table—and not for the first time that night thrust his face into Joan’s. “You’ll know *me* again, won’t you?” he gloated. “Never mind about that other night, you’ll — —”

He broke off abruptly. The schooner was suddenly beginning to assume an even keel as though she were coming up into the wind, and Ronald could hear now a voice in Malay calling down the cabin companionway.

“Ha!” Whitie Jahal rocked again with evil laughter. “Home! D’ye hear that, pretty face? Home! Won’t Daddy be surprised! But there ain’t no hurry.” He grasped Joan by the shoulder and shoved her forcibly toward the alleyway door. “You get back in there till we’re ready for you!”

Ronald began to retreat back along the alleyway until at the far end in the darkness he halted again. He was conscious that his brain was afire with a fury that was near to madness—and yet it was strangely clear and unfogged. He saw Bûrok and Awang run out of the cabin, presumably to go up on deck. He saw Whitie Jahal push Joan along the alleyway, lock her in her room, hang the key on the hook again, and go back into the cabin, shutting the cabin door behind him. He heard the slatting of sails, the creaking of booms, and the patter of feet on the deck overhead.

And then he was at Joan’s door—and in another instant had opened it.

“*Now!*” he called. “*Quick!*”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NIGHT AT BATAI

So far the luck had held. The galley had been both dark and deserted, and Ronald, his automatic smuggled in his hand, stood now with Joan beside him just inside the galley entrance peering out on the deck. Not a light was showing anywhere on board. He nodded to himself with grim satisfaction. The schooner was obviously not advertising her presence to anyone ashore! Also it had not only begun to rain, but a tropical downpour was in progress that made even the darkness misty. The schooner had dropped anchor, and there was commotion everywhere, but he could scarcely see the figures of the crew as they flitted and ran about the deck housing the canvas.

“I don’t think anyone will pay any attention to you,” he whispered encouragingly. “From a yard away your skirt might easily be taken for a *sarong*. Go straight across to the rail; then, when you’ve found the rope, wait your chance and slip over the side when no one is immediately near you. No noise; don’t splash, that’s all. I’ll be right behind you.” He laid his hand on her arm and pressed it reassuringly. “It’s going to be all right. We’ll make it! Why, it’s so black we can’t help it! Are you ready?”

“Yes!” she whispered back tensely.

“You’re a little brick—Joan!” he said involuntarily; and then something came welling up in his throat, and he clamped his jaws together. “Now’s your chance!” he breathed. “Carry on!”

He watched her as she stepped out on the deck. A yard behind he followed. He saw her reach the rail, and a moment later saw her disappear over the schooner’s side. No one was near by. He thrust his automatic into his pocket—and the rope was still taut with her weight as, in turn, he swung himself over the rail and lowered himself into the water. They struck out together, swimming noiselessly. Ronald breathed a prayer of gratitude. It had all been accomplished so easily that he could scarcely credit it.

A minute, two, three, passed in silence, and then she spoke suddenly.

“I—I don’t know where we’re going,” she said anxiously. “It’s so black I can’t see the shore anywhere.”

“No,” he said quietly; “and we can scarcely see the schooner either now—so obviously they can’t see us. That was the first thing we had to consider, and we’re quite safe now, I’d say. Don’t worry about not being able to see where we are going. I think God gave us this night. To your right now!”

More! Yes, that's it! We may not take the shortest way, but we can't miss it. The wind is dead ashore."

"Yes," she said—and instantly quickened her stroke. "Faster, then! We must go faster!" And then panic seemed to seize her. "Father! Father!" he heard her cry out in a low, broken voice.

"Steady!" Ronald cautioned. "If we have any distance to go, you must save your strength. I was in the alleyway when they took you into the cabin, and I heard and saw everything. According to that brute Jahal, the schooner was to anchor in a lagoon and, I presume, somewhere off your father's house. You can perhaps tell from that how far we've got to swim."

His words seemed to calm her.

"The lagoon is very large," she answered, "and is very shallow near shore. Vessels usually anchor a long way out. We'll have to swim at the very least a mile."

"The one reason, then, why we should take it easily," he pointed out coolly. "We've plenty of time. I locked that door of yours again, you know. They'll never discover you have gone until they are ready to take you ashore; and Jahal, you remember, intimated that wouldn't be for hours yet."

"Yes," she said.

"And we'll save our wind, too," he suggested cheerfully. "Very little talking until we get ashore."

"Yes," she said again.

The water in the sheltered lagoon was almost smooth, and the pelting rain helped to flatten it out. She swam magnificently, and Ronald, watching her as well as he could in the darkness, was conscious of a very distinct sense of relief. There was nothing to fear on that score, at least. As a matter of fact, though a fairly strong swimmer himself, he recognized her as being the better of the two.

They swam on side by side. His mind, relieved of any anxiety as to her ability to take care of herself in the water, became suddenly chaotic. A series of murders that had stretched across the world—from London to Singapore. Murders of the most ghoulish and abhorrent kind. They were incredible. The imaginings of a gangrenous mind—no rational human being could have conceived or engineered them. They overtopped the bounds of credence—and yet they were real. He had *seen* them. Gresham! Percival Smith! What was behind it all? No—*who*? Not Whitie Jahal, not Bûrok, not Awang, who were going ashore here to-night like jungle beasts, licking their chops at the prospect of a kill. They were merely degenerates whose thirst and greed for abominations were insatiable. Who—then? Well, he might never know now;

and quite possibly his own turn might come in consequence—but at least there was one proposed victim who would escape to-night. They would not find Andrew Robb at home—or, if they did, it would not be Andrew Robb who—

They had been swimming for a long time. It took a long time to swim a mile—and still there was no sign of the shore. He turned suddenly on his back.

“Float!” he called out in a low voice. “Listen!”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Listen!” he said again. “Do you hear anything?”

They lay motionless in the water for a moment.

“No,” she said finally. “What is it?”

“Imagination, I fancy,” he admitted. “I thought I caught the sound of oars a minute ago, but I must have been mistaken. I can’t hear anything now.”

“Neither can I,” she agreed, “not even from the schooner out there; but hadn’t we better hurry—Dr. Ward?”

“A little breathing spell will do neither of us any harm,” he replied. “It will be a minute or so well spent—especially for me. I’m not so good in the water as you are, and I fancy there’s still a bit of a stretch to go.” And then he prodded softly: “So it’s *Dr. Ward*, is it?”

She did not answer for an instant—and then for the first time her voice lost some of its anxiety, and there crept into it a lighter note.

“That’s what you told me, wasn’t it?” she retorted naïvely. “Didn’t you say you were Dr. Ward?”

“Not to you!” he declared brazenly. “I never mentioned the word ‘doctor’ to you.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed provocatively. “And just as I was beginning to believe! Who are you, then?”

“The other night, when that chap palmed himself off for me at Sarlow’s house,” he said a little wistfully, “I was standing outside—you remember that the French windows were open?—and I heard what you said about the four-to-seven age. So once upon a time you must have been Joan and I must have been Ronald.”

“Oh!” Her exclamation came with a startled catch of her breath this time.

“But of course we have grown up since then—Joan,” he said.

“Yes—of course.” Her voice sounded far away, indicative of nothing.

She might have said “Ronald.” He had hoped she would.

“I only wanted to make you really believe that I was one of the tots at those tea parties,” he said a little lamely, “you know—even before I could tell you the whole story.”

“Well, then,” she said, and suddenly there was a pathetic little quiver in her voice, “I’ll call you Ronald until you do. But I wonder if that will ever be? Somehow, I am terribly afraid out here to-night—more afraid even than I was back there on the schooner.”

“You needn’t be!” Ronald cried out buoyantly. “We’ll have your father away from the house long before they even think of starting to go ashore.”

She began to swim again.

“Yes; but, oh, do let us hurry just the same!” she urged frantically.

He swam beside her. She was cleaving the water now with lithe, powerful strokes, and he was forced to exert himself to the utmost to keep abreast of her. But he did not share her forebodings; instead, he was conscious that there was suddenly a song in his heart, and that somehow he was strangely content.

And then finally their feet touched bottom and they waded ashore.

As nearly as Ronald could judge the time, they had been in the water at least half an hour, and now they stood resting for a moment on the beach, and staring about them through the darkness.

“I can’t see anything except what looks like a clump of trees over there in front of us,” Ronald said, as he wrung some of the water from his clothing. “Certainly there’s not much showing in the way of landmarks!” There was a trace of concern in his voice. “Do you know where we are?”

“No; but I can find the way,” she answered confidently. “It’s my turn to be guide now. There’s a road that parallels the lagoon for miles just on the other side of those trees. Our house is back from it—somewhere. Come on!”

He followed her across the beach, and through what proved to be no more than a bordering fringe of trees.

“Now wait a minute,” she said, as they reached the road. “I’ve lived nearly all my life here. Just let me see exactly where we are.”

Ronald found himself standing suddenly alone. His hand, thrust into his pocket, touched his automatic. He had forgotten the weapon for the moment, and he wondered now if its submersion could possibly have had any ill effect upon it. Why not put it to the proof? Why not try a shot? A fool idea! A report—a flash! And why? He was not likely to need it any more now—

they were well ahead of time. And besides, a grease-jacketed bullet encased in what was practically a hermetically sealed shell could hardly —

He heard her call. Her voice came from down the road to the left.

A moment later he joined her.

“We must have swum almost straight in from the schooner,” she said. “That’s wonderful! We’re not more than half a mile from the house.”

“Which proves that our luck is zenith high to-night!” Ronald proclaimed gayly as they swung out at a brisk pace along the road. “And now tell me something—I haven’t had a chance to ask before. That reference Whitie Jahal made to your father’s neighbors was, I know, nothing more than a perverted exhibition of facetiousness on his part, but it is deucedly vital to us. I don’t know anything about Batai. Are there many people on the island? And how close is your nearest neighbor?”

“Batai is quite a large island,” she answered; “and there are a good many people here; but naturally we live rather far apart. The Blaylocks own the plantation next to ours—about three miles away. Why?”

“I was just wondering,” he said grimly, “if we could not turn the tables on those devils. Get a little force together, you know, and give them a warm reception when they come ashore.”

“But when they find that we have escaped from the schooner,” she countered quickly, “they will know that we have already warned Father and that they are too late, so perhaps they will not come at all.”

“Oh, yes—I think they will!” he asserted confidently. “They won’t know *when* we escaped from the schooner, and therefore whether we’ve had time enough to reach your father; but they *will* know that the only way we could get ashore, if we ever got there at all, would be by swimming—and they could cover the distance with a boat in about a tenth of the time it would have taken us. Besides, they haven’t come to Batai merely to sail away again. There’s no use mincing matters. You’ve seen too much of them already not to know that. The question is—is there any way of trapping them?”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. “I only know that the first thing to do is to get Father out of the house. Afterwards—perhaps. We have a car. Given a couple of hours, I suppose we could gather ten or twelve of the planters together.”

“Splendid!” Ronald exulted. “Near morning, Whitie said. We’ve time to spare on all counts!”

She was silent for a moment, hurrying her steps, breaking almost into a run, and when she spoke again it was as though she had not heard him.

“Oh, it’s all too horrible!” she burst out vehemently. “What does it mean? What does it mean? Why should they want to kill Father?”

“We’ll know to-night,” he answered quietly. “Your father is the only one who can answer that question.”

“Do you really believe it has anything to do with that voyage of the *Hawk*?”

“I am certain of it,” he said decisively. “But I do not know the wherefores.”

“I don’t understand!” she said. “It’s not only Father who has kept silent, but nothing ever seems to have been said about it by anybody, and one would at least think that some of the crew would have told the story if anything out of the ordinary had happened.”

“I’ve racked my brains a bit over that myself,” Ronald admitted. “Particularly as to the crew. But there’s no good speculating about it any more, is there? I fancy that after what’s occurred to-night your father won’t keep silent any longer.”

“But I don’t understand! I don’t understand!” she repeated. “Except, of course, that, so far as I was concerned, he did not want to frighten me.”

“Of course!” Ronald agreed. “Naturally, he— —”

But she had begun to run impetuously at top speed.

“Look!” she cried. “There’s the house! Oh, I’m so glad—so happy!”

Ronald followed at her heels. Lights, in spite of windows shuttered against the storm, showed through the trees a little way off the road to the right. It wasn’t far—up a private driveway—a hundred yards. In her haste she stumbled on the veranda steps, and Ronald laughingly set her on her feet—then she burst in through the front door.

“Father!” she cried.

And then for the second time that night she screamed.

Mechanically Ronald jerked his automatic from his pocket and in an instant was beside her as she stood swaying, white faced, in the doorway of what was evidently the living room of the house. And for a moment, then, reason fled from him, and his brain whirled chaotically. Near the center of the room, lolling at his ease in a lounge wicker chair and grinning diabolically was—Whitie Jahal!

“Hello! So you got here at last, did you?” mocked the half-caste. “It would have been a lot quicker and a lot easier if you’d waited for the boat. Too bad you was in such a hurry! And that”—he pointed suddenly to the automatic in Ronald’s hand—“you might as well put it in your pocket. I

don't say the water's hurt it any, mabbe it has and mabbe it hasn't, and the clip's there all right, but there's some of the insides missing—since last night. Awang's pretty clever at that, too. He borrowed it when you were asleep. It won't go off—*and you won't get a chance to bash my face with it again, either!*”

Instinctively Ronald's fingers tested the trigger. It did not function.

Whitie Jahal jerked himself up to a sitting position and laughed raucously.

Those last words of Whitie Jahal's! Their unmistakable significance! The man *knew*. Ronald glanced at Joan—and stark fear gripped at him.

But it was Joan who spoke.

“Where is my father?” she questioned wildly.

Whitie Jahal's laugh died away, and a vile scowl convulsed his features.

“Ask him!” he snarled, and pointed his finger again in Ronald's direction.

“What do you mean?” demanded Ronald hoarsely.

“Mean!” Whitie Jahal burst into a flood of furious blasphemy. “You know damned well what I mean! You didn't think it would come off, and neither did we. But it did. You win that trick—but, by God, you'll pay for it!”

Ronald stared bleakly at the useless automatic in his hand.

“I still don't know what you mean,” he repeated.

“Don't you?” blazed Whitie Jahal. “Well, I'll tell you! It's the only good news you'll ever get again, and I won't be mean about it. When we got ashore here fifteen minutes ago Robb was gone, and— —”

“Oh, thank God!” Joan cried.

“Thank God, eh!” roared Whitie Jahal. “Well, we'll see about that, too! But you keep your mouth shut! Mister Bob Curle wants to hear all about it. You're listening, ain't you?—Mister Curle! Well, listen! Robb was gone, and there was nobody left but some of the native servants—and one of 'em talked—because he had to. Robb got away on a schooner, a white schooner, that came into the lagoon this afternoon. Did you ever hear of a white schooner before called the *Sen-Chu*? Sure, you did! *And* that slick friend of yours named Li Yuan—and that double-crossing swine Chinese Johnnie—and Dr. Ronald Ward!” And then Whitie Jahal burst into mocking laughter. “Did you think I didn't know that you were Ronald Ward? Did you think I didn't know your game? Watch me, would you? Well, I gave you the chance to pal up with me, didn't I? Haackel! Ha, ha! That was a neat yarn I pitched

you, you poor fool! Did you think we were going off to steal opium together? Did you think you saw that door in the alleyway by accident, and the key hanging all nice and handy on the nail? And then you found out we was off Batai and there was a girl aboard, didn't you? And you figured out, being brainy, who she was! And the galley was left nice and empty for you to-night, wasn't it? And did you think nobody saw that rope, and nobody saw the two of you go over the side? Sure, we let you go—'cause we knew where you was going and we'd be waiting for you when you got there! Like we was! We wasn't going to spoil that nice little swim of yours—not for nothing! We ain't that kind!”

Ronald was fighting desperately now for composure. The game was up, of course. But—he dared not trust himself to glance at Joan again—was there any way out for her?

“I see!” he said—and forced a cold insolence into his voice. “A cat-and-mouse game! You've been very frank. Would you mind going a little farther and telling me how you discovered all this, and particularly—you see I do not deny it—that I am Ronald Ward?”

“You'll find that out one of these days”—Whitie Jahal licked bestially at his lips—“and while you're finding it out you'll wish to God you'd never been born!”

Ronald's eyes were making a critical survey of his surroundings now. The entrance hall behind him was unlighted. The only light in evidence came from a large, metal-based lamp that burned on the table beside the lounge chair occupied by Whitie Jahal.

“Thanks!” he said patiently. “But what I don't understand is that, knowing all this, you have permitted me to remain alive so long. You acted quite differently when you killed the man you thought was Dr. Ronald Ward in Sarlow's house the other night.”

“We didn't know who *you* was then,” said Whitie Jahal with an ugly grin.

“No; obviously, you didn't. But since the time you found that out?—and from what you say that must be several days ago.”

“We found out a lot all at once! Savvy?” Whitie Jahal suddenly thrust a contorted face outward from his shoulders. “What that swine got would be too easy for you. You ain't going to die quick like he did. You're going to live for a long time now—I'll tell you that. Only you won't *like* living! You're going to pay for Li Yuan; you're going to pay for Chinese Johnnie; and you're going to pay for—*Bob Curle*! And as for her—” Whitie Jahal

snickered evilly—"we've got orders to save her for—" Whitie Jahal finished his sentence with a suggestive leer.

Ronald took a step forward—and then another—toward Whitie Jahal.

"Yes?" he invited.

"You'll find out," said Whitie Jahal with a secretive chuckle; and then, with a snarled oath: "And you stand where you are till I get through talking to you! Savvy?"

Ronald shrugged his shoulders. There was certainly no one in the room here with the half-caste, but that was obviously merely one of Whitie Jahal's hell-born pleasantries! Whitie Jahal, as witness the cabin on the schooner, liked to stage-set his scenes. Where were the others posted? How many had Whitie brought ashore with him? There was only one possible way out—to take them all by surprise. And if that failed? Ronald's eyes measured the distance between himself and the table. He had no answer to that, save only that Whitie Jahal at least would not get off unscathed.

"All right," he said. "You were going to say something about orders. Perhaps you'll tell me who you take them from? I'd rather like to know who's back of all this."

"You'll find that out, too, one of these days—and you'll wish you hadn't!" taunted the half-caste. "And while you're waiting I'll take a hand for what you did to me, and you're going to crawl—"

With a leap so quick that there came only a startled cry from Whitie Jahal, Ronald reached the table and snatching up the lighted lamp hurled it with all his strength into the other's face—and the next instant he was back at Joan's side, pushing her out of the room.

"Run for it, Joan!" he cried.

But he had counted upon the darkness—and there was no darkness. Flames seemed to leap up in the room behind him. Forms from the hallway came swarming upon him, separating him from Joan, thrusting him back into the doorway. He heard Joan scream from somewhere in the hall—but there was no sound from Whitie Jahal within the room. And now, in the doorway, he fought like a maniac, striking with fist and clubbed pistol to reach Joan again. The flames grew brighter. He knew now where they came from. And he knew now, too, that he could save neither Joan nor himself. They were too many for him. They snarled and shrieked and stabbed at him. He had no weapon save the butt of his pistol, but—an access of fury surged upon him—he would not die alone if he could help it. He could at least, before the end came, hold the doorway here for a little longer—while Whitie Jahal back there paid at last and perhaps in full! And so he fought, now

borne down by the weight of numbers, and now heaving his great shoulders erect again. A glimpse behind him now and then he got—but it was enough. He knew. The blow from the heavy lamp had rendered Whitie Jahal insensible—and Whitie Jahal's clothes, oil-soaked, had been set afire. He had planned better than he knew! The long wicker chair on which Whitie Jahal lay was blazing now. Like a funeral pyre! He fought on—bleeding from knife thrusts—growing weaker.

And then blackness came.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CONDEMNED

RONALD opened his eyes, and, looking around him on unfamiliar objects and surroundings, lay wondering. There had been moments when it seemed to him he had been vaguely aware of cool hands, Joan's face, strange boisterous movement, and many voices, voices that jangled, voices that shrieked and yelled—but that was all remote and unreal now. It was as though he had passed through some great void where consciousness was numbed, and that now for the first time he was again in possession of his senses—yet still bewildered.

He was very weak. He tried to lift his head but failed. He seemed to be swathed, head, arms, and body, in bandages. Then memory came. That fight at Andrew Robb's house! A queer smile twisted at his lips. They had made a pincushion of him with their knives! Strange that they had let him live! That must have been a long time ago, and he must have been desperately ill. He still was, for that matter. He did not need to be told that. Not out of the woods yet!

Where was he? In a native hut of some sort, of course, he told himself impatiently. He could see that now; and from where he lay he could see trees and get a glimpse of ocean and a group of natives—black fellows, naked except for loincloths, their noses and ears adorned with shells, a forbidding-looking lot. But where was the hut? How had he got here? And how had

— —

Where was Joan? He tried desperately to raise himself upon his elbow—and fell back.

“Joan!” he called out weakly. “Joan! Are you here?”

Hope came and fled. There was no answer. Dread seized upon him.

He was very weak. He made a low moaning sound and covered his face with his hands, and in that moment of bitter agony he knew for the first time how much he had come to care for her. Joan! She too had been there that night at Batai. What had they done with Joan? He did not want to think now, he did not want this consciousness of his back again. That void through which he had passed had been a merciful thing.

He had been lying on his side. He turned now on his back, and his eyes, as he looked upward toward the thatched roof of the hut, widened suddenly into a fixed stare, and the shock of what he saw drove from his mind for the moment even the thought of Joan. But perhaps he was still delirious;

perhaps the fact that he had regained consciousness was only imagination—a phase of the delirium itself. Perched on the ridgepole of the hut was a huge gold skull—no, not gold—yellow. It had been painted yellow. Not a human skull—a head mask fashioned out of plaited twigs, he thought, but he couldn't be sure. He stared at the monstrosity for a long time, his brain racing, and then, with a short, nervous laugh, he turned on his side again.

He wasn't quite so great a fool as all that! A lot of the primitive savages used that sort of thing in their so-called religious rites and ceremonies, and those natives that he could still see out there, from the looks of them, quite probably belonged in that category—but where was the correlation? A religious vendetta? Absurd! No primitive man could ever have reached London and murdered Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne. The gold skull murderers, he had only too good reason to know, were Malays. The Malays didn't wear head masks and stick clam shells through their noses; the Malays, those who professed any religion at all, were supposed to be Mohammedans. But what was the damned thing doing there?

He did not like it. It worried him. He was not here by *accident* among a tribe of savages that adorned their huts with gold—no, yellow skulls. He tried to put it out of his mind—and after a time, through sheer weakness, fell into a fitful doze.

The next thing of which he was conscious was that he had somehow raised himself suddenly into a sitting posture, that his arms were outstretched, and that what could only be a miracle was taking place. That was Joan there! *Joan!* Joan entering the hut!

“Joan!” He wanted to shout out her name, but his voice was only a cracked whisper.

A startled cry answered him, and the next instant she was on her knees beside him, gently forcing him to lie down again.

“Oh, Ronald, is it really, really true?” Her lips were quivering, tears were in her eyes. “Are you really better? It has been so—so long a time that I thought—that I thought—oh, Ronald!”

“Better! Of course, I'm better! Quite myself, in fact!” He scarcely knew what he said. He had reached out and taken her hand, and had drawn her closer to him. He searched her face eagerly, hungrily, wistfully. The tear-wet eyes met his for an instant in answer, and then the eyelids drooped shyly while the color, mounting, tinged her cheeks. And he was not ill or weak any more—he was a superman. Closer he drew her face to his, closer until their lips met. “Joan, Joan,” he said huskily, “is this, too, really true?”

“Yes,” she said almost inaudibly—and hid her face on his shoulder. “But, oh, Ronald, you must not say another word now. You have been very, very ill, dear, and— —”

“Not say a word!” he exploded. “Not say a word when I— —”

But she placed her fingers softly on his lips—and rising to her feet ran incontinently out of the hut.

“Look here!” he called out ruefully after her—and tried to make his voice carry. “I’m a doctor. I ought to know what’s good for me!”

But interminable hours went by, or so it seemed to Ronald, before he saw her again—when ten minutes later she knelt once more at his side and, very severe and sedate now, an admonishing forefinger primly uplifted for quiet, bade him take the food she had brought.

The long day passed, the cool of the evening had come. Joan, in her accustomed place, was seated on the floor of the hut beside the heap of leaves that served as Ronald’s bed.

“But you must tell me about these things, Joan,” Ronald insisted gravely. “I may be a bit bashed up, but that’s purely physical. Mentally I’m all right again. Don’t you understand, dear, that the worst thing I can do is to lie here with my mind groping in the dark? The truth, whatever it is, isn’t going to worry me half so much as uncertainty does. And you can see for yourself I’m a lot better to-night.”

“Yes,” she admitted judiciously, “you do seem to be, but—well, perhaps you are right.”

“Of course, I am!” he asserted promptly. “Now, tell me! Where are we?”

She hesitated for a moment.

“I don’t know,” she said. “All I can tell you is that we are on an island—somewhere.”

“I see!” he said. “Well, then, tell me how we got here.”

“Bûrok brought us here on that schooner of his,” she answered. “Bûrok and Awang.”

Ronald frowned over this for a moment.

“Go back to the beginning,” he said. “Start with that night at Batai. You’ve mentioned Bûrok and Awang. What about Whitie Jahal?”

“He lived for two days—” she turned her head away—“on the schooner—at sea.”

“So the burns were fatal, were they?” Ronald ejaculated grimly. “Two days, eh? Then he must have died horribly! I think I’m a humane man, but no fouler brute ever lived, and I— —”

She reached out swiftly and laid her hand over his.

“Don’t say it, Ronald!” she pleaded. “He’s dead now.”

“Right!” he said gruffly. “Well, go on, dear.”

“They carried you and Whitie Jahal on board the schooner.” Her voice was very low. “And they took me with them. They—they *wanted* you to live. You remember Whitie Jahal said that? They let me nurse you. They bandaged and dressed your wounds. And—and—oh, Ronald—Bûrok always grinned.”

Ronald’s hand tightened over the one in his.

“Yes, dear,” he said comfortingly, “I understand. And then?”

“We were days at sea,” she said tremulously. “I don’t know how many. I lost track of time. It wasn’t only your wounds, though they were terrible enough. Some sort of a fever set in. At times you were in a stupor that was almost like death itself, at others you were delirious for hours. And—but you see now why I did not want to tell you all this until—until you were strong again.”

“It is harder for you than it is for me, little girl of mine,” he said tenderly. “Don’t try to tell me the details.”

“No, I won’t; just—just what happened,” she said with a forced smile. “The day before yesterday Bûrok landed us on this island. We were met on the beach by the natives. I did not understand what he said to them, but they undoubtedly knew each other well. Then Bûrok went away again with his schooner, and the natives brought us to this hut, which is just on the edge of their village. That’s all, Ronald. We have been here ever since.”

“Not all,” he prompted gently. “These natives here. What about them?”

“We are being watched, of course,” she answered, “or, at least, I am, for they know you couldn’t move if you wanted to. There are always two of their women squatted just outside the hut. I am never interfered with when I go out, but I am always followed. On the other hand these women have helped me to take care of you, and they bring food and water regularly. Sometimes groups of men, women and children will assemble in front of the hut and stare curiously. But they have never made any hostile demonstration, and yet—and yet—” the words seemed to burst involuntarily from her lips —“oh, Ronald, if you must know the truth, they are so friendly that their very friendliness terrifies me, because—because Bûrok brought us here.”

It was growing dark, but through the shadows he could see that huge yellow skull perched there on the ridgepole. He had not wanted to look at it, but his eyes seemed to have been drawn to it as by some sort of ugly magnetism—and forgot for the moment that she was watching him.

“I tried to get them to take it away,” she said in a low voice. “That is the only time they have shown anything but friendliness. When I made signs for them to take it out of the hut, the two women screamed and chattered and gesticulated at me furiously. Why is it here, Ronald? Why is a skull here? And it is not the only one. There are real skulls, too—stuck on poles. Yesterday I followed a path a little way into the jungle, because it was cooler there than on the beach, and I saw them. Are they put there to terrify us, Ronald? What does it mean?”

He drew her head down until it nestled on his shoulder—and fought desperately for words. What was he to say to her? A sort of chill horror seemed to have settled upon him. The Malays might be Mohammedans, but there *was* some connection between these natives here and the murders that the Malays had committed—even the murder of Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne.

“Listen, Joan!” His voice was quiet, reassuring. “I’ve never seen any of it myself, but I’ve read a lot about this sort of thing. Take Papua, for instance. It is a well known fact that some of the native tribes there have an unpleasant penchant for collecting human skulls—and these skulls have even been found sticking on poles in the most unexpected places, just as you describe them. So I am quite sure that the ones you saw were not placed there for our benefit. They’ve probably been there for years. Tribal custom and all that, you know.”

“But I don’t think this is Papua,” she objected.

“Probably not,” he admitted; “but there’s no reason why that species of natives shouldn’t be anywhere in this part of the world—and obviously we’ve got the proof of that right here. And now, another thing. Whitie Jahal, Bûrok, Awang, and all the rest of them are Malays; not natives such as these. Don’t forget that, dear.”

“But the skulls, Ronald,” she said almost below her breath. “The little gold skulls—this skull here?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed frankly. “What I’m driving at is that I am certain we have nothing to fear so far as the natives themselves are actually concerned, and that for the present we are quite safe.”

“And—and afterwards?”

Afterwards? He lay here helpless. Fear came again—for her. His attempt to hearten her had only opened his own eyes. Some day Bûrok would be

back. Or Bûrok's master—the fiend brain behind all this. How long would that be? He closed his eyes for an instant fighting for self-control. And then he pressed his cheek gently against hers.

“There's bound to be a way out, dear,” he declared cheerily. “Just let me get on my feet again, and we'll see. That's the main thing now, isn't it?—to get my strength back.”

“Oh, Ronald—yes!” she whispered.

CHAPTER XX

THE PORT OF MISSING SHIPS

RONALD'S strength, however, returned but slowly. Convalescence, as he knew it would be, was long and tedious. The days slipped into a week, a week into two—and still another week before he was at all back to normal.

And during those three weeks nothing untoward happened—except that from the moment he was able to walk the watchers outside the hut became men instead of women. There was no outward sign of animosity exhibited toward either Joan or himself; but, on the other hand, such friendly advances as he attempted met with no response from the natives. And the days seemed to *accumulate* dread.

He watched Joan with a growing agony in his heart. Hers was a brave masquerade of smiles and cheery spirits and tenderness, but there were unguarded moments when he read in her face and eyes the fear and horror of impending evil that was eating into her heart and soul.

Escape? The thought was never out of his mind. But how? Through the jungle? They would be followed. Steal one of those dugout canoes on the beach? They would be followed. No death watch over a condemned cell was ever more alert than that of those naked warders who squatted day and night outside the doorway of the hut.

And so they lied to each other, Joan and he, with their eyes and lips—which each knew was pretense for the other's sake. And daily together they schemed a different plan for their escape—which each knew was one of folly. And so, free and yet imprisoned, they waited—for they knew not what.

But at the end of that three weeks, suddenly and without warning, Ronald was left in no further doubt as to what their presence here on the island meant—and the end came.

It was afternoon. Joan had gone down to the beach. Ronald, in the hut, lay stretched out on his bed of leaves. His face was buried in his hands. It was one of his black moments—when Joan was not there to see. That gnawing in his brain! If it were not for Joan! No way out, and “she was to be *saved* for— —” Whitie Jahal had not ended that sentence. Whitie Jahal had only leered. Who was it from whom Whitie Jahal had received his orders? How, in what way, when, had Whitie Jahal discovered who he, Ronald, was? Where had he, Ronald, who had prided himself on his masterly portrayal of the rôle of Bob Curle, blundered instead like a fool into self-destruction and his own undoing? It couldn't have been treachery on the part of either

Chinese Johnnie or Weng-Kow, for through them Li Yuan had received the message that had resulted in the *Sen-Chu* reaching Batai in time. Perhaps Kria, then? But Chinese Johnnie had trusted Kria. That accursed cycle again! What did these things matter now? It was each minute that was passing so swiftly here on this island that alone mattered! No way out? There must be a way out. Some attempt, no matter how desperate, was — —

He sat suddenly upright. There was an unusual commotion outside the hut. He heard native voices raised in a fierce and angry chorus—and the next instant a human figure, flung violently through the doorway, lay sprawled on the floor of the hut.

Ronald stared in startled amazement. He was subconsciously aware that the natives, gesticulating and chattering furiously, had crowded around the doorway for a moment and had then dispersed, leaving only three or four of their number, obviously an augmented guard, squatting on the ground a few paces away; but he had eyes only for the figure on the floor.

It was a white man—or, rather, the wreck of one. A man with an unkempt beard and long, straggling hair, both streaked with white. A man with hollow eyes, and gaunt, sunken cheeks. A man whose clothing, what there was left of it, was in tatters, little more than shreds; and, where the naked flesh showed through the rents, like gruesome lacework traced upon the skin were the scars and cicatrices, inches long, of countless knife wounds.

“Good God!” Ronald gasped out involuntarily.

The man sat up and stared in return, his mouth agape.

“I’m not mad, am I?” he cried out hoarsely. “I sometimes think I am. Fancy another white man here!”

“Are you hurt?” Ronald asked.

The man laughed raucously.

“*That* sort of thing doesn’t hurt!” he said. “I’m used to it.”

“Look here!” exclaimed Ronald quickly. “Tell me about this! Who are you? What’s your name?”

“My name’s Rankin—Bob Rankin,” the other answered. “What’s yours?”

“*Rankin!*” Ronald sprang to his feet and took a step toward the other. The blood was suddenly pounding at his temples. “Bob Rankin, you say? Then you were the mate—on the *Hawk!*”

“Yes!” Rankin’s eyes widened. “What do you know about the *Hawk?*”

“I am Ronald Ward, Michael Ward’s son,” said Ronald tensely.

Rankin, too, rose to his feet.

“You are Michael Ward’s son?” he repeated in a dazed way; then huskily: “God help you, then, if these devils have got their claws on you on that count! How did you get here?”

Ronald told him—briefly.

“And Robb’s daughter, too, eh?” Rankin’s fingers twisted fiercely at his beard. “Do you know what you are up against?”

Ronald’s eyes traveled half-pityingly, half-grimly over the broken figure before him.

“I can guess,” he said tersely.

“Not half!” asserted Rankin with a sudden oath. “Where’s the girl? It’s not nice telling.”

“She’s down on the beach. They’ve let us go where we liked, except that they’ve always watched us.”

“Sure!” Again Rankin laughed raucously. “Until that son of Satan has paid you his first visit and told them what to do with you!”

Ronald reached out suddenly and gripped hard on the other’s arm.

“Rankin,” he said through set lips, “you are the only man who knows! Who is this son of Satan, as you call him? What is behind all this? You and Andrew Robb are the only two still alive of the five white men who were on the *Hawk*. Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne was murdered in London. Gresham was murdered in the cabin of a coastal steamer. And though my father died a natural death, he would— —”

“Murdered, were they?” Rankin broke in with a twisted smile.

“Hideously! And each was found with a little gold skull in his hand.”

Rankin moved across the hut and sat down on Ronald’s bed of leaves.

“Sit down here, and I’ll tell you—what I know,” he said. “I’ll cut it as short as I can in case *she* comes in. You can decide for yourself how much to tell her afterwards.”

Ronald seated himself.

“Go on!” he prompted briefly.

“We’d been cruising among the islands for about two months,” said Rankin. “No particular course, you understand; and Sir Henry going ashore here and there picking up beetles and bugs and the like. Then one afternoon we struck this island here. Sir Henry went ashore for a couple of hours and came back saying it was rich in what he called rare flora and God knows what else and that he’d decided to spend the whole of the next day ashore. Of course, Mr. Robb and Mr. Gresham always went with Sir Henry, and this

time your father elected to go along. I like a chance of stretching my own legs, and I'd already been on two or three shore trips with Sir Henry, so, as we were in a good safe anchorage and our native boatswain was a reliable chap, I put in my spoke to go along too—and the next morning the five of us started off. We didn't take any of the crew with us, as there wasn't any camp work to do, for we intended to return on board that evening."

Rankin paused abruptly—and suddenly moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Say," he said with a nervous jerk of his head, "those fellows out there won't interfere with you—*yet*. You can get a pretty good view offshore from here. Just step to the doorway and see if you can see a schooner, or a sail of any sort, making in for the island."

Wondering, Ronald obeyed. He returned after a minute or two and sat down again beside the other.

"There's nothing in sight," he stated. "Why did you ask me to do that?"

Rankin's eyes were on the floor. He did not look up.

"It's the full of the moon to-night," he said in a flat tone. "But perhaps this is one of my lucky months."

"Rankin," Ronald flung out sharply, "what are you talking about? Pull yourself together, man!"

"No—" Rankin swept his hand heavily across his eyes—"I'm not mad this time. If it's lucky for me, it will be lucky for you, too—and for her. You'll know what I mean in a minute. Where was I? Oh, yes, we'd gone ashore. Well, we struck into the interior, Sir Henry and Mr. Gresham and Mr. Robb gathering specimens as we went along; but we didn't see any sign of human life until just as we were talking about halting for lunch—and then we saw plenty! The island is charted, if you can call a fly speck you could cover with the point of your dividers being charted, which didn't give us much idea of its size—and we had suddenly come out on the other side. We came out on the top of a thickly wooded cliff. Maybe you've seen it? It's about a mile from here at the end of the beach."

"Yes, I know where you mean," Ronald nodded.

"Well, we lay there on the edge of the cliff hidden by the trees, and we couldn't believe our eyes at first. Down below us and anchored close inshore was a good-sized Chinese junk, and around the junk was a fleet of big Malay proas. We could see what was going on as plain as I can see you now. They were unloading the junk and bringing the stuff ashore—and suddenly disappearing with it under the cliff. And it wasn't only the Malays who were working, there were a lot of savages taking a hand in it too—this tribe of

skull-hunting devils here. But they all seemed to be under the command of a young Malay in European clothes, who kept walking up and down the narrow stretch of shingle at the foot of the cliff and shouting out his orders to both his own men and the natives. Well, we lay there watching them, and we forgot all about the time, and all about getting back to the *Hawk*. With the last load that they took off the junk were two Chinamen who had their hands tied behind their backs and who were attached together with a rope knotted around their necks; then they towed the junk a little way out to sea and blew her up. I remember what your father said then—and the same thing had been in my mind too. ‘By God,’ he said, ‘the port of missing ships!’ You know what he meant, don’t you? It’s been going on for years. You’ve only got to look up the records. There’s a long list of craft of one sort or another that have mysteriously disappeared, and no trace of them or any of their crews ever found. Piracy, of course; and that’s been known for a long time, too. But the gunboats of half a dozen different nations might as well have stayed in port for all they ever found out! Well, the answer was here all the time, or a big part of it, anyway. Your father was right. That cliff is honeycombed with caves, and I found out afterwards that they were chock-full of loot. You see how it worked out! The Malays brought their captures here, discharged the cargoes, sank the vessels, and sailed away again. How they afterwards drew on their storehouse and turned the loot into cash, I don’t know—but, unless the Malays were actually caught in the act, you can see that, if by any chance a gunboat ever put in here, all that would be found would be a tribe of primitive savages obviously incapable of piracy on the high seas.”

“I see,” said Ronald through pursed lips. “But there must be some queer bond between the two to account for the Malays trusting their plunder to savages.”

“Queer?” Rankin gave a hollow laugh. “It’s hellish! But you’ll understand before I’ve finished. I was telling you that they sank the junk. Well, after that, the proas sailed away—all except one that came back; and we saw the young Malay chief, or rajah, or whatever you want to call him, come ashore again. It was just about dusk then, and we realized that it would be no joke trying to make our way back to the *Hawk* through the thick jungle in the darkness, so we decided to wait until daylight. But we didn’t stay where we were very long, for pretty soon, from the direction of what we figured out was the tribe’s village, we heard native drums beating, and every once in a while a chorus of what sounded like laughter, only it would make your blood curdle.”

“A *chorus* of it?” Ronald leaned tensely toward the other.

“Yes,” said Rankin. “The whole tribe at it! It’s part of their cursed rites. Like a lot of other things, I found out afterwards what it was. When you were a kid did you ever stick a blade of grass between your thumbs and blow on it? Well, it’s on the same principle. They take two small bits of wood, shape ’em like bows, tie ’em together, and string fiber threads through the hollows, then they stick the things in their mouths and laugh—and it sounds like someone laughing down in hell.”

So that was it! Ronald smiled queerly. The laugh, the skull, and the knife! There was still the knife.

“Carry on, Rankin!” he said evenly.

“We thought we’d try and get a look at what was going on. It seemed safe, all right. The trees and undergrowth were thick enough to hide an army of us. So we crept up on the village. We got to the edge of a clearing. There was a huge fire burning in the center. It was as bright as day. We could see everything. The natives were squatted in a semicircle around the clearing with their backs to us and facing the fire, and right near us was the young Malay chief and his men. In front of this fire, about twenty yards from where we were, a stake had been driven in the ground, and one of the two Chinamen we had seen brought ashore was tied to it, stripped to the pelt. The other Chinaman sat on the ground a little way off with his arms bound behind him.”

Rankin paused and licked suddenly at his lips again.

“Six natives were dancing around the stake,” he said throatily. “They were stark naked except that each one wore a huge head mask like that one up there. They each had a knife in their hands—I’ve seen those knives too often since! Needle points! My God! There was a din infernal, those bursts of bloody laughter, the beating of wooden drums, and every few steps in the dance one of the six would leap forward and make a long slash in the Chinaman’s body—like these!” Rankin’s face was contorted as he opened wide his torn jacket and pointed to his own body. “Do you understand? They were carving the poor devil into ribbons. And then suddenly one of the six raised his knife high over his head for what no one needed to be told was the death blow, and — —”

Again Rankin paused. His hands were clenched now, his face working.

“You can call it a damned fool thing to do, if you like,” he went on after a moment. “We couldn’t have saved the Chinaman, or the other one either, who was waiting there to be tortured. But there are some things one can’t stomach and that make a man see red. I don’t know who fired the shot, and, in spite of what’s happened to me since, I don’t blame him; but, anyway, that

native, while his knife was still in the air, dropped like a felled ox. There were wild screams and yells. I can't remember exactly what happened then. I was close to the edge of the clearing, and I must have shown myself when I leaped to my feet. All I remember is that the young Malay closed in on me with his kris. I got him clean with a bullet through the head, but he got me too with a kris stab, and I went out."

Neither man spoke for a moment. There was sweat on Ronald's forehead. He wiped it away with his hand.

"And you? After that?" His voice rasped strangely in his own ears. "They tortured you?"

"I'm coming to that." Rankin's fingers were twisting at his beard again. "I couldn't understand them. These savages in their crude way nursed me back to life. Then, when I was able to get about a bit, they trailed me the same as they did you—just followed and watched me wherever I went. The Malays had gone. After several weeks, I can't remember how long exactly, the tribe suddenly vacated the village and took me with them into the jungle far down toward the other end of the island. We stayed there for a number of days. When we came back here the village had been destroyed, the caves emptied of their contents and blown to pieces. I understood from signs and the few words I'd been able to pick up that a gunboat had paid the place a visit, so I felt sure that some at least of the other four had got away and had tipped off the authorities—and later I had good reason to know that I was right. The destruction of the village didn't mean a thing. The natives built new huts practically overnight and I—God, you haven't got anything to drink or smoke, have you?"

Ronald shook his head soberly.

"Of course you haven't!" Rankin laughed gratingly. "Shows I've even got shaky in my head. Well, I'm nearly through. About a week after that a schooner put in. And that night I was tied to the stake. It was the full of the moon, and *he* was a fiend out of hell. And while those dancing swine cut at me with their knives he sat there and taunted me. He said that the young Malay leader I had killed was his son, and that he would come and watch me die fifty deaths before he was through with me; and, so that I would sit in fear and count the days and sometimes begin all over again, he said that whenever he came it would be at the full of the moon like it was that night—and in the last year that's driven me near mad, as he meant it to, though I didn't realize then what he was up to. A definite date—and uncertainty that wouldn't let you sleep—hope and fear—I came to count the days all right! And while he taunted me, he slashed at me again and again with a knife himself. And he said that the others who had been with me would die too

when he was ready. They went as far as they could, short of killing me. Since then he's been back three times—not at regular intervals. And between his visits I've been kept a prisoner in what was left of one of those caves under the cliff—and nursed back to life each time. As I've said, I never knew from month to month when to expect him, and I don't think the natives did either; but I am always brought back here to the village on the day preceding the night when the moon is full. That's why I asked you if you could see a schooner out there. If he doesn't come to-day, we are safe for another month."

Ronald's jaws were clamped.

"Who is this man?" he demanded in a monotone. "What is his name?"

"I don't know. I don't know his name."

"Describe him, then! What does he look like?"

"I've never seen him except when I was tied there to the stake," Rankin answered bleakly. "I've never seen his face—he always has one of those masks over his head. But he wears European clothes and speaks like an Englishman, and, if it weren't that the Malay I killed was his son, I'd say he was an Englishman—his hands are white enough. What difference does it make—now?"

"None, perhaps," said Ronald grimly. "But I would give a lot to know! It's queer what you say about his hands. That's all you know about him?"

"Yes," said Rankin, "that's all."

"Well, then, there's one other thing," said Ronald. "You were going to explain what it was that held the Malays and these savages together. The Malays, as I said before, wouldn't be fools enough to trust the tribe with all that plunder unless they had a good reason for it."

"I thought I'd explained that," Rankin said slowly. "I thought you'd understand—those two Chinamen."

"No," said Ronald, "I don't understand."

Rankin smiled miserably.

"I'll tell you, then," he said. "Where this tribe originally came from and when they settled on this island, God only knows, but they are head hunters. You know what that means, don't you? Heads are worth more to them than anything else in the world—and all head hunters have cannibalistic tendencies. But heads were hard to get here on their own—forays to neighboring islands were not always successful. You see it now, don't you? The Malays, out of the prisoners taken from the vessels they attacked, kept the tribe supplied—with heads."

“Great God!” said Ronald in a hoarse whisper.

Rankin began to lick again at his lips.

“Would—would you mind,” he said after a moment—and kept his eyes averted—“would you mind taking another look out there?”

Rankin was near the breaking point—a brave man faltering under more than he could bear. Sick at heart himself, Ronald glanced pityingly at the other, then he got to his feet—but halfway across the hut he halted. He could see Joan coming from the beach at a run; and, an instant later, passing the squatting figures there outside, she burst in through the doorway.

“Oh, Ronald,” she cried wildly, “there’s a schooner coming in! It’s a black schooner. I—I think it’s Bûrok’s. The natives are gathering on the beach, and— —” She had caught sight of Rankin.

Ronald felt the blood leave his cheeks. He looked at Rankin. Rankin’s face, that had been white before, was ashen now.

“Joan—” Ronald steadied his voice—“this is Bob Rankin, who was mate on the *Hawk*, and he— —”

But the words died on Ronald’s lips. He stood there like a man bereft of his senses, and it seemed as though his ears and eyes mocked him with sounds that were not real and sights that were unbelievable. It seemed as though he heard the booming of heavy guns out there at sea, it seemed as though he heard strange cheers and shouts near at hand and the running of many boot-shod feet; it seemed as though he saw those squatting figures out there leap to their feet and dash madly away, and that a squad of Chinamen with blue piping on their blouses came into view—and then he saw an apparition. In the doorway of the hut the face of Ah-tang grinned at him.

And then he knew that it was real.

“Ah-tang!” he shouted deliriously. “How did you get here?”

But Ah-tang only grinned the more.

“Come first take look-see,” Ah-tang invited blandly. “High Excellency Li Yuan make very damn fine finish. You see!”

Joan was crying softly. Ronald, with his arm around her, led the way out of the hut. Over his shoulder he saw Rankin following, hesitant, bewildered, a dawning hope struggling for expression in his eyes and face.

And here outside Ronald found a cordon of the *Sen-Chu’s* men thrown around the hut. They had machine guns with them. They greeted him with exultant cries. His eyes traveled seaward. A black schooner was close in offshore; and now, just appearing from around a headland, under auxiliary

power and firing as she came, a trim white craft that he recognized as the *Sen-Chu* was bearing down on the other.

And, with Joan clinging to him, he stood there and watched. One of the black schooner's masts toppled and went by the board. The two vessels closed, and from the *Sen-Chu* white figures seemed to swarm aboard the other. He heard the distant rattle of firearms, the faint cries of men. Then the *Sen-Chu* drew away, and there came the booming of her guns again—and presently the black schooner, settling slowly in the water, sank. And now boats from the *Sen-Chu's* side were pulling for the shore, and the natives who had been watching on the beach turned and fled in all directions.

“Joan! Joan! We're safe, don't you see? Don't cry so, dear!” Ronald pleaded. “It's all over now. Just—just a bad dream, sweetheart.”

And then he turned, his own eyes dim, to reach out his hand to Rankin.

But Rankin had flung himself upon the ground, and, with his face buried in his hands, was sobbing like a child.

CHAPTER XXI

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

ACROSS the deck of the *Sen-Chu*, Joan and her father were seated together, absorbed in their mutual confidences; below, Rankin had been tucked away in bed; astern, the island was dimming on the horizon, but through the dusk the glow of the burning village was still visible. Ronald, standing at the rail, pulled his hand across his eyes as Li Yuan joined him. His mental vision was still blurred. There was so much he did not understand; and since coming aboard an hour ago he had had no chance to say more than a few words to Li Yuan. And now a dozen questions were on his lips, all struggling for expression at the same time.

But it was Li Yuan who spoke.

“Trying to pull the warp and woof to pieces?” asked Li Yuan with a quiet smile.

“Yes,” said Ronald eagerly.

Li Yuan waved a hand shoreward.

“Let us begin there, then,” he said, and the smile faded from his lips. “The destruction of the village could have no lasting effect, of course, for the natives will rebuild it again as they have before; but what was of vital importance was that they should see that schooner destroyed before their eyes. It had paid them its *last* visit—you understand? But”—Li Yuan shrugged his shoulders—“so that no lingering hope might even then remain in their minds that the old alliance might some day be restored, here or elsewhere, I also left a little memento of the occasion for them on the beach.”

Ronald shook his head. He did not know what had taken place ashore. He had come directly aboard. The *Sen-Chu's* crew had not escaped wholly unscathed in the sea fight that he had witnessed, and he had almost immediately devoted himself to attending to the wounded.

“A memento?” he repeated in a puzzled way.

“The body of a man.” Li Yuan's face and voice were alike expressionless. “A man who has sunk my ships and butchered my crews. A man that the authorities have long sought and could never find. Do you remember that I told you once the *Sen-Chu* did not cruise altogether for pleasure? Well, the end has come, and from the fact that you yourself were taken to this island as a prisoner I do not need to tell you that it is the same man who instigated what the papers call the Gold Skull Murders.”

Ronald gripped hard at the rail; his throat was suddenly dry.

"Then you know who he is!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Tell me!"

"Was," corrected Li Yuan impassively. "When I last saw him on the beach he was quite dead. I regret that his execution was painless, but he was already severely wounded and only semiconscious. He was the only one we took ashore; the rest accompanied their schooner to the bottom. Yes, I know who he was; in fact, I suspected him almost from the moment you left Singapore with Whitie Jahal."

"Who was he, then?" Ronald leaned tensely forward. "What is his name? Do I know him?"

"Yes," said Li Yuan, "you know him. So I will let you name him yourself."

Ronald shook his head.

"I've tried to do that for the last month," he said grimly. "I can't."

"I think you can," replied Li Yuan placidly. "However, I will help you. You have not told me your story yet, but from my own investigations I know, in the main, what took place; so I know that when you left Singapore with Whitie Jahal, Whitie Jahal already knew that you were Ronald Ward. How did Whitie Jahal find that out?"

"I must have blundered somewhere like a fool," said Ronald savagely.

"If it was a blunder," remarked Li Yuan in a curiously judicial way, "it was a most natural one—and not the first of the same kind that was made in this affair, as you will see. But let me ask you another question. Who possessed the information that you were Ronald Ward, and could therefore have been in a position to have told Whitie Jahal so?"

"You and Captain Tao-Ming," returned Ronald promptly. "Possibly some of the officers and crew aboard here, possibly Chinese Johnnie, possibly Weng-Kow, and anyone that these in turn might have told. That doesn't help much, does it?"

"The list is still, incomplete," observed Li Yuan imperturbably.

"But there is no one else," Ronald frowned. "No one else except—"

He leaned suddenly forward and stared into Li Yuan's face. Li Yuan, forsaking his habitual immobility, was smiling strangely. "But, no!" Ronald burst out. "That's impossible! It's incredible!"

"And yet," said Li Yuan casually, "as you English say, it fits like a glove."

Ronald wet his lips with his tongue.

"*Sarlow!*" he said huskily.

Li Yuan for the second time waved a hand shoreward.

“Yes,” he said. “There!”

Ronald’s brain was in confusion and rebellion. Sarlow! His father’s friend! An outstanding figure in Malaysia! It couldn’t be Sarlow! Sarlow the man who had instigated the Gold Skull Murders? It was preposterous! Even the motive itself for these murders absolved him!

“There must be some mistake,” he said dully. “You don’t know about the young Malay that Rankin killed. That’s what started it all. It was a sort of vendetta, and — —”

“I know all about the young Malay,” Li Yuan stated calmly, “and there is no mistake.”

“But how do you know it was Sarlow?” Ronald persisted. “What proof have you got? How did you come to suspect him?”

“Let us open the book at the first chapter,” said Li Yuan. “I will turn the pages for you, and you will see. From Mr. Robb, when I brought him back from Batai, I learned the location of this island and the details of what occurred when he and his companions went ashore from the *Hawk*. I take it for granted that you have already learned from Rankin all that happened on the island up to the time the young Malay was killed.”

“Yes,” said Ronald laconically.

“Mr. Robb says,” Li Yuan went on, “that they saw Rankin struck down and believed that he had been killed, but that in any case they were too hard pressed themselves to do anything about it. How they got back to the *Hawk*, Mr. Robb will tell you himself. They got aboard, however, just before daylight, and at once sailed from the island. Your father was convinced that they had stumbled upon the secret lair of the pirates who have been infesting these waters for many years, and he and his companions were determined that it should be wiped out and destroyed. And to make sure that no news or warning should leak out about it until the information should be in the hands of the authorities, they decided to say nothing to their crew, a number of whom were themselves Malays. One story was as good as another for a crew of natives, and it did not matter very much whether it was believed or not, so that the crew did not know the truth. They told the crew that Rankin had accidentally shot himself and that they had buried him ashore.”

“So that was it, was it?” ejaculated Ronald. “I never could understand why it was that no one ever seemed to know what had happened on that voyage of the *Hawk*. But afterwards—even the authorities appear to have kept it dark!”

Li Yuan nodded.

“Yes. In order to protect your father and the others from any revenge the Malays might try to take, every precaution was observed that the source from which the information came should not be known—and there’s a grim bit of irony in that, for it was your father and the other three who themselves gave their own show away. There was a man in Singapore that they all trusted. A man of wealth and influence. Their own agent. Sarlow. Quite naturally they consulted Sarlow and asked him to assist them in laying their information before the proper authorities. That was the first news Sarlow had that his son had been killed.”

“His son!” Ronald repeated tensely. “That is one of the things that I — —”

“There are still some pages that we have not turned,” Li Yuan interrupted patiently. “Sarlow’s hands were tied. He could not prevent, he could not even protest against the punitive expedition that was determined upon by the authorities. You will doubtless know through Rankin of the gunboat’s visit to the island and what took place at that time?”

“Yes,” said Ronald, “but I don’t see how you do. You haven’t had a chance to talk to Rankin yet.”

“You will see in a moment. Let us keep in mind the night you sent that message about Mr. Robb to me through Chinese Johnnie, the same night that you ‘rescued’ Sarlow, and, later, through Chinese Johnnie again, sent me word of all that had transpired. It was almost from the moment that Sarlow reappeared in public that I began to suspect him—the story he told of his escape was not wholly convincing.”

“Yes, but that was on my account,” returned Ronald hurriedly. “That had all been arranged between us. You knew that. It didn’t matter particularly what the public were told so long as the police knew the inside story.”

“Exactly!” agreed Li Yuan smoothly. “And that was what aroused my suspicions. I have some contact and influence with the authorities myself. Sarlow made no mention of either you or Whitie Jahal to the police. Early that morning, as I soon discovered, you had left Singapore with Whitie Jahal. Sarlow did not intend that you should ever be heard of again.”

“My word!” Ronald laughed nervously. “There is no doubt about that! I was for it, all right. You told the police of your suspicions, then?”

Li Yuan again permitted a faint smile to cross his lips.

“No,” he said. “I have great faith in the police—but I did not want Sarlow to take alarm. I wanted to be sure, and then— —” He shrugged his shoulders once more. “When I will it so, I have many eyes and ears at work for me. From that moment Sarlow was watched day and night, and from that

moment Sarlow's past was under a far more reaching investigation than the police of Singapore could ever have undertaken."

Ronald shook his head.

"I still find it hard to believe," he asserted doggedly. "That poor devil Smith, or whatever his name was—murdered in Sarlow's own house!"

"Where could it have been done more safely?" inquired Li Yuan blandly. "The last of all men to be suspected of having had anything to do with it would be—Sarlow!"

"So that night at the Pandak house, when he heard us rapping," Ronald jerked out, "Sarlow simply ducked for cover and had Whitie Jahal, or that other chap, bolt the trapdoor behind him!"

"Yes," said Li Yuan.

Ronald swung his hand across his eyes. He still could not rid himself of his mental confusion.

"But then that kidnapping!" he blurted out. "Why did Sarlow pretend in the first place that he had been kidnaped with Joan?"

"I see," said Li Yuan softly, "that the pages turn too slowly. Let us close the book, and I will tell you the rest through those eyes and ears that I had set at work. Sarlow kidnaped Miss Robb because, instead of her going to England, he meant to send her back to Batai to add horror to her father's death; he pretended to be kidnaped himself because he also intended to go to Batai and gloat over Mr. Robb's last agony. Your premature 'rescue' spoilt that. He sent you instead—with orders to Whitie Jahal to take both you and Miss Robb to the island yonder after Robb's murder."

A nausea that was almost physical gripped at Ronald.

"An Englishman—never!" He fairly shouted his defiance. "We've rotters and beasts among us—but never that!"

Li Yuan waved the outburst away.

"Sarlow's mother," he said placidly, "was a full-blooded Malay—a woman of the *Orang-Laut*. I do not wish to be crude, but his father was one of many white men. Sarlow was a precocious child: he learned easily and rapidly—too many things! He picked up English at an early age, but so far as color goes the black strain in him seems to have skipped a generation. He came to Singapore as a young man and, with a specious tale of having been born in England, passed himself off as an Englishman. I will not follow his career in detail. He prospered. He became a man of great wealth—honored. The bazaars of Singapore, of Hong-Kong, of Shanghai sold his goods—that cost him only the percentage he paid to the piratical band he had founded and which grew under his guiding hand into gigantic proportions. His

‘trading’ voyages were, of course, nothing more than voyages to that island where he loaded his schooners from the pick of the accumulated loot.”

Li Yuan produced a jeweled cigarette case, offered a cigarette to Ronald, lighted one himself—and exhaled the smoke inconsequently through his nostrils.

“There is but little more left to tell,” he resumed. “Sarlow, though he had many opportunities, never married among the whites. He was afraid that the native strain might break out again—to his own undoing. But he had a son by a native woman on an island not far from Singapore that he visited constantly. It is difficult to conceive of a man such as Sarlow being possessed of any deep-seated affection; but, none the less, his life became centered in that son, whom he eventually brought up to be the active leader of his Malay followers. Do you understand?”

“I am beginning to,” said Ronald somberly.

“Well, so much, then, for Sarlow and his double life,” said Li Yuan. “Bûrok came back from Batai. My many eyes and ears informed me that Whitie Jahal was dead, and that you and Miss Robb had been taken, on Sarlow’s orders, to that island there, where, because Sarlow paid the inhabitants in the coin of their realm—in human heads—he reigned as a high priest, as it were, supreme above them all. And I also learned that Sarlow, along with Bûrok and Awang, and, incidentally, another of his lieutenants, the one who murdered Sir Henry Maclin-Clyne in London and who had by then returned to Singapore, proposed to sail for the island for the purpose of—need I tell you what?”

Ronald’s tongue circled his lips.

“No,” he said; “I’d rather you’d not.”

“Quite!” said Li Yuan composedly. “Well, leaving that aside, I should say that so far as your father, and Robb, and Gresham, and Sir Henry were concerned, the form of torture to which Sarlow subjected them could have been conceived nowhere else than in the private apartments of Satan himself! Sarlow had little miniature gold skulls made which he sent to the four of them at intervals. They knew what those skulls meant. They were the precursors of death. He was malignant, inhuman. He was crazed with a desire to avenge the death of his son, to say nothing of the destruction of his island stronghold; and his lieutenants, Whitie Jahal, Bûrok, Awang, and Mêrah, the man who killed Sir Henry in London, were almost as thirsty for revenge as he was—the hoard of years, hundreds of thousands of pounds, had been snatched away from them. Sarlow was well officered!”

“And—and knowing all this,” said Ronald numbly, “you still said nothing to the police?”

Li Yuan was silent for a moment. His face was impassive, but something he could not hide was smoldering in his eyes.

“No,” he said at last with cold finality. “Why should I clutter up the courts of justice with vermin, and perhaps allow some, through technicalities, to escape? They had scuttled ships of mine, and massacred men of mine whose forefathers had been retainers of my household for more than a century before I was born! I think I told you once that, in spite of Oxford, I still possess the Oriental mind. When Sarlow and his lieutenants sailed for the island, I too sailed in the *Sen-Chu*. I was in no hurry. I knew that you were safe until Sarlow got there. We knew the course. By day we dropped out of sight. We were engaged, Sarlow was not. At night we carried no lights—we picked up Sarlow’s. Last night, still eighty miles from the island, we passed Sarlow, and just before daybreak landed Ah-tang, machine guns, and thirty men. I did not know what the natives might attempt to do to you when the fight started. Ah-tang had orders to creep up on the village and at the first sound of the guns to rush the village and protect you. Meanwhile the *Sen-Chu* lay hidden behind a headland until Sarlow’s schooner hove in sight. I think that is all. You saw the end. Only a few fought well. They died like squealing rats.”

Ronald was staring unseeingly out over the rail.

“My God—*Sarlow!*” he whispered. “The one man I trusted! And I told him the whole story!”

“Yes,” said Li Yuan with an inscrutable smile. “Just as your father did! A bit queer, wasn’t it?”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Gold Skull Murders*, by Frank L. Packard.]