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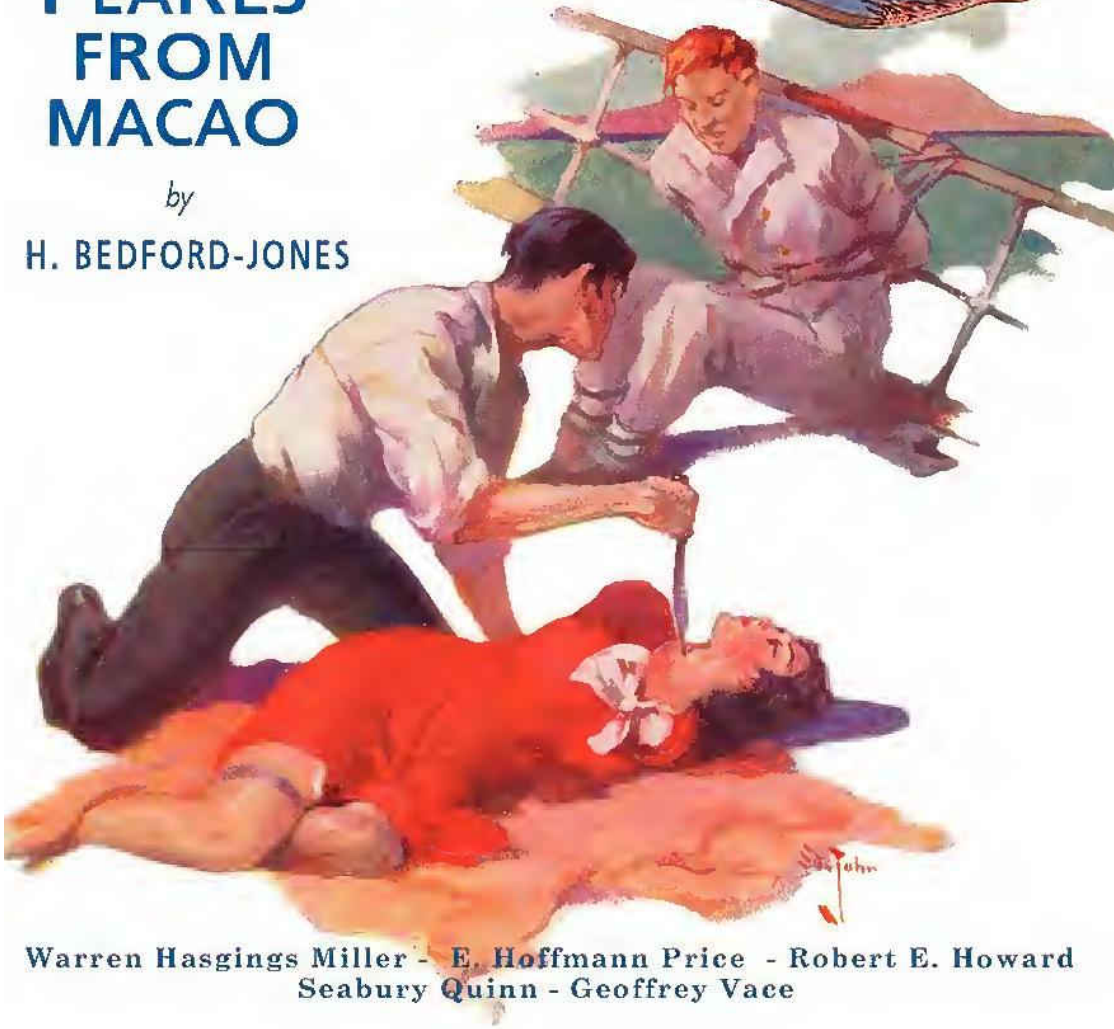
The MAGIC CARPET MAGAZINE

An illustration of a man in a red loincloth riding a magic carpet. The carpet is blue with yellow and red patterns and is flying through the air. The man is holding a sword and looking back over his shoulder.

PEARLS FROM MACAO

by

H. BEDFORD-JONES



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“Hell!” said Martin. “He broke his own neck.”

Pearls From Macao

by H. BEDFORD-JONES

A vivid thrill-tale of a desperate voyage on the China Sea, with murder striking from the shadows again and again, and a beautiful girl on board.

Cleghorn, who was usually as rough and abrupt as his own name, regarded the other with evident suspicion. He was a small, dapper man, sleek of hair and dress, and Cleghorn towered above him. A long scar ran down the left side of his dark features.

“Yes, I’m Joe Cleghorn. What d’ye want of me?”

“Business, good business,” said the other. “Darby is my name.”

Cleghorn stopped short, staring. Interest flashed into his sharp blue eyes, into his weather-roughened, large-boned features under the mop of sun-bleached hair.

“Hello!” he exclaimed. “Darby, eh? Might you, by any chance, be Cap’n Noel Darby of the *Moniteer*? Out o’ Frisco?”

“That’s me, mister. Cards on the table, I says, and all shipshape.”

“Don’t mister me, then,” said Cleghorn. “I ain’t your first officer. I’m a master and got the ticket to prove it. What’s more, I got a ship.”

“And I ain’t,” returned Darby. “That’s exactly why I want to talk with you. There’s money in it for you, Cleghorn. A lot o’ money. Not to be sneezed at these days, eh?”

True enough, and in Cleghorn’s case most vitally true. Cleghorn owned a two-thirds interest in his own ship, although he was a young man, the youngest master ever to sail out of San Francisco, they said. And right now he was in a jam, a bad jam, for lack of cash.

“What is this, dream money or real?” he demanded.

“Real,” said Darby softly. “And a thousand-dollar advance, in cold cash. Where can we talk?”

A thousand in cash? That meant everything, at the present moment. Cleghorn nodded to a café across the street.

“If you mean smuggling, running dope, or filibustering, I’ll waste no time on it,” he said bluntly. “Otherwise, we can slip over there and have a drink on it.”

“Fair enough,” said Darby, and took his arm. “It’s all on the level. Come on.”

They were in the French settlement of Tientsin, and the beer was good. Both men were thirsty, neither was in a hurry to speak. They looked out at the passing flocks of Chinese and whites, at the rattling trams, at the rickshaws and carts, and Cleghorn waited for the other to broach his business.

Not for nothing had Captain Cleghorn been knocking around Orient ports for the past few months with the *Hermione*. He had heard of Cap’n Noel Darby down at Singapore, and had heard nothing good. Darby got into trouble with the Dutch in Surinam, skipped out, was caught and arrested at

Singapore, got away, and was on his way to Siam when he lost his ship on a reef. He was a dope-smuggler, a little of everything in a bad way.

Cleghorn knew this, but he needed the money fearfully. His agents had provided no cargo here, after he brought up coal from Saigon; what with demurrage, harbor charges, wage and repairs, he needed a cool thousand before he could clear down the river to sea. His partners back in the States had gone broke. Cleghorn was savagely determined to save his ship, but how to do it was another matter.

Darby produced a whole sheaf of bank-notes, thumbed them off, laid them down on the table.

“French notes, but good,” he said. “Come to a thousand dollars gold.”

“Leave it lay,” said Cleghorn. “What’s the job?”

“Charter party between friends,” said Darby. He had a brisk, suave manner, and his bird-like eyes drove around swiftly. “Ever hear of the *Adamastor*?”

“No.”

“Portuguese tub owned in Macao, on the Yokohama run,” replied Darby. “Last month she was smashed up on one of those islands the other side of Dairen, on the south Manchurian coast. There’s a string of reefs there, bad ’uns. She pitched dead on one of them in that typhoon that swept the coast then. All hands lost except the cap’n, a Portugee named Silva; he died a day or so after being picked up. One other was saved, but not reported. I’ve got him aboard now. He was supercargo. Another Portugee, Aranha by name.”

“You’ve got him aboard—where?” demanded Cleghorn. “Got a ship here?”

“No. Got in today aboard the *Lyautey* from Saigon; she’s lying down at Taku, and we’re stopping aboard here till tomorrow — —”

“Who’s we?” probed Cleghorn.

“Me. Aranha. Couple more chaps. Four of us. Satisfied?”

“Aye,” and Cleghorn nodded. “Forge ahead.”

“The wreck’s high and dry on this island, charted as Fourteen—barren reef,” said Darby coolly. “Cargo of cotton goods and machinery, ruined of course. Native fishermen have probably looted everything loose by this time. Look at this. Bought her from the underwriters.”

He produced a sheaf of papers, cablegrams, letters, and set several of them before Cleghorn. The latter perused them cannily, but his suspicions of forgery were unjust. They were authentic. They showed that Noel Darby, master, had legally purchased the wreck of the *Adamastor*, wreck and contents both. Cleghorn nodded and returned them.

“You don’t waste time.”

“Not me. Well, there you are. Cards on the table and all shipshape, eh? Heard about you soon as I got in, and have been looking you up. Chap pointed you out to me.”

Cleghorn nodded again. He was suspicious of Darby, and would ordinarily have passed him up without a moment’s delay, but now—well, a thousand cash meant everything.

“I want to charter you,” went on Darby. “I can pay a thousand down, this here thousand. That just about strips us. We’ve put all we can rake and scrape into this deal. I can offer you this cash, and a fifth interest in the takings, for a month’s charter party. The job should last no more’n a week, but we’ll say a month to make sure.”

“Yeah?” inquired Cleghorn. “Well, come across. What’s in the wreck?”

“About three dozen bales in No. 1 hold,” said Darby in a low voice, “right on the top tier. On the manifest as cotton cloth, and baled to match. Any looting fishermen would pass it up sure, even if they got into the hold, which is doubtful. The cap’n didn’t tell about it; and he’s dead to boot. Aranha knew what it was, bein’ supercargo. It was shipped that way, and by the *Adamastor* besides, to save import duty. Some Jap syndicate was behind it.”

“Well,” said Cleghorn impatiently, “I’ll bite; what is it?”

“Ginseng. Manroot,” returned Captain Darby.

“Never heard of it.” Cleghorn frowned, his bright blue eyes striking out at the smaller man. “Hold on! You don’t mean ginseng, that medicine root we grow at home?”

Darby grinned, showing blackened, bad teeth.

“A distant cousin,” he explained. “Ask anybody here. Grows in the shape of a man. The Chinks think it has great powers and go crazy about it. This was the pick of the north Manchurian crop; it comes from there only.”

“Hell!” said Cleghorn in disgust. “And you wasting my time on junk like that!”

“Junk?” exclaimed the other, staring. “Look here! Prices on it run according to the roots. One with a real man’s shape can go into any money — five, ten, twenty thousand gold! And this was the pick of the crop, get me? Thirty-six bales of it lying there, and if each bale wasn’t worth about fifty or a hundred time its weight in dollar bills, I’ll eat my hat! Opium’s nothing to it, cap’n. The Chinks are wild about it, honest, like they are about snakes in wine and dragons’ teeth and so forth. There’s the thousand. Yes or no? I’ve got the location exact. We need your ship, we can’t raise any more cash, and that’s the only reason we’re offering you a fifth share in the gamble. Take it or leave it!”

Cleghorn eyed him suspiciously. It was possible, of course; on the other hand, this Noel Darby was a slick rascal and might be putting something over on him. Still, there was the money for the taking. If he lost, at least he would be square with the world. His powerful hand went out and closed on the sheaf of bank-notes.

“Done,” he said, and glanced at his watch. “Three o’clock. Come along to the consul’s office and get the charter party signed up. Suit you?”

“All shipshape,” said Darby, his little glimmering eyes filled with satisfaction. “When can you sail?”

“As soon as I pay my bills and get clearance. Say, midnight? The *Hermione* is down at the anchorage, down-river.”

“Suits me,” said Darby, and rose. “Let’s go.”

“But mind you,” and Cleghorn paused, for his beer was unfinished, “mind you, no tricks! No dope or smuggled arms. I’ve worked years to get me a start; my share in this ship means a lot to me, and my ticket’s clear. It’s all I have in the world, and I mean to keep it clear.”

Darby laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “All shipshape and cards on the table!”

They parted at the consulate, after signing the papers. Cleghorn picked up his first officer, Adams, and got him rounding up the crew, while he himself set to work paying his bills. He paused, however, to ask the consul in regard to ginseng.

“Ginseng?” and the consul laughed. “Manroot, eh? The Chinese are absolutely crazy about it, cap’n. I can take you into some of their shops

where a bit of root a foot long is held at ten thousand dollars! Some of it is literally priceless. The Manchurian wild root is of course the best—takes the most fantastic shapes— —”

Cleghorn went his way, thinking about three dozen bales of such stuff. When he had asked a few more questions here and there, he became convinced that Darby had told the truth.

In such case, the value of those bales, in any Chinese city, must be staggering. Whether the stuff would still be aboard the wreck, was a question; but Darby was no fool, and was gambling heavily. Fair enough! And having bought the wreck and contents, his legal right to it was unassailable. The chaps who had shipped it as baled cotton cloth and insured it as such were the losers.

Cleghorn was so thinking, as he stopped in at the office of his agent to impart the news and ask for any mail. The agent was busy with a woman, and Cleghorn waited. He gave no heed to the woman, until she turned to look at him. Then he saw that she was young, dark, and utterly magnificent.

“Captain!” He realized that the agent was speaking to him, “I wish to present you to Miss Silva. She wishes to speak with you. Will you go into the private office? If you please— —”

“Well! I’ve had a great time finding you, Captain Cleghorn!” Her hand folded in his like a rose-leaf; he bulked above her, those wide, hard shoulders of his looking very big, and he knew his hair must be tousled. It always was. Then he found himself in the private office, alone with her, and her first words gave him the shock of his life.

“Tell me, quickly!” she exclaimed, as she took the chair opposite him. “My father was the captain of the *Adamastor*. Did you ever hear of her? or of him?”

Cleghorn looked at her steadily. She was excited but her eyes were cool, capable, very steady. In repose, her features were quiet, lovely. In animation, they became imbued with an astonishing energy and vigor. Her English was perfect.

“Yes; not an hour ago, miss,” said Cleghorn bluntly. “But you don’t look like—well, like a Portuguese— —”

She broke into a quick laugh, but he read swift anxiety in her eyes.

“Names don’t matter, cap’n. My mother was American; so am I. Who told you of her?”

“Of your mother?” and Cleghorn’s blue eyes twinkled.

“No; of the ship.”

“The chap who has bought the wreck. A Cap’n Darby.”

She caught her breath sharply, stared at him, then sank back in her chair.

“Then he got ahead of me! He has chartered your ship?”

Cleghorn nodded silently.

“And I had counted on getting you!” she said. “I heard of your ship—I wanted your help. There’s no one else I can get here. Will you take me as a passenger, please?”

Cleghorn’s brows drew down. “No. Haven’t a passenger license, miss. And besides—well, it’d do you no good. Everything aboard that wreck is owned by Darby. You couldn’t get away with the stuff, if that’s what lies in your mind.”

Her eyes widened. “What stuff?”

“The ginseng, of course.”

“Great heavens!” She uttered an astonishing laugh. “Are you crazy or am I, cap’n? There’s no ginseng aboard that ship, that I know about!”

“So? Then let’s have your yarn,” said Cleghorn whimsically. “Perhaps somebody has lied to me. I know Darby is after some ginseng aboard her.”

“That may be,” she replied thoughtfully. “I got here yesterday from America; I found a letter from my father, the last he ever wrote. There is something aboard that wreck, cap’n, which I want. I mean to get it. I must get it! It’s all he had to leave me.”

“What is it?” demanded Cleghorn.

She met his eyes for a long, steady moment, then drew a deep breath.

“You’re straight,” she said quietly. “I’ll trust you. All my father had in the world is in his cabin aboard that wreck. I learned this morning by cable that some Captain Darby had bought the wreck from the underwriters; it was in the papers, too. He couldn’t be after my father’s things. No one else knew about them. They were in a little compartment of his cabin wall. You must take me with you!”

“No can do,” said Cleghorn calmly. “If you’ll allow — —”

“I’ll pay you,” she exclaimed. “I’m not broke. I’ve been at school in San Francisco, and I have money left.”

“Hold on,” said Cleghorn, laughing. “Why not let me do the job for you? Can’t take you on an old tinpot hooker like mine, one woman with a lot of tough waterfront rats. And it’s a tough mob, let me tell you. Rats? They’re lice. No, it wouldn’t do.”

“But you must,” she returned. “It would do perfectly well. That’s all nonsense about a woman not being safe alone with a lot of men. She’s safer than if alone with just one or two. Besides, I can take care of myself.”

“Yes, you look it,” and Cleghorn grunted ironically. Just the same, he knew there was a lot in what she said. Plenty of skippers’ wives or even daughters went along these days. Hm! “All the same, tell me how to get the stuff and I’ll do it.”

“No,” she said flatly.

“Get the point, miss,” said Cleghorn, frowning. “Darby has chartered the hooker. He can take you aboard, but I can’t, legally. That is, if you were signed on — —”

“Is he signing on the crew, or are you?”

“I am, blast it! Don’t ask so many questions — —”

She laughed quickly. "All right. Sign me on as assistant cook. I'll really be one, too; I can give your cook pointers."

"And Darby will raise hell about it and put you off at Taku."

"I'll chance that if you will."

"Hm! Another thing. Your father's personal effects may be retained by Darby, especially if he thinks they're valuable. You can't get them without his consent."

"He'll give it. Why not sign me on under another name?"

"Bosh! This is no story-book," snapped Cleghorn. "I'll not sneak up on any man, and that's flat. Tell you what I'll do! I'm catching the five o'clock train down to the anchorage. You meet me at the train. If Darby is there, all right. If he's gone ahead, I'll take you aboard and you can talk with him when he comes aboard tonight, around midnight. Then, if he refuses to take you along, you go ashore."

She nodded quickly. "Done. It's a fair gamble, captain. And if I go ashore, I'll tell you how to get the things, and you get them for me."

Cleghorn shrugged. "If I can." He rose and took her hand in his again, wondering at its softness and pink beauty. Like a rose-petal, he thought again. Then she gave him a quick, firm grip and he whistled to himself. Not so soft after all, eh?

"Good-bye, miss," he said quietly. "Five o'clock train. I'll get a place for you."

"Good-bye, and thank you," she rejoined, and left.

Cleghorn came to the outer office and watched her depart, a slim, slender figure of a woman, all in gleaming white silk. He groaned to himself at thought of such a girl aboard the *Hermione* with his crowd. Then the agent came up to him, with a jerk of his head.

"Magnificent creature, cap'n, eh?" he exclaimed. "When she was a kid, she used to take voyages with her father—old Silva was a good sort. White and straight. Too bad he kicked out! She's well known up and down the coast."

Cleghorn swung around suddenly. "Just what d'you mean by that?"

At the look in his blue eyes, the agent shrank suddenly.

“Lord, man! Nothing bad. Only that she’s beautiful—isn’t that so? Her dad wasn’t one of these Macao half-breeds, but a real Portuguese; fine chap, I tell you. Married an American woman. Well, good luck to you!”

Cleghorn swung away with a nod.

There was no sign of Cap’n Darby at the Tientsin East Station; he had probably gone down-river by steam launch. Cleghorn got a compartment, reserved places for dinner in the restaurant car, and saw the Silva girl hurrying through the gates two minutes before the train left. He met her, caught her bag from the porter, and swung her up to the right car, barely in time.

Only then did he really take stock of the change in her. The white silks were gone. She wore a neat, trim outfit of serge, a belted coat of the same, a blue beret that held in her luxuriant dark hair, and looked very efficient and business-like.

It was an hour’s run to the Tangku station, and two hours by launch on down to the Taku anchorage. In this time, many things happened—at least, to Joe Cleghorn. He found himself talking to this girl with unwonted freedom, talking about himself, about San Francisco, about everything he knew and was. He told her how he had beat his own way up from the bottom, how it had been hard going, how he lacked much that she seemed to have. And she understood perfectly.

“You’ve got one thing that’s rare,” she said to him, as they watched the Taku lights glimmering ahead from the prow of the launch, and he pointed out the lights of the *Hermione*. “You’re straight and unafraid. You wouldn’t cheat Darby—and yet you know quite well that he’ll put it over on you if he gets the chance.”

“Oh, do I?” growled Cleghorn, astonished. “What makes you think that?”

“His record. I’ve been looking him up. And you’re no fool.”

He broke into a laugh. “You’re a good one yourself, miss!”

“So far as you’re concerned, cap’n, it might as well be Marie from now on.”

“Thanks,” he rejoined. “You know, that—well, that sort of—blast it all! What I want to say is, if you do charm him and go along with us, I’ll watch out for you.”

“For who?” she questioned archly.

“For you—oh, I see! For you, Marie.”

“That’s better.”

Cleghorn indeed felt, somehow, that this permitted use of her name meant a good deal; it put him in the place of a protector to her. And he had the idea that if she made the trip, she was going to need a protector.

He was not long in confirming this belief. When he had followed her over the rail, and stowed her in a cabin temporarily, he came back and faced his dumfounded officers: Adams, the lean Seattle man, with big nose and scrawny throat; Horton, the second officer, chunky and always more or less drunk; Macintyre, a red-headed youngster who had wangled his ticket out of the examiners and joined Cleghorn as chief engineer, though his assistant was twice his age.

“She ain’t going, is she?” demanded Adams dourly.

“She is,” said Cleghorn. “And you mind your manners before her, mister. At that, I ain’t so sure about her going, either.”

“I hope to hell she don’t,” said Horton gloomily. “Crew’s skipped out. Jumped us today and beat it out of here on a Clyde boat that was short-handed. Wait till you see the ungodly lot o’ wharf-rats Adams fetched aboard! Beachcombers are angels alongside that gang.”

“Well, whip ’em in shape,” said Cleghorn. “That’s what you’re here for. Four gents who chartered us will be aboard before midnight. Everything shipshape when they come. We go with the tide.”

“Shipshape, my eye!” Macintyre guffawed. “Wait till you see the drunken scum, cap’n! Might’s well say navy style and wish for the moon. Say, when do you introduce us to the dame?”

“Get below and mind your engines,” snapped Cleghorn, and the others grinned.

Cleghorn took one look at the ten alleged able seamen forward, and went to find his passenger. A worse crew he had seldom seen; frayed and sodden dregs of humanity, all of them drunk. His former men had taken the chance to ship and had skipped out, leaving their overdue wages unpaid, but he was scarcely the gainer for that, he reflected bitterly. A few hours more, and all would have been well. Even the steward had gone.

“Well, miss, we’ll be off in an hour,” he said with his usual cheerful air, as he joined Marie Silva, “By the way, I forgot to tell you. Darby has three others in his party. One of them is from your dad’s ship. The supercargo, chap named Aranha.”

She stared at him for a moment, her eyes dilating. He saw the color drain out of her face; then she began to tremble.

“For God’s sake, what’s the matter?” he exclaimed. “What have I said?”

She recovered herself quickly. “Aranha!” she repeated in a low voice. “That man? It is impossible! No one else was rescued— —”

“Cap’n Darby picked him up, somewhere; gave no details,” said Cleghorn, frowning. “Said that Aranha did not report his rescue. It was him knew about the ginseng in the hold. He knew about it, having been the supercargo.”

She looked startled. “Aranha the supercargo? But that’s not so! He was my father’s second officer!”

“Eh? Something wrong here, Marie,” said Cleghorn. “I don’t think Darby was lying. He’d have no reason to lie about it. What’s wrong with Aranha, anyhow, besides this?”

She hesitated. “Nothing, except that I’ve always detested him. Father was certain that he smuggled stuff, but could not prove it, and Aranha was a good officer and had an interest in the ship.”

A knock at the door. “Party coming aboard, sir,” came the voice of Adams. Cleghorn turned to Marie.

“You stop here. This is your cabin if you go; next to mine. I’ll fetch Darby in here, and mind you don’t mention Aranha to him. I’ll straighten this out somehow later on.”

She nodded, and he left the cabin.

Had Darby lied about the man? Somehow, prone to believe anything of Darby as he was, Cleghorn did not think so. Possibly Aranha had lied to him. In that case, had Aranha told the truth about anything? Things began to look fishy to Joe Cleghorn, but he dismissed the matter momentarily.

The four men coming over the rail were headed by Darby, no longer looking slick and suave, for he now wore rough serge and an old cap from which the insignia had been ripped. He performed the introductions. Aranha

came next, a slender, swarthy man of about forty, with white teeth that glittered when he smiled, and a square, pugnacious face. The other two men brought Cleghorn a surprise. Stoutsman was a red-faced, bulbous-nosed fellow, thick-set, pig-eyed; Rapp was lean, hard, sour of face, with red hair and mustache. Both looked to Cleghorn like seamen.

“Mr. Adams! Will you show these gentlemen to their berths?” said Cleghorn, introducing his mate. “Cap’n Darby, I’d like a word with you, if you please.”

“When do you jerk up the hook?” asked Darby, following him to one side.

“As soon as you give the word. Something for you to settle, first. Come along.”

Cleghorn knocked at the door of the girl’s cabin, took the astonished Darby inside, and introduced her. He sketched briefly just why Marie Silva was here and what she wanted from the wreck, and watched Darby as he did so.

“That’s exactly the way of it,” exclaimed the girl quickly, when he had finished. “I’ll not be a bother to you, Cap’n Darby, and— —”

“Lor’ bless you, miss!” broke in Darby, with a jerk of his head. “Cards on the table, I says, and all shipshape. If you can put up wi’ things, a lot o’ men and all that, then we’ll have no kick.”

“You don’t mind, then?” she returned eagerly. “You’ll let me get my father’s things?”

“Miss,” said Darby earnestly, “I ain’t trying to rob the dead, nor a woman neither. So far’s I’m concerned, you can take what you like out o’ that wreck.”

So it was settled. Cleghorn revised his opinion of Darby somewhat, for it seemed to him that the man was quite in earnest, and he accompanied the other outside after a nod to the girl. Then Darby turned to him, fingering the long scar on his left cheek.

“Square of you, cap’n,” he said. “Some would ha’ took her along and asked afterward. Ain’t she a beaut, though! Sure, she’s welcome to her dad’s personal property.”

“By the way,” observed Cleghorn, “I dropped on to something today. It happens that your friend Aranha was the second officer aboard Silva’s barge.”

“Sure, I know it,” replied the other easily. “Supercargo also. He said as much.”

“Oh! Then it’s all right.”

Half an hour later, the *Hermione* had her hook out of the mud and was standing out across the gulf of Dairen and the tip of Manchuria, a day’s steaming to the eastward.

With morning, Cleghorn had taken over the bridge when Aranha appeared and nodded to him. The sour-faced Rapp followed, spat over the rail, and eyed the water.

“Doing a good eight, eh?” said he. Cleghorn gave him a glance.

“Seaman, are you?”

“Who, me?” Rapp grinned. “Not much. Never been to sea a day in my life, except coming up here from Australia, and wish I’d never come, you bet.”

Clumsy, thought Cleghorn, and turned away. Rapp and Aranha went over to the lee rail and stood talking together in low tone. Only a seaman could have glanced over the rail and known exactly what the ship was making. Why lie about it? Cleghorn was irritated. Presently Aranha came to him.

“Do you want the location of the wreck, cap’n?”

“I have it, thanks,” said Cleghorn. “The island charted as Fourteen, isn’t it? We’ll make the south’ard of the reef chain and run up to her in the morning.”

“Right,” said the other. By daylight, his square, choppy features looked an olive shade, an unhealthy greenish, and Cleghorn did not take to him a little bit. “Fourteen’s little more than a reef awash at low water.”

“How d’you know the wreck’s still there?”

Aranha shrugged. “Should be; she’s solid, hard and fast on the reef. Another big blow would break her up, but there’s been none.”

Horton appeared, to Cleghorn’s surprise, and beckoned him to the head of the ladder.

“Go on down, Adams’ cabin,” he said under his breath. “I’ll take over.”

Cleghorn gave the second officer a sharp look. Horton was sober, had a queer look in his eyes. With a nod, Cleghorn slipped down the ladder, turned into the passage, and made his way to the cabin of the mate. He knocked and went in.

Adams lay on the deck, face down, a puddle of blood about his body. He had been knifed twice under the left shoulder, and was dead. The body was cold, but no rigor mortis had set in; murdered within an hour, probably just after turning over the deck to Cleghorn.

Two cabins away, Cleghorn found the chief, his door hooked back, scribbling away at a letter; he was always writing letters to his wife. Cleghorn entered, closed the door, and told the astonished Macintyre what had happened.

“How long have you been sitting here like this, with your door open?” he demanded, in conclusion. Macintyre ran his fingers through his red hair, and frowned.

“Since breakfast—over an hour, anyhow.”

“Well, who’s been along here? Nobody could get to the end of the passage without passing by your door.”

“Lord, cap’n! I haven’t been watching,” said the young chief. “Let’s see. Adams came down from the bridge, said hello in passing. Since then, I don’t recall anybody except that Portygee chap, Aranha. He went on deck a while back. But he has the cabin next Adams.”

“A lot of help you are!” exclaimed Cleghorn. He stuffed tobacco into his pipe and lit it. “Two red-headed galoots on one ship, huh? You and Rapp — —”

“That’s right, that fellow Rapp did come along!” said Macintyre suddenly. “Just before Aranha went up.”

“Sure. They came on the bridge together.”

“Nope; I remember now. Rapp came along. Aranha went on deck. After a bit, Rapp followed him.”

“Yeah? Picked him up and then came to the bridge, eh?” Cleghorn scowled. “This is one hell of a thing! We’ve had a red-handed murderer aboard here, and no telling who he is. Your story ain’t evidence, so far’s Rapp’s concerned. Nothing to show he did it.”

“Let me run in there and take a look-see,” said Macintyre. “Back in a minute. I might pick up something; got a detective streak in me, you know.”

He vanished. Cleghorn grunted, and followed him. He found Macintyre on his knee beside the dead man. The engineer glanced up, then rose and held out something. A black horn button.

“This was in his hand, gripped hard. Been torn lose. Find a chap with a button off his coat—eh? What’s the matter?”

Cleghorn’s face changed. He recalled now that Aranha’s coat had two buttons off. If this matched the remaining buttons—well, after all, was that evidence? Still, Aranha could not get away. There was no hurry. Cleghorn handed back the button.

“Take care of that. Mark it with a knife, put it away for evidence.”

“What are you going to do?”

“There’s a lot I could do, and maybe should do,” said Cleghorn slowly. “But just now, I’m going to do nothing. Wait and watch your step.”

He left the cabin thoughtfully, and started for his own cabin, at the other end of the passage. Just before he came to it, the door of Marie Silva’s cabin, adjoining his, was flung open and a man came out with a tray. It was Tomkins, a ratty little cockney who had signed on as steward. He touched his cap, and Cleghorn stopped him.

“Been down at the other end o’ the passage since breakfast?”

“Me? No, sir. I fetched the lydy’s trye a bit ago, and just come for it, sir.”

“Any of the men been hanging around here?”

“Lord love you, cap’n! I should sye not.”

Marie appeared at the open door, and Cleghorn dismissed Tomkins with a gesture.

“Good morning!” Her hand came out to his, her smile was bright and cheerful. “What are you looking so sober about this morning?”

“Oh, business,” returned Cleghorn. “Coming up topside? It’s fine, fresh and clear.”

“I’ll be along in five minutes, yes.”

He went into his own cabin, opened the locker, and taking out a blunt pistol, shoved it into his hip pocket. Then he sought the bridge again, and found Horton at the rail, talking with Aranha and Rapp. The second officer came over to him, inquiringly.

“Know anything about it?” asked Cleghorn.

“Not a thing, sir. I looked in on him, and came straight up.”

“Right. Say nothing about it. Log it, and then have him prepared for burial tonight. Mac can tell you all I know.”

Cleghorn went over to the two at the rail, exchanged a word with them and eyed the coat of Aranha. It was held by one black horn button. Two were gone. One had been pulled clean out. No doubt of things now, in Cleghorn's mind, but he said nothing.

He did not doubt that Aranha was the murderer. To come out with an open accusation, to put the man under lock and key, could of course be done; he had sufficient proof as it was. Still, Aranha could not leave the ship, could not get away, and there must have been a cause for the murder. This baffled him completely. Adams had been stabbed from behind; the killer must have been watching, must have sneaked in and given it to him. There had been no fight. Adams had never seen the man before last night, and had said so. What earthly reason was there for the killing, then?

Cleghorn stepped inside, spoke to the man at the wheel, a bleary-eyed, unshaven ruffian, saw that the course was right, and came out to the rail again. A sharp word broke from Rapp; the two men, there at his left, whirled around and stood staring, slack-jawed, consternation and dismay in their faces. Cleghorn followed their eyes, and saw Marie Silva just topping the ladder. She caught sight of them and halted. Her eyes widened.

“You!” she exclaimed sharply. Aranha moved, came toward her, removed his cap and began to speak. She thrust him aside as though he did not matter, and moved toward Rapp.

“You, Peterson! What are you doing aboard here?” she demanded. Rapp took a step backward.

“No harm, miss, no harm,” he replied sullenly. “I’m in on a deal wi’ Cap’n Darby. We’ve chartered this here hooker, miss.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the girl. She glanced around, saw Cleghorn at the other side of the bridge, and turned toward him abruptly. He saw anger in her eyes; then it was gone. “Well,” she observed cheerfully, “it certainly is a fine morning, cap’n! Do you allow the cook’s assistant on the bridge?”

“Any and all times, you bet,” returned Cleghorn. He saw Rapp and Aranha go down the ladder, and gave her a quick look, his blue eyes very keen. “His name is Rapp aboard here. Where’d you know him?”

“A year ago, when I was home from the States for vacation,” she answered steadily, “that man was dad’s chief officer. Peterson, his name was then. Dad caught him in some crooked work. Peterson tried to kill him, and

went to jail. I don't know just what the crooked work was; dad wouldn't tell me, so it must have been something pretty dirty."

"I see," observed Cleghorn, and rubbing his chin, gazed out at the horizon for a moment. "Hm! He was chief officer, Aranha was second. Now they're with Darby, in on this ginseng deal. Well, the puzzle picture gets more and more involved."

"Cap'n Joe, I want you to read dad's last letter, the one I found here awaiting me," she said abruptly. "We're not going to pull at cross purposes, you and I, and I don't want to hide anything from you."

She put an envelope in his hand. Cleghorn met her dark, confident eyes, and spoke on impulse.

"That's a bargain, then. My chief officer was murdered this morning. Don't know who did it; stabbed. Keep your mouth shut about it."

He turned from her, took the letter from its envelope, and unfolded it. The epistle was brief. After an introductory paragraph, it read:

"In case anything happens to me suddenly, as it may, I want you to know that I am leaving everything in the place you know of. Nobody else can get into it.

"I turned over a very good deal last month with Su Hsien of Macao. He went broke; his gambling house was cleaned out and he needed ready money. I bought his collection of pearls for cash, and have put them away for you. Pearls are always in demand, and these are remarkably fine as you know. Everything is in the tin box, and safer than in any bank."

Cleghorn looked at the girl, as he returned the letter.

"Anybody else read that?"

"Why, no—oh! You mean it's not safe to keep it around? I hadn't thought of that, but you're right. Thanks." She shredded the letter and envelope into scraps, and tossed them fluttering down the wind, then looked at him with a smile. "There! And—you understand why I didn't want to say more, at first?"

Cleghorn nodded. "Sure. Is the amount large?"

"I don't know, but I fancy it must be. Dad put aside a good deal. But tell me, what was that about your chief officer?"

Cleghorn told her, briefly. As he was concluding the account, Cap'n Darby made his appearance, and Cleghorn beckoned him.

"Morning. Just the person I wanted to see. It's about that chap Rapp, cap'n. What's his business?"

Darby looked surprized, touched his cap to the girl, and answered promptly.

"Why, he's a broker of some sort! Aranha got him into the deal, as I didn't have enough cash to put it through, and Stoutsman rather fell down on me at the last minute."

"Oh! Broker, is he? You didn't know that his name's Peterson and that he was first officer under Cap'n Silva last year?"

Darby's gaze narrowed. "Eh? No, that just can't be so — —"

"Well, it is," broke in Marie Silva coolly. "What does it mean?"

Cleghorn was watching Darby. The latter gave the girl a quick, probing glance, and his lips compressed for an instant. He was startled, obviously.

"Miss, I don't know," he rejoined slowly. "Why he'd lie to me, I don't see. I'll have it out with him here and now — —"

"No," said Cleghorn, and Darby looked at him. "Wait, cap'n, wait! There's luck in leisure, as the saying goes. Who's this Stoutsman? A friend of yours?"

"He runs a saloon in Hong Kong," said Darby. "Used to be a seaman. I've known him off and on for some years. He's in it for a vacation and has a split in the proceeds. He couldn't put up as much as he'd thought, at the last minute, so we got Rapp into it."

"Yeah?" Cleghorn eyed him sardonically. "Thought you knew your way around better'n all that!"

The other started. His eyes lit up sharply, keenly.

"Eh? What are you driving at?"

"I dunno," said Cleghorn. "But there's something fishy back of all this. If I were you, I'd keep mighty quiet, and watch out sharp. And don't go leaning over the rail on dark nights."

"You're crazy!" scoffed Darby.

"Well, suit yourself." Cleghorn shrugged. Darby looked from one to the other of them, grunted, and left the bridge.

Marie Silva's anxious gaze went to Cleghorn. "You have some idea about it. What is it?"

"Can't tell, Marie. Looks to me as though Darby had been really taken in by three crooks. Can't see any reason for it, though, and so far as the game itself goes, they may all be simply playing it their own way. Darby's the last person in the world to be shystered."

"So any one would think," she assented dryly.

Tomkins appeared on the bridge, touched his cap, and asked if he might make up the girl's cabin. She nodded, and he departed. Then Horton came up, a moment later, saluted Marie, and gave Cleghorn a glance.

"All set, sir. Shall I take over, now?"

"No. It's your watch off; keep it so."

"The chief wanted to see you, sir."

"Tell him to come up here, then."

Horton departed, and Marie Silva presently left the bridge also. Cleghorn, keeping an eye on the course, exchanged a word or two with the bleary rascal at the helm, who gave his name as Martin.

"Quartermaster in the B.P. line, sir—once," said the man.

"Australia, eh?" Cleghorn stared out at the horizon. Rapp had mentioned Australia; probably came from there originally. "Hm! Peterson said he knew you down that way."

Martin darted a sharp look at his expressionless face.

"Well, that was some years ago, sir," returned the man.

Cleghorn's pulse leaped, but he ventured nothing more. The red thatch of Macintyre was rising on the ladder, and he went outside to meet the young chief engineer.

"What's on your mind, Mac?"

"Nothing much. Only I can't find hide nor hair of old Charley Gray."

Cleghorn frowned. "What d'you mean? Assistant engineers don't vanish, do they?"

"Never knew 'em to before this, cap'n. He's nowhere aboard, unless he's stowed away somewhere in a bunker. And a queer thing happened, too."

Macintyre hesitated, then went on. "You know that nice new Browning pistol I got in Hong Kong, last thing? Well, it's gone."

"What d'you mean? You think Charley took it and jumped overboard to spite you?"

Mac's eyes had no laughter in them.

"Well, it looks that way, for a fact. That gun was under my pillow last night, and it's gone now."

"Oh!" said Cleghorn. "Steward cleaned up your cabin? Go ask where he put it."

"I just asked him," said Mac. "He knows nothing about it. Swears up and down there was no gun under my pillow when he made up the berth."

"Believe him?"

"He seems an honest little rat. Damned if I know what to believe!"

"Same here," confessed Cleghorn. "Looks mighty queer, all of it. I don't savvy about Gray, though. He must be somewhere about the ship, Mac."

"He's not. He's supposed to be on duty now, too. Think we'd better make any general search for him?"

"No," said Cleghorn slowly. "No, something's up, Mac, and I don't know what it is. Best lay low and keep your eye peeled. Here, take my gun and keep it on your hip. I've got another in my locker. By the way, look in Adams' cabin for his, will you? He keeps it in his wash-stand drawer, right side. If you find it, bring mine back."

"Right," said Mac, and dropped the automatic into his jacket pocket.

Cleghorn, alone at the break of the bridge, gripped the rail hard and frowned at the sun-glittering water. Something very queer—yes! One at least of those men forward, who had come aboard the previous evening, knew that Rapp was really Peterson. Then, the murder of poor Adams. And now a mysterious disappearance. Charley Gray, the assistant engineer, was a rough old rascal, strong as a horse, with a bitter tongue, but true as steel. How on earth could he have vanished bodily? Such things just were not done. He was no doubt somewhere around the ship, perhaps dead drunk in a corner.

Then Cleghorn found Marie Silva ascending the ladder hastily. She stood before him, flushed, her dark eyes excited and angry.

“There’s something horribly wrong here, Cap’n Joe!” she broke out. “My bag was locked, and had a pistol in it. Now it’s been cut open—a long gash down one side—and the pistol is gone. Nothing else is missing. Tomkins discovered it himself and called me in to see the cut bag.”

As Cleghorn had half anticipated, Macintyre did not return his automatic, for Adams’ weapon was clean gone. And so was the second pistol in Cleghorn’s locker.

Evening found the mystery still unsolved.

Three things stood out sharply, with puzzling prominence. Charley Gray had simply vanished; he was not aboard the ship. Adams had been murdered, and if Cleghorn suspected the murderer, he said nothing, but busied his chief officer calmly. Then, the disappearing pistols. Some one had raided the officers' cabins; some one had cut open Marie Silva's bag and taken the pistol from it.

Cleghorn found his own futility maddening.

Moved by his own helplessness, he that evening confided in Darby. The other three of Darby's party were having a card game in the mess cabin, Horton was on the bridge, Marie Silva had gone to her own cabin. Cleghorn found Darby in the stern, smoking, looking out at the silvery moonlit wake. He told him bluntly what had happened.

"You've searched up for'ard?"

"Yes," said Cleghorn bitterly. "We've searched everywhere. No sign of Gray. No sign of any pistols."

"Well," and Darby tapped his pocket, "nobody's got mine, anyhow! I dunno what it can mean, for a fact. That Rapp-Peterson thing looks bad. You say one of the men for'ard knew him, eh? Might be those three sharks had hooked me, somehow, but why? No sense to it. We're all four partners. Piracy? Ain't likely. They'd not want this ship. Nothing in her to loot. It's a wonder," he added bitterly, "you ain't suspected me of some crooked work!"

"I have," said Cleghorn frankly. "But I can't see any particular point to suspecting you of anything. As to the murder of Adams—well, I know who did that."

"Spit it out, then," snapped Darby. "All shipshape, I says, and cards on the table! Who?"

"Aranha." And Cleghorn told of the button. Darby swore disgustedly, turned around to the light, pointed to his own coat.

"Hell's bells! Might's well say I did it myself. Same sort o' slop-chest buttons, and one's torn off here. That's no damned good, at least to prove

anything. But it does beat all how you can lose not only them pistols, but a perfectly good engineer, aboard a lousy little old well-decked coasting tramp like this!"

Cleghorn caught his arm suddenly.

"What's that? Hear it— —"

"On the bridge!" snapped the other. "Come on."

Darby dashed away. Cleghorn followed him forward, hearing again that thin, wailing cry, and then it was cut short. Some one had called him. It was his own name that had shrilled down the moonlight.

Upon reaching the bridge, the two stood staring at each other. Horton stood there, calm, inquiring; he had heard nothing. Cleghorn withdrew, and at the foot of the ladder waited for Darby, and growled an oath.

"Somebody called me, I could swear to it!"

"Aye," assented Darby. "Some one called 'Joe Cleghorn'! Heard it myself. All quiet on the bridge. I'll pop below and take a look. Want to get a couple cheroots anyhow."

He departed. Cleghorn went to the rail, glanced at the forward well deck, glanced aft. He made out nothing amiss, nothing suspicious. The deck lights were all burning. He strolled on aft by the engine-room hatch, and then turned at the quick step of Darby thudding along the deck. Darby extended a cheroot.

"Here. All quiet below, cap'n. Dashed if I can savvy it!"

Cleghorn struck a match; they lit the cheroots. Darby turned to the rail, leaned on it—and then sprang suddenly back with a startled oath.

"What's this? Look here, would you— —"

Cleghorn saw him staring at his hand. He touched the rail, found something wet and sticky. Next instant a match showed them the truth. On the rail, dribbling down to the scuppers, was wet, fresh blood. A lot of it.

"That card game still going on?" demanded Cleghorn grimly.

"Yes. My Lord! Where'd this come from?"

A frightful premonition seized upon Cleghorn. He turned, then paused.

"Watch out!" he said sharply. "Run up and tell Horton, like a good chap. I'll be along in a moment."

Then he was gone, through the open door, down to the engine-room gratings. Half-way down, he paused and shouted at the men below.

“Where’s Mr. Macintyre?”

“Ain’t here, sir,” came back the response. “Went topside for a breath of air a while back. Ain’t come down yet.”

Cleghorn was stunned for an instant. He retraced his steps, his brain in turmoil, passion boiling within him; by a tremendous effort he kept his head, forced himself to be cool, quiet. That was poor Mac’s blood on the rail. He had been stabbed and flung over, and had cried out as he fell. Dead now, beyond any helping.

“Here is something that I found by the rail,” came the voice of Darby.

From him Cleghorn took a little silver pencil with pocket-clip. It was one he himself had given Macintyre. Cleghorn stood there, trembling; grief and fury rushed upon him at once, and then a stifled groan came from his lips.

“It’s Mac, the chief,” he said in a low voice. “Murdered like Adams. Good Lord! What does it mean? Who’s the killer? There must be an insane man aboard here, a madman—and Mac had been warned, too. He was on guard. Now we know how Charley Gray vanished. What’s behind it?”

He turned upon Darby. In the moonlight his eyes glittered, his face was convulsed, he was filled with suspicion and hatred. At a word, at a look, he would have seized the smaller man before him like a rat.

Then his passion died out. Darby’s scarred feature bore a look that could not be mistaken—a look of earnest stupefaction, of deep alarm. The man was sincere.

“Him, of all people!” exclaimed Darby. “Lord, I’m sorry. He was a fine chap, cap’n; what the devil’s to do about it? D’ye think Aranha— —”

Cleghorn caught at the name.

“Will you see if he’s left that game since we were there? See what they say. Keep on your guard— —”

“Right,” said Darby briskly. “I’m with you all the way, cap’n. Back in a minute.”

As he departed, the chunky figure of Horton appeared.

“Hullo, cap’n. What’s up? Darby told me about the blood— —”

“Mac’s gone,” said Cleghorn. “And, by the lord Harry, if I find out who’s the bloody murderer, I’ll wring his neck! Noticed anything queer?”

“Mac!” Horton caught his breath sharply. “Who, me? Not a thing, sir. Who done it?”

“How the hell do I know? Would I be yammering here like a fool if I knew?” cried Cleghorn in a tortured voice. “Watch yourself, old man. It’s some of this damned gang we’ve got aboard us. Look out for that Aranha. None o’ them have been killed—and look at us! You and me next. I can’t figure this game, but look out!”

“You bet,” assented Horton calmly. “I’ll get back topside.”

Cleghorn was alone once more. He moved out of the moonlight, stepped back inside the door of the engine-room entrance, paused there. No use questioning the men down there; if they did know anything, they’d lie, of course. His thoughts flew to Marie Silva, up there in her own cabin. She must be warned about all this deviltry. She might be the next to go. Cleghorn was stung afresh by his own helplessness, his inability to do anything. He was convinced that Darby was not concerned in it, however; the sincerity of the man was beyond any mistake.

A shuffle of feet on the deck outside, then a voice. The words petrified him.

“— — leave her alone, see? Peterson’s got her picked out.”

“Trust him,” came the response, with a low, evil laugh. “Remember him and that dame down in Batavia?”

The two figures passed, oblivious of the man in the shadow. One was Martin, the quartermaster. The words burned into Cleghorn. He stood motionless, then heard Darby’s brisk step.

“Hey, cap’n! Where are ye?”

Cleghorn stepped out. Darby flung his cheroot over the rail.

“Game just broke up,” he said. “I asked the steward; nobody had been gone, he said.”

“Damn the steward! I bet he’s in on this, too. Listen!” Fiercely, Cleghorn told what he had just overheard. Darby whistled softly.

“Some o’ these men you shipped are in on it, sure!” he exclaimed. “Let’s you and me go have a talk with this Rapp, mister.”

“You’re on,” said Cleghorn grimly. “Meet you in five minutes below the bridge. I’ve got a slungshot tucked away in a drawer, and I’ll get it, then join you.”

Cleghorn started for his own cabin. So this devil Rapp was behind some of this work, eh? At all events, the girl was in no danger; that was one good thing. And now that he was warned, Rapp-Peterson was going to cough up information, and do it in a hurry.

Thus determined, Cleghorn turned into the passage, passed the door of the girl’s cabin, shoved open his own door, and reached for the light. His figure was illumined by the light in the passage, the cabin was pitch-black. As he put out his arm, something moved before him. Every sense alert, he ducked, and swerved quickly to one side.

A furious blow glanced from his head—had he not ducked, it would have brained him. Half stunned, he hurled himself to one side, and collided full with an unseen figure. His hands shot out. A grim and furious satisfaction seized Cleghorn as his fingers sank into the throat of a man, sank in with a terrible grip.

Another smash over the head, and another.

Blinded, he sank in his fingers the deeper. The two struggling figures hit against the door, and it slammed shut. Now there was perfect darkness. In his ears, Cleghorn heard the hoarse, frenzied panting of a man, felt the smashing blows of the other’s fists and of some blunt weapon. He had not the slightest idea who it could be, and cared not. This fellow had been waiting here to get him, and had come within an ace of it.

That man, gripped about the throat by those fingers of iron, gasped terribly, struggled with blind and frantic desperation to loose the grip, and could not. His strength began to fail. Again Cleghorn caught a terrific smash over the head, and this fourth blow all but knocked him out.

He lost balance, but did not lose his grip. He dragged down the other with him; they fell heavily, rolled against the closed door, and lay there sprawling. Flashes of fire beat before Cleghorn’s eyes. He tried to rise, and could not. He felt his senses slipping away. With an effort, he held himself motionless, let all his strength, all his will-power, flow into his hard-gripped fingers.

Even when everything went black before him, there was no slackening of his frightful hold.

When Cleghorn came to his senses again, daylight was creeping into the cabin, stealing across his face, wakening him.

He sat up abruptly.

At first he remembered nothing, for his head was very sore and aching, and he was in a most uncomfortable position, twisted with another man, lying solidly against the door. Then, as he put both hands to his head and squirmed aside, he suddenly recollected what had passed the preceding night. With a start, he turned to the still, motionless figure lying there face down, and lifted it. The body was quite stiff. The face, when he had turned it over, was horrible to see, and black.

It was the face of Rapp. In the man's hand was a slungshot. Fallen on the floor, where it must have slipped from his hold almost at the first, was a long, keen-edged knife. Probably the same knife that had slain Adams and Macintyre.

But now—daybreak! Morning! What had happened, meanwhile?

Cleghorn staggered to his feet. He was bruised and sore, his head felt like a battered apple, but he was himself again and it took a lot to damage him beyond recourse. He caught up the water-bottle from the rack and drank thirstily, heavily. Then he looked at the stiffened body of Rapp, and felt only satisfaction. Here he had the murderer, no doubt of it—and besides, what Rapp had told the men in regard to Marie Silva put him beyond the pale.

Rapp had been in collusion with the men, of course; had known one or two of them in times past. What was his objective here? Well, no matter now. And why had no one come during the night? Sudden sharp alarm pierced Cleghorn. Horton would have looked him up, surely. Had anything happened to the second officer? Aranha must be involved in this affair, probably had murdered Adams. That button still stuck in Cleghorn's mind.

Going to the body of Rapp, he examined it and grunted as he rose with a pistol in his hand. What was more, it was his own missing pistol, the one that had been taken from his locker. This settled things with a vengeance. He pocketed it, then picked up the slungshot. Donning a fresh jacket, he slipped

the springy weapon up his sleeve, hauled the body of Rapp away from the door, and stepped outside.

Voices came to him from the adjoining cabin. He heard Marie Silva speak.

“You say he hasn’t been around?”

“No, miss,” returned Tomkins, the steward. “Sound asleep and ’is cabin locked. Cap’n Darby tried to get in and couldn’t.”

Cleghorn turned away. He could talk with the girl later. At present, he had other and more pressing things on his mind. First, what about Horton?

He went down the passage to the latter’s cabin, tried the door. It was locked, and the key was on the outside. Cleghorn turned it and walked in.

Horton lay in his berth, breathing stertorously, fully dressed. Beside him on the floor was an empty cognac bottle. Another lay in the berth. Cleghorn picked up this latter and sniffed it, about to take a swallow; then he checked the motion. The brandy had an odd smell. He looked at the unconscious Horton, and a whistle escaped him. His first disgusted contempt passed away.

“Doped, by gravy!” he muttered. “Somebody got him drinking, then gave him a doped bottle! Well, they got him out of the way without killing him, that’s sure. Then locked him in. Hm! Rapp didn’t do this, anyhow.”

He went outside, saw nothing of Tomkins, and started for the bridge.

From the ladder, he looked down to the forward well-deck and saw two or three of the hands there staring up at him. He went on grimly. Mounting, he came face to face with Darby, who stood in talk at the starboard rail with Stoutsman. They broke off short, staring.

“Man!” exclaimed Darby, unconcealed pleasure in his eyes. “We thought ye were sleeping your head off! Horton’s dead drunk.”

“Doped, you mean,” said Cleghorn. Glancing into the pilot house, he saw the man Martin there, gawking at him, and smiled grimly. Then he looked at Stoutsman, whose red, bulbous-nosed face was all shot across with surprise and bewilderment.

“Couldn’t knock you up last night,” went on Darby quickly. “Couldn’t get in at all. Looked bad, cap’n. Stoutsman, here, knows a bit about engines, and he’s got things running sweet down below. You know, we can’t find Rapp anywhere? Didn’t turn up for breakfast.”

“He won’t turn up for any more breakfasts,” said Cleghorn calmly. “He’s the dirty devil who stole our guns and has done this murdering. He was waiting for me last night and damned near got me. He’s settled. What d’you know about it, Stoutsman?”

“Who, me? Not a thing, cap’n,” stammered the red-faced man, so plainly lost in puzzled anxiety that Cleghorn cleared him at once of any complicity in the murders.

Then, glancing around the horizon, Cleghorn started. The *Hermione* was no longer out at sea, but steaming along toward a scattered group of reefs and long, barren islands. Across the north and west rose the Manchurian mountains. He perceived at once that she had somewhat overshot her mark and was coming up now to the reefs. He glanced at Darby.

“Your work?”

“Aye,” said Darby with a nod. “In half an hour we’ll be at the reef. It lays behind that mass o’ rock off the port bow. We’ll raise her clear in three or four minutes.”

“Good,” said Cleghorn. “You and I will have to run her until Horton’s on his feet; Lord knows when that’ll be!”

He turned into the wheelhouse. Martin gave him a startled, shrinking glance, and Cleghorn came up close to him, pulled the slungshot from his sleeve, and dangled it before the quartermaster. The implement was of braided leather in different colors, beautifully woven.

“Recognize that, do you?” said Cleghorn. “Now, my lad, you’re going to come clean—or else you’ll feel it as well as see it. Rapp’s dead, savvy? Peterson, as you knew him. He’s dead, and I killed him, and I’ll do you the same in about two minutes.”

Martin’s face went gray, livid, ghastly.

“So that—that’s why he—he ain’t been around!” he muttered.

“That’s it. He’s down in my cabin, dead and stiff, and you’ll join him pronto unless you talk,” said Cleghorn.

Martin shrank suddenly, and cowered away from him.

“I’ll talk, cap’n, I’ll tell you everything!” he gasped.

Cleghorn caught sight of Darby, outside, and beckoned. The other came in by the port door and stood listening, his scarred features anything but handsome.

“I met Peterson on the street and he says to ship aboard you,” said Martin. “He says we’d have a bloody good thing of it, sir. That’s all I know — —”

“You lie like hell!” snapped Cleghorn. “Last night you and another man were talking about Peterson and that girl down below — —”

He swung the persuader, and Martin let out a cry.

“That’s true, sir! Sure! There wasn’t no harm in it, sir! Peterson told us queer things were going on aboard here, and to look out for the lady, that he had his eye on her for himself. That’s all he said. I don’t know nothin’ about the murder, cap’n! I swear it! He says last night he’d be around and give me and Swipes some orders, and he ain’t come.”

“You’ll go to join him,” said Cleghorn, “if you don’t watch your step.”

Darby beckoned, and they went outside, to the end of the bridge.

“That clears it up a bit,” said Darby. “Rapp had some sort of game afoot, eh?”

“And wasn’t alone in it. What about Stoutsman?”

“He’s no saint, but he ain’t mixed in it,” said Darby emphatically. “That man there knows more’n he’s told.”

“Sure; but he’s told enough. Try to get any more out of him, and he’d lie a blue streak,” replied Cleghorn disgustedly. “Aranha?”

“I dunno.” Darby frowned. “If he is, then Rapp’s death will knock him silly. See here, we got to pay attention to business or we’ll go on the reef! I know the ground here. I’ll con her up to the anchorage myself. There’s the wreck, by gosh!”

For the moment, everything else was forgotten. Indeed, Aranha came up the ladder, saw Cleghorn with a start of recognition and astonishment, then turned and stared like every one else.

The reef ahead, disengaging itself from the high rocky islet which had concealed it, now showed plainly to view. The tide was now high, the half-mile long reef was almost awash. Midway of its length and driven clear of

the water, the wrecked *Adamastor* lay upon her starboard side, half in a deep pool that ran the length of the reef. Her spars were gone, her bows were stove in, but her superstructure seemed intact. Darby was examining her through his glasses, and now lowered them with an exultant word.

“The hatches ain’t been touched! I’ll take her, cap’n. There’s twenty fathom steep to this side of the reef.”

He disappeared inside the pilot house, and a moment later the ship came to half-speed.

Aranha turned, met the gaze of Cleghorn, and smiled composedly.

“You haven’t seen Rapp, I suppose?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Cleghorn. “He’s down in my cabin now.”

“Oh!” Aranha’s brows went up in surprise. “Then I’ll just run down and call him, eh?”

Cleghorn shrugged, and watched the other depart with a grim smile. As Aranha went down one ladder, Marie Silva came up the other, her lovely features excited. She gave Cleghorn a glance and a swift greeting, and turned to look at the island as soon as she was on the bridge.

“Oh! Isn’t it pitiful?” she exclaimed hastily. “Are you going close up, cap’n?”

“We are,” said Cleghorn. She swung around to him.

“I forgot—everything’s all right, isn’t it? The steward said you were sleeping — —”

“Everything’s all right, you bet,” he rejoined, his eyes twinkling. “And you’re going in the first boat with me, Marie, so you’d better get ready. It’ll be rough work there on the reef; looks all coral, pitted and full of holes. Got any heavy shoes?”

“I’ll get them, yes,” she returned, and left the bridge hurriedly. Cleghorn turned to where Darby stood beside the quartermaster, giving instructions. The ship was on quarter-speed now, nosing up to the island. Darby touched Martin on the shoulder.

“Get for’ard and break out that anchor. Good holding-ground in twenty fathom.”

The engine telegraph swung to “Stop” and the monotonous clank of the engines ceased; all vibration left the ship and she surged forward slowly,

steadily. Two hundred yards from the reef, the cable began to rattle and bang in the hawser; presently the ship swung at rest, her nose to the reef, for the tide was on the turn.

“Well?” Darby faced Cleghorn inquiringly. “What’s the program?”

“Up to you, cap’n,” responded Cleghorn. “I’m going to give the lady a hand, that’s all.”

“Then we’ll take Aranha, Stoutsman and six men. Suit you?”

Cleghorn made a gesture of assent, went out to the bridge rail, and bawled the orders at the men below. They trooped aft to get the No. 1 boat into the water. Then Aranha came up the ladder, his dark eyes staring at Cleghorn, his face ominously set.

“Well?” he demanded, breathing hard. “What’s it mean, cap’n?”

“Oh, you found him, did you?” Cleghorn chuckled. “Means that he tried to do me in like he did the others yesterday. Bloody murderer, that’s what he was! And I’m not so sure but what you had a hand in it as well.”

Aranha faced him steadily. “Careful, cap’n!” he said in a low voice. “Is that an accusation or not?”

“No, it’s merely my opinion, and you’re welcome to it,” said Cleghorn. The other shrugged.

“You seem to want trouble! Well, I’ll not oblige you now; I want to have a look under the hatches of that wreck. When we return, we’ll settle this affair.”

“Suits me,” said Cleghorn. “Darby, hold the boat for me, will you? There’s something I want to look up below.”

Going down, he met Tomkins, and told the steward to call up some of the men and drop the body of Rapp overboard with a weight to the heels. He left the aghast steward staring after him, and went to Macintyre’s cabin.

He spent a good ten minutes in searching it thoroughly but fruitlessly. There was no doubt that Mac had taken care of the telltale button and scrap of cloth, but it was not here. With a grunt, Cleghorn accepted the blow.

“Either he kept it in his pocket,” he reflected, “or else his murderer got in here and looked it up. Aranha or Rapp? No telling. Seems silly to think those

two chaps would come aboard here with one or two men, to pull murder and piracy! Still, there's a reason back of it, if I could only find it."

Alert, wary, watchful of everything, he went to the galley and got a steaming mug of coffee, wolfed a hunk of bread, and then went to where the boat was waiting under the side. Six men were in her, with Aranha and Stoutsman, and Darby was just helping Marie Silva down. Two minutes later Cleghorn shipped the tiller, and the boat struck out. Behind her, the men left aboard stared down over the rail, watching.

The morning was still, almost a calm. Not even a fishing-craft was in sight, but against the horizon were two smoke smudges, no doubt steamers making for or leaving Dairen. This string of bare reefs and islets was waterless, uninhabited.

"Couldn't have better weather for the job," observed Stoutsman. "Nasty place if a blow came up! We ought to be gone by night, eh, Aranha?"

The latter nodded in silence. His gaze was fastened upon the wreck in rapt excitement. Marie Silva, crowded beside Cleghorn, was also watching the wreck, whose almost perpendicular deck was toward them as she lay. Cleghorn was watching the reef, however, and picked out a spot for landing as the boat surged forward.

"Bow oar! Lay out with that hook and stand by," he ordered.

They were ashore, scrambling across the face of Fourteen, as the reef was charted.

One man remained with the boat, the others trailed along. Cleghorn and Marie followed Aranha; the others spread out, all seeking the best path across the uneven surface of pitted coral, dotted with pools, and much of it slippery with weed from its recent submergence.

“It’ll be a job,” said Cleghorn, as he helped the girl across a pool close to the canted deck of the wreck. “You know his cabin, of course?”

“Yes. On the starboard side of the passage, easy to reach.”

“Won’t find much loose stuff,” observed Cleghorn grimly, with a glance over the deck above. “Natives have been here.”

This was evident. Everything not smashed loose had been cut adrift, even the windows having been hacked out. That the hatches had not been touched showed that the wreckers were probably passing fishermen in a hurry.

Cleghorn paid no further attention to Darby’s party, who scurried about and clustered about the forward hatch. He was busy trying to get into the cabin passage beneath the bridge, which was not easy by reason of the sharply canted decks. When at last he had cleared away the débris of a jammed, smashed door, the girl passed through and he followed, clawing a precarious way along the sloping deck.

The cabin doors were all opened, smashed, jammed, blocking the passage until forced out of the way. A quick cry from Marie, as she disappeared into a cabin.

“Here, cap’n! It looks all right, too— —”

It looked far from all right, as Cleghorn perceived on scrambling through the doorway. The floor was a litter of smashed crockery, furniture, moldy bedding, everything imaginable piled up; any object of utility had been carried off. Lockers, chests, drawers were all open and plundered.

Marie Silva, however, had gone to the bed, a French brass bed screwed to the floor, and was working her way around to the head of it. Cleghorn

looked at the wall but could see nothing here except a cracked mirror in a wooden frame screwed in place. When she came to this, the girl paused and flung him a laughing glance.

“Now you’ll see why everything was sure to be safe! Even if the ship had gone down to the bottom, it would not matter— —”

Her face changed abruptly. Fear flashed in her eyes. Cleghorn whirled suddenly and saw Aranha just coming erect in the doorway, watching them with an amused expression. The pistol leaped out.

“What d’you want?”

Astonishment filled the dark, aggressive features as Aranha saw the gun.

“Nothing, cap’n!” he exclaimed hastily. “I—I came to say that Cap’n Darby can’t get those hatches open, and asked if you’d come and lend a hand.”

“No,” said Cleghorn bluntly. “Tell him to play his own game and I’ll play mine. Get out of here and stay out.”

Aranha flushed angrily, but shrugged and scrambled away. Cleghorn went to the door and watched from there until he saw the man clear out of the passage. Then he returned again.

“All right, Marie! That blighter was curious; Darby sent no message at all, I’d gamble on it. Go ahead, he’s gone.”

The girl produced a short, blunt screwdriver with good purchase. Evidently she had come fully prepared, knowing exactly what to expect here. She fell to work at the mirror-frame, and a whistle of admiration broke from Cleghorn when he comprehended.

Silva had chosen his hiding-place admirably. No one would have given two glances at this broken mirror screwed against the wall. The very fact of the glass being cracked directed the attention elsewhere.

Then, as he watched, Cleghorn remembered Aranha. The rascal had looked dumfounded at sight of that pistol. His calm, unhurried appearance, his first amusement, the way in which he had entered without the least concealment, went to show that he had not anticipated finding Cleghorn armed—or did it? If Darby had really sent him, this would explain his manner just as fully.

“Slick,” thought Cleghorn angrily. “The devil is a smart one, smooth as butter! I’ll bet a dollar he’s been in cahoots all the time with Rapp; and he

sneaked that button out of Mac's cabin, too. But what's their game? That's what stumps me. If I knew that, I'd know just what to hang on him, and why."

After all, he reflected, things had happened with remarkable rapidity. When he was knocked silly last night, holding Rapp in his hands, not twenty-four hours had passed since leaving port. There hadn't been much time or chance to run down killers, with all the things that were happening and the work to be done. But now it would be different. Dairen was just over the horizon, steamers coming in and going out could be reached at almost any time with a smoke signal or rockets, and if Aranha tried any tricks, he would get into hot and quick trouble.

Then Cleghorn's thoughts shifted as the girl finished her task. The last screw was coming out, and without an effort she pried the mirror-frame away from the wall and lifted it to the bed, carefully. Where it had been, there was revealed a small square door in the cabin wall. Opening this door, Marie produced a tin box six inches wide and a foot long, laid this on the bed, then took up the mirror again.

"I'll just replace this first of all," she said. "No use advertising what we've done."

"Right," he approved. "Let me get around there—I'll do it for you."

Joining her, he fell to work and in no time was driving in the last of the screws. She started to open the box with a little key that was on a chain about her neck, and seeing this, Cleghorn heaved the mattress back upon the bed-springs, and opened out a handkerchief on this.

"Pearls mean money, and so does a tin box like that," he said significantly. "Whatever's in it, throw into the handkerchief and make a bundle you can tuck out of sight. If you carry that box, everybody aboard will know you've got something worth having. With all the goings-on we've had— —"

"Oh!" she paused, her eyes widening. "I meant to ask you about it, but we've hardly had time to talk since sighting the wreck. I haven't seen Mr. Macintyre around today, and that sour-faced man, Rapp, hasn't appeared — —"

"And won't," replied Cleghorn. "Both dead, Marie. Make up your mind to it, we're bound to have trouble before we're through. I can't explain. I

don't savvy it myself, but once we get what we're after, there's going to be some explaining done aboard ship."

She looked at him for a long moment, searchingly, then bent her gaze again to the box in her hands. Unlocked, this came open, and she dumped out the contents on the mattress. There were a number of small Chinese boxes, covered with bright brocades; a sheaf of bank-notes, a heavy purse, probably containing gold by the peculiar dead clink as it fell; and a legal envelope with papers inside.

"Pearls in those boxes, eh?" observed Cleghorn. "Well, the boxes are devilish unhandy, and to be frank, I think all this stuff is risky. Suppose you dump out the pearls and knot the handkerchief around them. They can't hurt unless you crush 'em. Stuff the other things out of sight. Carry the envelope, and I'll carry the box."

"You will? The empty box?" She gave him a sharp glance. "But I thought you said it might cause too much comment —"

"Sure. I'll throw it away into the pool, and they'll see it's empty. You'll be carrying the envelope. It'll look like we didn't find much."

"I see."

She obeyed, without further discussion. Cleghorn knew nothing about pearls. Whether the glittering rosy globules that piled into the handkerchief were real or imitation, he had no idea whatever. When the last box had been turned out, Marie pushed the cotton and boxes to the deck, knotted the handkerchief, and thrust the little bundle into her breast. After it went the sheaf of notes. The purse she handed to Cleghorn, who grunted at its weight.

"Carry this, please. All ready, if you are."

With a nod, he pocketed the purse and turned to the door. Upon reaching it, he was relieved to find the passage quite deserted.

Tin box in hand, he made his way along, the deck of the passage sloping sharply to his right, the left wall under his feet. Because of the splintered door ahead, exit to the outer passage beneath the bridge was no simple matter. Cleghorn had to clamber around it on his hands and knees, the tin box under his arm, and then let himself slide down into the scuppers.

"I'll go first," he said, on reaching the smashed door, "and catch you."

He worked his way around the door, slid down the sharp slope and then caught sight of the quartermaster, Martin, at one side. Martin was grinning at

him. Something whisked around him, and Cleghorn felt a tug that flung him sideways into the scuppers. A rope—he had been noosed— —

There was a burst of laughter as they fell upon him.

It was quite true about the ginseng in the No. 1 hold, although Aranha had somewhat exaggerated the quantity.

Aranha himself was in a fury of rage and terror over what he had seen that morning in Cleghorn's cabin. The death of Rapp was a frightful blow to him. The men knew it by this time, too. As they straggled over the reef toward the wreck, he knew they were discussing it. His own thoughts and eyes followed Cleghorn and the girl, however, and as he watched Marie Silva's lithe, slim figure climbing aboard the wreck, his eyes narrowed with a hungry, predatory glint in them.

He watched them disappear, then turned from the others and followed. No one observed him, for all were intent on getting aboard and reaching the closely battened forward hatch. He made his way into the superstructure, sublimely confident. What better moment than the present? Give them time enough to show him the way, that was all. Cleghorn would be unarmed, he felt certain—for he had quite forgotten about Rapp having a pistol.

This Cleghorn was altogether too clever, too dangerous, he reflected as he slowly made his way after the two. There was that button, so carefully preserved; that would have been a bad thing in any Admiralty court. But he had it now, had even sewn it back into place on his jacket. He looked down at it and laughed softly. They would have to go a long way to catch him like that!

At the opening under the bridge, he paused to listen and glance back. Stoutsman and Darby were at the hatch below, the five men were coming along to join them. No hurry there; the men would await his signal before doing anything. Martin was in charge; a good man, this Martin. Then he heard Cleghorn say something, there inside, and after a cautious look, made his way in after the pair.

He waited again cautiously. Silence; this worried him. The girl would know just where the hiding-place was, of course. She would go straight to it and open it up. Aranha clawed his way along the sloping deck, paused there outside the jammed door. Then he heard her speak, exultation ringing in her voice. She was showing Cleghorn the secret.

“Even if the ship had gone down to the bottom, it would not matter — —”

She had it open, then! Aranha lifted himself, came erect, moved into the doorway, hand on pistol.

To his mortification and dismay, he saw nothing—but the girl saw him. Cleghorn whirled around, pistol in hand, and only with an effort did Aranha compose himself, slide out of the trap somehow, get away. He cursed as he made his way forward again and joined the group about the hatch. The wedges were being knocked out, the hatch was nearly off.

Aranha caught the eye of Martin, and nodded. So Cleghorn had a pistol after all! Then it was impossible to wait longer. If they waited until he got out here, anything was possible. The last stroke must be delivered here and now. They would get Cleghorn when he came out. And the girl. Aranha smiled at this thought.

Martin passed a low word to the other four men.

Stoutsman was on one side of the hatch, mopping his bald head, and on the other was Darby, leaning forward, directing the men who cleared the hatch. This was raised up on one side and lifted over to the deck, sliding down into the scuppers with a subdued crash. The hatchway showed boxes and crates in mad confusion, the hold but partly filled, all the cargo there shifted into a solid mass on the starboard side.

Darby leaned over, peering down. Aranha came beside him, with difficulty keeping his footing on the sharp slope. Without a word, Aranha threw up his arm; the sunlight glittered on a knife in his hand. It was buried to the haft in the back of Darby. The latter, knocked forward by the blow, pitched headlong down into the hold and was gone from sight. Not a cry had come from him.

At the same instant, Martin and another man whirled on Stoutsman. He sensed their attack, started back, clapped hand to pocket with an oath of alarm. A man behind tripped him, Martin slammed in a blow under his jaw, and Stoutsman, knocked off his feet, went head-first through the air. He landed in the scuppers and lay inert. Martin slid after him, the other man also, with a glitter of knives; then, after an instant, they rose sheepishly and looked up at Aranha, who stood knife in hand by the hatch.

“Hell!” said Martin. “He broke his own neck.”

There was a grin, a quick laugh. The knives were put up.

“Who brought that coil of light line? Where is it?” demanded Aranha.

“Right here, sir,” said a man, showing the coil.

“Good thing we did,” said Aranha coolly, “since there’s not a scrap left aboard here. Cut it in two lengths, Martin! You and your pal there get into the scuppers under the bridge entrance and grab the skipper. He’ll be along in a minute. You, Swiggs! Fetch the other length and come with me—get up above the doorway. We’ll make sure of the lady.”

“Hey!” exclaimed Martin, frowning. “Why not douse him first off, cap’n? He’ll talk if we leave him live.”

Aranha showed white teeth in a laugh.

“Who’s going to let him live, you fool? I want him alive, that’s all you need know. When we go aboard, he’ll be dead enough.”

They went to their positions as he had ordered. Martin and the other, below, hid themselves at one side of the passage, Martin making his line into a running noose. Aranha, above, waited intent and hawk-like, and then drew back when he heard Cleghorn coming, heard him say that he would go first.

Cleghorn came out, glanced around, slid down toward the scuppers. Martin noosed him very neatly; both men fell upon him, throttling him, subduing him before he had a chance to put up a fight. Marie Silva appeared by the jammed door.

Uttering a laugh, Aranha was upon her with a swoop, passed his line about her arms and body, caught her to him despite her struggles, and looked down at Martin.

“Tie him to the rail there, anywhere!” he ordered. “Then— —”

A curse of furious pain broke from him. The girl in his arms had kicked him; now she brought up her knee, drove it into his groin, broke clear of him entirely. The line wound about her arms and body, however, kept her from using her hands. Aranha’s companion slid down and caught her, and both of them pitched down the deck. Martin took hold of the girl as she fell, and next instant they had her tied and helpless, while the furious Cleghorn cursed them from where he sat lashed to the rail. They broke into laughter as Aranha joined them, his dark face livid with pain and anger.

“What’s this?” he exclaimed, picking up the tin box. “Empty, eh?”

He went to Cleghorn and frisked him, taking his pistol and the purse. Looking into this, he gave a short laugh and flung it at Martin.

“Here! Divide that up among you—earnest of what’s to come! Then lay for’ard and get into the hold, and look for the wicker bales I told you about. Nothing else like ’em there, so you can’t miss ’em. Oval, wicker, about six foot long. I’ll be along presently.”

They departed, leaving the girl by the rail.

Aranha ignored her likewise, and turned to Cleghorn. He produced a cigarette, lit it, and smiled into the blazing blue eyes.

“Oh, you are very clever, cap’n, very clever!” he jeered. “But you are clever too late, eh? You were not clever when all your crew went off and you had to get more men. No, you never thought that maybe those men went off so my men could ship with you, eh? My men, all of them. After that fool Darby and his friends put up enough money to serve us. Poor Rapp! You killed him just too late. But then, so much the better for me, eh?”

Cleghorn glared at him, helpless, unable to move a muscle.

Under these taunts, he perceived the truth of everything—the bitter, ghastly truth. He had suspected Darby, but that man of admittedly bad record had simply been a dupe in the hands of this plausible scoundrel. He and Rapp; the two of them had limed the twigs with a likely tale, had caught Darby and Stoutsman, had got enough money to put over the deal, and here they were.

The crew of the *Hermione*, already behind in wages, had been lured away. Other men, ready and waiting, had taken their place. And it had been done swiftly, perfectly, with a smoothness betraying the brains behind the scheme. Murderous, foul, black brains—for what? Mere ginseng? Far from it. Cleghorn had a glimmering of the truth now, the elusive motive for all this.

Aranha snapped away his cigarette and turned to Marie Silva. He bowed mockingly, met her dark, riotous eyes as they burned at him.

“Miss Silva, you know me, eh?” he observed. “This tin box, it is empty. This purse of gold, it is not very much. You see, not long ago I watch your father one night. Somebody slipped me word that Su Hsien who owned the Flowery Palace gambling house had gone broke, that he had sold all his collection of pearls to your father. So! That was a valuable tip, eh? And one night I watch, I see your father with the pearls and the tin box. If you look close, you’ll see the hole drilled through the partition between his cabin and mine.”

Aranha grinned, took out another cigarette, lit it with a flourish.

"But the hole, alas!" he went on, "was not big enough to see where the tin box went. The hiding-place! That I could never find. Then came the typhoon, the wreck. Your father did not take the tin box away with him, that was certain. I was picked up, I kept it secret, got in touch with Rapp and Darby. We found you were coming. Darby thought it was all ginseng—ha! We meant to get there before you; or I did. But you fooled us. You came on the same boat, on the boat we chartered. And Darby, like a fool, gave you permission to come. Well! The rest is clear enough."

He shrugged, waved his cigarette, fastened his eyes upon the girl.

"Now—come!" he exclaimed sharply. "There are pearls and bank-notes; it is a fortune, a real one! The pearls of Su Hsien were famous in Macao. The tin box is empty. Here is Cap'n Cleghorn, a fine man. You like him. Perhaps you want to see me slit his throat, eh? Well, it will not be pretty to see, Miss Marie."

He chuckled and slid a knife into sight.

"What do you mean?" demanded Marie Silva, composedly. "You blackguard!"

"Names don't hurt," observed Aranha. "You hand over the money and pearls, and everything will be all right. I'll not hurt you—"

"Careful!" broke out Cleghorn. "He's a damned liar, Marie. He has other intentions toward you; I heard the men talking about it. Look for'ard, there. You can see poor Stoutsman in the scuppers, half over the rail—murdered!"

"You tell, maybe?" said Aranha, watching the girl. Color flooded into her face under his gaze.

"No, you murderer!" Her voice struck up at him defiantly.

"Oh!" Aranha chuckled softly. He moved closer to her. She lay on the inclined deck, her feet in the scuppers, and he balanced himself beside her, then looked at Cleghorn with a smirk. "What about you, cap'n? Suppose I leave her alone, eh? I don't want her with me. Don't worry! I can get girls of my own, real girls with fire in their blood. I wanted Marie unharmed until I got the pearls—not for the reason you think. No, I don't want her with me. You tell me, and I'll not touch her. But if you don't tell me—eh! You understand. Well?"

"Go to the devil," said Cleghorn. He made a sharp attempt to divert the man's thoughts. "Don't tell him where we put them, Marie—"

"No use, no use," broke in Aranha. "So you won't tell?"

His knife moved down. The girl shrank before the blood-stained blade, before the grinning face of the man above her. Sweat broke out on Cleghorn's brow. He saw the knife touching the flesh of her white throat, pressing against the skin with slow, insistent pressure —

"Damn you, I'll tell!" he cried hoarsely. "Leave her alone, you dog!"

"Oh! I thought maybe you would," and Aranha straightened up. "That's why you weren't killed, cap'n. So? Where are they? Maybe I search her and find them, eh?"

The girl flashed a sudden look at Cleghorn—a glance he could not fathom, although in it he read warning, alertness, purpose.

"Set me free first," she exclaimed. "Set me free, and I'll show you where they are."

"Eh?" Aranha stuck forward his head, like a turtle, and peered down at her. "Set you free first—you promise, your word of honor?"

"Yes," she returned steadily. "I'll get them."

"All right," he said. "But mind, little girl, you pull a knife on me and you'll die quick! I'm ready for your tricks."

"I have no trick," she said quietly. "Are you afraid of a woman, then?"

Aranha leaned down and began to cut at the line binding her, while Cleghorn looked on with bitter eyes. There was no help for it, of course; if the fellow had taken a notion to search the girl, he would have found them.

"There!"

She came to one knee, wavered uncertainly, then rose and stood in the scuppers, leaning back above the rail. Aranha stood close, suspicious, the long knife ready. But the girl merely reached into her dress and produced the bank-notes.

"Here," she said, holding them out. Aranha snatched them.

"Well? The pearls — —"

"Here." She got out the knotted handkerchief, and held it toward him.

As Aranha reached for the knotted handkerchief, it slipped from the girl's fingers. He grabbed for it wildly.

What ensued came with lightning rapidity.

Arm outstretched, the man leaned far forward. The pearls went down over the rail, to fall on the coral below. The girl's arm flashed out. She half hit, half pushed the leaning man. Flung off balance, he dived head-first over the rail for the rock ten feet below.

Marie's hand slipped into her breast. She flashed out a tiny, dagger-like knife, flew at Cleghorn, and slashed at the line confining him. A cry went up from the men forward, one of whom had seen what happened. Cleghorn found her flushed face close to his, heard her panting breath at his ear.

"Quick! Jump down, get his gun—it is our only — —"

He was free. A yell from forward, and another. He came erect, looked over, saw the figure of Aranha sprawled on the rocks below, saw the man's arms moving a little with convulsive effort. Then Cleghorn hurdled the rail and landed square on Aranha's body, without thought of mercy for his human cushion.

The chance! She had won him a chance after all!

His hands slid over the body of Aranha. He found a pistol, jerked it out, darted forward. A man had just leaped over the side, a second was following. Martin was on the rail with a pistol in his hand. Cleghorn threw up his weapon and pressed the trigger.

At the first shot, Martin pitched back and was gone. The man on the coral before him had whipped out a pistol, but his bullet missed. That of Cleghorn did not; the man went down, shot through the head. The second man struck the ground, then held up his hands in the air.

"Hey! Don't shoot!" he yelled frantically. "I give in!"

"You other two, come down here or you'll get no quarter!" blared Cleghorn. "Quick! You, Marie—come here! I need you!"

Almost at once, the girl joined him, excitement flaming in her face. She went to the prisoner, took a knife and pistol from him, and the other two men dropped from above and let her disarm them also.

“Run to the boat!” ordered Cleghorn. “Shoot the man there if you must—don’t let him get away— —”

The girl turned, broke into a run, and was gone.

Cleghorn surveyed the men grimly. They had been thunderstruck by the sudden reversal of affairs, supposing Aranha to be dead, as Martin certainly was. The three of them, panic-struck, had surrendered, the girl had flung their weapons into the pool; but now they glared at him, cursing volubly, realizing what it meant if they were taken into port as prisoners. Cleghorn laughed.

“Aye! You’ll hang, right enough, all of you! But you’ll work first. Pick up Aranha and carry him to the boat— —”

He broke off abruptly, his eye caught a movement on the ship. There on the bridge was a figure in whites—the chunky figure of Horton. Exultation thrilled in Cleghorn at the sight. He saw Horton lift a pistol and fire in the air as a signal. Marie Silva, at the boat, had the man there under her weapon. He stood with upraised hands.

Cleghorn turned.

“Where’s Darby?” he demanded. One of the men sullenly jerked a hand toward the wreck above.

“In the hold. Aranha knifed him.”

“So? Then— —”

Cleghorn had forgotten the slimy weed under his feet at the edges of the pool. He took a step. Suddenly his feet went out from under him and he pitched down, losing his weapon.

Instantly all three of them were leaping at him, desperate, frantic. They were upon him like wild beasts. Aranha had stirred, was not dead, came to one elbow, gasping out something inarticulate. Cleghorn rose to one knee, slipped again, just as the first man crashed into him bodily, sending him sprawling.

All three piled on top of him.

Fists and boots thudded into the prostrate, writhing, struggling figure under them. All three men realized instantly that it was their chance for life

and freedom. Cleghorn finished, they could take their weapons again and shoot down the girl; as to what was passing aboard the ship, this was far from their thoughts just now.

But, despite their efforts, the man beneath them slowly uprose, shook them off as a bear shakes off dogs fastened to him. One drove in a blow to the mouth, so that the blood gushed from his lips; but now he was on his feet, and Cleghorn's fist smashed in against the man's throat and burst his Adam's apple. Then he turned upon the other two, and beyond them saw Aranha coming erect, still clutching his knife, but dazed and bewildered. The sight spurred him terribly.

The two closed in on him. He ducked, lashed in one lightning blow that doubled up the first man, then staggered under a fist to the ear. Slipping again on the wet weed, he went to his knee. The man thought him down, and rushed in to finish it. That was unlucky for him, because Cleghorn leaped up to meet him, came up with a crushing right to the face that sprawled the last of his opponents senseless.

Then he flew at Aranha, who was staggering forward. The knife flamed in the sunlight, but it did not descend. Even as it glittered, Cleghorn darted in and struck, struck again. Aranha threw out his arms and fell over on his face, and lay still. Painfully, Cleghorn wiped away the blood from his mouth, then stooped for his lost pistol.

Twenty minutes later, beside Marie Silva in the sternsheets of the boat, with Aranha at his feet and the groaning, bleeding men bending over slow-moving oars, Cleghorn held the boat out toward the ship, where Horton's figure showed that he was in charge. Suddenly Cleghorn turned to the girl.

"We'll make Dairen tonight and be done with it. But wait! We must go back—I forgot about the pearls—"

"I didn't," she said, and smiled into his eyes as she touched her breast. "I have them. But there's the ginseng—"

"Devil take the ginseng!" exclaimed Cleghorn, and laughed. "Give way, you dogs—lean on those oars!"

The unhappy men obeyed, with terror in their hearts, and the boat came slowly under the ship's side. The men at the rail, cowed by Horton's gun, lent a hand.

"And that," said Cleghorn, "is that! But there's more to come."

And the girl, meeting the flame in his blue eyes, flushed suddenly. But not from fear.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some photographs have been digitally enhanced for improved image quality.

[The end of *Pearls From Macao* by Henry Bedford-Jones]