

FRANK L. PACKARD

Creator of JIMMIE DALE
and SHANGHAI JIM



MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE 'IN SULLEN TROPIC SEAS

MORE KNAVES THAN ONE

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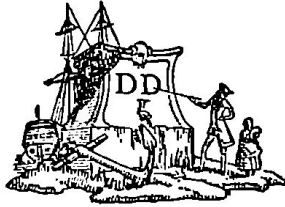
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FRANK L. PACKARD

More Knaves Than One



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To

MORTIMER L. PACKARD

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MORE KNAVES THAN ONE

Chapter I

Without Credentials

WANDLER stood on the wharf at Amoy, his eyes fastened on a boat that was pulling in from a freighter which lay at anchor out in the harbor.

His face, browned to a copper tint, was thin; his clothes, shabby, worn almost to a state of disreputableness, hung loosely from his six feet of body, giving to the muscular frame the appearance of gaunt leanness.

As the boat approached, he raised a battered pith helmet, brushed back the heavy shock of brownish hair that tumbled over his forehead, then pulled the helmet farther down over his eyes to shade them from the glare of the sun.

Sitting in the stern sheets of the boat was a European, and lying on what appeared to be a grating with a mattress over it, stretched across from gunwale to gunwale, was a form wrapped up in blankets. Two Chinamen were at the oars; a third sat in the bow.

Wandler, after another few moments of observation, during which the boat had drawn close in, turned and, making his way through the little knot of coolies and native boatmen around him, walked leisurely to the edge of the wharf. He reached it just as the Chinaman in the bow made fast with his boathook.

“What’s up?” asked Wandler coolly.

The first glance of the sailor in the stern evidently fell upon Wandler’s clothes—he maintained a contemptuous silence.

“Well?” prompted Wandler sharply.

This time the man met Wandler’s eyes.

“It’s our second mate, sir,” he said almost civilly.

“Dead?”

“No, he ain’t croaked yet, but to my way of thinking he will—and bally soon too!” replied the man coarsely. “He was took bad just after we left Hong Kong, so the skipper stops here to send him into hospital.”

“Your skipper’s a humane man,” commented Wandler. “What’s his name, the name of your ship, and where are you bound for?”

“Captain Barker, sir—the Kalgan for ’Frisco,” the man answered. “Would you be the port medical officer, sir?”

A little smile flickered quizzically for an instant on Wandler’s lips.

“No,” said he slowly, “I’m afraid not. Go on with your work.”

He walked a few paces away, watched them as they laid their burden on the stringpiece and followed them with his eyes as the four picked up the grating and disappeared shoreward along the wharf; then his glance rested speculatively on the Kalgan across the water.

Suddenly, with a short laugh, he retraced his steps, his hand dove into his trousers pocket, fumbled there an instant and came out with the entire contents—a shilling. And the next instant, flipped from his thumb and forefinger, the coin was deftly caught by a coolie sitting in his sampan alongside the wharf, and Wandler had stepped into the craft.

“Steamer out there,” directed Wandler, pointing to the Kalgan; “and look sharp about it!”

Ten minutes later he climbed aboard the freighter. There seemed to be none but Chinamen about.

“Where’s Captain Barker?” he asked one of these.

“Mabbe him up topside,” the man answered.

Wandler made his way up to the boat deck, and, as he reached there, a heavy, thickset man, emerging from the charthouse beneath the bridge, confronted him.

“I’m looking for Captain Barker,” said Wandler.

“You won’t have far to look, then,” returned the other, while his eyes traveled critically over Wandler’s person. “I’m Captain Barker. What do you want?”

“My name is Wandler, Harvey Wandler. Your man told me he was taking your second officer to the hospital, and I came out to get the berth.”

“Let’s see your papers,” said the skipper curtly.

“I haven’t got any—or anything else except the rags I stand in,” Wandler stated candidly.

“Lost ’em?” inquired the skipper, screwing up his eyes.

“Yes sir.”

“How?” demanded Captain Barker.

Wandler smiled. “Does it make any difference? If you don’t believe I ever had any when I say I had, would you believe anything I might choose to tell you to account for the loss of them?”

“Which is to say,” said the skipper a little shortly, “that it’s your business and not mine.”

Wandler, still smiling, shrugged his shoulders.

“Humph!” grunted Captain Barker. “Well, you’ve got your nerve, you have.” He turned and bellowed down the deck: “Mr Rankin! Ahoy there, Rankin! Pass the word for Mr Rankin!”

Presently a voice from below answered him:

“Coming, sir,” and a moment later a tall, red-faced man appeared from close at hand at the head of the companionway from the main deck.

“Mr Rankin,” said the skipper as the other came up, “here’s a chap wants the second’s berth without papers, which, if he ever had any, he’s lost, and his memory as to the how of it at the same time.”

Wandler flushed a little as he submitted to the unpleasant stare with which the newcomer favored him.

“We can’t ship a second without papers; ’tain’t legal—even if we wanted him,” decided Rankin brusquely.

“Oh yes, you can,” retorted Wandler calmly. “What’s to prevent you using any of your crew who might happen to know something of navigation from acting as an officer in an emergency? It’s done every day—because it has to be done. This is an emergency. You can’t get a certified mate here. You’ll either have to run back to Hong Kong, which, if I know anything, you won’t waste the time to do, or run to San Francisco under-officered, which will be rather onerous on you, Mr Rankin, who, I suppose, are the first officer, or—take me.”

“My word!” remarked the skipper. “You’re a cool one, you are.”

“My proposal seems eminently fair.” Wandler dug his hands in his side pockets and leaned toward the two men. “I know my business—that’s what should appeal to you first. I’ve been on the bridge of pretty well every kind of craft that floats, from a P. and O. to a South American coaster. I have even passed for master. If I don’t show that I know my business, you can relegate me to the crew’s quarters, and you’ll be a white hand the better off than you are now; certainly no worse off than if you turned to, Captain Barker, as I suppose you’d made up your mind to do, and stood watch and watch with Mr Rankin across the Pacific.”

“Well, my word, you’re a cool one, you are,” ejaculated the skipper again. “Here, you wait a spell.” He turned to the first officer. “Mr Rankin,” said he abruptly, “come down into the saloon.”

Wandler watched the two men disappear through a door in the deckhouse, evidently the companionway entrance to the saloon below, and then his eyes roved over his surroundings. It was the usual boat deck of a vessel of the Kalgan’s class, a tramp of perhaps three thousand tons—aft of

the chartroom, a deckhouse, broken by the engine-room skylight, then another bit of deckhouse.

And then suddenly Wandler's eyes shifted from his survey of the deck as a woman of middle age came to the doorway through which Captain Barker and the mate had disappeared, shaded her eyes, stared shoreward for a moment and went inside again. Wandler's eyebrows lifted. He had hardly expected to find a woman aboard. He looked down at his clothes and smiled whimsically. Then he turned, glanced downward at the lower foredeck—and the whimsical expression vanished as his lips thinned. What he saw was a half score of Chinamen lounging about, and only one white face among them—one more than he had seen when he had come aboard! Chinese manned! But he knew that already.

"A fool trick!" he muttered.

A half-hour passed. Came a hail and the splash of oars from overside. The boat was back.

He heard voices from the deck below—Rankin's and the captain's and that of the man he had met ashore. Then the creak of tackle as the boat came inboard, and a minute afterward Captain Barker came up the companion ladder and joined him.

"I hope I shan't regret it," said the skipper bluntly, "because I'm in a hole. It's by no means regular; quite the reverse. You understand that?"

"Quite," said Wandler with a slight smile.

"I hope I shan't regret it," repeated the skipper. "The second's togs—he's dead, poor devil—will about fit you, and you can pay for them out of your wages."

"Very good, sir," agreed Wandler quietly.

"Then take the bridge, Mr Wandler, and we'll see what you're made of. We'll get under way at once."

Chapter II

A One-Time Friend Appears

IT was growing dark at the end of the second dogwatch before Rankin relieved him and Wandler descended from the bridge. As he stepped to the deck, he drew back abruptly and stared, a dull red creeping slowly over the tan of his face, at a girl who had come suddenly around the end of the charthouse.

For a moment their eyes met and held. Hers, big and blue, widening first in amazement, then setting in a cold, contemptuous stare.

“*You!*” she cried. “*You*—on board this ship, Mr—Mr— —”

“Wandler,” he supplied steadily.

“I supposed you would have changed it,” she said evenly. “I have been lying down all afternoon, so I did not know who the captain had secured as a new second officer, though Mrs Laurie told me he had one just after we left Amoy. If I had known that it was you, I would have made the captain put you ashore.”

“‘Made,’ Miss Hearn?”

“My father”—stonily—“is the owner of this line!”

Wandler did not speak for a moment.

“You are rather hard, aren’t you, Miss Hearn,” he said presently, “even on a—a jailbird? Of course I realize perfectly that I have no right to expect more than anyone else—than any man under like circumstances, but — —”

“You are here now,” she interrupted coldly. “There are very few valuables aboard the ship, and I assure you that my trinkets are not worth while. I know that Captain Barker cannot get another mate without returning to Hong Kong, and, as I have reason to know that you are a capable officer, you need not fear anything I may say so long as you confine yourself strictly to your duties, if that is what you mean.”

The blood surged in a fierce flood to Wandler’s face, and then, receding, left him white as ivory. His voice was hard and bitter as he spoke:

“I did not intend to imply, Miss Hearn, that I was asking for protection. I wished only the opportunity to right myself in your eyes, as any man would wish to right himself in the eyes of the woman he respected.”

She half turned from him.

"I heard you protest your innocence in Singapore at the trial—that I was forced into as a witness. I do not care to hear it again. For the present, while we are aboard here, you will understand that — —"

"I understand," Wandler broke in with a short laugh. "You in turn, Miss Hearn, need have no fear on that score."

Without another glance at him she walked away. He watched her for an instant, and then, with a mirthless smile and a shrug of his shoulders, turned to go around the charthouse in the other direction.

As he did so, he raised his eyes to the bridge—just in time to see the first officer's head duck hastily back behind the weather cloth. For a second Wandler hesitated. Had Rankin heard?

He put his foot on the ladder to go up—and drew it back. Time enough if Rankin had, and after all, what did it matter? A little more unpleasantness—that was all.

Wandler walked slowly aft and descended to the main cabin, or saloon. It was deserted, except for the Chinaman who waited behind the single place set at the table.

"You new slecond off'cer?" inquired the celestial politely.

Wandler nodded shortly as he dropped into his seat.

"Me stleward—Ling Woon," volunteered the other.

"All right," said Wandler indifferently.

He ate his supper with a sort of grim humor at his appetite. According to the fashion of prevailing fiction, the denouement of a few moments before should have deprived him of the ability to do more than touch a few morsels sparingly; only he remembered he had not eaten anything since early morning.

At the end he rose and turned to the Chinaman. He had gone on duty at once, and this was his first time below.

"Where's the second's room, Ling?" he demanded.

"Him here," replied Ling promptly, leading the way into a short alleyway off the port side of the cabin. "You likee anything more?"

"No; that's all, thanks," said Wandler, and he stepped into his new quarters, shutting the door behind him.

He struck a match to find the position of the electric bulb, switched it on—and a low whistle escaped his lips. A sound caught his ears. He listened an instant; then, with a quick step to the door, he wrenched it open.

Ling Woon, rising from his knees, calmly extended a key.

“Him allee samee drop on floor outside,” said Ling blandly. “I stepee on it when I go ’way.”

Wandler scrutinized the yellow face, that was wreathed in a placid smile, suspiciously; then his fingers closed firmly on the neck of the celestial’s blouse and he swung Ling Woon into the room.

“Now,” said he, “I’ve an idea that, being so handy with a key, my lad, maybe you can throw some light on this. What’s it mean?”

The room was in wild disorder. The dead man’s chest was upside down on the floor, the contents littered about in every conceivable direction.

The Chinaman stood patiently submissive in Wandler’s grasp, as his narrow-slit eyes roved about him.

“Well?” snapped Wandler.

“Me no savvy,” said Ling, shaking his head. “Perhaps capt’in savvy.”

“Humph!” said Wandler; then, suddenly pushing Ling Woon to the door: “Well, perhaps he may. Anyway, you tell him there’s something here I want him to see.”

Chapter III

Tangled Threads

WANDLER sat down on the bunk, and during the five minutes that he waited his eyes were not idle. There was a hard, queer look in their depths when he rose as Captain Barker's form, with Ling's blouse fluttering behind, bulked in the doorway.

One glance the skipper gave to the scene, and then with a darkened face he stepped into the cabin.

Wandler passed by him to the door, took the Chinaman by the shoulder and shoved him, not over gently, down the alleyway.

"And keep away!" he warned. "Understand? There are no more keys on the floor."

He came back, shut the door and faced the captain.

"What's—what's the meaning of this, Wandler?" demanded the commander sharply.

"You should be better able to answer that than I, sir," replied Wandler. "That's why I asked you to come here. As you know, barring supper, I've been on duty ever since I came aboard, and this is the way I found the room when I first saw it a few minutes ago."

"Ling!" snapped the skipper with an oath. "Ling, or some of the pilfering heathen, of which I've too many aboard. I'll make 'em sweat for it!"

"I'm not so sure," returned Wandler soberly, "though I thoroughly agree you've too many aboard."

"What d'ye mean by that?" asked the skipper quickly. "Who else would it be?"

"I don't know," answered Wandler slowly. "I only know that it looks dashed queer to me—not like picayune pilfering. It was, as I remarked to that chap of yours at the wharf, a humane act to run into port with a sick man. How did you come to put the second ashore at Amoy?"

"I don't just get what you're driving at," said the skipper, "but your question's a fair one, and I'll answer it. In the first place, once I'd seen the need of it, Amoy was the nearest port, though none too near at that. I never knew a man die quicker. I didn't think it was anything serious at first—no more than a touch of fever, say—and I had no idea all morning of putting into any port at all.

"In the second place we've the owner's daughter aboard, Miss Hearn, who has been spending some time touring around in the East. Miss Hearn joined us at Hong Kong as she wanted to make the trip back in one of her father's ships, and brought with her one of her Hong Kong friends, Mrs Laurie by name, for the sake of companionship. It was Miss Hearn and Mrs Laurie who really began to worry first about Turner—that was the second's name, in case you haven't heard it.

"And then along about noon, with Miss Hearn getting anxious and urging me to do so, I changed course sooner than I otherwise would, for I still didn't think Turner was dangerously ill, and headed in for Amoy. But it didn't make any difference in the long run, for the poor chap would have died anyway."

Wandler nodded.

"I see," he said. "So if it hadn't been on account of Miss Hearn's anxiety, Turner would have died at sea and been buried there."

"Why, yes," conceded the skipper, "I suppose that's right—if you put it that way. Turner didn't look that bad to me then, and I suppose I'd have waited another hour anyway before adding an extra hundred or more knots to the log until I was sure it was necessary."

Again Wandler nodded.

"There's another thing, Captain Barker. I'm not so much surprised at seeing these things chucked ballyendways around the lot as I am at seeing them here at all. A skipper that will run out of his course to put a sick mate ashore, no matter what the reason, isn't the kind to rob him of his chest and belongings and leave him among strangers with no more to his name than a suit of pajamas and the blanket he was wrapped up in."

"You're a queer card," grunted the captain, looking hard at Wandler's ragged figure. "When we got in abreast of Amoy, it didn't need any doctor's say-so then to see that Turner hadn't a ghost of a chance and that there wasn't any time to lose if we wanted to get him ashore alive—"

"It wouldn't have taken any longer to put his chest in the boat," interrupted Wandler; "and, though you might honestly think so, you didn't *know* then that he would die."

"Well, no," admitted the skipper, "and I fancy I would have sent it along if it hadn't been for Rankin saying there was no use doing that until we found out—that, if Turner was going under, his people on the other side would thank us to hand it over to them. But of course we'd have sent it ashore after him when our boat came back, if the hospital lot had said there

was a chance for him, instead of him dying, as he did, a few minutes after he got there.”

“What was the matter with him?” asked Wandler abruptly.

“The Lord knows,” said the skipper. “He was well enough last night.”

“And by four in the afternoon he was dead,” added Wandler grimly. “Didn’t he say anything?”

“No. Once he got bad enough to look serious, he was out of his head, raving, delirious,” replied Captain Barker; then suddenly, his voice sharp: “See here, Wandler, it strikes me that, for a man I don’t know any more about than the law allows, you’re asking a good many questions, aren’t you?”

“There’s one thing you do know,” returned Wandler coolly, “and that is that I’ve had no hand in this—and that’s a good deal.” He took a step nearer the skipper. “Captain Barker, what’s behind it all I don’t know, but I’ll stake my life that the matter with Turner was—*murder!*”

“What!” cried the skipper, his face paling a little. “Murder? Nonsense!”

“Listen,” said Wandler gravely, pointing to the scattered articles about the cabin. “There’s no doubt but that a desperate search has been made here. Turner had something that somebody else wanted pretty badly. Granted that I am right for the moment and that he was murdered, whoever did it obviously supposed that he would die and be buried at sea, and that until you reached port on the other side he would have the opportunity that the days and weeks afforded of getting at Turner’s effects at his leisure. And that is exactly what would have happened under ordinary circumstances, as you have agreed. In other words, Miss Hearn’s presence on board, and quite naturally so, was not considered as a factor. Putting in for Amoy and sending Turner ashore was pretty nearly a checkmate: a man wouldn’t be sent ashore without his chest. If I am right, it was positively necessary to keep the chest containing Turner’s effects aboard—and it accounts for keeping it aboard. It will also account for the hasty search. You see how it dovetails? There was only the time between taking Turner ashore and the boat’s return available, for, according to you, if the hospital report had given him any hope, his chest then would have followed him. It didn’t afford an overabundance of time, and whoever was up to his devil’s work didn’t even have all of that. He was interrupted, probably, in the midst of it, certainly before he had time to put the things back and in order, and has had no chance to do so since, for no one would be fool enough to leave the cabin like this purposely.”

Captain Barker sat down on the bunk and stared at his new mate, an expression of incredulity upon his face.

"I tell you," he said testily, "that Turner was *sick*."

"And maybe this," said Wandler with a hard smile, stooping suddenly and picking up an object from beneath the head of the bunk, which he handed to the skipper, "had something to do with his 'sickness.'"

A shining little hypodermic syringe lay in Captain Barker's hand. For a moment the skipper stared at it, handling it gingerly; then he laughed a little unnaturally, as he shook his head.

"This was Turner's," he said. "I know he used it occasionally, for I caught him at it once."

"Morphine?" suggested Wandler quietly.

"Yes," answered the skipper. "I don't think it ever got the better of him, though, for I never saw him the worse for it. Anyway, he wouldn't die the way he did from that."

"No," agreed Wandler grimly. "No, he wouldn't—from *morphine*."

Captain Barker laid down the hypodermic, rose to his feet and paced up and down the narrow confines of the cabin two or three times, mopping nervously at his forehead.

"I don't believe it!" he rapped out finally. "For a moment the way you strung things together made me think there might be something in it, but I don't believe it. It's coincidence—anything you like. What would Turner have that anyone would murder him for? I say again, I don't believe it. It's Ling or some other of the slant-eyed, thieving heathen after what they could pick up—his money, probably, though that, and more, I sent ashore by Jackson to do what was necessary." The skipper's fists closed, and a vicious look crept into his face. "I wish I'd caught 'em at it! I'd teach 'em to break into officers' quarters!" He paused a moment, looking at Wandler. "You understand, don't you?" he ended tersely. "I don't believe it!"

Wandler eyed his commander steadily for a long second before he answered.

"Very good, sir," he said stolidly.

Captain Barker grunted.

"And I don't know exactly what to make of *you*," he flung out abruptly. "I don't know anything about you, and you hinting at dirty work the first night you're aboard doesn't *feel* good, and I don't like it. That's plain, ain't it? Now get these things back into the chest and keep 'em there—the trinkets and suchlike. As for the clothes, as I told you, being of about Turner's size, you can help yourself, paying for 'em out of your wages. The money'll do his folks more good than the togs they can't use, and the sooner you get into something that'll stand another day's wear the better."

The skipper turned, walked to the door and swung around on the threshold. "Mind now," said he gruffly, "I don't want any fool murder mystery talk getting to the ears of the women and scaring 'em into hysterics."

"Very good, sir," said Wandler again.

For a minute or two after the door had closed behind the skipper, Wandler stood undecided. Then, a determination evidently arrived at, he stepped quickly to the chest and righted it. A heavy padlock, unlocked, the key still in it, hung from the staple. He examined it carefully. It had not been forced.

Alert, intent now, he settled down for a long, thorough search. Books, letters, papers, the odds and ends of belongings, nothing went by him without critical inspection, as, one by one, he replaced them in the chest. It was slow work.

He heard the ship's bell strike the half-hours and hours, and it was near the end of the watch before his task was completed. Nothing—absolutely nothing had been his reward.

Then, slowly, Wandler changed his tattered clothing for an outfit from Turner's wardrobe.

"In a dead man's shoes!" he muttered grimly as he discarded his own frayed canvas footgear and laced on a pair of Turner's boots. "I wonder what's at the bottom of it!"

He closed the lid of the chest, snapped the padlock shut and pocketed the key; then he picked up the hypodermic from where Captain Barker had laid it on the bunk, and that, too, went into his pocket.

"God knows," he muttered again, "but it fits pretty well, Rankin, pretty well. Men have been hanged for less. Why did you suggest keeping the chest aboard? And whoever was at this business was interrupted while the boat was ashore. Was it when the captain sung out for you when I came aboard?" Then whimsically: "I am afraid, though, the interruption came only in time to prevent the things going back *into* the chest, not in time to prevent something going *out* of it. It doesn't seem to be here!"

He reached up, extinguished the light and made his way on deck. Eight bells sounded as he mounted the bridge ladder. Rankin came toward him out of the darkness.

"East by north, Mr Wandler," said the first officer formally.

Wandler stepped to the binnacle to check the course.

"East by north," he repeated.

Rankin swung to the head of the ladder and halted.

“Oh, by the way, Wandler,” he called.

“Well?” Wandler stepped toward the other, away from the quartermaster.

“The skipper tells me that Ling or some of the heathen yellow fiends we’ve abroad have been trying to get their filthy paws into poor Turner’s things.”

“The place was in a bit of a mess,” said Wandler shortly.

“Yes,” said Rankin. “They’re a ratty lot. Good night.”

“Good night,” returned Wandler curtly.

Chapter IV

The Accusation

Two days went by, and aboard the Kalgan nothing untoward had happened. Wandler had found Mrs Laurie both unreserved and friendly, to the extent that he had on more than one occasion politely excused himself from making a fourth with her, the skipper and Miss Hearn at bridge—while Miss Hearn listened coldly to the invitation.

MacKeever, the engineer, as likewise his one assistant, Pulver, he had very shortly discovered were both sour and uncompanionable, and he made little attempt at friendly overtures with them. When his watch off brought him to the table for meals with the others, Miss Hearn treated him with impersonal politeness; at other times . . . But there were no other times—Wandler saw to that.

Rankin, on the other hand, was with her constantly, playing bridge beneath the awning aft or tramping the boat deck, while she laughingly counted the laps around the deckhouse and computed the miles.

And in spite of himself Wandler covertly watched her from behind the weather cloth. It seemed natural to see the lithe young figure in dainty white, the sweet oval face, the fearless blue eyes, the sheen of the sun from the gold of her hair; natural, bringing back other days, to see her on the deck below him, to hear her laugh ring out over the swish of waters lapping at the steamer's sides, over the low hum of the ship's myriad voices talking, talking, talking, over the purr of the wind through the stays.

Then his eyes would fasten on Rankin, his great fists would clench till the knuckles grew white, and his lips would close in a thin, hard line—and he would turn suddenly and stare out ahead over the curling crest of the bow wave to the vast blue reach beyond.

His hands were tied; he was impotent. He would willingly have swallowed his pride to speak to her of the man. But of what? He had nothing but his suspicions, his theory—nothing tangible.

Rankin, suave, oily, if he mistrusted anything, gave no evidence of it, though between the two there had come to pass nothing but the common amenities of the sea, and even those, grown strained, curtailed to the breaking point.

Wandler's antipathy, with no effort to conceal it, was answered by a galling, patronizing air that was effectual at least in that it had given no open

cause for rupture.

And so, in a sense gradually, Wandler found himself occupying, partly through choice, mostly because it was forced upon him, an isolated position among the ship's company.

As there is a lull before the tempest, so were those first two days without untoward happenings aboard the *Kalgan*; and then, on the next morning, came suddenly the first thunderclap of the breaking storm.

Wandler, summoned from the bridge, halted just outside the door of the saloon, glancing around him in surprise. The captain sat at the head of the table, scowling savagely; Miss Hearn, staring straight before her, sat at his right; Mrs Laurie at his left.

Behind Marion Hearn, Rankin lounged against a bulkhead. Ling Woon was clearing away the last of the breakfast dishes.

"So," said the captain without preface, "so, Wandler, we've found out what you are at last, eh? A jailbird! And up to your old tricks again!"

Wandler's eyes widened, swept slowly around the group and rested on Marion Hearn. She met his look icily. The red crept into his cheeks. He drew himself up and waited patiently.

"Get out of here, Ling, you yellow villain!" rasped the skipper suddenly. "Make yourself scarce! Now then," he growled at Wandler, as the Chinaman shuffled from the saloon, "last night Miss Hearn's brooch was stolen, and, as it appears to be a habit of yours to thieve on shipboard, the sooner you hand it over the better."

"Does Miss Hearn accuse me?" demanded Wandler quietly.

"No. *I* accuse you." It was Rankin's voice, a half sneer in the tones.

Wandler whirled on the other like a flash, with clenched fists, but Rankin only laughed tauntingly—the table was between them.

"I had the misfortune—for you," went on Rankin, "to hear you confess yourself a jailbird to Miss Hearn on the first night out, and"—unctuously—"I'll thank you not to drag her into this. Little as you deserve it, she was exceedingly unwilling to tell us the rest of your beastly story."

"Rankin"—Wandler was white to the lips, his voice a hoarse whisper—"Rankin, as God lives, I'll reckon with you someday as a man reckons with a snake!" He stepped suddenly to the table edge, and Rankin, with a startled, muttered oath, jumped back as suddenly.

Marion Hearn rose hastily from her seat.

"Please sit down, Miss Hearn." Wandler's tones rose full again, his request almost a brusque command.

For an instant she hesitated; and then, the color heightening in her cheeks as she met his steady gaze, she resumed her seat.

Wandler faced Captain Barker.

“Since you have already heard the story,” he said deliberately, “I’ll add the sequel. Eight months ago I was the chief officer of the British liner Asian Monarch. Miss Hearn was aboard on the passage out. A theft of a large sum of money was committed. Circumstances, a damning chain of them, pointed to me as the guilty man. I was tried at Singapore, a number of the passengers being called upon to testify, found guilty and sentenced to three years imprisonment.”

“Eight months ago, eh?” Captain Barker caught him up quickly. “So the sequel is that you escaped, made your way up the coast and got aboard me.”

“No”—steadily—“I was released.”

“Pardoned?” grunted the skipper.

Wandler’s lips curled bitterly.

“I believe that is the term. I was graciously ‘pardoned’ because the man who did it, the purser, two voyages later was caught at the same game—and confessed.”

Marion Hearn uttered a little cry.

“Oh, you never told me that!” she said in a low voice.

Wandler turned and looked at her.

“No, Miss Hearn,” he said evenly, “I did not tell you that.”

“And I for one don’t believe it,” sneered Rankin.

The skipper, still scowling, scrubbed at his beard.

“It is the truth,” said Wandler simply. “Since then things haven’t been any too rosy. I couldn’t get a berth at Singapore, so I started to work my way up the coast and—well, I stranded at Amoy.”

“It strikes me,” snarled Rankin, “that we’re wasting a good deal of time. We decided to search him and his room, and we might as well do it without any more talk. If you’ll ask him to hand over the key to the chest, sir, it’ll save me breaking the lock.”

Wandler’s eyes fastened upon Rankin, and a queer look gleamed suddenly in their depths, but coolly enough he reached into his pocket, produced the key and handed it to the captain.

“I am perfectly willing to submit to a search,” he said.

Captain Barker took the key and passed it to Rankin.

“Go ahead,” he ordered.

“Providing,” added Wandler calmly as Rankin started toward the alleyway, “that the search is made in *my* presence.”

“I don’t think we need your assistance, or that you’ve any choice in the matter; we — —”

Rankin’s words and progress stopped with equal abruptness. With a bound Wandler had cleared the end of the table and stood blocking the entrance to the alleyway.

The tense moment of silence that followed was broken in an unexpected quarter.

“I’m sure I don’t know what to believe,” exclaimed Mrs Laurie nervously, “but I’ve always found Mr Wandler very pleasant and gentlemanly, and I hope what he says is true. Anyway, his wanting to be present when the search is made is perfectly reasonable and — —”

Captain Barker got up from his chair.

“So it is,” he admitted. “I’ve no objections to that.”

“It would be better,” began Rankin, “to — —”

The skipper cut him short.

“That’ll do,” he growled. “Stand clear there, Wandler. You may come with us. Now then, Rankin, go ahead.”

His face set like flint, Wandler turned about, walked to his cabin door, opened it, went in and sat down on the edge of the bunk. Captain Barker followed him, and then Rankin.

For half an hour, with the captain beside him, Wandler sat there motionless, following with his eyes every movement that Rankin made. Once or twice the first officer turned quickly and, finding Wandler’s eyes always upon him, with a snarl, as though thwarted in something, resumed the search.

Every article in the chest Rankin took out; every article of clothing he shook, pulling the pockets inside out. These exhausted, he began with almost feverish eagerness to hunt about the room. Ten minutes more of this, and the skipper became impatient.

“I think that will do, Mr Rankin,” he decided. “There doesn’t seem to be any sign of a brooch here, and you’ve searched pretty thoroughly. We’ll give Wandler the benefit of the doubt.”

“Wait,” said Wandler through clenched teeth, his face white. “You’re not through yet.” He rose to his feet, pulled off his clothes and handed them to the captain.

Captain Barker flushed a little, and took them reluctantly.

"By heavens," he said bluntly, "I don't like this kind of thing." He made a perfunctory search and handed them back.

Wandler began to put them on again.

Rankin, gnawing at his lips, an ugly look on his face, obeyed the skipper's command to lock the chest and return the key.

Captain Barker stood up.

"You can go back to the bridge when you're dressed, Wandler," he said gruffly. "I don't say this lets you out, because it doesn't show anything one way or the other, and we've only your word that you were another innocent man clapped into jail—and they all say that, every last one of them. However, a man ain't guilty till he's proved such, and that's the way it stands here and we'll treat you accordingly." He walked to the door. "Now then, Rankin, come on," he called, and stepped out.

Rankin started to follow him.

"*Rankin!*" Wandler's voice was low, suppressed.

The first officer paused an instant, measured Wandler with a sneer and started for the door again.

"Rankin!" Wandler had not raised his voice, but the tone rang deadly cold, imperative.

"Well," snapped Rankin, "what do you want?"

"Just this," said Wandler grimly. "To tell you that the third time you may have better luck."

Rankin's face went suddenly livid, and he took a quick step toward Wandler.

"What do you mean by that?" he cried hoarsely.

"I mean—exactly what I said. I thought till now that you had succeeded in your first attempt."

The livid hue on Rankin's face as he glared at Wandler dyed to a mottled purple, the veins on his temples swelled to small whipcords, his lips parted in a snarl as a paroxysm of fury swept upon him. Like a flash his fist shot out, went home, and Wandler reeled before the blow that caught him full upon the jaw.

The next instant Wandler had recovered his balance, and, with all the pent-up rage that was in him breaking as the surge of waters through a fractured dam, he hurled himself at the other.

They locked. Both men were big, nearly of a size. In the confined space of the cabin between the bulkhead and the bunk, scarce wide enough for

them to stand abreast, they swayed like drunken men, each straining at the other's hold.

With a gasping breath, putting forth all his strength for the effort, Wandler broke Rankin's grip and reached the other's chin with a quick, vicious, short-arm jab that jolted back the first officer's head.

A panting, ugly curse sprang from Rankin's lips as he swung a terrific blow with his right. Wandler parried it, led fiercely—and his force spent itself in mid-air. A hand had locked into the collar of his shirt, and he was yanked savagely back toward the door.

"By the Eternal!" roared the skipper. "That's enough of this, both of you! Get out, Rankin!"

"You're in luck, Wandler," snarled Rankin as he obeyed sullenly. "But I'm not through with you yet."

"I think," said Wandler softly, as he wiped a trickling stream of blood from his face, "I think, Rankin, I shall end up by killing you."

"No, you won't!" flashed the skipper. "The first one of you that starts anything like this again will reckon with me." He shoved Rankin, who had halted on the threshold, through the door, and turned to Wandler. "I suppose *you* began this?"

"If reminding him that this was the second time this cabin has been searched since Turner went ashore, yes." Wandler met and held the skipper's eyes.

Captain Barker started.

"You mean . . ." He hesitated and looked sharply again at Wandler; then, with a shake of his head, his voice rose in a growl: "It's nonsense, and I won't have it, d'ye understand? And don't forget your own shirt ain't so clean you can afford to be hinting at someone else wearing a dirty one. Now go to the bridge, and keep your hands off each other."

Chapter V

Six Bells in the First Watch

FOR the rest of that day neither Wandler nor Rankin spoke to the other. Only looks passed between them—Rankin's full of baffled hate in which, too, lurked a fear that was not physical; Wandler's as one in leash, like a smoldering fire.

They had met only at the change of watches, and there were no longer even formalities. If Wandler mounted the starboard bridge ladder, Rankin descended to the deck by the port one—that was all.

One thing only Wandler noted with a sense of satisfaction from the bridge that afternoon—Marion Hearn's companion on the deck was Mrs Laurie, not Rankin. Once it had been himself.

The days of that last voyage he had made on the Asian Monarch were with him again, as they had often been since he had come aboard the Kalgan. Days when, no more than a ship's officer, he had let himself dream, drinking in a new joy of living, not deluding himself, realizing that it was but a transient present; that afterward it could be but a memory; a memory, though, that he would be the better man for having, the memory of a good woman who had entered into his life.

And then had come the hideous denouement, stripping him before her of that single thing he had dared hope to inspire in her—respect. He did not blame her, no feeling of hurt was with him even now that she, like others, had turned from him, accepting his guilt.

Fate is a pretty grim player sometimes, and sometimes, it seems, it plays with a marked deck. It had woven a web of evidence around him in the face of which love, were it strong enough, deep enough, true enough, might still have held; but in the face of which mere respect, with weaker tendrils, was shattered—the one rude blow crushing it, killing it, stamping it out.

A half cry, half laugh, involuntary, smothered as he caught himself in the midst of it, broke from him as the surge of mingling thoughts swept over him. The silent, sallow helmsman, a few paces from him, raised slant black eyes in a quick, sudden glance, then dropped them, inscrutable, to the binnacle again.

The act, slight as it was, brought Wandler out of the past into the present. From the man his eyes roved forward over the lower deck. Under the shade

of the forecastle head a group of celestials played at fan-tan, others lazed the hot, airless afternoon away sprawled about here and there.

Of the two white sailors, the one he had spoken to on the wharf at Amoy, propped with his back against a windlass, played plantation airs on a mouth organ, while his mate, the one Wandler had seen when he first came aboard, lay flat on his back, his hands clasped behind his head, his knees drawn up, patting time with bare feet on the deck.

Not a breath of air stirred a ripple upon the ocean. Peaceful, still, calm it lay, a giant plain of glass that caught the sun glint and reflected it back in tints of glorious azure blue.

Forward, from the bows, creamy ribbons of foam kissed at the steamer's plates; astern, the wake, a series of low, smooth, rolling swells stretched away in an almost perfectly straight line, growing narrower and narrower until the eye lost them in the sweep of sea.

Wandler brushed his hand across his forehead. The sense of unreality was strong upon him. The very peace, the quiet, the commonplaceness of the shipboard scenes struck home to him incongruously—incompatible to one who, thanks to fate again, and a fate that still played grimly at its game of life, stood in a dead man's shoes, an object of suspicion to those around him.

His hands gripped the rail in front of him, and his brow contracted in a heavy furrow. The theft of a brooch was a flimsy, paltry pretext, but it had accomplished its object.

A little tinge crept to both cheeks and burned like hectic fever spots. "Give a dog a bad name," he muttered bitterly. Another furrow seamed above the first; his thoughts turned, drawn irrevocably, as immutably as metal to the poles of a magnet, to Turner—and Rankin.

For the rest of the watch he paced uneasily back and forth upon the bridge, his hands in their favorite attitude, dug deep in the side pockets of his jacket.

The afternoon passed, the watches changed, both dogwatches. The evening came, and the first watch, from eight till twelve, was Wandler's again. The night, with a late moon, had set in black, and only the stars above gave light and an added opaqueness to the vast, still, silent sea.

Six bells struck, eleven o'clock, and as the last calm, mellow note died away, a wild cry rang through the ship. It came again—from aft—from below somewhere—a shriek that chilled Wandler's blood. Then it ceased abruptly, and over all again was quiet—just the steady pound and throb of the engines, the swish of the bow wave, the vibration of the ship, the churning screw, the soft medley of shipboard sounds.

An instant, shocked into inertness, Wandler stood rigid, motionless; in the next, he was down the bridge ladder and was racing aft along the deck. He reached the cabin entrance and dashed down into the saloon just as the skipper, half dressed, and MacKeever, the engineer, off duty and in equal dishabille, emerged from their rooms.

“What’s up?” demanded the skipper.

“I don’t know,” said Wandler.

“Two shrieks,” barked the skipper. “They sounded as though they came from your room.”

“Well,” flamed MacKeever, “don’t let’s waste time. Let’s go and see.”

Half running, the skipper led the way, MacKeever next, while Wandler turned on the alleyway light as he followed closely behind.

The door of his room was ajar, and a light showed from within. Captain Barker swung it open, fell suddenly back and turned a white, horrified face to the others.

“Good God!” he cried huskily. “It’s a wicked sight. He’s—he’s *dead*!”

Wandler and MacKeever pushed by the shaken skipper into the cabin, and then, with an oath, the engineer turned on Wandler.

“Is this your work?” he snarled. “I heard you’d threatened to do it. What were you doing in the saloon just now? Come from here, eh?”

Wandler grasped the man by the shoulder and shook him.

“Keep your head!” he counseled. “You don’t know what you are saying. The man at the wheel will tell you I was on the bridge when we heard the shrieks—that I haven’t been off it since I went on duty. Here, pick him up. There may be life in him yet.”

Captain Barker, recovered from his momentary shock, pushed forward.

“Life in him!” he said hoarsely, shaking his head. “No, he’s dead, stabbed half-a-dozen times. There is the knife, see? My word, what a ghastly mess!”

Wandler made no answer, only motioned MacKeever to help, as he stooped to the floor. Again, around on every side, as he had seen it once before, the cabin was in wild disorder. Clothes, belongings lay in heaps and piles, some spotted now with blood, while the chest lid had been pried open and almost wrenched from its hinges. And in a huddled heap, twisted edgewise between the bunk and the bulkhead, great red stains upon the bosom of his shirt, from which a crimson flow still trickled to the floor, lay—Rankin!

With a sweep of his hand Wandler cleared the sofa of its litter. Then, MacKeever helping, they placed the first officer upon it, but as they did so, something fell from Rankin's pocket. The skipper picked it up mechanically; but Wandler paid little attention—he was concerned now only with the man himself.

Rankin's eyes fluttered open, fixed upon Wandler, darkened suddenly and then dulled. A moan came from him, then a shudder, and he relaxed, but the next instant life seemed to surge upon him anew. He jerked himself bolt upright, his face convulsed with passion as he raised a clenched, blood-smeared hand.

“Curse you, Turner,” he railed, “you got me into this! Curse you, and your—a-ah!” he choked.

“Rankin,” admonished Wandler solemnly, “don't curse—you are in the presence of your God. Turner is dead. If you've any confession to make, speak while you can.”

Almost a sneer crossed the dying man's lips.

“You—you fool!” The voice was very weak.

Wandler bent quickly over him. The man was going fast.

“Rankin!” he cried. “Rankin, answer this then, man. Who did this?”

Rankin's lips moved without sound.

“Rankin!” cried Wandler again, as though through very force of will to rouse the man. “Rankin, who did this?”

Rankin's lips moved once more, blood flecked now, and the words came faintly: “Ling”—a gasp—“Woon . . . I . . .” Came a long, shuddering movement, the eyes glazed, then a spasmodic twitching of the muscles, and Rankin fell back—dead!

The eyes of the three men lifted from the lifeless form and sought one another's. Wandler's face was like chiseled marble, set and hard; upon MacKeever's dumb horror had stamped itself; into Captain Barker's was creeping a look that was not good to see.

For a moment tense silence reigned, then Captain Barker spoke.

“MacKeever,” he ordered hoarsely, “go forward and rouse Jackson and Saunders, and bring that yellow fiend Ling to the charthouse. Don't make any more disturbance about it than you have to.”

“Right,” said the engineer, stepping quickly to the doorway, and evidently relieved enough to get out of the cabin.

“And you, Wandler,” continued the skipper, “you come along too.”

Wandler nodded without reply. He watched the skipper go out, then turned and looked for a moment at the form upon the sofa. Quick and sudden as doom Rankin had gone out—as Turner had gone out. Rankin because of Turner, Rankin had said. Was it the other way too?

And now Ling Woon—a new factor in the case! Mechanically, his thoughts a maze, Wandler reached up, snapped off the light and went out into the alleyway, closing the door behind him.

As he passed the entrance to the saloon, someone called his name. He stopped and turned quickly. Marion Hearn, a dressing gown of some soft, creamy material wrapped around her, her face pale and anxious, was standing in the doorway.

It was the first time since their meeting after they had left Amoy, apart from her one exclamation that morning, that she had addressed him of her own initiative.

“You called me, Miss Hearn?”

“Something—something terrible has happened? What is it?” she asked quickly.

Wandler hesitated.

“Really nothing to alarm you, Miss Hearn,” he evaded.

“I know some fearful thing has happened,” she persisted. “I heard the shrieks. They came from your room, I think. What is it?”

“Mr Rankin is dead,” he said soberly.

“Dead!” She drew back with a quick start, her eyes widening. “Dead? You mean he was—was killed—murdered?”

“Yes,” admitted Wandler reluctantly.

“Murdered—in *your room*.” The words came dully, as though she were speaking to herself.

To Wandler they were like a whiplash in his face, stinging him to the quick.

“I have already been accused of it, Miss Hearn,” he said bitterly, his lips white. “But there are some things that even *I* would not do.”

The great blue eyes she raised to his were full of troubled horror. She shook her head slowly.

“I had no thought of that,” she said, and with a sudden, impulsive movement stretched out her hand and laid it on his sleeve. “It is *that* room—everything seems to happen there.”

At her touch, at the quiet, simple dignity of her words, the color rose to Wandler’s face. A revulsion of feeling swept over him, shame at his

outburst, and then a fierce, mad impulse to take her hand that lay upon his arm.

Between them, perhaps only for the moment, seemed to exist again the old comradeship, the mutual liking and, yes, above all else, the *trust*. He stumbled with his words; they were trite, awkward.

“I—I am sorry I said that, Miss Hearn; forgive me. And—and thank you.”

Her hand dropped to her side.

“What does it mean?” Her voice was very low. “I am beginning to be afraid.”

“I do not know,” Wandler answered. “Only that Ling Woon, the steward, killed Rankin. Rankin was able to say that much. But”—reassuringly—“you have nothing to fear, Miss Hearn, and—and you mustn’t lie awake thinking about it, you know.”

A moment more she stood there, her eyes on his almost pleadingly, it seemed to Wandler.

“I’ll—I’ll try not to,” she promised with a forced smile as she turned slowly away. “Good night, Mr Wandler.”

“Good night, Miss Hearn,” he said hearteningly.

Chapter VI

Pieces of the Puzzle

THE tramp of feet, voices, MacKeever's in gruff command, others chattering shrilly, sounded from the deck outside the charthouse.

Within, Captain Barker, his face as black as the night without, waited by the chart locker. Wandler, grave and serious, stood beside him.

The door opened, and, half flung, half pushed, the form of Ling Woon stumbled inside, MacKeever and the two sailors crowding after him.

Captain Barker stepped suddenly forward.

"So, you yellow hound of the pit!" he roared. "You blood-letting dog, I've got you, have I!"

His great, horny hands shot out and locked like a vise around the other's throat, and, fury adding strength, he fairly lifted the Chinaman from his feet, shaking him to and fro until Wandler interposed, and Ling Woon, purple, choking, reeled and sank to the floor.

"You'll kill him," protested Wandler as Captain Barker jerked Ling Woon to his feet again. "And there's no good in handling him like that."

"It makes little difference," gritted the skipper with an oath. "I might as well do it as let him hang."

"Ling," demanded Wandler abruptly, "why did you kill Rankin?"

"Rankin? Me no kill Rankin," said Ling Woon as glibly as the treatment he had just received would permit.

"Don't lie," warned Wandler sternly. "The only thing that will do you any good is to tell the truth. I suppose you thought he was dead when you left him, but he wasn't. He lived long enough to tell us it was you."

"Rankin say that?" asked Ling Woon quickly.

"He did," stated Wandler laconically.

"Then me kill Rankin," announced Ling Woon in matter-of-fact tones.

"Ah!" rumbled the skipper, advancing again, his fists clenched. "For cold-blooded gall — —"

Again Wandler interposed.

"We'll never get anything out of him that way, sir. Now then, Ling, tell us, why did you do it?"

Ling Woon's black eyes, a venomous gleam in their depths, fixed on Captain Barker, then passed to Wandler; the venom faded away, and they became inscrutable. He tucked his hands up the sleeves of his blouse, but made no answer.

"Well, why?" prodded Wandler.

"What you do to me?" inquired Ling Woon with calm irrelevancy.

"Do!" burst out the skipper. "Do, you yellow, murdering swine! I'll hang you to the forestay before morning and save the lot at 'Frisco the trouble, if you don't loosen up your tongue!"

"Me tell, me no tell, hangee allee samee both ways," summed up Ling Woon, not illogically.

"Aye, you'll hang, as sure as I live," replied the skipper between his teeth.

"You're not offering him much inducement, sir," Wandler pointed out with a hard smile.

"Mabbe," murmured Ling Woon, raising his eyes to the skipper, "mabbe you no live?"

"What's that?" snarled Captain Barker. "What d'ye mean by that?"

"Mabbe you no live!" repeated Ling Woon imperturbably. "No can tell, how can say?"

"Oh!" said the skipper with a harsh laugh. "Well, don't count on that. Whether I do or not, *you* won't!" He turned to the engineer. "Where'd you find him, MacKeever?"

"In his bunk in the fo'c'sle," answered MacKeever. "Dressed, of course, though that don't make any difference now he's admitted he done it; and anyway, I don't believe the beggars ever take their clothes off from Hong Kong to 'Frisco."

"All quiet with the rest of the watch below?" queried Wandler suddenly.

"Yes; they were in their bunks, too, though I thought I heard voices when I went in. Of course there was a lot of chattering and excitement with both watches when I took him out."

"Ling," said Wandler persuasively, "I want you to tell me how you and Rankin both came to be in my cabin; tell me, and I'll do what I can to make things easy for you."

"You fair man," remarked Ling Woon blandly. "Me likee you."

"Well, I'd rather have you for a friend than an enemy," admitted Wandler, "but I can't say the liking is mutual. Come now, answer up!"

"Mabbe someday me tell," said Ling. "Me no tell now."

"There'll be no 'someday,' you wharf rat!" threatened the skipper thickly. "You answer now, or I'll make you *glad* to be hanged by the time we touch 'Frisco."

"Me no tell," said Ling with finality.

Wandler's closed hand shot suddenly under the Chinaman's nose—and opened.

"Do you know what that is? Ever see it before?" he questioned, quick as a flash.

Not a muscle of Ling Woon's face moved as he fixed his eyes on the shining little instrument in Wandler's hand.

"Him hypodermic," said he dispassionately. "Allee samee make feel good with dlope."

For a moment Wandler scrutinized the impassive, masklike features sharply, trying to read what no European had ever read—the oriental mind—then he turned to Captain Barker.

"I'm afraid it's no use, sir; at least for the present. We can have another try at him in the morning."

Captain Barker hesitated, and scowled fiercely at Ling Woon.

"Well, I'll give him till then," he decided finally. "Do you hear that, Ling Woon, you crawling gutter pup? Till morning, though I've a mind to make a finish of you now. MacKeever, take him away before I get my hands on him again. Throw him into that storeroom aft on the boat deck here, put the irons on him, and see that he ain't any too comfortable."

"Aye," grinned MacKeever wickedly, "I'll see to it. Leave him to me. Now then, you, Jackson and Saunders, out with him."

The two sailors, with very evident relish, grasped roughly at the Chinaman and flung him from the cabin.

Captain Barker sat down on a locker and passed his hand back and forth through his grizzled hair in a harassed fashion.

"Wandler," he confessed, "I've been a blind fool. I wish to heaven I'd taken more stock in what you said about Turner having something he was murdered for. I believe now you're right. What Rankin said shows that, and shows he was in it. I know you thought he did for Turner. Do you still think so?"

"God knows," said Wandler solemnly. "I shoved that hypodermic at Ling on a chance—and it didn't pan out as well as I expected. I— —"

"Hello!" exclaimed the skipper suddenly, diving his hand into his pocket and producing a little leather case. "I'd forgotten all about this. I picked it

up, you remember, when it fell out of Rankin's pocket as you were lifting him onto the sofa." He opened it, stared at it and then stared at Wandler. "It's — it's Miss Hearn's brooch!" he gasped. "The one that was stolen from her, that — —"

"That I was accused of taking," supplied Wandler calmly.

"Well, good Lord, man," ejaculated the skipper, "you take it cool enough. Don't you understand? This clears you!"

Wandler took the brooch, examined it a moment, then laid it on the table.

"I'm not surprised," he said shortly.

"Not surprised! You mean you thought Rankin had taken it himself all the time?"

"Yes," said Wandler. "There was nothing else for it but that, unless I was wrong from the first about Turner. If Rankin had known that I suspected anything, he'd never have tried it, of course, for it was too palpably evident a ruse to search the room. And I think, to save his face, he intended to produce the brooch during the search and pretend he'd found it there, only — well, he saw that I was watching him too closely."

Wandler took two or three turns up and down the room.

"I don't know!" he burst out suddenly, halting in front of the skipper. "I can't make head nor tail of it. At the first glance it seems simple enough, but the more I try to think it out the more twisted it gets. Whatever Turner had, Rankin and Ling knew about it. That much is certain now. But how did they know? There's not likely to have been anything in common between the two; the very men themselves are too wide apart. If, by any possibility, Turner himself told them, why should Turner have hidden what he had? On the other hand, the fact that he did hide, and very cleverly and successfully, it would seem, whatever he had, would suggest that he either knew or was afraid that his secret was out. There's no question, after what happened tonight, that Turner was done away with. Either Rankin or Ling did it, and now Ling has killed Rankin. It would seem as though it were down to a simple equation, only . . ."

"Well?" prompted Captain Barker as Wandler paused. "Only what?"

"I don't know," answered Wandler. "I am afraid that fiend Ling has more up his sleeve."

"We'll shake it out before we get through with him then," declared the skipper with a hard laugh.

Wandler shook his head.

"That's not what I mean. How long were you in Hong Kong, and how did you come to pick up the yellow crew we've got aboard?"

"Two weeks. The crew I had coming out deserted, all but Saunders and Jackson, and— —"

"When? Right after you touched there, or later on?"

"Later on. We'd been there five or six days before they began to drop off. 'Tain't anything unusual, as you ought to know."

"No," agreed Wandler; "but there are generally plenty of men ashore who have had their fling and, stranded, are ready enough to get a berth. Did you try the boardinghouses?"

"Nothing but yellow—that or nothing," replied the skipper. "We raked 'em to the last hole."

"That's queer," commented Wandler, his face puzzled. "Who went ashore for the men? You or Rankin or Turner?"

"By the Lord!" exclaimed the skipper, leaning suddenly forward. "Come to think of it, Turner told me he'd got into a bit of a row ashore. I don't remember what he said it was about, except that it was a fight or something due to being a sheet or two in the wind, and he didn't leave the ship during the last week at all."

"Who went, then? You or Rankin?"

"Rankin. Do you make anything out of that?"

"And the Chinks we've got, where did they come from? The boardinghouses?" probed Wandler, ignoring the captain's question.

"Yes. They were guaranteed to be full-blown seamen, and, to give 'em their due, I'll say they've done even better than I expected so far."

"You ask me if I make anything of it," said Wandler slowly after a minute's silence, "and I can only say that it might mean everything—or nothing." He laughed mirthlessly. "But too much has happened aboard here now to shut our eyes to the fact that there are just six of us—MacKeever, Pulver, Saunders, Jackson and you and me—and that we are divided three to a watch against fourteen or fifteen yellow-skins. So, if there *is* anything, if Ling Woon *has* anything up his sleeve, it's pretty long odds to face, especially if we're taken unawares."

"By the Eternal!" exploded the skipper. "If I thought that!" He clenched his fist and shook it; then suddenly: "But if Ling was only after something from Turner, what would he want of a lot like that?"

"Same answer," returned Wandler tersely. "I don't know. And it's just that that's giving me a presentiment there's more to come. There's too *much*

we can't explain, and that we don't *know*."

For an instant the two men looked at each other in silence, then Wandler spoke again.

"We've women aboard," he said significantly. "And whether I'm right or wrong, whether my imagination, presentiment, or whatever you like to call it, is running away with me, we owe it to them to be on our guard at least."

At Wandler's mention of the women the skipper's face had grayed a little. Now he stood up suddenly.

"It's my belief the hooker's accursed," he said in a strained voice. "I'll own I feel about the way you do, though I can't bring myself to believe it any more than I could about Turner. But you were right enough then, and you may be now, though God forbid."

"Amen to that," responded Wandler fervently. "But I'm glad we're of a mind in the matter. The next thing is what we're to do. I think we'd better bunk Saunders and Jackson somewhere aft, so as to keep our guard over Ling's door to prevent any collusion between him and the rest of the Chinese."

"Right!" approved the skipper. "And I'll see to it at once."

"And a revolver apiece, beginning with myself," suggested Wandler with a whimsical smile, "wouldn't come amiss."

Without a word Captain Barker took the key from his pocket and unlocked the top drawer of the locker. From this he took out four revolvers and several boxes of cartridges. One of the weapons and one of the boxes he handed to Wandler; the rest he stuffed in his own pockets.

"Just enough to go around," he said evenly. "I've got another in my cabin, and MacKeever's got one of his own. You stand the next watch, Wandler, and then I'll relieve you. And you had better move into the charthouse here. It will be handier, and I take it you won't —"

"No," said Wandler grimly. "I won't object to changing quarters."

"All right, then," said the skipper. He turned to the table, and his eye caught the morocco brooch case. He picked it up. "Wonder what Miss Hearn will say when she hears where this came from?" he grunted.

"I wouldn't tell her," said Wandler quietly. "I think she rather liked Rankin. It won't do Ling's reputation any harm to stand for it."

Captain Barker slipped the case into his pocket and looked at Wandler curiously for an instant.

"Wandler," said he gruffly, "I'm mighty sorry I didn't size you up the right way from the start, and that's a fact."

And before Wandler could reply, the skipper had opened the door and stepped out on the deck.

Chapter VII

No Quarter!

AT the end of the middle watch, four o'clock in the morning, Captain Barker came onto the bridge to relieve Wandler. It was still dark, for though away to the eastward a faint tinge of gray was beginning to show, overhead black banks of cloud were scudding low before a smart breeze from the northeast that, with the promise of more to come, in the last two hours had whipped away the mirror surface of the ocean into a short, choppy sea.

"Weather's changed and not for the better, eh, Wandler?" remarked the skipper as he led Wandler to the end of the bridge.

"Yes," said Wandler. "I shouldn't be surprised at a bit of a blow before we're through."

Captain Barker leaned back against the weather cloth.

"I gave Miss Hearn her brooch and told her it was Ling who took it," he said abruptly. "From the way she looked I fancy she'll have something to say to you that— —"

"Gave her the brooch!" ejaculated Wandler. "Why, she's in— —"

"No, she isn't," returned the skipper. "They're both up. Mrs Laurie isn't very strong, anyway, and what's happened has upset her and given her a nervous turn. Miss Hearn is keeping her company."

"That's too bad; I'm sorry," said Wandler; then: "Have you seen the rest?"

"Yes. Jackson's bunked aft, and Saunders has just gone on watch at Ling's door." The skipper made a wry face and flung out his arm impetuously. "I hope to heaven, Wandler, we're nothing but a pair of gloomy asses with a touch of nerves ourselves, and that someday we'll laugh at this."

"I won't mind laughing," responded Wandler shortly.

"No," said the skipper slowly; then, with a shrug of his shoulders: "Well, you'd better turn in, Wandler."

"Right!" replied Wandler briefly and, walking to the bridge ladder, swung briskly down to the deck and entered the chartroom, his new quarters.

Here, instead of undressing at once, he filled his pipe and lighted it. He sat down—but got up again almost immediately.

A strange restlessness was upon him, and he began to pace up and down. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes passed, and then, unable to compose himself, he went to the door.

“I don’t know what’s come over me,” he muttered with an uneasy laugh, “but I’ll have a look around before turning in.”

He walked down the deck and halted for a moment at the open doorway to the saloon companionway. MacKeever’s voice reached him from below, and then either Marion Hearn’s or Mrs Laurie’s, he couldn’t distinguish which. He went on again aft.

Here the deckhouse divided, and he turned into the short passage that terminated in the storeroom. The next instant he halted with a low, suppressed cry.

The storeroom door was open, and there was no sign of Saunders.

A chill seemed to clutch with icy fingers at Wandler’s heart, stopping it—and then the beat came in quick, fierce, pounding throbs.

“Saunders! Saunders!” he called in a whisper.

There was no answer. He listened. Not a sound. It was too dark to see much in the passage; too dark to see anything in the storeroom. There was an electric light on the port bulkhead, he remembered, and he reached up for it; then checked himself and moved forward, feeling his way with his hands.

His foot touched something soft and yielding. He dropped quickly to his knees. He was bending over a huddled human form. He felt hastily in his pocket for a match, struck it and, shading the flame cautiously with his hands, held it to the man’s face.

It was Saunders—*dead!*

A bead of sweat gathered on Wandler’s forehead.

“My God!” he mumbled hoarsely. “It’s come—and since the change of watches—not half an hour ago!”

He leaped to his feet, sprang for the door and dashed down the passage.

As he reached the deck, the soft, stealthy patter of many feet reached him from farther aft, and dark against the sky line a form showed on the ladderway leading up from the lower stern deck, another behind the first, and still another—the first was on the boat deck now.

In a flash thought took concrete form in Wandler’s mind. Cunningly enough, instead of rushing from forward where the yellow fiends must first have been seen by Captain Barker from the bridge, they had gained the stern by means of the between-decks alleyway—though prior to this, of course, one or more of them must have sneaked up and fallen upon Saunders for the

purpose of liberating Ling Woon and returning with him to their fellows before launching any attack in force.

Almost quicker than thought came action. A single cry of warning Wandler gave that echoed and re-echoed through the ship; then his lips shut in a thin, merciless line, and from his revolver muzzle leaped a tongue of flame, cutting a lane of light through the darkness.

A scream of pain answered his shot, then a menacing chorus of shouts and cries—then a rush. Again Wandler fired, and again. He was deadly cool now. The crack of a revolver sounded from the bridge. Came a shout behind him from somewhere amidships.

Two shots more he fired to check the rush that would not check, and his sixth and last shot he blazed point-blank at the nearest fluttering blouse, no farther than a foot away from him. The man threw up his arms and with a queer, grunting squeal pitched at Wandler's feet.

And now they were upon him. Wandler met them with his clubbed revolver and his bare left fist. It was like a nightmare—there seemed myriads of wicked, gleaming eyes leering at him, a thousand hands with short, uplifted knives, lunging at him.

Something hot seared his shoulder, then a torrent of round English oaths were bawled in his ear, and the pressure against him eased for an instant. It was Jackson beside him, fighting as he swore.

Quick-running feet came from behind. A revolver sang and spat and streamed fire over his shoulder, so close it singed his skin. MacKeever, too, was now in action.

"Skipper's going to get the women up to the charthouse," cried the engineer. "Too many entrances to the saloon. We've got to hold this side while he goes up the other, then run for it— Ah, you yellow son of the devil, I got you that time! No, ha-ha, Wandler, he's—got—me!"

For the first time a shot had come from the other side, and with it, for the first time, too, Ling's voice in shrill command.

MacKeever slid wriggling to the deck at Wandler's side. Cold with rage, Wandler leaped forward full into the midst of the snarling pack, and for a moment cleared a space for himself by the very impetus of his rush. Jackson closed shoulder to shoulder with him.

And now it was all a wild, mad medley—hours of it, it seemed, that were only seconds. There was no thought of victory—only to hold them long enough in check to give the skipper a chance to get the women forward to the charthouse.

Wandler's clubbed revolver swung, he parried one thrust and caught another on his forearm. The blood trickled to his hand.

Gradually Jackson and he were being forced back along the deck. It could not last.

Almost a signal it had been, that single shot, that single cry of Ling Woon's. Even as he fought, in a curious, dazed way, Wandler wondered at it; and as he wondered, Jackson, with a last cry, went down.

And at that instant, to port, on the other side of the deckhouse, just abreast of where he struggled, quick and sharp like the crackle of a Gatling, came a volley of revolver shots. It was answered by two shots in rapid succession from farther forward by the entrance to the saloon companionway.

Bitterly the truth burned itself into Wandler's reeling brain. The crafty Ling had led a part of his force around to the port deck and was cutting off the captain's attempt to reach the charthouse with the women. MacKeever's sacrifice, Jackson's, and now his, had been in vain.

But he was not yet at his end. Somehow now he must reach the captain, the women, Marion. He leaped suddenly backward and, turning, dashed down the deck, the yellow horde screaming at his heels.

The starboard entrance to the saloon companionway was open. He swerved, jumped into it, slammed the door and threw the catch. It would cause his pursuers at least a momentary check.

Barely an instant he paused to do this, then, running again, he crossed the head of the companionway to the port deck.

As he emerged from the doorway, a man, one hand raised in air, the mighty fist waving above his head, the other hand brandishing his revolver butt, raced past Wandler full toward the wicked spurts of yellow flame that marked the oncoming rush of Ling Woon and his followers.

It was Captain Barker in a final gallant effort to stem the tide. But the man was only running to certain death. Wandler reached out his hand to stay the other—and then, with a stricken cry, he sprang forward in the other direction.

It was scarcely dawn, but he could see a woman's form lying on the deck—Mrs Laurie—and, bending over her, another form—a woman's too—Marion's.

In a fraction of the next second Wandler had covered the few yards between them.

"Marion, *quick!* The charthouse—*run!*" he cried.

The girl half rose.

“She’s dead—dead!” she moaned. “Oh, God, have mercy — —”

She staggered, reeled.

Wandler caught her in his arms and plunged along the deck. It was only a little way—around the forward end of the charthouse to the starboard side—and the door. But, weakened already, he stumbled. Behind, the sound of a terrific conflict came to him. It died suddenly. There was nothing to check Ling and his cutthroats longer—they were coming.

Three yards to go!

He heard Marion speak.

“I—I can run. Put me down,” she breathed.

“Try, then,” gasped Wandler, “and we’ll make it yet.”

Relieved of her weight, but with his arm around her, supporting her, Wandler half lifted, half swept her along.

The rest he knew little about. Within a foot of the charthouse door she slipped from him, and he turned like a tiger at bay.

His head was swimming; queer shapes danced before his eyes, from his lips came laugh on laugh; he was fighting again—and then, clearing his brain and senses like a galvanic shock, her voice rang bravely in his ears:

“Jump *straight* back. The door is open.”

He obeyed, landed inside and tottered against the chartroom table. The door closed with a crash as she flung it shut and bolted it.

She came to him quickly, her face white as death itself.

“You—you are badly hurt,” she cried. “Tell me, what must I do?”

He smiled at her with grim lips as he clung, swaying weakly, to the table, still grasping his empty revolver.

“Not hurt so much,” he panted. “Done up for the moment. Can you load a revolver?”

She nodded and took it from him.

Wandler fumbled in his pocket for the box of cartridges, and handed it to her.

“I’ll be all right in a minute,” he smiled again—and slid to the floor.

Chapter VIII

Gray Dawn

HE lost consciousness. When he came to himself again, she was bending over him, knotting a bandage around his arm. Bewildered, dazed, he looked at her and around him; then recollection swept upon him, spurring his brain into alertness.

Along the decks, save for an occasional voice that rose, chattering, shrill, all was silent. And now he felt the steamer roll—and remembered the shot from the bridge. It had been fired by the skipper, probably, who had been too quick for the yellow traitor at the wheel, and since then, left to herself, the Kalgan had payed off and was running with the wind abeam.

He sat up as the movement of feet sounded overhead on the bridge. An instant later came the quick rumble of the steam steering gear. Someone was at the wheel again.

Marion's eyes met his bravely through the horror that lurked in their blue depths, and each in that moment read the other's thoughts—their plight was desperate: it was a respite, that was all, a respite that would last so long as it pleased Ling Woon to have it last.

After that . . . Wandler suddenly turned away his head. *Her* plight was worse, a thousand times worse than his.

That thought, too, she must have read, for she shook her head, forcing a smile to her lips.

"If it comes to the worst," she said steadily, "I can die too. Death cannot be more terrible than this awful night." Then, with a quick change in her voice, as though to drive the thought from them both: "You are better, aren't you? I think it must have been loss of blood, and I think that's stopped now. They went away right after you—you fainted, and nothing has happened since."

Wandler rose unsteadily to his feet and brushed his hand across his forehead; gaunt, clothes torn and blood spotted, disheveled, his face without color, the lips drawn tight, he was a grim relic of the night.

The revolver lay upon the table. He reached for it and sat down in the nearest chair, twirling the cylinder.

"I loaded it," she said simply.

He nodded.

"How long was I down and out, Miss Hearn?" he asked.

"Oh, not long," she answered. "Hardly more than two or three minutes. You *are* better, aren't you?"

"Quite!" he said reassuringly. "I'll be perfectly fit in a jiffy."

She leaned against the table; and after a short silence, forcing the words, she spoke again:

"They are—all—gone? We are the—only ones—left?"

"Yes," said Wandler in a low voice. "All except Pulver. He was in the engine room. I do not know whether—but you mustn't stand there, Miss Hearn. You are right in the line of the two windows. I'm a fool not to have noticed that before. You—"

A step sounded suddenly from the deck without, followed by a sharp rap upon the door. And then a voice:

"Open the door, Wandler, I want to come in!"

Marion moved quickly toward it.

"That's Mr Pulver now!" she cried.

Wandler stepped in front of her, barring the way.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

A thin, chuckling laugh answered him.

"Suppose me allee samee stleward, Ling Woon," was the reply.

"I thought so," gritted Wandler. "You've learned pretty good English overnight, you yellow cur."

"Mabbe," returned Ling Woon; "and mabbe you no call names it will be better for you. Mabbe, too, if you open door, it will be better for you and little missy."

"Do you think I'm a fool?" laughed Wandler harshly.

"I think you are a very great fool, Wandler," was the imperturbable retort. "If I want to kill you, why not on deck with MacKeever and Jackson? Why not shoot revolver or stick knife hard? You let me in. There's very great storm coming. We fix it all right."

"Oh!" Wandler flung out tersely. "That's it, is it?" He turned and looked at Marion. "I believe the beggar means it," he whispered, "and if he hasn't got a crowd of heathen at his heels, it's safe enough."

She nodded, though her face grew a little whiter.

"Very good, Ling, I'm going to chance it," Wandler called out. "But if you're up to any tricks, I'll take care that before I'm out it will be the last *you'll* play in this world."

"No tricks," promised Ling. "Play square."

"Begin then," ordered Wandler, "by going around to that open port window and dropping your revolver inside here."

"You are a very great fool again, Wandler," answered the Chinaman. "Suppose I do; can get plenty more before I go in."

"Nevertheless," insisted Wandler shortly, "you do as I say if you want me to let you in."

"All right," agreed Ling Woon.

As Ling's steps shuffled around the end of the charthouse, Wandler caught the perplexed, wondering look Marion fastened on him.

"We can do very well with another revolver, you know," he explained as he drew the girl to one side out of possible range. "And there it is!"

A hand, dangling a revolver, and then a loose sleeve-covered wrist, appeared over the top of the lowered sash. The revolver dropped with a clang on the floor.

Wandler closed the window, picked up the weapon and examined it carefully, breaking it to look at the chambers and try the hammer action. He snapped it shut with a grunt of satisfaction and handed it to Marion.

"Now please go in there, Miss Hearn," he said quietly, pointing to the open door of a large built-in storage closet in the lower port corner of the chartroom; "and leave the door just enough ajar for air." Then, smiling as she hesitated: "If it's an attack, you can be the secondary defense, you see; if it's Ling alone, you'll at least be away from him."

"Very well," she said slowly. "If you wish it, I will."

He waited until she had complied with his request, then he stepped softly to the chartroom door, slid back the bolt without noise, suddenly flung the door half open—and as quickly slammed it shut again. Then, quietly this time, he swung it wide and stood aside for Ling Woon to enter.

There was a derisive smile on the Chinaman's lips as he stepped inside, a smile that widened as he watched Wandler close and fasten the door.

"You little afraid of me, Wandler?" he remarked blandly.

"I am," said Wandler grimly, "very little—but my lack of faith is very great. We'll start without any illusions. I trust you just about the way I trust a mad dog—savvy?"

"That too bad," deplored Ling. "All the same should be very honorable friends. I save your life by not killing you with MacKeever and Jackson."

"Yes," snapped Wandler, "so you said. But I notice you took precious good care to make up for it before I managed to get in here."

"You are very great fool again, Wandler," returned Ling. An evil smile curled his lips, his eyes traveled toward the closet door, and he lapsed, from pure malevolence it seemed, into pidgin-English. "Mabbe thought by and by very much likee catch little missy, how can — —"

A startled cry came suddenly from behind the door, and, on the instant, quivering with rage, Wandler leaped for the other, his hand shot out and closed around the Chinaman's neck, choking the words in Ling's throat.

"As there is a God above, Ling Woon," he flared, "I believe it would be better, come what may, to make an end of you now."

The Chinaman wriggled free, and into his eyes came the same look Wandler had seen there once before, that night when Captain Barker had nearly strangled the man to death, but upon the features was only calm, unruffled placidity.

"That would be very bad bargain all round," stated Ling Woon smoothly. "We make very much better one. You love the girl so much, then all right — you keep her. I know you. You been in jail — I heard that in cabin. That very good thing, Wandler. I share with you if you help."

Wandler's impulse was to fling himself at the oily wretch again; but instead, with an effort, holding himself in hand, he motioned toward the settee. After all, his only chance lay in matching his wits against the craft of the other; *her* only chance lay with himself.

"Sit there," he growled roughly, "and I'll listen to what you've got to say." He moved around the table, sat down where he could command both Ling and the door with his revolver. "Now then," he jerked out, "what is it you want me to help with, and what is it that, being a jailbird, it seems so eminently fitting that I should share in?"

"*Diamonds!*" confided Ling Woon with an engaging smile.

Chapter IX

The Tale of Ling Woon

TURNER, RANKIN, the whole tragic sequence of events flashed through Wandler's mind at the word. This, then, was at the bottom of it all. Ling's eyes were upon him, studying him. Wandler forced a sarcastic laugh.

"Diamonds? What diamonds?" he inquired coolly enough.

"Very many diamonds!" replied Ling Woon, spreading out his hands in a gesture that was meant to be conclusive.

Wandler shook his head.

"Won't do," said he decisively. "I don't know anything about any diamonds. I don't even know that there *are* any. If I am going to make any bargain with you, I'm going to know what it is from start to finish. I told you before, I didn't trust you."

"Very bad storm coming up," murmured Ling Woon ingratiatingly. "You take ship now, by and by we — —"

"It'll be worse before it's over," interrupted Wandler calmly. "The hooker'll do well enough for the present as long as the engines keep going."

"Engines all right," announced Ling Woon with a placid smile. "Pulver is very honorable engineer."

"Oh!" exclaimed Wandler quickly. "So Pulver is alive, is he?"

"I not a fool, Wandler," returned Ling Woon softly. "Engines must run. Pulver not want to die, so Pulver make engines go. That is a very fair all-round bargain. So Pulver stay down in the engine hole and eat and sleep there because two men with knife very much prefer him so to do. You nothing to do with Pulver, Wandler."

Wandler leaned back in his seat.

"You're a nice customer, you are," he remarked with apparent unconcern; and then, with intentional irrelevancy: "Where'd you pick up your English?"

"Born in New York," explained Ling Woon complacently. "Go to school there for very many years. Study medicine and become very great man and head of very great secret society. Great man now in Hong Kong, and head of same society."

"I believe you," growled Wandler as he stared, scowling, at the other, "but it's a pity you weren't cut off in the flower of your youth!"

“Mabbe we get to business?” suggested Ling Woon pleasantly.

“I’m waiting for you,” declared Wandler; then, suddenly leaning forward, he banged his fist heavily upon the table. “See here, Ling Woon,” he rapped out, “I see your game now, and you might as well know, too, that if it came to a showdown, I know you see far enough ahead to realize that I, not you, have got the whip hand. There’s more than this bit of a storm you want me to see you through—more than that why you kept a knife out of me, as you say you have. *You can’t navigate*. What are you going to do with the ship? Steam around like a blind bat till your coal’s gone and some vessel runs you aboard and takes you into port where they’ll hang every last one of you?”

“All that is very much true,” agreed Ling Woon. “I show you on chart where to go, where it is safe.”

“I’m glad you admit it,” cried Wandler, banging his fist again. “And that’s exactly where I’ve got you. You can stand over Pulver with a knife or two, and so long as the engines go you can see that he’s not fooling you. But I could agree to navigate, and run you five hundred miles off the course you wanted me to shape, and you’d never know the difference.”

“All that is also very much true,” said Ling Woon a little wearily; “so I offer you share to make sure.”

“Well, I’m still waiting,” prodded Wandler craftily. “I don’t *see* any diamonds to tempt me. Where are they?”

“Pretty soon,” answered Ling, “we take Rankin out, put him overboard and tear up cabin to find them.”

“Oh!” said Wandler. “So that’s what the place has been ransacked for two or three times, is it?”

Ling Woon’s almond eyes grew narrower and glinted; his lips smiled acquiescence.

“How do I know you’re not on the wrong track?” demanded Wandler after a moment’s pause. “There’s been enough searching done to find them if they were ever there; or, at any rate, they’ve been so well hidden that you’ll never find them, and that amounts to the same thing.”

“They there. I *know*,” responded Ling patiently. “Turner had them; Turner not take them on shore. By and by I find them. You trust me, Wandler, you get share.”

“No!” snapped Wandler. “Trust nothing! I’ve had the run of Turner’s things since he was sent ashore, I’m wearing his togs from shoes to collar now, and I’ve seen no sign of diamonds. That there was something up between you and Turner and Rankin I’m ready to admit, but if you want me

to believe the rest, you'll have to do better than you're doing now. Where could a man like Turner get enough diamonds to amount to anything?"

"Steal them," Ling Woon smiled.

"From whom?"

"Hai Ping was traitor to the Tse Wong Tong Secret Society, and together they steal them from the Tse Wong Tong."

"And where'd your precious Tse Wong Tong lot get them?"

"One by one, a few at a time, they — —"

"Stole them themselves, I suppose," supplied Wandler with a short laugh.

Ling Woon shrugged his shoulders.

"Mabbe," said he composedly. "Who can tell?"

"That sounds better," grunted Wandler. "All thieves, the whole bally lot of you! And what became of this Hai Ping?"

"The Tse Wong never forgive," said Ling meaningly. "Hai Ping very much unfortunate and get caught in Tong house that night, but Turner escape with diamonds—for a very little while. You believe story so far all right, eh, Wandler? Very well. I tell rest now so we make bargain. If not make bargain, then mabbe all get caught like you say, but you and little missy die first."

"Go on, then," said Wandler tersely.

"Hai Ping made confession before he was with very much justice gathered to ancestors," expounded Ling Woon jerkily, in a singsong voice, tucking his hands up his blouse sleeves, while his eyes, veiled by half-closed lids, sought the floor. "Turner was dlope fiend, sometimes with morphine in hyploclermic, sometimes on shore with opium and pipe. Hai Ping kept pipe house. Turner and Hai Ping make friends and make plot. Hai Ping was to go away with Turner on ship. But Hai Ping was very great fool. He forgot the very great power of the Tse Wong Tong. Where would he go, suppose he get away, where would he hide so eye of Tse Wong not rest upon him? Where — —"

"I'm not much interested in that," broke in Wandler. "Stick to Turner. He got away to the ship with the stones. You knew it, but couldn't apply to the authorities because your own claim to ownership was a bit too fishy itself. I can see that."

"It was very great sum," said Ling Woon. "Mabbe two hundred stones, and one very great stone of high value."

"Taken out of their settings, of course," commented Wandler acidly.

"Yes," nodded Ling Woon. "The Tse Wong Tong very rich, but value of stones very great, so the Tse Wong Tong spend money with the boardinghouses of the sailors, and make very pleasant time for sailors of Kalgan when they come on shore. When it come time that Kalgan must go, her crew is hatchet men of Tse Wong Society, and Ling Woon is cabin steward."

"My word!" muttered Wandler as he stared at the unmoved, expressionless countenance of the other. "You're a grizzly lot. I'll say that for you."

"Justice for Hai Ping—same justice for Turner," went on Ling Woon, ignoring Wandler's remark. "Hai Ping was dead—Turner must die too. If I kill Turner, find stones and not get caught by captain, then no use for hatchet men, who are very good sailors; if captain find out, then why should I hang? So have hatchet men. Very good idea?"

"Where does Rankin come in?" Wandler's voice was gruff as he strove to maintain his role of a possible accomplice.

"I got job of steward two days before sailing"—Ling Woon's eyes lifted, studied Wandler for a moment and dropped again. "I watch Turner. First night I watch him through window of cabin. He sat on bunk, all the diamonds spread out to look at them—he was very great fool. Very quick the door open, and into the room come Rankin. Turner jump up and try to hide stones, but Rankin already see them. They almost fight, then they talk, but Turner not tell where stones come from. 'What you do with them?' say Rankin. 'Sell them on shore in 'Frisco,' reply Turner. 'You no get lot like that through custom men alone,' say Rankin. 'Won't I?' say Turner. 'I guess I will, though I not thought of that before. Suppose I hide them where custom men not find them, and you not either, for mabbe you very much like help yourself to a few. But you keep mouth shut till I get them on shore and I fix it with you.' They talk a little more, then shake hands, and Rankin go out. You see where Rankin come in?"

"Yes," said Wandler in a strained voice, "I see."

"I not very much pleased with idea of hiding away stones," confessed Ling Woon ingenuously, "but cannot dare kill Turner till ship leave port. The next day and next night I watch, too, but Turner put something over slat blind, so cannot see in any more. But I hear little noise like squeak of knife cutting, and once I hear hammer, so mabbe it's easy to say diamonds are under floor or in wall—we find out by and by. The next morning we leave port, and that night I change morphine dose in hypodermic so Turner die next day at sea by very bad Asiatic fever."

“Call it poison and have done with it!” growled Wandler. “You’ve a way of your own of practicing medicine. Where’d you get the stuff?”

“Very good laboratory in Hong Kong,” said Ling Woon. “Mabbe poison, but act like fever. No can tell. Turner become very sick, then little missy make captain put him on shore, which is very bad idea instead of bury him at sea, for mabbe chest and things go with him, though I think then diamonds are under floor, but no can tell. Rankin not know that, though, and see chance to get stones, so have captain keep chest on board. I watch Rankin go to cabin and make search, and then captain call him when you come on ship so have to leave mess like you find it. I very glad let Rankin search. That very good idea. Too bad he not find stones; that save me very great trouble of putting knife in him last night. I think he steal little missy’s brooch himself to get second chance to make search in cabin.”

A faint rustle came from the closet door. Wandler started quickly. Ling Woon raised his eyes and smiled calmly.

“Very glad know you are from jail. That very good thing for you, Wandler, to help in bargain. Rankin took brooch— —”

“Never mind about that!” interposed Wandler hurriedly. “Finish up as quickly as you can. How’d you and Rankin get together last night?”

“Twice Rankin search and find nothing”—Ling Woon spread out his hands and lifted his shoulders with a little jerk—“you see? Mabbe time then to make search myself, to make sure stones not in chest and about room before make other plans to pull up floor and down walls. So, last night, with hatchet man, Won Duck, I go to room. Mabbe Rankin not like to give up very easy so many diamonds of great value, so mabbe he come try again. Won Duck and me hunt very hard mabbe an hour and not find stones, then get ready to put back things, when Rankin come. That very bad thing for Rankin, for when he open door Won Duck make quick knife cut, only not strike hard enough, and Rankin yell. After that very quick work, though before can finish Rankin yell again. That too bad; very bad thing, too, he not all dead the way he look when we run, and so captain find out. Well, Wandler, what you say?”

Chapter X

The Terms As Set Forth

FOR a moment Wandler sat scowling silently at Ling Woon.

"Suppose I say no?" he flung out at last. "What then?"

"That very foolish thing to do," replied Ling coolly. "Mabbe you hold charthouse little while, but suppose you want something to eat by and by, eh?"

Wandler drummed on the table with his fingers—he was playing Ling at his own game now.

"What share of those diamonds do I get if I run the ship where you want me to?" he demanded with sudden avarice.

"Eighth," said Ling promptly.

Wandler laughed harshly.

"Oh, come off!" he jeered. "I may be in a tight hole, but so are you. It's one thing or the other for you; deal with me, or . . ." He drew his finger significantly around his throat. "Now, how much?"

"Quarter," said Ling very pleasantly. "I think you must be very good jailbird, all right."

"And how long would I have them, Ling Woon? Until we made some Chinese nest in the Archipelago, and then follow Turner, Rankin and the rest? I don't like call loans, Ling Woon."

"You help now, you go free then with little missy and be rich. I promise."

Wandler shook his head.

"I haven't forgotten what you said about the Tse Wong Tong lot of yours keeping their eyes on things generally, and even if you played square, I'd have to reckon with them, I fancy. How about that?"

"You very cute man, Wandler," said Ling Woon. "I'll tell you something more. You trust me, I trust you."

"Honor among thieves, eh?" grunted Wandler, sitting back in his chair.

"Better motto in Chinese which say no can clap hands with one palm," submitted Ling Woon smoothly, "so you listen, Wandler. The Tse Wong Tong not know. All the same sure chance you and me get very plenty rich. I have room torn up, then make search alone and go back and say stones not found. I head of Tse Wong Tong Society. Very great justice on Turner

executed, all possible done to find stones as proved by hatchet men, very much risk taken, too bad stones not found, but what can do? Very much regret expressed by Tse Wong Society, who believe true story and make me honorable head of Tong again for work done. You see? You keep mouth shut, go where you please, you nothing to fear. We both play square.”

“Double-cross your own crowd, eh?” summed up Wandler, nodding his head. “Well, you’re a cool specimen, Ling Woon, but that’s the nearest you’ve come to anything that looks good to me along the community-of-interest line. You mean that?”—eying the Chinaman sharply.

“Why not?” inquired Ling Woon calmly. “That very good thing all round. Both get rich and live happy, instead of both die. You say yes, Wandler?”

For another long minute Wandler kept his eyes on the other, as though to pierce beneath the placid expression that lay like a mask upon Ling’s countenance, then he pushed back his chair, rose to his feet and walked to the chart locker. Wandler was not a bad actor.

“Archipelago?” he demanded curtly.

“Yes,” said Ling Woon.

Wandler laughed shortly.

“Thought so,” said he as he came back to the table and spread out a chart. “Now where’s the place?”

Ling Woon bent over the chart, studying it for a minute or two, then his fingernail rested on an island a little to the south of Ceram, in the Banda Sea.

“How long that take?” he asked.

Wandler took a pair of dividers from the table drawer and maneuvered with them a moment.

“Ten days,” he said.

“Ten days,” repeated Ling Woon. “All right. Very good Chinese headman there, very glad buy ship and cargo and give junk or proa to take us mabbe Singapore.”

“Right, then,” said Wandler. “You get after the stones, and leave the rest to me.”

“That very honorable bargain concluded all round.” Ling smiled broadly. “I trust you then. You take ship now, everything all very right.” He went to the door, opened it and turned around. “Mabbe very bad storm. You think so, Wandler?”

A dull, dreary, sunless morning had set in. An ominous sky was overhead; a stiff head sea was whipping at the ship’s bows. Wandler stepped

to the door beside the other for an appraising glance at the elements, but his eyes, instead, rested instantly upon more than one dark object that lay huddled along the deck in shapes hideously grotesque. He caught Ling Woon's arm and pointed.

"Never mind about the weather," he said with a quick intake of his breath. "You see to *that* before Miss Hearn — —"

"I see to it," broke in Ling briskly.

Wandler's hand tightened fiercely on Ling's arm.

"Decently, mind. Canvas, and a bit of weight at the feet."

"I see to it," said Ling Woon again, and started down the deck.

Wandler closed the chartroom door and turned to find Marion facing him across the table. Neither spoke for an instant as they looked at each other.

"It is horrible," she said finally, holding her hand across her forehead. "Horrible!"

"I'm sorry you had to listen to it," Wandler said bitterly. "Only there was nothing to do but play him."

"What he said about Mr Rankin and—and my brooch was true, wasn't it? Captain Barker said it was Ling, but"—before he could answer—"it doesn't matter, Ling or Mr Rankin, you—you must hate me."

"Hate you!" He stepped quickly around the table toward her. "Hate you! You know that I, that I—don't hate you," he ended lamely, the color mounting to his face.

A tinge of red crept, too, into Marion's cheeks.

"But," she began, "I — —"

"You see," he said awkwardly, interrupting her, "I'm no manner of use at saying things. I'd like to tell you the way some fellows could that anyone in your place would have done just what you did, that"—he held out his hand impulsively—"it's just that if you believe in me now nothing else matters."

She laid her hand in his frankly.

"I have very much to believe in you for, very much that I owe you for," she said in a low voice.

Wandler's pulse leaped at the touch—and then, sobering him, replacing the quick, fierce throb of joy that for the moment had seized him, came the sickening realization of her position, the awfulness of it all.

She seemed to sense his change of mood, for she drew back her hand.

"What is it?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing. Really nothing," he lied shortly.

Her eyes rested upon him in grave scrutiny.

“Was Ling’s story, the rest of it, true?” she questioned presently.

“About the diamonds? Yes; I’ve every reason to believe so.”

“And his promise to you—will he keep that?”

“For ten days, while we are at sea, while he has to depend on my assistance, yes. He’ll even turn over a portion of the stones, too, if he finds them.”

“And after that?”—steadily.

“*Before* that very many things may happen,” he countered cheerfully. “We’re safe until then—that’s a good deal—and before then we’ll find a way. Now you’ve been up all night, and you must rest for a few hours; then I’ll take my turn and you can watch. We won’t be too trusting.”

“Are you going to make for that place he wants you to?” she asked.

Wandler smiled grimly.

“Wherever we make port,” he said quietly, “it won’t be there.”

Chapter XI

A Storm's Plaything

THE heavy weather that had set in the night before had ripened into a boisterous gale. At midday Wandler could not get an observation; and by afternoon, grown anxious, he kept the deck, taking his position in the lee of the starboard bridge ladder, where he could both bawl his orders to the bridge above and stand sentinel-like as well over the chartroom door.

Here, at times, in the lull of the wind, he could hear hammering and the rip and tear of splintering wood from the direction of Turner's cabin below. And at these times he would smile grimly. Ling Woon, to use his own words, was "pulling down walls and up floor."

Twice Ling came to him, uneasy about the weather, and both times Wandler took occasion to ask for the stones. "Not find them yet," Ling had answered the last time. "Very cute man, Turner, but Ling Woon very patient. Find them by and by."

Occasionally, too, at first, Marion had joined him for little spells of fresh air, but as the afternoon grew on, the wet decks from the spray, that, flying over the bridge, was flung in damp, drizzling, misty sheets everywhere, kept her thereafter within the chartroom.

Of Pulver, Wandler had seen nothing; though of the engineer, too, he had spoken to Ling Woon, and the reply, if not entirely satisfactory, had at least been one of finality.

"Him all right," Ling had said significantly, "but that none of your business, Wandler. You keep away." And Wandler had kept away—not alone because of Ling's words and their unveiled threat, but because he dared not let the chartroom door for a moment out of his sight—or reach.

As the afternoon waned to evening, the storm grew steadily worse. Intermittently came heavy downpours of rain that strove in the puny might of their drops to beat the great rolling billows, cream-crested now, back into peace and quiet.

Intermittently, too, came distant rumblings of thunder, and faint streaks of jagged lightning, horizon down, played through the gray, leaden sky.

Headed into the teeth of the gale, the Kalgan was making wet work of it, her scupper ports hissing streams of blue-green water as she shook herself free from the tumbling tons that poured over the bows and dropped, thundering, upon the lower forward deck.

She buried her nose ever and anon in a gigantic wave, while her stern, flung high in air, lifted clear the flying screw; and the engines, racing madly, sent a long, shuddering vibration through her hull.

The afternoon passed, and night fell sullen black, and with it came the height of the storm.

At midnight Wandler was still at his post, within reach of the chartroom door, his face white-strained from weariness, a taut, glistening figure in dripping oilskins. The bridge ladder behind which he stood—to which at times, indeed, he was obliged to cling as the roaring wind swept down in wilder, fiercer gusts upon him—afforded little shelter.

It afforded less for a Chinaman with chattering teeth, who crouched upon it halfway up between Wandler and the bridge. “Sink or swim,” Wandler had told Ling Woon an hour before, “I stay *here*, not on the bridge—understand? Put a man on the ladder to relay orders.” And Ling Woon had put a man there.

Two men were at the wheel upon the bridge; aft, Ling Woon and the balance of his crew, save those in the stokehole and engine room—reduced, all told, to ten men now, for they had not come off scatheless in the fight—were gathered in the saloon below.

From the starboard window of the chartroom, just forward of where Wandler stood, a yellow glow of light struggled out into the night and lost itself in the range of black, tossing waters overside. Wandler’s eyes had fastened on it often through the weary hours. It had seemed like a beacon light that brought to the overtaxed, weakened man new strength, new courage, new endurance. He turned to it again now, sweeping the clinging drops of rain and spray from his face, while . . .

There was a sudden rending crash, another, and then another—and through the ship came the shuddering vibration again of the racing engines, only faster now, faster and faster, until she seemed to quiver, a stricken thing, in every bolt and stanchion. Then a low, droning whir, like a minor chord, rose in ominous accompaniment to a terrific pound and thrash and crunch that, too, now came faster and faster in repetition—as of some giant hand flogging in fiendish might at the very vitals of the ship.

With blanched face Wandler whirled about, facing aft. Through the darkness, like a ghostly pall, a dense white mass of steam poured from the engine-room skylight. And then for an instant a flash of lightning, tearing a zigzag lane through the blackness, flooded the scene with lurid light.

And in that instant a startled cry came from Wandler’s lips. A man in shirt and trousers, the shirt torn and bloodstained, came running along the

deck. It was Pulver. And after him, fleeing for their lives, came the Chinamen from the engine room, while at the same time Ling Woon and two others dashed out from the saloon companionway entrance. And then the flash was gone, and darkness was in its place again.

What had happened Wandler did not know, only that the engines were wrecked; but what would happen, once the ship lost her steerageway, he knew only too well. Broached broadside to the terrific sea that was running, her upper works would be pounded into splinters.

“She’s *sinking*, man! The main shaft’s snapped like a pipestem, wrecked the tunnel, and the crankshaft on the low pressure with a broken rod is punching holes through her. Man, the engine room’s awash already. She’s a sieve! D’ye hear? Take to the boats! The boats, d’ye hear?” And the man—it was Pulver—beside himself, it seemed, was gone.

Wandler’s lips were a thin line. He did not need to be told that if the ship was flooding the boats were the only chance—if *they could be launched!*

Ling’s voice echoed the cry:

“The boats!” And shrieked shrilly in Chinese.

“For God’s sake, Pulver,” Wandler shouted after the engineer, “keep your nerve! I’ll be with you the second I get Miss Hearn. Have a care how you handle those boats! The ship’ll pay off and broach in a minute. You—can’t— —”

The roar of the wind caught up his words and flung them in whispers into space.

And what he had foretold was already happening. The ship’s way, barely enough to hold her into the eye of the wind before, was lost. She rose, shaking foam and water from her bows at the next pitch, with a nasty edgewise slew of her stern to port. The next she took with a half roll farther around, and reeled from a smashing blow upon her quarter that swept the lower stern deck from rail to rail with seething foam. She rose again, sodden, lifeless. Pulver, at least, had drawn no exaggerated picture; she must be flooding fast below. And still came the fearsome grind and thump, the slash of flying steel on steel; still from the engine-room skylight, misty, filmy through the blackness, poured a mass of steam from the maddened, insensate thing below.

But now Wandler had wrenched open the chartroom door, and without a word, throwing his arm around Marion to steady her, led her out on deck, only to be flung against the bridge ladder as, with another pitch, another slew, the Kalgan, now full broadside to the sea, slid lumbering down with canting deck into a black, yawning valley of water.

Excited cries, yells, the creak of davits, clustered forms around the boats, faint, moving shapes, came to Wandler. Again he shouted with all the power of his great lungs, this time in warning:

“Stand clear there! Pulver! Ling! The next wave’ll be aboard us. Get to starboard for your lives! *Run!*”

“Oh, *look!*” Marion cried out wildly.

A flash of lightning made day of night. Around the forward and amidships boats two groups of men were pushing, heaving, straining, working frantically. The forward boat was already swung outboard, the other was just swinging clear in the tackles; and beyond, just beyond the ship’s side, rushing upon them, towering above them, with trembling, churning crest, a mighty wall of water reared itself and . . .

Wandler saw no more. His right arm closed tightly around Marion’s waist, he braced himself and gripped with his left hand at the ladder.

“Hold! Hold to the ladder with both hands!” he shouted. “Tight, I— —”

A shock, a reel, screams, crunching timber, and then a singing roar of water was in his ears. Across the deck it surged, sweeping his feet from under him, tearing at his hold, and, making a plaything of Marion’s frail grasp, threw all her weight upon him.

His muscles tightened, grew rigid. Both were buried in the rush of waters over them. The strain was agony. He struggled for a foothold again and, as though in mockery at his efforts, was hurled sideways, twisting his arm.

His fingers loosened, slipped one by one from the ladder—gave way—and the next moment they were lifted from their feet, and in a swirl of water, still clinging to each other, were flung tumbling down the near-by companionway to the main deck.

Slowly the staggering vessel righted herself. The shallowing water seethed by them with whirlpool force, draining through the scupper ports, into one of which Wandler, half stunned, as he tried to rise, found that his foot was wedged.

Marion, from beside him, got to her knees, and then weakly to her feet. Savagely Wandler jerked to free his foot; there was no time to be lost; the Kalgan was beginning a heavy roll to leeward.

“Oh, quick, quick!” she urged frantically. “Before another comes. Give me your hands. Let me help you. Are—are you hurt?”

The heel of his boot tore away suddenly as he wrenched viciously, freeing him, and in a moment he was beside her. And then for an instant they stood motionless.

Around them was only chaos, death, the beating winds, the warring elements. Of the others there was no need to ask—they were gone.

With dead, sluggish movement the Kalgan was heeling to starboard. From below came a low, menacing rumble; and from overside, irregularly, a dull, knocking, thumping sound. The last caught Wandler's ears, and fierce, desperate hope swept over him.

"Come!" he yelled and, grasping Marion's hand, ran stumbling down the careening deck toward the waist of the ship.

Once more, tossed like a cockleshell, helpless, a broken thing—and yet once more again, perhaps—the Kalgan might outlive another onslaught like the last; but the end was near, and now before Wandler's eyes as he ran swam the mental picture of a great black hull, black even against the night, the stern tossed heavenward, swaying, trembling, hesitating like a human soul on eternity's brink, then a long, slow, shuddering plunge to doom, then only the black of the night, the raging, angry, turbulent sea. His hand closed spasmodically, tighter, over hers.

"Marion! Marion!" The cry came from his lips without will of his, spontaneously—the cry of his soul.

She did not answer, only struggled bravely on beside him.

They were nearly at the waist now, but the deck was at too sharp an angle beneath their feet for them to stand longer upright, since with the roll of the ship at its full the rail went almost under.

Forced to their knees, they crouched against the rail—and a cry of desperation was wrung from Wandler's lips. Ten feet farther along the deck, just outboard, a long white object pitched and tossed, tugging at a rope snarled somehow at the ship's side.

It was his wild hope fulfilled—a life raft swept overboard, though still mercifully held by some of its lashings; but already the deck was rising to a more even level, already the life raft was dropping out of sight.

"Quick!" he gasped.

And they crawled the last ten feet.

One glance Wandler gave—and shook his head. A single short rope held the raft, so short that even now, as the ship rose a little, one end of the raft was dragged free from the water.

One chance had come and gone—to cut the rope and jump when the rail, rolling almost under, was level with the raft.

"Next time!" he shouted in her ear.

Next time! He did not know there would be one. With the opposite roll the raft would be lifted clear of the water to swing like a pendulum, to batter itself against the iron plates of the vessel's hull—and sever the rope, perhaps, that held it. Next time! There might be no next time for the Kalgan herself.

He seemed to be living years in the torturing moments that he waited. And then the “next time” came. Wandler's knife was in his hand. The rope had held. Far below, a pitiless distance it seemed, the life raft dangled backward and forward. Now one end of it touched the water and began to float—it was drawing closer and closer to them.

Wandler turned and looked at the girl beside him, and a prayer, soul-wrung, moved his lips. It was a desperate chance—mad but for the certain, inevitable death that was the alternative.

He leaned closer toward her. Her lips, closed tight, quivered with a little smile; her eyes, from out the white, strained face, met his steadily.

“You must jump from the rail when I tell you.” His voice, though raised to carry above the howl of the wind, was calm, confident, unhurried. “Then throw yourself flat. There are life ropes along the sides of the raft. Hold on to them with all your might. Do you understand?”

She nodded and pressed his arm.

The rail sank lower and lower; nearer and nearer the life raft rose toward them. Suddenly he wrenched at the rope, pulling on it with all his strength.

“*Now!*” he cried.

With stilled heart he watched her spring; and then, with a choking, fervent “Thank God!” he began to cut and slash at the rope.

But desperately as he worked, the tough hemp yielded slowly, strand by strand, and the rail was rising up again before his knife cut through. An instant he balanced himself on the rail, then jumped, slipped, recovered and flung himself full length beside her.

There was a moment of wild, chaotic, pitching, plunging madness—he was holding to a lashing, holding to Marion; churning water broke over them, and then the ship's hull, in glistening menace, took form before him.

The raft swirled, swept nearer to it, then receded; swept nearer again, as though drawn by some magnet. They grazed the hull. Then the life raft lifted under them, shot suddenly down the slope of a wave, and the towering stern, high now, high as he had seen it in fancy, was lost—lost as his picture had lost it, in shuddering upheaval, in the black of the night, in the raging, angry, turbulent sea.

Chapter XII

The Hiding Place

FIERY red, like a ball of molten metal, the sun rose on the second morning over the vast, lonely sweep of sea—no wind, no breeze, no stir of air to temper them, even the first rays fell aslant the waters as a dry, hot, choking breath from the flame-tongue of a furnace blast.

And, as though a tired and wearied thing, spent and exhausted from its unshackled strife, its wild, untamed commotion, the ocean was sinking to repose in long, smooth, listless swells.

Upon the raft Wandler stood upright, shading his eyes with his hands. Gaunt, haggard and undone he was, with drawn cheeks and sunken eyes; his limbs were weak beneath him, scarce strong enough, it seemed, from their trembling, to support his weight.

Forty-eight hours it was now without food or water—*without water!* Forty-eight hours—and twenty-four of them, in their every minute, a delirium of struggle, a battle with grim death that sapped at strength, at hope, at courage.

And now the transient victory colored itself in grim mockery, and the suddenness of violent death was as an offered boon passed by. Another long look he swept around the horizon, then sank down beside the motionless form that lay outstretched at his feet.

Since early dawn Marion had not moved, except restlessly in a troubled sleep. Wandler turned away his head. Something choked in his throat. The yearning of his love surged over him.

An impulse, mad, feverish, seized upon him to turn, to wake her into life, to hold her again clasped to him tightly as he had held her against the ceaseless onslaught of the waves—to hold her so, to *make* her listen, to tell her what was in his soul—it seemed he could not die with that unsaid.

He crushed his hands to his eyes and bowed his head. It was a poor part to play, little of manliness in it, little of her own sublime, unfaltering courage, to fret her now—at the end.

When he raised his head again her eyes were open, fastened upon him. From her words, as she spoke, she must have been watching him.

“There is nothing in sight?”

Wandler shook his head. It was an effort to control his voice.

"Try and sleep again," he said.

"I haven't been asleep," she answered. "I have been thinking for the last hour of so many things—so many things I want to say to you. Will you listen now, because—because perhaps soon I may not be able to say them. I have so much to thank you for, so much to ask forgiveness for, that— —"

"If it is that," he said hoarsely, "I will not listen."

"But you must," she persisted gently. "If, after all, we are to die— —"

"Die! *You die! You shall not die!*" Wandler had risen to his knees; the thought, word-given now, had loosed the mad passion that was in him, burst restraint. "I love you, Marion, love you, love you!"

A sharp, quick cry came from her lips. She clasped her hands over her eyes, as though to ward them from some blinding light.

"Love me?" Her voice was low, wondering. "Love me? You—you cannot love me. Once, it seems so long ago now, I thought—I thought it might be—and—and then I killed it!"

"*Marion!*" A fierce hope, joy, gladness, was upon him. Gone was the realization of his surroundings, gone the gnawing thirst, the dizzy, numbing weakness—gone the thought of death. It was life now, vernal, pulsing, life as he had never lived it before—a new life, the essence of it—love. He caught her hands and forced them gently from her face, searching her eyes, and his voice rang clear and buoyant. "Killed it! It was never dead. It has grown stronger, bigger. It can never die. With all my soul I love you. Speak to me, Marion. Speak to me. You cared then—once. Tell me that what I am reading in those eyes is true—that you care—now."

Her lips quivered.

"I love you," she whispered.

With a great cry he gathered her to him, kissing her lips, her eyes, her hair, and then the golden head, hiding tears, sank down upon his shoulder.

The sun grew higher, fiercer, the scorching heat more intense, the thirst pitiless, intolerable. After a while she slept again from pure exhaustion.

He felt a weakness creeping upon himself, greater than before, that now brought with it a sense of terror. He laid her down, the action scarce rousing her from the lethargy into which she had fallen, and reached forward, passing over them both again the lashings that in the height of the storm alone had saved them, but which with the quieting sea he had cast off some hours before.

His strength then had been sufficient against the easy roll of the swells; but now . . . He sat suddenly motionless, staring in a half-listless, half-

puzzled, curious fashion at the heelless boot protruding from under his other leg where he had tucked it to ease his position.

And then he remembered. Of course! It was the heel he had torn off when he had wedged his boot in the scupper port. Yes, he remembered that. But looking at the heel now, the little that was left of it, a lift or two, he saw that it had been *hollowed out*.

He pulled out his knife, drew up his other foot and began to hack frantically at the other heel, which was intact. Now he was laughing softly. Sick, half crazed, weak, his brain was reeling.

He wrenched the bottom lift, a little worn from the wear that he had given it, free. His knife dug quickly under the next, and slid an inch to the other edge. He pried it off and laughed again—like a madman now.

From a bed of soft white cotton a diamond, a little larger in diameter than a plum stone and twice as thick, gleaming, glistening, sparkling, rolled into his hand—a king's ransom, a fortune—Ling's "very great stone of high value."

But that was not all. In the hollowed heel—a cavity a full half inch in depth, circular, and an inch across—a score of small stones, yet not so small, still nestled in the packing.

Now they were cupped in his two hands with the first magnificent gem. He rolled them about, crooning in glee. Glorious, scintillating, full of fire they were, flashing back the sun's rays. He held them before Marion's closed eyes.

"Marion! Marion!" he babbled. "Look! Look! The diamonds! Ling's diamonds! The big one, see the big one, look at the big one! Ha-ha, no fool was Turner. He had four pairs of shoes, I remember, four pairs of shoes, eight heels—eight heels!—but this heel held the big one, worth all the rest! See the big one! Look at the big one!"

She stirred, opened the great blue eyes, so tired now, for an instant, and her lips moved.

"*Water!*" she moaned.

It seemed to take a moment for the thought to reach, center and take form and sense in Wandler's overwrought and swimming brain, for in that moment a bewildered, groping, puzzled, half-disappointed look stole into his face, and mechanically, slowly, he stuffed the gems into his pocket.

Then it came overwhelmingly upon him—the abysmal irony of it. His hands shot up above his head, clenched till the nails bit into the flesh; and then, with a cry that was like the snapping of a tense-drawn bowstring, he sank down, a crumpled, inert heap—and all was nothingness.

When Wandler opened his eyes again, a languorous weakness, a sense of strangeness, unreality, was upon him. He groped with his hands, feeling about him. Something soft was under his head—it must be a pillow.

A throb like the throb of engines, a lulling vibration like the vibration of a ship, came to him. Yes, that was it—he was in a bunk. He struggled suddenly to a sitting posture.

“Marion!” he called. “Marion!”

“Steady there, steady now; you mustn’t bob around like that, you know,” remonstrated a gruff, hearty voice. “She’s all right, fine—or will be in a day or two. Come now, lie down again.”

Wandler sank back obediently, staring at a man’s face that bent over him.

“Who are you?” he asked weakly.

“Ship’s doctor,” replied the voice cheerfully. “We picked you up just before sundown.”

Wandler smiled and closed his eyes. He tried to think, but he was very weak. There was something else, something else. He couldn’t seem to grasp it—it kept floating off into space. Ah yes, he had it now. Again he sat up suddenly.

“*In a dead man’s shoes!*” he cried out. “I remember saying that when I put them on. D’ye hear, Doc? That’s what I said when I put them on. That’s where I was, and that’s where the diamonds were—in a dead man’s shoes. Don’t you understand, Doc, don’t you— —”

He felt cool fingers close firmly over his wrist, and an arm around his shoulder forced him back on the pillow while the same cheerful voice said:

“You’ve a pocketful of them. Go to sleep.”

THE KING OF FOOLS

Chapter I

Fate Comes Aboard

CAPTAIN JOSIAH KEMP was in a humor not exactly to be described as amiable as he paced the bridge of the *Empire Queen*—and for two very valid reasons. Trade in his particular branch of the seafaring profession was dead, stagnant, gone to seed, for even the not uncommon quarrels of Central and South American republics, both external and internal, had fallen under the spell of the dove of peace. It was a decidedly lean year in the commerce of contraband; and hence, very logically, the *Empire Queen* had been anything but a lucrative proposition.

For six months she had made inroads into the reserve funds of her commander, who was likewise her owner, as she nosed her way like a dog on the scent, following stray rumors of trouble through more miles of water than are to be counted—rumors that proved either ill founded or so paltry in substance as to cause Captain Kemp a sense of chagrin that he did not hesitate to express.

Finally the inroads had become serious, so serious that the *Empire Queen* had now beneath her hatches, possibly to her own amazement, certainly to the intense disgust of her commander, officers and crew, something that had not desecrated her hold for many years—a perfectly proper, legitimate cargo, perfectly, properly and legitimately tabulated, scheduled and insured as per triplicates, duplicates and originals, manifests, bills of lading and official documents without number, which latter were, heaping insult upon injury, ignominiously thrust upon Barretson, the operator, who was obliged to turn his wireless room into a highly respectable purser's office to accommodate them.

All this in itself might, with justice, be considered sufficient cause to lower the spirits and sour the temper of any man; Captain Kemp, however, as has been said, had another grievance. The *Empire Queen* was in an ocean highway he did not like, and he liked less the night that found her there. Bound from Brisbane to Singapore, he was between Java and the Banda in the Flores Sea, just south of Celebes, and at four bells in the first watch, ten o'clock, the weather was so thick that he could not see the fo'c'sle head from the bridge railing.

It was damp and drizzly, sticky hot, with a sluggish sea, hardly more than an oily swell, in which the *Empire Queen* wallowed with long rolls to

port and starboard. The rays from the binnacle lamp gave shadowy form to the quartermaster at the wheel, while Captain Kemp and Peters, the first officer, loomed like two black patches in the combined gray of the fog and the dark of the night a few feet away from him.

“Lord!” blurted out the skipper suddenly, giving speech to the bitterness in his heart. “And to think of a night like *this*, and us loaded with what we are! It’s fair heartbreaking.”

“Aye,” sympathized Peters; “it does seem like things always does go by contraries. We’d have worn the knees out of our trousers praying for half this fog the night we run into Port del Marto with them rifles for General Caraventes and his revolutionist crowd. That was touch and go, thanks mostly to that low-lived, sneaking Stavert, d’ye mind?”

“Aye, I mind,” growled Captain Kemp fervently. “Damn him!”

Peters sighed heavily.

“Them Central American lads ain’t what they used to be for revolutionizing, though I don’t say they ain’t the happier for it. But look at us. As you was saying, though in different words, what’s under *our* hatches tonight? I— —”

“Listen!” snapped Captain Kemp suddenly. “D’ye hear anything?”

“No,” said Peters after a strained instant of silence.

“Humph!” grunted the skipper. “I thought I heard a tackle creak out there somewhere.”

“Me too, sir,” chimed in the quartermaster from the wheel.

“You did, eh?” Captain Kemp’s voice was quick now, and he stepped to the amidships of the bridge. “Where away? D’ye place it?”

“No sir,” replied the man. “’Tain’t easy, as you know, sir, to place sounds in a fog like this. Seemed, though, like it come from a bit to starboard an’ ahead.”

Captain Kemp leaned over the weather cloth of the bridge.

“For’ard there! Fo’c’sle, ahoy!” he bellowed.

“Aye, sir?” answered a guttural voice from out of the nothingness.

“Keep your eyes peeled, and skin your ears, d’ye— —”

A wild yell from the lookout cut the skipper’s words short off. Misty, shapeless, like a phantom specter, something was towering over the steamer’s bows. Quick as the winking of an eye, Captain Kemp’s hand shot out, grasped the engine telegraph lever and flung it over to “Full Speed Astern.”

“Port! Port—*hard!*” he flashed at the quartermaster.

The wheel spun whirling—too late. There was a terrific crash, a shock that threw the three men on the bridge from their feet to the grating, a ripping, grinding sound of rending timber, and then a mad chorus of cries and yells. The Empire Queen staggered, shuddered and, like a whimpering thing, reeled from the blow, quivering in every stanchion.

The first to recover himself, Captain Kemp was on his feet in a second. In the weird setting of the fog's gray blanket pandemonium reigned. The grinding and ripping of timber went on at the bows; queer, grotesque shapes, scarce seen through the haze, the crew of the Empire Queen, were scurrying from the forecabin; while a voice from outboard, bellowing like a mad bull, intermingled orders with a torrent of foul sea oaths directed at the steamer. To this latter, for the moment, Captain Kemp paid no attention.

"For'ard with you, Peters," he flung out sharply, "and see if we're damaged. Look lively! She's swinging in on us to starboard."

As he spoke, the rasp and crunch of wood and iron pounding against each other worked aft, and now, abeam the bridge, the misty, shapeless thing he had seen towering over the bows took the form of what seemed like a schooner's foresail. A moment later his diagnosis was confirmed—the boom swung suddenly and brought up against the steamer with a mighty flog. This was followed by another and another, and then the two vessels began to swing apart as the Empire Queen, her initial momentum already stopped by the first impact, answered to her thrashing screw and commenced to make sternway.

A seaman reported on the bridge:

"Mr Peters' compliments, sir, an' all's well. We've stove a plate or two by the starboard hawser pipe, but we're all sound else."

Captain Kemp stopped his engines.

"Very good," he said with relief, dismissing the man, and then to the wall of fog that was now all that was to be seen: "Schooner, ahoy! Are ye bad hurt? Shall I stand by?"

The reply, in the same bull-throaty voice, consisted of an epithet, expressive but unprintable, followed by a wonderful, marvelous and amazingly shocking assortment of qualifying phrases, whose flow ceased finally from what was apparently sheer lack of breath and quite apart from any evidence of exhausted versatility.

"My word!" gasped the skipper indignantly. He snatched up the bridge megaphone and placed it to his lips. "Look here, you swine," he boomed, "I'll have you know who you're talking to, and I'll have you keep a civil

tongue in your head, I will, you duck-pond navigator, you unregenerate, illiterate apology for a mud-scow sailor! I'm Captain— —"

"I wouldn't tell him if I were you, sir, whoever you are," advised a strange voice at the skipper's elbow.

Captain Kemp whirled like a flash. Two forms showed black before him. One was Peters'; he put down the megaphone and leaned forward, peering into the other man's face.

"Who the devil are you?" he rasped.

"Well," replied the other coolly enough, "I *was* second mate of the Cynthia until about five minutes ago."

"What!" ejaculated the skipper. "Here, Peters, what's the meaning of this?"

"I fancy that's where he came from, right enough," submitted Peters, "if that's the name of the craft that we—that run us down. I found him lying on the fo'c'sle head, stunned, sir."

"I saw stars for a minute," explained the man. "It was like this. A bit back, aboard the Cynthia, I thought I heard a fog whistle. I had the deck, and I went forward to caution the hands to keep a sharp lookout, and before going aft again I swung onto the foreshrouds to listen a spell myself. The next I knew there was a shock that knocked me clear of my hold and pitched me forward, and when I got my senses back, I was here."

The sounds from the schooner were growing fainter and, already being made sport of by the fog's acoustic tricks, seemed to come from half-a-dozen different directions at once.

"Humph!" commented Captain Kemp. "And now I suppose you'd like to get back on her, eh?"

The man laughed shortly.

"No, I'm not pining to. And anyway, if I were, I imagine I'd have to pine."

"Yes, I imagine you would," said Captain Kemp with some irony, then abruptly: "What d'ye mean by putting your oar in a while gone when I was talking?"

"Why, purely as a precautionary measure," replied the other, an underlying grimness in his easy tones. "I've learned from personal experience that the less one has to do with Captain John P. Stavert— —"

"*Stavert!*" exploded the skipper with a sudden roar. "Stavert, d'ye say! D'ye hear that, Peters? Yon was Stavert."

“Aye, I hear,” growled Peters fiercely. “I only wish to the Lord we’d known before the fog swallowed him up, Captain Kemp, and we’d—”

“*Kemp!*” It was the other’s turn, and his tone, first incredulous, ended in a low whistle. “You don’t mean to say *you’re* Captain Kemp! Oh, holy sailor, what a bally go!”

Captain Kemp stared at the man curiously for a minute through the darkness; then he turned to his first officer.

“Get under way again at once, Peters,” he ordered crisply. “And you”—touching the other on the arm—“what’s your name?”

“Hale.”

“Well then, you, Hale, come down to the chartroom with me.”

He led the way off the bridge to the chartroom directly beneath it, switched on the electric light as he entered, then turned, and his eyes swept critically over the other, who had followed at his heels.

The erstwhile second of the *Cynthia* was a big man. Captain Kemp measured him at a glance and found him a good four inches taller than his own squat, muscular frame, and as broad across the shoulders, as full in chest development—which latter points said much for Hale’s physique, for Captain Kemp’s breadth was beyond the breadth of most men. The man was hatless, and a tangle of fair hair tumbled almost into the blue eyes that played upon the skipper with a curious, speculating light in their depths. The face was leathery brown, wind-whipped; the features good. Captain Kemp completed his inspection with a grunt of approval, crossed to the locker, produced a bottle and glasses, a box of manilas, and shoved them toward the other along the locker top.

“Now,” said he crisply as he appropriated the settee and motioned the other to a chair, “it strikes me there’s something behind the way you’ve handled your jaw. I don’t wonder you’re not pining for your berth back if you shipped with Stavert, but what’s surprising about me being Captain Kemp? You don’t know me; or at least, I don’t know you—which is about the same thing as far as I’m concerned.”

Hale poured himself a stiff four fingers and tossed it off. He shook his head.

“You’re wrong,” said he, “dead wrong. There’s a vast deal of difference.”

“Well,” invited the skipper, “I’m listening.”

Chapter II

An Enemy in Common

HALE'S eyes roved over Captain Kemp for a full half minute before he spoke.

"I heard Stavert boast about it the first night out," he said. "He had a bit too much under his shirt, of course; enough to loosen his tongue. He said he was anchored in the harbor that night and spotted you running some arms ashore for the rebels at Port del Marto, so he tipped off the government johnnies—for a consideration. He said it was the easiest money he ever got."

Captain Kemp's back teeth clamped suddenly on the end of the manila he had just placed between his lips, and his fingers, that were reaching to curl around a glass, curled into a clenched fist instead.

"He got a thousand pounds blood money for it," he said hoarsely. "Some of the rebel lot told us about it afterwards. Are you tolerably fair at mathematics, Hale? A thousand pounds he got, and there's interest, two years of it, compound. It cost me the closest squeak I ever had, a wrecked engine room—MacCrea'll give you the figures on that—and two lives went out to the account of that skulking Judas. Are you tolerably fair at mathematics, Hale?"

"He'll think I fell overboard when we rammed each other," said Hale, nodding his head, "for I yelled for help when I jumped, and the shrouds and sail and fog hid me."

Captain Kemp's shrewd black eyes fixed sharply on his companion.

"So you *jumped*, eh? Why didn't you say so at first?"

"Because," Hale replied, "I didn't know who *you* were then. I told you it made a vast deal of difference. Strange, ain't it? I'm pinching myself to make sure I'm not dreaming. Twenty minutes ago I was on the Cynthia's deck with the horrid feeling that a knife was tickling my ribs every time I drew a breath—and now I'm here talking to the one man in the world I'd have given my eyeteeth any time in the last twenty-four hours to run across. Luck won't account for it—it's like the working out of Providence. Yes, I jumped; but I didn't show myself until the vessels had separated, and then I pretended I'd been stunned to account for not crawling back on the schooner."

"Providence, eh?" rumbled the skipper. "Well, Providence it may be. When I've heard the rest, I'll be better able to judge."

“Right!” said Hale. “And it won’t take long to tell it—and if you see things my way, the chance at Stavert you’ve been waiting for has come. And I—well, I love him too—the way a man loves a snake. You heard of the *Helmatia* being wrecked off here a few months ago?”

“No,” said Captain Kemp. “I wasn’t in these waters then.”

“Well, anyway, you know her and the two or three other tubs of her line, and you know Cronderheim and Kilsteil, her owners.”

“I do,” affirmed Captain Kemp with emphasis. “And from what I know of them, they’re crooks. Were they at the bottom of it?”

“Wait,” protested Hale with a grin; “you’re taking the yarn out of my mouth. Old Horton was master of the *Helmatia*— —”

“And as clean a man and as good a sailor as ever I want to meet,” interposed the skipper sharply, a hint of aggression in his tones.

“So he is,” agreed Hale heartily; “right you are. But he suffered for it. They salted him. Cronderheim and Kilsteil laid down on him hard when he went before the Board, and the Board took his certificate away from him. He was fifty miles off his course the night the *Helmatia* broke her nose on a reef and sank. Horton was in his bunk at the time, of course; the second had the bridge, and he and the quartermaster both swore they were steering the skipper’s course—it was up to Horton. But the compass was dosed with a magnet; the second did it. That’s the inside of it, and you’ll see how I found out before I get through. They took to the boats and eventually were all picked up.”

“Sounds promising,” observed Captain Kemp, disposing of his belated drink. “What’d she have under hatches? Anything out of the ordinary?”

Hale smiled grimly.

“She had,” he said tersely. “Gold—Australian gold. And a tight little pile of it at that. The consignors insured, of course, and the underwriters paid. It hit them pretty hard, I guess; so hard that they sent out a crowd to look the ground over and see what the chances of salvage were. They came to the conclusion that there was a mighty good chance, and that perked them up a bit, and they decided they’d tackle it. Then Cronderheim and Kilsteil took a hand. They said that even if it were successful the salvage would eat up anything there might be left for them; in other words, that they’d have to pay for it one way or another; so, as it would be cheaper for them in the long run, they’d outfit a wrecking expedition themselves and place it at the disposal of the insurance lot.”

“They did, eh?” reflected the skipper. “Well, that doesn’t sound as though they had been up to any dirty work. It looks fair and aboveboard

enough, only how's Stavert mixed up in it? Did they give him the command?"

"The wrecking expedition is a *steamer*," said Hale with quiet significance; "and, as there's been a good deal of delay in securing the outfit that appeared to be essential to make a success of the venture, she's *still* lying at Singapore. Briefly, Captain Stavert is not the authorized edition, d'ye see? If things work out the way they're planned, by the time the insurance crowd arrive with their elaborate and extensive paraphernalia he'll be far, far away, and the gold with him."

Captain Kemp's comment was to draw on his manila with a sharp little sucking sound.

"Now," continued Hale, "the game's in our hands, if you've a day or two to spare. We can let Stavert do the work and get the gold up for us, and then—well, you've an account to square, and so have I. He'll have enough gold aboard to pay both."

A hard glint crept into Captain Kemp's eyes.

"Look here, Hale," said he, "I've got a reputation, I'll admit, that first and last has had some holes punched in it from freebooting contraband and such, which is likely misleading you, so I'll let what you've said go, but for the sake of preserving peace I'll ask you to remember that no man yet ever called Captain Kemp a thief. Taking it from Stavert, whatever I've against him, is the same as taking it from the underwriters."

Hale laughed gleefully like a boy.

"No, it isn't," he said; "no, it isn't. Wait! Wait! That's the richest part of the whole bally business. All you've got to do is to figure out how to work it. Stavert's got a little bandy-legged, black-browed cuss with him as first mate."

The skipper stared.

"And what's that got to do with it?" he grunted.

Hale leaned nearer the skipper.

"Everything," he said. "It's Cronderheim—Cronderheim himself. Cronderheim, of Cronderheim and Kilsteil."

"What!" shouted Captain Kemp, sitting bolt upright. "Say that again!"

"Cronderheim," repeated Hale. "You see the game now, eh? Accounts for Cronderheim and Kilsteil's offer to outfit that steamer down at Singapore and their delay in doing it, doesn't it? They've got it all worked out to the last word—even to a touch of dynamite in the submerged hull, once they've got the gold snug in their fists, to make the Helmatia slip off the reef

completely to cover up their tracks, for the water's so deep, they say, just outside the reef, that no bottom has ever been found—and of course you understand that, even as it is, the Helmatia's covered and isn't showing at all. What do you think now about taking it from Stavert being the same as taking it from the underwriters—with Cronderheim in between?"

"Oh, Lord!" murmured the skipper softly. "Oh, Lord! I'm beginning to see the poetic justice of it." He propped his elbows on the locker and his chin in his hands, and for a full minute stared at the brass handle of the chartroom door; at the expiration of that time he looked at Hale, one eyebrow uplifted. "I'm thinking," he said, "that it might be done. Cronderheim and Kilsteil are rich enough to pay for what they steal." The eyebrow dropped. "How d'ye know all this? How d'ye come to be aboard the Cynthia, and what's *your* trouble with Stavert?"

"I shipped with him at Keopang. How I came to be in Timor is too long a story and nothing to do with this," replied Hale. "He fitted out and chartered the Cynthia there, he and Clark, which is the name Cronderheim is sailing under. We three were the only white men aboard—the crew's Malays, Chinks and lascars. I shipped because they wanted another white man—for a while, curse them! and because I was fool enough to think I was going on a pearling cruise. But we'd hardly lost sight of land before I began to smell a rat. Cronderheim was a sailor once, I believe, before he got to be an owner, but he was rusty enough at the business for a greenhorn, and his attitude toward Stavert wasn't exactly that of mate to master. I got most of the work, and the other two spent most of the time with their heads together in the cabin.

"Well, to make a long story short, the second night out the cabin skylight was partly open, and the two below were talking. I heard one of them say 'Helmatia,' and that was enough to make me prick up my ears, so I moved around close up against the lee side of the skylight and filled my pipe, taking my time about it, because a lascar at the wheel wasn't ten feet aft of me. Stavert had been drinking pretty steadily since supper and had hit the garrulous stage, and I hadn't been there half a minute when the cat came out of the bag kerflop.

"'You're all right,' he says, mushy thick. 'Neatest game ever worked. Twenty years of the sea I've had, twenty cruel, hard years, but it's all over now, all over. Last voyage, old boy—going to retire after this—rich. You're all right, and here's to you, Cronderheim, you're —'

"'Shut your fool mouth!' says Cronderheim, quick and fierce.

"And I fancy my heart skipped a beat, for two and two makes four, and the arithmetic came so quick it took my breath away.

“‘That’s all right,’ says Stavert. ‘What’re you afraid of? There ain’t anyone aboard to understand English but Hale—and *Hale ain’t likely to be aboard when we make port again, eh?* Not likely! Accidents *will* happen. Had to have someone to do the work. Rich—last voyage, you bet! Accidents *will* happen. Going to settle down on some bally island in command of a plantation and be a blooming feudal lord and take it easy. Twenty hard, cruel years I’ve had, and—’

“Like a fool, I didn’t get onto the fact that he was talking, tipsy fashion, to himself, and, soft-stepping as a cat, Cronderheim caught me. The man was like a beast in his fury; his face grayer than that fog out there, and every muscle working wickedly. I jumped back quick.

“‘You dirty, low-lived, sneaking spy!’ he yelled, and followed it up with every rotten name he could lay his tongue to, and in language that would have put a wharf rat to shame.”

Hale paused for a moment and looked at Captain Kemp.

“Well?” prompted the skipper.

“I knocked him down the companionway,” stated Hale quietly. “What would you have done?”

“That or thrown him overboard,” replied Captain Kemp with a complacent and approving chuckle. “What happened then?”

“I kept the deck until pretty near morning,” resumed Hale. “I didn’t know just what to expect, and I wasn’t feeling any too comfortable. When a man finds out he’s going to be murdered when his usefulness is past, it doesn’t help to cheer him up any, does it? I figured they might conclude they could dispense with my services just about then instead of later; so I slipped a belaying pin into my pocket and wished to the Lord it had been a revolver. Every now and then, for an hour or so, I could hear their voices below; then they turned in, and I didn’t hear anything more from them till Stavert came on deck just as it was getting light. Instead of a bullet or the fight I expected, he was as sweet as candy.

“‘Look here, Hale,’ he says smoothly—the drink was all out of him then—‘you’ve found out what you weren’t supposed to know, and, as it’s partly my fault through taking a nip too much, I’m going to do the fair thing to square it; though, knowing then who he was, you played the fool in roughhousing Cronderheim. You know enough of the game now to make you one of us—and here’s the rest of it.’

“Then Stavert laid the whole thing wide open; how Horton had been made the goat, the wrecking steamer at Singapore, the insurance crowd and all. ‘You see,’ said he, ‘I’m giving it to you straight, for once you’re in,

you're in without any strings tied to it, and if you've got to trust me, I've got to trust you. Cronderheim and Kilsteil get three quarters, and I get the other quarter. Cronderheim is sore as a pup. He blames me for babbling in my cups and says if you're to be squared it comes out of my pocket. Now I'm not going to split with you—that's too much, for I have to stand the expense of the trip—but I'll give you a quarter of what's coming to me, and that'll put you higher up among the fashionable numbers of Easy Street than I guess you'd ever figured to get on speaking terms with. What do you say?"

A whimsical smile settled on Hale's lips, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I said sure, and took the temporary lease of life he offered, figuring there'd be at least a chance to extend it by escaping to the shore and hiding upon the island, once we reached the wreck. That was yesterday morning, and that was when I began to think of you. That's *my* trouble with Stavert, to say nothing about Cronderheim."

Captain Kemp got up from the settee, and stepped to Hale's side.

"That's good enough," he said briskly. "Do you know where the Helmatia lies?"

"Yes," said Hale. "About twenty miles south of Salayer."

"How long will it take Stavert to fetch it?"

"Well," Hale answered, "there's no telling. If the breeze freshens, he'll make it by noon; if it holds light, it'll take him till tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night, eh?" repeated the skipper. "Well then, Hale, you turn in now and get a night's sleep; I expect you need it, according to your own story, and I'll see what's to be done for a starter. We'll get down to the details tomorrow. You can bunk up here in the chartroom while you're aboard."

"All right," agreed Hale. "That appeals to me, now that I know you're on."

Captain Kemp crossed the room to the door, opened it and swung around on the threshold.

"I'm on, all right!" He laughed short and hard. "Oh, Lord, two years! Two years *and* interest—compound! And I always liked old John Horton. Yes, I'm—*on*. Good night."

He closed the chartroom door behind him and, with an evidently well-defined object in view, made his way quickly down the starboard ladder to the lower forward deck and, dispatching a hand to request MacCrea, the chief engineer, to come immediately to the fo'c'sle head, kept on until he had gained that position himself. Here, in the darkness, as well as he could, he examined the fractured plates, noting the damage done by the collision.

He had spent perhaps five minutes in this manner, and was still engaged in his inspection, when he turned as a step sounded behind him, and was greeted by the voice of his irascible little Scotch engineer.

“An’ can ye no bide till daylight?” demanded MacCrea tartly. “She’ll do well enough the night; there’s little damage done.”

“So there is,” returned the skipper cheerfully. “In fact, that’s the trouble; there isn’t damage *enough* done. Here.” He caught MacCrea by the arm, pulled him to the ship’s side, leaned over and pointed downward. “I’ll give you forty-eight hours to make her bows look like an eggshell that’s tried to ram a hole in a rock.”

MacCrea puckered up his wizened little face, shoved it within an inch of the skipper’s and stared long and incredulously.

“Have ye by any chance gone daft, Captain Kemp?” he inquired at last.

“Get down near enough to the water line to make it *look* dangerous,” continued Captain Kemp imperturbably; “and if you’ve got any art in you, let it come out. What I want is realism.”

“Fair loony!” ejaculated MacCrea, drawing back.

“And mind,” went on the skipper, “that what you take out’ll have to go back temporarily till it can be done shipshape in a dockyard, so have a care how you do it.”

“Come aft to your bunk, Captain Kemp,” wheedled MacCrea in what was meant to be a soothing voice, “an’ I’ll see to it.”

Captain Kemp laughed.

“MacCrea,” said he the next minute, and the laugh died short as he clapped his hands down on the engineer’s shoulders, “MacCrea, is your memory good? Do you remember the night a shell burst in your engine room? Do you remember the two we buried off Port del Marto afterward?”

The little engineer leaned sharply forward.

“Aye, I mind,” he said, a sudden hoarseness in his voice. “Petrie was the better wi’ the engines for all that Farquhar was cousin o’ mine by blood. Aye, I mind, but what’s that to do wi’ the wrecking o’ the Queen’s nose?”

“Just this,” said Captain Kemp. “The man we’ve to thank for that night is the one we were in collision with an hour back.”

“Stavert!” burst out MacCrea. “Stavert—the—the—” His jaws closed with a snap. “I’m a Presbyterian,” he choked fiercely, “an’ I canna—but itherwise, ye ken?”

“Then gloat,” said the skipper, “gloat, and take it out of the plates —’twill be less ungodly.”

“I’m minded ’twas the codger that tumbled aboard us told ye,” said MacCrea; “but I canna see the sense o’ it. To make Stavert pay for a bit o’ damage is no payment for what he’s done, an’ its money out o’ our pockets, for afterward we’ll be idle while we’re laid up for repairs. An’ what’s more, I misdoubt ye’ll be able to make him pay at all.”

“He’ll pay, MacCrea,” said the skipper with a soft smile. “He’ll pay—in *full*. I promise you that. Mind now, you’ve got forty-eight hours. Get your crowd and go to it—for the sake of your blood cousin—and other things. That’s your stunt. Leave the rest to me.”

“Oh!” said MacCrea with a little whistle through his teeth. “Oh, vera good. Mon, I’ll show ye the most forsaken wreck that ever ye clapped eyes on.”

And a half-hour later, while Captain Kemp, in his cabin, maneuvered with a pair of dividers on the chart before him, and while Barretson, who had previously been visited by the skipper in the wireless room, bent over his instruments, the gear clamped on his head, an expression of divine contentment on his face, the purser’s books that had been so ignominiously thrust upon him now rudely pushed aside and littering the floor, there came from forward, breaking the stillness of the night, completely obliterating the subdued throb of the engines, now slowed to the bare steerageway with which the Empire Queen had monotonously begun to describe two-hour circles, the uproar of clanging hammers, the smash of sledges, the ring of cold chisels biting steel, and the rip and crack of bursting woodwork.

MacCrea was paying his tribute to the memory of his blood cousin.

Chapter III

Aces Are Trumped

THERE are many islands in the East Indian Archipelago. The wisdom of governments has charted a marvelous aggregation of them, and the fruit of that labor defaces the map by a multitude of tiny dots, singly and in groups, strewn about in every direction from north to south and from east to west.

One of these, whose authorship, from its appearance, unless the chart itself were safeguarded under glass in fly time, might well be open to suspicion, lies approximately twenty miles due south of its more pretentious and nearest neighbor, Salayer Island. It is very small and very low, an uninhabited spot, volcanic in its origin, and the coral reef that fringes it is close onto two and a half miles out to seaward.

This reef is known to mariners as Skeleton Reef, and the island it surrounds—to those who name it at all—as Fua Matte. It is a most excellent graveyard for ships, and, if intentionally chosen as the last resting place for the *Helmatia*, showed judgment of no mean order, since it was established by the findings of the Board, who heard the case of Horton and listened to the specious testimony of the second officer, that Fua Matte on a blackish night might not be readily enough distinguishable to give warning that a ship was off her course, much less to intimate the presence of an overhospitable reef at the distance of two and one half miles.

Through this reef there is one channel, and only one, somewhat tortuous for its short length, that leads into the sheltered lagoon between the reef and the shore; and this channel is on the southern side and about opposite the western extremity of the island. However . . .

On the second night following her collision with the *Cynthia*, the *Empire Queen*, black as the night itself, her engine-room skylight painstakingly covered and not a light showing from fore to aft, crept stealthily down on the northeastern side of Fua Matte and lay to as close in with the reef as Captain Kemp's caution and Hale's judgment would countenance. A boat, with tholepins carefully padded, dropped from the after-port tackles into the water, a cask and box were lowered into her, and six seamen dropped into their places at the oars. Followed Hale, the second officer of the *Empire Queen*, Palmer by name, and lastly Captain Kemp.

"Now, my lads," said the skipper heartily as he took the tiller, "make what speed you can to begin with, for it's a longish row, and the last half of

it will have to be done with caution. Give way!"

"We're safe enough," remarked Hale as the boat shot away from the steamer's side, "until we round the end of the island. He'll be just opposite that or a trifle to the west, for that's where the Helmatia lies. I hope to the Lord he'll be at work."

"He'll be at work fast enough, trust him for that," predicted the skipper grimly. "He won't linger around any longer than he has to, and every minute, night or day, 'll count with him now." Then suddenly: "Look here, Hale; are you sure of the depth of water inside the reef?"

"Well," replied Hale, "all I know of the place is from the one and only time I ran in here to fill up with fresh water and couldn't find any, but I'm pretty confident there's no more than four fathoms anywhere in the lagoon, though it goes down in a sheer drop like a precipice on the outer edge. Anyway, you've brought the lead, and once over the reef, we can skirt it a bit and take a sounding or two to make sure. That'll give us an approximate idea of what to expect, for the inner edge of the reef shows pretty well all around the island at low water, and the depth can't vary much anywhere."

"Right!" said the skipper. "We've time enough, and we will." He waited a few minutes. "We should be about over the shallowest of it now. Easy, men," he cautioned.

A moment later the boat's bottom scraped lightly once or twice, and then one of the seamen, feeling with his oar, announced deeper water again.

Captain Kemp swerved the boat's course to parallel the reef.

"Take a cast or two, Palmer," he directed.

At two-minute intervals Palmer read his soundings by the aid of a carefully shaded match.

"Three and a half—four—three, three quarters—four again," he called off.

"Good enough," grunted the skipper. "That'll do, Palmer. Now, men, bend to it."

They rowed for half an hour in silence, and then, rounding the point abruptly, Hale uttered an ejaculation. The men stopped rowing and swung around in their seats. Captain Kemp chuckled.

"They're at work, all right," submitted Palmer. "But I can't make out the schooner; there's no chance of her being outside, is there?"

Ahead of them, but a little to their left, a group of twinkling lights low down on the water's edge, like fireflies at the distance, had sprung into view; and now, over the silence that had fallen on the boat, came faint, subdued

sounds from across the water, a medley of them, separately indistinguishable. Captain Kemp, who had been standing up in the stern sheets, sat down.

“She isn’t likely to be carrying riding lights, Palmer,” said he. “Outside? No fear? Give the devil his due. Stavert’s an ugly, treacherous, murdering swine, but he’s a good sailor—too good to risk his schooner on a lee like that, that he couldn’t claw off from in a sudden squall. And besides, she’d take too much care and handling from the tides alone if she were outside. He hasn’t got any time to bother with the schooner; she’s lying somewhere close to those lights, moored snug and convenient in the lagoon; we’ll rise her presently. Go on, men, and be careful—no splashing.”

Little by little the lights grew brighter and began to take individual form as the boat headed for them, the crew rowing with long, steady, silent strokes. Another five minutes of progress, and Hale touched the skipper suddenly on the arm.

“I think I make her out now,” he said in a low voice. “See those two lights that seem to be a little higher than the others and nearer us?”

“Aye,” agreed the skipper; “I’ve been watching them. They’ll be her deck lights, and that’s her. She’s a good bit off yet. We’ll run in as close as we can.”

They covered another half mile, by which time the schooner had loomed into a black, formless shape, and the lights beyond her had begun to throw yellow, wavering streaks across the water. Then Captain Kemp released the tiller to Palmer and leaned forward to the crew.

“Higgins, you and Wilson paddle on for another four hundred yards or so. Easy, all the rest of you. Now, Hale, get ready.”

Captain Kemp peeled off his jacket as he spoke, and Hale followed suit; and by the time the four hundred yards were traversed both men were stripped to no other clothing than the shorts with which they had come provided—unless the sheath knife each strapped around his waist could be classified under the category of apparel.

“That’ll do,” whispered the skipper; “we won’t risk going any closer. Mark your position as well as you can by the lights, Palmer; and mind the tide—it’s setting in. You’ll have to row a bit now and then to keep the distance. Not a sound, remember, no matter what happens, unless we call you. Right, Hale?”

“Right,” responded Hale laconically.

“Come on then,” said the skipper.

They slipped noiselessly from the boat and, powerful men both of them, struck out as noiselessly for the schooner, swimming steadily, with magnificent ease, close together and low in the water as a safeguard against an inadvertent splash.

The lagoon was smooth, unrippled, like a great sable-covered plain of glass, but, with the tide against them, it was a full quarter of an hour before they had won close in to the vessel's hull. And here, when still a few yards away, Captain Kemp, who was slightly in the lead, stopped suddenly and touched Hale.

The cluster of lights out beyond the schooner had divided, and three or four of them were coming rapidly in their direction. The two men, treading water now, watched and listened anxiously. There came the thump of oars in tholepins and, too, another sound, steady and regular, like the measured beat of some mechanical contrivance at work.

"Air pump for his divers," said Captain Kemp softly. "Can you make out what kind of an affair he's got rigged up out there?"

"Looks as though he'd made a pontoon for a landing stage and swag receiver out of a couple of his boats and stuck lanterns around it," replied Hale.

"Aye, that's what I was thinking," agreed the skipper. "And these other boats coming in are bringing a load of bullion to discharge. They'll be going back again presently. Make for the sternpost and hang on."

A few strokes brought them under the black shadows of the Cynthia's low-hung stern where she lay just beyond the flickering radius of the lights from the reef, which was scarcely a hundred yards away; and here her rudder and steering gear afforded them not only security, but a comparatively easy resting place.

A moment later a boat rasped along the schooner's port side. This was answered by a hail in the Malay tongue from forward, and the creak of boots running up the cabin companionway aft accompanied by a strident English voice.

"Holy sailor!" ejaculated Captain Kemp in a fierce undertone, pressing Hale's arm. "D'ye note that? Sounds as though they're keeping no more than two aboard—that's better than I hoped for."

"That's the size of it, I'd say," concurred Hale. "There's only ten of a crew, as I told you. Stavert's driving 'em out yonder. Two divers going down in turns and two in each of two boats makes six, say three relaying at the pump and lines, and that leaves one here besides Cronderheim—that's Cronderheim bellowing. He's got a voice like a stuck pig."

“He ain’t through *squealing*,” said the skipper significantly.

A second boat now bumped alongside, and a turmoil and hubbub ensued on the deck above—the patter of hurrying feet, the rattle and squeak of a tackle, the shrill chatter of the Malays, the hoarser, more guttural accents of the lascars, and ever the unpleasant, nasal voice of Cronderheim snarling orders in pidgin-English; while from the bowels of the schooner came, muffled, an occasional thump as the tackle, evidently, deposited its load.

This lasted for ten minutes, at the expiration of which time the listening men heard the crew drop overside into the boats once more, then the dip of oars, Cronderheim’s protesting boots come aft again and descend the companionway—then silence, save for the sounds of the retreating boats and, from the reef, the low clank of the pump and the murmur of voices.

“Cronderheim’s in the cabin, and all we’ve got to look out for is that heathen for’ard,” observed the skipper; “and there’s only one, that’s sure, else they’d be jabbering. They’ve probably got a gangway of some sort, or a ladder rigged at the waist. We’ll board that way if we can.”

He lowered himself into the water again, and Hale followed him. Close in by the schooner’s hull, the shadows were impervious to the murky, uncertain glow that hovered a little farther outboard over the waters, and they hugged the Cynthia’s side. Amidships the skipper’s hand touched a rope ladder; and while Hale clung to the bottom of it, Captain Kemp drew himself cautiously up to the schooner’s rail.

A gleam came from both the cabin companionway and the forecabin; but the decks were in darkness, save for a dull, square patch of light where a lantern hung a little below the level of the open hatchway opposite him and filtered out over a wet, splashed space between the rail and the hatchway’s edge. He noted this with an inward chuckle of approval—the drippings from the erstwhile submerged cases would cover up his own and Hale’s wet tracks. A shadow crossed the streak of light inside the forecabin—the coast was clear.

He let himself down until he touched Hale with his foot as a signal to follow, then quickly went up again, swung over the rail to the deck and darted to the hatchway. Hale was beside him almost on the moment; and, flat on their stomachs, they peered into the Cynthia’s hold. Disclosed by the hanging lantern and scattered about without order, in heaps or singly as the tackle had dropped them, lay perhaps fifty small wooden cases, each about two feet long and a foot in the square; they were reeking wet, water-soaked, and the strong iron hoops that bound them at both ends were covered with rust.

"My word!" muttered the skipper. "What a bally haul! And he hasn't got a quarter of it yet, according to what you say the Helmatia had aboard. Down we go!"

Dangling from the hatch coaming was another rope ladder, and in a trice both men were in the hold.

"Now for the floor boards, and hurry," said the skipper. "Let's hope they're still loose. Where are they?"

"For'ard by the fo'c'sle bulkhead," replied Hale. "They're sure to be still loose; Stavert'd never bother about a thing like that. I had 'em up to do some calking the afternoon of the collision, and only laid 'em back temporarily." He started forward and stopped suddenly, pointing with his hand. "Curse it all!" he breathed. "They've cleaned up all the junk in the hold and piled it against the bulkhead to make ready for the gold. We can't get at the boards under all that mess without raising a racket and taking half the night."

"Oh yes, we can," whispered the skipper cheerfully. "We've got to. We can't take any chances, and it's too neat a hiding place to let go—those boxes'll just about fit to a T, and the stuff over 'em makes it all the better."

Hale knelt down and felt with his hand.

"All right then," he said. "They're still loose, but it will be some of a job."

It was. There was barely light enough to see, and old canvas, barrels, ballast and a heterogeneous collection of odds and ends were not easy things to move when absolute silence was the first requisite of the undertaking; also they were heavy.

At the end of thirty heartbreaking, anxious minutes, however, panting and perspiring for all their near nakedness, they had laid bare the center planks of the hold flooring; and, this accomplished, they pried up two boards with their sheath knives, one on each side of the center over the keel, disclosing a space to the skin of the ship of some fourteen or fifteen inches in depth.

"Get the stuff over here now," said the skipper under his breath, "and make haste. There's no telling how soon those boats'll be back."

"How much'll we take?" Hale questioned as they made their way back to the pile of cases under the hatch.

"Enough to make it worth while, and not enough so's they'll notice it." Captain Kemp weighted a case in his arms. "Those boards'll be about twelve feet long, so there's at least room for ten of these, five on each side of the old scrouger's ribs, and we'll risk that many. Take 'em off the heaps here

and there; don't touch the single ones lying around, or you'll spoil the present artistic effect."

Five trips apiece they made, stopping often enough to listen, cursing more often with inward fervor as they stubbed and bruised their naked feet, until, five on each side, tucked neatly against the sheer of the hull, there reposed ten iron-hooped bullion cases; then they replaced the boards and returned the choked miscellany that before had stretched across the length of the bulkhead to its place.

"Nifty *and* neat," approved the skipper. "And now to get back to Palmer."

They swarmed silently up the ladder to the deck, slipped as silently overside—and twenty minutes later, hauled aboard the Empire Queen's boat, they were putting on their clothes, and Palmer was steering back for the point of the island.

But, the point once reached, Captain Kemp took the tiller again and, instead of making directly for the Empire Queen, followed the shore line for a short distance and finally ran the boat's nose on the sand.

"Now, men, look lively," he ordered. "Out with that cask and box, and lay 'em inside the fringe of trees there across the beach." And then, as the crew busied themselves following his instructions, he turned to Palmer, who had also stepped out of the boat. "You know what you've got to do, Palmer. There's water and grub there for longer than you'll need it. I'll pick you up as soon as I can."

"Right," said Palmer. "I understand."

The men tumbled into the boat again and shoved off.

"Mind, Palmer," was the skipper's final injunction, "have a care you're not seen—no fires. And keep your eyes peeled from first to last—it's a tossup whether they choose the shore or four fathoms, and either way it's up to you."

"Right," said Palmer again, this time with a grin. "I'll see this end of it through, trust me for that. Good night, sir, and good luck."

Chapter IV

Captain Josiah Kemp Presents His Compliments

SEVEN bells in the middle watch, had bells been sounded that night aboard the Empire Queen, would just have gone as Captain Kemp climbed her side and, met by Peters, went directly to his cabin.

“All well, sir?” inquired the first officer anxiously.

“All well, Peters—*very* well,” replied the skipper, reaching for a bottle; “only I’m infernally cold and tired as a dog. Anything new turned up here?”

“Yes sir,” reported Peters. “There’s a wireless on the table there that Barretson got just after you’d left.”

Captain Kemp put down the bottle and picked up the slip of paper instead. He read it, pursed his lips and whistled. Then he laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, it can’t be helped,” he said with a resigned grin. “I was figuring on another twenty-four hours, for Stavert hasn’t got anywhere near all of the loot yet. But part of the loaf is better than no bread; and what he has, or will have by morning, is a very tidy sum. Noon, eh?” He looked at his watch. “It’s near a quarter of four now, so you’d better get under way at once, and then edge to the sou’ard. As soon as it breaks light, come about and stand in for the island again as though we’d been heading for it all the blessed night. Call me when you think Stavert’s sighted us. Understand?”

“Oh, quite!” said Peters with enthusiasm.

“Away with you, then,” said the skipper. “I’m going to turn in for what sleep I can get.”

But what sleep he got was embraced by a space of time little better than two hours, for at four bells in the morning watch, six o’clock he was on the bridge, and his glass was glued to his eyes.

He laid the binoculars down as Hale, who had likewise been called a few moments before, came up the ladder and joined him.

“We’re producing somewhat the effect of a hawk in a chicken yard, Hale,” he observed with a hard grin. “He’s unshipping that pontoon affair of his, and cleaning up proper and nice. As you said, I can’t make out anything of the Helmatia.”

“No, of course,” said Hale, “since she isn’t showing from the surface. As I understand it, it’s a sheer drop without soundings outside the reef and just a

little above her draft at the outer edge. When she struck she punched a hole through her bottom by the bows, and as she filled, the stern sank downward and left her, hanging like a picture nailed on the wall, held by a point of the reef hooked through her nose close to the forefoot. That's their game, as I explained to you—send her off with a touch of dynamite when they're through to cover up their tracks, for then it would be good-bye to the Helmatia forever and ever, amen. And who's to say a gale didn't dislodge her, while Cronderheim and Kilsteil sit tight on the gold and hold out their paws for the insurance on their departed tub!"

Slowly, painfully, a pitifully battered-looking object, as one far spent and sore distressed, whose strength had been sufficient to carry her to the bare fringe of the haven of safety she had struggled to attain, just that and no more, the Empire Queen drew in toward Fua Matte.

Presently the southwest point of the island crept between her and the schooner, far up at the other end of the lagoon, hiding them from each other; and then, with a boat in the lead to con the way, she entered the channel, cautiously negotiated its windings, gained the inner edge of the reef and swung broadside to—neatly and effectually blocking the sole exit from the lagoon.

This done, her boat waited in the water while Captain Kemp descended to his cabin and indited the following short epistle:

On board SS Empire Queen.

Captain Josiah Kemp and Mr Hale, late second mate of the Cynthia, present their compliments and request the honor of a visit from Captain Stavert and Mr Cronderheim, of the firm of Cronderheim and Kilsteil. The matter is urgent and important.

P.S. If Captain Stavert's memory should lead him to suspect the possibility of meditated violence, he need have no concern on that score, and is hereby guaranteed a safe-conduct.

Captain Kemp folded and sealed the note, returned on deck and handed it to Peters.

"That'll fetch 'em hotfoot," grinned he; then cautioned: "They'll try to pump you dry, Peters. Don't give 'em any satisfaction."

"No fear!" promised Peters and, nodding, swung over into the waiting boat.

And an hour later, as two boats, Peters' and one from the schooner bearing Stavert and Cronderheim, came alongside, the Empire Queen presented an amazing spectacle. There was mighty hammering from

forward, and a portable forge worked overtime on the fo’c’sle head; the hatches were open, derricks and tackles were swinging, creaking, groaning, and the decks were littered with cases, bales, barrels and boxes.

Stavert’s heavy, beetle-browed face was black and savage as he came over the side; Cronderheim’s thinner, more crafty features wore a worried look, which he tried to disguise with an ugly sneer.

Captain Kemp unostentatiously permitted his visitors to absorb the scene.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” said he, meeting them at the rail. “You’ll have gathered from the note that we picked Hale up the other night. I’m a little late in following you in, for with the hole you made in me two knots is about the best I’ve been able to manage.”

Stavert’s eyes roved about him.

“So it was you we rammed, was it?” said he. “Well, I wish I’d sunk you,” he added fervently.

“You’ll have more reason to wish it before I’m through with you,” rejoined the skipper softly. “Will you come down to the cabin?”

“No,” refused Stavert roughly. “What you’ve to say, say here. And the less time you take about it the better.”

“Quite right,” purred the skipper; “I’ll promise to be brief. As for you, Stavert”—his voice rasped suddenly—“I’ll ask you to go back the matter of two years or so to a little account you ran up then at Port del Marto. You’re going to pay that account now, *and the interest is compound*. As for you, Cronderheim, what I’ve against you, save for the ruin and disgrace you brought upon as fine and honest an old sailor as ever trod a deck, is mostly general, which is to say that you’re a rotten crook.”

Both men stepped menacingly forward. Stavert’s face grew blacker, and his great fists clenched into knots.

“Steady!” warned the skipper sharply. “You’re only taking up the time you didn’t want to spare.” He pointed aft to where Hale was standing by a hatchway. “Hale there told me the whole story. We won’t go into it. The point is that I’m here, and maybe you’ve noted that until the Empire Queen shifts her berth from in front of the channel you’re likely to *stay* here.”

“I thought so!” flung out Stavert with a snarl. “Well, I ain’t going to quarrel with you, you blasted blackmailer. I’m not so blind I can’t see you’ve got the whip hand for a spell. How much do you want?”

“Stavert,” pointed out the skipper ironically, “you’re asking me to compound a felony.”

"I'm asking you how much you'll take and call it square, you bloodsucker," returned Stavert angrily. "You've a rare reputation, you have, to be talking about felonies!"

"I'm in regular and righteous commerce," proclaimed Captain Kemp; "and whatever I've done, I've never been called a *thief*." He turned to Cronderheim. "Of course you realize," he said easily, "that, caught red-handed, it's *prima facie* evidence that you and your precious partner engineered the wreck from the start, and, besides a term of imprisonment for you both, you'll have to pay back to the underwriters every blessed dollar they've paid out. I know your firm's rich enough, but I don't fancy there'll be much left when you get through, eh?"

Cronderheim's face grayed.

"Look here," he said limply. "Let's deal. Half?"

"That's right," sneered Stavert, "put on the screws. You're pretty slick, you are, Kemp. Well, how's half strike you?"

"I'm afraid," said the skipper patiently, "that you haven't quite understood. How much gold have you filched out of the *Helmatia* so far? All of it?"

"We haven't said we had any," countered Stavert slyly.

"Well, no matter," said the skipper. "As long as you have *some*, much or little, aboard the *Cynthia*, it'll be all the same to you and all the same to me, for if you brought every last ounce of it over here on a golden platter, I wouldn't accept it from you, do you get that? And if you've only a little aboard, it'll be enough as evidence to put you both where you belong. I was going on to say when you sidetracked me a while back that when Hale told me the story, I relayed it ashore by wireless and asked for a gunboat. I didn't expect they'd pick one up nearer than Sumatra, but it seems they did—twenty-four hours nearer. The reason I sent for you two this morning is to tell you that she was close enough to be in our radius last night, and that she'll be up by noon, and that I'm holding the channel for her till she gets here. I sent for you," repeated the skipper, his voice growing harder, "to tell you that, so's you'd know that I am at the bottom of it, and also that when she's through with you, Stavert, you can have the satisfaction of knowing our little account is squared, and you, Cronderheim, of getting what you deserve."

Fear and cowardice were written large on Cronderheim's face as he shuffled toward Captain Kemp.

"I say," he whined, "you — —"

“Shut up!” growled Stavert savagely, plucking Cronderheim back; then, with a sudden laugh, he wheeled on the Empire Queen’s commander. “You’re the king of fools, Kemp!” he jeered. “And we’re much obliged to you for the warning. That story of Hale’s doesn’t go. There isn’t a stiver of gold aboard us.”

“King of fools I may be,” retorted the skipper, “but when they come to salvage the Helmatia, the difference between what she *had* and what they’ll *find* will be a tolerably accurate account of what you’ve aboard at this present moment, I’ve a notion.”

“They’ll never salvage her,” leered Stavert. “She’s gone to the bottom. Savvy? Cronderheim here, being one of the owners, was afraid the first spell of weather would shake her loose, d’ye see? That’s what we came down ahead of the wrecker for—to try and make her more secure. It’s only today we located the spot she struck and found she’d gone.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” snapped Captain Kemp with well-simulated contempt.

“Of course not,” replied Stavert, grinning wickedly; “because, confidentially, and just between us three, it isn’t true. But as neither you nor your bally gunboat’ll be able to *prove* the difference, I fancy it goes, eh? When you get John P. Stavert, you’ll be a blasted sight better man than you are now.”

“That,” said the skipper mildly, “is as it may be; and now, seeing as I’ve said my say, I’d be glad if you’d go.” He pointed to a faint smudge of smoke just showing horizon down to the eastward. “I’d hate to have you found aboard here, you know.”

Stavert looked, scowled, hesitated as though about to speak, broke into another unpleasant laugh instead, then hustled Cronderheim without a word to the rail and followed him down into the boat.

Once during the morning a dull roar sounded from the direction of the reef. Captain Kemp and Hale were standing just outside the wireless room.

“I’ve been waiting for that,” remarked the skipper, and his lips thinned in a grim smile. “That’s the last spike driven home in Cronderheim’s coffin, and clear sailing for us—the Helmatia’s the Lord knows how many fathoms deep by now. Stavert’s got his nerve, I’ll give him credit for that.” He stuck his head inside the door. “Barretson, tell the gunboat they’ve blown the Helmatia off the reef—and give them a hint that Stavert’s a slippery eel and an empty hold may not be as innocent as it looks.” He turned to Hale again and chuckled. “He’d kill his heathen crew for annexing those ten cases and hiding them for a little rake-off of their own when he and Cronderheim were

down here, if the marines weren't there to protect them, or he dared do anything for fear of giving the rest away. I'd give something to be there when they show up."

"My word," murmured Hale, "so would I. And we can't even see them board her from here."

But later on, from the bridge, they watched the gunboat heave to and several cutters drop from her davits and pull in toward the reef; and still later on, when MacCrea's greasers and trimmers and engine crew—they had suspended operations on Stavert's departure—were again earnestly laboring with the awesome wound in the bows of the Empire Queen, they watched the Cynthia bear slowly down on them around the point in tow of the gunboat's cutters. And while the Empire Queen warped away from the channel to give them passageway, one of the boats came toward them, and a white-uniformed officer climbed to the deck and shook hands with Captain Kemp.

"Got the scoundrels hard and fast," said he. "I expect they found it slow work, for they hadn't as much as I thought they'd have—but enough. We discovered ten cases under the flooring while they were blustering and cursing us and pointing to an empty hold. The Helmatia's gone, too, as you wired, but what they were fools enough to do that for is beyond me."

"Well," said Captain Kemp judicially, "I take it they didn't expect you to find *anything*, in which case they couldn't afford to have the wreck salvaged and the gold in her found *short*—they might as well be caught with it to begin with."

"So they might," agreed His Majesty's naval representative; "right you are, Captain Kemp. But it has acted like a boomerang—Cronderheim and his partner will have to pay to the last penny." He glanced forward up the deck. "You got the worst of it the other night, Captain Kemp; the Cynthia's no more than splintered a bit. It's lucky you had fair weather, or you'd never have got here, nor anywhere else but the bottom. Can we give you any help?"

"Thank you kindly," said the skipper gratefully, "but we'll make shift all right. We're as snug here as in harbor, and the chief says it's only the matter of a couple of days to patch her well enough to finish out the voyage."

"Very good, then," said the naval man. "Good-by." He shook hands again. "I'll see that you're not overlooked in the report, Captain Kemp." He shook hands once more. "Good-by," he repeated cordially as he went over the side.

The Cynthia towed slowly past, negotiated the channel, and her prize crew set her sails; the gunboat steamed down outside the reef, picked up her boats, courteously dipped her ensign to the Empire Queen, and turned her nose to the horizon; and Captain Kemp drew leisurely on a thick, rope-sized manila, lifted one eyebrow, looked first at Hale, then at Peters and lastly at MacCrea.

“MacCrea,” said he, “being a Presbyterian, as I’ve heard you say, I put it to you as the most fitting. Would it in any sense be violating the rules of ethics to pick up what might be lying at the bottom of the lagoon, or maybe tucked ashore—the which we’ll learn presently from Palmer—knowing that them as were lawful owners will lose nothing if we do, and that them as are unlawful thieves will come back for it someday if we don’t? You’re making a dour face, MacCrea—which is right and proper if it’s against your scruples, for it’s like to be a matter of some fifty thousand pounds.”

“Mon,” said the little Scotch engineer sharply, “I was thinking o’ those ither ten cases. ’Twas a sinfu’ waste; ye might ha’ done wi’ five.”

BEHIND THE MASKS

Chapter I

In Conclave Unholy

LITTLE sounds that mingled low breathings, the occasional, scarcely perceptible scraping of a chair, cloth rubbing against cloth as when one moves involuntarily in change of posture—little sounds that made the predominating silence heavy with the hush of expectation. The room was dark. One could not see one's hand before one's face. If there were shutters, they were tightly barred. Not a gleam of light penetrated the interior.

Somewhere out of the blackness a clock chimed with a soft, mellow note. One, two—ten. A door opened, closed. The footsteps of two men, quick, sure, masterful, crossed the room—and ended in the faint creaking of chairs as they seated themselves.

Came then the click of an electric switch, and a shaded bulb that proved to be suspended but a few inches from the surface threw a circle of light on the green baize covering of a table, but the rays, reaching barely to the edge of the table, to all intents and purposes left the room as dark as before.

"Begin," ordered one of the two who had just entered.

Someone rose from a chair, advanced to the table and laid his hand within the circle of light, palm up, the four fingers pyramided one upon the other.

"I report forty-three-X. All is well. Nothing has miscarried. We require two Russian passports in blank."

"They will be sent to you tomorrow."

The man's footsteps echoed through the silent room, passed out and died away.

Another hand, fingers pyramided, was laid upon the table.

"I report eight-eleven."

"Ah! Francœur blundered—or was he false?"

"Francœur is dead. The daughter is dead. There is still the banker. It will take longer, but the end is inevitable. We cannot fail."

"When?"

"On the tenth."

"I will be there two days before." The voice was quiet, cultured, velvet in its softness. "See that there is no further blunder."

The hand was withdrawn, footsteps echoed down the room as before, and as before died away outside.

During the next hour one after another advanced to the table, pronounced their formula of introduction, made their reports, received their instructions, sometimes curt, sometimes lengthy and involved, but always sharp, incisive, bespeaking the keen-edged brain behind them—until finally it became the last man's turn to make his report.

"I report five-N," he said. "I have engaged passage to America by tomorrow's boat."

"You will cancel it and wait. We are not ready. Be on the Embankment by Blackfriars Bridge each morning from noon until half-past twelve. You will be communicated with. Go."

There was an instant's silence following the man's departure; then the light was swung well above the table. Two men were seated side by side; both were in conventional evening dress, both bore every evidence of good breeding and refinement—but there the resemblance ceased, for one was tall and fair, whereas the other was noticeably short in stature and of swarthy complexion.

The shorter man produced a paper from the pocket of his coat.

"The American project," he said with an inscrutable smile, "reminds me that last night in Paris I had the honor of dining with Monsieur le Juge d'Instruction Delcasse—one of our most noted criminologists, as you are aware."

"If the judge was on his hobby, it should have proved interesting."

"Highly! He talked of nothing else. He is writing a treatise on the subject, and was good enough to permit me to copy an extract from his manuscript, which I did for your benefit. Listen; I will read it:

"There is no question in the minds of those who have devoted earnest study to the subject but that we are face to face today with the appalling fact that there exists a cleverly governed and controlled organization whose object is the perpetration of crime upon an alarmingly extensive scale. The scope of this unnatural brotherhood is apparently limitless, and no country appears to have escaped unscathed from its depredations.

"I have already dealt, in detail, with the points that have led up to this startling conclusion. It will suffice to mention but one case here—a case in which this organization had the astounding audacity to go to the extent of actually *admitting* its existence. The Gorlam murder committed near New York in the United States,

and which attracted almost world-wide attention, is still fresh in the reader's mind. The ingeniousness of the motive was without precedent. It remained for Mr Richard Marters, perhaps our most eminent living criminologist, to solve the mystery. The actual perpetrators of the crime were arrested and, indeed, executed. Within a few hours of the time the arrest was effected, Mr Marters received a threatening cablegram which was sent from London by this outrageous band!

"It would be useless to pretend that the efforts so far put forth to unearth and bring to justice those at the head of this menace have produced any positive or concrete results; but —

"And so on—I didn't copy any more." He crushed the paper into a ball and smiled grimly. "Marters—Mr Richard Marters—is he omnipresent? Since that Gorlam affair he —"

"He is at least in London," interrupted the other.

"In London! Here! How do you know?"

"Dining with criminologists appears to be à la mode. You in Paris last night; myself here in London last night—with Mr Marters. It is a coincidence, is it not? Lord Lees introduced us at the Besswick Club."

"Why is he in London?"

"Mr Marters is not a communicative person. His man is more so, but by no means a find. I do not know. Pleasure, perhaps; he's wealthy enough. Or it may be —"

"Yes, it may be. We've made a mistake. More than once I've urged his removal when we have had the opportunity. He has shown us his claws. I do not believe in underestimating an enemy. Marters is the only man who has ever beaten us. He has had the advantage in the opening move, and that has whetted his appetite for the game. He is dangerous."

"He is a very charming individual," replied the taller man softly; "and, I will admit, undesirably clever—too clever, in fact, for us to invite his attention—unless he forces our hand. I am not of your opinion that his visit to London has anything to do with us. As I told you, he is wealthy, a millionaire several times over, and he travels a great deal. The other is simply a fad with him. I advise allowing the matter to rest there for the present. We have enough on our hands, have we not? When the time comes to cross swords or wits with him, if it ever does, let it be with you and me personally. He may have upset our plans once, but he has never beaten *us*."

"Very well," agreed the other reluctantly, "it shall be as you wish; but you are wrong. Why did you delay the American matter?"

“Because,” the taller man answered, “because Mr Richard Marters is not the only American in London.”

“You mean— —”

“I mean that better game is here—no, not tonight, it is already half after eleven. I’m due at Lady Lonslie’s bridge, you know—and our game. We’d better go.”

The two men rose from the table, extinguished the light and passed out of the door, locking it behind them. They felt their way along a narrow passage, then down a flight of steps. A figure suddenly loomed before them, blocking their path. A whispered exchange of words, and they went on again, out through another door, onto the pavement of the street, into an enveloping fog that, with the night, was almost as impenetrable as had been the room above.

They stood for a moment together, listening. An occasional whistle, someone’s appeal for a taxi, the dull sound of traffic or a man speaking suddenly out of the fog to a companion—that was all.

And then, as they separated:

“Good night,” said one.

“Good night,” said the other.

Chapter II

In the Fog

"If you'll excuse my sayin' so, sir, I'd advise a taxi. It's rare bad tonight, the fog, sir. It's easy enough to miss the direction." The porter was holding the hotel door open as he pocketed a generous tip.

Marters smiled as he drew on his gloves.

"Thank you, no," he said affably. "I can hardly miss my way. Two blocks to the right, four to the left, you said. I should have no difficulty—and your fogs are an experience."

"It's just as you say, sir, though, well as I know Lun'on myself, I'd be a bit anxious, I would, sir, myself, to find my ways about. Thank you again, sir; an' if you get lost, ask a bobby, sir; he'll put you straight."

"All right," said Marters, stepping outside. "I'll remember."

He turned to the right and began to walk briskly along. He had hardly gone a dozen paces, however, before he collided sharply with a pedestrian coming from the opposite direction. There was an exchange of apologies, and thereafter Marters moderated his pace. He counted the crossings as he went along, one, two; then he turned to the left and counted four more. "It is the third house from the corner; you'll know it by the railings in front," Jacques had said.

Marters edged in toward the buildings and moved slowly forward. A dull gleam from the fanlights of the doors cut through the fog in sickly yellow streaks. They were at least beacon lights; one could hardly go astray. He halted before the third, and his hand felt along—a low wall. There were no railings.

Marters whistled perplexedly.

"By Jove, that's queer," he muttered; "perhaps it's the other side of the street, though I'm positive he said it was this side."

He crossed the street, tripped against the curb—and brought up against the identical condition that had confronted him before. He stood for a moment, puzzled. Unquestionably a genuine, thoroughbred London fog was an experience. Decidedly an experience!

His appointment was not an important one. Alfred Jacques, an old New York friend, learning of his visit to London, had asked him around to his rooms for an informal evening, and they had set this date, the last day of

Marters' stay before leaving for the Continent and the Orient—a trip Marters had long projected, a pleasure trip, free from the hurly-burly of New York life, and free, too, for a while, from active participation in criminal investigation, for which, though but a hobby with him, he was famous on two continents.

But Marters' mind, as he stood on the sidewalk, was concerned neither with Jacques nor with crime in any of its manifold phases. It was simply a question of how in the name of common sense he could ever have missed his way. The directions had been clear enough, in all conscience. He felt in his pocket, produced a cigar, lighted it, stared at the glowing end with a frown, and then he laughed. Of course! The hotel was on a corner, though the entrance was fifty yards away. The porter had said two blocks to the right, meaning, naturally, two blocks beyond the hotel. Undoubtedly his collision with the passer-by, almost immediately after starting out, was responsible. But of all blunders this was the most stupid! He had counted two *crossings* before turning off—he should have counted *three*! Well, the matter was not serious. He could still retrace his steps to the hotel and start out again. But that was rather a roundabout and useless proceeding. If the streets in any way paralleled each other, he had only to go back to the one he had just left, continue one block farther on, which would make up for the one he had neglected to count, turn in, and the third house would be Jacques's.

Arrived at this decision, he went back to the corner and then started along to traverse another block. Since turning off from the street his hotel was on, he had not met more than one or two people, and in the last ten minutes not even one. The fog hung thick as a curtain; the street lamps, except within a very few feet of their immediate vicinity, were completely obscured.

"And our English cousins describe this as 'rather a nuisance, really a bit of a bore, you know,'" growled Marters as he stumbled along. "This seems a deuce of a long block. Hello! Now what?"

He was walking on *grass*. The next minute his knees collided with something, and he pitched forward, striking his chest. The obstacle gave way, sending him crashing to the ground. Half vexed, half amused, for the humor of the situation appealed to him—the possibility that it could exist seemed almost a joke—Marters picked himself up and struck a match. Overturned on the ground was a bench.

"Um-m!" pondered Marters as he righted the bench. "And now where the devil am I? A park or square of some kind—and I'm not quite sure I can hit the street that, somehow or other, I've just left."

The porter's advice, "If you're lost, sir, ask a bobby; he'll put you straight," came back to him. Very good, but where was the bobby? Everything around him was as still as the grave—and as black. Whimsically he seated himself on the bench—but the next instant he was on his feet, every nerve tense, staring into the nothingness around him.

Again the cry rang out, in shrill, piteous appeal:

"Help! Oh, help! Quick! I— —"

The cry died away in a choking gasp.

A woman's voice! It did not seem more than fifty yards away. Marters began to run in that direction, and as he ran, his face set grim and hard. To give his arms free play he flung back the cloak he was wearing over his evening clothes, and reached into his hip pocket for his revolver. Fifteen, twenty steps he raced forward; then he stopped to listen. From a little to his right he caught the sound of a low moan, the hoarse whisper of a man, the words unintelligible, the reply from another; and then he dashed forward again. Black objects loomed suddenly before him. He launched himself upon them, striking fiercely with the butt of his revolver, only to stagger back from a slashing blow that landed just beneath his eye.

"Aw, hit's no peeler!" panted a voice. "Hit's honly a bleedin' bloke. Kill 'im!"

They rushed upon him in concert, a hand closed around his throat with a choking grip; he shook it off and struck madly back. Again they rushed at him and, closing in, clung to him, trying to throw him to the ground. Panting, snarling, cursing like worrying dogs they were. Marters was fighting with the revolver still clubbed in his hand—shooting was a last resort. Backward and forward the three men rocked, Marters' powerful build and splendid physique almost, if not quite, a match for the combined strength of the two ruffians.

A hysterical sob came from the ground beside them, gained volume and became a piercing shriek.

"'Ell!" snarled one of the men. "Give it 'im, Bill, if 'e *will* 'ave it. Finish 'im quick!"

The grasp of one of his opponents tightened around Marters' waist and pinioned his left arm. He struggled to free himself, sensing his danger. Instinctively he flung out his right arm above his head—just an instant too late—only in time to divert by a few inches, not stop, the blow. A dull, sickening, weakening sensation shot through his side. The knife stab had gone home. He was almost to his knees; his head was reeling; blackness, utter and complete, a blackness other than the blackness around him, was

stealing upon his senses. He rallied himself by the sheer force of his will, fell backward as though insensible, thus freeing himself momentarily from his antagonists' hold; and then his revolver streamed fire, cutting the night with long flashes of light.

Came horrid oaths, a scream of pain, a figure fell, toppling, to the ground, staggered unsteadily to its feet again . . . another beside it . . . scurrying, shuffling footsteps . . . misty outlines vanishing, as the trickster vanishes in the black cabinet on the stage. Silence. Marters' head was throbbing with the wild, erratic pumping of blood as his heart still fought to function against the draining loss that was flowing from his side; ringing sounds were in his ears; lights were dancing in his eyes.

The woman—she was quiet now—a huddled shape a few feet away from him. He tried to gain his feet—and crawled toward her on hands and knees instead. He was growing incoherent, muttering to himself as he raised her head.

The action roused her.

“Help! Help!” she moaned faintly.

Her head was very heavy—too heavy to hold. It sank, slipped away from between his hands.

“Rather a nuisance, really a bit of a bore, you know,” he was mumbling. “Fog? London fog? Yes, quite an exper— —”

The last word broke on his lips, and he slid, unconscious, to the ground.

Chapter III

The Diamond Mine

"I COULDN'T say, sir, I'm sure. Every day for the three weeks you were in the hospital, sir, and since you've been back here, they've come every day, regularly. No sir; no card—not even the florist's name on the box. I thought it strange myself, sir, if you'll pardon my saying so, and I took the liberty of mentioning the matter to the porter, sir. He has an idea they're private cuts, sir, and— —"

"It is very unfortunate," interrupted Marters softly, "that our trip has been delayed a month— —"

"Yes sir; but I'm sure— —"

"I was about to add, James, that I am afraid the climate here is not having an altogether salutary effect upon you."

"On me, sir?"

"On you, James. Indeed, I hardly recognize you. You have become positively garrulous. Your accent is still a little off color, but you have done marvelously. Would you—er—mind translating 'private cuts'?"

James coughed behind his hand and reddened.

"Private cuts, sir? I think he meant that the flowers came from the lady's own conservatory or greenhouse, sir."

"Thank you, James," said Marters gravely. "That's quite American. Why do you say lady?"

"Why, I don't know, sir. I just said it, naturally like. I'm sure I never heard of men doing that sort of thing—for other men, sir."

"Um-m! You are a very keen observer of human nature, James—no, don't thank me. I know that's the custom here, but I'd rather you wouldn't."

"Yes sir," said James meekly; then: "Excuse me, sir; I think there is someone knocking."

He went to the door and returned with a card tray, which he extended to Marters.

"Um-m," said Marters, glancing at it, "didn't you say Mr Everlee had called before, James?"

"Yes sir; three or four days ago. I told him, sir, the doctors had forbidden you to see anyone. He said he'd call again."

"Ask him to come up," said Marters.

“But, sir, the doctors haven’t — —”

“James,” said Marters unhappily, “this is getting serious. The climate seems to be affecting your hearing, as well as everything else. Shall I repeat — —”

“No sir,” said James hastily, retreating to the door. “No sir.”

“Everlee, eh?” mused Marters. “Um-m, I wish I’d told James to take those confounded flowers out of this room. There are just two things Everlee is fond of—making money, though the Lord only knows what he wants any more for; and making game of things that are usually none of his infernal business. Er—there’s no use leaving them under his nose, in any event.”

Marters picked up the vase of roses from the center table and carried them, hobbling with the help of a cane, to the mantelpiece. His suite in the Ritzwold Hotel faced upon the Thames Embankment, and he crossed to the window for a moment while waiting; then he returned to his chair.

“Mr Everlee, sir,” James announced, throwing open the door.

A man of about Marters’ own age, thirty-five, stepped briskly forward.

“Now, don’t get up, old man,” he cried. “Just stay where you are. By Jove”—shaking hands—“I’m glad you’re coming around. That’s sincere, even if it is a bit selfish.”

“A bit selfish? Sit down, Everlee. I didn’t know you were in London till James said you’d called, though I believe you did say something at the Athenaeum Club, one night a few months ago, about getting away from New York for a while. James, you may go.”

Everlee nodded, drew off his gloves and leaned suddenly over the table.

“Yes, selfish. I want help—your help, Marters. And I want it badly.”

“Um-m,” said Marters. “I left New York for a change and rest. So far I’ve had the change, unquestionably; but not the kind of rest I anticipated. I’m going after that just as soon as I can travel—in a couple of days now. You’ll have to cut me out, Everlee.”

Everlee shook his head.

“Not much,” said he. “You can have the travel, but you’ll travel with me. Look here, Marters, this is no joke. It’s a pretty serious matter. I’ve been dogging this hotel ever since they moved you back from Guy’s, but between your confounded doctors and your confounded man, I haven’t been able to see you. Now that I’m in, I don’t leave until you’ve promised to help me. That’s flat, old man.”

“Yes, it sounds pretty flat,” smiled Marters. “But sit down. I’ll promise to listen to your story, anyway. What has happened?”

Everlee glanced quickly around the room as he seated himself.

“We’re alone, I suppose?”

“Quite. Go ahead.”

“I don’t know just where to begin to give you the thing in the fewest words. I don’t know whether you know it or not, but I’ve been a good deal interested, from a connoisseur’s point of view, in diamonds. Kind of a fad, if you want to put it that way. And as a consequence I’ve visited the ‘fields’ pretty much all over the world: Australia, Brazil, but more particularly the South African mines, De Beers, Kimberley, Dutoitspan—I’ve seen them all, and seen them work, from the strata excavation to gravel searching on the Vaal River. So much for that.

“Take Africa, for instance—it always struck me as queer that there hadn’t been more prospecting for ‘beds’ in other parts of the continent than in the district of the ‘precious circle,’ as it has been called.

“There’s no use going into details, but last year I was cruising the Atlantic coast of Morocco in my yacht, and about ten miles up a small river that I was exploring in the yacht’s launch—the stream wasn’t navigable for anything larger, and even the launch got stuck once or twice—I stumbled across what I was pretty well convinced was ‘blue ground’ of exactly the same consistency as the strata the Kimberley mine was following. I was sure enough of it in my own mind to take a chance, anyway; so I went back to New York, and fitted out a little expedition, and got hold of an old college chum of mine, a chap named Blaine, Harry Blaine, a corking good mining engineer, to take charge of it, and sent him off.

“I intended to go myself, but you’ll remember things were pretty panicky around Wall Street, and I wouldn’t even have dared to go as far as Coney Island during ‘Change hours, let alone a trip like that. Sorry I’m taking so long to tell you this, but it’s rather a queer state of affairs, and out of the ordinary, and I want you to understand.”

“We’ve got all the time there is,” said Marters with a smile. “Go on, Everlee, I’m interested. What happened? Blaine go back on you?”

“Blaine? No! I wish to God I knew what had happened to Blaine. You understand, we had to keep the thing quiet. That was the first consideration; that, and discovering if there was anything doing, if you’ll excuse the expression. We had no idea of fitting up anything elaborate there at first—that would come afterwards. Blaine just went in with a couple of picked men and enough coin to keep the district caid from getting either interested or inquisitive.

“Now it may or it may not be an easy thing to test the ‘blue ground.’ If you get stones near the surface, why, you’ve found out what you want to know; if you don’t find them, it’s no reason that there aren’t some deeper down. It’s like sinking an oil or gas well, you know, so far as the hazard is concerned.

“Blaine and his two men had the blacks to do the heavy work, which latter he got from the accommodating caid—at a price. Blaine said he was an archaeologist or something, and I suppose the caid thought he was crazy, but it was the kind of lunacy he admired—it was remunerative. I got all this from the first letter Blaine wrote me, and which reached New York about six weeks—no, I’d say it was two months—after he’d left. After that I’d hear from him regularly about every month.

“The news wasn’t very encouraging. He kept going down and down, and following the strata horizontally as well as vertically. By the end of six months he was some disgusted and more satisfied that there wasn’t a diamond within several hundred miles of him, and suggested giving it up and returning to New York. But somehow, even in the face of the negative results, my faith was as strong as ever, and, too, I wanted to see with my own eyes just what had been done. I wrote him to keep it up, and that I was planning to make a trip over there in my yacht within a few weeks. Then if, after talking the matter over, we decided there was no use continuing any longer, I would bring him back with me.

“Now comes the mysterious and disturbing part of the affair. Within a week of the receipt of his last letter, and just after I had posted mine to him, I received another, bubbling over with enthusiasm—and well it might—stating that, besides a number of smaller ones, they had found three large stones which were worth a small fortune in themselves.

“He went on to say that he knew this news would bring me hotfoot, and suggested that I come via London. He did not dare to leave himself, but one of the two men, Thurston by name, would meet me in London, to aid in selecting the supplies and equipment which were needed to start things on a big scale, and part of these we could bring with us. Also there were arrangements, such as concessions from the Morocco government, to be considered and taken care of.

“He gave me the name of the hotel where Thurston would stay in London, and said that he had told Thurston that I was to be found at the Besswick Club—making sure at both ends that we wouldn’t miss each other, you see. Well, a week ago I arrived in London, or rather, Liverpool, with the yacht, and came right up to town; but I never saw Thurston, though he was

here before I was. Thurston was murdered in his hotel room the night he reached London—*strangled*.”

“Did you identify him? Was he known to you personally?” asked Marters quickly.

“No, I had never seen him. He was a friend of Blaine’s. That wouldn’t matter much, anyway, for it all happened a week before I reached here. He was already buried. You see, Thurston probably left the camp at the same time as Blaine’s letter, and would reach London almost as soon as the letter would reach me in New York.”

“Um-m. How do you know, then, that it was Thurston who was murdered?”

“Unfortunately there is no doubt of it,” replied Everlee gravely. “The man who was murdered in the hotel was registered there as Thurston; and among the victim’s effects was a letter of introduction from Blaine to myself. Further than this, papers of one sort and another, his watch, with his name engraved inside the case, all pointed without question to the fact that the man was Thurston.”

“Have you any theory as to the motive?” demanded Marters. “Do you think he had the stones in his possession?”

“He may have had a few of the smaller ones; in fact, now I think of it, Blaine said he was sending a few to let me see them; but they wouldn’t amount to anything big enough to suggest murder. I am positive he did not have the large ones. I know Blaine well enough to know that they wouldn’t go out of his possession until he had delivered them to me personally. Besides, what would be the use? Thurston would have trouble with them through the customs, and then the whole business would be public property. No, it is absolutely certain that Thurston did not have the stones with him.

“Theory? God knows! There’s something damnable and far-reaching behind all this that I do not understand. Listen. The next morning after I had learned of the murder I got this.” Everlee took a very soiled and dirty envelope from his pocket and handed it to Marters.

Marters examined it critically. The envelope had been originally addressed to Harry R. Blaine, New York. This, with several forwarding addresses, had been scratched out, and in one corner was written: “James K. Everlee, Besswick Club, London, Eng.” The flap, originally torn, had been sealed by the aid of a small piece of court plaster. Inside was no more than a scrap of paper, a half-inch wide and the length of an ordinary sheet of writing paper, as though it had been torn from a blank space at the bottom of

a letter. Scrawled here in pencil, the words somewhat blurred, was one line, running from edge to edge of the paper:

For God's sake come quick. BLAINE.

"I imagine your man Blaine is in a hole, and a pretty tight one," said Marters tersely, after a moment's silence. "Certainly he was hard put to it for envelope and paper."

Everlee got up and began to pace the room excitedly.

"There's something hellish going on!" he burst out. "If it hadn't been for Thurston's murder here in London, it would be easy enough to imagine that Blaine had had a row with the caid of his district, or had got into trouble some way with the Moors or Arabs; but, as it is, it is a certainty that it's far deeper than that. What in God's name does it mean? Everything is quiet until the moment the stones are discovered! The place is way out of civilization, but one of my men is murdered in London, and another, two thousand miles away, probably has been by this time. What does it mean, Marters?" he cried fiercely, halting suddenly before the table; then, before Marters could reply, he went on hurriedly:

"Wait! It was after receiving this line from Blaine that I began to try to get into communication with you. I knew you were here, of course, and in the hospital—the papers were full of it. You say you will be well enough to travel in a few days, a couple of days. I'm going down there, and I want you to come. You'll have every comfort on the yacht, the sea trip is the best tonic you could get, and by the time we reach there, you'll be straight as a string and ready for anything. Now, for heaven's sake, old man, don't say no."

"Everlee," said Marters gravely, "you said, and I agree with you, that Thurston was probably carrying a few of the smaller stones. I take it, however, that they were not found."

"No, there was no trace of them."

"Quite so. Was there any appearance of anything else having been rifled? Money, valuables or anything of that sort?"

"Not a thing."

"Um-m! You, of course, have not called the attention of the police to the connection you believe to exist between Thurston's murder and your mine in Morocco?"

"No, naturally. It is essential that the latter, the existence of the latter, remain a secret for the present."

"That is the point, Everlee. Just how much of a secret is it? Who besides Blaine and his two men knew of it? Do you know of anyone who did?"

"Only one person," Everlee answered. "A friend of mine who was on the yacht with me a year ago, when I first determined to go into the thing; and who, too, by the way, is going to accompany us—mind, I say *us*, Marters—on the present trip. You'll like him immensely. He's an awfully decent chap. I met him first at Monte Carlo last year; that's how he came to be aboard—came back as my guest, you see. Since then we've been pretty thick, corresponded a lot, if we haven't seen much of each other. He's in investments, finance, that sort of thing—and very well fixed, I'd say. Also he's quite prominent socially."

"So now I know all about him," smiled Marters. "Except his name."

"Oh! Marnesdale—Derrol Marnesdale."

Marters nodded.

"Of Marnesdale's Limited? If so, I've met him."

"Yes; he says you have. That's the chap. Only he isn't *of* Marnesdale's Limited—he *is* Marnesdale's Limited. He's as much at sea over all this and almost as much worked up about it as I am. That's why he's coming along. And when I told him I was going to try to get you to go with us, he was delighted. You'll say yes, old man, won't you?"

"Yes," Marters answered. "Yes, I'll go, Everlee."

"You're a brick, Marters," beamed Everlee. "I knew you would, but it's no end of a relief to hear you say so, and I appreciate it all the more from the fact that you're practically getting out of a sickbed to do it. Speaking of which, reminds me that, so far, since I've been here, it's been all *me*. I've hardly asked you how you were or how it all happened. I expect everybody wants to know that, and all anybody knows is that you were found alone one morning, half dead. Of course the newspaper theory is that you were the victim of some criminal or criminals whom you had previously exposed, and that this was their revenge. I'm not much up on deductions, but"—with a playful grin—"judging from that vase of roses over on the mantel there, I'll bet a dinner there's a woman in it."

"Quite between you and me, confound you," laughed Marters, "you are right. I might have known you would notice them, even over there. I moved them from the table before you came in."

"Would it be impertinent for an old friend to ask her name?"

"You're welcome to ask, Everlee; but I can't answer you, because I don't know."

"You don't know! But the roses!"

“I suppose she sent them; but I don’t know, Everlee. I’m as much in the dark as anybody. I heard a woman scream for help in the fog that night, and went to her assistance—and had it out with two brutes who had attacked her. I fainted from loss of blood after they took to their heels, and that’s all I know about it. She’s evidently grateful, for she has been sending flowers every day; no card or name. If she has reasons for remaining unknown, as she certainly must have, she is entitled to have those reasons respected. That’s why I have said nothing before, and that’s why I’ll ask you to respect them now, Everlee.”

“Why, of course, old man. There is no — —”

He was interrupted by a knock at the door, and in response to Marters’ “Come in,” James appeared on the threshold with a large box in his arms, which Marters recognized at once as identical with those that had come day after day with the flowers.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” said James hurriedly, evidently anxious to forestall any verbal expression of the annoyance that had crept into Marters’ face. “I wouldn’t have dreamed of interrupting you, sir, but the messenger that brought this said it was most important, most important, sir, that you should have it at once. I’m sure I don’t know why, myself, sir, but he was that anxious that — —”

“Put it on the table and get out!” snapped Marters.

“Yes sir,” said James, obeying with unusual alacrity.

Everlee, with a chuckle, pushed the box across the table toward Marters.

“Let’s see ’em,” he said.

Half angry, half amused, Marters cut the string and stripped off the cover; then his eyes traveled to Everlee.

Everlee grinned.

“You’re a sly dog, Marters. No card, no name, eh? Well, I don’t blame you.”

On the top of the box was a sealed envelope.

“I give you my word, Everlee, that this — —”

“Don’t mention it, old man,” interposed Everlee laughingly as he rose, moved to the window and turned his back with exaggerated politeness.

“You are an ass, Everlee,” said Marters, picking up the envelope. He opened it and took out the double-folded sheet inside. It was closely written in a woman’s hand. He read it over hurriedly, then over again—slowly. It ran:

DEAR MR MARTERS:

The very strangeness of my failing to thank you in person, or even of acquainting you with my identity, when I owe my life to you, is sufficient in itself to convince you that the motives impelling me to this course are ones that leave me no alternative. But if I cannot thank you, I am in a position to repay, in a measure at least, the debt I owe you. As you have saved my life, so I can save yours, if you will be guided by what I say.

You will be asked, perhaps have been by this time, to accompany Mr Everlee on his yacht to the coast of Morocco. And the very fact that I am informed of this plan must be the guarantee that I am in deadly earnest when I warn you in the most positive manner that your life will be in peril from the moment you put your foot upon the yacht. I implore you not to go.

ONE WHO IS GRATEFUL

P.S. If it were known that I had written this, or even that you had received a warning—for then suspicion would be directed toward me—my life would not be worth a moment's purchase.

Slowly, thoughtfully, Marters folded the letter, put it back in the envelope and tucked it into his pocket.

Everlee turned toward him from the window and, approaching the table, buried his nose in the box of roses. He looked up with a smile.

"I don't think I'd object to being an invalid myself under such conditions," he remarked. "It has its compensations, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," replied Marters grimly, "it has its compensations, Everlee."

"Well, there's no use taking it quite so seriously. One would think you had received an invitation to a funeral, to look at you. I hope I haven't annoyed you by joking about it. The Lord knows I didn't feel much like joking when I came in—and don't now, for that matter. But I must be getting along. Shall we call it settled, then, for the day after tomorrow? I'll call for you in the morning, and we'll travel up to Liverpool together. The yacht is there."

"The day after tomorrow," repeated Marters. "Very good, Everlee. I promised you I would go. I shall be ready then. I think I shall leave James here in London."

"It's more than good of you," said Everlee warmly. "No, you'll hardly need your man. If anything new turns up between now and then, I'll let you know. I'll probably drop around tomorrow, anyway. Good-by for the present, old man."

For a time after Everlee had gone, Marters, leaning back in his chair, with his hands clasped behind his head, stared at the door, his thoughts busy with the story to which he had just listened, and busy, too, with the warning that Everlee had not shared. And then suddenly his lips straightened in a thin line, and his eyes grew hard, as there flashed upon his mind another warning that, too, had originated here in London, though of quite a different character, a warning that he had received some few months ago in New York—at the conclusion of the Gorlam case. They had called him the “Meddler” then.

The furrows gathered between Marters’ eyes. Meddler? There was an ugly significance behind the word. He reached into his pocket and drew out the letter.

“Meddler!” he muttered as he studied it again. “I wonder.”

Chapter IV

By Wireless

WHEN EVERLEE had promised Marters every comfort on board, he had given his palatial, seagoing yacht no more than her just and honest due. The Sylvania was a model of grace and elegance. From her oil-burning boilers and the last word in wireless apparatus, down to the minutest detail in equipment, she was the highest exponent of the shipbuilder's art. And on the first afternoon out Marters explored her from stem to stern—that is, as far as his still slightly crippled condition would allow.

Marnesdale and Everlee, with Clifford, the yacht's surgeon, were still quarreling good-naturedly over a game of cards under the awning on the after deck, where he had left them, when Marters, winding up his tour of inspection, halted on the boat deck by the engine-room skylight, to peer down at the flying machinery.

"Ye'll ken there's no her like in all the world," said a voice proudly in his ear. "Mon, she fair sings hersel' for the pair joy o' living."

Marters looked up, with a smile, into the eyes of the man of machinery, the chief engineer, Stuart McLeish.

"I'm promising myself the pleasure of paying you a visit below, Mr McLeish, one of these days, as soon as I am able to negotiate those steel ladders of yours. Mr Everlee tells me the Sylvania is an oil burner. Do you like it as well as coal?"

"Well," said McLeish cautiously, "I'd no say but there's deeficulties wi' it, ye'll ken, though I've no complaint. The study of machinery is like the study o' human nature—no twa are alike. Ye can get along wi' one or other, if ye understand 'em. It's mostly the mon, an' no the machine, when things go wrong." Mr McLeish pointed aloft to the wireless antennae. "Take yon for instance."

"What's the matter? Broken down?" asked Marters.

The engineer nodded.

"'Tis no the fault o' the instrument, I'm thinking. I mind we had nae trouble wi' it for the twelvemonth Simpson was aboard. A mon must ken the innards o' his own particular machinery. I've nae doubt 'twill be all right in the course o' time. The new mon's been tinkering valiantly wi' it since we left port."

Marters' eyes traveled from the masthead to the engineer, and then strayed aft to the wireless cabin that was just at the head of the after-deck companion ladder, and which a tall, angular, stoop-shouldered young fellow was at the moment entering.

"Yon's him," volunteered McLeish. "Clayton's the name. Came aboard yesterday to replace Simpson."

"And what became of Simpson? Wasn't he efficient, Mr McLeish?"

"Effeecient! Aye, he was—an' more. I'm mindfu' he was a wizard. But for a' that we found him at the bottom o' the main hatch a week gone. He must ha' walket over the vara edge—an' he was no a drinking mon, ye'll ken. Losh! 'Twas fair sinfu' for a mon to meet his death like that. Ah weel, what'll happen wull, ye ken."

"Yes," agreed Marters; and, smiling at the engineer's logic, he stumped thoughtfully aft and down the companion ladder, to join the others.

As Everlee had said, Derrol Marnesdale was a most charming companion, and in his and Everlee's society the first few days of the voyage, aided by fair weather, slipped by enjoyably. Marters, fast regaining his strength, was now able to dispense with his cane. The feeling of unrest and disquiet incident to the peculiar reason for his being aboard, and, indeed, for the trip itself, while never wholly absent from his mind, became, through the very nature of things, more or less dormant; and it was not until the third night that anything occurred to awaken him into activity.

The regular rubber of bridge, himself with Captain Sanders against Everlee and Marnesdale, had been played, and Marters had stretched himself out on one of the saloon sofas for a final smoke before turning in. Captain Sanders had gone to the bridge, and Everlee to his cabin, while Marnesdale, who still sat at the table, divided his attention between a scotch and soda and a game of solitaire. Marters watched the other for a few moments through half-closed eyes, noting with approval the tall, fair, broad-shouldered figure, the square-chinned, firm-featured, intellectual face; but wondering, too, a little at the incongruously cruel thinness of the lips. Then the figure, table, saloon and surroundings drifted into haziness, and he slipped off into a doze.

When he opened his eyes again, Marnesdale was still at the table, bending over the numerous piles of cards into which he had divided his pack. Marters turned restlessly and yawned.

"You've had a bit of a sleep," said Marnesdale, looking up. "You ought to remember you're only convalescing, Marters, and keep better hours."

You've been tossing like a rocking horse for the last ten minutes, and playing the deuce with my game. It's kept me busy picking up your belongings. If there's anything hasn't fallen out of your pockets, I'll be surprised. Your things are on the corner of the table, there."

"Why, thanks," said Marters, rising slowly to his feet.

On the table, as the other had indicated, was a miscellaneous little pile of things, his pocketbook, the papers and letters that had been in his inside coat pocket—and among them the warning he had received the day that Everlee had called! There was no question but that the articles could readily have dropped from his pocket; it was quite possible, entirely natural. His eyes traveled from the table to his companion. Marnesdale was shifting a card from one pile to another, tentatively, with a frowning face.

"Confound it," Marnesdale exclaimed suddenly, "that's the third time I've been stuck for a deuce!" He brushed the cards together with a petulant sweep of his hand. "What do you say to a turn on deck before turning in for the night, old chap?"

Marters was restoring his effects to his pockets.

"No, I hardly think so. I think I'll retire at once," he answered.

"Right!" returned Marnesdale. "Good night, then, and sleep well."

Marters watched him disappear up the companionway at the head of the saloon, and then stood leaning against the table, his brows contracted, a touch of red tingeing his cheeks.

"I am growing childish," he told himself. "That letter should have been destroyed."

He took it again from his pocket and read it once more. The last words, with their grim significance, he read over more than once: "My life would not be worth a moment's purchase." The lulling sense of security of the past three days was gone; he was alert enough now, alert enough to be amazed at his own apathy. And yet that he should be in peril on board the yacht seemed senseless, foolish. Peril from whom, from what?

He began to tear the letter into strips, and the strips into tiny pieces. They made a handful. One scrap fluttered to the floor. He stooped and picked it up carefully, then turned toward the companionway and began to ascend the stairs. The yacht's chronometer, facing him on the divided landing, arrested his attention. Two thirty-three! It was barely one o'clock when the bridge game had broken up. His doze was not a doze; he must have slept a good hour at least. He walked out on the after deck, crossed to the lee rail, opened his hand, and the breeze, catching the little papers, whirled them far out over the yacht's side.

He had no desire for bed. His brain was too active now. The boat deck invited him. He started up the companion ladder and when nearly at the top paused suddenly. There was a light in the wireless cabin, and he distinctly heard the sound of the key. So the wireless was in operation at last—and for the first time at half-past two in the morning! Strange! His curiosity aroused, he stepped toward the closed door—but drew back again immediately.

The green curtain over one of the open ports was only half drawn. At the table, dressed in only shirt and trousers, with the receiver clamped over his head, sat Clayton, working furiously over his key. Beside him, leaning over his shoulder, was Marnesdale. The noise of the instrument ceased.

“I can’t pick up anything,” he heard Clayton say. “I’ll try again in half an hour.”

“You’ll try again *now*, and keep on trying until you succeed,” was Marnesdale’s reply, and there was an ugly ring in the tones, usually so full and pleasant. “This must reach London by morning,” Marnesdale went on. “I don’t need to tell you, do I, that it would be unfortunate *for you* if you failed? Add to the cable the words ‘at Gibraltar.’”

Marters retreated softly down the companion ladder.

“At Gibraltar!” he pondered as he made his way to his cabin. “We are to touch there for mail, Everlee said. What else?”

Chapter V

The Barriers Down

IT was late afternoon of the following day. The yacht's launch had just brought off the mail from the "Rock," and the Sylvania, already under way again, was steaming out through the Straits to resume her southern course.

Marters, Everlee and Marnesdale were gathered around the mail bag in the saloon. They had been playing cards, but these, with glasses and tumblers, were now pushed to one side.

Everlee began to sort out the letters and newspapers, placing those belonging to the officers and crew in a pile aside, keeping his own in front of him, and occasionally handing a letter or paper to Marnesdale or Marters. This accomplished, the three men lounged back in their chairs to read.

Marters' share was of little importance, a few forwarded letters, cards and invitations to affairs in London, bills and receipts and the odds and ends of general correspondence.

Marnesdale's mail seemed even less absorbing, for he scarcely scanned the contents of his letters before cramming them into his pocket with a bored yawn. He decanted a glass of whisky and soda for each of the other two and, picking up a newspaper, spread it out before him on the table. Suddenly he looked up with a low whistle.

"By Jove," he ejaculated, "here's something that will interest you, Marters. Cable news in the local Gibraltar paper." He indicated the paragraph with his finger and pushed the sheet across the table.

As Marters took the paper, back through his mind flashed Marnesdale's words to Clayton in the wireless room: "at Gibraltar."

His eyes met the other's for an instant, caught the hint of something ironic, satirical lurking in their depths, then his own dropped to the paper. The dispatch, only a few lines, was dated London, July 19, and ran:

Fèkla Yulanoff, the famous Russian concert star, died suddenly here this forenoon under circumstances that the police believe to be the result of foul play.

Apart from her stage prominence, added interest is attached to her death as it has transpired that the injuries received by Mr Richard Marters, which attracted such widespread notice some six weeks ago, and nearly resulted in the noted criminologist's death,

were due to his rescue of Miss Yulanoff from the hands of footpads who had assailed her.

For all his self-control, Marters' face grayed as the ghastly import of the thing burst upon him.

"What is it? Let's see," said Everlee sharply.

Marters passed over the paper mechanically. The train of events was passing in swift significance before him. Thurston's death, the woman's warning to himself, Simpson's death, his own papers exposed that night—the *night of the eighteenth*—the wireless—"at Gibraltar." She had paid for her warning with her life! The vengeance had been swift and sure—on the *nineteenth*.

And now this. They were deliberately and contemptuously throwing off the mask! Her letter that had "fallen" from his pocket! It was the only source whereby her warning to him could have become known—and it was only to Marnesdale that it had become known. It would have been very simple to have picked his pocket as he had lain there on the saloon sofa asleep—no, probably slightly drugged. And equally simple to have returned the letter to his pocket! Marnesdale had *intended* him to know it had been read. Why? Strange that a Russian woman could write such perfect English, but that had no bearing on *fact*—the explanation would probably be simple enough.

His brain was working in lightning flashes. The devilish subtlety of the dispatch—their warning this time; the ugly power, the far-reaching scope of it all! He felt it, sensed it, knew it, as he knew he breathed, that once more he was doing battle with the organization with which, though at long distance then, he had matched wits in New York—knew too, now, that the head of that organization was no other than this devil in human shape across the table, who was speaking coolly, with even a trace of sympathy in his voice.

"You seem to be taking it hard, old chap. Did you know her?"

Marters turned slowly at the words, looking steadily into Marnesdale's face, and with the look the barriers went down between them.

"No," he answered. "Did *you*?"

"Why, yes," was the cool response. "I knew her well—quite well. Her parents escaped from Russia at the time of the Revolution and brought her while quite a child to England. She was educated there and spoke and wrote"—there was a faint but unmistakable emphasis on the word—"English much better than she did her native language. It's very distressing. You've met her, Everlee?"

Everlee laid the paper aside and looked up.

"No," he said; "but it's a bit queer, eh, Marters? I mean that you wouldn't even know who she was until she was dead. Queer that she wouldn't have let you know. I don't see why."

"I think I do," said Marters evenly.

"You do! Why?" asked Everlee.

"I think she wanted to live." Marters' eyes were on Marnesdale.

"Why, what on earth do you mean by that?" cried Everlee.

Marnesdale laughed.

"Don't you know better than to question a noted criminologist, as the paper has it, on points like that, Everlee? If Marters has a theory, I'll venture to predict it's right. Furthermore, I'd even venture to express my admiration for—"

"Oh, don't talk rot," interrupted Everlee crossly. "I say it's queer, and so it is. Let's drop it. I haven't said anything to you two chaps, or bothered you so far about what's brought us down here. But we'll be off the river tomorrow, and now's as good a time as any to talk it over. Not that there's much to discuss yet. The first thing, of course, is to find Blaine, if the poor devil is still alive, and after that the stones—if they're still to be found."

"Your stones will be found," predicted Marters quietly; "so will Blaine—without much difficulty. The difficulty will be in keeping your diamonds after they are in your possession."

Marnesdale's hand reached out for his glass, and as he raised it to his lips he bowed toward Marters with an almost imperceptible inclination of his head.

"I hope you're right," said Everlee, accepting the assertion broadly, "because once I get them, I'm not worrying much about being able to hang on to them. I'll take care of that part, all right. What I propose is this. We can't take the yacht much more than into the mouth of the river. From there on we'll go up in the launch to the mine. After that it depends on circumstances. Does that sound feasible?"

It was Marnesdale who answered:

"There isn't anything else to do, is there?"

"I suppose not; but to be perfectly honest with you both, I'm not sure I'm doing right in running you into this. God knows what will happen, or what's at the bottom of it all. I can't get Thurston's murder out of my head. It's a long way from London, yet there's a connection between Thurston and what's going on down here. I've been thinking the matter over since we left Liverpool, and I've come to the conclusion that it's my hunt, not yours,

fellows. I don't think I'll ask either of you to come up in the launch, after all. You can stay aboard the yacht, and then my conscience will be clear about you, at all events."

"Well, rather *not!*" exclaimed Marnesdale. "You're a nice selfish beggar, you are! D'ye think we'd miss the fun after we've come all this way? Not much! Would we, Marters?"

The man was a master—imperturbable, adaptable, inscrutable, facile. His effrontery, far beyond the vulgar acceptance of the term, was magnificent. The trump hand was his so far, and he led boldly, forcing the game, forcing even Marters' admiration in spite of himself, in spite of his repugnance and the bitter anger that seethed like a torrent within him. But Marters, too, was now impassive, accepting the challenge, playing the game.

"No, I should not like to miss the *fun*," he answered.

"Well then, your blood be on your own heads," said Everlee, rising, "though I'll admit it's a relief to know you feel the way you do. It's getting pretty well on to dinnertime, if you are going to change your togs."

Without a word, as though both were anxious to avail themselves of the opportunity, Marters and Marnesdale rose from their seats and followed Everlee from the saloon, each going to his own room.

The situation was unnatural, unbelievable, impossible almost. Marters' face was hard and set. As he undressed, preparing for his bath, someone knocked softly on his door.

"It's Marnesdale," said a voice. "May I come in?"

With a quick movement Marters flung his dressing gown over his shoulders and caught up his revolver from the dresser. Then he stepped to the door, unlocked it and flung it open.

Marnesdale entered quietly, closed the door and sank coolly into a chair.

"Really, you know, Marters," he drawled, "you've no use for that thing now. I don't say you won't need it before you see London again—if you ever do—but I protest it's not hospitable."

"Do you consider yourself entitled to hospitality?" demanded Marters coldly as he laid the revolver on the berth within easy reach beside him.

Marnesdale waved his hands deprecatingly.

"Is it worth argument? There are other things to say. It is refreshing, is it not, that we shall be able to talk without reserve. I am sure you agree with me that the situation is far enough removed from the trite and commonplace to be exhilarating. I am prepared to be perfectly frank, and I trust you will feel inclined to be the same."

“Perfectly!” Marters assured the other without hesitation. “I know you for as damnable a scoundrel and as great a menace to society as the world has ever seen!”

“Delcasse—do you know Delcasse?—he is writing a book—would envy you your command of language. Certainly I cannot complain of any lack of frankness. It is now my turn; but first let me remind you that it is I who have voluntarily, deliberately if you prefer, opened your eyes to the situation as you see it now. I will explain why, and in return have faith to believe you will answer one very simple little question. Not very long ago, Mr Marters, you were under discussion; the advisability of your removal, *permanent removal*, was suggested. I admit I underrated you, and I opposed it—unless fate or your own insistency should bring you across our path again. You had already been warned once. You will remember that we took occasion to call you ‘Meddler’ and— —”

“Thank you,” Marters interrupted with a tight smile. “That eliminates even the possibility that I could by any chance have been mistaken in your identity!”

“You are quite welcome,” returned Marnesdale urbanely. “I am so glad to set your mind at rest! But to continue. When you came aboard the yacht, we did not know that you had been warned a second time—from another source. That discovery came later. You are well aware that I read the letter that—I promised to be perfectly frank—I took from your pocket the other night. You know the result. I took pains to see that you should know it, and I trust you were duly impressed with the fact that we have the power to strike surely and swiftly. We could not consider the motives that actuated Fèkla Yulanoff, laudable as they were—she was one of us until she betrayed us — —”

“You rotter!” cried Marters hotly.

Marnesdale smiled coolly.

“I said I would tell you why I had that notice cabled to Gibraltar and inserted in the paper. That was the principal reason—that you should appreciate our reach and power. Another was to show you your own impotency by playing the game out under your eyes—with your eyes wide open. A delicious situation, is it not, Marters? Oh yes; you were clever enough to read the meaning of that paragraph instantly; but of course you had the key to it through knowing that the wireless was significantly in operation for the first time that night. I might even say that I added the *uncoded* words ‘at Gibraltar’ to the code message for your benefit. I saw you come on deck and knew you were outside the wireless room. Why was the wireless out of order at my convenience? I’ll tell you. Everlee is an amateur

sender, clumsy enough, but at least comprehensible, and fond of pounding the key. I did not care to risk any more meddling! Simpson's unfortunate accident in falling down the open hatch we need hardly refer to."

"I have met many great criminals," said Marters icily. "I use the adjective in its ugliest sense, and you will therefore not misconstrue my words into a compliment when I say I fully realize that in you I am facing perhaps the greatest of them all. I recognize, too, the dominating trait of the class—the braggart."

For the first time Marters had touched the other. The red rushed into Marnesdale's face, his eyes narrowed, glittering angrily. Impulsively he leaned forward in his chair, as though about to spring to his feet.

Marters' fingers were toying unconcernedly with the revolver beside him.

Then Marnesdale sank back in his chair with a laugh.

"You lack finesse, aplomb, Marters," he said softly. "And you are doing me a very grave injustice. Am I not strengthening your hand with every word I speak? Even if I can afford to! You call me by names as hard as any in the English tongue, while I came to tell you that, though I always believed you clever, you have proved yourself cleverer than I gave you credit for. I told you I was going to ask a simple question in return for my frankness, braggadocio, if you will. On what did you base your statement to Everlee that the stones would be found readily enough, but that the difficulty would be in keeping them, once they were in his possession?"

"On your blunder," replied Marters tersely.

"You mean the small stones Thurston carried?"

"That and your handling of Blaine."

There was silence for a moment.

Marters, quiet, self-contained, composed, his watchful black eyes fixed on the other, sat motionless.

Marnesdale's gaze had strayed to the porthole across the cabin, his fingers were beating a tattoo on the arm of the chair. Suddenly he turned to Marters.

"You are clever," he said with his peculiarly engaging smile. "It's really too bad, you know, that you're not one of us, for I will pay you the compliment of saying that, were such the case, we would unhesitatingly have made a triumvirate of the High Command—and considered ourselves most fortunate. As it is—"

"As it is," interposed Marters, "you are gratuitously telling me that there are two of you. But why you are telling me so I do not know."

Marnesdale shrugged his shoulders.

"Does it matter? There is no reason why I shouldn't. You will never, unfortunately for you, benefit by—shall we say?—my confidences. Yes, we are two; but I might remind you that trees have many branches."

"So they have," agreed Marters; "but when the roots die, the branches do not long survive. That sounds a trifle sententious, doesn't it? But I am sure you grasp my meaning. I shall look forward to meeting the other—root."

"Rather a vain hope!" Marnesdale sighed ironically. "As I was about to say when you interrupted me, I am willing to admit that you are right. We did blunder. But you will never have the opportunity of profiting by it. I'm sorry I can't promise you a sporting run for your money from now on. You're the only man I've ever met that would have made it worth while, or even interesting."

"Really," protested Marters dryly, "I do not think you need harbor any regrets on that score."

Marnesdale shook his head.

"*You know too much.* You have come into this affair voluntarily; you must accept the consequences. I will even warn you that they are inevitable. Positively, I admire you too much to feel any elation. If you had not gone so far, I would give you an opportunity of escaping. As it is, it is too late."

Marters was silent for an instant.

"Is there any object in continuing this discussion?" he inquired abruptly.

"Not very much, it is true," returned Marnesdale. "We thoroughly understand each other. The position for the moment is an impasse between us. Your deductions, correct as they have been, have come through intangible sources. That is, intangible so far as connecting me with what has taken place. You are powerless. Could you go to Everlee with the story—even repeat to him what I have said here in this room? Hardly! Nor would you consider it for a moment. He would believe that you were crazy, that your illness had turned your head. I would but have to suggest it. My social and financial standing is quite unimpeachable, is it not? You might shoot me as I sit here. You won't. The psychological moment for that has not come. You are waiting. There is still another hand of the game to be played, another move to be made—and so far you have never failed. I? I too am waiting. For the present you are but a fellow guest of Mr Everlee, whose society I enjoy. And we are both old enough and experienced enough players

to keep the masks upon our faces. Not voluntarily, perhaps, on either side, but of necessity for the moment there is a truce between us.”

He rose from his chair. “May I help myself to a cigarette? I am afraid you might misconstrue the action if I reached into my pocket. Thanks.” He selected a cigarette from Marters’ silver case on the dresser, lighted it nonchalantly, passed to the door and, swinging around to face Marters, paused for an instant on the threshold. “I am afraid I have kept you from your tub. Au revoir,” he smiled, and the door closed behind him.

Chapter VI

With Intent to Murder

THE SYLVANIA had made good time, and it was but shortly after lunch the next day when she reached her destination and came to anchor about a mile upstream from the river's mouth. Ahead and around, the shores were thick with foliage. The Atlas chain rose just to the north; the slopes covered with forests of pine, oak, white poplar and wild olive trees. Away to the southward, stretching toward the Sahara, the verdure thinned, giving place to bare, level tracts of country.

Bobbing at the vessel's side, hooked onto the gangway, a complement of men already in their places, was the yacht's motor launch. Everlee was halfway down the gangway with Marters and Marnesdale preparing to follow, when the latter drew back suddenly and looked around.

"I thought we'd planned to take Clayton with us," he remarked. "I don't see him down there."

"I believe Mr McLeish has spoken for him," volunteered Marters calmly.

Marnesdale glanced quickly at Marters and then at the chief engineer, who was leaning on the rail near the gangway head.

"Aye," said McLeish, "there's a bit overhauling to do. It requires a man wi' some idea o' mechanics to be o' any use. My first has gang in the launch, an' the second's in his bunk wi' his innards upset. I was obleeged to requisition Mr Clayton for the wark! 'Twas no much to his liking, I'm mindfu'; but needs must when the devil drives, ye'll ken. I induced him wi' a bit pat on the head fra' a spanner. He'll be down in the bowels o' the machinery workin' like a Trojan, an' though he's a slow worker wi' his own outfit, I misdoubt he'll no do so bad wi' mine—there's naught like a leetle persuasion o' the right sort, ye'll ken. I— —"

"Aren't you fellows coming?" It was Everlee's voice bawling up from below.

"It was quite futile, Marters," said Marnesdale pleasantly, in an undertone, as he turned to the gangway. "Good-by, McLeish, don't break too many spanners over the poor chap's head." And then to Marters again, as he descended: "Quite futile, old chap."

"Perhaps," replied Marters steadily. "Do you ever play chess, Marnesdale?"

"Oh, come on, you fellows!" cried Everlee. "We've got ten miles to go before dark. Do your gassing in the launch. What's it about?"

"We're talking chess," said Marnesdale.

"And the value of pawns," added Marters, seating himself in the stern sheets beside Marnesdale.

Everlee sniffed disdainfully, motioned to Thompson, the second officer, who was at the wheel in the bow, and the launch shot out from the yacht's side, heading up the river.

At the first bend, a few hundred yards away, Marnesdale touched Marters' arm and pointed astern to where the white hull of the Sylvania glistened in the sunshine, her spars and rigging in perfect outline on the water, behind her the dark background of the wooded shores, the mountain peaks, with a glint of the sea to the westward.

"Pretty, rather," he said casually. "I thought you'd like a *last* look—before we got round the bend."

"Yes, it is pretty," said Everlee, picking up the conversation; "that is, for a few miles. After that it begins to get flat and monotonous. We get pretty well into the edge of the Sahara, you know. We're really skirting the southern boundary of Morocco. It was just about a year ago this time that we were up here, Marnesdale, wasn't it?"

"Just about," replied Marnesdale, filling his pipe.

"Ten miles, at this rate," said Marters, "ought not to take more than two hours at the most. We're doing five easily. I thought you said, Everlee, that we wouldn't reach the mine much before dark."

"Neither we will. It's slow going after a bit. We have to pick our way. There's a long afternoon ahead, and you'll have to make the best of it. We're pretty crowded, but I expect you'll be able to stretch out somehow for a snooze. That's the best way I know of passing the time."

Marnesdale grunted in acquiescence and proceeded to follow the advice.

Marters' eye roved speculatively over the back of the yacht's first engineer, just in front of him, roved forward over the crew sitting four abreast, and finally rested on the second officer in the bow. A sun-tanned, sturdy, brawny lot they were, laughing and jesting like children out for a lark. And the only sign that the outing was other than just that—a lark, just playtime—was the brown leather belt around each man's waist and, protruding from the holsters, the ugly butts of heavy navy revolvers.

They were men of the best type of American seamen, these fellows, men to be trusted, to be relied upon, Marters felt, and the thought brought him satisfaction and, in a measure, relief. But only in a measure. Outwardly calm

and composed, his mind and brain were working at their highest tension—as they had been working since the preceding afternoon. Ahead, somewhere before them, was peril, certain, imminent—the placid commonplaceness, the lulling conventionality of his surroundings but served to accentuate the deadly reality of it all—the demand for even greater mental effort.

It was not enough to know that Blaine was the vital point at which this man stretched out beside him, debonair, suave, plausible, the embodiment of malignant, almost immeasurable power, was aiming. That point was certain, sure. But from what direction, how, when and upon whom would the blow fall—besides himself?

Slowly, carefully, he reconstructed the appalling series of crimes with its one basic object in his mind. Beginning with Thurston's murder, he followed it, point by point, logically, surely, certainly, to the end—Blaine. And here, where it seemed that Marnesdale must certainly face defeat, the man, instead, faced the developments to come with a confidence, a reliance that could be born only of the certain knowledge of reserve power, of strength, hidden, masked. Marters felt that the other's eyes were upon him, and he turned to meet the look.

For a long minute their eyes held, each trying to read to the other's soul; then Marnesdale took his pipe from his mouth. The dottle fell with a little hiss into the water as he rapped the bowl against the gunwale. The corners of his mouth drooped downward in a faint sardonic smile. He yawned, stretched, rolled over on his side and settled himself with his arm under his head.

The afternoon droned monotonously away. Progress had become slow, laborious. The launch crawled slowly along, picking her way as best she could, dodging the floating limb of a tree or the sudden shallowing of the channel, occasionally striking with a jarring thump upon a piece of timber, waterlogged and half submerged.

An hour passed, and still another. It was flat, low country now on either hand; but the heat was giving place to the cool, refreshing evening breeze from the mountains to the north, and the men, awakening from the dull apathy of the hot, breathless afternoon, into which they had sunk, once the novelty of the change from shipboard restraint had worn off, were moving restlessly, uneasily in their seats, anxious for action, like children again demanding something to occupy their attention. One of the men, presumably for the sheer lack of something better to do, drew his revolver from his belt and set to polishing it. Marters noted the action and smiled at the humanness of it as one after another imitated the example of the first, even to Everlee sitting across from him on the opposite side of the launch. Marnesdale still

lay on his back, stretched out between them on the narrow seat that ran across the stern, but now he turned on his side and, raising himself on his elbow, held out his hand to Everlee.

“That’s a rather curious piece of artillery you’ve got there, Everlee. Let’s look at it,” he said.

Everlee handed it over without comment. It was a murderous-looking little weapon of the automatic, short-barrel type; heavy enough in caliber, but so compact and small in size as to be readily hidden by the back of one’s hand when held in the palm.

Suddenly the second officer, who had made the trip the previous year with Everlee and Marnesdale, shouted from the bow:

“There’s the place now, sir, if I remember rightly. Just ahead on the port side.”

Most of the men stood up and craned forward to get a glimpse of what was before them, and from that, if possible, an idea of the reason for the river trip. Everlee rose eagerly to his feet with the rest. All eyes were riveted ahead upon the left bank. Instinctively Marters’ gaze followed the others for an instant, then intuitively his eyes swept back to Marnesdale. His heart seemed to stop its beat, the color faded from his face. The end—for him, at least—had come.

Marnesdale had not changed his languid attitude; he lay on his side as before. In the space of time, short as the tick of a watch, long as the endlessness of eternity, Marters got it all, the half smile on the handsome face that seemed incongruously to temper the set, relentless features with an expression of pity, apology almost, the hand held close in against the body, the muzzle of the revolver peeping out between the fingers unerringly. Marters’ brain was whirling. An accident—deplorable truly—there had been many like it before—accidents of the kind were common enough—but why delay . . .

A shock! A crash! Marters was flung violently sideways against the gunwale. A flash! The muffled roar of the report sounded in his ears. The men forward were sprawling at the bottom of the boat, and then a cry of horror came from Everlee. Marters recovered himself almost instantly. A huddled heap was lying in the little cockpit of the launch—and the heap was Marnesdale!

The man was motionless, still, inert, his head bent in, jammed against his shoulder, one arm flung out with extended hand—while a few inches from the finger tips lay the little automatic where it had fallen from the nerveless grasp. A red stain on the waistcoat just over the heart was widening rapidly.

Marters dropped to his knees, bent over the other, grasped the man by the shoulders and lifted his head. The lips, almost livid, were twitching convulsively, the eyelids fluttered weakly, opened, and into the fast-glazing eyes came recognition. The same smile, debonair, careless, with its lurking hint of irony, flashed across the graying features. The lips moved. Marters bent to catch the words:

“Lucky dog, Marters, sporting luck, eh . . . old . . . boy? Meet you later . . . soon . . . I . . .”

That was all. A convulsive shiver of the limbs, and Marters laid the lifeless form back on the bottom of the launch.

Unnerved himself, he rose to his feet and met Everlee’s horrorstricken eyes.

A hushed silence lay over the launch. The men were staring aft with blanched, awed faces. The boat had come to a full stop and was canted slightly to starboard; the only sound was a dull, scraping noise from the grating keel forward under the bows.

Thompson, the second officer, made his way aft from the wheel, looked for a moment at the prostrate form, then buried his face in his hands.

“It’s my fault, God help me!” he whispered. “I was watching the shore, and we were on the deadwood before I knew it.”

Marters laid his hand kindly on the other’s shoulder.

“Don’t take it so hard, Thompson. Perhaps you haven’t so much to reproach yourself for as you appear to think now. That log, or whatever we struck, is still under us. Go forward like a good fellow and see to getting it away.”

“Marters, this is awful!” cried Everlee as the mate went forward again. “Awful! I don’t understand how it happened.”

“He was stretched out on his side on the seat,” said Marters soberly, and more as though he were constructing the scene before his mind’s eye than attempting to explain it to Everlee, “not very well balanced in that position—the seat’s too narrow. He had the pistol in his hand, holding it quite close in against his body. The shock when the boat struck pitched him forward with a half roll off the seat into the cockpit. The pistol was discharged, and the ball entered just below the heart.”

“All clear, sir,” announced Thompson in a subdued voice.

“If that’s the mine yonder,” said Marters, anxious to divert Everlee’s thoughts, “let us get over there as quickly as possible.”

“Go ahead, then, Thompson,” directed Everlee; and, turning to Marters: “The poor chap said something, didn’t he, before he died? I couldn’t catch the words.”

“Yes,” said Marters quietly. “I’ll tell you later. Not now. You wouldn’t understand.”

Chapter VII

Blaine

THE gravel bank rose in an easy slope until it attained a height of some ten feet above the water's edge. In the foreground, fifty yards away, were a couple of rough wooden shacks. To the right were scattered piles of earth, as though thrown up in the excavation of a long trench. Behind these again, a quarter of a mile in the distance, wooded country framed the scene in a somber, dark blue line.

The launch's keel rasped gently on the shore. Everlee called to two of the sailors and, pointing toward the silent form on the grating, bade them carry Marnesdale's body ashore. Then he and Marters stepped out of the boat onto the bank.

Desertion, desolation, decay were all about them. There seemed nothing else. Everlee's face was strained and anxious as he turned to Marters.

"I don't know what to make of this," he said nervously. "It looks like a bad business—it's been a bad business from start to finish. I wish to heaven I'd never seen the place before, never heard of a diamond! There's been devil's work going on here. What's that?" He pointed suddenly toward the wooded land to what, in the twilight already darkening into night, was scarcely more than a moving speck.

"Horseman of some sort, I imagine," Marters answered. "He seems to be the only sign of life around here."

Everlee raised his voice in a long halloo. If the horseman heard, he gave no sign of having done so. Again Everlee shouted, and this time a faint, low cry, more like a moan, answered him. It came from their left, from the direction of the farther of the two shacks. Both men whirled about and stared intently, trying to locate the sound. Again it came, apparently a little nearer. Then, in the half-darkness, they made out a shape, queer, ungainly, moving with clumsy, painfully slow and awkward movements toward them.

"It's a man," exclaimed Everlee. "A man crawling on his hands and knees!"

Marters was already running forward, with Everlee beside him.

"Ever—lee! Is it—you—Everlee?"

"Blaine! *Blaine!* In heaven's name, man, what have they done to you?" Everlee cried out bitterly as he and Marters reached the other's side.

The man's hair, dust and blood-caked, straggled stringily over sunken, hollow eyes. His face, from its emaciation, seemed elongated to twice its normal length; the cheeks so thin they curved inward to the jaws, as though the man were sucking them in between his teeth; his trousers, frayed to the knees, left his legs bare; while wrapped around his ankles and over his feet, in great wads, were strips of what once might have been a blanket.

Marters held his flask to the man's lips.

Blaine drank greedily—and then burst into a wild singsong torrent of oaths. The fury that shook the man seemed almost demoniacal.

"Done to me!" he raged. "Do you need to ask? Help me back to the shack."

"Just a minute," intervened Marters as Everlee was about to shout for the men. "Blaine, answer one question. The diamonds—you've still got them, haven't you?"

"Diamonds! *Diamonds!*" Blaine began to curse furiously. "What's that to you? Are you another of them? Diamonds, damn 'em! That's what brought me to this!"

"Answer me, Blaine. Everlee, tell him to answer."

"Mr Marters is my friend, Blaine," said Everlee. "Answer his question. I'm sure he wouldn't ask it without good reasons."

"Yes, then, if you want to know, I've got them—safe."

Marters nodded.

"Just so. It's all right, Everlee; we're secure enough until we get ready to leave. Call up a couple of men."

"What do you mean—until we're ready to leave?" demanded Everlee.

"Presently, presently," begged Marters patiently. "Let us make Blaine here as comfortable as we can first. What's the matter with your feet, Blaine?" he asked as Everlee called to two of the crew to come up with lanterns.

"Bastinado!" Blaine answered through his teeth. "Bastinado! The hellhounds!"

"Blaine, poor old chap!" choked Everlee. "I got you into this. I don't understand, only that—"

"It's all right," Blaine interrupted, "now you've come. I'm not dead yet by a long sight—if I am a wreck. Let me have that flask again."

Marters gave him another drink; then the sailors, coming up, and followed by Marters and Everlee, carried Blaine into the shack and laid him on one of the three bunks that were built against the wall.

The interior had never been anything but crude and primitive, but now it was in a state bordering on ruin—ransacked and stripped of everything, bare from roof to flooring.

“Mr Thompson wants to know, sir,” said one of the sailors, “what we’re to do about . . .” He hesitated and stopped.

“Yes,” said Marters soberly, addressing the sailors, “you must bury him. There should be plenty of shovels—”

“Shovels!” Blaine laughed raucously. “There’s *nothing*! Those cursed Berbers stole everything. There’s not a tin dipper left!”

“Then,” said Marters quietly, “you must do the best you can. The ground had been excavated all around here, you—”

“No, no,” protested Everlee hurriedly. “We can’t do that! We’ll take him back to the yacht and bury him at sea. This is too—”

“It is necessary,” Marters interrupted earnestly. “Please let me be the judge of this, Everlee. Believe me, I am not speaking idly when I say it is for the best.” He turned to the sailors again as Everlee nodded acquiescence. “With Mr Everlee’s permission, I am going to ask you to request Mr Thompson to have this attended to at once, and at the same time to see that Mr Marnesdale’s personal effects are carefully preserved. I would also be glad if he could spare a few men, from this duty and that of getting supper, to form a patrol line between here and the launch. That is all.”

The men touched their caps and withdrew.

Everlee was regarding Marters with a puzzled expression on his face, but Marters, with just a friendly, reassuring touch on the shoulder, stooped over and began to devote his attention to Blaine.

The man had been cruelly maltreated, his body was bruised and scarred, his feet lacerated and swollen to twice their natural size. Marters adjusted the bandages more comfortably, his touch as gentle and delicate as a woman’s, then he stepped back.

“You’ll be all right, Blaine, when we get you back to the yacht and into the doctor’s hands,” he announced cheerily. “Rest, quiet and nursing will bring you around in quick order. I hate to ask you to talk now, for I know you’re weak, but a great deal depends on it. Can you manage to tell your story? You can make it very brief. Just give us the essential points.”

“Give me another nip from that flask first, then,” said Blaine. “Thanks. It won’t take long to tell. It’s only since we found the stones I suppose you want to hear about. Well then, first of all, there’s a little town about fifteen miles from here where the caid of this district lives. That’s where I mailed letters—to get that point straight. Well, as soon as we made the find, I wrote

to Mr Everlee at New York. Everything was ripe then to go ahead here on a big scale, so, to save time, I asked him to meet Thurston in London, and I sent Thurston off with plans and specifications for the things we'd need, with the idea that they'd purchase immediately in London, and bring down what they could with them at once, and also I gave him a dozen small stones just to let Mr Everlee see that it wasn't all a dream. You met Thurston, didn't you, Everlee? Why didn't you bring him back, or have you?"

"Thurston is dead—murdered in London before I got there," said Everlee in a low voice.

"Dead! Murdered!" Blaine raised himself on his elbow. "I've felt it all along. There's some ghastly business going on here—someone here watching every move. This proves it."

"Yes," concurred Marters. "Go on, Blaine."

Blaine nodded.

"You know," he continued, dropping back on the bunk, "that there are a great many Negroes brought in here from the Soudan. That's the only labor I could get, and I had to hire them from the caid at a price that would make a grafting politician back home envious. I didn't have much faith in them or the caid, or his Moors and Shelluhs either, so the night we found the big stones I hid them. Not even Thurston or Lunn—the other American with me, you understand—knew where they were.

"Well, the day after Thurston left, the caid arrested Lunn and me and took us over to the village and imprisoned us. Then in about two days they began their deviltries on us—after they had ransacked this place for the stones without being able to find them. Lunn *couldn't* tell them, and he died under their tortures. And I—well, damn them to everlasting perdition, *I haven't told them yet!* One fellow, when this began, seemed friendly—the interpreter. He was disguised as a Moor, but I know now that he was no more Moor than I am. His English was infernally good, but I didn't suspect him then, and I was only too glad to grasp at straws. He offered to get a letter through for me, and I wrote it, but I don't suppose you ever got it."

"Only part of it." Marters' voice was level as he made the statement.

"Why — —" began Everlee.

"Only part," repeated Marters. "That move was almost diabolical in its shrewdness. You explained the situation and asked for help, didn't you, Blaine? And perhaps, at the end, the Moor suggested that you make your appeal still stronger by repetition, was that it?"

"Yes," ejaculated Blaine, "that is just exactly it. But — —"

"We will come to it presently," Marters smiled. "Finish your story first."

“There’s nothing more to tell. They brought me back here yesterday and left me. They gave me a little coarse food to eat, but for water I’ve had to crawl to the river twice. You can see that everything was stolen while I was a prisoner. I don’t know why they brought me back at all, but they did, as you see. I haven’t seen a living soul since yesterday, until you came.”

“And I am responsible for this,” said Everlee brokenly. “I wish to heaven you’d given them the stones! God knows they’re not worth what you’ve been through, nor the lives they’ve cost! I feel like a murderer. It’s like a trail of blood, only I can’t follow it, can’t see, can’t understand. Marters, for God’s sake, what does it mean? Where is the end? Do you know?”

“Yes,” replied Marters evenly. “I know what it means, though I cannot yet prophesy the end. I have known for some time that there was in existence a widespread organization at whose doors lay the guilt of many, perhaps the large majority, of the great crimes of the last few years which have mystified and baffled the authorities almost everywhere. Their power and resources seemed boundless; they were bold, daring and unscrupulous in so big a way as to make their audacity almost magnificent. You will begin to understand when I tell you that it is against this organization we are pitted. You will understand better when I tell you that one of the two, for I now know that there were two, governing brains behind this organization was—Marnesdale.”

“Marnesdale! Marters, are you crazy?” gasped Everlee.

“I knew Marnesdale,” said Blaine. “He was with you last year, Everlee, wasn’t he? Mighty decent fellow—not much of a criminal about him.”

“Marters, do you realize what you are saying?” insisted Everlee sharply. “Why, it’s unbelievable!”

“It may be less unbelievable,” returned Marters soberly, “if you will remember that it was Marnesdale who was on the yacht with you a year ago when, in your own words, you ‘first determined to go into the thing,’ that you were in constant touch with him thereafter, by mail mostly, I believe you said, and that he is therefore the one man who *could* know what was going on here since he obtained his information directly from you; and also may I add that this is the same organization that I personally encountered in New York during the last year. You were in New York at the conclusion of that case, Everlee, and I do not need to rehearse the details of what the papers called ‘the Gorlam murder.’

“But let us sketch the course of events in the present case briefly. There are two peculiarities connected with Thurston’s murder. First, that while nothing else was disturbed, the small diamonds he was carrying were

missing. Second, the absence of any attempt to conceal the man's identity after his murder; or rather, let us say, the significance of the fact that his letter of introduction to you reached you at all. In considering these points we must coincidentally consider the torn message that Blaine here sent you, and remember that, though you received it almost as soon as you did the news of Thurston's murder, Thurston had already been dead then for nearly a week.

"One of the several reasons, of course, why Thurston was murdered was to obtain the large stones which they believed he was carrying; but when they were not found in his possession, the logical assumption was that they had never left the mine. But, following the murder, they could not find the stones at the mine here either, and it was that intervening week to which I have referred that changed the plans of these devils, for during that time they had come to the realization that they could not, even under torture, make Blaine disclose the hiding place. There was, however, one way still open to them of securing the diamonds. That was to bring you here to Blaine and then take them from *you*!"

"Curse 'em!" snarled Blaine viciously.

Everlee's face whitened.

Marters went on: "You will remember I said you would have no difficulty in finding either the stones or Blaine, that the difficulty would be in *keeping* the diamonds. Very well, they wanted to bring you to Blaine, and with the utmost possible speed—before, for instance, Blaine, like Lunn, died on their hands from the treatment he had received. What better means than an appeal from him in his own hand? Hence his letter. It is hardly necessary to explain why they tore off all but the few words at the end. The appeal was there—the rest was far too intimate a description of what was going on.

"The possibility that you might not give full credence to Blaine's letter and act promptly enough to suit them was obviated by Thurston's death—corroborative evidence, if you like. But, as I have intimated, that was not the only motive for killing Thurston, nor was the hope of stealing the large stones from him the only other motive either. They were even more anxious than you were to keep the existence of this mine a secret—they intended to *own* it themselves. Therefore they did not dare to run the risk of even exciting the suspicion that a new diamond mine had been discovered, as might have followed a preliminary selection of material and appliances by Thurston, pending your arrival. Do you understand? That is why, too, they took the small stones. No; wait a moment." Marters held up his hand as Everlee was about to interrupt.

“I can give you the rest in a word or two, and I prefer to finish it now. That note you saw me receive in the box of flowers was, as you know now, from Fèkla Yulanoff. She, it seems, was connected with this organization of which Marnesdale was one of the chiefs. That note was a warning to me out of gratitude for the help I had been able to render her that night in the fog. She paid for her gratitude with her life. Marnesdale extracted the letter from my pocket the third night out, and by means of the wireless sent a code message denouncing her as a traitress.

“It was then I began to suspect Marnesdale. My suspicion became certainty when he called my attention to the dispatch in the paper just after leaving Gibraltar. He knew then that the barriers were down between us. Someday, when we have time, I will explain this more fully, and tell you what passed in my stateroom last night before dinner. I will only say now, so that you may know him for what he was, that, feeling himself secure in the fact that I had no actual proof and that my hands were tied until I could foresee the next move, he, true to type, boasted vaingloriously of what he had done—even going to the length of expressing his regret that, for my own sake, meaning what was to follow, of course, I had become involved in the case.

“Just one thing more. The accident this afternoon. If the launch had not struck at the moment it did, I, not Marnesdale, would be lying out there now where he is lying. At the moment you were all engaged in looking at the shore the revolver in Marnesdale’s hand was pointing at my heart—not his. It would have been an *accident*. Playing with firearms has occasioned accidents before. That, I believe, takes us down to the present time; there are a few details and one or two points I have not touched upon—they remain for the future. The game is not ended yet.

“Oh yes, I might add, Everlee, that unless your claims to this particular piece of property here were pretty well established, strongly enough, in fact, to get the American government behind you, you’ll probably find somebody else has made themselves solid with the authorities of Morocco. I am afraid you’ll discover you do not own it.”

“Own it!” Everlee burst out. “Own it! I *wouldn’t* own it! I’d give ten years of my life never to have seen it.” His voice lowered, and the lantern light flickering on his face showed it gray and strained. “Marnesdale! What a ghastly mess!”

“We’re not out of it yet,” stated Marters gravely. “They expected us here about this time. I mean within a day or so. That’s why they brought Blaine back here—so that he could give you the stones. They know we’re here now. What their plan of action was with Marnesdale alive, I do not know; I

suppose he prearranged plans for communication. What they will do now that he is dead, I do not know; only that we will not be allowed to get away with the diamonds if they can prevent it. Only one thing is certain. They will not, as I told you before, make any move, within a reasonable time, before we actually start to leave.”

“I don’t see why you’re so sure of that,” said Everlee dubiously.

“Because,” Marters smiled, “they have no interest in us until they *know* the stones are in our possession—that is, in yours—and they have no means of being sure of that until we are, as I said, actually leaving. In other words, if they attacked too prematurely, before Blaine had given them to you, or even disclosed their hiding place, they would simply find themselves up against the same dead wall of Blaine’s stubborn resistance as before, and all their plotting and scheming would have been for nothing.”

“So it would,” Everlee agreed. “Well, Marters, what do you propose?”

“We’ll give the men a chance to get their supper, and then try and make the yacht tonight. I know it’s dangerous attempting to navigate the river in the dark, but it’s the safest thing to do, because, in event of an attack, the darkness will favor us more than it will them. We must force their hand to that extent, at least. In the meantime, Blaine, if you’ll tell us where those stones are, we’ll get them and have you carried down to the launch.”

Blaine sat up in the bunk.

“Look here,” said he. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I’ve been through a thing or two on account of those diamonds. Marnesdale was a friend of Everlee’s—and something else. That’s how, as you said, he got wise to the whole thing. You’re a friend of Everlee’s—and I don’t know whether you’re anything else or not. I’m not taking any chances. Do you get the connection?”

Marters’ laugh cut short Everlee’s protest.

“Blaine,” said Marters, “there’s no race under the sun, not even my own, that I admire more than I do the Scotch. You’re Scotch, Blaine, no matter what your name is. It’s all right, old man. If the stones are where you, in your crippled condition, with Everlee’s help, can get them without other assistance, I’ll leave you and go down to the launch.”

“I reckon we can manage, thanks,” grunted Blaine uncompromisingly.

Again Marters laughed, then turned to the door.

“Don’t be any longer than you can help. When you’re ready, call the men who are patrolling outside,” he said as he left them.

Chapter VIII

The Trap

JUST the steady *putt-putt-putt* from the exhaust of the engine, the voices of the crew talking in low monotones, the night sounds of the river, little splashes, the rustle of branches, that was all. Apart, the heavy stillness of the wild, unsettled country, and over all a blackness that was impenetrable. Twice already the launch had grounded on the bank in the bends of the river's course; then, fended off, she had continued her way cautiously, at quarter speed.

"I wish to the Lord the moon 'ud come up," complained Thompson. "I might as well have my eyes blindfolded. I can't see the course two yards ahead."

"How far have we come, Mr Thompson, would you say?" asked Marters, who had stationed himself beside the second officer, in the bow.

"Well, it's hard telling, sir. A matter of three miles maybe. D'ye really think we're likely to be attacked? Seems as though we'd made a clean enough getaway."

"I don't know," Marters answered seriously. "If we could choke the ubiquitous chatter of that engine of ours, our chances would be better. The sound will carry miles a night like this."

"Yes. That's so, sir. That's why I didn't stop the men talking. They're all keyed up now, and if you close sailors' gab under those conditions, they're worse than old women on the verge of hysteria. I don't know as I blame them, with what's happened this afternoon. I can't get that out of *my* mind, sir."

"I can quite understand," returned Marters. "But you mustn't let yourself dwell on it, Thompson. You are quite sure that you didn't overlook any of Mr Marnesdale's effects?"

"Quite sure, sir. I gave Mr Everlee everything that was in his pockets, and we emptied every one. Watch, papers, money and all that. *That* was a ghastly business too. I felt like a vulture."

"It was necessary," said Marters briefly.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, a half-hour passed. Then Marters touched Thompson on the arm.

"It seems to be growing darker, if that's possible," he remarked.

"We're getting into the wooded stretches," explained the second officer, "where the trees come right to the banks. I don't mind that so much, but maybe you noticed coming up that there's one or two bad shoals hereabouts, if I've got my position right. I don't believe there's more than four feet, five at the most, covering the bed straight across, and in places, if you stepped out, you wouldn't wet your boot tops. We're drawing three and a quarter; pretty deep we are, you see. This'll be the nastiest work of all. You there, Meehan, pass the word back to slow to steerageway."

Once or twice in the next five minutes the keel grated, rubbed the river bottom and heeled the launch, now to port, now to starboard; but each time she slipped over without holding, and Thompson swore in relief.

"I'd give a month's pay to be out of this and alongside the Sylvania," he growled. "There's too — — Lord! What's that?"

The bow had struck with a curious, yielding jar; the launch lost way, brought up with a jerk and then began to swing with the current, broadside on.

"Reverse her, quick," ordered Thompson. "Look sharp — —"

The words were lost in a medley of savage yells. A flash of light along the right bank, and then the rattle and crash of firing for an instant drowned out the yells. A leaden hail hummed and sang over the launch.

For a moment all was confusion aboard, men sprang to their feet, some silently, some profanely. The launch rocked and shipped a little water. Then Marters' voice, quiet, cool, contained:

"Don't fire, men, yet. It would only give away our position. They're aiming high; they can't see us. Sit down, all of you. Are we aground, Mr Thompson?"

Thompson had swung himself out of the boat at the first shot and was floundering around in the water by the bow.

"It's a hawser," he called. "The devils have stretched it between the two banks."

"Cut it," prompted Marters.

Thompson laughed mirthlessly.

"It's steel."

Another volley rang out from the shore, a cry of pain from one of the men, then the crashing of branches and undergrowth, wild, derisive shrieks, a splash as of a body of men charging into the water.

"They're coming," yelled Everlee from the stern. "There's no use waiting, Marters. Let 'em have it, boys."

The men needed no second bidding. Their revolvers were singing, roaring, crackling, spitting with the venom of a machine gun, cutting their paths of flame through the darkness and lighting in momentary flashes a set, grim face here and there among them.

Marters was bending over Thompson, trying to catch his words above the pandemonium that was raging around him.

"It's only up to my chest," Thompson was saying. "We could lift her over easily enough, by disembarking."

"No time," Marters answered. "They knew we'd think of that—that's why they're charging. It would only put our men at their mercy without doing any good. There's just one chance, Thompson—the shore end."

"Right!" said Thompson. "I'll try it."

"I'll go with you. Wait an instant." Marters reached back and drew the man next to him forward. "Listen," he said sharply. "We're held by a steel hawser stretched between the two banks. Mr Thompson and I are going to try and loosen the shore end on the opposite bank from which the attack is coming. Do you understand? Tell Mr Everlee to be ready to go ahead the instant you're clear. Don't wait for us. We'll either join you farther down or make our way along the bank to the yacht. You understand?"

The next instant he had slipped into the water beside the mate. The yells and cries were drawing nearer and nearer, within a few yards of the launch now.

Thompson led the way, one hand on the hawser beneath the surface to guide him, the other holding his revolver above his head to keep it dry. Marters imitated his example. The water, at times, was almost below their knees. Once Marters hesitated.

"Thompson," he gritted, "we've only our knives; suppose —"

"Ten to one it'll be lashed," Thompson flung back. "We'll be able to cut it. That's the chance. If it's made fast any other way, there's nothing aboard the launch would help us to loosen it in time to do any good. Listen! They're at it hot now. Hand-to-hand. It's a good thing there's row enough to drown the noise we're making, or we'd have the devils after us. I hope the boys can hold them. I suppose we could have gone about and run upstream again."

"It would have served for the moment," Marters answered, "but it would have been certain death in the end. They'd have got us tomorrow, the next day or the day after."

"Right," said Thompson. "Here's the shore. Look out, don't hit your head. The trees are thick. Holy sailor, it's black! Wait! I'll have it in a minute. All right, come on, here it is. I've got it. It's lashed, as I thought.

Help with your knife. Cut here.” He guided Marters’ hand as he spoke. “You’ll have to feel. The cable’s once around the tree trunk with a half-inch manila rope through the looped end. Cut, for God’s sake, *cut*! There she goes. Jump clear, or she’ll take your leg off!”

There was the ripping, tearing sound of rending strands as the manila parted, a swish like the cut of a saber through the air, and the taut, straining cable struck the ground a few feet to one side, whipped the trees and undergrowth like a giant lash, and slid, zipping angrily down the bank, as the slack sank along the river bed.

Both men turned and stared anxiously out toward the middle of the stream. The fight, still waging as hotly as ever, was evidence enough that Everlee and his men were holding their own. Shrieks, curses, cries, groans, the crackle of small arms, the flashes of the shots came in a jangled discord of sounds to their ears.

Suddenly Thompson shouted:

“They’re moving! They’re moving! There goes the engine. Look, they’re passing us. You can tell by the flashes. But those devils are still hanging on. If the boys can only make deep water, they’re all right.”

“They’ve made it now,” said Marters after a moment of breathless suspense. “They’re shaking them off. See! The firing is from two points—and the distance is widening. Now, Thompson, let us be looking out for ourselves.”

“Mar-ter-ers! Thomp-son-on!” It was Everlee’s voice raised in a long-drawn-out hail. “D’ye hear, you fellows? We’re going to head in for your bank a little farther down and pick you up.”

“Quick!” Marters urged his companion. “The cat’s out of the bag now. Some of those fellows understand English, I expect, and they’ll know now what happened to their cable. They’ll be after us hotfoot. Here they come now.”

Chattering, angry voices reached them from midstream, and then the swish and splash of men hastily thrashing their way through the water.

Shrubs and undergrowth hampered the two men as they ran. Panting, breathless, bruised from the limbs and trunks of trees into which they crashed, they kept doggedly on. Behind they could hear the pursuers breaking through the thicket. Came suddenly then the sharp crack of a rifle, and a bullet clipped the leaves above their heads.

“This won’t do,” panted Marters. “We’re guiding them by the noise we’re making, and they’re catching up on us. The launch can’t be more than a few hundred yards away, but that means a quarter of an hour with this

going. We're opposite deep water now. Strike for the river, and we'll swim for it."

"Yes!" agreed Thompson shortly.

It was a matter of only a minute to reach the bank. They hung over it for an instant, and then, clinging to trailers, tendons and shrubs, they lowered themselves cautiously and silently into the water.

A hundred yards, and Marters' clothes began to tell on him. Thompson, too, was breathing heavily. Then something white showed just ahead.

"There she is," gasped Thompson. "Launch, ahoy!"

There came a quick answering hail, a suppressed cheer, and then, as they were dragged aboard, Everlee's voice:

"Thank God, you're safe!"

Chapter IX

Fourteen-Three-K

IT was just breaking dawn when the launch ran alongside the yacht at the river's mouth. The night's work had been disastrous. Two of the crew had been killed in the fight at the shallows, and another by a chance shot—one of the many that had been fired at the launch at intervals by their assailants, who had kept abreast of them on the bank, following their course for miles down the river. Of the others, there were few who had not been more or less wounded in the hand-to-hand melee that had taken place around the hawser-held launch.

Everlee, himself worn and haggard, with a shoulder wound which, if not dangerous, was extremely painful, was assisted up the gangway to the deck by Marters. Here he turned to watch gloomily the debarkation of the survivors.

Captain Sanders, apprised of the arrival of the launch, appeared from his cabin half dressed and came hastily toward them.

"Good Lord! What's happened?" he cried.

"About everything that could," Everlee answered bitterly. "It's too long a story to tell you now. Get under way at once. Out to sea—full speed—anywhere so that you put this ghastly place behind us."

Captain Sanders nodded, walked to the rail, peered over and came back.

"Pass the word for the doctor!" he bawled at a steward; then to Everlee: "From the look of things, he'll be the busiest man on board for the next few days. I think we'd better rig a sling for that man you've got in the stern there. He looks pretty well done up."

"That's Blaine," said Everlee. "Tell Clifford to see that he has every comfort. Have him put in the cabin next to mine. Come on, Marters; we can't help any here. We'll be down ourselves if we don't get a little rest. We'd better turn in."

"Not yet." Marters shook his head as they walked toward the main companionway. "There's some work to do first. I know you're pretty well all in with that shoulder, but if you can face it out for another hour — —"

"Work!" interrupted Everlee, halting abruptly. "What do you mean? What work?"

"Wait until we're in your cabin," replied Marters, leading the way below. "You've got those things belonging to Marnesdale, haven't you?"

"Yes, but for heaven's sake, Marters, aren't we through with that yet? I want to forget it. I want to forget it so much that I almost wish I hadn't got the stones, after all—except for Blaine's sake. I'm going to give them to him, of course. God knows, if anyone is entitled to them, he is—and I only hope they will recompense him in some measure for what he has been through on their account."

"I agree," concurred Marters heartily; and then, gravely, as he followed Everlee into the latter's cabin and closed the door behind him: "As I said, I'm afraid there's still some work to do before we can turn in. Let me see those things—no, only the papers and notebooks. I don't care anything about the rest. Um-m! I thought he'd be likely to carry it around with him. Here we have it!"

"Have what?" demanded Everlee.

But Marters did not answer. Apparently oblivious to his companion for the moment, he was working rapidly with his pencil on a piece of paper he had picked up from the writing desk. Spread out on the blotter before him, open, was one of the notebooks belonging to Marnesdale that Everlee had handed him.

"Oporto's about nine hundred miles," he muttered. "Say three and a half days, four to be sure. Allow for contingencies, and call it four from London. Today's the twenty-fourth. That would make it the twenty-eighth. Um-m . . ."

"What the devil are you mumbling about?" snapped Everlee querulously, leaning over Marters' shoulder. "And what's that you've got there?"

"Just a minute," said Marters. "I'll — —"

There was a rap at the door and Dr Clifford entered brusquely.

"The second officer says you're wounded in the shoulder, Mr Everlee—and by the way, Mr Marters, the chief engineer asked me if you wouldn't go to him in the wireless room. Now, Mr Everlee, we'll take a look at that shoulder, please."

"Devil take the shoulder," said Everlee. "Go and fix up the rest first. Blaine — —"

"I've just brought him into the next cabin. He'll be all right in time, with care and nursing. Shoulder please"—curtly.

"Let him patch it," put in Marters, "while I finish this. You'll be in better shape to come with me. Go ahead, Doc; Mr Everlee will give you ten minutes for temporary repairs. I'll be ready then."

The “repairs” were completed, however, and the doctor had left the cabin before Marters looked up from the desk again. Then he closed the notebook, slipped it into his pocket, together with the sheet of paper upon which he had been working, and rose to his feet.

“Hello!” he exclaimed. “There’s a bit of a sea on. I hadn’t noticed it. Sanders hasn’t lost any time putting out. We’re clear of the river already.”

“Good job,” said Everlee fervently. “What is it about the wireless room? That where you want me to go with you?”

“Yes,” said Marters, “come on. McLeish will be getting impatient, I’m afraid.”

But McLeish, on the contrary, appeared to be in high good humor when, a few minutes later, they entered the wireless room.

“Weel, ye’re back again, I see,” was his greeting, “though a wee bit worse fra’ the trip. So Muster Marnesdale’s dead, is he? Weel, ye’ll be glad to ken, Muster Marters, that yon misgueded ape has confessed.” He jerked a stubby thumb at the operator, who sat in a dejected attitude on the edge of the berth, holding his head between his hands.

“Confessed?” Everlee repeated the word in a puzzled tone.

“Aye—wi’ *persuasion*,” grinned McLeish. “I’ll no say he volunteered much information. I was obleeged to labor wi’ him for the best part o’ the night. ’Twas the one wi’ the most forcible arguments, ye’ll ken. A spanner’s a braw — —”

“I should say you used them, or it, whichever you prefer, with some effect,” Marters interrupted grimly as Clayton looked up, disclosing a bruised and battered face. “To explain to you, Everlee, I left Clayton to the tender care of McLeish here yesterday before we started up the river. When I tell you that Clayton is one of Marnesdale’s tools and accomplices, you will perhaps understand the strange perversity with which the wireless apparatus refused to operate; also it may enlighten you somewhat in reference to the accident that cost your former operator, Simpson, his life when he fell down the hold.”

“Good God!” ejaculated Everlee in horror. “Is there no bottom to this hellish work?”

“There is an end,” Marters answered sternly, “and it is near. Now then, Clayton, you know Mr Marnesdale is dead; but there appears to be someone almost, and perhaps equally, as prominent as he. I want him.”

“I don’t know!” Clayton burst out. “I tell you I don’t know. I never knew anyone else but Mr Marnesdale.” The man’s spirit, under McLeish’s heroic methods of “persuasion,” seemed utterly broken.

“Mr McLeish says you have confessed.” Marters turned to the engineer. “To what extent did he confess, Mr McLeish?”

“Weel,” said McLeish gruffly, “it was mostly to the mistreatment and manhandling of the wireless, acting on the orders of Muster Marnesdale; but the rest of his yarn I’m no so sure I got to the bottom of, ye ken, so mabbe ye’d do weel to question him yersel’, Muster Marters.”

“I will,” said Marters evenly. “And we’ll begin, Clayton, with the murder of Simpson, your predecessor, for there is no doubt that it was murder, and — —”

“I had nothing to do with that!” Clayton broke in wildly. “I wasn’t aboard here then. I hadn’t even seen the Sylvania when that happened. I’m telling you God’s truth! I swear I am!”

Marters searched the other’s face keenly, penetratingly, for a full minute.

“Yes, I’m inclined to believe you had no actual hand in it,” he granted finally; “but what do you know about it? You must know something.”

“I—I . . .” Clayton hesitated, and his gaze traveled miserably around the room.

“Well?” prodded Marters; and then sternly: “Listen to me, Clayton. A murder has been committed—more than one, for that matter. You are implicated. The only grounds on which you can expect any leniency is by making a clean breast of everything you know, and I warn you that otherwise you will only make things worse for yourself. Now answer my question.”

“I only know”—Clayton circled his lips with his tongue—“what Mr Marnesdale told me.”

“What did he tell you?”

“He told me that Simpson had been disposed of—I think those were the words he used—and that I was to go to Mr Everlee, say that Mr Derrol Marnesdale had sent me, apply for the position of wireless operator on the Sylvania, and I would be given the job.”

Everlee swore suddenly under his breath.

“That’s true,” he said in a numbed way. “Shortly after Simpson’s death—*very* shortly after, come to think of it—Marnesdale came to me and, after expressing the usual regrets about the ‘accident,’ said he had a young protégé, a very capable chap named Clayton, that I’d oblige him greatly by taking on in Simpson’s place. Naturally I was only too glad to do so, and when Clayton here showed up the next day, I engaged him.”

Marters nodded.

“Naturally!” he said; and then to Clayton: “Where and when did Mr Marnesdale tell you this?”

“One night at a meeting.”

“A meeting?”

“Yes—whenever we were ordered to report, and get new or further instructions. But”—with a sickly smile—“I’m afraid you wouldn’t understand.”

“And I’m afraid I don’t quite agree with you,” returned Marters crisply. “By ‘we’ I take it you mean Marnesdale’s felonious brood—and I’ve met some of them before. So you met on call for instructions, eh? Did you”—ironically—“all wear masks at these secret conclaves?”

“No, but we couldn’t see each other’s faces. There was only one shaded lamp, low over the table at which we sat.”

“Very interesting! How many were there of you?”

“Sometimes only three or four, and sometimes perhaps a dozen—it all depended on who had been ordered to report.”

“But Marnesdale was always there?”

“Not always; but generally, after the rest had all arrived, Marnesdale and another man came in together and sat at the head of the table. There was always one of them there, and we took orders from either one.”

“Who was the other?”

“I don’t know. None of us knew.”

Marters’ face hardened.

“If you knew that one of them was Marnesdale, how do you explain not knowing who the other was?”

“I didn’t know then—any more than the others did.” Clayton twisted his hands together nervously. “I didn’t know it was Mr Marnesdale until after the Sylvania had been at sea for several days.”

“Ah! And how did you—no, we’ll come back to that. I suppose at least that you of the lesser breed were all known to each other?”

“No; only those who sometimes had to work together. We were known by numbers and initials.”

“And your number?”

“Fourteen-three-K.”

“How many of these others did you know?”

“I didn’t know any. I always worked alone.”

"That sounds very convenient," commented Marters coldly. "I hope, Clayton, you are still telling the truth!"

"I am, so help me God!" asserted Clayton in passionate earnestness. "It's true. I always worked alone. I didn't know any of the others. Everyone went to the meeting alone—always a few minutes apart—we were given the precise time we were to be there. And everyone left separately. I'm telling you the truth, Mr Marters."

"All right," said Marters almost soothingly. "But there is one thing that you cannot help but know. Where were these meetings held?"

"They were never held in the same place twice."

"Indeed?" Marters' eyebrows went up. "You're not going to tell me, are you, that you don't know the various addresses?"

"No," said Clayton steadily, "I'm not. I know them all."

"Um-m! Well then, try not to forget them," cautioned Marters dryly. "They may be of some use to the police—later on. And now let's see where this has got us as applied to the present situation. Marnesdale does not want any wireless messages to be received by or sent from the Sylvania except his own or those that he could first censor. He dare not risk the possibility, say, of any new police development regarding Thurston's murder coming to light and being wirelessly that might awaken suspicions in Mr Everlee's mind, or cause Mr Everlee to change any of his plans.

"He knows Mr Everlee can manipulate the wireless after a fashion, and so the wireless must always be conveniently out of order at Marnesdale's pleasure; and, above all, he dare not risk the chance of something going amiss at the mine at the last moment which, if communicated to the London police, or the police anywhere, might spell disaster to him. In a word, for these and contributory reasons, the Sylvania was to be strictly incommunicado. I think that is a fair statement of the case, Clayton?"

Clayton nodded his head miserably.

"Thus," Marters went on, his voice dispassionate now, "Simpson is in the road and is 'disposed of' as a mere matter of routine and as callously as one would squash a fly on a windowpane. So one of Marnesdale's degenerate henchmen takes Simpson's place—you, Clayton. And that brings us back to the point where you said that after you had been aboard here a few days, and not until then, you recognized Marnesdale as one of the two men from whom you and your perverted associates received their orders. I would like you to explain that—how you came to recognize him."

"Well," said Clayton huskily, "from the orders he gave me about the wireless I knew almost from the first that he must be connected with—

with”—Clayton hesitated for a word—“us,” he ended, and began to twist his hands nervously together again.

“Go on!” prompted Marters. “You knew he was one of you. And then?”

“Yes,” said Clayton. “And then—I don’t quite know how to explain it—but little by little and more and more there seemed to be something familiar about him, though I couldn’t make out what it was. And then one day it came to me all of a sudden. It was his voice. I was sure then who he was.”

“I see! And Marnesdale—did he suspect that you had recognized him?”

“Yes. It must have been from little things I may have said, or the way I acted without knowing it, and once or twice he caught me when I suppose I was looking at him rather queerly; but anyway, he not only suspected that I had recognized him, but was certain that I had. And one day he came out with it straight and admitted who he was.”

“So,” observed Marters slowly, “you were the only man in or out of your organization—or let’s put it in the world, if you like—except that ‘other man’ who sat at the head of your unholy council table, who knew who, or shall we say *what*, Marnesdale really was?”

“Yes.” The word came jerkily.

Marters stared at the other musingly.

“I was wondering,” he said after an instant’s silence, “what would have happened to you, Clayton, before the Sylvania got back to London—if *Marnesdale had lived*.”

Clayton’s face whitened.

“I—I had thought of that—more than once,” he said unsteadily.

“Um-m! The subject, I see, is unpleasant. We’ll change it to something else. Am I right in assuming that there were other wireless messages sent besides the one that I know was sent on the night of the eighteenth, and also that messages were received?”

“Yes sir. There were quite a few—both ways.”

“In code?”

“Yes sir. All in code.”

“And the code, Clayton—have you the key to it?”

“No, Mr Marters, I haven’t,” Clayton replied earnestly. “And what’s more, I’m sure nobody else has either, except the one man to whom all the messages were sent and who sent back all the replies.”

“And yet you are wrong, Clayton,” contradicted Marters gently. “I have it. I found it in Marnesdale’s notebook a little while ago, and — —”

“Oh!” Everlee broke in. “So that’s what you were so obsessed with down in the cabin, is it?”

“Yes,” acknowledged Marters; and then to Clayton: “But what made you so sure that no one else save the man you have mentioned had the key to the code?”

“Because,” Clayton explained, “Mr Marnesdale told me so himself. That was the same day he told me who he was and warned me about what would happen to me if I ever opened my mouth or made a slip anywhere, especially with the messages.”

“And this other man’s name, for there can be but one ‘other man,’ you have already told us you do not know. How, then, were the messages signed?”

“Those that Mr Marnesdale sent were signed ‘Rex,’ and those that were received were signed ‘Imperator.’”

“To what address, or addresses, did you send the messages?”

“There was only one address. They were all sent to Marnesdale’s Limited.”

Marters glanced at Everlee.

“Marnesdale’s Limited,” he repeated meditatively. “Do they keep open all night? It must have been pretty late when that message of the eighteenth reached London, so we — —”

“Wait a minute!” exclaimed Everlee excitedly. “I believe I can perhaps let a little glimmer of light through on that.”

“Good enough!” applauded Marters. “What is it, Everlee?”

“Well, in a sense, they do keep open all night. I remember going there once with Marnesdale in the small hours of the morning—we’d been out somewhere together. I’ve forgotten where for the moment, but it doesn’t matter anyhow. He said he had left some important papers in the office that he would need in the morning, as he was going out of town.

“There was a clerk at work there, a very pleasant-looking young chap, and I asked Marnesdale jocularly if he *did* keep open all night. He laughed and said that there was always someone on duty. He explained that they had cable correspondents all over the lot and that to a financial house time was a vital factor in respect of quotations and that sort of thing, instancing the fact that today was tomorrow in Hong Kong. And so if anything particularly urgent was received, he could be called up at his apartment or the message sent there for his decision and reply.”

Marters smiled queerly.

"Thank you, Everlee," he said after a moment. "That clarifies things greatly. In fact I think I could almost say that we can now pretty well visualize the picture in the large. Marnesdale's Limited is evidently in reality nothing but a clearinghouse for Marnesdale's criminal activities, but that it did, or does, a certain amount of legitimate business in order to justify its existence is also obvious. A cable or wireless in code, and no matter how many in number, addressed to Marnesdale's Limited, could never excite suspicion, and doubtless a number of perfectly bona fide business messages in established code were received by the firm; but it is quite certain that the code—and Clayton here has substantiated this fact—used by Rex and Imperator was a secret one that could be used by these two men alone.

"Your reference, Everlee, to the young clerk in the office explains just how it could be worked. It enabled Rex and Imperator to communicate with each other secretly when, as you have seen, they were separated from each other. We shall find, I expect, when that young clerk reaches the witness stand, as he eventually will, that his testimony will be somewhat as follows: that the office instructions were that when code messages signed Imperator were received, they were to be delivered without loss of time to Marnesdale, and when messages were received signed Rex, for Marnesdale would then necessarily be away, they were to be delivered to Imperator—whose identity and address must of course be known to someone in the office. And so through Marnesdale's Limited these messages were available to whichever it might be, Rex or Imperator, at any hour of the day or night. So you see, the equation becomes simplified. Rex, we know, is, or was, Marnesdale. The only unknown factor is Imperator."

"A rather important one, I'd say!" Everlee laughed a little shortly. "That's just the whole point. Who is the man? That's all that counts now!"

"Don't be impatient, Everlee," chided Marters with a whimsical smile. "I'll promise to introduce you to him, or perhaps I would better say *you'll* introduce him to me, since you are acquainted with some of Marnesdale's intimates and I am not—provided you will agree, which I have taken it for granted you will, to have the Sylvania touch at Oporto and can find room for an extra passenger from there to London."

"Why—er—yes, of course," said Everlee in a puzzled way. "But what do you mean?"

"I wrote out a message down there in your cabin." Marters drew the sheet of paper from his pocket. "I'll read it to you: 'Plan at mine foiled. Was forced to keep out of affair personally. Have got stones, but dare not hold them. Meet me midnight, twenty-eighth, customs quay, Oporto.' We will address it to Marnesdale's Limited and sign it Rex. I have coded it here on

the lower half of the sheet in Marnesdale's code. I need hardly add that at that hour the customs quay will be deserted."

McLeish, who for a long time had remained silent, gave sudden evidence of his presence.

"Losh!" ejaculated the engineer sibilantly, and nodded his head vigorously.

"Yes," said Everlee in suppressed excitement, "that ought to get him all right, and it won't be the fault of anyone on the Sylvania if we don't! But I must confess I don't quite follow the significance of some of the wording in the message."

"I will explain," said Marters. "We must assume, if we are not to underrate them, that our late friends at the mine, who treated us so warmly, are without doubt in cable communication with London. And this Emperor probably knows already what we are telling him, namely that the plan was a failure; and he must also know that Marnesdale in some way failed to appear or perform his part at the crucial moment. That, I imagine, will be the most disturbing factor of all. You will appreciate why, therefore, we must allay agitation, or perhaps I should say suspicions on this score. The rest, I think, is self-evident—the implication being, of course, that it was imperative Marnesdale should turn over the custody of the stones to his confrere."

"Quite!" said Everlee. "That explains everything."

"Except," amended Marters, "that there is one thing which occurred to me and which may also have occurred to you, and that is that another way perhaps of trapping our man might have been by wirelessly the London police, putting them in touch with the clerk you saw in Marnesdale's Limited, and so onto the track of the other ringmaster of this devil's circus. But there were several objections to that. There was always the chance of something going astray and of our man being forewarned; but the vital objection was that, even if he were caught in that way and arrested, we might not have the necessary proof to convict him. For instance, Clayton, have you a copy of any message you sent for Marnesdale, or a copy of any of the messages you received?"

"No, Mr Marters," Clayton answered as he shook his head. "Mr Marnesdale always tore up the paper on which he had coded the message he was sending out just as soon as he had given me the last word, and he also destroyed the incoming messages that I gave him as soon as he had read them. It was against orders to copy anything that came in, and I never did."

"Exactly!" Marters shrugged his shoulders. "And the same thing will have happened at the other end. We could prove that this Emperor received

code messages—but so do thousands of other people. We could not have produced one and decoded it because none existed. But with this message”—he tapped the paper in his hand—“we not only have exactly the proof we require, but whoever answers this in person condemns himself out of hand as being the man we want. You are agreed, Everlee?”

Everlee’s hand was nursing his wounded shoulder.

“Do you need an answer?” he inquired through tight lips.

Marters handed the coded message to Clayton.

“Send it,” he ordered tersely.

Chapter X

The Other "Root"

AT eleven o'clock on the night of the twenty-eighth, the *Sylvania*, standing in from sea, slowed down, lay to off the sand bar that guards the mouth of the Douro River and the approach to Oporto, two miles above on the right bank, and dropped a launch over the side.

At almost exactly midnight the launch poked its nose gently and silently against the foot of the landing stage at the customs quay, and Marters, wrapped in a long dark cloak, stepped out.

A figure emerged suddenly from the shadows, hardly two feet away.

"Imperator!" The word came in a whisper, scarcely audible.

"Rex!" replied Marters in the same guarded tone.

Two sailors had left the launch and had slipped onto the landing stage, presumably to assist in making fast the boat, for one of them carried a coil of rope.

At Marters' reply to the challenge, the figure, apparently satisfied, approached without hesitation, and the next instant the two sailors had flung themselves upon him. Taken off his guard, the man was borne to the ground, gagged, bound and placed in the launch, almost without resistance. And half an hour later Marters, with his captive, was standing on the yacht's deck, the launch was being swung aboard, and the *Sylvania* was heading at full speed for the open sea.

Everlee and Captain Sanders were seated at the saloon table, when Marters, followed by his prisoner, ungagged and unbound now, but under guard of two seamen, entered.

"Well, gentlemen"—he smiled, half quizzically, half seriously—"I have induced our friend from London to accompany us. I am sorry I cannot introduce him, as, owing to the darkness, I have not——" He stopped suddenly.

Everlee had jumped to his feet.

"*I* will introduce him!" he said with a quick intake of his breath. "You were right, Marters. He *is* one of Marnesdale's intimates, and I *have* met him before. His name is Carleton Fetteridge, and he is the chairman of the board of Marnesdale's Limited of which Derrol Marnesdale was the president."

The man, short and swarthy, dark-haired, clean-shaven and perfectly groomed despite the rough usage he had received, glanced speculatively from one to another around the table.

“Yes, of course,” he said coldly, “and you are Mr Everlee. And such being the case, this is doubtless your yacht, the Sylvania, on which Mr Marnesdale has been cruising with you. I am in a sense relieved to know that this is so, but it does not explain the outrageous treatment I have received at the hands of your men. I will thank you to explain that, and”—his eyes roved again around the faces that confronted him—“I might observe that I do not see Mr Marnesdale here.”

Marters had seated himself beside Everlee.

“Marnesdale is dead,” he said levelly. “He shot himself accidentally in the launch on the way up to the mine on the afternoon of the twenty-third.”

Fetteridge’s eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

“Dead!” he exclaimed in a shocked, incredulous voice. “But I — —”

“I hope you are not going to say that is impossible,” Marters interrupted sternly, “since you received a code message signed Rex that was wirelessly from the Sylvania here on the night of the twenty-fourth—the message that brought you here to Oporto tonight. We, Mr Everlee and I, sent that message. We discovered the key to the code in Marnesdale’s notebook—and one of your tools, Clayton by name, who is now under arrest aboard here, was quite helpful.”

Fetteridge laughed unpleasantly.

“I must have fallen among madmen!” he exclaimed sarcastically.

“You may take that attitude if you like,” said Marters evenly, “but I assure you it will not do you any good. I do not think any further introductions are necessary, for I am quite sure you already know who I am. However, my name is Marters—Richard Marters. You and Marnesdale must undoubtedly have discussed me at length, and my name is certainly well known to you in connection with the Gorlam case.”

“I never heard of any such case!” asserted Fetteridge defiantly.

Marters shrugged his shoulders.

“It is quite useless,” he said a little wearily. “We know you for what you are—there is no need to go into details here. You and Marnesdale, I have no hesitation in saying, were as dangerous and murderous a pair of scoundrels as ever lived.”

“That,” said Fetteridge boldly, “is a damnably ugly accusation that I resent to the full in spite of the fact that it is childishly vague.”

“At the present time,” Marters replied, “I have no wish to deal with anything but a concrete case—the case that has just brought about Marnesdale’s death— —”

“Which, obviously, I had nothing to do with,” Fetteridge interrupted truculently.

“Except,” asserted Marters sharply, “that you were engaged in the same murderous scheme that brought it about, which is proved beyond question by your very presence in answer to that code message, and even by announcing yourself on the wharf as Imperator in the presence of witnesses. But we are concerned with a great deal more than Marnesdale. There is, for instance, the murder of Simpson, the wireless operator, aboard the *Sylvania* here, and the murder of Thurston in London.”

“This is palpable nonsense!” blustered Fetteridge. “I have never seen or put foot on this yacht before; and as for this Thurston, I read in the papers about a man by that name being murdered in London, but I was in Scotland at the time.”

“Quite so!” There was an ominous note in Marters’ voice now. “You complained that my charges were vague a moment ago. I will make a specific one. On the night of the eighteenth a wireless message in code was sent to you from this yacht by Marnesdale. Whether it was accomplished by your own hand or through your instrumentality, I do not know as yet, but in either case you are equally guilty. I charge you with the murder of Fëkla Yulanoff.”

A grayish tinge had crept into Fetteridge’s face, and for the first time he faltered.

“I,” he began, “I— —”

Marters glanced meaningfully at Captain Sanders.

Captain Sanders rose abruptly from his chair, motioned to the two sailors—and the next minute, followed by the yacht’s commander, Fetteridge, blasphemous now, was hustled from the saloon.

Marters, leaning back in his chair, relaxed.

“Well, that is the end, Everlee,” he said. “The law will make quick work of Fetteridge when we hand him over in England. Marnesdale and Fetteridge! Their niches should be fittingly elaborate in the Hall of Crime! Some of their tools and minions will undoubtedly be unearthed as the police proceed with their investigation, and some will not; but”—he smiled wanly—“the minor crooks we have with us always. Would you mind ringing for a steward? It was a bit chilly out there in the launch hanging around for the approach of midnight.”

THE DEVIL SITS IN

Chapter I

Under Charter

OUTSIDE she was a rusty, salt-crusted, down-at-the-heels-looking tramp; inside, and particularly as to her engine room, she was marvelously groomed. Lloyd's lists were dumb concerning her; and, her business being religiously at variance with the underwriters, the Traymore, so far as the maritime world at large was concerned, was an unknown quantity.

Five years back, Jack Seaton had bought her—bought her when the words of dismissal that sent him out from the Naval Academy at Annapolis, just a month before graduation, were still ringing in his ears. He had accepted the dismissal with the same silence that, despite the pleadings of his friends, he had maintained throughout the entire investigation that had preceded it; and then, barred from the service he loved better than anything else on earth, the big ex-halfback dropped quietly from sight and disappeared.

In a little port on the east coast of Africa he had come across the Traymore—she was then under another name—and the scanty capital left him by his parents just sufficed for her purchase. Since then the two, he and the Traymore, had been in many ports and in many seas, and had participated in many things quite foreign to the eminently staid and conservative code that governs the goings and comings of the merchant marine.

On the afternoon this story opens, the Traymore lay at anchor in the harbor of Singapore. Two men were in the captain's cabin on the boat deck: Seaton, young, perhaps twenty-eight, big, broad-shouldered, sun-tanned; a sharp contrast to the little, florid-faced, middle-aged man who sat at the opposite side of the table.

Seaton shook his head emphatically, and the hang of his under jaw was finality itself.

"I'll make it seven hundred and fifty—seven hundred and fifty pounds—that's three thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars in your money," said the little, florid-faced man. "Good heavens, man, for a simple bit of business and no risk, it's a fabulous price!"

"Aye, it is—for a simple bit of business," returned Seaton; "but you're modest in your description, aren't you? As for the risk, the Traymore's risk enough, for she's all I've got."

"One thousand pounds!" said the little man sharply. "That's all I can afford, and that's the last quid you'll squeeze out of me, Captain Seaton."

Seaton's jaws came together with a snap.

"I'm not the kind to squeeze and screw," he said evenly. "Don't make that mistake. I want enough to make a fair profit over and above expenses, enough to make the deal worth while, and that's all I want. The sooner you understand that, the sooner you'll understand *me*, and the sooner we'll do business—or we won't!"

The little man edged back in his chair and eyed Seaton with a glance that combined both shrewdness and uncertainty.

"And further," continued Seaton, "I've got to know more before I go junketing around, and you'll have to open up, price or no price. Your name is Kallinger, you say; but that doesn't account for your offer of one thousand pounds to have me take the Traymore on a little pleasure cruise around the Archipelago to get the scenic effects—hardly! Now, Mr Kallinger, who's behind you, and what's the game?"

"I'm just offering to charter the ship for a month or so," said Mr Kallinger.

"That's what you said before," returned Seaton.

Kallinger smiled.

"I didn't expect that you would care—that is, that you would question too closely so long as the money was forthcoming. And as for that, it's cash down, Captain, cash down. That's the main thing. We've heard of you often enough, Captain Seaton, Africa way, Japan, all over. You're pretty well known to some; and—you'll pardon my saying it—your reputation is pretty well established. I didn't think you'd be—er—overinquisitive."

"I'm not going to quarrel with you," said Seaton slowly, "because I don't think you quite understand. Your information is accurate in some ways, but in some ways it isn't. I have run some contraband, arms and otherwise, and I won't say I'm not known in some quarters; but when I'm running contraband, or anything else, I'm not fooling myself very much on what I am doing. Do you get that, Mr Kallinger? If it's clean work with a bit of risk for spice, I'm game; if it's dirty work, you've come to the wrong shop."

"Your standard of righteousness has at least the merit of being original," said Kallinger with a laugh.

Seaton shrugged his shoulders.

"Possibly. I've run guns, and perhaps a blockade or two, and I'm willing to admit that I've nosed around more than one squib war in South America, but there's some things I won't do. Now if you and I are going to deal, we'll

have the whole story. I'll tell you yes or no. If it's yes, well and good; if it's no, then that ends it, and no harm done."

Kallinger got up from his seat, walked to the cabin door, swung it open and stood looking shoreward from where the Traymore lay at her anchorage in the eastern harbor facing the town of Singapore. Seaton helped himself out of a box of very black cigars, and waited for the reply to his ultimatum.

After a moment Kallinger shut the door, came back, resumed his seat and leaned over the table.

"There's no help for it, I suppose—since you won't come any other way, and I've got to have you. I'd have preferred 'sealed orders,' I believe you call it, until we were clear of port. Things leak strangely sometimes, and the only way to be sure is to keep a close tongue."

"What you may say will go no further, whether I agree or not," said Seaton.

Kallinger nodded.

"I've always heard that you played square," he responded; "but you can't blame me for not being overanxious to show my cards before the draw, especially to a stranger."

"That's understood," conceded Seaton amicably. "So fire ahead."

"Well, about a month ago," said Kallinger, "I received a letter from a friend of mine, a medical missionary whom I have known for a great many years, who is stationed on an island, Lougoa Island, to be exact, which, if you know it at all, you'll know is one of a small group in the Banda Sea."

"I've heard of it." Seaton nodded his head.

"Yes; no doubt. Well, you know these medical missionaries in the islands are constantly on call, much after the fashion of the country doctor, and this letter was written by my friend—his name is Hewton—on his return from a near-by small island, inhabited only by natives, where he had been told that a white man was very sick. He had found the man in a dying condition. In fact, the man died two days after Hewton got there. He was delirious most of the time, but in his lucid moments, knowing he was dying, and out of gratitude for what Hewton had done for him, he told Hewton that he had discovered where a treasure— —"

"Wait a minute," interposed Seaton with a whimsical smile. "It isn't another of those buried-treasure yarns, is it? Because, if it is, I'd advise you to lay off it—even though my advice may cost me my charter."

"That's unselfish of you at any rate," Kallinger smiled back; "for, as a matter of fact, that's exactly what it is—buried treasure—though it's not the kind that I imagine you think it is."

“Oh! What is it, then?”

“Tin,” said Kallinger.

“Tin?” Seaton stared. “But what’s that got to do with the Banda Sea?”

“That’s where it is.”

Seaton shook his head in a puzzled way.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” he confessed. “I never heard of tin thereabouts.”

“No, I dare say not,” returned Kallinger; “but then, I take it, you’ve never had much of anything to do with mines and minerals.”

“The same as Greek to me,” admitted Seaton.

“But you do know that some of the richest tin deposits to be found anywhere are right here in the Malay Peninsula, and Singapore has the biggest tin smelters in the world?”

“And boasts white and Chinese tin millionaires galore,” grinned Seaton suddenly. “Yes, at least I know that. Are you in the tin business, if it’s a fair question to ask?”

“Practically ever since I was a lad, though”—Kallinger smiled wryly —“I’ve never made a million out of it—yet. That’s why Hewton sent me that letter—because tin’s my business; and there’s where I hope the million is coming from.”

“You think there’s tin, then, in those islands down there?”

“In some of them, yes,” replied Kallinger decisively. “Geologically, with the Peninsula being, as I’ve just said, about the most extensive storehouse of tin in the world, there’s bound to be; for why shouldn’t the same substrata extend, regardless of distance, to the islands, so many of which must be of volcanic origin? It’s not a question in my mind whether there’s tin there or not; it’s whether it’s to be found in sufficient quantity and the ore rich enough in quality to make it a profitable venture—and that’s what I’m going to find out.”

“I don’t know anything about it, and it’s your money you’re spending,” commented Seaton bluntly, “but it looks like a long shot to me.”

“Yes, I dare say it is,” granted Kallinger frankly, “though I’ve good reason to believe we’ll win out. But to get back to the letter. Hewton said he was convinced that the man who died, and whose name was Maurice Graydon, was not only telling the truth, but knew what he was talking about from a mining angle. Graydon told Hewton he had spent a great many years mining tin in this part of the world and that lately on some small islands in the neighborhood of Kangean Island— — Do you know where that is?”

"Yes, roughly," replied Seaton. "It's also in the Banda Sea."

"All right," said Kallinger. "Well, Graydon stated that he had discovered on those small islands the richest tin ore he had ever seen in his life, and that there would be a fortune in mining it even in the islands down there. It seems that Graydon had been cruising around in a small schooner manned by a crew of three or four natives, and, in the light of what he said, for the very purpose of mineral, and especially tin, exploration. Anyway, the schooner was wrecked and driven ashore on the island where Hewton found Graydon. Graydon had been badly smashed about in the storm, and, as I've said, died a few days after the natives brought him ashore. There was only one survivor of Graydon's crew, and he bore out the story of the wreck, and that Graydon was constantly landing on various islands though for what reason he did not know."

"I see," said Seaton judicially. "Sounds fair enough. So you decided — —"

"No," Kallinger interrupted with a dry smile. "I was still keeping my head. There's more to it than that—the main thing, in fact. I checked up on Graydon after I got Hewton's letter, and found that Graydon had been telling the truth about himself and his mining affiliations. His reputation was ace high. That practically settled the matter, and then some corroborative evidence turned up, the details of which I need not go into here, and I finally made up my mind to go through with it. So I approached a few friends and we formed a small syndicate. We're not wealthy—which is the reason I haggled a bit with you over the charter price of the Traymore—but we've enough to see the preliminary investigation through. Afterwards, if we find that the ore is actually there in paying quantities, we'll have no trouble in raising all the money we want; but meanwhile, I think you can now see for yourself, to put it in blunt English, the necessity of keeping our mouths shut until the concessions we will then have to obtain, if all goes well, are in our hands. In other words, we are taking no chances of anyone else beating us to it, as I believe you Americans say. So that's the story, and if you're satisfied, Captain Seaton, we'll see that the word gets around that my friends and I are going on a trading expedition—for naturally questions are going to be asked as to the whys and wherefores of our chartering the ship and going off in her."

"I'm perfectly satisfied," Seaton answered heartily. "Why shouldn't I be? It's your risk. But I hardly think your trading idea will hold water as things now stand. The Traymore's as empty as the day she was launched, and the port authorities know it. Thin air doesn't look like trinkets for trading purposes even to a blind man."

"True," concurred Kallinger, "and I haven't overlooked that point myself; but I had to get you to consent to charter your ship first. As it is now, I'll see that a few cases of the said trinkets are sent aboard in the morning. Is that all right?"

"I can't suggest anything better!" Seaton grinned. "And now what exactly are the orders?"

"Well," said Kallinger, "my idea is to head for Kangean Island so as to get our bearings, and then visit the small islands in the vicinity. We shan't put in at Kangean itself, of course. If we find ore on the first island, we'll take all the time that is necessary to value it, and then we'll see if we can't find it on other islands as well. If there is none on the first island, we'll search for it on others. I don't know how long we'll be, but you'll be paid each month in advance, and I shouldn't be surprised"—he pursed his lips whimsically—"but that you would really get a chance to do a bit of trading—in which case you're welcome to anything you make out of it. And now how about accommodations? I shall have a couple of my friends with me. One's a geologist, and the other's a mining engineer—both good fellows."

"I think you'd be more comfortable up here in the hot weather," said Seaton after a moment's thought. "You three can have this cabin, and I'll move into the charthouse. When do you want to sail?"

"We'll be ready by tomorrow night, and that would suit us splendidly if you can manage it."

"Nothing to prevent it," assented Seaton. "I've coal aboard, and there'll be only a few stores to lay in. Tomorrow night it is, then."

"Fine!" applauded Kallinger. "I will get the money at the bank tomorrow, bring it with me when I come aboard, and hand it over to you before you pull up anchor—so there will be no question about strict payment in advance. Is that also satisfactory, Captain?"

"As long as you don't forget it, it is," laughed Seaton; "for it's only fair to tell you I don't leave Singapore without it."

"I won't forget it," Kallinger laughed in return as he rose from his chair and moved toward the door. "I don't think there is anything else except to remind you again to say nothing about the real object of our trip, even to anybody aboard, until after we've sailed; for, as it is, the Traymore has already excited a bit of interest ashore."

"How's that?" inquired Seaton as he followed Kallinger through the doorway to the deck.

"Well, nothing much," said Kallinger. "I just caught a word that passed between two young British naval officers in the Raffles' lounge this

morning. I heard one of them say: 'Well, Powell, I see your old friend the Traymore's in port.' I didn't hear any more. I don't suppose that means any—well, any interference, or anything of that sort, does it?"

"Powell, eh?" Seaton shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, I remember him, but that's past history and over and done with long ago. No, Mr Kallinger, you've nothing to worry about on that score."

"Good! Well then, I'll be getting ashore. Good-by, Captain—until tomorrow."

"Good-by, Mr Kallinger," Seaton responded cordially; and then, presently, as he mechanically watched from the deck the progress of the native boat that was taking Kallinger ashore, he whistled softly to himself. "That's a rum go!" he muttered. "Powell, eh? Let's see; it's two—no, three years ago, the time we were running contraband, since I've seen him. Wonder if he ever found out what became of that cargo at 'Marquez?" Seaton chuckled reminiscently. "He was a junior lieutenant or some such thing as that then. I can quite imagine he hasn't forgotten me, or the Traymore either. Wonder if he'll pay us a little friendly call—for tea! I don't suppose he will; but anyway, let him come! We're as empty as we were the last time he saw us! Hanged if I wouldn't like to see him, for that matter. He nearly put me out of business. 'Twasn't his fault that he didn't; he's got the pluck of a dozen—"

Kallinger's boat was disappearing among the shipping, and with a last glance in that direction Seaton swung on his heel and returned to his cabin.

Chapter II

Specters in the Offing

THAT night in Seaton's cabin, Gillespie, the Scotch engineer, canny, wizened-faced, red-haired and irascible, sat at one side of the table; on the other side was Fuller, the first officer, gray-eyed, lean and tall.

Seaton screwed around his chair from the head of the table, opened the locker behind him and produced bottle and glasses.

"I've told you," said he, "that we sail tomorrow. Here's to a good voyage!"

"Here's hopin'!" said Gillespie.

"Here's hopin'!" echoed Fuller.

Gillespie set down his empty glass and wiped his stubby little sandy mustache with the back of his hand.

"But, man," he suggested, "ye've no' told us where nor for why."

"Trading," said Seaton with a little smile. "Trading with the natives for a month, or maybe more. We're going to take it easy for a change."

Gillespie sucked in his under lip and stared at his commander.

"Tradin'!" cried Fuller. "*Us!* With what, Captain Seaton?"

"With what will be alongside in the morning. Incidentally, there will be a party of three aboard for the purpose of geographical observation—"

"Which is to say," interposed Gillespie, "that we're chartered to the three?"

"We are," assented Seaton. "Or, perhaps, to be more accurate, to one of them."

"For the purposes of geographical observation?"

Seaton smiled.

"I *said* geographical observation; but their business is their own. Just what it is I'm not at liberty to say until we've left port. I'll admit, however, that to me there doesn't seem to be much sense in it; but the money will be paid before our mud hook leaves bottom, and there is no risk as far as we are concerned."

"A fair price?" insinuated Gillespie shrewdly.

"Enough for your wages," laughed Seaton, "and a bit over for the boat's share."

"Where are we goin' to trade?" inquired Fuller, picking up the conversation from the point where he had been dropped out of it.

Seaton pushed the bottle invitingly forward. Gillespie helped himself and passed it on to Fuller.

"Banda Sea, Mr Fuller," Seaton replied.

Fuller set down his glass, already halfway to his lips, with a thump that spilled a good portion of the contents on the table.

"Banda Sea, d'ye say!" he cried. "Blimy! Captain Seaton, d'ye remember Powell, Lieutenant Powell, of H.M.S. Canwell? Him that boarded us on the east coast of Africa, the chap we fooled afterward to the top of his bent at 'Marquez?'"

"I'm thinkin' he was no' so badly fooled, Mr Fuller," corrected Gillespie. "He couldn't prove anything. Give the man his due."

For the second time that day Seaton had heard Powell's name mentioned—the first time in three years—first by Kallinger, and now by his first officer. Before he could reply, Fuller went on:

"I meant to have told you when I came aboard this evening, but the news that we were goin' to sail knocked everything else out of my head. About the first man I saw when I went ashore this morning was that same Powell. Blimy! I knew him the minute I clapped eyes on him. He stared at me pretty hard, an' I reckon he remembered he'd seen me before, but whether he placed me or not, I can't say."

"Well," said Seaton, "it's possible he'll be paying us a visit before long. I've been looking for him. Kallinger—the man we're chartered to—told me Powell was here; and that Powell knew we were here. But what has he got to do with the Banda Sea that put you in mind of him?"

"He'll pay us no visit this trip," asserted Fuller; "an' as for what he has to do with the Banda Sea, I'll come to that in a minute. Ye'll understand I wasn't hankerin' any for his company, an' I dove out of sight as quick as I could; and, bein' a little curious about his turnin' up in these parts, I used my tongue. He's been on this station for the last two years. Ye'll have noticed the gunboat in the western harbor that put out this afternoon? Well, she's the Ajmir, an' he's in command; an' since she's gone an' him with her, that's why he won't be paying us any visit."

"I noticed her making out with the tide," nodded Seaton. "Perhaps it's just as well he has gone. Not that there's anything he could find fault with aboard; but, as Gillespie here should be painfully aware, there's no living down a bad reputation. Eh, Gillespie?" he grinned.

“’Twould be true with some men an’ things, Captain Seaton,” snapped the little Scotsman. “Ye can best speak for yourself. Tell us the rest, Mr Fuller.”

“Well,” continued Fuller, “you know how things leak along the water fronts, in the boardin’houses an’ the like? If you want information, ye’ll get it there—from common talk to government secrets spilled by some blabbin’ idiot who’s taken more’n was good for him. What’s doin’ I don’t know. That part didn’t leak out, but this did: Powell’s sailed on a secret mission for a cruise in the Banda Sea!”

Gillespie twisted his glass absently in his fingers and looked at Seaton. Fuller, after his pause, had leaned back in his chair to allow this startling piece of information to sink in.

But Seaton received the news in quite a different manner than his subordinates evidently expected.

“Granted that he has, Fuller,” he remarked. “It’s not the first time a British gunboat has been in those waters, and I don’t imagine it will be the last, either. There is room for us both, if that is what you mean.”

“Mabbe there is, an’ mabbe there ain’t,” returned Fuller significantly. “I ain’t so sure. There’s a queer look to it from my way of thinkin’.”

“Thinking queer seems to be a habit of yours,” said Seaton a little sharply. “You’re worse than an old woman for smelling out trouble ahead—when it doesn’t exist.”

Fuller’s face reddened.

“Old woman or not, I say it looks fishy,” he persisted sullenly. “Here’s Powell turnin’ up after three years or more, an’ startin’ off for the same place as us on a secret mission—same as us. Only we’re goin’ *tradin’*! I say there’s something up, down that way, an’ the reason Powell’s goin’ is the same reason this chap that’s chartered us is goin’. You can take it or leave it, Captain Seaton, but I’ll lay you a month’s pay I’m right. I’ll leave it to Gillespie, here. Tradin’, my eye!”

“I’d no’ say,” ventured Gillespie cautiously; “but I’m minded Mr Fuller has the right of it.”

“I didn’t say the object of the cruise *was* to trade,” said Seaton in a tone he would employ in humoring a child. “Can’t I get that idea out of your heads? That’s simply the way we’ll knock in the time, and the *excuse* for going. And knowing the *real* object of the cruise, I’ll say right now I can’t see a possible chance this side of Hades of there being anything in common between Kallinger and a British gunboat; but, even if there were, as I’ve told you before, it wouldn’t affect us one way or the other, for we’ve got nothing

to do with it. In any event I've passed my word, and the Traymore sails tomorrow night."

"Very good," said Fuller, "I'm not kickin'. We've been at the game, the three of us, for the matter of four years an' more, an' we've always pulled through, though close enough sometimes to take the skin off your teeth. It's the easy thing an' fair sailin' I'm afraid of—it ain't natural for us. Risk, an' the chances ten to one against us, we're used to. Someday there'll be an end to our picnic, an' the squall'll come from a clear sky. Don't say I didn't warn you, Captain Seaton."

"Pass the bottle," said Seaton good-humoredly. "You're a morbid ass."

Gillespie wagged his head. "I know how ye feel, Mr Fuller," he volunteered. "I've a premonition—"

"Hang on to it then, if you don't mind, Gillespie," pleaded Seaton, filling his glass. "I've an idea your share of a thousand pounds a month will help you to digest it! It's enough to drive a man to drink"—suiting the action to the words—"the pair of you."

"'Twould go a long way, a thousand pounds. It's a tidy bit of money," confided Gillespie to himself aloud.

"I'm going to turn in," announced Seaton, rising and shoving the bottle toward the others for a final glass. "And from the way you've been talking, I don't think a little sleep would do either of you any harm. You keep to your machinery, Gillespie, and leave the rest to me. Fuller, you pass the word forward that there is no shore leave tomorrow."

"Aye, sir; an' what about the loadin'?"

"There'll be a lighter alongside in the morning with the cases. Put them down the main hatch."

"Aye, sir," replied Fuller again.

"And, Fuller," added Seaton, halting the mate as he and Gillespie moved toward the doorway, "you're such a suspicious individual, perhaps it would ease your mind a bit if a case or two broke in the tackles accidentally—so's you could see what's inside. There'd be no questions asked."

"It often happens, sir, loadin' from lighters. They're a clumsy lot, the lightermen."

Seaton smiled.

"They are," he agreed.

Chapter III

Captain Seaton Plays Poker

IT was late in the evening of the next day when Seaton, having satisfactorily concluded his business ashore, which business looked to the procuring of his clearance papers, came over the side of the Traymore.

“So you’re aboard ahead of me, eh, Mr Kallinger?” said he as that individual met him at the head of the boat-deck ladder. “Others here?”

“Good evening, Captain. Yes; they’re in the cabin. And”—with a smile, as he drew a bundle of crisp new English bank notes from his inside vest pocket—“here’s the thousand pounds according to agreement. I think you’ll find the count correct.”

“Why, thanks, Mr Kallinger,” said Seaton heartily; “and as for the count, we’ll take it as read.” He crammed the notes into his trousers pocket. “All set to go?”

“Yes,” said Kallinger. “As soon as you’re ready.”

Fuller came forward from the shadows of the charthouse.

“I expect we’re ready, Mr Kallinger,” said Seaton. “How about it, Fuller?”

“We’re ready, sir,” replied the mate.

“Good!” said Seaton briskly. “Tell Gillespie to stand by. I’ll see you after we are under way, Mr Kallinger, if you’ll excuse me for the present.”

“Certainly, Captain, certainly,” agreed Kallinger affably. “I don’t want to be in the way. Come to the cabin when you’re free.”

Slowly and cautiously the Traymore picked her way through the shipping and out of the harbor. Then, with a free course and the open sea ahead, Seaton, on the bridge, swung over the engine-room telegraph to “full speed ahead,” and glanced at the binnacle.

“A point to starboard,” he ordered the seaman at the wheel. “Steady! Keep her as she goes.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” replied the man. “Steady she is, sir.”

It was a night a sailor loves better than he does his sweetheart. Astern, the quickened thrash of the propeller churned the sea into sparkling phosphorescence that, as the Traymore gained speed, trailed off into ribbons of white, creamy foam. Overhead, the night was cloudless, star-studded everywhere, the full moon flooding the decks with a soft light.

Seaton leaned over the weather cloth, puffing his manila.

"It's a fine night, Fuller," was his greeting as the mate came up the starboard ladder and joined him on the bridge. "A fine night."

"Aye," replied Fuller, "it's a fine night, sir; couldn't ask for better." He touched Seaton's arm and moved down the bridge out of hearing of the helmsman. "I've been wantin' a chance to talk to you, sir. There's four of the hands didn't come aboard."

Seaton swung around like a flash, and his face grew black as he glared at Fuller.

"What's that you say? Didn't I tell you to stop shore leave? A pretty mess we'll be in, four short. Confound you! Why didn't you wait until we were halfway to Borneo before saying so!"

"That part's all right," protested Fuller hastily. "I did stop shore leave; but these four—it's Martin, Tom Bailey, Shanks and O'Rourke—went ashore yesterday, ye'll recollect. Blimy! If ever I set eyes on 'em again, I'll bash their faces for this! I will that, the swine! I wasn't surprised that they didn't show up last night, but this morning after you'd gone I began to wonder. About noon I sent the boatswain to look for 'em. When he came back, he said he couldn't find any trace of 'em anywhere, but in nosin' around the boardin'houses he'd found some likely-lookin' fellows that offered to ship. He told 'em he'd report an' let 'em know. I talked it over with Gillespie, an' we figured we couldn't sail short-handed like that, so we sent the boatswain back after 'em an' had 'em come aboard. They sized up, all right, an' we shipped 'em."

Seaton swore.

"Don't you know any better than that?" he snapped. "A sweet way to pick a crew for our business, that is!"

"Ordinarily I know it is," Fuller answered, "an' we wouldn't have done it; but for a cruise like this, which you said yourself was free, open an' aboveboard, we couldn't figure that it made much difference so long as we had the men. If we don't like 'em, we can let 'em go after the voyage is over."

"Well, perhaps you're right," admitted Seaton in a mollified tone. "They're aboard now, anyhow, so there's an end to that. How about those cases, Fuller?"

Fuller sniffed.

"We stoved in three of 'em. Of all the bally loot you ever clapped your eyes on, it's the limit. Beads, bits of cloth that look like they were made out of a crazy quilt, cheap looking glasses and stuff like that."

Seaton laughed.

“Well, that ought to lull your suspicions, Fuller. I’m not much up on trading as an art, but we seem to have the proper implements of warfare from all I’ve heard.” He tossed his cigar stump overboard and took a turn up and down the bridge. “I think I’ll look in on Kallinger and his crowd, and see how they are getting along,” he announced as he came back to Fuller.

“All right,” returned Fuller ungraciously. “I hope you admire ’em more’n I do. From the looks of ’em, I wouldn’t trust ’em farther than I could chuck a ship’s biscuit.”

“What’s the matter with them?”

“I don’t like the looks of ’em, that’s all. They’ll bear watchin’, I’ll lay my davy to that. That’s the way Gillespie feels about it too.”

“Oh, does he! Well, you and Gillespie will have plenty of opportunity for watching them in the next month or so. Any other troubles?” inquired Seaton sarcastically.

Fuller scowled but made no reply; and Seaton, with the terse direction, “Southeast by east, Mr Fuller,” went down the ladder.

His cabin, that he had turned over to Kallinger, occupied the forward end of the deckhouse, and he made his way toward it, whistling softly to himself; but just as he reached the cabin and prepared to knock, the door was opened, and someone darted out.

Seaton’s whistle died away. The flood of light from the interior of the cabin, making him blink, added a grotesque and deceptive appearance to the figure that, for a moment, looked like some ghostly apparition in loose, flowing white garments.

Seaton’s arm shot out, his hand descended like a bolt on the other’s shoulder, crept round and closed viselike on the nape of the neck, and the next instant he had stepped inside the cabin, dragging his wriggling captive with him.

“Hell!” he ejaculated, and let go his hold.

A little, undersized, sallow-faced Chinaman fled chattering to the farthest corner.

A laugh came from the table.

“Startled you, did he, Captain?” It was Kallinger speaking. “It’s only my servant, Ching Lang. He’s remarkably ugly, I’ll admit, but otherwise I’ve had no reason to complain of him. I forgot to speak to you about him yesterday. We can use him as mess steward, and I suppose he’ll be able to find a place to tuck himself away up forward somewhere with the crew.”

“Aye, I suppose so,” grumbled Seaton, his eyes on the Chinaman, “though I can’t say I’m exactly pleased, Mr Kallinger. I’m not fond of the ratty devils with their yellow teeth. This chap has got the face of a monkey.”

At Seaton’s words, Ching Lang’s lips widened into what might have been construed as a grin, had it not been for the eyelids that narrowed into angry little slits.

“Oh, you understand, do you?” rasped Seaton, interpreting the look.

Kallinger, seemingly anxious to distract his attention from the Chinaman, had risen from the table, and now took his arm.

“I want to present you to my friends, Captain Seaton. This is Monsieur Vernier, one of the most efficient mining engineers in Malaysia. Unfortunately Monsieur Vernier does not speak English.”

At mention of his name, the man across the table rose and extended his hand.

“Enchanté, je vous assure, Monsieur le Capitaine,” he said with a bow.

“Glad to know you,” returned Seaton bluntly as he gripped the offered hand.

“And this,” continued Kallinger, completing the introduction, “is Monsieur Knapp, assistant to Monsieur Vernier. Monsieur Knapp, as you will appreciate, speaks English as fluently as yourself.”

Knapp’s acknowledgment of the introduction, while not so effusive as his confrere’s, was perhaps more sincere. He shook hands with a smirky grin, his eyes on a line with somewhere in the neighborhood of Seaton’s midriff.

A pack of cards, bottle and glasses were on the table.

“We were amusing ourselves at your national game, Captain,” explained Kallinger. “We’d be glad to have you join us, though I’m afraid we shall all be at your mercy.”

“Well, I don’t know.” Seaton hesitated. In view of what Gillespie and Fuller had said, an opportunity of getting a little better acquainted with these men might not come amiss.

“Of course you will,” insisted Kallinger genially. “Here, sit in between Knapp and myself. Ching, bring another bottle of that ‘special.’”

And Seaton sat in.

The game progressed smoothly and with increasing good-fellowship, as one bottle of “special” succeeded another, with the result that, little by little, Seaton’s first, and not altogether favorable, appraisal of the low-browed,

shifty Knapp, and the suave ingratiating Vernier gave place to a more friendly understanding.

The little pile of notes and silver in front of him gradually increased—and continued to increase. His luck was phenomenal.

Usually abstemious and careful to the last degree, Seaton realized in a misty sort of a way as the game went on that, though he had drunk sparingly, the “special” was getting the better of him. He ventured an opinion.

“Pretty strong stuff, isn’t it?” he remarked.

Kallinger held a glass up to the light.

“Bottled twenty years,” he proclaimed proudly. “I’ll risk the statement that you never tasted better in your life, Captain. What have you got? Aces up?”—as Seaton laid his hand on the table. “Well, that’s good. You’re certainly unbeatable.” And his hand went into the discard.

As the hours went on, the absolute good nature with which his companions accepted their losses, coupled with the chaff and banter that circulated around the table, broke down, with the further aid of the “special,” the last of Seaton’s lingering reserve; so it was not until about the beginning of the morning watch, four o’clock, when the game broke up with mutual protestations of good will, and that Seaton, more unsteadily than the pitch of the ship warranted, headed along the deck to the charthouse door preparatory to turning in.

But here, with some hazy notion of quieting any forebodings his chief officer might harbor in reference to either the voyage or the passengers, he hailed the bridge for Fuller.

Thorpe, the second, answered him:

“Mr Fuller’s turned in, sir; it’s just gone eight bells. Anything you want, sir?”

Seaton did not answer. He lunged into the chartroom and groped for a light.

“Fuller’s an ass,” he explained to his surroundings; and, as an afterthought: “So’s Gillespie! Both asses! Kallinger’s all right; so’s the others. Forgot to tell Kallinger ’bout Powell. Tell him in the morning.”

And in a decidedly unaccustomed condition for him, Seaton laboriously disrobed and rolled into his bunk.

Chapter IV

The Corroborative Evidence

FAIR weather and smooth seas were the lot of the Traymore, and, fast for her class, she steadily reeled off her ten knots each hour of the twenty-four.

Aboard, as the days went by, both Gillespie and Fuller, though they now knew the real object of the voyage as well as their commander, remained faithful to their original distrust, holding themselves cordially aloof from their passengers despite the repeated advances toward a warmer footing made by Kallinger and his friends.

"I'm no' much of a hand at cards, Captain Seaton," Gillespie had said with a sour look when Seaton had brought up the subject. And Seaton had reddened at the fling, but made no reply.

As for Seaton himself, he had no occasion to change, or even question, the friendly relations established by the poker game. He had brought the matter of Powell's departure, and the latter's objective point as the Banda Sea, to Kallinger's attention on the first day out, but Kallinger's reaction to this had been just what he had expected and exactly the same as his own.

"They don't send men-of-war out on a tin-hunting expedition," Kallinger had said indifferently.

And Seaton, caring very little about it one way or the other, had let the matter drop, and even the subject of their own precise destination did not come up again until the evening of the sixth day out from Singapore, when, as Seaton was studying over his chart, there came a rap on the chartroom door.

"Come in," he called.

Kallinger entered and closed the door behind him.

"I wanted to have a little chat with you, Captain," he began; "and, first, I'd like to check up on our position. We're fairly close to Kangean now, aren't we?"

Seaton nodded and jabbed a point of his dividers down on the chart.

"Yes, here we are," he replied. "We'll be sighting Kangean by sunrise."

"I see," said Kallinger, bending over Seaton's shoulder. He straightened up after a minute and, going around to the other side of the table, dropped into a chair. "According to Ching, there are a couple of small islands to the north again."

Seaton's eyebrows lifted sharply.

"Ching!" he ejaculated. "What the devil does he know about it?"

Kallinger waved his hand and smiled easily.

"He says he was born on one of them. But the main thing is that Ching is the corroborative evidence I mentioned during our conversation that afternoon in Singapore. I haven't said anything about it since we came aboard, for I've noticed that you don't take much stock in Ching, and I didn't see any object in it."

"H'm!" Seaton frowned. "Well, I'll confess I haven't much time for him, but what's the story anyway?"

"It's simple enough," said Kallinger. "Ever since I've had Ching, and that's several years now, I've known he came from somewhere down here, and when that letter from Hewton came, I questioned Ching closely about his island. But he didn't know any more about tin ore or even what it looked like than, as you've said yourself, you do. Then an idea occurred to Monsieur Vernier, and we put it into practice. We got some samples of the richest tin ore we could obtain and showed them to Ching. We asked him if he had ever seen any 'stones' like those on his island, and his reply was: 'Allee same sometimes dig find plenty.' So you see, Captain, there's nothing very mysterious about it. It's corroborative, as I said, and that's all, but it decided us to make our first search on Ching's island."

Seaton's dividers beat a mechanical tattoo on the chart.

"It doesn't make any difference to me where we touch first," he said, "and all I can say is that I hope for your sakes he's right." He bent over the chart and located what looked like little more than two fly specks in close proximity to one another. "Here they are," he said. "Want me to shape up for them?"

"Yes, that's the idea," Kallinger answered. "The more westerly one, Ching says."

"Any white men there," inquired Seaton, "or are they all natives?"

"I asked Ching about that. It's out of the beaten track, of course, and he said they were all natives—Malays, Dyaks, Chinese and that sort of thing. When would you say we would make the island?"

Seaton maneuvered with his dividers and made a rapid calculation.

"We'll rise them by noon tomorrow, if we change course tonight," he replied.

"Well, do so then, please," requested Kallinger, rising and going to the door. "I'll hope to see you later on in our cabin, Captain, but in the

meantime I'll leave you to your work."

For the next few minutes Seaton busied himself with his calculations, and then, having worked out his course, he left the chartroom, mounted the bridge and gave Fuller the necessary instructions.

"And, Fuller," he added, "we'll make our first port of call tomorrow at a bit of an island that, you'll note from the course I've just given you, is to the north of Kangean."

"That's good news—in one respect at least," observed Fuller a little tartly.

"Not feeling well?" inquired Seaton with mock solicitude, noting the other's tone. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," returned Fuller crossly. "But if you want plain words, the sooner we start this tin-islanding business the sooner we'll be through, and that's what'll please me. I've told you before I haven't liked this affair from first to last, and I tell you now I like it less than I ever did."

"Look here," Seaton rapped out, "what's the matter with you, Fuller, anyway? If you've got anything on your mind, let's have it. Anything happened out of the way?"

"No," admitted Fuller; "there hasn't. It's the *feel* that things ain't right that's got me, an' I can't get away from it."

"Perhaps you'd advise going about and putting back to Singapore," suggested Seaton sarcastically.

"I would! So help me, I *would*!" The words came away in a gust of fierce assertion.

Seaton, taken aback, stared for a moment in mute astonishment.

"Don't be a fool, man," he admonished in a friendly voice. "You're not a child, Fuller. By the way, what's going on forward? They've been kicking up didos for the last hour or more. Something new for our lot, isn't it?"

From the forecandle, as he spoke, came the shuffling sound of many feet in a sailor's hornpipe, keeping time to the furious strumming of a banjo. It ended in a burst of applause, presumably by the participants themselves; and then, the banjo going on again, "Sailor Sam," in a by no means bad baritone, floated up to the bridge:

" 'Ow, bless my soul,' said Sailor Sam,
'Wot a great, big fool of a goose Hi am,
Hi've got a girl hin hevery port,
An' hit's all the sime to me!'"

"It's the new crowd," explained Fuller, "that we shipped in place of Martin an' the others. They're rough, if you like; but I've no fault to find with 'em. They do their work."

Seaton was laughing, and he gave Fuller a friendly slap on the back.

"Well, I'm glad something satisfies you," he grinned and, bidding the mate good night, went down the ladder.

Back in the chartroom, with the thought in mind of the natives who would probably be aboard the next day to trade, Seaton unlocked the drawer of the table containing the ship's papers where he had placed the thousand pounds Kallinger had given him. There was a more secure hiding place for the money than that. A piece of the deck planking under the head of the bunk on the port side had been arranged for just such contingencies. He got down on his knees and pried it up with his clasp knife; then, folding the notes, he placed them in the hollow and put back the planking, hammering it down solidly with his fist.

A little heated from the cramped position as he rose to his feet, he walked to the door and threw it open with the intention of standing in the doorway a few moments for the sake of the breeze. He drew back quickly with a startled exclamation. Before him was the figure of Ching Lang.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he demanded sharply.

"Excellency Kallinger send know you want play plover?" replied the Celestial glibly.

Seaton stared at him suspiciously. Ching Lang stood humbly, patiently waiting.

"No," said Seaton at last. "Tell Mr Kallinger not tonight. I'm going to turn in."

He watched the Chinaman glide away, and then re-entered the chartroom, shutting the door with a vicious bang. He took off his coat, preparing to turn in, and mechanically reached up to draw the window curtains. His hand stopped halfway suddenly, and the next minute he was out of the chartroom and hurrying along the deck to Kallinger's cabin.

Without waiting for a reply to his knock, he thrust his head inside. The three men were sitting around the table, playing.

"Did you send Ching Lang to ask me to play, Mr Kallinger?" he demanded abruptly.

"Yes," said Kallinger promptly. "Come in. I thought you weren't coming."

“Neither I am,” returned Seaton. “I found him snooping around the outside of the chartroom, and I wanted to make sure he wasn’t lying.”

“That’s all right,” Kallinger reassured him. “I sent Ching with the message. Sure you won’t play, after all, Captain?”

“No,” said Seaton, “not tonight, thanks just the same.”

“Better,” urged Knapp, while Vernier smiled invitingly.

“No, too much to do tomorrow,” replied Seaton decisively. “Good night.”

He shut the door and walked back to the chartroom. They were still singing on the forward deck, and he paused a moment to listen before going in.

“I must be getting as bad as Fuller,” he muttered, “though it was just as well to make sure, and it was a fool trick to leave that blind up.”

Chapter V

The Traymore Drops Anchor

IT was noon the next day, and the Traymore, slowed down to quarter speed, was feeling her way cautiously along the coast of an island of not inconsiderable size, despite its diminutive representation on the chart, and which Ching Lang pronounced to be Sampi.

Low and flat by the shores, though thick with vegetation, the interior rose wild and mountainous, terminating in two lofty peaks that seemed to divide the island in the middle. Between these, some five to six miles to the eastward, one caught a glimpse of a thin ribbon of blue sea, and then the sister island of Puli as Ching called it, that since entering the lee of Sampi from the open sea had been shut out from view.

Seaton, with the caution of a good seaman, began to take soundings as they stood in for the shore.

Kallinger hailed him from the deck.

"Ching says there's deep water right in," he called, "and a good harbor. He says he can pilot you, if you like."

Seaton leaned over the weather cloth of the bridge and stared down.

"Plenty much water allee way," corroborated the Chinaman, who was standing beside Kallinger. "Me boy here. Me show?"

"Go for'ard there with Mr Fuller, then; but have a care what you're doing," consented Seaton a little dubiously.

"Me savvy all light," grinned Ching, and started forward.

Seaton watched him make his way to the forecabin, where Fuller and a couple of seamen were busy with the lead; then he bellowed through his hands at the first officer:

"For'ard, there, Mr Fuller! Ching says he can pilot us in. Keep your eye on him, and the lead going."

"Aye, aye, sir," responded Fuller. "Eight fathoms, sir."

But Seaton need have had no cause to doubt his volunteer pilot's ability. Ching's work was masterly.

At the expiration of half an hour they had drawn close in to the island, skirting and finding their way between reefs with marvelous precision; and then, when there had seemed to be no break in the shore line, suddenly a narrow channel, less than a hundred yards wide, opened up ahead.

It appeared to reach inland, but just how far inland could not be determined from the ship's deck, as it twisted sharply almost at the entrance. As they entered it and worked slowly along, it became a succession of short, tortuous turns, so short at times that, with the swing of the ship, it seemed the Traymore would ground astern.

A black look settled on Seaton's face, and his lips set in grim lines, while his eyes never left the figure of the little Chinaman perched on the forecastle beside Fuller.

Ching Lang, however, seemed perfectly self-possessed and entirely at ease. His arms moved semaphore fashion, now to the right, now to the left, while, amplifying his movements, his squeaky voice floated aft: "Stlarbo'd! Plort!"

Suddenly Seaton gasped. Without a minute's warning they swung abruptly, the channel was behind them, and they had emerged into a large, landlocked lagoon. He wheeled quickly on the bridge and rubbed his eyes as he stared astern. They were shut in everywhere, and only the swirl of the steamer's wake indicated the position of the channel behind them.

The lagoon was perhaps a mile in length, the length paralleling the coastline of the island itself. In width it was much narrower, not more than a quarter of a mile at the most.

Ahead of them, on the island side of the lagoon, the shore stretched away in a thick forest, the trees and vegetation reaching almost to the fringe of sandy beach that gleamed white in the sunshine. Here and there, peeping through the foliage, could be seen little clusters of huts. On the beach itself were a number of long black objects that Seaton rightly judged to be native canoes.

Kallinger had gone forward to Fuller and Ching, leaving Vernier and Knapp on the boat deck below the bridge. Now he came back and joined them. After a few words he hailed Seaton:

"Ching says those huts ahead are the only village on the island, Captain. I think the handiest thing we can do is to anchor as near there as possible."

"All right," agreed Seaton. "For'ard, there, Mr Fuller! Make ready to let go!"

"Aye, sir," responded Fuller. "All ready, sir."

Seaton swung the Traymore broadside with the shore, coming in in a long curve, and then backed his engines till she lost way.

"Let go, Mr Fuller!" he roared.

"All gone, sir," answered the mate.

There was a splash, the clang and rattle of chain, and the Traymore lay quietly swinging to her anchor some two hundred yards from shore.

Seaton left the bridge and joined Kallinger and his companions.

“We’ve evidently caused some excitement,” Kallinger remarked, waving his hand shoreward. “I suppose that’s the chief, or whatever he calls himself, coming out to see who we are and what we want.”

Groups of natives had gathered at the water’s edge, and, as Kallinger had indicated, a canoe was already putting off from the beach.

Seaton nodded, watching the canoe as it approached.

“Better make His Highness a present of some of your trading stuff to put him in a good humor,” suggested Kallinger. “Ching can have a powwow with him, and then we’ll decide what’s the best thing to do.”

The canoe, propelled by ten paddlers, approached swiftly until within fifteen or twenty yards of the Traymore, when it stopped. Its occupants appeared to be composed of about an equal number of Chinese and Malays. The man in the bow, evidently the chief, stood up and began to gesticulate, shouting some words.

Ching answered him and, after the exchange of a few sentences, turned to Kallinger.

“Him say likee come ’bloard,” he translated.

“Tell him that’s all right, and to come up here on the boat deck,” said Seaton.

Ching spoke rapidly for a moment, pointing to where the gangway was being lowered, and the canoe moved forward.

Seaton scowled, and eyed the chief with little favor as the latter came up the boat-deck ladder. He was an undersized, brown-complexioned fellow, with long, black, coarse hair, and his grin of welcome stamped his features with undeniable malignity.

Kallinger, setting the pace, advanced and shook hands. “We’ve got to show we’re friendly,” he explained.

Vernier, Knapp and, lastly, Seaton followed suit.

This ceremony ended, Kallinger again took the initiative.

“We’ll take him into the cabin, give him a drink or two, and the present of a bottle—he’ll favor that more than anything you’ve got in the hold, Captain—then we’ll tell him that we’ve come here to trade and that some of us would perhaps like to spend a few days ashore. There’s no use being any more definite than that until we’ve won his confidence a bit. Tell him, Ching.”

Ching, who had begun to chatter volubly with the Malay, stopped abruptly as he was addressed.

“Him know me. Boy here. Say how do. Me tell him.”

The program was evidently to the chief’s taste, for he nodded and grinned.

“Come along, then,” said Kallinger.

“What about those fellows below there in the canoe?” demanded Seaton.

Again Ching translated.

“They wait,” he informed Seaton.

“All right,” said Seaton. “You go ahead, Mr Kallinger, and get what you can out of him. I’ll join you after a bit, when I’ve seen things shipshape and shaken down.”

And, Kallinger agreeing, the group moved off in the direction of the cabin, leaving Seaton with Fuller, who had lingered near by watching the scene.

“Fuller,” directed Seaton shortly, “have some of that trading stuff chucked into the canoe, and post a man at the gangway to keep an eye on them.”

“Aye, sir,” grunted Fuller. “Are ye — —”

But Seaton was already stamping down the deck, leaving Fuller’s unfinished sentence in the air.

It was half an hour before, his duties concluded, Seaton joined Kallinger and the others in the cabin.

“Well, how did you come out?” he inquired.

“Everything’s all to the good,” replied Kallinger with every appearance of being in a very happy frame of mind. “The chief here, his name is Koru, or something like that—Ching, fill up the chief’s glass, only put more water in it—says we’re welcome to come and go as we like.”

“When are you going to start? Great Scott!” This last as Seaton watched the Malay dispose of a huge tumbler of rum and water at a single gulp.

“We’ve just been talking that over, and Knapp thinks we might as well go at once,” Kallinger answered. “It’s only two o’clock now. We’d be away easily by three, and get a little something done anyway—but, for that matter, we’ll go prepared to spend the night if we decide to do so—maybe visit with the chief if he puts on a show for us, as most of them usually want to do. We’ll need some men, of course, to carry our things and do the rough work. I was speaking to one of those fellows who were singing last night, and he says that he and his mates have had a good deal of experience in the woods

and bush—somewhere down in Australia, I believe he said. If that's so, they're just the ones we want."

"I can't say anything about that," said Seaton, "because I don't know. They're a new lot we shipped at Singapore, in place of some of our own crew who didn't show up. You're welcome to them, if you want them. In fact, I'd rather you took them than any of the rest."

"Good!" cried Kallinger. "That's settled, then. The chief here says he'll be very glad to trade, and will come out in the morning. I'd let you have Ching to interpret, but I don't see how we can get along without him inland. Anyway, you've one consolation—you can't very well get the worst of any bargain you make, no matter what it is."

"Oh, never mind about that," returned Seaton. "I'm not very keen on doing anything in the trading line, and especially so since that canoe came alongside. I can't say I like their looks, and I don't fancy the idea of their swarming all over the ship."

"Nonsense!" laughed Kallinger. "If we're willing to trust our skins ashore, I don't see that you've anything very much to fear aboard. They can't help their looks, Captain."

"No, I suppose not. Anyway, I'm going to limit them to one canoe load aboard at a time. Let Ching Lang tell him so."

"But, look here, Captain," protested Kallinger, "that's foolish. To begin by exhibiting distrust is the surest road to trouble; and, on top of that, it'll make it harder for us ashore."

"I'm sorry," insisted Seaton, "but it's got to be that way or nothing. If the chief can't see it that way, all I've got to say is that it ought to be a hint to you to look out for yourselves ashore. Let Ching tell him."

"Well, if you feel as strongly as that about it," said Kallinger, yielding, "why, all right. Tell the chief what the captain says, Ching."

"Him say," interpreted Ching after the exchange of a few words, during which Koru, the chief, held up his hands, counting on his fingers, "him say only high men come 'bloard. Eight, ten. Allee rest allee samee stlay down in bloats."

Seaton nodded.

"I didn't think he'd make any objections," he remarked.

"Well, if that's settled," suggested Knapp, "let's get moving. We need all the time we've got."

"I suppose we'd better," agreed Kallinger. "Just a last word, Captain. It's understood that you wait here with the Traymore for us, no matter how long

we're gone."

"She'll be here," said Seaton, turning to go. "And I wish you all kinds of luck."

"One second." Kallinger detained him. "That's a point I'm coming to. There's a chance we won't have luck; or rather, we may have bad luck. There's no telling what might happen. If we get into a tight hole and need help, we'll fire a rocket."

"Shore expeditions weren't in the bargain, Mr Kallinger, and I'm not overanxious for any," replied Seaton. "However, I'll agree to do my best for you."

Chapter VI

Under Cover of the Night

AT three o'clock in the afternoon, when Kallinger and his companions, together with Ching and four of the crew—the four who had shipped at Singapore—went ashore, long, low-lying banks of dull-gray clouds to the eastward already promised a speedy change in the fair weather that had lasted without interruption during the last few days.

As the afternoon drew on, the weather grew worse, blowing up a high wind, increasing in velocity every hour, with intermittent gusts of heavy rain. Then the night closed in black as pitch, until a man's figure was scarcely discernible across the width of the deck; and over the whistling of the wind through the rigging and the constant thud of the rain, now a steady downpour, upon the decks, came the boom and moan of the surf from the eastern shore of the island, growing louder and louder as the storm worked up a sea.

Sheltered in the lagoon, the Traymore lay securely, with hardly more motion than if she were at dock. Aboard, the crew were snuggled comfortably in the forecabin, all save Fuller on the bridge, and the shore watch—one man forward.

In the chartroom Seaton and Gillespie were seated at the table with a bottle and a set of dominoes.

Seaton looked at his watch.

"H'm!" he grunted. "I wish them joy of it in this weather! They've evidently decided to put in the night ashore, as Kallinger said they might, or they'd be off by now—it's already a bit after ten." And then, with a good-natured snort as he flipped a third successive half crown to the engineer, who caught the coin deftly and pocketed it at once: "Damn the luck! You've all of it, Gillespie!"

"The difficulty, Captain Seaton," remarked Gillespie, shuffling the dominoes with both hands and beginning to draw for a new game, "is not with the luck. 'Tis a natural defect with the Yankees—ye're o'eranxious in your play, Captain Seaton—imprudent and hasty-like, d'ye see?"

Seaton laughed.

"Sure," said he. "And while you Britishers are sounding mud puddles with a ten-fathom lead to see if they're deep enough to drown you, we jump them and *hustle* for what we're after. Maybe, with your keen powers of

observation, Mr Gillespie, you've noticed we usually get there too. Well, play!"

"Aye, I'll no' say but for a young country ye've made strides," Gillespie admitted with a grin, and triumphantly planked down a domino, face up. "Double five, Captain Seaton—which ye'll note will count ten."

Seaton's rejoinder died before it reached his lips. There was a wild shriek from forward, then shouts and curses and a hideous chorus of unearthly and soul-sickening yells. He sprang to his feet, and for an instant his eyes met Gillespie's. He nodded as though answering the other's unspoken thoughts, and pointed to the revolver rack behind the engineer's head.

"Two apiece, Gillespie, and don't forget Fuller," he said coolly, and, wrenching open a drawer of the table, began to fill his pockets with cartridge boxes. "Have a care, Gillespie; they're loaded!" he cautioned as the other jerked the heavy navy revolvers from their clasps and tumbled them, two at a time, upon the table.

"Aye," muttered Gillespie savagely, "but we'll be like to empty 'em fast enough! 'Tis fair pandemonium for'ard. I've suspicions 'twill be the godless heathen."

The door burst open, and Fuller in dripping oilskins stumbled in.

"For God's sake, be quick!" he gasped. "They'll be here in a minute. It's those cursed Malays. They boarded for'ard. Didn't see 'em. It's so dark I couldn't see a thing from the bridge. The crew's done for, most likely, by now—to say nothing of Thorpe and the engineers who were bunked for'ard, you know. Listen! Listen to that! I just saw one—"

"We'll hold this deck if we can," interrupted Seaton sharply. He flung a box of cartridges to each and picked up a brace of revolvers, motioning the others to do the same. "Gillespie, you hold the starboard ladder. Fuller, you keep with me for a minute. Come on!"

From the break of the lower deck, two ladders, one on either side of the ship, led up to the boat deck where the charthouse was located. Seaton leading, they dashed out and separated, Gillespie going to the right, and Seaton, with Fuller close behind him, going to the left.

Seaton reached the head of the port ladder not an instant too soon. Something darker than the blackness of the night loomed before him. Came the sound of quick breathing, the sense of other shapes following fast on the first. His arm shot out with all the strength of his great frame behind it, and the butt of his weapon crashed into soft, quivering resistance. There came a

scream of pain. Fuller's revolver roared like a cannon in his ears, almost singeing his hair, as the mate fired over his shoulder.

Across the deck, Gillespie's revolvers were cutting the night with long flashes of light, and over the roar of the reports, the savage medley of noises from the lower deck, the little Scotchman's voice rose stridently in fervent blasphemy.

At this sudden and unexpected resistance, the Malays retreated, and for a moment the ladders were clear.

"Fuller," Seaton rasped, "we can't hold this long. Besides, some of the devils are likely to board by the stern. Our only chance is to lower a boat. Can you manage it alone?"

"I'll manage," replied Fuller between his teeth. "But it can't be done in a minute. I'll have to lower away bit by bit, one end at a time."

"Quick, then!" Seaton ordered. "Lower the small cutter amidships on the port side—that'll be away from the shore."

"All right," answered Fuller and disappeared.

Seaton called across to Gillespie.

"They'll be making a rush in a minute. Look out for yourself! We've got to hold them long enough to give Fuller a chance to lower a boat."

Gillespie did not answer. He was whistling through his teeth. Uncanny and grim it sounded over the hush that had fallen, and the tune he whistled was, "The Campbells Are Coming," to the accompaniment of empty shells tinkling upon the deck as he emptied the cylinders of his revolvers, reloading with fresh cartridges.

Just the soft shuffling of bare feet, the uneasy sounds of the movements of many men crowded upon the space below, was the only evidence now that it was not some horrible nightmare; for the shouts and confusion from the direction of the forecastle had died away even before the attack on the upper deck.

Seaton's voice cut through the darkness in a harsh hail:

"Thorpe! Peters! Robbins! Jackson! Burnet!" He was shouting the tale of the crew. Not a voice replied to him. "Murdered!" he cried in horror. "Caught like rats! They're out—every last one of them *out*!"

A peal of thunder shook the heavens and died away in a series of long, rumbling rolls like the intermittent firing of artillery. The rain, in a sudden access of fury, poured down in sheets. A flash of lightning cut the sky; and for an instant from below there danced before Seaton's eyes half-naked

brown and yellow forms, upturned inhuman faces, distorted with blood lust and passion, the stamp of hell upon them.

And simultaneously with the flash, a wild yell broke from Gillespie's lips, and he fired twice in rapid succession.

"Hold your fire, man!" shouted Seaton. "You'll need every shot you've got to stop their rush. Look out! Here they come!"

Whether it was Gillespie's shots that stirred them to action, or that the lightning had disclosed the fact that the defenders of the deck above them numbered but two men, their apparent hesitation vanished, and with demoniacal cries the Malays rushed forward and flung themselves upon the ladders.

The first of the advance on Seaton's side went down before his steady fire, cluttering the lower steps and impeding the movements of those behind. In the momentary check this caused, he peered anxiously in Gillespie's direction. The engineer seemed to be holding his own.

Seaton had time for but a single glance. Clambering over their fallen companions, those behind were coming on with a rush, splitting the air with their unearthly yells; and for a moment the narrow ladderway was like a channel of light as Seaton's revolvers streamed fire into the swaying mass before him—then the hammers clicked upon empty shells.

With a bitter curse Seaton reversed his weapons to ply the butts in a hand-to-hand conflict. The hot barrels scorched his flesh, the pain adding to the blind fury that was now upon him. His arms rose and fell flaillike. His blows went home with crunching sounds. Slowly they were pressing up to the topmost step. He was gasping for breath. He was conscious that Gillespie's fire, too, had ceased, though the sound of the conflict still waging across the deck gave evidence that the plucky little Scotchman still held the ladder. Then suddenly Gillespie's fire broke out anew, footsteps came running toward him, a revolver was thrust into his own hand, and an empty one snatched in exchange.

"Drop the other!" yelled a voice in his ear. "I'll load 'em."

It was Fuller—and in the nick of time.

"Good old Fuller!" panted Seaton. "Take that!" A sinewy arm brandishing a wicked kris just grazed his neck as he leaped back and fired. The kris clattered to the deck, the arm fell back, and its owner pitched over backward, head down.

Seaton, with a laugh of unholy glee, stepped forward—down onto the topmost step. They slashed at him, cut at him, but the leaders, forced to give

back before his attack, were now cramped by the jam of their followers packed in below them.

It was either up or down. Disheartened by Seaton's desperate forcing of the fight, and by the renewed firing that was now picking them off mercilessly at the very moment when they had believed the victory theirs, they gave way sullenly, leaving the ladders clear again save for the bodies of the dead that strewed the steps, and only the kindly darkness withheld from sight a scene that could have been little better than a shambles.

"The boat, Fuller!" gasped Seaton. "The boat, is it launched?"

"Aye, she's ready," replied Fuller from the starboard ladder where he had joined Gillespie.

"This is our chance, then. Steal away quietly, both of you—no noise. It will take them a minute or two to discover we're gone. They've learned caution at all events. Now then—*quick!*"

As he spoke, Seaton stepped silently back a pace or two from the head of the ladder, and then, turning, moved rapidly along the deck, feeling his way past the charthouse, to the davits amidships. The others were there ahead of him.

"I've made fast the stern tackle," explained Fuller in a low tone. "We'll have to shinny down that."

"Away with you, then," directed Seaton. "Gillespie, go first. You're not hurt, are you?"

"A scratch or two—no more," replied the engineer. "'Twas perfectly — —"

"Hurry, man, hurry!" Seaton cut him short.

Gillespie disappeared over the side, and an instant later his voice rose guardedly, announcing his safety.

Fuller followed, and then Seaton. As he dropped into the stern of the cutter, he drew out his clasp knife.

"Cut away in the bow, there, Gillespie," he ordered and severed the stern tackle as he spoke.

Fuller was fumbling with the oars.

"Wait, Fuller," whispered Seaton. "Let her drift a spell; we'll go clear of the stern. They can't see us, and I reckon all their craft are around the bows."

They sat still in the boat, listening intently. Though under the protection of the Traymore's hull, the wind swept around in little gusts and eddies that gradually blew them clear of the ship. Her outline grew more and more

indistinct, finally merging into the surrounding darkness. Fuller in the center seat now carefully ran out his oars.

“’Twas fair grand,” murmured Gillespie. “Fair grand!”

“Aye,” returned Seaton bitterly, “if ten good men murdered with hardly a chance to strike a blow for themselves, and the loss of a ship, is grand — ’twas grand, Gillespie!”

“The fight, man! The fight! Ye know well enough I meant that an’ naught else, Captain Seaton!” snapped the engineer. “I’ll no’ say — — Losh! They’ve discovered we’re gone!”

A babel of yells, as though all bedlam were turned loose, broke out astern; and then, looking like will-o’-the-wisps flitting hither and thither, lights began to dance around in the darkness as evidence that the Malays were now scouring the ship from end to end.

“Pull, man, hard!” urged Seaton. “They can’t hear us now for their own row. Pass an oar forward to Gillespie.”

Gillespie reached for the oar, and then it almost fell from his grasp as the hoarse notes of the Traymore’s siren rose above the confusion—someone, evidently, had discovered the whistle cord, and was jerking it violently.

The sound roused Gillespie as though it had been the sting of a whiplash across his face.

“They’ll be down with the machinery presently,” he moaned. “There’s no’ much steam, but enough to do harm. ’Tis all the work of that dirty yellow devil. I misdoubt I got him, but I can’t tell. ’Twas at him I fired by the lightnin’ flash, Captain Seaton. I wasn’t wastin’ charges, I’ll have ye know.”

“What are you ranting about?” demanded Seaton. “Who was it you fired at?”

“Who was it?” flamed Gillespie angrily. “Who was it? ’Twas that sneaking heathen Ching Lang, an’ none else!”

“Ching Lang!” repeated Seaton incredulously.

Fuller stopped rowing and swung around to stare at Gillespie.

“Go on rowing, Fuller; we aren’t clear by long odds,” bade Seaton tersely. “Are you sure, Gillespie, that it was Ching Lang?”

“Aye, I’m sure. Would I be like to mistake a face like his? I fired twice, as ye’re aware.”

“Did you get him?” questioned Seaton quickly.

“I’m hopin’ I did,” replied Gillespie fiercely, “though ’tis against the ethics of the creed to say it. I’m hopin’ I did; but I’d no’ say for a certainty.”

“I hope you did too,” concurred Seaton fervently as the remembrance of the open blind and Ching’s presence outside the chartroom door the previous night, when he had placed the thousand pounds beneath the flooring, flashed across his mind.

“If Ching’s in this,” submitted Fuller, speaking for the first time, “what about Kallinger and his crowd ashore?”

“Murdered probably,” answered Seaton grimly. “Murdered before ever the attack on the Traymore began. It’s plain enough. Ching is hand in glove with the natives, and he’s stirred them up to it. If you didn’t end him, Gillespie, he’s the owner by now of the thousand pounds Kallinger paid me for the first month. That’s what he was after, I imagine, and what put him up to start all the deviltry.”

“What d’ye mean?” demanded Fuller.

Seaton related the events of the preceding night.

“Ching saw me put the money under the bunk,” he ended; “there’s no question about that now. And I’ll say that yarn he spun Kallinger, about there being ‘stones’ here like the samples of ore he was shown, was all eyewash to make sure Kallinger touched at the island, and so get Kallinger and the lot of us down here among his own knife-sticking crowd. Nice pickings!”

Fuller swore and dug his oar viciously into the water.

“I don’t know how it strikes you,” he growled, “but it strikes me that we’re in a number-one-size mess!”

Chapter VII

Into the Small Hours

FOR a period of ten minutes Fuller and Gillespie pulled steadily at their oars, and no one in the boat spoke. Then Seaton bade them stop to listen. The uproar aboard the Traymore still reached them distinctly enough, but there was no sound of pursuit.

“Do you hear anything?” he asked the others.

“No,” replied Fuller after a moment. “It’s queer too; for I figured they’d be after us with their canoes. They’re bound to have seen the tackles hangin’ loose from the davits.”

“I rather expected they would myself,” agreed Seaton; “but I suppose they calculate we won’t be able to get away very far and that they’ll get us at their own convenience.”

“Blimy!” muttered Fuller. “I’d say they ain’t far wrong at that. We’re in a tight hole, any way you look at it.”

“We’ve been in tight holes before, Fuller,” Seaton reminded him cheerfully, “and I’ve a notion we’ll get out of this one.”

“Would ye have formulated a plan, Captain, by any chance?” inquired Gillespie.

“There’s only one thing I see to do,” Seaton answered. “Steering by the lights on the Traymore, I’ve been heading as nearly as I can for the far end of the lagoon. I didn’t get much of a look through the glass coming in this noon, but from what I saw I don’t think it’s very far across to the other shore of the island. But, far or near, we’ll have to cross it, carry the boat and make for that other island out there.”

“Man, she’d never live with the sea that’s on,” Gillespie protested. “Hark to the surf, Captain Seaton.”

“I fancy we’ll have time enough to consider that,” returned Seaton dryly. “If we’re across by daybreak, we’ll be in luck. If the sea is running too heavily then, we’ll have to lay up, hide, wait and take our chances. Give way, both of you. The sooner we’re out of this the better.”

The oars dipped obediently.

It was five minutes before Seaton spoke again.

“Fuller,” he asked suddenly, “have we any stores aboard?”

“Water an’ a few biscuits in the locker,” replied the mate briefly.

“Good!” said Seaton and relapsed into silence.

The few twinkling lights from the Traymore grew dimmer and dimmer. Ahead was just utter blackness, like a wall of inky hue. It was still raining as heavily as ever, and they seemed to be getting a little more of the sweep of the wind; but, already wet to the skin, except Fuller, who was protected by his oilskins, the gusts that blew the drops with stinging force into their faces could add but little to their discomfort.

They had been pulling steadily for some twenty minutes when suddenly the boat grounded with a shock that flung them from their seats.

“Out!” ordered Seaton as he recovered himself. “Out! Ashore with you, and haul her up.” He shivered a little as he spoke, though the air was hot, scarcely cooled by the storm. “Fever,” he muttered, “if we’re not careful—and neither quinine nor brandy to stave it off.”

“Ah, but there is,” soothed Gillespie. “I’ve a wee drop of the last, an’ if ye’ll drink light, there’s no tellin’ but ’twill go round again.”

Gillespie’s caution was not to be despised, for his stock was slender indeed, but little as each man took, it acted as a tonic upon them.

“Come on, now, up with her!” urged Seaton encouragingly.

They lifted the boat bodily and carried it over the sand. Twenty yards from the water’s edge, where the trees and vegetation fringed the beach, they set it down.

“What to do now?” demanded Fuller.

“Do!” cried Seaton. “There’s nothing to do but go ahead, or wait here and get our throats slit in the morning. It can’t be more than half a mile across. The undergrowth is not over thick, and we can do it all right in easy stages.”

They tackled it manfully, with set teeth and muscles that quivered with exquisite pain under the strain, stumbling, falling, banging into trees, tripping over trailing tendons, hurt, sore, bruised from head to foot, but ever the clear grit and unfaltering determination of Seaton spurred them on. Yet at the end of two heartbreaking hours, they had made no more than a quarter of a mile.

Seaton himself, though stronger than his companions, was about exhausted, and a prolonged halt was necessary. But, to his relief, he knew that he had overestimated the distance that lay ahead of them—the boom and roar of the surf sang pleasantly near in his ears. Another half-hour would see them through. They could take an hour’s lay-off and still make it before it grew light.

“One more heave,” he called, “and make it a good one. Then we’ll rest for an hour, and grub. Biscuits and water aren’t so bad—when you’ve nothing else. Now then!”

“Wait!” ejaculated Gillespie suddenly, as they stooped over the boat to lift it. “What’s yon?”

“Where?” asked Seaton and Fuller in unison.

Gillespie pulled Seaton a little to one side of where he had been standing, and pointed through the trees.

“There! D’ye see now?” he whispered excitedly.

Not more than forty yards away was the glimmer of a light.

“Blimy!” exclaimed Fuller. “It’s like enough we’re running plum into another of their dashed villages like the one we was anchored off from, for all that murderin’ heathen said there was only one.”

“I don’t think so. It looks like a campfire to me,” declared Seaton. “We’ll go forward and see, anyhow.”

“But we’ll never be able to find the boat again in the dark, if we leave it,” objected Fuller.

“Maybe not. Perhaps you’re right. Well then, you stay here, Fuller, and Gillespie can come halfway with me. That’ll string us out and keep us in touch. Come along, Gillespie.”

The wind and rain were now in their favor, drowning out as they did the sound of their advance. Halfway, as they had arranged, Gillespie stopped, and Seaton went on alone.

As he drew nearer, he moved with the utmost caution, feeling his way from tree trunk to tree trunk, and testing his footing carefully before trusting his weight upon it. And then, in the perversity of things, and just as another step would have given him the position of vantage he was seeking, he slipped and, with a desperate but fruitless effort to recover himself, pitched forward with a crash.

“Halt! Who goes there?” The challenge came suddenly, uncompromisingly out of the darkness.

An English voice!

Seaton was on his feet in a moment. It seemed as though he had never heard so heavenly a voice before. A wild thought flashed across his mind that it was Kallinger and his companions—that they, too, had escaped. He pushed forward.

“Halt!” came the command again, this time with a harsher ring. “Halt, or I fire!”

Then Seaton found his voice.

“Don’t fire!” he shouted. “It’s all right, whoever you are.” He broke through the trees into the circle of light. “By the holy Jehoshaphat!” he exclaimed. “A British marine! Ho, Gillespie, pass the word to Fuller and come on. It’s all right.”

There were hasty, hurried movements as of those suddenly alarmed, and, where there had been but one before, the place was now alive with men. The marine’s carbine was stolidly leveled at Seaton’s head.

“What’s wrong there, sentry?” sang out a voice sharply from somewhere in the shadows.

“Prisoner, sir,” was the marine’s curt response.

“Sergeant, get a light”—the authoritative voice was speaking again —“and bring him in here.”

“Prisoner nothing!” snorted Seaton in disgust. “I’m an American, you idiots. Here, keep your hands off!” He shook away a couple of men who had grasped his arms. “I’ll go to your commander peacefully enough—I could fall on his neck for joy, for that matter. I’ve a couple of men behind there, whom I’ll thank you not to perforate as they come up. Ahoy, there, Fuller! Gillespie!” he called again.

“Comin’, man, comin’”—it was the Scotchman’s voice—“but the walkin’s no’ perfect!”

The floundering and thrashing of the men in the thicket, in their evident haste to join their commander, bore eloquent testimony to the engineer’s words.

“Well, Sergeant! What the devil’s up there?” The interrogation was full of angry impatience.

“It’s all right, sir, I expect,” replied the man at Seaton’s elbow. “There’s three of ’em. English, sir; though they’re hard-looking tickets.”

Gillespie and Fuller had by now arrived, and stood blinking in the firelight. The words roused the fiery little Scotchman.

“Ye’re not asked for your opinion, ye forsaken, pipe-clayin’ image!” he snapped aggressively. “I’ll have ye know ’twill be well for ye to keep your tongue in your cheeks to your betters!”

“Shut up, Gillespie!” flung out Seaton. “The man’s perfectly right. We can’t look much less than scarecrows. Go on, Sergeant, lead the way.”

The sergeant hesitated a moment, seemingly tempted to bring matters to a more intimate issue with Gillespie, but a wholesome regard for the impatience of his officer evidently made him think better of it.

“This way!” he growled. “Jenkins, Harris, Smithers, fall in as guard!”

A few steps brought them to a rude, hastily constructed brush shelter, in which a ship’s lantern was burning. Here the sergeant halted and saluted.

A tall, slim young man, his oilskins unbuttoned, displaying the naval uniform beneath, was standing at the entrance. Behind him was another man who, dimly seen in the shadows, appeared to be short, thickset, stout; evidently a civilian.

At sight of the naval officer, a tight smile crossed Seaton’s lips.

“You’re English, you say?” demanded the officer crisply.

“Personally, I’m an American,” corrected Seaton coolly. “The others are — —”

“Sergeant, let your men turn in,” ordered the officer, apparently satisfied, and abruptly breaking in on Seaton’s explanation. Then, as the marines withdrew, he motioned the three inside.

“Now then,” he said curtly, “you’re no doubt from that ship that came into the lagoon this afternoon. What in bally time are you doing picnicking around ashore a night like this?”

“Picnickin’!” Gillespie repeated the word softly, rolling it on his tongue as though it embodied a world of infinite delight.

“Also,” went on the officer, “I’m dashed curious to know what your ship touched here for anyway.”

For a moment Seaton did not reply, turning the matter over in his mind. He had been permitted to tell Gillespie and Fuller of course—but not outsiders. He believed that Kallinger and the others were dead, but he had no means of knowing that was actually so, and if they were still alive it was only fair to them to keep his mouth shut. He’d given his promise that he would, hadn’t he?

“Well!” prompted the officer suspiciously, breaking in on his thoughts. “Why don’t you answer?”

“I’ll answer your last question first,” replied Seaton, his mind made up. “We touched here to trade.”

“Trade, eh? I suppose you’ve been here before, then?”

“No,” said Seaton, falling blindly into the other’s trap.

“Perhaps you’ll explain, then, how you navigated that channel so handily. We watched you come in this afternoon.” The words were keen as a knife edge. “You may have imagined I didn’t recognize you, Captain Seaton. I’ve a good memory for faces, even under a poor light. Your engineer—

Gillespie, I believe, is the name—would be a good signpost in any event. You, Fuller, I saw ashore at Singapore.”

“My own memory’s not over poor, Lieutenant Powell,” returned Seaton imperturbably. “The last time, and the second it was, I had the pleasure of seeing you was at ’Marquez. You were recovering from either brain fever or the hallucination—which I trust is dissipated—that we’d run a cargo of contraband arms under your nose.”

“Yes,” said Powell grimly, “and perhaps *you’ll* recall, too, that I warned you to look out for the third time. You can hardly expect me to believe your story. Your reputation doesn’t lean toward trading—not of this kind. You’ll be better off to tell the truth.”

“We came in *trading*,” repeated Seaton smoothly. “Take it or leave it. As for the channel, a Chink we picked up at Singapore acted as pilot. The reason we’re ashore tonight is that that same Chink trapped us. He went ashore with a landing party this afternoon—God help them!—and tonight in the storm he boarded us with a gang of those bloody pirates from the village at his back. They were aboard before we knew it. The crew, penned in the forecastle, were murdered like a lot of sheep. We made our escape, rowed down the lagoon and landed. Since then we’ve been breaking our hearts and backs toting our boat along, intending to launch her on this side, once the sea is down, and make for that other island out yonder.”

There was a pause before Powell replied.

“I don’t know whether to believe you or not, and you might as well know it,” he said bluntly at last.

“You’ll find our boat a few yards back in the bush if you’ll take the trouble to look!” Seaton burst out angrily. “Do we look as though we were here for *fun*? We’ve had to run for our lives, I tell you, and we’re about all in. You’re a hospitable cuss, and you can go to the devil!”

Powell stared levelly and shrugged his shoulders.

“I believe you’re in trouble—you look it,” he said quietly; “and we’ll stand by you there; but I do *not* believe your trading yarn. There’s the reputation of your ship to begin with, and the word of a man who was broken at the United States Naval Academy isn’t generally taken at par.”

At the words the blood fled from Seaton’s cheeks. He took a quick step toward the other, and his fist clenched.

“Don’t go too far, Powell!” he flared; then, as suddenly as he had advanced, he stepped back again with a bitter laugh. “You’re right. I *was* kicked out, disowned by my country, if you like. It’s none of your business—nor what I’ve done since that’s earned me the reputation of a freebooter.

It's been clean work—clean, Powell, do you understand!—and big stakes—success or a fusillade—to make life worth hanging onto. Sometimes I've even dared to float the Stars and Stripes; but, by heaven, I'll have you know I've never disgraced them, though it's five years since I put a foot on American soil!"

"It's five years too long, my son—five years too long!" The stout man had suddenly brushed by Powell and was extending both his hands. "Jack Seaton! Jack Seaton! My boy! My boy!"

"You, sir—Senator Wilton!" mumbled Seaton, hardly knowing what he was saying. "It's not you, sir, here, really!"

Chapter VIII

A Story Is Told

SEATON's mind was in a daze. He was trying to persuade himself that it was not all a dream. A United States senator, and that one Wilton, the man who had been a second father to him, here on a wild and almost unknown island in the Banda Sea! The man he had not seen since that day five years ago when . . .

Senator Wilton was speaking again, and the words were burning into Seaton's brain:

"Your record is clear, my boy, *clear*, do you understand? Your classmate, Trevor, was fatally wounded in a gun-practice accident soon after he graduated, and he confessed before he died. Your record is clear, Jack. We tried over and over again to get track of you, and couldn't. Powell, it was I who procured Jack's appointment to the Academy. What happened was a miserable story best left untold, save Jack's part in it. He sacrificed his career, shouldered the disgrace and went out a dishonored man to shield a classmate."

"By Jove!" burst out Powell in genuine admiration. "Seaton, here's my hand. Will you take it? I'm sorry I flicked you on the raw like that."

Seaton was almost too stunned and bewildered to understand.

"It's all right," he said to Powell incoherently. "All right."

The little Scotchman's bony fingers gripped his like a vise.

"Man, but I'm glad, I'm glad," he cried heartily.

Fuller's handclasp was no less eloquent.

"I don't care what brought you here, Jack," the senator was saying, "or what the purpose of your visit to this island is. It is sufficient that I can say, thank God, I've found you at last! And now I know that Lieutenant Powell, who is really here on my behalf, will be only too glad to have me explain the reason of *our* presence, which must seem very strange indeed to you."

Powell nodded.

"I expect I've had the wrong focus on you, Seaton," he said, pointing to a roll of rubber sheeting in the corner. "Spread that out and sit down."

Fuller rolled out the sheeting, and the three squatted upon it, gratefully accepting Powell's flask, which he handed around. The other two resumed

their places on the blankets, where they had been lying when disturbed by the sentry's challenge.

"Jack, do you remember my daughter Betty?" the senator began abruptly.

"Little Betty? Remember her!"

"Not so little now. Indeed, God knows——" His voice broke, and he stopped. "A fortnight ago," he went on, regaining control of himself, "she disappeared. Kidnaped. We have reason to believe that she is on this island."

"Betty here! On this island!" Seaton was on his feet, savage fury in his face. "How? I don't understand!"

"We were down here for a year's cruise on my yacht, my wife, my daughter and a party of friends, and had put in at Surabaya on the Java coast. Betty, as you know, was always much given to athletics and outdoor exercises, and we had aboard a light skiff especially designed for her to use when we were in harbor. Surabaya, I need hardly explain to you, is at the mouth of the Kediri River. One evening, two weeks ago today to be exact, she started for a row up the river, and—and that was the last we have seen of her. The boat was later found about a mile up beyond the Chinese quarters on the east bank. Her mother was almost crazy with anxiety, and we feared at first Betty had been drowned; but the finding of the boat, pulled up a distance inland, disproved that theory, and we knew then that there had been foul play."

Seaton slumped down again on the ground sheet as Senator Wilton paused.

"Go on," he prompted hoarsely.

"I shall not attempt to do more than sketch the details of what followed," Senator Wilton continued. "There was a demand for ransom. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The local police believed it to be the work of the *orang-laut*, the sea robbers. They caught a Malay they believed to be implicated, and, under pressure, he confessed. He said the plot was hatched by a pirate leader, a Chinaman named Hoh Yuan, whose lair was on this island of Sampi. There were no gunboats in any Java port at the time. I cabled our consul general at Singapore. There were no American gunboats there either, but the British have policed these waters down here for years, and they acted at once. They dispatched the Ajmir, under the command of Lieutenant Powell here, immediately to Surabaya to pick up the Malay informer for what further use they could make of him, and with orders then to proceed to this island without delay. I asked to be allowed to go on the Ajmir, but I was told, in the kindest sort of way, mind you, that it was

against regulations for a civilian, unless specifically attached thereto for some tactical reason, to accompany a punitive expedition, and— —”

“And I’m afraid,” Powell interrupted with a whimsical smile, “that your presence here at this moment is against regulations too. I suppose I should have arrested you and sent you back to the yacht when you followed us ashore tonight.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” snorted Senator Wilton. He turned to Seaton. “Jack, I did what any father would, and what, I imagine, the authorities not only knew I would, but were quite willing that I should do. I put my wife and party of friends ashore at Singapore and came down here with the yacht in company with the Ajmir. The yacht’s quite as large and quite as fast as the Ajmir, and we were never very many miles apart, but of course I took my orders by wireless—suggestions, he called them—from Lieutenant Powell. It’s my little girl, Jack, my little girl. Powell will tell you the rest.”

Seaton’s eyes were flashing, and his fists were clenched.

“The devils!” he muttered fiercely. “The— —”

“We stood in just before dawn this morning”—Powell took up the tale—“and anchored the yacht and the Ajmir behind that island out there, so that they would be hidden from sight here. It’s very much smaller than this, and is not inhabited, so far as our landing party could discover. They reported seeing you come in this afternoon. Our idea was to effect a landing on this island without being seen, find out where Miss Wilton was being kept, and trust to a surprise attack to rescue her. The storm aided us with the first part of our plan, as it grew dark early in the evening before the sea was running too heavily to hinder us any in landing. I brought the Ajmir around, debarked forty men and sent her back to her anchorage. And”—again Powell smiled whimsically—“Senator Wilton did the same, except that he contented himself with coming ashore alone. We soon found, however, that we could make no headway in the darkness, and, as our object of effecting a landing unknown to the islanders was accomplished, we decided to camp and wait for daylight before moving forward. From the information supplied by the Malay that Senator Wilton referred to, this Hoh Yuan has his stronghold somewhere between those two hills you will have noticed as you stood in.”

Seaton leaned suddenly forward.

“Lieutenant Powell,” said he, “will you give me your word as an officer and a gentleman that this is the *sole* reason for your being here?”

Powell stared.

“Why, of course I will!” he exclaimed. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” mused Seaton and looked at Gillespie and Fuller. Both men were sitting straight up, a queer look on their faces.

Gillespie shook his head. “It’s no’ that, Captain Seaton. It had nothin’ to do with the lass. There wouldn’t be time.”

“How soon did you sail from Singapore after the cable was received from Senator Wilton, Lieutenant?” asked Seaton quickly.

“The cable came in at noon. We sailed at four,” replied Powell.

Gillespie wagged his head. “’Twasn’t that, at any rate. Let be, man. They’ve paid for it with their lives, whether they told the truth or no’—’tis little odds.”

“What is the matter, Jack?” put in Senator Wilton. “To whom are you referring?”

“I’ll tell you what I can, sir, and still preserve the confidence that I’m bound to keep. Lieutenant Powell was right when he said my ship wasn’t down here trading. We were chartered by three men to come here. For a moment the suspicion crossed my mind that they were concerned in some way with Betty’s abduction, but the time of the news reaching Singapore and the Ajmir’s sailing disproves that. We didn’t sail for twenty-four hours after she did. I believe they were straight enough, poor devils, and, as Gillespie says, whether their story was true or false, they’ve probably paid for it with their lives. They went ashore this afternoon with four of the crew and that Chinaman, Ching Lang, who led the attack on the Traymore tonight. They were probably murdered in cold blood, as the rest of my crew were. As far as I am concerned, I give you my assurance upon my honor that their object, as they stated it to me, was one upon which they had every right from their standpoint to be engaged.”

“I believe you, Jack,” said the senator simply.

“So do I,” chimed in Powell, “and you’ve certainly been through a night of it. It will be breaking light in another hour or so, and you chaps had better get what little sleep you can, for we’ll leave camp the minute we can see to move. Did you say you had carried your boat over here?”

“Pretty nearly. It’s back there a few yards in the bush, as I told you,” Seaton replied.

“That’s rather bad, I’m afraid,” reflected Powell. “They’ll take up the search for you in the morning, find where you landed on the shore of the lagoon and track you to the boat. After that they’ll find this camp, and the game of hide and seek will be all up.”

“No,” countered Seaton slowly, shaking his head. “I don’t think so. In the first place they don’t know which direction we took after leaving the

Traymore. In the second place the rain will have washed out all the tracks on the beach long before this, and we were careful to carry, not drag, the boat across the sand. The boat is too far away from the beach to have them find it unless they stumble upon it by accident. My idea is that, not finding it anywhere around the shore, they'll believe we risked the channel and the open sea. They may search around out there a bit, but that's all. That's the way it looks to me, Lieutenant."

"My word, I believe you're right," agreed Powell. "We'll risk it, anyway. You haven't any idea, Seaton, I suppose, how many of these devils there are on the island, have you?"

"There's a swarm of them," Seaton answered savagely. "That village on the lagoon alone is a husky-sized one. What's in the interior, I don't know."

"Well, there's no use borrowing trouble," said Powell; "and we'll have to take things as we find them. Once we've located Miss Wilton, we can decide on the rest. You're anxious about your ship, of course."

"That can wait," replied Seaton grimly.

"'Tis no' likely they'll be able to move her, at any rate," put in Gillespie, "though 'tis fair heartbreakin' to think of the state the machinery'll be in."

"Well, we'll have her back before we're through, and we'll disinfect this pest hole with shell, once Miss Wilton is safe," concluded Powell. "Now get your sleep."

Chapter IX

Seaton Takes an Observation

PHYSICALLY exhausted as he was, Seaton could not sleep. Gillespie and Fuller, stretched out beside him, lay like logs. Across the shelter Powell's regular, heavy breathing announced that he, too, was deep in slumber. Only the senator tossed fretfully in an uneasy, fitful doze, occasionally moaning and muttering broken words.

Seaton lay on his back, his hands clasped behind his head, staring out through the opening. The rain had ceased. The only sounds now were the patter of the drops as the wind shook them from the leaves and the branches. The storm had spent itself. Overhead, here and there, the black clouds were breaking into lighter patches. Sleep was an impossibility. The restless activity of his mind carried him along with irresistible force through a series of events and happenings, reaching back over the last five years.

The old days at the Academy! His name was clear at last! None knew the bitterness that had been his. Came the picture of a white-hulled, trim-rigged cruiser in a little harbor in the South Sea Isles one summer's evening as he had steamed slowly past her in the Traymore, and out to sea. On the quarter-deck the white figure of an officer—perhaps a man he had known—known intimately and well. The band, playing some medley, had crashed suddenly into the strains of "Yankee Doodle." It was all a blur. The folds of Old Glory drooping from the stern he had seen through a blinding mist and wet eyes. He remembered his hand had gone to the old-time salute, and then he had hidden himself behind the weather cloth of his bridge. Now he could hold up his head among them again! Trevor was dead and . . .

His thoughts flew off at a tangent. A brown-eyed—great, glorious, wonderful eyes they were—brown-haired little girl in short frocks. His "little comrade," he used to call her. The senator's home had been almost his home. She was fifteen then. Twenty now. Twenty now, and a woman. A *woman*—among these wretches! Beads of sweat sprang to his forehead. A paroxysm of fury, wild, ungovernable, swept over him. It passed; but stamped upon his features was an expression it was not good to see—the same look, grim, merciless, that had been there a few hours before when he had faced death a dozen times fighting desperately for his life on the Traymore's deck.

Ching's treachery, the murder of his men, the loss of his ship, Kallinger and his friends, his own escape, surged upon him in incoherent fragments of thought. He tried to puzzle it out, but somehow the pieces would not fit. Over and over in his mind he revolved the matter. Ching's malignant, grinning yellow features kept swimming before his eyes. He wondered if Gillespie had missed—to fire by a flash of lightning is an uncertain shot at best. He opened his eyes again. A dark form blocked the entrance.

"Five o'clock, sir," said a voice, "an' it's just growing light."

"Right!" responded Powell, instantly aroused, springing to his feet.

But neither Gillespie nor Fuller moved, and Seaton was obliged to shake them roughly before they stirred. He was sore and stiff as he rose to his own feet. He went to the doorway and looked out.

"The storm is over, isn't it Jack?" Senator Wilton was at his elbow.

"Yes sir. We'll have it hot by noon," Seaton answered smilingly.

"I—I am impatient to go ahead. It was very hard to remain inactive all last night." There was a pathetic, pleading ring in the tones, and the words came slowly.

Seaton turned quickly. The dim light accentuated the other's haggard face—the white hair adding a pitiful touch. Senator Wilton looked like a broken man. Here was one whose trouble was far greater than his own. Seaton's hand, in instinctive sympathy, found the elder man's shoulder.

"You mustn't worry, Senator," he said cheerfully. "I know it must have been hard, but Powell did the best thing. If he had pushed forward in the dark, he would probably have stumbled onto something that would have given the show away. It's bound to come out right, sir; you'll see."

The senator smiled sadly.

"Thank you, my boy," he said simply, and went back inside.

"Betty!" whispered Seaton through gritted teeth. "Betty!"

The camp was astir. About him the men passed to and fro, hurriedly but with quiet movements, preparing the morning meal—a brown-tanned, sturdy lot, infusing him with confidence and respect. He watched them until Powell summoned him to breakfast.

The meal ended quickly—no one seemed much in the mood for talk—and presently Powell announced that they were ready to start. As the men fell in, he gave them a few hurried instructions.

"Single file, lads, at three paces; and be careful to watch your footing. We must make as little noise as possible. Senator, we'll place you in the

middle of the line, please. Seaton, you and your men fall in behind me. Are you ready? Forward!"

Leading the column, Powell headed straight into the bush, Seaton following close in his rear, and behind him again Gillespie, and then Fuller.

It still lacked half an hour to sunrise, and the eastern glow penetrated the woods with only a dim, uncertain light, making the progress both difficult and slow.

"I'm steering by compass," explained Powell in a low voice, over his shoulder. "Hoh Yuan's place ought to be about northwest. Unless we meet clearings and have to make detours to keep out of sight, we'll head straight for it."

They moved steadily along, picking their way carefully, the pace, tediously slow, increasing a little, however, as it grew lighter.

At the end of an hour Powell again called over his shoulder: "We've done about two miles, wouldn't you say?"

"About that," agreed Seaton. "Look here, I was thinking it wouldn't be a bad plan to halt for a few minutes and shinny up one of these trees for the sake of the perspective."

"Bully idea! Pass the word back to halt, and I'll send up one of the men."

"No, I'll go up myself," said Seaton, and, picking out what appeared to be the tallest tree about him, he swung himself quickly into the lower branches.

A few minutes climbing took him as nearly to the top as he dared to venture his weight. Here he found that some small branches above him impeded his view. He wriggled cautiously several feet higher, pushing the branches aside, and an exclamation of satisfaction escaped him.

To the right of the line of march, and some three miles in the rear, lay the lagoon, and beyond again the open sea. The surface of the lagoon was dotted with little black objects, presumably the Malays' canoes, all apparently making for the same point, around which already a number of them appeared to be clustered. As nearly as Seaton could judge, it was the channel through which the Traymore had entered; certainly it was not the spot where he, Gillespie and Fuller had landed. So far, then, they were safe. The Traymore, lying close inshore, was hidden by the intervening woods, and he could not get a glimpse of her.

Ahead, in the direction in which they were traveling, the woods stretched out unbrokenly, though rising perceptibly to meet the slopes of the two hills that made the center of the island. From where he clung to the

treetop, these two hills lay obliquely before him, and, following the course they had been pursuing since leaving the camp, they would hit squarely on the valley between the two.

His glance came back again wistfully to the point where he knew the Traymore must lie, but his only reward was the sight of a few curls of smoke rising from the village on the shore of the lagoon. He descended the tree and reported to Powell.

Powell nodded approvingly as he listened.

"I fancy you were right about the beggars not finding the boat. We seem to be heading all right, and we'll keep straight on," he declared.

They took up the march again.

When they stopped at noon, they were close to the foot of the first hill at a point where, not more than half a mile away, lay the valley. Somewhere nestling between the two hills must lie Hoh Yuan's village.

As they ate their rations, they held a council of war.

"First of all," said Powell, "I'm going to send a small scouting party forward before we go any farther."

"Well, I'll volunteer," offered Seaton. "Three will be enough. Gillespie and Fuller here can come with me, if it's agreeable to you."

"I don't see any objection," replied Powell a little hesitantly, "only . . ."

"Never mind hunting for one, then," broke in Seaton, laying his hand, with a smile, on Powell's knee. "We'll go."

Senator Wilton looked up.

"I should like to go too," he said.

"No sir; I think you'd better not," Seaton answered kindly. "We'll probably have some tough scrambling to do, and may even have to run for it, for that matter."

"I'll absolutely have to forbid that, Senator," declared Powell firmly.

"But," protested Senator Wilton, "I—"

"I can understand your feelings, sir, and your anxiety," said Seaton quickly; "but, frankly, you wouldn't help us any by coming."

"Very well, then," conceded the senator resignedly. "I suppose you know best."

As they went on with their meal, they continued to discuss the plan of attack. It was obvious that before anything else could be done they must find out just where Miss Wilton was being held a prisoner, and in this connection a great deal would depend on the report of the scouting party. But, her exact

whereabouts once definitely known, the consensus of opinion was that they should work up to it as closely as possible, then wait for night and surround it under cover of darkness. It seemed the best and, indeed, the only course to pursue.

“Aye,” said Gillespie, wagging his head, “I make no doubt ’twill work; but afterward, Lieutenant—have ye thought of that? ’Tis a long walk to the beach, an’ a fair bit of a swim to the Ajmir.”

“Yes,” replied Powell grimly, “I’ve thought of that. The Ajmir will stand in each night, and our signals are arranged. If these devils got wind there was a gunboat here, we could never hope to get Miss Wilton alive. We’re in sufficient force to take care of any eventuality, but a surprise attack is the best chance. The Ajmir can’t help us until we get back to the beach, and there’s only one way to get there—*fight!*”

“Man,” wheezed Gillespie, and his little, wizened face puckered up until it looked a network of wrinkles, “man, I could love ye like a brother for that!”

Chapter X

The Fight

HALF an hour later, Seaton, Gillespie and Fuller were pushing forward alone into the bush. For some time they had been steadily climbing, the ground rising steeper and steeper; now they seemed to have topped a ridge, and began to descend.

Seaton, who was leading, halted suddenly and drew back, motioning the others to keep silent. After listening a moment, he got down on his hands and knees and, with a sign to the engineer and mate to imitate his example and follow him, began to crawl through the undergrowth. Five yards farther on he stopped, and, as his companions came up beside him, pointed ahead. Before them lay a broad, well-beaten track.

"It's the road, of course, from the lagoon to this Hoh Yuan's nest," he said. "I thought there must be one somewhere. Listen!"

From the direction of the valley ahead came the sound of many voices and the movement of many feet. The sounds kept drawing nearer and nearer. Seaton and the other two edged farther back from the pathway and lay well hidden, peering out.

The track bent sharply just before them, and around this bend there now appeared a half-naked Malay bearing a huge load on his head; behind him came another, and others behind the second again—an interminable procession, each carrying a burden, sometimes two or three sharing it together if, as in the case of a chest Seaton noticed, it appeared to be particularly heavy or too clumsy of shape for one man to manage alone.

They swung, laughing and chattering, past the spot where Seaton and his companions lay hidden. Seaton counted them as they went by. Fifty-three.

The Malays had passed and were well out of sight before any of the three spoke. Fuller was the first.

"Blimy!" he exclaimed. "It looks like they were movin'!"

Seaton stared down the path where the last of the Malays had vanished, a puzzled frown on his face.

"What do you make of it, Gillespie?" he asked.

"I'd no' venture an opinion," was the cautious rejoinder, "but"—shrewdly—"I'm thinkin' there'll be less men by fifty-odd to reckon with in the locality we're makin' for."

"You're right!" said Seaton instantly. "Fuller, you make back to Lieutenant Powell, tell him what we've seen and ask him to bring the force up here. Be careful to keep them well back from the path as you come up. It will be an hour before you're back, and in the meantime Gillespie and I will go ahead again. We'll probably return before you do, but if not you must wait for us, for we must know where to find you. Understand?"

"Aye," Fuller nodded. "I can do it an' back in about an hour. Look out for yourselves." And, rising to his feet, he disappeared in the woods.

"We'll go up parallel with the path to that turn yonder," said Seaton when Fuller had gone. "Come on."

Moving with even greater caution than they had exercised before, they made their way to a point opposite the bend Seaton had indicated. Here they crawled again to the edge of the path.

Gillespie whistled softly under his breath. From where they lay they could see that the track dipped sharply downward into a sort of natural bowl, where, easily distinguishable, though nestling among the trees and foliage, were a number of small native huts, and one so much larger in size, constructed of felled trees, that it might even have been called a building. An air of desertion pervaded the place. Indeed, apart from a few native women who were moving about, the village showed no signs of life whatever.

"That pretentious-looking house is where Hoh Yuan lives, I'd say," observed Seaton with a hard smile. "You were right enough, Gillespie. I believe the place is cleaned out of the male population. It's safe to say they were going to the lagoon, because there's no other place they could go. If that's so, we've a couple of hours at least. It's up to us to get down there and see if we can find out exactly where they are keeping Miss Wilton. We ought to be able to manage it. Powell will be back in an hour, and then, with luck, instead of a night attack, we can all be taking the back track long before those devils return."

"Aye," agreed Gillespie tersely.

"All right," continued Seaton. "Well, the likeliest place for Miss Wilton to be is in Hoh Yuan's house—which we're assuming is that big one we saw—so we'll reconnoiter around there first anyway. Get your bearings. The house seems to front on this pathway which appears to run straight back through the village."

"And 'tis near the far end of the village the house is," supplemented Gillespie. "There'll be no missing it, and we've only to keep out of sight well back among the trees and bushes in getting there."

"Let's go, then," prompted Seaton—and started forward.

With Seaton leading, they made a detour to avoid the nearest outlying huts, then headed along again in, as nearly as they could judge, a direction that paralleled the pathway. Once or twice they heard the voices of native women in the distance, but that was all. They moved as silently and quickly as they could, but the going was slow through the woods and lush undergrowth, and it was not until the expiration of some fifteen minutes that Seaton spoke again.

"I think we're about abreast of the house now," he said. "We'll make straight in for the pathway. It can't be far—not more than a few hundred yards. Watch yourself, Gillespie. Don't make a sound if you can help it."

Cautious before, they were still more careful and silent in their movements now as they started on again. Perhaps five minutes passed—and then both men instinctively came to a sudden halt and stared at each other, stupefaction and amazement stamped upon their faces.

"Did you hear that?" breathed Seaton.

"Aye," returned Gillespie. "'Tis someone speaking *English*. And yon's what we've called Hoh Yuan's house—I can see it through the trees—a bit to the right."

"Creep the rest of the way," directed Seaton in an undertone.

The vegetation was thick, but, if it impeded progress, it concealed them completely. The voice—voices now—grew louder, raised in angry altercation, and as the two men came within a few yards from the edge of the pathway, as close as they dared approach, and lay there hidden by the trees and undergrowth, the words reached them distinctly. The voices came from the open door of the house that had been their objective, and which they could now see faced them from across the path which had broadened out here to some fifteen yards in width.

"My neck's worth more to me than all the pirate loot in creation, I tell you!" roared a voice. "If I'd known about this girl business, I'd never have moved a finger."

"No more would I; but that's no reason for playing the fool now we *are* here. We'll have the loading done day after tomorrow. What's to happen between now and then? Who's to know she's here?"

"Hoh Yuan no likee you go without load. Girl allee samee slafe. By and by get ransom, then mabbe girl go—mabbe not. No can tell—"

"Shut up!" snarled the first speaker. "Don't be too sure about not knowing she's here. Curse it, I tell you this will stir up the fireworks from one end of this part of the world to the other, and there's going to be hell to pay with nothing to pay it with!"

“That’s Knapp,” whispered Seaton tensely, “and the other’s Kallinger! Good God! What’s it mean?”

“I’m thinkin’,” gritted Gillespie, “I no hit the yellow devil—yon’s Ching Lang!”

“But we didn’t have anything to do with the girl.” It was Kallinger’s voice continuing the argument.

“And what’s that got to do with it?” returned Knapp in sneering tones. “Girl or no girl, if we’re found here after what’s happened we’ll decorate the gallows, and you know it! If the prospect pleases you, it don’t me! There’s the murder of the crew, and, thanks to Ching’s cursed mess of it, Seaton, the mate and that sour-faced, sniffing Scotsman escaped to tell the tale.”

“God forgive me for sayin’ it, but——” Gillespie was muttering. Seaton’s hand closed restrainingly on his shoulder.

“Why, you fool!” retorted Kallinger. “They wouldn’t suspect us if they have. They’ll think we were massacred probably before the attack began on themselves. As for getting away, Ching here says they searched the lagoon this morning, and there’s no sign of their boat. They must have put out by the channel. You ought to know, being a sailor, that no boat could have lived in the sea that was running last night, or even this morning.

“If I didn’t think they were drowned, I wouldn’t feel so easy myself—not for your reason, but because they’d be likely to contest the ownership of the Traymore if they ever turned up. No one else could—she’s neither registered at Lloyd’s nor known to the underwriters. You know that because you know that’s why we picked her out for our meat. She’s like a stray cat—only more valuable. In case, however, they did escape, we’ll take the precaution to change her with a little paint and scare up a new name.

“But what’s the use of talking? They’re food for the fishes by now, and so’s that thousand pounds—of counterfeit notes! Ha-ha!” Kallinger’s voice rose jeeringly.

“Ye’re dislocatin’ my shoulder,” groaned Gillespie. “Let go, man!”

Seaton’s hand, still on the other’s shoulder, had tightened unconsciously, as he listened, into a viselike grip. Now he loosened his hold without turning his head, and strained intently forward to miss nothing of the conversation.

“Mloney no good?” The tones were both anxious and incredulous.

“Not a single picayune,” asserted Kallinger.

Here followed a burst of gruff laughter from Kallinger that lasted for fully a minute, intermingled with voluble, high-pitched execrations from the Chinaman.

“Say, Knapp,” cried Kallinger after a moment, “wouldn’t that jar you! The blamed heathen thought they were good, and has stolen the bogus notes. It’s the first time I ever saw a Chinaman tear money up and chuck it around. Here you, Ching, you’re making a mess all over the place. Hoh Yuan’ll give you fits when he gets back for dirtying up the palace! Where’d you get them?”

“See Claptain hide ’em, plenty much care, in clabin,” explained Ching Lang in infinite disgust.

“Well, you’re stung, and the joke’s on you!” brayed Kallinger with another burst of guffaws.

A slow smile crept over Seaton’s face, but it was not a smile that lent a pleasant expression to his countenance.

The little dissertation did not seem to have deflected Knapp from the subject under discussion.

“To blazes with the Chink and his ‘queer’!” he growled. “There’s just one thing for us to do, and that’s to hike out of here at once. If you can’t see it my way, I’ll go down to the ship and put it up to Vernier and the other four.”

“That’ll be the new lot we shipped,” interpreted Gillespie excitedly.

Seaton nodded grimly.

“But I tell you a day can’t make any difference,” snapped Kallinger; “and in that time we’ll have Hoh Yuan’s store aboard—the pickings of a year of his piratical work. You’ve seen it. You know it’s worth something fabulous—more than the last lot we ran for him. After the risk we’ve taken and what’s been done, you’re not going to be chicken-livered enough to go and leave it, are you?”

“I’ve told you once”—Knapp’s voice was like a snarling cur’s—“that my neck’s worth more to me than pelf. I’ll get out while I can, and when the others know about the girl and who she is, they’ll say the same. I’m going down to the lagoon to put them wise, and I’m going now!”

“See here, Knapp”—Kallinger’s voice had dropped to a wheedling tone—“can’t you be reasonable? We’ll get out tomorrow, or the next day at the latest. There’s no use stirring up a rumpus with Vernier or the rest. I wish Hoh Yuan had kept his mouth shut to us about the girl before he went off. Can’t you see we’ll be rich? Rich, I tell you, man, richer than nabobs, once we’ve cleared this haul. Just stand pat with me on this—you won’t regret it. Anyway, Vernier would only laugh at you.”

“Would he! What’s your objection to my going down to tell him, then?” sneered Knapp.

Kallinger's voice dropped still lower, and for the next few minutes the listeners could catch only a scattered word of the conversation here and there. Then suddenly Kallinger burst out into a string of oaths.

"Aw, shut up!" was Knapp's snarling retort. "You can talk till you're sick. I'm going."

"Get out, then!" bawled Kallinger, evidently in a furious passion. "I'll show you who's master here!"

Knapp laughed jeeringly in reply, and a moment later came out of the house. As he started off, two other forms, those of Kallinger and Ching Lang, appeared in the doorway, watching him. And then, quick as the winking of an eye, came the unexpected. Knapp had gone but some five paces from the door when suddenly Kallinger's arm went up, there was a flash, the sharp report of a revolver, and Knapp staggered, spun half around, recovered himself and, with a cry, began to run for the shelter of the woods—straight toward the spot where Seaton and Gillespie were hidden.

Again Kallinger fired—this time twice in rapid succession. Knapp flung up his hands, stumbled forward another pace or two, and then pitched headforemost between the trees, almost into Seaton's arms.

Kallinger's mocking voice reached them in brutal, cold-blooded derision.

"It'll take you some time to reach the lagoon, I'm thinking!" he cried and disappeared again inside the hut.

For an instant Seaton, stupefied with horror, did not move, then he reached forward, caught the wounded man by the shoulders, dragged him farther into the foliage and turned him quickly upon his back.

"Lift up his head, Gillespie, quick! We'll do what we can, though I'm afraid he's beyond help." Seaton was tearing open Knapp's clothes as he spoke. Devil, as he now knew the man to be, and joint murderer of his own crew, the fellow was at least a human being.

The eyelids quivered—opened. Into the vacant stare came recognition. With a desperate effort Knapp made a motion with his hands as if to ward off a new terror that the sight of the faces looking into his seemed to bring him; and then, as though pleading that no further punishment should be his, he moaned:

"I'm—in! All—in!"

"The girl, man! Miss Wilton! Tell us where she is. For God's sake, Knapp, make what reparation you can!" Seaton's words, though his voice was low, were coming in sharp, fierce sentences, as though by the sheer force of his own will he would reach the other's consciousness.

Again the eyes opened, and Knapp's lips moved. Seaton bent over to catch the words:

"Back . . . of . . . in . . . there . . . where I was. Look out . . . Ching and . . . Kall— —"

The eyes glazed, there was a spasmodic movement of the limbs, and Knapp had passed across the Great Border.

Gillespie lowered the dead man's head and wiped his own forehead with the back of his hand.

"'Twould be awful to die with a conscience like yon," he muttered with a shudder. "Awful! Though I'd no' say but the Lord'll give him credit for the last. I'd no' judge him, ye understand."

The sound of Kallinger's shots had evidently disturbed the few inhabitants who were left in the village. Women were now coming excitedly along the pathway.

"We must get away from here," said Seaton sharply. "Kallinger or Ching Lang may come out, or some of those women prowl onto us. Miss Wilton's in that house there where Kallinger is. Thank God we've found that out! Powell and his men are surely up to where we left Fuller by now, and must be waiting for us. We'll circle around to them and bring them up here before the Malays can get back. We ought to have an hour's leeway yet. I think that's our surest and safest plan, if you've nothing better to offer, Gillespie."

"I have not," said Gillespie. "We'll just— —"

He stopped suddenly, and both men, alert, stood as silent as the body that lay between them. From across the clearing rose piercing, savage yells from many throats in unison, a scattered shot or two, and then the rattling crash of a volley.

"Too late!" cried Seaton. "It's too late. The Malays, coming back, have run foul of Powell somehow, for he would never have started the fight with Miss Wilton to think of until he'd heard from us, unless he'd been forced into it. I don't see how it happened—the Malays couldn't have been to the lagoon and back again by this time."

The crash of another volley followed the first.

"Quick!" cried Seaton again. "Powell's chasing them in. We've got to get to Miss Wilton first, or her life won't be worth a chance in a million. Make a dash for the house, and trust to getting Kallinger by surprise or— —"

The words were lost. With his revolver in his hand, Seaton was already running straight forward at full speed, Gillespie close at his heels. There were only a few yards to go, but, before Seaton could make them, he saw Kallinger and the Chinaman, obviously attracted by the uproar, come

hurriedly to the doorway again. He saw Kallinger's arm straighten out, heard the man's curse, then the roar of the sea was in Seaton's ears, and the powder flash scorched his face as something seared hot along the side of his head, tearing his cap away. He fired from his hip, still running. Kallinger slid wriggling to the ground across the threshold. Ching Lang's white blouse was vanishing in the interior.

He leaped over Kallinger's body and rushed inside. The Chinaman had snatched up a kris, and now, halfway across the room, was making for an inner apartment—but it was Gillespie who fired, and Ching Lang sprawled forward on the floor.

"Miss Wilton! Betty!" Seaton shouted. "Are you there? It's I, Jack—"

Then he choked, stumbled, a mist swam before his eyes, but he staggered gamely on, the blood trickling in a stream from his side where the treacherous Chinaman, as he had passed, had risen suddenly to his knees and lunged viciously with the kris.

It was Ching Lang's last act—the little engineer took care of that.

"Betty! Betty! Are you here?" gasped Seaton again.

"Help! Oh, quick!"

The cry seemed to revive Seaton's fast-ebbing strength. He plunged desperately forward through what appeared to be a narrow passageway in the direction from which the cry had come, and reeled out into a room beyond. A struggling group of native women were at the farther end. They fled shrieking at his approach. A girl rose to her feet from the floor, where she had evidently been thrown in the struggle, and came forward a step, then drew back in alarm.

"Oh! Oh! Who are you? What is it? What do you want?"

With powder-blackened face, staggering like a drunken man, his white canvas trousers and shirt wet with blood, Seaton was no pleasant sight.

"Don't be frightened, lady," called out Gillespie reassuringly. "Your father with the marines'll not be long getting here."

"I'm Seaton—Jack Seaton. . . . Used to play with . . . Jack and Jill—"

Seaton was laughing crazily; his head was swimming like a top. Gillespie, the girl, the queer, fantastic oriental furnishings of the room ran chaotically together—and then darkness.

The last drops of the engineer's jealously guarded brandy were burning his throat. Gillespie was holding the flask to his lips. Deft fingers were knotting a bandage at his side. Memory, the realization of where he was, came sweeping over him like a flash.

“Barricades, Gillespie! Barri— —”

“Aye, ’tis done—the best we could. There’ll be two entrances: the one we came in by, an’ the one by which yon female creatures went out.”

“Prop me up by the passage and give me my revolver,” ordered Seaton. “You take the other door. Betty, get over in the corner out of gunfire.”

“Jack, Jack, you mustn’t!” And then: “Oh, Jack, I didn’t know you!”

“Small wonder,” he said grimly. “I fancy I’m rather a sight. Well, Gillespie!”

“Man, ye’re no’ fit,” snapped the engineer. “I’m thinkin’ I’ll manage with a little— —”

“Do as you’re bid!” cried Seaton angrily. “Or shall I crawl? Hurry! Can’t you hear them? They’re outside now!”

Unwillingly Gillespie, with Betty’s help, carried Seaton across the room and placed him behind a couple of upturned cushioned divans that had been thrown hastily before the opening. Shouts reached them from the outside, then the trampling of feet in the room beyond.

“They’ve found Kallinger and Ching Lang,” muttered Seaton. “Get to the other door, Gillespie, quick! They’re running around the house. Don’t bother about me. I’m all right.”

The next instant he had fired twice.

“Betty,” he called hurriedly, “get over in the corner as I told you. You can’t help me here.”

“Give me your box of cartridges,” she pleaded. “Don’t you remember you taught me to load when you were at the Acad— —” She checked herself suddenly. “Oh, Jack, I never believed *that*.”

“That’s great of you, Betty,” he said softly.

Giddiness was overcoming him again. Some grotesque apparition was crawling through the window. He fired unsteadily. The place seemed all surrounded with rushing demons, howling, yelling, shrieking. With all his strength he strove to fight against the numbed feeling that was paralyzing his brain.

“Jack, quick! In front of you!”

The girl’s warning was just in time. Forms were creeping down the little passage, almost upon him. His revolver blazed fire obediently, but something was wrong with it—the trigger pull was desperately hard. Above the tumult came a cheer, long sustained, and then another. As it rose and fell, now high, now low, his tottering senses associated it with the flapping of a

tablecloth as one shakes it overside of ship to free it from the crumbs. Queer fantasy! But he understood.

“’Twon’t last long,” he murmured. “Not long . . . Knows his business, Powell . . . keeping ’em on the run. . . . No chance for ’em to fight. . . . Good old Powell. . . . It’s all right, Betty . . . little Betty. . . .”

Chapter XI

In Port

CAME periods of torturing agony, sounds as of the booming of great thunderclaps, and then long, dreamy repose in which Seaton floated in mid-air while fairy hands, cool, soothing, ministered to him. Voices, in soft tones, spoke out of the nothingness that surrounded him.

One voice he came to know and distinguish from the rest, tender and sweet, like the limpid music of a running brook. Sometimes it would seem to whisper almost in his very ear, and he would reach out after it, to hold and give it form, only to have it escape like the bubble at the moment of its greatest beauty when, sparkling with iridescent, rippling hues, it bursts and vanishes into thin air. Nothing was concrete; all was a land of unreality—intangible.

And then, one morning, he struggled back to consciousness. It stole upon him gradually. First the sensation of utter weakness, complete helplessness, bewildered wonderings of what had happened. Then his eyes opened and rested on a little red-haired, undersized man hunched up in a chair before him, upon whose wizened face was an expression almost saintlike in its patience, as he pulled at a short black (though quite empty) briar that he held between his lips.

“Why don’t you light it?” inquired Seaton suddenly, after a long and puzzling attempt to solve the problem for himself.

The little Scotsman jumped as though he had been stung.

“Man, but ye startled me!” he cried, and with a movement meant to be surreptitious swept the pipe into his pocket.

“Why don’t you smoke?” insisted Seaton as though the question were the most important one in the whole wide world.

“Man”—Gillespie’s voice was a whisper—“man, I’d no’ dare. She’s a tyrant—worse than the doctor.”

This was quite beyond Seaton’s comprehension.

“Talk sense, Gillespie,” he said querulously; and then suddenly: “There’s no time to waste! What are you sitting there for? We’ve got to hold them off till Powell comes. D’ye hear, man— —” He was struggling up.

Gillespie, with a chuckle, pushed him gently back.

"It's Hoh Yuan's house ye mean. That's long past. D'ye not know ye've been sick—very sick—for the matter of two weeks?"

"Two weeks!" repeated Seaton weakly. "Two weeks! Where am I now?"

"Surabaya. Aboard the senator's yacht, Troubador. Man, ye'll note the luxurious surroundings." Gillespie waved his hand comprehensively about the exquisitely appointed cabin.

Seaton closed his eyes and lay still for a while to digest this information.

"Tell me what's happened," he demanded at last.

"I was no' to talk," demurred the engineer. "I'd no' like to anger the lass; there'll be trouble if I do."

"There'll be more trouble if you don't! I'll break your head, Gillespie!"

"Tut, tut, man!" chortled Gillespie, glancing cautiously over his shoulder to assure himself that the cabin door was closed. "I'm minded 'twill do ye no harm, though I'm disobeyin' orders."

"Go on, go on," urged Seaton impatiently. "Begin where I went under at Hoh Yuan's. I remember that now."

"Aye," said Gillespie, puckering his face reminiscently. "When ye keeled over for the second time, the first I knew of it was a cry from the lass, but I could see nothing. My hands were full, ye see. The next I knew she had your place. Man, the sight thrilled me; she's a rare plucked one. I'd no' ask for a better in a fight."

Gillespie paused, evidently to review the scene for his own satisfaction, and unconsciously his hand slipped into his pocket for the stubby black pipe.

"Betty held the passage?" queried Seaton, his face flushing.

"Aye, she did!" replied Gillespie proudly. "She did that—an' *well!* 'Twas a good fight, but 'twas no' for long, for soon Powell with his men were there, an' the lassie's father. 'Twas a reunion 'twould have done your heart good to see, the joy of it, though she cried a bit over one Captain Seaton, thinkin' he was dead or near-by to it."

"Gillespie," admonished Seaton sternly, "you are telling tales."

"Let be, man," returned the engineer imperturbably. "I can't go on with your constant interruptions. They were a demoralized set, the Malays an' Chinks, an' we hadn't much trouble gettin' back to the beach, savin' the trouble with yourself. We were minded more than once to drop ye by the way."

"Thanks!" acknowledged Seaton dryly.

"Ye're more than welcome," grinned Gillespie, who had failed to state that for four weary, heartbreaking hours he had shared the burden of

carrying his commander, and would let none take his place. "Well, we reached the beach, an' there was a bit scrimmage with the gentlemen from the lagoon village, who'd got wind of what had happened and followed us across the island. 'Twas in no particular to be called a fight; 'twas no' worth the name, ye understand. The Ajmir standin' in dropped a shell or two over our heads, an' we stepped into the boats for all the world like a church picnic, 'twas that peaceful —"

"Wait!" interrupted Seaton. "How did Powell come to get started on that fight that afternoon?"

"I'm thinkin' 'twas Providence, the way it turned out. Ye'll recall the Malays that passed us with the loads when we were hid in the bushes? Well, they did but go halfway to the lagoon. Double shifts, ye see; others of the same ilk carryin' the rest of the way, an' the first lot returnin' to duplicate the proceedin'. They an' Powell reached the same spot at the same time. I'm thinkin' there may have been a bit talkin' an' the lads no' overcautious, but it's certain anyway they were discovered. After that there was no choice for Powell—he's a fine lad—but to follow it up an' drive 'em along with no opportunity for argument, bein' mindful that we an' the lass was somewhere ahead of him. Where was I? Oh, aye, we'd boarded the Ajmir. Oh, but, man, after that ye missed it. I'm fair sorrowful for ye. 'Twas a fight, aye, man, 'twas a fight!"

"You bloodthirsty ruffian! Go on, Gillespie, tell it."

"I could no' do it justice in any particular," sighed the engineer. "That night we stood off an' on outside the channel for fear they'd make out with the Traymore, though we'd naught to fear of that, if we'd only known it." Gillespie chuckled. "They couldn't move her, havin' no man of machinery aboard—a point which I'll ask ye to note is a calamity at all times. She's away now with Fuller an' the Ajmir for Singapore, an' little the worse for wear. Knapp was the engineer who was going to take the Traymore back after they'd cut our throats, but bein' dead—ye understand! Well, in the mornin' we warped in by the channel. Oh, man, I can no' describe it, but my hearin's defective yet from the screech of the shells. Then we landed in force—in force, ye'll mind—a hundred of us, an' for two days we scoured the island from end to end. 'Twas like the desolations of Jerusalem when we had done with it."

"Like the what?"

"I'm sore minded ye no read the Scriptures, Captain Seaton"—this with reproachful dignity—"but let be. I'll no' argue it. Vernier we got—he's an old French skipper, but deprived of his certificate long since by some board who knew their business. 'Twas him, ye'll mind, who was to do the

navigatin' on the way back. An' the other four we got as well. They'll be snug in irons, with Powell to see they get their deserts. An' whatever more of a crew they'd have wanted would have been made up of the Chinks an' Malays from the island, ye'll understand.

"Well, when we'd got through ashore, them as was left of the native devils sent Hoh Yuan's head aboard as a peace offerin'. Vernier confessed for the sake of court clemency, which I'm thinkin' 'll no' help him much. They were in cahoots with a Chinese firm in Singapore an', of course, with Hoh Yuan for the distribution of the latter's pelf. Powell said he'd long suspected something of the likes, an' that Hoh Yuan was the prince of the cutthroats in these waters, though they'd no' been able to locate his nest before. Their business with the Traymore ye already know—Kallinger statin' she was a stray cat, an' only the gettin' of her bein' needful to own her with no questions to be asked by anybody. There's no' much else to tell. The — — Hist, man!" A light step sounded outside. "If ye love me, keep your eyes shut, an' likewise your mouth," pleaded the little Scotsman breathlessly.

The door opened very cautiously—and so did Seaton's eyes. He couldn't have kept them shut for all the engineers in Christendom. Gillespie was sitting hunched up in his chair again, the same saintlike expression of resigned patience pictured on his face. In the doorway stood the slender form of a girl in cool white—like a vision she seemed to Seaton as he watched her through half-closed lids—the loveliness of her skin, the sheen of gold in the brown of her hair, the sparkle of her eyes.

She tiptoed softly into the room.

"I thought I heard voices, Mr Gillespie," she said in a low tone.

"Sh!" whispered Gillespie, placing a warning finger to his lips.

And then Seaton laughed.

With a gasp the Scotsman lurched suddenly forward in his chair, his face turned a dull brick red as the flush mingled with the tan, and then, with a look of mortal reproach at his betrayer, he fled incontinently from the cabin.

"Betty!"

She came forward slowly, and the look of severity she tried to assume was not severe at all, only a demure little frown and a bewitching contraction of the arched eyebrows.

"You are not to talk," she commanded, shaking her finger at him. "I ought to have known better than to have trusted Mr Gillespie. But, oh, Jack, I'm glad you're better!"

"Are you?"

It was a senseless, crazy, asinine thing to say, and he could have choked himself for the sheer idiocy of it. It wasn't what he wanted to say—far from it.

“Why, Jack! Of course I am.” The eyes, a little wider open, looked at him with a hint of merriment in their depths.

“Gillespie says I've been out of my head for two weeks,” he said nervously.

She nodded. “Yes, you have been very ill. We were even afraid that—that you wouldn't get well. But that's all over now.”

“And you nursed me?” He was doing better now, much surer of himself. That horrible, tongue-tied feeling had left him.

But his opportunity had gone.

“You're not to talk.” She evaded the question utterly.

“But— —”

“Not a single word, sir,”—this very authoritatively—“or I shall have to go. Doctor Wilson would be terribly angry.”

“Then I just want to say— —”

She turned toward the door to put her threat into execution.

“That I won't say a word,” he ended.

The days went by, long, glorious days, full of sunshine, full, too, of Betty's presence; days cooled with the gentle breezes coming in from the sea, that sent the ripples dancing and sparkling over the harbor where the yacht still lingered. Each day Seaton had found his strength coming back to him, until now he could almost walk alone from his cabin to the deck chair under the after awning.

Here, one afternoon, when Betty had gone ashore, he sat alone. The book on his knee remained unopened. His elbows were on the arms of the chair, his chin cupped in his hands.

All too short those days had been; more like hours they seemed, he thought as he sat there. And now they were almost at an end. The next day they were going on to Singapore; then he must pick up the broken ends of things and knot them together again.

His brows drew close in troubled perplexity. It was a different problem, this—like beginning all over again. There were new factors now, and he could not see the way. Somehow the old life with its tang of danger had lost its appeal, and not alone because now the motive that had led him into it was

gone, but because there seemed to be other things in life more worth while, better worth the doing.

His eyes traveled to the empty chair beside his where Betty had been accustomed to sit and read and talk to him through his convalescence. Yes, he knew it well enough, the change had come through her. His eyes shifted straight ahead of him again, and he smiled whimsically at his presumption.

What a bore and an untold nuisance he must have been, waited on, his wants and needs anticipated even, his feeble protests laughingly cut off before they were half uttered! He remembered it all, and would always remember it. The days had gone, but their memory would be his whatever

...

“Everybody deserted you, Jack, my boy? Lonely?”

Seaton started. It was Senator Wilton. “No sir, thanks. I was just thinking that it was about time I got over expecting to be spoiled. I’m pretty fit again now, you know, sir.”

Senator Wilton laughed and dropped into the other chair. “We’re going on to Singapore in the morning, Jack, I suppose you know.”

“Yes sir; Betty said so last night.”

“After that, Jack, we’re going to do Japan, and then back to San Francisco. I want you to come home with us.”

“Home!” Seaton’s face lighted up, then clouded.

“I’d like to, sir, but I can’t. It’s awfully good of you. I’ll have to stay in Singapore and look after the Traymore; she’s the sum total of my worldly wealth, sir, you know.”

“I wanted to speak about business,” smiled the senator. “How about the navy?”

“No,” said Seaton quickly. “No, it’s too late for that now.”

“It might be managed,” remarked the senator. “There are ways.”

“No sir,” repeated Seaton, shaking his head. “Really, I wouldn’t think of that now.”

“Well, I hardly thought you would, and, to tell the truth, I’m rather glad you feel that way about it, though I must admit my reason for feeling so is a selfish one. As you know, I own a few boats myself; in fact, no small part of my money is invested in that way. To get to the point, I’ve been wanting somebody like Captain Jack Seaton, for instance, to look after them for me.”

“I! Look after the White Crescent Line!” Seaton gasped. “You’re joking, sir!”

“They’re freighters, of course, and not beauties; but they’re good dividend earners,” went on the senator. “You would have nothing to do with the commercial part. I want a practical man at the practical end of the business. I would buy in the Traymore and add her to the fleet, paying you in shares of the company to sort of make you feel at home. Now — —”

“But I — —”

“You mustn’t interrupt,” laughed the senator. “It is really all arranged, cut and dried. I took the liberty of speaking to Mr Gillespie, and we’ll leave the Traymore in his and Fuller’s care. Now I’m not going to be pestered with either questions, protestations or thanks; and besides, I’ve some letters to write, so I’m going to leave you. There’s Gillespie coming for company.”

And with a hearty slap on the shoulder, Senator Wilton rose from his chair, laughingly put his hands to his ears and tramped off down the deck.

Seaton stared after him until he was out of sight, and then looked up to meet Gillespie’s eyes.

“Well, man, what’s troublin’ ye?” inquired the little Scotsman.

“Gillespie,” said Seaton slowly, “you know of the proposal Senator Wilton has made me?”

“Aye, I know,” replied Gillespie, wagging his head. “Well?”

“Well, I don’t know what to do, that’s all. I don’t know whether to accept it or not.”

Halfway out from the shore, coming toward them, was the yacht’s launch. Both men watched the boat in silence for a moment. A trim little figure in the stern stood up and waved.

Gillespie’s face puckered into a grin.

“I’d no’ venture an opinion as to the course ye’ll pursue, Captain Seaton,” he chuckled, watching Seaton wave his handkerchief in return; “but I’ve suspicions—very strong *suspicions*.”

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.

[The end of *More Knaves Than One*, by Frank L. Packard.]