

Much Lost, More Won

H. Bedford Jones

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by H. BEDFORD-JONES

Illustrated by MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.

Templeton, dark and impetuous and fiery, listened with impatience as we talked of the changing history of the world, the murderous warfare east and west, the wholesale slaughter and rapine from China to Spain.

“It’s nothing new,” he broke out suddenly. “Anyhow, we don’t know what’s happening anywhere. Nobody knows. It’ll come out maybe a hundred years from now—how some chap turned the course of history by a handshake.”

“Who?” asked somebody. Templeton shrugged.

“Anyone; you or I. That’s the way history is made. The captains and the kings rant before the footlights. Away upstage, some unknown person pulls the strings, perhaps without his own knowledge. It’s happened many times, particularly in the east, in the south seas, in the orient.”

“You have a case in mind?” I demanded rather coldly.

“I have,” said he. “I got hold of it in the Philippines last year, looked it up in the Arab records—the Moro tribes, you know, are more than half Arab. I could tell you how a *nakoda*, and Arab ship-captain, played hero to destiny three hundred years ago, and got no credit.”

We called for drinks and cigars. Templeton, who has spent most of his life out in the islands, has no end of yarns that are not in the history books. Nothing loath, he waved his cigar, looked into the weave of smoke, and worked his wizardry.

“It was just about three centuries ago, when the Dutch and Portuguese and Spanish and English were fighting tooth and nail for the spice trade and the Indies. The Portuguese held Malacca, but were losing out; a ten-year siege by the Dutch was drawing to its end. The Spaniards held Manila, but not strongly. Everything was in flux, a changing world.

“For a thousand years the Arabs like the Parthians before them, had been the seamen and navigators of these eastern seas. Theirs was all the knowledge of the monsoons, which blew the fleets eastward for half the year, westward the other half; the island trade, the coral reefs, the spice groves, the pirate lairs—all were known to the Arabs then, before Europeans ever heard of them.

“In those seas the word *nakoda* is still used to express the master of his own keel, the captain and ship-owner. It was a proud name in the ancient days. I wish I could make you see Nureddin the Nakoda as I can see him in my mind’s eye! I’ve known more than one man of his type, proud and fierce and honorable to a fault, but never one who had the tremendous physical power and the keen brain, the will to victory, of Nureddin, Light of the Faith . . .”

He was silent for a moment. Then, to make us see his man, he quoted the old Arab proverb and explained its meaning: “If you meet a cobra and a Hazrami in the road, slay the Hazrami!”

A Hazrami, a man of Hadramaut, the old Arabian seaport, was the most dangerous thing afloat or ashore. Safer a cobra in the way, and less deadly, than a Hazrami of the old breed. Such was Nureddin, such were all his crew in the big dhow that had come to the Philippines from faraway Hadramaut.

That morning he had sailed out of Manila bound for Sulu and the Moro ports, when the *Swann* and her consort overhauled him. They plumped a few shot at him and were about to let him have full measure, when the two Portuguese ships came out of Manila Bay and hove up for the Dutchmen. Then Nureddin stood on the rail of his ship and watched, a bronze figure like the Perseus of Cellini. He sensed what was coming, though the Dutchmen did not. He had the gift of smelling blood before it was spilled.

“By Allah,” said he to his men, all older men than he, “wait and see how these Christians fight!”

So he waited. The two Portuguese bore down; he saw the *Swann* signal them and hail, saw the Portuguese suddenly luff and pour full broadsides into the two smaller craft. Then they laid aboard and grappled, ship for ship; and there was fighting that day off the Luzon shores, from ten of the morning until sunset. When Nureddin and his men made the sunset prayer, they saw the Portuguese admiral go down to death with all his crew, while the *Swann* still floated, though she was afire; and the other two ships, still

grappled, were still fighting savagely. And Nureddin, laughing, headed away for the Moro ports.

“There are the ones who can fight!” said he. “Let’s make friends with these Hollanders, if we meet any.”

So he bore on south, and at Sulu spoke with an English ship, who told him that two Flemings—so they called the Dutchmen then—were lying off the Boedor river; and he went on there to fulfill the will of Allah.

That was a large and a wide river, coming down to the sea through marshes and rice-paddies in half a dozen mouths, with Boedor two miles up the stream. In those days it was a rich place, famous for pearls, and the sultan could summon full fifty fighting praus if need were. In fact, he had already summoned them, to the astonishment of Nureddin and his Arabs. The river and harbor were crowded with ships.

The landing was a ceremonious affair, Nureddin the Nakoda and twelve picked men going with gifts to be received by the sultan. They were dressed in their finest; he wore a light steel cap, a steel mesh shirt, his gold-hilted scimitar and a scarlet cloak over all. Tall, young, with the face of an eagle and the bearing of a conqueror, he was hailed with admiring shouts by the massed Moro warriors, as he led his men up to the palace.

Here was a tremendous jam, for the dattos and warriors of the neighboring islands were here, the captains of the praus, the council, and a score of Dutchmen. Nureddin noted the grizzled, bearded faces, the half-armor, the sturdy bearing of these last, and saluted them joyously, in friendly fashion. He exchanged greeting and salutations with the old sultan, Ali, then stood in talk.

Everyone else there was seated, even the Dutchmen; it was the fashion among the Malays and Moros and other island peoples to squat, in token of respect to the sultan. This the men of Hadramaut did only when regarded as equals. Nureddin took note that the Dutchmen had an interpreter, an Achinese. They spoke no Arabic. He, however, had learned their tongue from a Dutch renegade in Hadramaut. When he found that the sultan had gathered this array for a raid against the Mindanao shores, a thin smile drifted across his high-boned features.

“It were better, Beloved of Allah,” he said to the old sultan, “to uplift the standard of a *juramentado*, a holy war against the infidel in Manila!”

“Has Allah addled your brains?” spat out the sultan. Nureddin laughed.

“Not yet, Sultan Ali! I have news, important news, for your ear alone. Gather your council and give me private audience, I pray you. First let me speak with these infidel Hollanders, or with their captain, and I’ll guarantee you the aid of their guns and ships.”

Sultan Ali chewed his betel paste and eyed the young eagle who dared advise him. Well he knew the worth of the men of Hadramaut, and Nureddin the Nakoda had won a name for himself even among the islands, where every man was a warrior to the death. Into his fierce, shrewd eyes came a glimmer of admiration and resolve.

“Wait in the inner court. I will come. First I’ll send the captain of these infidels to speak with you. Also his interpreter.”

“No need of that; I speak his tongue,” said Nureddin.

A chamberlain took him to the inner courtyard, a pleasant spot with a fountain, and left him. There, as he waited, a lattice at a window was pushed aside, and he looked up to meet the eyes of a girl. He stood stock-still; so did his heart. Their eyes met and held. She was of such striking beauty that Nureddin was stupefied. Yet he knew how often mere beauty was deceptive, in the orient. He noticed that she wore in her hair an ornament of pearls, shaped like a scimitar; then she smiled, made him a slight gesture, and was gone from sight.

Nureddin turned, to meet the Dutch captain, Jans Doort, a massive, heavy-jawed man. He saluted gaily and spoke in very fair Dutch.

“Greetings, mynheer. Do you know a ship of your nation called the *Swann*?”

“Aye!” replied Doort in astonishment. “I know her well. We took her from the English. She was to meet us here.”

“She will not, for she was afire when I saw her last, after fighting a Portuguese all day long,” said Nureddin.

He went on to tell what he had seen off Manila, while Jans Doort swore many a grim oath at hearing the tale. Then he went on, craftily, to tell more.

“You may ask why no other ships came out from Manila to help those Portuguese in the fight? Because no others are there. The two stationed there were destroyed in the hurricane of last month. Other ships have not come yet, except those two Portuguese craft. Also, insurrections have broken out,

and the pestilence is in Manila; there is great sickness. Many of the garrison were lost with the harbor ships in the hurricane.”

“What of it?” asked Jans Doort, pulling at his beard.

“A fleet is expected from Spain, but cannot arrive for another month,” said Nureddin. “Because of the insurrectos, the castle and land forts must be manned. Thus, the harbor forts are empty. There are not enough soldiers for both. Further, I know the harbor, the entrances, the depths, every foot of the place.”

A startled gleam lit up the Dutchman’s eye.

“You’ve just come from there, I hear.”

Nureddin laughed a little.

“I might go back there. Why not? We could do it in three days, with a fair wind. I have eight guns aboard my dhow, and sixty men who can fight them. You have two ships and more guns, and your men can fight. Here is Sultan Ali, with some fifty praus and three or four thousand Moro warriors—who can fight! Why waste time on Sulu, where the loot is small, when Manila and an empire is waiting?”

“Ha!” exclaimed Jans Doort, and grunted in his beard. His face lit up. “You’re Nureddin the Nakoda, eh? Yes. I heard of you at Achin. Manila—ha! Thunder and lightning! It could be done. Manila seized for Holland, aye! Will the sultan do it?”

“Will you do it?” Nureddin looked him in the eyes.

“I’ll consult my officers.”

“Then consult them. Here comes the sultan. I’ll talk with him and his council; ten to one, he’ll do it. He hates the Spaniards. Come back and talk with him in the morning. By that time, you’ll find him all afire for the venture—if you are.”

Well Nureddin knew that Sultan Ali and the wrinkled old men of the council, who looked like monkeys in their scarlet jackets, would itch for the sword-hilt when they heard how helpless Manila was; and would not wait for morning to blaze for a holy war against the infidel and the loot of the Spanish town.

Jans Doort stalked out, assembled his junior captain and his officers aboard his ship, and imparted the news to them. They lit long pipes and

broached a keg of beer, they looked at one another, they heard the news of the *Swann*, and the junior captain spoke up.

“The *Swann* and her consort much damaged or lost, eh? That’s bad news. Manila town ready to drop like a ripe plum, eh? That’s good news. Treasure ready for the loading.”

A little man with flaming eyes spoke with sudden sharpness.

“Is that all ye see in it? Look, Jans Doort! Here’s the offer in our hand—not of a little loot alone, though God knows we’ll not refuse that, but something greater. The whole course of history in these seas, for ever! Manila can’t be taken. It’s impregnable, ordinarily. But, if this news be true, we can take it for Holland!”

“That,” said Jans Doort mildly, “had occurred to me. Look, gentlemen! We have two other ships loading at Achin; we can send word to them to come to Manila. We must act now or never. No delay is possible. Decision is here and now. It means the winning of Manila, and more than that, a secure base from which we can’t be dislodged. All those islands will be ours; the island trade, the China trade, the spice trade—at one stroke, everything falls to our hand. Spain will be swept off these seas.”

“Right,” said another. “Who holds Manila, holds Luzon; who holds Luzon, has wealth of every kind, and the key to empire. I vote we agree—if this Arab trader can be trusted to fight.”

“Fight?” Jans Doort smiled and sent a smoke-cloud at the cabin ceiling. “You don’t know him. But he promises he can pilot us, once in the harbor.”

“There’s the rub,” said the other captain, in doubt. “Our ships mean life to us all. None of us know Manila harbor; the Spanish charts are secret. No one knows it. These Moros, with their light craft, are ignorant of depths. If we ran aground in that harbor, God help us all! Without a pilot, I’d say no. I’m not sure of this Arab.”

“I think he’s the right man for us,” said Jans Doort. “Suppose we take that for granted, eh? On the assumption that he’ll pilot us, let’s put it to the vote—do we see Sultan Ali and make a bid for empire?”

One by one, they voted; there was no dissenting voice. Fired by this chance at destiny, they were ready to gamble lives and fortunes and future, and said so.

Nureddin, meantime, laid his information before Sultan Ali and the council of old dattos, left them to chew over the thought of a holy war and loot beyond all calculation, and took his swaggering way out of the palace.

As he passed through the gates and headed for town, an old crone came whining up to him, asking alms in Allah's name. He gave her a coin, and she cackled a laugh.

"Thanks, Nureddin the Nakoda! Now go to the bazar of the yellow infidel, and ask to see the pearls in his rear room."

"Eh?" Nureddin gave her a quick glance. "Why should I? Pearls?"

"Shaped like a scimitar, lord," was the answer, and the old hag departed.

Pearls in dark hair, a scimitar of pearls—ah! His heart leaped. He was not unused to such palace intrigues. His girl of the palace would be there! Then, with contempt, he spat and growled an oath. A mere pretty toy, no doubt; a dumb doll with a lovely face!

A palace girl seeking a light o' love—Allah forbid! His hot and tempestuous Arab heart leaped again, and recoiled. In that girl's face he had divined great things, wonderful things; and it hurt to find her so cheap. Or was he mistaken?

He fell in talk with a captain of the palace guards, and in jest mentioned a dream he had had two nights ago, a dream of a woman wearing in her hair an ornament of pearls shaped like a scimitar. The captain stared and rolled his eyes.

"Allah upon you, Hazrami! That is a true dream. The princess Fatima, youngest daughter of the sultan, upon whom be peace, wears such an ornament in her hair!"

Nureddin laughed lightly. "Of a truth? And she is fat and ugly, no doubt?"

"As Allah liveth, Hazrami, she is a very gazelle for beauty, and the wisdom of the ages is in her brain! In three weeks she is to marry the datto of Jolo—he is here now, and has brought ten praus to the assembly."

Carelessly, Nureddin closed the talk and sauntered away, but now he went straight to the town and the bazars. There were a few Chinese traders in the islands, and one of these had a bazar in the town here, a large and prosperous place.

When he had bought a thing or two, Nureddin beckoned the yellow man apart and said he had come to see the pearls in the rear room. He was taken through a narrow passage, a curtain lifted and fell, and he was alone in a room with the girl of the palace. She was veiled, now, and cloaked from head to heels, but he could glimpse her face through the thin veil.

“Greetings, Nureddin, and peace,” she said softly.

“And to you, peace,” he rejoined. Then she gave him a shock.

“So you came, drawn by a pretty face, in search of intrigue?”

“No, by Allah!” he said stoutly. “I came to see if so lovely a face could have so cheap a heart.”

“Ah!” Her voice leaped at him, thrilled him, burst into a rippling laugh. “Well said! You’re the man I thought you were, at first sight. I’ve no time now to talk or to explain. Will you do me a service, Nureddin?”

“I may and I may not,” said he. “Lightly promised, lightly forgotten; that’s not my way. When I give my word, I keep it. Is the service to be done a sultan’s daughter, the promised bride of a chieftain—or to a woman named Fatima?”

She caught her breath. “So you know me! Well, why not? I want a boat, six rowers, and your sword to guard me, an hour past the prayer of darkness tonight. We must row eight miles up the river and land, wait an hour, and return.”

“Is that all?” asked Nureddin. She laughed again.

“All? It may mean all—life and death and eternity. My errand at that village upriver is to free my brother, who has been condemned to death by my father.”

Nureddin frowned. “A father condemn his own son to death?”

“The sultan, my father, is a harsh man,” she said bitterly. “He sells me into a loveless marriage with the datto of Jolo; he condemned my brother, who dared to speak the truth. Now will you help me or not?”

Nureddin looked at her for a long, long moment. Once again his heart leaped, this time wildly, exultantly; and his heart shone in his eyes. She was a woman like a sword, true and keen and great-hearted. Her beauty was no lie. There was a flame in her; it spoke by her tongue, in her eyes, through her words.

“You may well hesitate,” she said a trifle scornfully. “If my absence is discovered, if I’m betrayed, it means death and torture for us both.”

“I think we shall each be in good company.” A smile curved his lips, lit up his eagle-face, lightened his eyes. “Death together, life together—there’s a gamble worth the winning, by Allah! Look, Fatima. In a moment, all life is changed; I give you my promise, my heart, myself. You’re the woman I’ve sought and have never found till now. Agreed! Tell me where to find you an hour after the prayer of darkness.”

She told him, drew aside her veil, put out her hand with a word of thanks; he pressed her fingers to his lips and she was gone, with her ringing laugh that was like the little silver bells under the Borodor temple eaves.

In the sunset, over their bowl of food, Nureddin talked with his mate, a shrewd old Arab. The other men were all ashore, seeking women in the vast camp of warriors that lined the curving beach.

“Have the men aboard an hour after midnight,” said Nureddin. “Warp out the dhow silently and carefully with the current. Let her drop downstream, just below the town.”

“It is an order,” said the mate obediently.

With darkness, Nureddin had his boat, and six of his best men. He knew now that Fatima’s warning had not been idle, for the camp was full of talk about the prince Khalid and his fate—condemned to death upriver, in another two days. A fine fellow, said all of them, but Khalid had been a fool to brave the old sultan, to try and save the life of a man, to speak the truth about injustice and tyranny. The more Nureddin heard, the higher sang his heart; and as they waited, he told his six men about it, keeping back nothing.

They were no ordinary men, but were full mailed, keen, hard warriors and seamen, veterans of seas and battle, each of them worth a score of ordinary men.

“Why, here is a brave errand!” said one, laughing. “Love and rescue, brave hearts together—by Allah and Allah, I’m glad to be alive this night!”

The others said likewise, and Nureddin felt a swelling in his throat that such men should be his comrades and should serve him.

She came, alone, wrapped in a dark mantle. A word, an excited breath, and she was in the stern beside Nureddin, and the six rowers pushed off.

“Who knows the river?” asked one of the men.

“I do!” said she. “And I sit beside your captain. Row, Hazrami!”

They laughed to hear the word on her lips, for she had a pretty accent. Nureddin, moving the tiller, struck his elbow against her breast, and felt the hard touch of mail. She laughed softly, took his hand, and showed him that she wore a coat of steel mesh like his own, and was girded with a curved sword as well.

“I’ll not be empty-handed in peace or war,” said she, but he did not know the meaning of those words yet awhile.

The eight miles upstream to the village below the rapids were not quickly passed. The current was swift, wide as the river was, and other boats had to be avoided. Nureddin talked with the girl beside him, learned much of her, imparted much of himself; gradually they grew acquainted with likes and dislikes and ambitions and past histories. And the more he learned of her, the farther he saw into her heart and brain, the wilder sang his blood.

“Your great plan goes through,” she said suddenly. “I heard tonight that my father and the council have decided to follow your advice, to follow you, join with the infidels and go to Manila. It will be settled in the morning. Are you glad?”

“Yes,” he said honestly. “Conquest, glory, achievement—why not be glad? But I’ll not leave you. How are you going to free your brother? What are your plans?”

“A faithful servant does the work; but I must get him away,” she said. “Plans? I have none. If I get back to the palace unseen, well and good. If not—well, at least I’ve found a man worth calling comrade!”

“We’ll talk about that later,” said Nureddin.

She pointed the place; they drew in at a village beach amid fishing craft drawn up on the shore. All was dark under the stars, and silent, until village dogs began barking. Fatima rose as the boat backed in, stepped out and waded ashore.

“Wait,” she said. “It may take a while. Will you wait?”

“Shall I go with you?” asked Nureddin.

“Safer not. You don’t know the jungle paths. Will you wait?”

“We’ll wait,” said he, and she was gone.

They pushed out a little way, anchored, and waited. Nureddin talked with the six men, and the news about Manila brought fierce exultation to them and to him. He talked of his great schemes—place Manila in Dutch hands, and wax great! The Dutch were well liked in all the islands, whereas the Spaniards were hated. All the Moro trade would come to Manila, the trade of Sumatra and Borneo and beyond; wealth and power would come, alliance between the Dutch and Arab traders—why, the thing became enormous in scope and dream!

They waited a long time, an hour and another hour. The men dozed, their steel shirts and caps laid aside.

Suddenly Nureddin started. Off in the jungle, a drum was sounding. It was taken up elsewhere; a message, obviously, of uneven throbbing beats. It traveled on. Another and another took up the sound, fading away into the distance. A vague sense of evil oppressed Nureddin as he listened.

The men stirred, wakened, cursed the drums in the night. The village dogs began to bark once more, furiously. Nureddin hove up the anchor and sent the boat in at the mudflat shore, and presently heard her voice.

“All well, Nureddin! But get away fast. They’re after us.”

Two figures loomed, came scrambling into the boat. The oars dipped. They were out on the starlit water, whirling away with the current; behind, all was silence and darkness. No alarm, no shouts. A laugh broke from Nureddin.

“Allah be praised! I thought you said they were after you?”

“You heard the drums? They’ve sent word on ahead.” She crowded close to him. Khalid spoke, courteously, quietly, voicing his thanks; a slim, dark figure of restraint.

The moon was up now, well past the full, rising at midnight, striking a silvern radiance down the river road. With current and oars, the boat sped fast. Presently Fatima touched Nureddin’s arm, her voice soft with regret.

“I’m sorry. It’s another mile to the narrows; they’ll stop us there. That’s where we’ll find the first boom—a defence against pirate raids, that can be swung across the river. Another farther down. You’ll have to let us slip ashore and take our chances in the jungle. For your sake, dear Nureddin, I’m sorry.”

He grunted scornfully. A laugh broke from the men.

“By Allah, we’ll take you through safely!” said he. “How can they know about us?”

“The drums tell everything. That I’m here, with you. The drums from the coast make answer. There will be boats on the river, coming up. To get through is impossible.”

“Wait and see,” answered Nureddin. “We’ve met booms before now.”

They swept on. Here the river made a wide bend and then narrowed for a space. As they came around the bend, the flare of torches appeared ahead. Nureddin snapped out an order. Two of his men laid in their oars, produced bow-cases and quivers, strung their bows, and moved aft, so that the boat was out of trim, her bows high. She was a stout but light craft, long and narrow, well suited for work about reefs or rivers.

“Careful!” exclaimed Khalid suddenly. “They will have rafts to fight off any attack on the boom! If you have an extra bow, give me one.”

The stroke-oar chuckled and passed him bow and quiver, without losing a stroke. Nureddin held the boat in midstream, heading for the torches. These burned on two bamboo rafts, crowded with men, moored along the center of the boom. This boom, of huge bamboos, was half awash.

A storm of voices broke out at the boat as she drew near. Conches, drums, brazen gongs sounded death. Orders were shouted. Nureddin, making no answer, headed between the two rafts. When he drew near, the air suddenly sang with shafts. An arrow slapped into the gunnel, another thudded on his steel shirt.

“Loose!” he said, and the bowstrings twanged.

The two men, standing, shot with terrible rapidity, their shafts piercing the crowded masses aboard each raft. Shouts became shrieks. The bow of Khalid joined in. Those powerful bows sent their arrows through and through the unprotected warriors. Wild confusion ensued as dead and dying plunged down. In the midst, Nureddin called sharp warning, and the two men dropped their weapons as the bow of the boat slid up on the bamboo boom. Under the weight, the boom sank.

The two darted forward, the oars dipped and pulled, the boat slid up and over the boom and was across. A few arrows sped after her. With all six oars at work again, she fled away downstream in the cold moonlight.

“Hurt?” queried Nureddin. “Not even a wound? Good. There’ll be worse ahead. Where’s the second boom, Fatima?”

“A mile above the town,” she replied. “But it’s not like this one. It’s made of great logs lashed together, that will hold back a war prau. And there’s a huge fighting platform, an enormous raft. The warriors will be men from below, also, not villagers.”

“So much the more honor in fighting through them,” and Nureddin laughed a little. “Mahmud and Abdallah! When I give the word, bend every effort to cutting the lashings. Use your own brains—we don’t know what’ll turn up. If it comes to swordwork, the others join me and we’ll get you time to do the cutting.”

The drums were speaking again, from behind, from ahead; a more rapid beat now, excited tongues speeding the word downstream. The moonlight hung clear and beautiful on the water, and Nureddin caught a sudden exclamation from Khalid, as he leaned toward his sister.

“What’s that? Fatima! What’s that sword?”

She laughed, and bared the blade she wore. A huge kris, shaped like a flame, the hilt heavy with gold and gems.

“Our father’s kris,” she said. “The sword of authority, the sacred kris of the sultan! Take it, Khalid; I stole it for you. Take it and use it.”

Nureddin eyed the thing curiously. The scabbard was draped with pearls, the flame-bladed weapon richly dight with gems that flashed in the moonlight.

“A treasure indeed,” said Khalid, “but if we win through, it becomes a gift for our friend here, Nureddin the Nakoda!”

“Keep it,” said Nureddin, understanding now the words of the girl. “I have gems enough, and a blade that suits my hand better, of Toledo steel. If I seek reward, it is not from you but from another.”

Fatima looked at him, her face flashing with laughter and excitement.

“If you seek rewards from me, Nureddin, look well that I share in them fully!”

“You shall do that,” he said, and put his hand under her chin and kissed her on the lips, and her lips responded. From the men at the oars broke a grunt of fierce delight. Thus, silently yet with a perfect understanding of words unuttered, was their troth plighted beneath the moon.

The boat swept on at speed, and Fatima sketched the situation ahead. The great boom was meant to close the river to traffic, and did so upon any alarm. There was no evasion, for the channel was narrowed by rocks on either side. Scarcely had she finished speaking, when a glow of light showed ahead, and they were in a straight course that led down to the boom, where hundreds of torches flashed. A groan escaped Khalid.

“No use, Nureddin! Men are there by the hundred.”

“Only so many can reach the boat and us,” said Nureddin. “Ha! Look there!”

A small boat was hailing them. Fatima answered in the local dialect, and turned.

“Nureddin! They know you’re here, and that I’m here. They say to come in peace to the raft and talk. The datto of Jolo is there, and one of my father’s chief captains.”

“Good,” said Nureddin. “Mahmud! You and Abdallah work while we talk.”

The little boat tore on back ahead of them. They held on, and Nureddin drank in what awaited them, his brain alert to seize every chance; there was none.

In the torchlight, the boom was visible, high and great. In mid-current was a huge raft or platform, solid as the earth itself; he reckoned swiftly, and found there must be a hundred men or more on the raft alone, for it was all aglitter with weapons and armor in the torchlight. On the downstream side of the raft, which blocked further passage, was a crowd of boats from the town below, with more men.

“Allah is great!” said one of the rowers, glancing over his shoulder. “The river crocodiles will be full fed this night. They trap us into a peace-talk.”

Nureddin said nothing, but steered for the right side of the platform, where a space was being cleared in the lurid torchlight. Once landed there, he was lost, it seemed. He held on; a dead silence had fallen upon all those men. Fifty feet from the platform, he called aloud.

“In the name of Allah! Do ye guarantee peace?”

“We do not,” replied a short, squat, powerful figure in gay sarong and coat. “But we offer you peace and free passage, if that be your choice after hearing our words.”

"Then the choice shall be mine," said Nureddin, and signed his oarsmen on.

"That is the datto of Jolo," breathed the girl beside him. "And at his elbow is Mansur, chief of my father's captains. If you land there, you must consent to what they say or be killed quickly."

"So they think," Nureddin said. "Mahmud! Throw your cloak over Abdallah, so he may cut at the lashings unseen, while we talk."

The oars were put in. The boat drifted down upon the boom and the platform, and came to rest where two of the huge tree-trunks were lashed together. Murmurs went up at sight of Fatima, rising with Nureddin to land. He signed Khalid and the others back, and went first, with the girl following. In his hand was his naked scimitar, a keen curved blade made long since in Toledo. Fatima was slim in her mail-shirt, lovely to see.

The datto of Jolo, for whom a stool had been placed, was a squat chieftain, dark with negroid blood, and held between his two hands, as he sat, a heavy-bladed war axe. He sat leaning upon it, his eyes going to Fatima, slender-breasted, her hair flowing, in her hand the common kris she had taken from her brother in exchange for the glorious weapon.

"Well?" Nureddin halted in front of the datto, smiled a little, leaned lightly on his long thin blade. "Why is our passage stopped?"

"You know well," snapped the chieftain. "As Allah liveth, I am here to act, not to talk! You are a fool. Hand over this woman and her brother, and you go free, for we respect you, Nureddin the Nakoda. Otherwise you shall be slain quickly."

"Wait, wait!" exclaimed a voice. Through the close-packed throng came shoving a burly figure. It was Jans Doort, in half-armor, steel cap in hand. "I want a word with you, Nureddin!"

"Have it," said Nureddin quietly. He had put on his steel cap, was very composed, but his hawk-face was alight with repressed eagerness. Behind him, covered by the mantle, he knew that Abdallah was at work on those lashings.

"You've jeopardized everything," exclaimed the Dutchman angrily. "We've decided to accept your plan. We must have you to pilot us into Manila harbor; without you, the scheme were impossible. The sultan has

decided to join with us. Now, give up this woman and her brother! Give up this madness; glory awaits you, power, wealth, empire!”

Nureddin caught his breath. He saw very clearly what his choice must be. His dream had been a great one, greater than he knew. This Dutchman had seized it, Sultan Ali had seized it; all combined, they could do what no one could do singly, for the Dutch cannon and the Moro swordsmen and the Arab seamen together held Manila at their mercy.

“You offer me a hard choice,” said Nureddin slowly. “My honor is pledged to this woman and her brother.”

“I release you from the pledge,” said Fatima unexpectedly, and drooped a little. “Hand us over, Nureddin; your honor is clear, you’ve done all that can be done . . .”

There were murmurs of amazement and approval. But Nureddin gave the girl beside him a glance and a smile, and shook his head.

“You didn’t pledge my honor; I did,” he said. “Therefore, I’m the one to say on that head, not you. So the choice is mine, not yours.” He jerked up his scimitar and thumbed the curved edge, and then looked at the datto of Jolo. “So the choice is mine to make—for peace or war?”

“If you call it such,” said the datto with a flash of contempt. “Only a fool would call it a choice, Hazrami, with death at his throat!”

“Very well,” said Nureddin. “I choose, by Allah! I choose the best in the world, whether for life or death. Cut, brothers, cut!”

As he spoke, he moved so swiftly that no eye could have warning. His blade flashed up and down. It shore through the two wrists of the datto of Jolo, that leaned on the axe. It flashed again, and the warrior beside the stool dropped across the falling chieftain. In the boat behind, bowstrings twanged and there came a flutter of shafts, and Mansur, the sultan’s captain, pitched forward with arrows in his throat.

All this in one instant. As the first alarm yells pealed up, Nureddin hurled himself at the massed ranks. His four men appeared behind him, and Fatima, and Khalid. In the moment before the surprised Moros could use their arms, the Arab scimitars were smiting them into death, hurling them back, carving a bloody path in the torchlight.

Jans Doort whipped out his blade and struck. It glanced from Nureddin’s steel cap. Furious, he struck again, and again the blade glanced. The swarthy hawk-face of Nureddin rose at him with a grin and a word.

“Poor work, infidel, poor work! Hadramaut does better—”

The Toledo blade slashed into the Dutchman’s throat; and with that blow, as he well knew, Nureddin bade adieu to all his dreams and ambitions. A Moro with a stabbing spear was upon him from behind, but Fatima’s kris cut short the thrust, and this corner of the platform was clear.

Now befell stern work under the flaring torches. The Moros were stubborn fighters, and the men of Jolo, seeing their datto dying, yelled for vengeance. Steel clashed and men died, but Nureddin was now here, now there, with satanic agility, and every man who faced him fought for a space and died.

His four Arabs fought like himself, and Fatima guarded his back, while young Khalid dyed the glorious kris red that night. Then, by sheer weight, they were pressed back and back upon the boat. One of the Arabs went down under a spear-thrust. Nureddin leaped to his rescue, but a kris had slit his throat. Another Arab slipped in blood and sprawled, and an axe beat out his brains. Nureddin killed the slayer, but a bolo slashed across his thigh and he was down. Shrill and wild pealed the yell, but changed to a death-shriek as he came up and struck, and a Moro died. Another bolo slashed at him, slithered from his mail-shirt, and Khalid struck down this man. But Nureddin’s agility was gone now. That slash across the thigh was draining the life from him, and he knew it.

“Free!” came the yell from the boat. “Quick, *nakoda!*”

Free indeed. The boom was swinging with the current. The boat was moving. Fatima and her brother scrambled in, Nureddin leaped for the stern and made it. One of his Arabs went down under the Moro rush, the other got aboard.

As by magic, the battle and tumult were gone. The boat was heading downstream, the Moro boats dashing for her in vain; most of them were swept aside by the boom as it swung. Three Arabs left, Khalid at an oar with them, and Nureddin with the blood pumping from his thigh, as he sat at the tiller. He caught the girl’s hand and dabbled it in the warm blood.

“Tie it up! Stop the blood somehow!” he commanded, and peered out at the water intently, heading the boat over to the farther side.

Away from the town—aye, that was the one chance! Boats crowded there by the wharves and godowns and harbor. Nureddin held over to the

farther shore, the oars dipped hard, the current swirled them on. The torches and roaring voices of the town slid past.

“Finished!” exclaimed Fatima, panting. “The best I could do—”

“Good enough,” he broke in. A sudden fear had assailed him, at sight of flaring lights far down the river. If they knew he had gone with the girl, then they might well try to occupy the dhow. The mate had moved her, yes; but those lights, those lights! And the flash of powder, the mutter of guns! His crew had muskets, the Moros had none.

The town was past, the massed fleet of praus was past, the two Dutch ships dropped behind. Ahead, under those torches that shamed the feeble moon, was rising a din of fight; yells, shots, the ringing clash of steel. Nureddin saw that the dhow must have been attacked by surprise, before the mate could get cannon to work or boarding-nets up. Along one side of her showed the dark mass of boats gathered.

The boat was closing down upon her now. Nureddin lifted his head and shouted at his men aboard her. A wild yell made answer; they had heard him.

“Cut the cable! Out with the sweeps! Throw me a rope!” he shouted, and then the boat crashed in among the craft that surrounded the dhow.

From the Moros lifted wild shrieks of dismay and consternation. Luckily, none of the fighting praus were here; only small craft had come. Once at sea, as Nureddin well knew, no Moro vessel could overhaul this big dhow of his.

A last medley of confusion, clashing weapons, wild voices, and they were in under the rail. He was aboard somehow, limping, falling, scrambling up to hurl himself into the fight raging on the deck. The Moros broke and fled. A dying man uprose, bolo in hand, and slashed at Nureddin viciously; the blow missed. Nureddin struck at him, slipped in blood, went all asprawl on the deck—and darkness engulfed him.

When he wakened, the salt sea-air was in his nostrils, the sun was in the east, the dhow was lifting and falling to the sea-swell. Nureddin glanced around. He was lying pillowed on the after-deck, alone. Talking with the old mate, at the tiller, were Fatima and her brother.

Nureddin eyed them. The fine sweep of the young Moro, the lithe body, the alert gaze, pleased him. He was smiling when Fatima turned, saw him lying on one elbow, and came to him with a rush.

“They’ve given up! They’ve turned back!” she cried.

“Who?” demanded Nureddin, as she sank down beside him.

“The praus. The two Dutch ships. They were chasing us, but they’ve gone!”

Gone, true; gone, and with them dreams and empire and the loot of Manila, and the glory of conquest. And he smiled again, for he thought of what he had won instead.

We all sat staring as Templeton came to the end of his story, and his voice died, and the magic of southern seas died with it. We were back in the present again, and the world seemed suddenly drab and empty.

“And you claim that’s how history is made?” asked somebody.

“Good lord, man, what more can you ask?” exclaimed Templeton harshly. “A trifle of a man’s honor, of a girl’s face—think of the tremendous effect it had! Otherwise, Manila would have fallen into Dutch hands, and the whole course of history would have been altered in that part of the world, in other parts of the world. No Dewey at Manila bay, to mention just one thing. No Manila galleons to be raped and plundered by buccaneers. Spain would have been banished from the south seas, as Portugal was—”

“But what became of this Nureddin? And the girl?” I demanded. “Do you know?”

Templeton gave me a long, slow glance, and looked away, and nodded.

“Yes, I know. A great story, a glorious and glowing story of blood and heroism and empire—good lord!” He glanced at his watch, leaped to his feet, and reached for his hat. “I’m overdue. So long! See you again.”

And he was gone, taking his unuttered story with him.

What was this “unuttered story”? What did become of Nureddin the Nakoda? The questions fascinated us, and we put them up to Mr. Bedford-Jones. He, in turn, got after Templeton and the records of the ancient Philippines, and—well, are you interested? If so, let us know, and we’ll pursue the matter farther.

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.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by Maurice Archbold Jr. (1910-1979) have been omitted from this etext.

[The end of *Much Lost, More Won* by Henry Bedford-Jones]