The Devil's Admiral eBook

The Devil's Admiral

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CHAPTER I

MISSIONARY AND RED-HEADED BEGGAR

Captain Riggs had a trunk full of old logbooks, and he said any of them would make a better story than the *Kut Sang*. The truth of it was, he didn't want me to write this story. There were things he didn't wish to see in type, perhaps because he feared to read about himself and what had happened in the old steamer in the China Sea.

"Folks don't care nothing about cargo-boats," he would say, taking his pipe out of his mouth and shaking his head gravely, whenever I hinted that I would like to tell of our adventure of the *Kut Sang*. "They want yarns of them floating hotels called liners, with palm-gardens in 'em and bands playing at their meals and games and so on going from eight bells to the bos'n's watch.

"It was mostly fighting in the *Kut Sang*, and the mess you and me and poor Harris and the black boy there got into wouldn't be just the quiet sort of reading folks want these days. It was all over in a night and a day, anyway—look at them Northern Spy apples, Mr. Trenholm!"

He wanted to forget the *Kut Sang* and the awful night we had in her. He imagined he didn't figure to advantage in the story, and he winced when I mentioned certain events, although I always insisted that he was the bravest man among us, having a better realization of the odds against us. Those who have faced danger know it takes a brave man to admit that he is beaten, and still keep up the fight.

We all have better memories for our brave moments than for the fear which threatened for a time to prove us cowards. The man who has faced death and says he was not afraid is either a fool or a liar; and, if only a liar, still a fool for telling himself that which he knows to be a lie. The bravery of the seaman is that he fears the sea and knows its ruthlessness and its ultimate victory, and accepts it as a part of his day's work. This is a sea-story.

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Captain Riggs had log-book stories that were good, and they might have served him for a volume of marine memoirs. But I was with him when we freighted the *Kut Sang* with adventure and sailed out of Manila, so his musty records of rescues and wrecks lacked life for me. In the old logbooks I found no men to compare with the Rev. Luther Meeker; or Petrak, the little red-headed beggar; or Long Jim or Buckrow or Thirkle. I never found in their pages a cabin-boy like Rajah the Malay, strutting about with a long kris stuck in the folds of his scarlet *sarong*, or a mate whose truculence equalled the chronic ill-humour of Harris, who learned his seamanship as a fisherman on the Newfoundland Banks. And in all his log-books I never found another Devil's Admiral!

Riggs is dead, and I can tell the story in my own way; for tell it I must, and the manuscript will be a comfort to me when I am old and my memory and imagination begin to fail. Not that I ever expect to forget, because that would be a calamity; but I want to put down the events of the day and night in the *Kut Sang* while they are fresh in my mind.

How well I can see in a mental vision the whole murderous plot worked out! Certain parts of it flash on me at off moments, while I am reading a book or watching a play or talking with a friend, and every trivial detail comes out as clearly as if it were all being done over again in a motion picture. The night gloom in the hall brings back to me the 'tween-decks of the old tub of a boat; the green-plush seats of a sleeping-car remind me of the *Kut Sang's* dining-saloon, and even a bonfire in an adjacent yard recalls the odour of burned rice on the galley fire left by the panic-stricken Chinese cook.

I know the very smell of the *Kut Sang*. I caught it last week passing a ship-chandler's shop, and it set my veins throbbing again with the sense of conflict, and I caught myself tensing my muscles for a death grapple. To me the *Kut Sang* is a personality, a sentient being, with her own soul and moods and temper, audaciously tossing her bows at the threatening seas rising to meet her. She is my sea-ghost, and as much a character to me as Riggs or Thirkle or Dago Red.

The deep, bright red band on her funnel gave her a touch of coquetry, but she had the drabness of senility; she was worn out, and working, when she should have gone to the junk pile years before. But her very antiquity charmed me, for her scars and wrinkles told of hard service in the China Sea; and there was an air of comfort about her, such as one finds in an ancient house that has sheltered several generations.

Precious little comfort I had in her, though, which is why I remember her so well, and why I never shall forget her. If she had made Hong-Kong in five days, her name would be lost in the memory of countless other steamers, and there would be no tale to tell. But now she is the *Kut Sang*, and every time I whisper the two words to myself I live once more aboard her.

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Rajah is with me—inherited, I might say, from Captain Riggs. Perhaps he keeps my memory keen on the old days, for how could I forget with the black boy stalking about the house—half the time in his bare feet and his native costume, which I rather encourage—for his *sarong* matches the curtains of my den and adds a bit of colour to my colourless surroundings.

I am quite sure that if Captain Riggs were still alive he would agree that the story should begin with my first sight of the missionary and the little red-headed man, so I will launch the narrative with an account of how I first met the Rev. Luther Meeker.

He was in the midst of a litter of nondescript baggage on the Manila mole when I came ashore from a rice-boat that had brought me across the China Sea from Saigon. The first glance marked him as a missionary, for he wore a huge crucifix cut out of pink shell, and as he hobbled about on the embankment it bobbed at the end of a black cord hung from his neck.

Quaint and queer he was, even for the Orient, where queerness in men and things is commonplace and accepted as a part of the East's inseparable sense of mystery. With his big goggles of smoked glass he reminded one of some sea-monster, an illusion dispelled by his battered pith helmet with its faded sky-blue *pugri* bound round its crown, the frayed ends falling over his shoulders and flapping in the breeze.

He was a thin old man, clad in duck, turning yellow with age. When he threw the helmet back it exposed a wrinkled brow and a baldish head, except for a few wisps of hair at the temples. He appeared to be of great age—a fossil, an animated mummy, a relic from an ancient graveyard; and the stoop of his lean shoulders accentuated these impressions. It was plain that the tropics were fast making an end of him.

He was whining querulously as I stepped ashore, and the first words I heard him say were:

"An organ! An organ! An organ in a cedarwood box! An organ in a cedarwood box, and the sign of the cross on the ends! Oh, why do you try my soul? Such stupidity! Such awful stupidity!"

The native porters were grinning at him as they simulated a frantic search for his organ in a cedarwood box, but they probably knew all the time where it was. He was surrounded by baskets and chests; and, if the crucifix were not enough to indicate his profession, black lettering on his possessions advertised him as "The Rev. Luther Meeker, London Evangelical Society." The multiplicity of labels proclaimed him a traveller known from Colombo to Vladivostok, and he must have been wandering over Asia for years, as his luggage was as ancient as himself.

Fighting my way out of the multitude on the river-bank, I gained the cable office near the customhouse and reported myself in Manila, bought all the newspapers I could to learn how the war was going in Manchuria, and to anticipate if possible where I might be ordered next.

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I revelled in the noise and crowds as only one can after a week at sea. While I was on the way from Saigon the Russian armies might have been beaten or the Japanese fleet destroyed. There might be orders sending me anywhere, but I hoped that I would leave Manila for the Strait of Malacca to meet the Baltic fleet. What I feared most was the end of the war, for a war-correspondent without a war is deprived of his profession. I was young and ambitious, then, and seeking a journalistic reputation at the cable's mouth.

It happened that I had allowed myself to heed the glib tongue of a hotel-runner before I left the rice-steamer, and he had commandeered my bag and taken it to the Oriente Hotel, of which I knew nothing except that it was in the walled city and across the river from the cable office. To recapture the bag and my clean linen I would have to take an instrument of torture known as a *carromatta* and drive across the Bridge of Spain.

I could cross the river in a small boat with a Filipino pirate, and go on a hunt for a conveyance on the other side; but thought it better to risk being shaken to death than drowned in the dirty Pasig, so I hailed a *cochero*. The villain demanded a double rate, and, while we were haggling, a bus of the Oriente drew in sight and I caught it as it was spinning up Calle San Fernando.

When I crawled into the bus I wished that I had struck a bargain with the thief of a *cochero*, for I found myself in a seat beside the whining missionary. He prayed for his bones over the rough places, and for his life, when the driver took a corner recklessly, and made us all very weary with his eternal complaining. That was not the worst of it—-he tried to strike up an acquaintance with me.

There was a letter in my coat-pocket which had been given to me in Saigon to deliver to the Russian consul in Manila. It was an errand for the cable-operator there, who had done me favours, and I was to leave it at the Hong-Kong-Shanghai Bank for the consul, who would call for it. That bank carried an expense account for me, so the delivery of the letter was of no trouble. The envelope was long and official-looking, and it fell to the floor of the bus as I clambered in.

Meeker picked it up and handed it to me, but for the instant he held it he read the address:

Russian Consul,
Care Hong-Kong-Shanghai Bank,
Manila
Courtesy Mr. James A. Trenholm,
Amalgamated Press

"My dear sir," said Meeker, "you have dropped a document—allow me."

“Thank you,” I replied, and took the letter, which was quite bulky and sealed with a splotch of black wax imprinted with a coat of arms or a crest, or some such insignia. I fear I betrayed my irritation over Meeker’s reading the address.

“No offence, I trust, my dear sir,” he said, mild surprise in his tone.

“None whatever,” I snapped back; but our companions in the bus smiled and winked at me openly, as if they appreciated my cold manner toward the missionary.

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He said no more to me, but remarked to no one in particular that “an austere manner is a poor passport in this country,” which implied that I was new to the East, and would learn better if I stayed long enough. I ignored the remark, somewhat pleased that I had rebuffed him, for I well knew he would talk me into a fever if I did not keep him at a distance; and, furthermore, I did not relish the idea of having him intrude upon me at the hotel. My dislike for him was not because he was a missionary, but because he was a common enough type of bore. He was over suave, and his peevishness jarred my none too steady nerves.

The bus was not a pleasant place for me after that, so I dropped off in Plaza Moraga, when I observed the signboard of the very bank mentioned. I cashed a draft and handed the letter to the clerk at the barred window.

“Oh, yes, we have been waiting for that!” he said as he took the envelope. “Mr. Trego! Here are your papers for the consul,” he called to a man somewhere behind the frosted glass wall. “We appreciate your kindness very much, Mr. Trenholm.”

It was then that I first saw the little red-headed man. He was looking in at the door, but scurried away when the Sikh guard inside moved toward him. The little man wore a white canvas navy-cap; but his appearance was dirty and disreputable, and he had the aspect of a beggar. His visage was wizened and villainous and shot with pock-marks under a coppery stubble of red beard, and his little mole-like eyes were that close together that they seemed fastened to his nose.

The clerk kept me waiting for signatures, and finally handed out my gold. As I filled my purse I was conscious of some one behind me, and, glancing over my shoulder, I saw the Rev. Luther Meeker.

CHAPTER II

RED-HEADED BEGGAR AND MISSIONARY

Turning my back on him, I edged toward a desk. It seemed to me that he had not recognized me as the austere man in the bus, or perhaps he chose to pass without encountering me again. He stared about the place, leaning on one leg for a minute as if undecided what to do next, or not quite sure he was in the right establishment.

I could hear voices in a room close at hand, and Meeker turned toward the door, walking silently in his cloth deck-shoes, and passed into the room. I heard a man give a cry of astonishment, followed by a growl of wrath, and Meeker ran out again, retreating backward and holding his hands up in protest.

“My dear sirs!” he whined. “No offence, I am sure! I hope you have taken no offence, for none was intended, and I did not mean to disturb any person—I was simply asking alms for a seamen’s chapel, and I do most sincerely beg your pardons, gentlemen.”

He went into the street, and a sallow-faced man with a slender malacca cane held in his hand as if it were a rapier, came to the door of the room and said something in French, indignant that he should be disturbed. He waved the cane menacingly after Meeker and slammed the door.

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Leaving the bank, I turned toward the Escolta, which is the principal business street of Manila. The shop windows attracted me, and I sauntered for half an hour or more. I wanted a new field-glass, and as I stood on the pavement at a corner and looked in at a jeweller's window I caught the image of Meeker in the glass, which was thrown in a shadow by an awning.

I turned without thinking Meeker could have any interest in what I might do, and saw him half a block away talking to the little red-headed beggar who had looked in at the bank door. Meeker evidently caught me looking at him, for he whispered to the beggar, who hastened away, taking a furtive glance at me over his shoulder as he left. I turned toward Meeker, and he swung away down the street as I approached him, with more nimbleness than I supposed was in his old bones.

"I suppose the pest will be at my heels for the next week," I told myself, annoyed at the way the missionary crossed my path. That was the fourth time I had seen him in an hour, and I dreaded to go to the hotel, sure I would meet him again—for, of course, he could not have gone anywhere else but to the Oriente.

I thought it strange that he should be talking to the little beggar, although it never occurred to me that they were watching me; and, even if they were, I would have not concerned myself much about it. As it was, I ascribed Meeker's embarrassment when I last saw him to what had passed between us in the bus, and concluded that he was trying to avoid me, which I considered a praiseworthy effort on his part.

There was a possibility of orders awaiting me at the hotel; and, although it was not yet noon, I hailed a rig and drove there. The clerk passed over the familiar yellow envelope, and my message read: "Proceed to Hong-Kong for orders." I replied that I would leave at once, and the message was gone before I discovered that there wasn't a steamer for Hong-Kong before the end of the week, five days away.

It would have sounded silly to dispatch another message, telling of lack of steamers. I had supposed a steamer sailed every day or two, and my temper was ruffled at my mistake and the prospect of fretting away a week in the heat of Manila.

A little item in the *Times* gave me hope. It told of the steamer *Kut Sang* coming out of dry dock to sail for Hong-Kong that very afternoon with general cargo. There was a bare chance that I might get passage in her, for the paper referred to her as a former passenger boat, and I was sure I could cajole the company into selling me a berth, or bribe the captain into signing me as a member of the crew, with no duties to perform, a common practice.

"This is Mr. Trenholm of the Amalgamated Press," I told the clerk in the steamship office over the hotel's desk-telephone. "Simply must get to Hong-Kong as soon as possible, and would like to go in the *Kut Sang* this afternoon. May I buy passage in her?"

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It was hard to make him understand, for he was a Filipino who insisted on speaking English, although I had a working knowledge of Spanish. He first mistook me for a stevedore, then for the manager, and next for the Hong-Kong-Shanghai Bank. I stormed at him, irritated that I should have to shout my business for the benefit of the loafers in the hotel office.

“Correspondent!” I yelled in answer to his questions. “Newspaper correspondent working on the war. I want to go to Hong-Kong in the *Kut Sang*!”

“I am very sorry,” he said, without explaining his sorrow.

“May I go in the *Kut Sang*?” I insisted, and he told me I could, and after he had talked in a low tone with somebody in his office, said that I couldn’t, which was exasperating. I decided to go to the steamship office and plead with the officials. Hanging up the receiver, I signalled to the boy to call a carriage.

“You want to go in the *Kut Sang*, my dear sir?” came a purring voice at my shoulder. I looked up, and the Rev. Luther Meeker smiled at me.

I growled something at him to the effect that I wondered if I was ever to lose sight of him. He bowed again and grinned.

“Sorry that you object to me,” he murmured, with lifted eyebrows. “But we’ll let all that pass. I might inform you that it is impossible to go in the steamer *Kut Sang*. You will pardon me, I am sure, but I heard what you said at the telephone, and I am willing to annoy you to save you time and trouble. I repeat, there is absolutely no possibility of your getting passage in the *Kut Sang*.”

“How do you know?” I asked, still curt with him, but feeling a trifle ashamed of myself for insulting him.

“Because they have just refused me, my dear sir—allow me—the Rev. Luther Meeker of the London Evangelical Society,” and he gave me a card which had seen considerable service.

“Trenholm is my name. Sorry I haven’t a card. Equally sorry, Mr. Meeker, that you have been refused passage in the *Kut Sang*. Excuse me, but I am in a hurry.”

“It won’t avail you anything to visit the office,” he said, with sad mien and a sneer on his lips.

“And why not?”

“If they wouldn’t let me go, a man of the cloth, with credentials from the Bishop of Salisbury, your case is hopeless.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” I shot at him, and left him staring after me with puzzled surprise on his wrinkled countenance. He stepped to the door and saw me enter a *quilez*, and there was a gleam of anger in his crafty old eyes. The sunlight made him blink, for he was not wearing goggles, and as I rolled toward the Parian Gate, I looked back and saw him standing in the door and shading his eyes with his hand to look after me.

Taking possession of a very surprised steamship-agent, I informed him that I was going to Hong-Kong in the *Kut Sang*, and I was ready to argue with him until the vessel sailed. A refusal was out of the question—he didn’t have time to refuse. I spread all sorts of papers on the counter and threatened to bring all the officers of the Hong-Kong-Shanghai Bank up there to argue for me.

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The talk about the bank seemed to help me wonderfully, for he had a whispered conversation with a gray-bearded old gentleman, who looked me over with a shrewd eye, and nodded his assent to my buying a ticket.

“It won’t be necessary for you to sign ship’s articles,” said the agent, turning affable all of a sudden. “We have a passenger-license for the *Kut Sang*, although we have withdrawn her from the passenger-trade except in cases of emergency or delay of the regular ships. But she hasn’t been in the passenger-trade for nearly a year and we won’t undertake to guarantee the table or service.

“You won’t find her equal to a liner, and the ticket is sold with the understanding that she is a cargo-boat, and if you are willing to take pot-luck with Captain Riggs, that is your affair. However, it is understood that you are not to make unreasonable complaints or demands of the master.”

My answer to this was to dump a handful of gold coins on the counter before he could change his mind. I told him I was willing to go to Hong Kong in a coal-barge.

“You will find it lonesome on the passage,” he said.

“I’ll manage all right,” I replied, not quite rid of my asperity over their lack of decision about taking a passenger.

“We have already sold one ticket,” continued the clerk, as he put down figures on a pad. He glanced at me with a quizzical expression, and then smiled.

“One passenger will help,” I commented, for something better to say.

“If he doesn’t talk an arm off you before you reach Hong-Kong, I’ll give you the ticket for sixpence. He’s a missionary,” he grinned.

“The Rev. Luther Meeker!” I cried in horror.

“The Rev. Luther Meeker!” he repeated, and gave me my change with a chuckle.

Naturally, I was astonished to discover that Meeker was to be a passenger with me in the *Kut Sang*, but I was out in the street again before it dawned upon me that the situation was more than a mere coincidence. The missionary had lied to me when he said he had been refused passage, he had misled me when he said it was impossible to buy a ticket in the *Kut Sang*, and I could make nothing of it all but that he did not want me to know he was sailing in the vessel, and that he did not want me to go in her.

The idea that he would interfere with my plans and delay me for a week simply because he objected to my presence in the same steamer with him filled me with wrath. I so lost my temper for a minute that I was bent on going back to the hotel and knocking him

down, missionary or no missionary; but, instead, came to the conclusion that the joke was on him, and I would have plenty of opportunities to retaliate upon him between Manila and Hong-Kong.

Before I got into my *quilez* my ire was roused again at the sight of the red-headed beggar lounging in a doorway across the street, obviously watching me. It was plain enough that Meeker had sent him to spy upon me and learn if I went to the steamship office. The little beggar saw me looking at him and dodged into a doorway, but fled when he saw me start after him.

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In the *quilez* I laughed at myself for allowing a prying old man like Meeker to upset my temper, and, as I rode back to the hotel, put the both of them out of my mind; but promised myself that I would take my revenge on the old pest in some way aboard the steamer.

My bag was packed again, and I was ready for tiffin and then an afternoon nap, to be called in time to catch the steamer. My telephone rang, and I hastened to answer it, expecting orders from the cable-office, and hoping that London had decided, after all, to send me after the Baltic fleet to the south, rather than to Hong-Kong.

“Is this Mr. Trenholm? This is the steamship office, Mr. Trenholm. We wish to inform you that the *Kut Sang* has been delayed until to-morrow morning for cargo which did not get in to-day. Sails to-morrow sure.”

It made little difference to me, and I would be glad to have a night’s sleep ashore after the rice-steamer. However, it would be wise to have the exact sailing-time of the *Kut Sang*, so I rang up the steamship office and asked, not wishing to run the risk of getting to the mole and finding the steamer gone.

“She sails this afternoon at five, as noted on the board,” was the startling response to my query. I was so taken aback for a second that I didn’t know what to think or say. I remarked into the telephone that somebody in the steamship office must take me for a fool, and that I did not consider such things jokes.

No, they had not telephoned me the sailing was delayed; couldn’t say who had; certainly no one in the steamship office could think of doing such a thing, which sounded reasonable enough; knew nothing whatever about a delay, and were quite perturbed to hear I had been told there was; had no idea how it happened, but there was no doubt the *Kut Sang* would sail on schedule time, for the stevedore was there in the office at that minute getting lading-slips signed, and he knew of no delay.

“Meeker’s little joke is going too far,” I decided, after I had hung up the receiver. “I think there are a few words I can say to him that will convince him I am not to be trifled with in this manner.”

Seizing my cap, I pulled the door open abruptly and almost fell over the little red-headed beggar lurking near my room. He darted down the stairway, and I leaped after him.

CHAPTER III

THE SPY AND THE DEAD BOATSWAIN

Three steps at a time I took the matted stairway, which was reckless speed, for the shell-paned windows were shut, and the awnings pulled down to keep out the heat of

the blinding sun, making it quite dark. But I was bound to capture the little red-headed man, thrash him soundly, make him tell his motive in trailing me, and turn him over to the police.

I caught the indistinct figure of a man in white coming up, and threw myself to one side to avoid him, but he stumbled in front of me, and we went sprawling into the corridor below. It was a nasty spill, and I shot out on the matting at full length with my hands thrown before me. The polished teak-wood floor and the loose matting saved me from injury.

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“My dear sir!” exclaimed the man who fell with me, and I found the Rev. Luther Meeker sitting on a crumpled mat and propped up with his arms behind him, while his pith helmet went dancing away on its rim to settle crazily upon its crown a dozen feet from us.

For an instant I was tempted to attack him, when I realized that his presence on the stairs and his interruption of my pursuit of the redheaded man were significant of more than an accident, and that Meeker and the other were spying upon me. I bridled my ire, and decided to play the game out with them and fathom the mystery of their espionage.

“My dear sir, I am almost certain that I have sprained my back—I am sure I have injured my back!”

“I am sorry for your back,” I said, getting to my feet. “For my part, I am satisfied to escape without a broken neck.”

“My immortal soul, if it isn’t Mr. Trenholm!” said he, blinking at me, his goggles bobbing on a rubber string made fast to a jacket-button. “Of all persons, Mr. Trenholm! Bless my soul!”

My mental remark was somewhat similar and with equal fervour, if not complimentary to him and his soul. Brushing my soiled ducks, I started to move away, for it would never do to assume an excess of friendship too suddenly.

“Just one moment, Mr. Trenholm—” he called after me, shaking a bony forefinger—“just one moment, I beg of you, sir! I have some information which I desire to impart, and, strangely enough, I was seeking you when this unfortunate tumble came about, partly through my infirmities, I am sure. One moment, sir. It is to your advantage to wait, I assure you.”

“What is it?” I asked, hesitating. The little beggar had undoubtedly escaped, and I knew that in Meeker I had bigger game if I handled him cautiously.

“The *Kut Sang*!” he said, arising with difficulty and holding his back with one hand while he hobbled after his helmet.

I was convinced that his injury and decrepit bearing were clever bits of acting.

“I desire to correct you regarding the *Kut Sang*” he cackled, caressing the recovered helmet.

“What about it? My dear Mr. Meeker, I am in a hurry and cannot waste the day waiting for you to talk. I am sorry for what has happened here, but I trust that you are not incapacitated. Anyway, I do not think there is anything you can tell me about the *Kut Sang* that I do not already know.”

“Oh, but there is,” he protested, holding up his hand and eyeing me craftily. “I was seeking you to tell you when we fell upon each other so unceremoniously. It is quite—”

“I suppose you want to tell me that the sailing has been delayed. I know all about that—she sails in the morning.”

“Sails in the morning!” he exclaimed, pretending surprise, but being puzzled about something. “Does she?”

There was guile in that last question, and when he asked it I knew it was he or some one acting for him who had attempted to mislead me about the time of the vessel’s departure. I saw a chance to trap him, and asked:

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“Was that what you wanted to tell me?”

He parried it, and while he fumbled in his pockets for something, a trick to gain time, he was thinking hard and fast.

I had him against the ropes, so to speak, and he knew it, for what he did want to find out was whether I knew the telephone message to be fraudulent. If I did, he wanted to take credit for setting me right; and if I didn’t, he wanted me to miss the *Kut Sang*. So, knowing his game, I came to the conclusion that I must not press him too hard and so make him suspicious that I knew his true character—his character, that is, as a decidedly suspicious person.

“I was told that she sails in the morning, but it was some mistake,” I told him, as if I had not found anything peculiar in the error and was not the least disturbed about it.

“Oh, no! Nothing in that!” he cried, unable to conceal his delight over my admission of how much I knew. “For a minute I thought there might be something in the story, after all, when I heard you say she was delayed. That is just what I was going to tell you—-there is no truth in that report. Some person, who I cannot say, also gave me misinformation regarding the *Kut Sang*. I feared that you might have had the same experience. That, however, is only a part of it—what I want to tell you is that it is now possible to buy a ticket in the *Kut Sang*.”

“I already have my ticket,” I said. “So we will be fellow-passengers, and I hope you will pardon my throwing you down the stairs; but I was running after a beggar or a thief.”

“Indeed! Do you know the rascal, or did you see him so that you can give a comprehensive description of him to the police?”

“A little red-headed man,” I said, watching him closely. “Did you see him before you started up the stairs?”

He burst out in a dry, mirthless cackle of laughter, and slapped his knees, much as if he had heard a good joke.

“If you will come in to tiffin with me, Mr. Trenholm, I will tell you about him.”

Assuming affability, I accepted his invitation, and we went into the dining-room together and found a table to ourselves in the corner. I was rather pleased at having an opportunity to study him, especially at his own suggestion, and I made up my mind that before the lunch was over I would have solved the mystery of who or what the missionary was, and why he had the little red-headed man at my heels since I had arrived in Manila that morning, and why he had attempted to keep me out of the *Kut Sang*.

“And who is this little red-headed man?” I asked as we took our chairs.

He bowed his head and mumbled a grace before replying, and I had a sense of mental conflict between us, and knew that I would have to guard against chicane, or the suave old fellow would talk me out of my suspicions.

“It must have been Dago Red you saw,” he began, grinning, and wagging his head. “I hope he did not actually steal anything, my dear Mr. Trenholm. I am quite sure you must be mistaken about his being a thief; but it is quite possible, he has deceived me.”

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“I found him sneaking near my door in the hall,” I said. “Who is this Dago Red?”

“A worthy man,” he replied getting serious. “I am afraid you have done him an injustice, for I sent him up to see if you were in your room, and after I had given him the errand the clerk informed me that you were in, and I started up myself.”

“He didn’t appear anxious to talk with me when he saw me open the door.”

“You probably startled him by—”

“But who is he?”

“Petrak, I think his name is, although I am not sure, and my poor old memory cannot hold names long. He is a sailor who has been shipwrecked, and he became a vagrant here and was sent to Bilibid Prison. Much of my work is in prisons, and I took charge of him when he got out and sent him to the Sailors’ Home, sure that he would be able to get a ship again. That was a couple of months ago, and when I arrived to-day he met me and told me that he had left the Home because the keeper was prejudiced against him, owing to his term in prison.

“He was on the verge of starvation, and I gave him some money from my charity fund, which he promptly spent on drink, for he is quite dissolute. But he took charge of my luggage and attended to some errands for me, but he fears the police and cannot get out of his habit of skulking about, and, as the detectives have hounded him, he is suspicious of everybody, and ready to go into a panic when a stranger approaches him. It is a pity that he cannot get back to sea, but he has had the fever, and no master seems to want him, and he has been forced into vagabondage.”

He gave me this history of the little red-headed man in disconnected sentences while we were at the soup, and I let him run on. As he talked his eyes were roaming over the room, and he scanned every person that entered, and peered at me from under his brows when he thought I was not observing him.

It was plausible enough, but I could not forget that Meeker and the little sailor were together a great deal, and whenever I had seen them they were acting suspiciously, and both of them had kept close watch upon me. Neither had he explained away the fact that he had told me I could not buy a ticket in the *Kut Sang*, which I did; nor the fact that he had his own ticket when he told me that, nor the false telephone message for the obvious purpose of making me miss the steamer, and then his getting in my way when I was in pursuit of Petrak, or “Dago Red,” as he called him.

It seemed beyond reason that this chain of events could be nothing but a combination of coincidences, and, when I analyzed the situation, I framed what I considered a good theory regarding Petrak’s presence outside my door. It occurred to me that Meeker was

the author of the false message, and that he was really on his way to visit me to learn if I had discovered the falsity of it when he met me rushing down the stairs. But he had sent Petrak ahead of him to listen at the door in case I telephoned the company to verify the first message; Petrak had heard me ask the company for the sailing time and was about to report to Meeker when I opened the door upon him.

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Meeker was probably at the foot of the stairs and covered the retreat of his henchman. Petrak may not have been able to stop and report what he had heard, so Meeker fished for the information from me, ready to confirm the report that the sailing of the vessel was delayed, or pretend that he was about to set me right.

Upon my admission that I knew the report was false, he grasped at the latter alternative, and, seeing that it was impossible to prevent me going in the *Kut Sang*, determined to make friends with me and disarm whatever suspicions I might have regarding him. It seemed a tenable theory, but I could not account for all this bother on his part because James Augustus Trenholm, of the Amalgamated Press, took passage in the *Kut Sang*.

It seemed absurd to me that Meeker or anybody else would be concerned because I was leaving Manila for Hong-Kong. It was plain enough that he, or somebody, had done their best to keep me from sailing in the *Kut Sang*. That it was the Rev. Luther Meeker there could be little doubt, but the mystery lay in what his motives could be, or who he was acting for, and it was beyond me to say why there should be any objection to my sailing in the steamer *Kut Sang* that afternoon.

While I was thinking these things over he was keeping up a running conversation about trivial matters, and we were well into the curried lamb and getting along famously when he asked a question which put me on my guard at once, and set me groping mentally for a solution of the puzzle.

“Did you deliver your letter?” he asked, casually, but I saw in an instant that he had been paving the conversational way all along for that very question.

“What letter?” I asked, although I knew the one he meant.

He looked at me craftily, with what I took for a bit of surprise that I did not know the letter he referred to, or that he expected me to deceive him.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t mention it, for it may recall our little unpleasantness this morning,” he sent back. “Perhaps it was my fault, my dear sir, in speaking to you when I picked it up, and I certainly want to assure you that I was not put out by your disinclination to begin an acquaintance with a stranger.”

“Haven’t the slightest idea of what you are talking about,” I said lightly, and professing ignorance in my puzzled expression.

“The letter you dropped in the bus.” He fairly hurled the sentence at me, although his voice was low and he was pretending to have trouble with the saltcellar.

“Oh! To be sure, the letter I dropped in the bus, and which you so kindly picked up for me. I have an idea that I was rather gruff at the time, and not at all inclined to

appreciate the service you performed. I might have lost it entirely but for you, so I'll thank you now, with an apology."

"Don't mention it—don't mention it, I assure you. I trust you delivered it safely."

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He had given me the key to the mystery. The letter for the Russian consul was the cause of Meeker's attentions to me! And, instead of being a newspaper correspondent, to Meeker I was a Russian agent, probably a spy! It was all I could do to restrain myself from laughing in his face.

"Delivered it safely," I repeated inanely. "It was only an errand for a friend of mine, and I left it at the—"

He waited for me to finish the sentence. He forgot himself and failed to conceal his assumed nonchalance regarding the letter, for, as I cut off what I was saying, he held his fork poised over his lamb, so intent was he on learning where I had delivered the letter for the Russian consul.

I seized a glass of water and struggled with an imaginary obstruction in my throat, and mentally cursing my stupidity in telling my friend's private business to a stranger who had already betrayed an inordinate interest in the letter.

"Where did you leave it?" purred Meeker.

"At the post-office," I finished, amazed at his boldness in pursuing the destination of the letter, and having no qualms of conscience about telling him a falsehood. I did not regard it as any of his affair where I had delivered the letter, and did not intend to inform him I had left the bulky envelope at the Hong-Kong-Shanghai Bank.

The image of the bank-front which crossed my mind gave me another clue to Meeker's solicitude about me and the letter. I remembered seeing a sign over the teller's window, which stated that the bank was a branch of a Russian financial house. What could be more natural for a Russian spy than to cash his drafts in a place which dealt with Vladivostok and Port Arthur, or even St. Petersburg and Moscow?

And, if he took me for a spy in the Russian service, it followed that he must be watching me for the Japanese, and it was probable that the cable-agent in Saigon was in the service of the Czar and found it convenient to deliver an important document with my assistance.

At that time Manila was the headquarters for blockade-runners bound for Port Arthur, and Russian and Japanese spies, from coolies to bankers, were watching every ship and every stranger. So it was not strange that I, coming from French Indo-China, with a dispatch for the Russian consul, should be mistaken for a spy by Meeker the instant he read the address on the envelope and saw the wax seals.

I had a mind to tell the old fellow the joke on him, but that would require explaining where the letter to the consul came from, which would hardly be playing fair with my friend in Saigon. If he knew the truth he might abandon his trip to Hong-Kong in the *Kut*

Sang, and I would be rid of him, for I knew he was going with me in the steamer for the purpose of attempting to learn what my business would be in the British port.

If I was to remain in Manila I would have disillusioned him, and so put a stop to his trailing me about, but, as I was leaving in a few hours, I anticipated but little more trouble from him or the redheaded man. Besides, I saw an opportunity to make game of him by telling him his mistake after we were well to sea and leading him on a fool's voyage.

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“I am sure that we will have a pleasant passage in the *Kut Sang*,” he said. “I am something of a literary man myself, Mr. Trenholm—an exhaustive life of the saints, a shilling in paper covers, four shillings in cloth, with gilt title and frontispiece of me. It is recommended by the Bishop of Salisbury, and in its class quite a standard work.

“Then I did some poems, chiefly on sacred subjects. Not much as poetry, perhaps, judged by severe standards, but I am told they are regarded as marvels of piety and sweetness. I may have a copy in my luggage, which I will show you after we are settled aboard the steamer.”

I let him ramble on like that, turning over in my mind the while all the schemes I intended to put into play to convince him I was really a spy, and when a boy brought a paper I fell upon the war news.

“Another Russian defeat,” I half moaned, and made out that I was dreadfully upset because the Japanese were winning battles.

He said he deplored war, and had a prejudice against the Japanese, and hoped they would lose, and praised the Russians as brave and pious. When I expressed satisfaction at his views in order to prove my character as a Russian agent, we might have been mistaken by an observer for a couple of old friends.

He wearied me, however, with his chatter and efforts to make himself agreeable, and after the meal I escaped from him on the plea of business which must be attended to before the steamer sailed.

Leaving the walled city, I crossed the Bridge of Spain to the Escolta and took a stroll in Calle Rosario, where the Chinese merchants keep themselves in grateful shade with miles of awning. After an hour of sight-seeing, I found myself in a square near the San Miguel Bridge.

There was a crowd gathered before a building, which I remember on account of the picture of a frigate painted upon the stucco wall and the great red letters spelling out:

THE FLAGSHIP BAR

There had evidently been a fight; and coolies and natives, and Europeans in white, clustered at the door. I joined the knot of people and pressed forward to see what was holding their attention, and saw the body of a big, foreign-looking man, half inside the door and half on the pavement, with his head outside.

His mouth was open, and from his upper lips drooped long, black moustaches, looking all the blacker for the ghastly pallor of his cheeks. He had been stabbed in the back,

and the spectators in the front of the group edged away to avoid the growing pool of blood on the sidewalk.

“Does anybody know who he is?” demanded a khaki-clad policeman, taking out a notebook.

“A sailor,” said an American in a white apron, who leaned out of the door. “Drank whiskey and vermouth and talked like a squarehead.”

“Greek he was,” said a man with the appearance of a mariner.

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“Here’s his cap in here,” said the bartender, and he turned and picked up a watch-cap, and held it so we could see letters wrought in it with gilt cord, and I made out “Kut Sang,” which excited my interest in the case.

“Boatswain he was in the *Kut Sang*, bound out to-day for Hong-Kong,” said the mariner.

“Jolly long road to Hong-Kong for him now,” said another.

“Who cut him?” demanded the policeman. “Didn’t you see how this happened? Are you all deaf and dumb? You, there in the apron! Who did this?”

“You can search me,” said the bartender. “He had a couple of drinks and was going out when somebody slipped a knife in him. I was at the other end of the bar—never saw a thing until this one here lets out a yell and goes down. Somebody cut and run through the door.”

“I see him! I see him!” cried a boy in kilts who had a hoop, and we all turned, expecting the murderer to be pointed out to us; but the boy meant that he had seen the man running away and all that he knew was that he had worn a “funny hat,” and he could tell nothing else.

“A little chap it was,” volunteered a cockney.

“What’s that?” asked the policeman. “Speak up—nobody here going to bite you, my man! Did you see him? What did he look like?”

“I didn’t see him do no cuttin’, if that’s what you mean, officer. I didn’t see no knife-play, and ye couldn’t hang a man on what I see, and—”

“What did you see?” said the policeman, with a show of asperity. “Never mind what we can do with it. What did you see?”

“Small chap, in a white navy-cap, and ’air red as the sun in the Gulf of H’annam.”

CHAPTER IV

I GO ABOARD THE “*KUT SANG*”

Perhaps I should have told the policeman about Petrak, when I heard the cockney say he had seen a red-headed little man in a white navy-cap running away from the Flagship Bar. But, if I had, I might have been held as a witness and nothing come of it, for it developed that the cockney knew nothing about the murder—as he said he had simply seen the little man running away from the scene.

I had other business beside aiding the police to find the murderer of a sailor, and that business was to get to Hong-Kong as quickly as I could in the *Kut Sang*. Even then it was time that I hasten to the dock and board the steamer. I hailed a *cochero* and, leaving the Manila police to settle their own mysteries, got my baggage from the Oriente and rode through Binondo toward the waterfront.

Now it occurs to me that I must set down in their order the events of that day in their proper sequence, which compels me to tell of my meeting with Mr. Trego in the Hong-Kong-Shanghai Bank.

It was not until the whole affair was ended that the significance of that apparently casual meeting in the bank came upon me with its full force, and I saw the pattern of what was to become a tangled succession of the most queer happenings.

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There were papers at the bank which I must take with me, and on the way to the docks I stopped there. As I went in there was a sallow-faced man standing outside a grated window talking with a teller. He was smoking a long Russian cigarette, and pulling with nervous fingers at a tiny black moustache. His malacca cane was leaning against the wall by his side. I recognized him as the man who had driven the Rev. Luther Meeker out of the rear room of the bank, when the latter went in to seek alms, as he said.

He stood aside as I approached the teller's window, and the clerk handed out the papers to me, with a smile and some trifling remark.

"When are you leaving, Mr. Trenholm?" asked the clerk.

"In an hour in the *Kut Sang*," I said, and the man with the cigarette turned round and surveyed me with mild surprise. As I stepped to the door he went up to the window and whispered something to the clerk.

"Mr. Trenholm! Just one minute, please, Mr. Trenholm!"

The clerk called me and I halted, thinking that he had forgotten something about my letter of credit, or wanted my signature again.

"I want you to meet Mr. Trego," said the teller. "He will be with you in the *Kut Sang*."

I bowed, and Mr. Trego bowed, but his eyes were appraising me as he looked at me, although outwardly he had the excessive politeness of a Latin.

"I am very glad to meet you," he said without the trace of an accent, although in that mechanical manner which makes the words sound as if they had been read many times out of a grammar or phrase-book. I took him for a Frenchman.

"I must be going now, but I hope to meet you on board," I said, and we bowed again and I left him.

"He's all right," I heard the teller say as I went out, and understood that the bank-clerk had assured Trego that my character was good enough for him to be friendly with me on the passage to Hong-Kong.

As we swung out of Calle San Fernando I saw the *Kut Sang* tied up at the embankment of the Pasig River, with the Blue Peter at her foremast and heavy black smoke pouring from her funnel. She had the aspect of a vessel getting ready for sea, and the last of her cargo was being put into her hold.

It was then that I was attracted to a knot of natives and sailors clustered about an organ, in front of the decrepit building which I knew for the Sailors' Home, roaring out the chorus of "Rock of Ages" as though it were a chantey. There could be no mistaking the

figure seated at the wheezy little organ—the Rev. Luther Meeker, with his battered helmet on the back of his head and his goggles turned skyward as he wailed in a high-piped tenor the words of the old hymn.

He was too busy to see me and was making hard going of the tune, for the assorted voices which followed his lead held to various keys. He may have seen me from behind his goggles, but, if he did, he gave no sign, and I urged the driver to whip up the horse and pass the group at a good clip. I had no desire to be annoyed by the old impostor, and was afraid that he might have some new pretext to keep me from going in the *Kut Sang*.

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We were well clear of the congregation when I was startled to see Petrak emerge from the pack of staring natives about the organ, and run after my carriage.

“Take your luggage aboard for a peseta, sir!” he cried, grasping the side of the vehicle and keeping pace with it.

I confess that I suspected some game, and that Meeker had waylaid me. It looked like a bold move to block me at the last minute, and I was rather amused at the idea of watching their game and seeing what might be the tactics.

The little fellow had changed his appearance a trifle. His red head was covered now with a black cloth cap, making him look more like a stoker than a seaman. His ratlike visage was covered with a coppery stubble, but its colour was not apparent at first glance, for his face was smeared with coal-dust and grease.

“I’m nigh dead for a drink,” he whined. “Let me take your luggage aboard, sir—just a peseta, sir. I’ve had jungle fever and was shipwrecked—in the *H.B. Leeds* it was that went down in a typhoon. I can’t get a ship out of this blasted place. I’m an honest sailor if some hard on the drink—just a peseta, sir, and I’ll put your dunnage down in your cabin slick as a whistle.”

“I have a mind to turn you over to the police,” I told him, expecting him to take alarm and run away, for I was not so sure he had not had a hand in the murder of the sailor in the Flagship Bar.

The *cochero* had pulled up his horse on the mole in the thick of the scattered cargo, and Petrak still clung to the stanchion supporting the canvas-top of the carriage.

“And for why?” he demanded with a touch of arrogance, giving me a shrewd look. “What have I been doin’ of, sir?”

“That little cutting in the Flagship Bar.”

“The squarehead? Not me, sir. The bobbies got that chap right enough—one of his mates out of this wessel right alongside what you’re goin’ aboard of. Just a peseta, sir, and I’ll handle your luggage.”

“They have got the fellow who stabbed the man in the Flagship Bar?”

“Slick as a whistle, some two hours back. One of his mates, he was, that did the cuttin’—lampman out of this wessel. Take your luggage.”

“Take it along, then, and see that you don’t drop it,” I told him, convinced that the little villain could have had no hand in the murder, even if he had been on the scene.

He shouldered my bag and went up the gangway and I followed him closely. I looked in at the door of the saloon where I saw the old captain seated at the table, with a litter of papers about him, arguing with a tall rawboned New Englander, whom I knew to be the mate. He was complaining about something.

“I say we ain’t goin’ to git out to-night, Cap’n Riggs,” he said. “The bo’sun has went and got hisself stabbed and four of the white hands are missin’, and we ain’t got nobody to work ship but the chinks.”

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“We’ve got to have a crew, Mr. Harris, and that’s all there is to it,” said Captain Riggs. “You say the Greek got cut?”

“Dead as a door-nail, cap’n. Went out for lamp-wicks and got hisself slit open in a gin-mill, the fool! We’re turrible short-handed, cap’n.”

“Who cut him?”

“Hanged if I know. The police say the lampman, but the lampman didn’t leave the ship until after the bo’sun was done for, near as I can make it out. But the police have the lampman locked up for it, and I’m too busy to bother my head. First we know they’ll want all the crew for witnesses. There’s some monkey-business goin’ on, too.”

“Now, what do you mean?” demanded the captain, losing patience.

“Just what I’m sayin’ of—thar’s a furriner sittin’ on the dock watchin’ everything that goes over the side. Looks like a Rooshan Finn to me. What sort of a charter we got, cap’n? This ain’t no blockade-runnin’ game, is it? You got orders for Port Arthur? If you have, I’m out—I don’t want no Japs blowin’ me up unless I’m paid for it.”

“Mr. Harris, you are talking nonsense. We are chartered for Hong-Kong. My orders are to get to sea to-night, no matter how I do it, and you ought to be able to scrape up a crew at the Sailors’ Home for the asking. We’ll manage all right with the chinks on deck, if we can get some good helmsmen. You can’t expect to get out with a battleship crew this trip. Get the cargo in her and send the Dutchman ashore for men who can take the wheel.”

The mate went out, and I stepped into the saloon and presented my ticket to the captain. I was rather surprised to find such an old man in command, for he was gray and stooped, but he surveyed me over his glasses with kindly eyes, although I knew he was being harassed with difficulties in getting routine established on board the *Kut Sang*, for she had been in dry-dock and everything seemed topsyturvy.

“Glad to meet ye, Mr. Trenholm,” he said. “I’m up to my scuppers with business. Maybe we’ll sail to-night and maybe we won’t, but your room is No. 22, starboard side, well aft, all to yourself. Two more passengers to come yet, according to the list. Didn’t know I was to have passengers this trip, so I can’t tell what the accommodation will be, but we’ll try and make things homelike if they ain’t like a liner. You got a valley?” He pointed to Petrak, who stood behind me with my baggage on his shoulder.

“Hardly that,” I laughed. “He says he’s a sailor with a Manila thirst in his throat and no job.”

Petrak swung his burden to the deck and squared his shoulders, making a gesture, which he intended as a salute to the captain.

“Petrak’s my name, sir,” he said, addressing Captain Riggs. “I’ve been bo’sun, sir, discharged out of the *Southern Cross* when she was sold in Singapore, and shipped out in the *H.B. Leeds* that went down in a typhoon. Junk picked us up, sir, what was left of us, and I lost all my discharges and can’t get a ship out of here. I’m smart, sir, and strong, if I do look small. It’s because I ain’t had no wictuals to speak of, sir.”

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“Ever handle steam-wheel?”

“Aye, sir. One trip out of Cardiff to Delaware Breakwater in the *Skipton Castle*. Stood wheel—”

“See the mate,” said Captain Riggs, and Petrak went out, deserting my baggage.

A black boy in a scarlet *sarong* took my bag away to my stateroom, but I went up to the hurricane-deck, where I found a grass-chair under an awning and sat down to enjoy a cigar.

Just above where the *Kut Sang* lay was the Bridge of Spain, presenting a moving panorama of the many races that mingle in the Philippine capital. The river itself was alive with *cascoes* being poled about by half-naked natives, the families of the crews doing the cooking and primitive housekeeping on the half-decks, while the family fighting-cocks strutted on the roofs of the boats and crowed defiance to each other.

On the opposite side of the river was the walled city and the moss-grown walls of Fort Santiago, and on both banks were steamers and river-craft, making a colourful and noisy scene.

The Rev. Luther Meeker was preaching to the group before the Sailors’ Home, and I watched him until he closed the service and started toward the dock, two men carrying his little street-organ behind him.

Mr. Harris, the mate, was doing the final work of getting the steamer ready to sail, and was preparing to cast off the lines, when a dray, loaded with boxes, pulled up alongside the vessel.

“What ye got there?” demanded Harris. “That ain’t for this packet—git out the way thar!”

Just then a man in white darted out of the office of the harbour-police station, and, holding up his hand, cried to Harris:

“One minute—one minute!”

“One minute yer grandmother!” retorted Harris angrily. “Who be you to hold up this ship! Vamose!” he roared to the driver of the dray.

The man in white ran up the gangplank with a paper in one hand and a malacca cane in the other, and I recognized him as Mr. Trego, the man to whom I had been introduced in the bank. He met Harris at the foot of the ladder to the hurricane-deck, and they were right below me, so I could not avoid hearing what took place between them.

“Call the captain, Mr. Mate,” said Trego hurriedly, and, with his voice lowered, “Here are my papers—get those boxes off the wagon, eef you please. I am supercargo for the owners. I hold the charter for these sheep. Queeck—on deck with those boxes of the machinery.”

“Oh, cap’n!” called Harris, after he had taken a quick glance at the paper which Trego thrust before him, and Captain Riggs came out of the saloon.

“What’s up now?” he demanded. “What’s this?”

Harris waved his hand toward the paper, and Trego put it before Captain Riggs.

“Read it,” said Trego. “Here are your orders from the company.” He leaned against his cane and twirled his moustache, while Captain Riggs adjusted his glasses and scanned the papers.

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“Get that stuff aboard, lively,” said Captain Riggs to Harris, and the mate gave orders to have the slings thrown outboard.

“Where do they go?” asked Harris.

Captain Riggs looked at Trego inquiringly.

“In the storeroom below—right under the feet of me,” said Trego, stamping his foot.

“Cargo in the storeroom,” said Captain Riggs in surprise.

“Eet ees for you to obey,” snapped Trego excitedly. “You will please to see from my papers that I am the commander of all. Read eet again eef you do not know!” And he shook his malacca cane in the air.

“Get that cargo aboard and stow as this gentleman—Mr.—what is it, Trego?—as Mr. Trego says. Move navy-style! Keep clear of the side there, you! Can’t you see we’ve got cargo coming over there!”

“My dear sirs, I beg your pardon,” said a familiar voice, and I stepped to the rail and looked over to see the Rev. Luther Meeker standing at the edge of the embankment, within a few feet of where Trego, Riggs, and Harris stood.

“Get out the way!” bawled Riggs to him.

“No offence, I hope,” said the missionary, “but is this the steamer *Kut Sang*?”

“It is,” said Riggs, and turned his attention to Harris and Trego, who were giving orders to the Chinese at the winch.

“Then all is well,” said Meeker, and he turned away toward the gangplank, where the two men were standing with his organ between them, awaiting his orders.

“Go right on board with it, my good men,” he said to them. “This is my ship, sure enough,” and he preceded them up the gang.

Captain Riggs came up the ladder from the foredeck in time to see the men bringing the organ aboard, although Meeker was out of his sight by the time the captain reached a position where he had a view of the gang.

“Here. Where are you chaps going?” he shouted to the porters.

They stopped and looked up at him.

“Gear for a passenger,” said the taller of the two.

“What passenger?” demanded Riggs, in surprise.

“A parson,” said the spokesman, and as he said it Meeker himself came up the after-ladder.

“Ah, the captain,” he said. “I am the Rev. Luther Meeker,” he explained, presenting his ticket. “I am going to Hong-Kong, and, if I am not mistaken, this is the good ship *Kut Sang*”

“That your baggage? All right, you men—come aboard and look sharp.”

“That is my hymnal organ,” said Meeker, looking over the side. “Come right along with it, my good men, but leave it below. How do you do, my dear Mr. Trenholm? Captain, those two men are sailors who are looking for a ship, if—”

“I’ll meet you below in a minute in the saloon,” said Captain Riggs, handing back the ticket. “Mind that you stay aboard, because we sail at once, sir.”

Meeker bowed to me again, and hurried aft, twirling his shell crucifix between his fingers in a nervous manner.

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“Hang a parson, anyway,” growled Riggs, grinning at me. “They always make a fuss—-like as not he’ll sing his way to Hong-Kong, with that old melodeon of his. Oh, Mr. Harris! There are two men below with a parson who say they are sailors. Have the Dutchman sign them on if they are able hands.”

He went down the ladder again to the fore-deck, and I went down to my stateroom to see that my baggage was safe.

“Smart job, my man; smart job!” I heard the Rev. Luther Meeker saying as I stepped into the passage.

He was in the stateroom next to mine, but the door was open.

“Who’s that?” asked somebody cautiously. Then, in a louder tone: “We got your dunnage stowed all snug, sir.”

I stepped into my room, and, after a minute’s whispered consultation, I heard some one step into the passageway and run forward. Looking out I saw the little red-headed man scurrying away.

“Single her up!” called Captain Riggs from the bridge, and I knew we were letting go of Manila as the winches drew in the mooring-lines, and the whistle blew a farewell blast.

The nose of the *Kut Sang* fell away from the embankment and into the current of the Pasig, which swung her toward Manila Bay and the China Sea.

I could hear Meeker humming a tune and arranging his baggage. I stood for an instant and pondered over the situation, not sure that I would not be wiser to remain in Manila rather than sail in the *Kut Sang*. I shivered as I sensed danger about me, as one feels the presence of an intruder in the dark that cannot be seen.

Then I laughed at myself, and opened my bag for my pistols.

CHAPTER V

THE DEAD MAN IN THE PASSAGE

The *Kut Sang* was dropping downstream as I locked my stateroom and made my way to the upper-deck, partly to get a last look at Manila, but more for the purpose of considering what I should do in the matter of telling Captain Riggs that I suspected Meeker was not a missionary.

In the last few minutes before the departure of the vessel I had suddenly been struck with the idea that Meeker was more than a mere spy who mistook me for one of his own

ilk. This feeling was vague and formless, and I did not know how to begin to put together the various elements that seemed to connect some sort of a well-defined plot.

No sooner would I set about putting certain facts together than I would laugh at myself for manufacturing a mystery; and, after I had tried to shake off the impression that the *Kut Sang* and all of us in her were more than mere travellers and seamen, the fantastic ideas insisted upon running through my head.

Through this formless mass of queer events of the day, Meeker and the little red-headed man kept to the front of my fancies, and with them the steamer *Kut Sang*.

Why, I asked myself, had Meeker made such strenuous efforts to keep me from taking passage in the vessel? It seemed absurd to suppose that he had acted as he did, simply because he disliked the idea of having me for a fellow passenger.

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Then there was Trego and Meeker's appearance at the bank, "seeking alms," and the further fact that Trego was in the *Kut Sang*. It seemed to be more than a coincidence that the two of them should meet as they did.

I even found something queer in the killing of the boatswain of the *Kut Sang* at the Flagship Bar, and began to wonder if Petrak did not have a hand in the murder, even though he was so ready with a denial when I spoke to him about it.

As I stood at the rail of the hurricane-deck, and thought of these things, Petrak came up from the fore-deck and stood at the foot of the ladder leading to the bridge, where I could hear Captain Riggs pacing to and fro and speaking through the trap to the helmsman about the course.

The little red-headed man grinned at me and set to work polishing the knob of the wheel-house door, and not until that minute did I realize that he had come along with us in the *Kut Sang*. And he likewise reminded me at once that it was I who had brought him aboard.

"I signed on, sir," he said, pointing to his new cap, which had the steamer's name embroidered upon it. "Thanks to you, sir, I got a ship out."

"I am glad you did," I said curtly, not sure whether I ought to be amused at the turn of events by which I had unwittingly brought the little rascal along with me.

I glanced up the companionway to Captain Riggs, and had a mind to go up and speak to him about Meeker, but I disliked to invade the bridge, sacred territory at sea. He was standing just at the head of the ladder then, and could see me.

"Would you mind the peseta, sir?" asked Petrak.

I remembered that he had brought my bag aboard, and, finding a peso in my pocket—-five times what he had asked for—I gave him the coin.

"Here," I said; "take this, and keep out of my reach. I've seen quite enough of you for a time."

"Please don't tip my crew," Captain Riggs called down to me in a pleasant manner. "The steward's department must attend to the passengers, for we are short-handed on deck, and I can't have the men running errands."

"It's for services rendered," I told Riggs, and he nodded as if satisfied with my explanation, and turned away to the other end of the bridge.

Impulsively I started up the ladder, determined at least to tell him what I suspected of Meeker and let him judge for himself, or be on his guard against the old impostor,

whether he liked my tale-bearing or not. As I put my hand out to take the ladder-guard, Petrak thrust himself before me and barred the way.

“Can’t go on the bridge, sir; against orders,” he said.

I fell back, convinced that he was right and that I had had a narrow escape from making an ass of myself. Captain Riggs probably would not thank me for disturbing him or bothering him with idle rumours and fanciful yarns about passengers, even though they might be spies.

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The steamer was now well into the bay. The sun was at the rim of hills between us and the open sea, and the sky was aflame in a gorgeous tropical sunset.

Harris, the mate, was busy on the fore-deck battening down hatches and clearing up the litter of ropes and slings. The *Kut Sang* was plainly enough short-handed for the passage, for there were but half a dozen Chinese sailors in sight. Petrak worked with a cloth on the brass-knob, and he was loafing without a doubt.

I suspected that he was afraid I was waiting for him to go away, so that I might go up the ladder to the bridge. One of the men who had brought Meeker's organ aboard had the wheel, a long, lanky cockney he was, from what I could see of him through the window of the pilot-house.

We were well clear of the ships at anchor outside the breakwater when four bells—six o'clock—struck, and Harris came up and went on the bridge, passing without apparently seeing me. He growled something to Petrak, and the red-headed man went toward the forecastle.

"Time for Rajah to have the bell going," said Riggs as he descended to the hurricane-deck and greeted me affably. "What do you say to going below and seeing what's on the table?"

As he spoke I heard the rattle of a gong, and as I turned to go below with Captain Riggs, Meeker came around the deck-house and joined us, regarding us from under his heavy brows as he approached, and rubbing his hands in a manner that increased my growing dislike for him.

"My dear sirs," he said; "that is a beautiful sight. I have never seen, in all my twenty years in the Orient, such a sunset."

"Can't keep me from my meals," said Captain Riggs, waving to Meeker to precede him into the companionway. I was rather pleased at the captain's gruffness with him, and resolved that as soon as the opportunity offered I would discuss the crafty gentleman with Riggs.

We found Trego at table. He looked up, and made no attempt to conceal his surprise at seeing Meeker.

"Ah! Mr. Trenholm," he said to me, and we shook hands, and the Malay boy gave me the seat opposite him.

"Mr. Trego—allow me—the Reverend Meeker," said Riggs.

"So you and Mr. Trenholm have met before?" said Meeker, evidently astonished because Trego spoke to me without an introduction.

“Old friends,” and I winked at Trego, to the further mystification of the pseudo-missionary, who took the seat beside me. Captain Riggs took the head of the table, so that he was between Trego and me.

“And this is Rajah, the mess-boy,” said Riggs, indicating the black boy who stood behind him, clad in a white jacket with brass buttons, below which he wore a scarlet *sarong* reaching to his bare feet, and evidently fashioned from an old table-cover. The hilt of a kris showed above the folds of his *sarong*, and the two lower buttons of the jacket were left open, so that the dagger might be free to his hand. He grinned and showed his teeth.

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“Dumb as a dog-fish, but can hear like a terrier,” said Riggs. “Picked him up in the streets of Singapore, where he was sort of an assistant magician. He’s quick with that knife, gentlemen.”

The captain was obviously proud of his queer bodyguard and servant.

“It is a pity that he should be allowed to carry a fearsome weapon, which is a menace to his fellowmen,” said Meeker, shrinking away from the boy. “I believe he would slay a human over a trifle.”

“Absolutely harmless unless he has some reason to anger,” laughed Riggs, somewhat amused at the nervousness of Meeker. “Has to pack that cheese-knife—chinks pick on him if he don’t. Give him a wide berth, though, when they see that blade. Quick with it.”

“But we should lead the barbarian to the light,” said Meeker. “It is a dreadful example for Christians to set such people. They should not be allowed to carry such weapons—-the practice leads to crime.”

“Soup all around, Rajah,” said Riggs, as if to close the subject.

“Do you carry deadly weapons, Mr. Trenholm? Do you approve of the bearing of arms?”

“I always have a weapon at hand,” I replied seriously. “One never can tell when it will be needed in this country, and I believe in always being ready for an emergency.”

“Indeed! And is it possible that you have a dagger concealed upon your person?”

“No daggers; but this is my right bower”—tapping the butt of the pistol on my right side —“and this is my left bower,” and I tapped my left side.

Mr. Trego burst out laughing at this, much to the discomfiture of Meeker, who glared at him, and edged away from me.

“And do you carry such death-dealing machinery, Mr. Trego?” asked Meeker, a sneer in the question.

Trego reached for his malacca cane. In an instant he had whipped it apart and presented a delicate point toward Meeker, who recoiled at the suddenness of the unexpected thrust.

“With me at all times,” said Trego, when the captain stopped laughing. “And my cabeen —eet ees one beeg arsenal, like you call it in your language. Yes.”

“A pitiable example for the heathen,” said Meeker. “I trust that you are not armed to the teeth, as the expression goes, captain.”

“I don’t want to spoil your appetite,” said Riggs.

“Of course, Mr. Trego needs those things, as he is—”

“A passenger,” said Trego, giving the captain a quick glance.

“A passenger,” said Riggs blankly. “To be sure, a passenger. Now, Mr. Meeker, I wish you would say a grace, if it pleases you.”

Meeker bowed his head and mumbled something which I could not make out; besides, I was much more interested in a little byplay between Captain Riggs and Trego, which began as soon as Meeker and I had piously cast our eyes downward.

It was a signal conveyed by Trego to the captain, in which he cautioned him to silence about something, by putting his finger to his lips, as if some subject were tabooed. Riggs nodded as if he understood. Before Meeker had finished, Trego looked at him and scowled, to convey to the captain that he did not like the missionary.

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“The weather is going to be fine from the way it looks now,” said Riggs, in an altered tone, as if he wanted to shift the conversation into more congenial lines. “I trust we will all do our best to stay up to the weather in that respect—quick passage and good company keeps everybody on good terms and in good spirits,” he added significantly.

Then he began giving us the stock-jokes of the China Sea and telling stories of his younger days, when he had better commands than the old *Kut Sang*. He was a bluff but likable old sea-dog, but I saw that he observed Meeker closely as he talked, and I knew that he was none too well taken with him.

So the meal went on well enough. Night had fallen upon us with tropical swiftness, and a cooling breeze was blowing through the open ports, charged with the salt tang of the sea. The *Kut Sang* was humming along, and there was a soothing murmur through the ancient tub as she shouldered the gentle swells of the bay.

The saloon was cozy and we dallied at table, chiefly because we did not like to leave while Riggs was telling his stories, although I would have preferred my cigar on deck.

There was something about the little party in the saloon of the *Kut Sang* that evening that held my attention. To me the air seemed charged with a foreboding of something imminent—something out of the ordinary, something to be long remembered. I told myself, in a premonition of things to come, that I should always remember Captain Riggs and the Rev. Luther Meeker and Trego and Rajah, and the very pattern of the parti-coloured cloth on the table, the creak of the pivot-chairs and the picture of the Japanese girl in the mineral-water calendar which swayed on the bulkhead opposite my seat.

I can see them now; as clearly as if I were back in the old *Kut Sang*, with the chatter of the Chinese sailors coming through the ports to spice the tales of the China coast which Riggs kept going.

We picked up Corregidor Light, which winked at us through the ports as we entered the channel. Somebody looked in at the door of the passage and Riggs waved a napkin at him.

“Tell Mr. Harris to call me if he needs me,” he said, and then to us: “It’s clear, and Mr. Harris, my mate, knows the Boca Grande like the palm of his hand.”

He was well launched into another of his long yarns and had a fresh cigar between his teeth when the pitching of the steamer told us we were heading into the China Sea. We were clear of the channel by the time he had finished the adventure he was relating, and Trego was beginning to fidget. We all moved as if to leave the table.

“I signed the two men you brought aboard, Mr. Meeker,” said Riggs. “What are their names?”

“That I do not know for certain,” replied Meeker. “I believe the chap in the navy-pantaloons is known as—Buckrow, and the other, the tall Briton, is called ‘Long Jim,’ or some such name, by his companions. They both appear to be worthy men, and it made me sad to see them on the beach in Manila for the need of passage to Hong-Kong, or some other place where they would be more likely to get a ship.

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“That is why I interceded in their behalf, and it is very kind of you, captain, to make it possible for them to better themselves, for idle men in these ports fall into evil, and it is best that they should keep to the sea. They were both well spoken of by Mr. Marley, who has charge of the Sailors’ Home.”

“Two sailors that I see?” Trego asked the captain.

“Mr. Meeker brought two men aboard with him to carry his gear,” explained Riggs. “They wanted to get out of Manila, and, as I was short-handed for chinks, I let ’em work their passage. They signed with the commissioner, and will get four Hong-Kong dollars for the trip.”

Trego frowned as he toyed with a bamboo napkin-ring, but said nothing.

“Your red-headed chap is a good man at the helm,” said Riggs to me. “He’s got the wheel now, and, with the other two, I’ll have good quartermasters. The chinkies are poor steerers.”

“Meester Trenholm ees breeng a sailor, too?” demanded Trego, turning his black eyes on me in a manner that I could not understand.

“He brought my baggage aboard,” said I, somewhat annoyed. “He offered his services to Captain Riggs, and was hired, and it is no affair of mine.”

“The little man with hair of red?” persisted Trego.

“Decidedly red.”

Knowing, as I did, that he had charge of the ship—a fact which he evidently wished to keep from Meeker and me, judging from his signals to the captain—I understood in a way his interest in the crew.

“Pardon, captain,” said Trego abruptly. “I must go to my cabeen for some cigarettes. Soon I will return. I hope you will be here.”

It struck me that his suggestion that Captain Riggs wait for him was more in the nature of a command than a request.

Rajah served coffee again, and the three of us fell silent. It was an awkward situation, for we all felt embarrassed—at least I did, as a result of Trego’s displeasure over the method of recruiting the crew. I wished that I had left Petrak on the dock.

Meeker took an old newspaper from his pocket and unfolded it on the table carefully.

“I think I have something here which will interest you both,” he began. “It concerns—my glasses! Will you pardon me for a minute while I get my glasses from my room? I’ll be back presently,” and he bowed himself out.

“The old shark is funny,” said Riggs. “I hold to what I have said about parsons—I don’t like ’em aboard me.”

I glanced at the passage and wondered if I would have time to whisper to Riggs about Meeker before the latter returned.

“He wants to hold some sort of service for’ard this evening,” continued the captain. “I’m suited if the crew is. It’s not that I’m against the sailing directions in the Bible, mind, Mr. Trenholm, or an ungodly man, for I was a deacon back home in Maine. I don’t like this chap—he looks too slippery to suit me.”

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Meeker came back and closed the bulkhead door behind him, adjusting his glasses and picking up the newspaper as he took his seat.

“My dear sirs,” he resumed, “I want to read this little article to you and then I’ll explain it more fully to you. I am sure that you will find it of interest, Mr. Trenholm, as a literary man and a member of the press, even if in no other way, and you, my dear Captain Riggs, will be interested because it concerns the sea, and you may have some knowledge of the facts. When I was in Aden four—no, five years ago it was—I met a most remarkable gentleman. Most remarkable! He told me a story that was passing strange, and—”

He was interrupted by the bulkhead door flying open violently and Rajah, with his hands thrown up and terror in his eyes, ran toward Captain Riggs, making frantic efforts to frame words with his lips.

“Sally Ann!” cried Riggs in alarm, jumping up. “What the devil has happened to give the boy such a turn! He’s nigh out of his wits!”

Rajah pointed to the open door, but we could not see into the passage beyond the triangle of light thrown out from the gimbal-lamps in the saloon. The boy ran toward the door and pointed again, and then drew back in fear, drawing his kris and raising it in a position of defence.

Captain Riggs ran to the door and I followed him, with my hand on my pistol, Meeker crowding against my shoulders. In the dim light oozing into the passage we made out an indistinct figure.

“What in Sally Ann’s name is this?” shouted Riggs, darting out and seizing the object, which he pulled toward the light.

It was the body of Mr. Trego, stabbed to the heart, the sailor’s sheath-knife which had killed him still in his fatal wound.

“What the blue blazes does this mean?” demanded Captain Riggs, turning to us as if we could explain the tragedy. “What in the name of Sally Ann has happened here? Tell me that?”

“Can that be our friend, Mr. Trego, who was with us but a minute ago?” asked Meeker, aghast as he gazed at the waxen features of the dead man.

“It’s Mr. Trego right enough,” shouted Riggs. “It’s Trego and no doubt of that! Well, I’m blowed!”

“Who could have done such an awful thing?” whispered Meeker, staring at me with wide-open eyes. “Who could have done this?”

“Don’t ask me!” Captain Riggs bawled at him. “Don’t ask me!”

“He’s quite dead,” said Meeker, leaning forward again. “In the midst of life we are in death.”

He held his hands over the dead man and said a prayer.

CHAPTER VI

THE RED-HEADED MAN MAKES AN ACCUSATION

“That’s all very pious and according to Hoyle,” said Captain Riggs, breaking into wrath as Meeker finished his prayer over the body of Trego. “But I’d have you know, sir, that the *Kut Sang* is no bally chapel, and I don’t take murder aboard me as a regular custom, and let it go at that. Somebody will have to answer for this at the end of a rope, or my name’s not Riggs. Hereafter when there’s praying to be done I’ll order it.”

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“I was merely speeding a departing soul,” said Meeker.

“That’s all very well, Mr. Meeker, but I’ve got to see what this is all about, and why—Mr. Trego is supercargo in charge of the ship and—”

Riggs stopped suddenly when he realized that he had told us the secret which Trego wished kept from us.

“Well, I’ve got trouble enough,” he said, confused at what had happened.

“Nothing irregular, I trust,” said Meeker, raising his eyebrows in mild surprise and observing me cautiously.

“Too blasted irregular to suit me,” said Riggs. “Gentlemen, I may as well tell you that this man is down on the passenger-list as a passenger like yourselves, but at the last minute before we sailed he showed papers as supercargo and announced that he was in charge of the ship, and that he represented the charter party. The truth of his statements was borne out by a messenger from the owners. He told me that he would explain it all as soon as we got to sea, and now he has been killed. Is it any wonder I am upset about it?”

“It is passing strange,” said Meeker. “Will you have to turn back to Manila on account of this?”

“My last orders to proceed to Hong-Kong at the best speed still stand. The Dutchman, Rajah—the Dutchman,” and he made a sign to the Malay boy to call the second mate.

The three of us gathered at the end of the table and steadied ourselves in the minute we waited for the Dutchman, who soon came clumping down the passage. He nearly stumbled over the body lying just outside the coaming of the door, and then stopped and stared at the dead man.

“Gott!” he said, and then looked at Riggs questioningly.

“Take the bridge and have Mr. Harris muster the crew—all hands, and look sharp,” said Riggs. “Have every man Jack of ’em up here, and let us see what they have been about. Have Mr. Harris muster the crew! Hear me? Don’t stand there like a barn-owl! Relieve Mr. Harris, and have all hands aft!”

He hurried away, and that was the last I ever saw of the second mate of the *Kut Sang*. Rajah and a Chinese sailor spread old canvas close to the door inside the saloon, and lifted Trego’s body on it.

Harris came up the passage and leaned against the door. He had on an old pair of dungaree trousers and a jacket that had been white, and his bare feet were thrust into native heelless slippers.

“This is a nice mess, ain’t it?” he growled, looking coldly at the scene before him. “Who let the knife into him?”

“That’s what we want to find out at once,” said Riggs. “Have all hands up here, the watch below and all. Muster them in the passageway, and let them in here one at a time, the white hands first. We’ve got to get at the bottom of this affair right away, Mr. Harris.”

“Like as not somebody’ll know the knife, cap’n,” suggested the mate.

“That’s it, Mr. Harris. Bring ’em up here with a sharp turn and no laying back, and you be here so I can find out what every man has been at in the last quarter of an hour—you know what this means.”

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We sat down at the table, Riggs at the end in a pivot-chair swung toward the door of the passage. He took off his glasses and wiped them in an officious manner, and sent Rajah for a pad of paper and a pencil.

“Then this poor Mr. Trego was not a passenger,” said Meeker, leaning his elbows on the table and scanning Riggs closely.

“Gentlemen,” began the captain, clearing his throat and adjusting his silver-rimmed spectacles again, “I am going to hold an inquiry now, and, as witnesses to what takes place, I think you should know the facts in the case, as far as I know them.

“There is something about this business that has carried by with me. Never had anything like this happen aboard me in the thirty years that I’ve had a command. First time since I’ve had a master’s ticket that I haven’t had the full confidence of the owners.

“This man Trego was very mysterious, and why he wanted to sail as a passenger when he was supercargo, and keep it from you, gentlemen, is past me. Perhaps I should not have said anything about this end of it until I have examined his papers, but as witnesses I want you to know the facts as they lay.”

“A most mysterious affair—most mysterious,” agreed Meeker, shaking his head and fingering his shell crucifix. “What are the details of the man’s coming aboard, captain? I am not quite clear on that point.”

“He was down as a passenger, just as you gentlemen are. I never saw him before until Mr. Harris called me forward before the lines were cast off. He told me that this man wanted to take charge of lading the last of the cargo—cargo that was manifested as machinery. His papers were right, and the messenger from the owners made it all as he said.

“It is not for me to question the acts of the owners, but I should have been advised of the circumstances. However, Mr. Trego was going to explain. It may be all right and nothing out of the ordinary, but now that this has happened I’m all back, and I’m left to guess what it all means if I can.”

“What was the cargo?” asked Meeker.

“Machinery, so far as the manifest says. Several cases—By George! He had it stowed in the storeroom—”

He was interrupted by Harris bawling in the passage, and the Chinese stokers swarming up the fire-room ladder, chattering and yelling to their mates below. The news of the murder had spread through the ship and had created a great turmoil.

The mate thrust a man into the doorway, whom I recognized as one of the men who had brought Meeker's organ on board.

"Here's one of the new men, sir," said Harris, "Says he has been for'ard since going off watch. He's next at the wheel, sir."

"Now, then," began Riggs, with pencil poised, "what's your name in the ship's articles?"

"Buckrow, sir," said the sailor, staring at a lamp, and avoiding the figure of Trego almost at his feet.

I observed him closely, and was not pleased with his appearance. His large mouth carried a leering, insolent expression and his nose was broken, hanging a trifle to one side. He was short, with great hulking shoulders. His black shirt was open at the neck, and he wore blue navy trousers with the familiar wide bottoms. His brown forearms were covered with tattoo-marks.

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“Tell all you may know which could throw any possible light on this dreadful affair, that the guilty may be brought to justice and the dead avenged,” said Meeker.

“Steady as she goes!” warned Captain Riggs. turning in his chair and holding up his hand. “I’ll ask the questions, if you please, Mr. Meeker. Now, then, my man, where have you been in the last hour?”

“For’ard, turned in, sir,” replied Buckrow, keeping his eyes on the flame of the lamp.

“See this dead man here?”

“Aye, sir.”

“No, you don’t—look at him! Did you have a hand in this?”

“No, sir.” He took a quick glance at the dead man and fastened his eyes on the lamp again.

“Know who killed him?”

“No, sir.”

“That’s all for now.”

Harris led forward the tall cockney I had seen at the wheel. He said his name was Crannish, and he spelled it for the captain, who examined the crew list to verify him. He said that he was known as “Long Jim” by his mates. He did not seem to take the murder as a serious matter, but answered Captain Riggs’s questions calmly, his eyes roving over the interior of the saloon, taking us all in very coolly.

There was a gleam of amusement in his eyes as he looked at Meeker, as if he thought it a joke that the missionary should be sitting on an inquiry board. Meeker returned his gaze in a disinterested manner, swaying in his chair with the motion of the ship, and fumbling his shell crucifix, as if it was a talisman to guard him against danger.

Crannish was dismissed, and the next was Petrak. He impudently winked at me as he stepped into the light, and hitched up his trousers in a nonchalant manner that was amusing. He had his shoes in his hand, and he had evidently dressed in a hurry to obey the summons of the mate.

“Petrak’s my name, sir, and they make a joke on my head by making me out ‘Dago Red,’ sir. Been bos’n in—”

“He was relieved at eight bells, sir; has the wheel in the Dutchman’s watch,” explained Harris.

“Where did you go then?” demanded the captain.

“Turned right in, sir, after a bit of a wash.”

“Where were you at one bell?” put in Harris, giving the captain a significant look.

“For’ard in my bunk, sir.”

“You lie,” drawled Harris coldly. “Ye passed the galley ports a minute or so after one bell was struck. I saw ye.”

“Not me, sir; never anything like that, sir, beggin’ ye’re pardon.”

“Yes, ye did, and don’t ye lie to me,” retorted Harris. “Ye didn’t go right for’ard when ye come off watch. I heard ye yarnin’ with Buckrow, or what’s his name, just after ye passed the galley. Yer phiz showed plain to me as Cape Cod Light on a clear night.”

“Where’s your knife?” said Riggs suddenly, leaning forward and peering at his belt.

“Left it in my bunk, sir. Top one, first to port as ye go down—right at the head it is, sir, in some straw.”

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“Send a man for it, Mr. Harris. Is it in the sheath, you Petrak?”

“Can’t say, sir,” said Petrak, looking about nervously, and feeling at his belt.

“Can’t say! Can’t say! You can’t say because that’s yer knife right there under yer eyes! That’s yer knife and you killed this man!”

“Tell the truth, my good man,” interjected Meeker, holding up his hands. “Tell the truth and—”

“Belay!” yelled Riggs. “You speak when ye’re spoken to, Mr. Meeker, if you please!”

“No offence intended—purely involuntary on my part. I beg your pardon, my dear sir.”

“That’s your knife and you killed him,” repeated Riggs to Petrak.

“Never killed him, sir, and nobody else, strike me blind if I did, and that’s the truth, sir,” said Petrak doggedly, but in spite of his brave showing there was a whimper in his voice and his knees trembled. “Did you have an accomplice?” asked Meeker, and I thought I saw some sort of a signal pass between them.

Buckrow arrived from the forecastle with a leather sheath and a knife in it. He handed it to Harris.

“There’s my knife!” yelled Petrak. “That’s it, just as I said, and Bucky found it in my bunk where I said it was, strike me blind!”

Captain Riggs was nonplussed for a second at this, and he hesitated. Then he looked at Buckrow, who was trying to get past Harris into the passage again.

“Buckrow! Wait a minute, my man! Where’s your knife?”

“My knife?” said Buckrow in amazement. “My knife?”

“Yes, the knife you had when you were here first. Where is it now? It ain’t in your belt.”

Buckrow reached to his hip, and consternation pulled his face into varying expressions as he found his sheath empty. But we knew his astonishment was simulated.

“Damme if it bain’t gone! Some of them cussed chinks must ’ave a tooken it. It was—”

“That’s all very well,” said Riggs. “The redheaded one is our man.”

“Where’s that bleedin’ knife?” said Buckrow, fumbling at his belt.

“Never mind that,” put in Riggs. “That’s your knife there in the red fellow’s sheath, and this is settled until it is turned over to the judge. Put this man Petrak, or whatever his name is, in irons, Mr. Harris; and you, Buckrow, you know more than you’ll tell. Mind what you’re about or you’ll be clapped in irons, too, along with your mate here. Have the body wrapped with some firebars, Mr. Harris, to be buried in the morning. That’s all. Double irons, Mr. Harris.”

“I never done for him, and that gent knows it,” wailed Petrak, as Harris put his hand on his shoulder to take him away. To my amazement, Petrak pointed his finger at me.

“What’s that?” said Riggs sharply.

“Tell all you know, my good man,” said Meeker despite the caution Riggs had given him about interfering.

“The gent in the white suit knows all about it. I done for this chap, and the writin’ chap, that I brought his bag aboard, paid me for it. Said he would, and gave me some of the money on deck to-day. You saw him, cap’n—you saw him hand-in’ me the silver, sir. He’s in it, too, and—”

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“Why, my dear Mr. Trenholm!” exclaimed Meeker, getting to his feet, aghast at the accusation of the little red-headed man. “My dear sir, I could hardly believe such a thing of you! And we dined with you—”

“Here, you hold up,” shouted Riggs. “What does this mean, Mr. Trenholm? I remember now that I did see this man taking money from you and I told you not to be tipping the crew. What have you to say?”

“He was to give me ten pound—”

“Shut up!” roared Harris to Petrak.

“What have I to say?” I gasped, astounded at the turn of affairs and hardly able to believe what I heard from Petrak. “I know nothing about it! The man must be crazy!”

“I am not so sure of that,” retorted Riggs. “I must confess, Mr. Trenholm, that I was somewhat surprised to find that you carried two pistols, and you must admit that you brought this man on board with you. You seem to know him.”

“Know him! The little rat has been following me about Manila all day! I thought I was to be rid of him until you took him as a member of the crew—”

“Ten pound I was to get for a killin’ of that chap there,” shrieked Petrak. “That’s what he was passing me the silver for this day, sir. They’ll hang me now—they’ll hang me!”

“It looks very awkward for you, Mr. Trenholm,” said Meeker, sadly.

I was about to denounce the missionary and tell him how I had seen him and Petrak together much in Manila, but I was so angry for a minute that I thought it better to hold myself in check for the time.

I stood before them for a few seconds, wondering what I should do, and then my rage got possession of me, and I reached for a pistol, intending to hold Meeker under the muzzle of it and make him confess his true character and admit that Petrak was his friend rather than mine.

As I threw my hand back, my wrist was seized and I turned to see Rajah behind me, holding my arm in a firm grip. He menaced me with his kris and grinned calmly.

“My dear Mr. Trenholm,” said Meeker, smiling blandly. “One crime should serve your purpose for this evening, it seems to me.”

Captain Riggs stepped up and relieved me of my pistols, and I knew that I had made a fool of myself by attempting to draw the weapon.

“I am very sorry about this, Mr. Trenholm,” said the captain.

CHAPTER VII

I TURN SPY MYSELF

Meeker stood with folded arms and grinned at me as he saw my pistols taken by the captain; and for the first time since I had seen him he dropped his sanctimonious pose and looked anything but the decrepit old missionary which he had always seemed. His shoulders were squared and his head thrown back, and there was mockery in his eyes.

But it was not so much his insolent and triumphant look which took my attention as the manner in which he stood upon the heaving deck of the saloon; his knees had that limp sea-bend of the sailor and his out-turned toes seemed to grasp the uncertain rise and fall of the carpet beneath his feet; he was a mariner now, not a preacher, for no landsman could hold himself so easily in a vessel which pitched and rolled in the long swells of the China Sea.

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I looked at him defiantly, and his eyes seemed to dare me to speak out and say the things which were in my mind. He seemed to understand that I was trying to frame a denunciation, for I was white to the lips with rage at him.

“You seemed determined to sail in the *Kut Sang*, Mr. Trenholm,” he said: “So your insistence to be a passenger was to slay a fellow-man, was it? I am shocked beyond measure!”

“You hound!” I screamed. “You have played your cards well, you and your little red-headed scoundrel! If you think I am a spy you will find—”

“Tut, tut, Sally Ann!” said Captain Riggs. “We can’t have any of that. Hold your tongue, sir, or I’ll have you in irons.”

“If you’ll give me ten minutes privately, captain, I’ll tell you who this devil—”

“I’m a man of the cloth, and I will not countenance such language!” shrieked Meeker in an attempt to check me; but I could see that I had cut him deeply, for he whitened and stepped toward me with closed fist. “Don’t you call me devil! You know nothing of me —tell it if you will—what do you know? Where did you get that name?”

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen!” said Riggs, still holding one of my pistols in his hand, and keeping an eye on the bulkhead door for the return of the mate.

“He’s a Japanese spy,” I said. “He’s no missionary at all, but a spy, and the fool believes that I am in the Russian service. He tried to hold me in Manila, and when I would not listen to his lies he has taken this way to discredit me, probably have me hanged! It’s all a plot—”

“That will do,” commanded Riggs. “You have not been tried yet, Mr. Trenholm. You can tell all that to the judge. If you go on this way I will be compelled to make a prisoner of you. I am not taking that red chap’s word for what he says about you, but if you go on like this I will have to put you in confinement. Otherwise, you will simply be restricted to your cabin until we reach Hong-Kong. I will have to make sure that you have no more arms, and if you will promise to remain in your room, that will do until this matter is turned over to the courts, and then you may state your case.”

“Are you not going to put this man where he can do no more harm?” asked Meeker. “You can see for yourself that my life will be in danger unless this man is made a prisoner. I protest against his being allowed his liberty—I have no desire to be found in my bed as poor Mr. Trego was found here a few minutes ago.”

“You will be protected,” said the captain. “Mr. Harris, is that you? Take Mr. Trenholm here to his room, and remove all his luggage and see that he has no more arms, even so much as a pocket-knife. Then lock him in his room.”

“I protest against such treatment, Captain Riggs. If you will give me ten minutes so that I may tell my story I will willingly obey any order you may give, even to becoming a prisoner in my room; but I think that it will be better for you to know the facts about this case, and what I have learned about this Mr. Meeker in Manila.”

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“And what is it you have learned?” cried Meeker, advancing on me again in a menacing manner, and plainly surprised at what I had said.

“A few things about you and Petrak that Captain Riggs should know,” I retorted.

“Mr. Harris, take Mr. Trenholm to his room,” and the mate took me by the arm and led me down the passage. As I went out Meeker grinned after me and whispered something to Captain Riggs behind his hand.

Harris opened the door and thrust me before him into the dark stateroom and commanded me to light the gimbal-lamp, passing me a match. When I had the lamp lit he took a quick glance inside.

“That man Meeker is a spy,” I began. “It was for him that Petrak killed Trego, and all day in Manila he and that little fellow were at my heels—”

“Stow that,” said Harris. “Take what you need out of yer gear, and hand the rest of it out, and mind that thar’s no gun-play about it. I’m well heeled, and if ye make a move I’ll let daylight through yer innards. Look lively now.”

I took a pair of pajamas and a few toilet-articles from my bag. He would not let me have my razors, or any of the packets of papers or my money belt. When he had taken my grip he demanded my clothes, and left me in my pajamas and locked the door, with a growl of caution about monkey-business.

“We hain’t takin’ no chances with gents like ye be,” he said. “And mind that ye stick close here, ’cause we’ve got a watch outside, and the first time we ketch ye up to any didoes we’ll have ye below with brass bracelets on with yer pal Petrak, where ye belong.”

At this he slammed the heavy oak door and turned the key in the lock.

My first emotions were anger and the sense of humiliation. I was beaten, outwitted, captured by Meeker, and by my own stupidity. But I realized that the battle had but just begun, and my first task must be to attempt some defence, some counter move against the old fraud who had drawn his plot about me for his own mysterious object.

I berated myself for my conceit in imagining that I could play with such a dangerous man as Meeker proved himself to be, especially since I had seen through his disguise almost from the first. One of two things in Manila would have saved me from my position—either I should have told Meeker at once that he was mistaken in thinking me a spy and warned him to keep clear of me, or I should have told the police that I was being annoyed by a suspicious character. I had had grounds enough for making a complaint against Meeker and Petrak when I found the little red-headed man sneaking

outside my door in the hotel, and the supposed missionary blocking my pursuit on the stairway.

Even if the police had given me no satisfaction, I could have warned Meeker that I would not submit to his espionage—a hundred ways of protecting myself from the fellow came into my mind as I sat there on my berth and reviewed what had taken place in Manila before I ever went on board the *Kut Sang*.

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But that was all past, and it did me no good to go over the mistakes I had made. I was bitter at myself for allowing Petrak to bring my bag on board, for I had thus given him an opportunity to claim me as an ally in the murder.

The best that I could make of the whole affair was that Meeker took me for a spy, as I had suspected from the first, and in order to prevent me from going to Hong-Kong for some purpose opposed to the plans of his masters, had done his best to keep me out of the steamer.

Then, when he found that he could not block me in going, he did the next best thing and came with me. To further embarrass me and prevent me from accomplishing the object of my supposed mission in Hong-Kong, he had got me involved in a crime from which I knew I would have a great deal of difficulty in getting myself free, especially as Petrak seemed willing enough to testify against me even though he should hang for the murder.

It seemed beyond reason that they should kill Trego simply to have something of which I might be accused; it seemed to me that my own death would have been an easier way to get rid of me.

I began an analysis of every event which entered into the total of the mystery, seeking for some key which would aid me in assorting the tangled bits that only needed to be arranged properly to bet the solution, much as a jig-saw puzzle is worked out. If I had a proper beginning it would all be easy enough.

The killing of the boatswain in the Flagship Bar seemed significant, although I could not connect it with Meeker's plot against me, and I had to lay that episode aside until I saw it in its proper relation to the other parts.

Standing near the lamp, I wrote down on a scrap of paper each event in its proper order, from my first sight of Meeker that morning as I arrived at the mole from Saigon. When I had made a note of the delivery of the letter to the Russian consul at the bank, I found Trego and Meeker together—the spy disguised as a missionary seeking alms, and Trego driving him out of the room.

It was obvious enough to me that in delivering the letter I had walked into some sort of a plot of which I had no knowledge, for Meeker was not only spying upon me, but he was spying upon Trego or the bank.

The next time that Trego entered the list was when I was introduced to him in the bank, of little importance in itself, but worth a great deal when connected with the fact that Trego left Manila in the *Kut Sang* and in charge of the ship, to the amazement of even Captain Riggs.

“Trego killed.” As I put that down it flashed upon me that he had been struck down before he had told Captain Riggs why he had papers as supercargo—and a few minutes after he had shown that he was suspicious of Meeker!

I was baffled and realized that it was a waste of effort to attempt to theorize about the snarled web in which I found myself enmeshed. One thing was apparent enough, and that was Meeker did his best to keep me out of the *Kut Sang*, as he said, and I reached the conclusion that it was not me so much as the steamer which concerned him when he sought to divert my path from the vessel. If I had taken his broad hints in Manila I would have cancelled my ticket and probably never seen him again.

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There was little comfort in proving that my own blunder had led me into such a mess. I threw the pencil down and sat on the edge of the lower berth. My anger was giving way to alarm. I began to realize that perhaps being a prisoner was the safest for me while on the steamer, for if Meeker had brought about the death of Trego because the supercargo suspected him, why should he not attempt to kill me after what I had said about him to Captain Riggs?

I remembered that he had shown concern when I offered to tell Riggs about him—he was ready to strike me down on the spot, and his plea that I might attack him was made more for the purpose of having me put out of reach of the captain than for his own protection. I was still a passenger, even though confined to my room, and he knew that I might find an opportunity to tell my story to Riggs.

At least I was safe for the night, and I knew nothing could be done in the way of explaining things to Riggs before morning. I decided that I would ask for paper and write a brief account of Meeker and Petrak for him and let him judge for himself.

I blew out the lamp and opened the port, but hooked it so that the heavy brass-rimmed glass acted as a shield for me as I lay in the upper berth. I had no desire to have a pistol thrust through the port while I was asleep, and after what had happened I was ready to see danger in anything.

The steamer was well to sea, and there was a stiff breeze blowing, which made her pitch and roll heavily. Her beams and joints groaned every time she bucked into a sea, and the wash at her freeboard and the spray breaking on the deck outside made a great racket. Her old engines jolted and jarred and vibrated every inch of the *Kut Sang*, and I could hear the whir of the propeller as it lifted out of the water when her head plunged into a swell.

But although I tried to put everything out of my mind and get some sleep, my imagination conjured up possible situations for the next day conferences with Captain Riggs, fights with Meeker, a confession forced from Petrak that he had lied when he charged me with complicity in the murder.

I tumbled and tossed in my berth and counted a million sheep jumping a fence, worked at the multiplication table, and resorted to other devices to get into a doze, but every new creak, every groan of the straining timbers, kept me wide awake.

One of the most irritating noises was the grating of some object hanging on the bulkhead close to my head. I could not hear it when the vessel pitched, but when she took a long roll to starboard it rattled a second and then rasped along the board. Locating the sound in the dark, I groped along the planks to find the loose object, and my fingers came upon a small metal rod. I seized it and lifted it from a hook, and with the tips of my fingers found it to be a key!

Bounding out of my berth, I went to the door with it, certain that it was a spare key to the stateroom. Cautiously I tried it in the large, old-fashioned lock, and it turned back easily. I tried the knob, and the door swung inward.

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I closed it again and debated for a minute what I should do, and, deciding that anything could not be worse than lying idle in a cell, made up my mind to venture out and call upon Captain Riggs if I could find him, or do a little spying on my own account to learn of any new development since I had been dismissed from the saloon and imprisoned.

I held the door open a few inches for several minutes and listened for some suspicious sound in the dark passageway. I remembered that Harris had said something about a guard at the door, but although I strained my eyes, in the darkness I could see no one. Each end of the passage was capped by a penumbra of dim light, for although the sky was overcast, the open air was not so dark as the intensified gloom of the passage.

My courage grew as I stood in the doorway, and I stepped out, closing the door silently and not locking it, but knotting the key in the string of my pajamas.

I listened for a minute at Meeker's door but heard nothing. His room was next to mine, but further aft, with one or more doors between his and where the passage gave on the open after-deck, Captain Rigg's room was on the same side, but away forward, under the end of the bridge, close to the open ladder which led down to the fore-deck.

In my bare feet I made no noise, and slowly made my way forward to see if there was a light in Captain Riggs's room. Before I had gone far I heard a murmur of voices, and then saw a sliver of light from the jamb of a door. There was a conversation going on in the captain's room, but I could not distinguish the voices. I went on to the forward end of the superstructure and discovered a port-hole in the captain's cabin partly open, and by going up three steps of the bridge-ladder I had a partial view of the room.

Captain Riggs was fully dressed, and sat at a shelf which dropped from the wall. He was sorting out papers, and Harris, the mate, was standing over him, talking.

"You must be mistaken, Mr. Harris," I heard the captain say.

"Make me third cook if I be!" exclaimed Harris, who seemed to be in an irritable mood. "I know what I'm talking about, cap'n! I run my thumbnail along the edges of it."

"Sally Ann's black cat, Mr. Harris!"

"All I ask ye to do, cap'n, is come down and have a look at it for yerself. That's what this is all about I'm tellin' ye! We got somethin' on our hands, I tell ye! We've got to do somethin' about it right away or we'll have more trouble. What if the crew smells a rat?"

"You got a little too excited about that murder, Mr. Harris. I'd know all about that. The owners wouldn't send me to sea with such as you say, and say nothing to me, nor the charter party, either. They'd use a liner and about forty men for anything like that. I'm crazy enough now, what with this murder and mess, without getting myself stirred up

over anything like that. You better get some sleep. We'll find in the morning that you made a mistake."

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“But I had a light on it!” insisted Harris. “It’s thar, I tell ye, and I made sure. I don’t come botherin’ of ye with no cock-and-bull story like this unless I know. I held a bull’s-eye light on it and it showed plain as Cape Cod Light. One of them chists got sprung, and I thought maybe I’d made a mistake when I put the light on it, but when I rubbed my thumbnail on it I knew I was right. I know the feel, I tell ye. Every cussed one of ’em is the same, too.”

“I tell you, Mr. Harris, I’ve had tomfoolery enough for one night, and I ain’t going down in the hold and dig around in cargo and get the crew suspicious. They are stirred up enough as it is with what’s gone on to-night, and I guess that’s what ails you.”

“Cuss it all, Cap’n Riggs!” exclaimed Harris in exasperation. “Ye ought to know I don’t get gallied for a little blood spilled. I slep’ in a bunk all one night in the *Martha Pillsbury* with a man what didn’t have any head and never turned a hair. Ye know that old barkentine whaler that Cap’n Peabody sold. Dang it all, cap’n, that is what this man Trego come aboard as he did—that’s what he was here fer. It come down at the last minute and he bossed the job of gettin’ it aboard.

“Wouldn’t let a man touch it, but had his own chinks from shore-side get it aboard with slings from the davits, and watched ’em stow it in the storeroom. It ain’t in the hold. When I come across the key to the room I made up my mind I’d have a look at it. Tinned milk! Marked tinned milk! I say tinned milk hell! I wash my hands o’ the whole cussed mess if ye don’t look at it and see for yerself.

“I don’t want the responsibility, and we’ve got to take some precaution. That’s what the killin’ was for, and I’ll bet a clipper-ship to a doughnut-hole that writin’ chap Trenhum knows about it, and he ain’t no writin’ chap, neither. Thar has been bad business, and there’ll be more from what’s below, mark my words. Come below and look at it.”

“You looked it over in good shape with a light,” said Captain Riggs, evidently in doubt as to what he should do. “It ought to be on the manifest, you know, Mr. Harris.”

“Cuss the manifest! It’s down as machinery and marked tinned milk. What more ye want? They got things switched somehow, and that’s plain as the nose on yer face. I had my thumb on it, I tell ye.”

“Then, if that is true, it explains why Mr. Trego was so mysterious, and why he wanted to be a passenger to the others. That’s what he was aboard for, right enough, and like as not he would have told me if he had been left alive long enough. It don’t strike me reasonable that he’d keep anything like that from me—not with the way things are going these days. The master of the vessel ought to know in a case like that, and a scraped-up crew.” Riggs began to button his coat.

“Of course that was what he was so close-jawed for, and that’s why the owners was so close-jawed. Like as not they didn’t know—charter was for cargo, and they didn’t bother their head about that part of it. Some sort of a sneak game about it, of course, but we’ve got to mind our P’s and Q’s now.

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“The owners nor the charter party can’t help us none with it now, say I, and as master ye’re got to do as ye see fit. All this monkey-business to-night comes from it. I don’t like the passengers and I don’t like these new whites in the crew. They know one another, I’m tellin’ ye. The long chap and Buckrow sailed with Petrak. They pretend they don’t know one another—all bosh—thick as fleas when no one is a watchin’ of ’em.

“See how Buckrow was so smart handin’ over his knife to the red chap when he got in a jam? I say, where did we git them three jewels—the writin’ chap brought the little red killer, and the parson brought the long fellow and Buckrow. Looks funny to me, cap’n—-and we don’t want no Devil’s Admiral aboard of us.”

“Mr. Harris!” exclaimed Captain Riggs getting to his feet, “you are not fool enough to believe stories about the Devil’s Admiral, are you? That’s all newspaper talk and water-front gossip.”

“I ain’t so doggone sure about that, cap’n—bein’ gossip. Of course, I don’t suspect nothin’ like that aboard here, but from what Chips Akers told me before he died, after the loss of the *Southern Cross*, I’m not so sure this devil’s-admiral talk is all folderol. Chips couldn’t tell much before he went under, but the *Southern Cross* was boarded by the Devil’s Admiral sure enough—didn’t they find a sextant out of her in a store in Shanghai?

“Ships that go down in typhoons don’t have their chronometers pop up in Shanghai a year later, I’m tellin’ ye. There ain’t nobody ever saw this here Devil’s Admiral, sure enough, that lived to tell it, but ships don’t always go down in deep water and never a boat got off or a life-preserver or a spar or a door found on the beach.

“Thar’s been bloody work in the last three or four years in these waters—look at the *Legaspi*; never a man jack out of her, and sailed from Manila, as we did, for Hong-Kong, and never heard of. Steamer she was, too, right in the steamer-lanes. They say the Devil’s Admiral got her, and I more’n half believe it.”

“Sally Ann! Sally Ann!” said Captain Riggs. “I guess I better go down, Mr. Harris, and look this thing over and get it off yer mind, or ye’ll be fretting yerself and losing sleep with such yarns running wild in yer top-piece. I don’t like this night prowling a mite, but take the bull’s-eye along, and never a bit of light until we are in the storeroom.

“I don’t want the crew hugging our heels on this trip below, ’cause ye may be right about it, at that. Be sure the slide is shut in that lantern, and call the boy to watch for us. Be sure that glim is doused—I don’t want anybody to know about this.”

I slipped off the ladder and clung to the superstructure out of the range of the light which spurted from the open door as Harris came out. He went aft for Rajah, and when he returned in a minute Captain Riggs was standing at the head of the fore-deck ladder

waiting for them. Harris whispered something, and I saw the three figures descend to the fore-deck and heard them enter the companionway to the lower deck. I followed them.

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CHAPTER VIII

MR. HARRIS HAS A FEW IDEAS

Clutching the iron hand-rail of the ladder leading to the fore-deck, I went down as quickly as I could. For half a minute I stood on the wet plates of the deck, drenched by the spray which swept the head of the vessel every time she lurched forward into the seas. Above me I could make out the dim shape of the bridge and superstructure, and I could hear the wind slatting the storm-apron lashed along the bridge-rail and the singing of the funnel-stays, but it was so black overhead that I could not distinguish any figure on the bridge.

The forecastle-head could barely be made out, and the winch-wheels and ventilators on deck were inchoate masses which took shape only when they were within reach. The green starboard-light threw a sickly glare over the surges which rose to the rail. I had to feel my way along and not release my grip until I had found a hold on something else.

If it was dark on deck, the appalling gloom below was terrifying, and nothing seemed stable—there were times when I mistook the bulkhead for the deck, when the vessel took a long roll and laboured to right herself.

I found myself in a maze of stanchions below, and after I had passed under the hood of the companionway lost my bearings for a time, until I discovered that I had to turn aft to make any progress. Everything seemed to be making as much of a clatter as possible between decks, and I seemed to be directly over the engines. Fire-doors were clanging close at hand, and the Chinese firemen were bawling behind a bulkhead; so my difficulty was not so much to keep silent myself as to recognize sounds which would give me a clue as to where Captain Riggs and the others had gone.

For a time I was on the point of getting back to the deck above, for it was a foolhardy business with nothing to gain that I could see, and no end of trouble if I should be caught stalking Captain Riggs on his mysterious expedition to the storeroom. My silk pajamas, now thoroughly wet, clung to me, and the salt water began to sting, and my wet stockings were sticky and uncomfortable and formed bunches under my toes, but I kept them on for the little protection they afforded my feet.

But I kept crawling aft until I came squarely against a solid wall, and knew it for the bulkhead of the forward part of the superstructure. As I was in some sort of a passage, it must lead to a door, and I fumbled to find its outlines.

I found the knob, although it seemed to be on the wrong side, as things will in the dark, and I tried the door, but it was fast. Just as I was about to turn away I detected the sound of voices behind it, and knew that Riggs and the mate were inside, and that I had found the room which contained the mysterious cargo.

Bound to know what they were talking about, I made another effort to open the door a little. I did not succeed, but I found a big key protruding beneath the knob, and drew it out so I could hear better and even get a glimpse of the interior. All was dark inside, except for a small circle of light thrown against the bulkhead in such a way as to illumine a box which was braced against the wall.

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I knew this light came from the bull's-eye lantern, and that if I opened the door an inch or so those inside could not detect it; but when I tried the key I found that the door was unlocked but hooked inside, so I took the key out again and put it down on the deck, and took another survey of the limited portion of the room visible to me. I could hear Harris talking in a low tone, and Captain Riggs asking questions, and by putting my ear to the keyhole I heard enough to get the drift of their conversation, although in this position I could not see what they were doing.

"Tinned milk," said Harris, and he laughed.

"Let the boy hold the light," said the captain. "Pry it open a bit more, Harris, and let me have a good, square look at it. I don't believe there's more than one box, at that—which wouldn't be no great trouble for us."

"Make a devil of a racket to git it broke open," said Harris, using some sort of a tool on a box. "Thar's two chists here, to tell the truth about it. One is heavier than t'other and bound with iron strips, and this outside one is cleated with tin. I'll rip the whole works open, cap'n, if ye say the word."

"No, no, Mr. Harris! Sally Ann, not that! Just enough so I can see and have no doubt about it—I don't want no guesswork."

"They made it fast right enough," growled Harris. "I never see no tinned milk nursed so particular as this, blow me if I did! But when I started this side so's I could get my thumb in, I was Jerry Smith—here, cap'n—quick while I hold this side out—put your thumb in there and feel the aidge."

"It feels like it. Take the light from the boy and hold it down so I can get a look at it—no, let him keep it, Mr. Harris—you hold the board out so I can see it in good shape—down, Rajah, down low, so."

I tried to see what they were doing, but all I could make out was Captain Riggs as he bent low between me and the object on which the light was turned. I put my ear back to the keyhole.

"Sally Ann! Sally Ann!" I heard Captain Riggs exclaim, and then he whistled. "Blast me if ye ain't right, Mr. Harris!"

"I knew I was right," growled Harris. "Can't fool me with that—it felt like it and looked like it, and that man Trego fits into the game to a T. I thought he was a mighty shady customer from the first look I got at him, when he come alongside and bossed things. When he got that knife throwed in him I thought I'd come down here and have a look around on my own hook, and thar ye be, cap'n."

"But Sally Ann! What are we going to do with it? We can't leave it here, can we?"

“Maybe it would be better, at that,” said Harris. “But I look at it this way, cap’n—-somebody knows it’s here, that’s what. Maybe the parson; maybe that Mr. Trenhum; maybe Petrak knowed about it; maybe Buckrow and Long Jim knows; but, anyhow, whoever had that knife hooked into Trego knowed, and ye can put that in yer pipe and smoke it.”

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“But I don’t believe anybody would broach cargo. We can keep the door locked, and bury this under a mess of stuff, say spare chain and a lot of old heavy gear.”

“Broach Tophet!” snorted Harris. “Ye call this cargo, Cap’n Riggs? Wal, if ye do, I don’t! Broach cargo! Think a man that would kill Trego, or get him killed, would stop at broaching cargo to git his paws on this?”

“That’s true enough,” said Riggs. “It’s bad business to have it aboard, Mr. Harris. I hope nobody in the ship knows about it. If they find out it may lead to trouble, and I’m too old to have trouble with my ships now. I’ve had trouble enough this night as it is—”

“That ain’t the idea at all, cap’n,” said Harris, entirely out of patience. “Ye’ve had trouble already, and all over this, and ye’ll have more of it, and ye can’t avoid it. We got some pretty fancy passengers aboard, and I’ll bet my shirt the parson and Mr. Trenhum knows; and what’s more, that parson ain’t no more a parson than I be—if he’s a parson I’m a bishop. Now, them two brought a bad lot aboard with ’em—Petrak, thar in irons, and this Buckrow, and Long Jim.”

“It does look queer,” admitted Riggs.

“Trego had his suspicions all the time, cap’n. They got him before he could tell ye what he guessed. Trego never liked the both of ’em. When ye come to look this thing over in yer mind, a little at a time, it gits plain to me. Ye see, the parson brought Long Jim and Buckrow; and Tryhum, or whatever his name is, brung Petrak to do his part of the dirty work.

“Now, look what I’m sayin’, cap’n. We got short-handed quick thar in Manila, didn’t we? I been turnin’ that over in my mind, too. Somebody cut the boatswain, didn’t they? The police got that Lascar quartermaster who we had for lampman, didn’t they? That’s two men gone, ain’t it?

“Look a here. The police come aboard lookin’ for a little red-headed sailor they said done the killin’, and I told ’em they was dreamin’; but they said the lampman, who they took for the murder, blamed it on a little red-headed sailor. I just told ’em I guessed the lampman was their man, and they said a parson told ’em he done the killin’, but they wanted to find this little red-headed sailor ’cause he had some hand in it, so some witnesses said.

“See what I’m drivin’ at? I didn’t know about no red-headed man, and I didn’t want to. We had to get out of Manila, and I didn’t want to be monkeyin’ around with no courts nor judges, and I let the police have their own say, and agreed with ’em when I saw a chance to keep clear, and disagreed when I saw it would delay us to get tangled up in the killin’ of the bos’n.”

“Well, I don’t see what all that has got to do with this,” said Captain Riggs.

“Ye don’t? Look a here! One of our men cut up; a red-headed little sailor has a hand in it of some sort; a parson tells the police our lampman done it, and thar goes another of our hands. Who do we git in their place? A parson for a passenger and two men of his own he brings aboard. Looks like he made room for ’em, cap’n.”

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“You’ve been reading books,” said Captain Riggs. “What I need is a mate, not a detective. But go on, Mr. Harris—maybe ye’re right—I’m getting old and trustful.”

“That ain’t my main p’int, either,” continued Harris. “What I mean is this—come to think it over, the lampman didn’t leave the ship’s side until after the Greek was cut up ashore. It was the parson who put the police on to the lampman.”

“This same parson, Mr. Harris? Ye ain’t sure about that?”

“Oh, shucks! Think thar’s fourteen thousand parsons runnin’ around Manila with a red-headed sailor that’s too handy by far with a knife? Ain’t I got brains in my head? He had to make room for his pals aboard here, didn’t he? It’s plain as Cape Cod Light to me, cap’n.”

“Well, what does it all mean? You suppose this is what they want?”

“Ye don’t guess they killed the bos’n and this Trego just for friendship sake, do ye? If ye want to know what my personal, private feelings are, it looks like we’ve been boarded by the Devil’s Admiral.”

“Sally Ann’s black cat!” said Riggs. “That story was started by some sea-lawyer full of gin, and the newspapers took it up for fun. There ain’t no more a Devil’s Admiral than there is a *Flying Dutchman*.”

“Wal, didn’t I see the *Flying Dutchman* off the cape with my own eyes when I was second in the brig *Peerless*? Ye can’t tell me thar ain’t no *Flying Dutchman*, and ye can’t make me believe thar ain’t no Devil’s Admiral—I’ve been told some things about both of ’em, and dang me for a blue-nose fisherman if I don’t believe in ’em both!”

“Who is your Devil’s Admiral aboard here, then?”

“The parson.”

“You’re full of hashish! You been bothered lately with your head, Mr. Harris?”

“That’s all right, cap’n. When a man looks overside and says ten knots and better, and the log says ten knots and a shade, he ain’t no landsman. He spits to looward like a commodore, that parson, and I’ve had my suspicions right along.”

“All buncombe. You been readin’ too many Manila newspapers.”

“Yes, and I see a few things on deck, too, that ain’t got nothin’ to do with newspapers. Petrak, Buckrow, and the long lime-juicer was all pretty thick when no one was lookin’ at ’em. And they don’t let on to know each other, neither. Askin’ one another their names

when I was standin' by, and soon as my back was turned thick as flies at a molasses-barrel, sneakin' round and whisperin'.

"'Who's the red chap?' asks Long Jim from Buckrow, when he knows I can hear.

"'Says he's out of a collier,' says Buckrow, speakin' loud a purpose so I can hear.

"The next I know, cap'n, Reddy was tellin' Long Jim that Buckrow never paid him that two bob for a round of drinks in the Flagship Bar before the cuttin'. Don't that sound funny? Then when Petrak takes the wheel I asks him if he knows Long Jim, and he says not afore he come aboard, and Buckrow says the same.

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“They all lied; and ye remember how Buckrow helped Petrak with a knife when he was in a tight jam thar at the door. I put two and two together, and I’m here, Ezra Harris, your mate, to tell ye that they make four, and ye can’t git away from it—and what’s more, this Trenjum is in with the parson and the other three. Devil’s Admiral or no, it don’t look nice to me.”

“Do you think Buckrow and the other two know about this, Mr. Harris?”

“It ain’t clear to me, so far as that goes, but Trenjum and the parson do. I looks at it this way—they knowed ye didn’t know, and that Trego might tell ye; so they ups and lets a knife into him before he can tell, and then we’re up in the air. If I hadn’t found it they’d keep us guessin’ until they was ready to get in some more fancy work, the Lord knows what.

“That Trenjum is a slick customer—I don’t believe he ever writ anything for a newspaper, anyway—he’s too tall and strong-lookin’ to make his livin’ with a pencil. This Trenjum and the parson is in together for all of their lettin’ on they don’t like one another. What business has a writin’ chap with his breeches full of pistols like he had in the saloon? Ye can’t tell me writin’ chaps eats their meals with guns enough in their clothes to arm a landin’-party, no, sir!”

“A pretty pickle! Sally Ann, but I’ve got a nice mess aboard me, and I’m hanged if I know what it’s all going to come to! I’ve half a mind to throw the whole lot in irons and work the ship with the chinks.”

“Now ye’re talkin’ like somebody,” said Harris. “But go slow and git ’em one at a time when it’s convenient, so they won’t suspect nothin’. If ye go after the whole gang at once I’ll bet ye have a fight on yer hands. Grab one and then the other so ye’ll git ’em separate: and keep ’em separate, so they can’t talk it over, or ye’ll have a peck of trouble on yer hands.”

“It’s no small matter to put passengers in irons, Mr. Harris. They would make trouble for me when they get into port.”

“They’ll make a cussed sight more trouble for ye aboard here, is my way of lookin’ at it. We got Petrak, anyway, for a start. He said Trenjum got him to do it, and Trenjum told ye Meeker had a hand in it. Just say one accused the other, and when ye come to find this aboard ye had to put ’em in irons ‘cause it looked like they was hatchin’ mutiny in the crew. Then we’ll slam the other two in irons on suspicion, and they bein’ crew, ye got a right to do that.

“What’s the good o’ bein’ master if ye can’t protect yerself and yer ship? Trenjum is safe enough, as it goes for now, but I’d make him fast below when we have the others, and see what sort of a talk he puts up. If we git ’em to tellin’ on one another, then we’ve got

the whole yarn out, and ye won't have no trouble with the port authorities. Don't that sound sensible to ye?"

"I don't see any other way out of it," said Riggs. "I suppose the best thing to do is to go up and take the parson. His room being next to Mr. Trenholm's, the two of 'em will know what's going on, but we don't care. Then we'll take Buckrow and Long Jim."

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“I guessed ye’d see it that way, cap’n. I’m willin’ to stand double watches and take the wheel myself, and, with the Dutchman doin’ the same, we’ll manage to get the old packet to port right enough.”

“We’ll go right up,” said Captain Riggs, and I heard them move toward the door.

“Blow out that stinking lantern,” said Riggs.

For an instant I had a wild idea of taking the key and locking them in, and then making terms with the captain, and arguing him out of the conviction that I was in league with Meeker, and offering my services in capturing the others. But I knew Harris could not be convinced that I was not in whatever plot was afoot, and that I could put no faith in any agreement Captain Riggs might make while the mate was with him.

Besides, I had borne out the mate’s suspicions by being below spying upon them, and the wiser course would be for me to get back to my stateroom and let them find me there. Then I might be able to discuss the whole affair with them and prove that I was the victim of a plot myself.

As it was, I had lingered at the door too long, and Harris lifted the hook inside and nearly stepped on me as he stumbled into the dark passage. I crawled out of his path so that when the three of them came out they were between me and the companionway to the upper deck.

“Where’s the cussed key?” whispered Harris. “I thought I left it in the door.”

“Light a match,” said Riggs, and he began to move his feet along the deck. “Sure you didn’t put it in your pocket, Mr. Harris?”

“Who’s that?” cried Harris suddenly, and I was sure he had seen me crouching against the bulkhead. I was about to surrender myself and explain my presence below when I heard the patter of feet and somebody bounded up the ladder and crashed into a ventilator as he gained the deck above.

“Somebody been listening I’ll bet my hat!” said Harris. “I’ve got the key—it dropped out.”

He locked the door and they hurried down the passage, Riggs telling Rajah to “go get him,” and then I heard them running forward toward the forecastle as they got on deck.

I ran for the ladder as best I could, glad of the chance to get out of the black hole and wondering who could have been down there with me. I stepped upon something which slipped from under me, and I went down sprawling, sure that I had gashed my foot, for I had felt a sharp edge as I fell. I found that my stocking was not cut, and was getting to my feet again when my hand came in contact with the object which had tripped me.

I had stepped upon a large shell crucifix.

CHAPTER IX

A FIGHT IN THE DARK

Dazed for a minute by the discovery that Meeker had been lurking in the passage while I was listening to Captain Riggs and Harris in the storeroom, I leaned against the companionway and fingered the shell crucifix, wondering how near Meeker had come to making an end of me. Of course, the finding of the crucifix down there, and the man who ran up the ladder when surprised by Riggs, meant nothing else but that Meeker had been below either before or after I followed the ship's officers down.

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The fact that he was between me and the companionway was proof enough that he had come after I had taken my position at the keyhole of the storeroom, but if I was inclined to make theories and draw conclusions about Meeker, there were other things going on to distract my attention.

There was much shouting and running on deck, and, before going up, I listened in the hopes of learning what was taking place, but the roar of the sea, the throb of the engines, and the thumping of my own heart prevented me from making any sense of the tumult above. I had a fear that Riggs had discovered that I was missing from my room, and that he had found Meeker likewise absent from his quarters.

No matter what had come about, I was in peril as long as I remained where I was, both from Riggs and Harris and from Meeker and his assassins. And no matter which side won above, whether Meeker was taken, or Riggs and Harris killed, I would be regarded as an enemy by the victors. The best thing for me to do was to surrender to Riggs at once, and secure my pistols that I might get into the fight with him against Meeker and his henchmen.

That seemed to be an easy solution of my troubles until I considered that Riggs and Harris were certain that I was the most dangerous man on board. Before I could say a word I might be seized and ironed, if not shot on sight. Perhaps the wiser course would be to get to my room and barricade myself until affairs were more settled, or until we had the light of day and I could know with whom I was dealing.

With one hand on the rail of the ladder and the other clutching the crucifix, I debated with myself about what I should do, while above me I could hear Riggs and Harris yelling to one another, although I could not make out what they were saying. I heard Harris say something about “the parson,” and there were shouts from the bridge, and all hands seemed to be running over the main-deck like madmen.

I started up the ladder, bent upon learning what was happening and watching my chance to slip back to my room through the darkness. Before I had gone three steps I was halted by a terrific noise between decks in the direction of the storeroom. Several heavy blows were struck in rapid succession against a bulkhead, followed by a rending crash and splintering timbers. An iron bar rang on the deck-plates as it was thrown down, and there was a rattle of chains.

Going down the ladder again, I crouched in a corner, for I was sure that the racket below would attract the attention of Riggs and Harris, and that they would be down to investigate. I would have wagered that some one had broken into the storeroom containing the mysterious cargo.

Whispers reached my ears from the end of the passage, and then I heard Petrak yell in his fretful, whining way:

“Hold it down, Bucky! Hold it down, ye beggar! It’s my bleedin’ hand ye got, will ye mind?”

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“Dry up about the paw,” said a voice. “Lucky for ye it’s not yer neck in a rope. Can’t break the chain, can I, ‘thout givin’ ye a twist, ye fool! There it is now—right aft and on deck, Red, and follow me close! We’ll git ’em off right enough when ye git above decks. What’s matter if yer flippers are clear?”

Something rushed toward me in the dark, and again I heard the musical tinkle that made me think of chain-armour. I pressed my body against the boarding to be clear of the ladder, and made out the figure of a man, crouched down and feeling his way along the passage. He stumbled up the ladder, and then I heard Petrak close behind him, panting and cursing, and the broken chains on his hands rasping along the bulkhead.

“Wait for me, can’t ye? Bucky, wait for me! Stop a bit and give me a hand up—”

“Oh, come along and stow the gab,” called Buckrow from the head of the companion, but in suppressed tones. “Keep yer lip shut, the afterguards are on deck here and I don’t know where Thirkle is. Slip along and give us a hand with a knife or a gun. Looks like we’ll settle the business quick now.”

Petrak went up the ladder, his progress over each iron step plain to me by the jingle of the chains dangling from his wrists, and before I had settled in my mind what had happened the pair of them were gone. Buckrow had rescued the little red-headed man from the ship’s brig.

I crawled up the ladder, still holding the crucifix, for it was the only thing in the form of a weapon I possessed, and the manner in which I gripped it improvised it into a hilted dagger, although I remember keeping it more for evidence against Meeker than for any other purpose. If the sly rascal was still making a fool of Riggs, or denied that he had been below, I felt that his crucifix would be proof against him which he could not deny.

When I emerged from the hood of the companionway I found a high wind was drenching the deck with spray and everything was black and wet and slippery. The vessel was labouring, and, although there was nothing that could be called a storm, she was bucking into head-swells that rattled her from stem to stern, and the gusts of wind whipped the tips of the waves across her fore-deck spitefully and without warning.

There were probably twenty feet of open well-deck between me and the foot of the ladder leading to the saloon-deck, and, then, I had the dark passageway to traverse for another thirty or forty feet aft before I could gain my room.

I braced myself between the hood of the companion and a thrumming ventilator and listened for some hostile sound. I was conscious of dim forms all about me, although I could not see them, and I felt as if I had blundered into a desperate game of hide-and-seek.

Thrusting my hands before me into the darkness, I stumbled toward the ladder. As I was about to grasp it I encountered a wet jacket, and the next instant I found myself gripped in a pair of arms. The fingers of my enemy shut on the light fabric of my pajama-jacket. I struck at him with the point of the crucifix and landed a glancing blow in his face, for the knuckles of my hand brushed his jaw.

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The sharp edge must have cut him, for he uttered a stifled groan, and as he recoiled from me, partly from my blow and partly as the result of a deep roll of the vessel, I wriggled out of my jacket and ran forward. In my flight I bumped into ventilators, stumbled over a hatch-coaming and pulled myself along the swaying rail-chains toward the bow of the vessel. In the scuffle I had lost the crucifix, but I had also escaped from the man who had grabbed me, and, while I was in a panic and did not know where I was going, I hoped to be able to regain the ladder on the port side and get back to my room once I had thrown my assailant off my track.

I reached the break of the forecastle head, but did not go into the bows, because I knew I could not hope to escape from them if I did not keep open some means of retreat. I halted at the closed scuttle of the forecastle, for from there I could have my choice of getting aft again along either rail. I clung to the wooden hood, naked to the waist, and swept continually by the spindrift from the seas which met the vessel.

As my eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness I could distinguish the outlines of the machinery on deck, the foremast and the companionway forward of the superstructure. I could make out the bridge and the funnel well enough to see a figure moving over the rim of the storm-apron. The vessel rolled and the side-lights threw red and green glares over the sea on either side.

As I stood there waiting for some sound which might tell me the position of the mysterious man who had attacked me, eight bells was struck on the bridge, and I knew it was midnight. I expected that there would be some answer from the bows, as there should be a man on lookout there, and the faint double notes of the bell in the wheel-house should have been repeated from the ship's bell near to where I stood.

I had about decided to make another sortie toward the ladder, when I heard a commotion on the bridge, and then a yell as a man might give who had been stricken suddenly with death. It chilled my blood, for I knew that another blow had been struck which took another life on board the *Kut Sang*, and I realized that the striking of the bells had been a sort of signal for the assassin.

After a minute I heard Harris bawl: "The Dutchman has been killed! Ho, cap'n—the Dutchman has been knifed on the bridge!"

"The devil and all ye say!" shouted Captain Riggs from the fore-deck, and I heard him clamber up the ladder and knew it must have been he who grabbed me as I was about to gain the upper deck.

"Who was it, Mr. Harris? What in God's name is this, Mr. Harris? Mutiny? Is this mutiny aboard me?" He was mounting to the bridge.

“They got the Dutchman,” repeated Harris. “They done for him—he’s dead as a red mackerel!”

“It’s mutiny, Mr. Harris,” said the captain.

“Ye know cussed well what it is,” shouted Harris, as loudly as though Captain Riggs were still below. “I come up to take the watch and find the Dutchman hangin’ over the port ladder bleedin’ like a dead goose! More work of yer fine passengers, that’s what it is, and ye know why.”

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A lantern flickered above the storm-apron and then swung in the break of the bridge-rail at the ladder-head, and I saw Harris moving something which hung limply as he dragged it behind the canvas.

There was a wrathful conference as the two of them inspected the body of the second mate, and as I watched I saw a lancelike tongue of fire, outside the halo of light cast up from the lantern, followed by the report of a pistol shot, which reached my ears after I had seen the flash, for the wind checked the sound.

On top of this came a ripping, rending noise and the figure of a man swung to the lower deck, carrying with him a portion of the storm-apron, which volleyed in the wind for a minute and then was swept away as he let go of it.

“There they go!” bellowed Harris. “Come on, cap’n, we’ll git the hounds now,” and he led the captain down the bridge-ladder, Riggs still carrying the lantern, which swung crazily as he dropped three steps at a time.

“W’ere the bloody ’ell be ye, Bucky?” called a voice which I knew to be that of Long Jim. “W’ere be ye, I s’y! Ye missed ’im, ye fool. Missed ’im dead. Jolly nice mess ye made of it! Were be ye, Bucky?”

“Shut yer bloomin’ face,” growled Buckrow. “What if I did miss him? It was you that spoiled my aim, falling against the lashings as ye did, so the blasted thing carried away with me and like to mashed my head. What, with a fall like that. Dropped my gun, too, and it’s broke or jammed.”

“Likewise I couldn’t ’elp it,” said Long Jim. “Caught my blasted foot in a lashin’—rotten sailcloth, that, Bucky. Make a stand of it ’ere as they come on an’ we’ll git the two of ’em, Bucky.”

“My gun is jammed, I say,” said Buckrow. “Come on below for now and find Thirkle and Red. We’ll get another gun.”

They were coming toward me all the time, and behind them were Captain Riggs, still with his lantern, and Harris, uttering terrible threats of vengeance.

“Throw that cussed light away,” said Harris. “Throw it away, cap’n, or they’ll wing us sure. Cuss it all, cap’n, they’ll blow yer head off if ye pack that ’round with ye. Throw it, can’t ye?”

“I can’t see!” wailed Riggs, who seemed to be confused. “I can’t see, Harris.”

“‘Course ye can’t see with it shinin’ in yer eyes! Throw it away, will ye? Here—now keep after me.”

Harris wrenched the lantern from Riggs's hand and hurled it into the sea, and, as the briny spume closed over it, it went out with a spiteful, protesting hiss.

"'Ere's w'ere we bloody well get the two of 'em," said Long Jim, who was within a dozen paces of me. "Give 'em the knives as they come along in the black, Bucky."

"No knife-play for me with Harris—he's got a gun," said Buckrow. "Come along below, Jim, and let 'em go for now. Quick, or the mate'll have ye. Thirkle said he'd have the fo'c's'le by now. He run the chinks out, him and Petrak. Scuttled 'em aft. Come below."

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“Not till Mr. Mate ’as this in ’is ribs,” said Long Jim.

“Ye fool—here they be, on us, and Harris with a couple of guns. Run for it, Jim, I tell ye,” and Buckrow rose up out of the dark within reach of my hand and thrust back the slide of the forecastle-hood and swung below.

Long Jim came after him, chuckling with the joy of battle. I wanted to do something, to have some hand in the fight, to capture one of the murderers, and so prove to Riggs that I was not in league with them. This impulse to aid the captain’s side of the fight came to me swiftly, and I put it into action at once by jumping directly in Long Jim’s path at the head of the forecastle ladder. I planned to grab his arms and hurl him back, yelling at the same time to Harris not to shoot, that it was I, Trenholm, and that I was holding Long Jim.

It was a foolish enough thing to do, for in the excitement of the minute Harris would have undoubtedly shot me and Long Jim, too, and with good reason, for he would have suspected a trap if I had asked him to hold his fire and approach us in the dark.

As it happened, Long Jim was throwing himself forward in a sort of dive beneath the hood of the scuttle, just as I thrust my body against the opening. His shoulder caught me in the stomach, and my head and feet flew out and we grabbed each other and went tumbling down the old wooden companion together and rolled into the black forecastle.

“Blime me, I thought ye was down afore me, Bucky,” gasped Long Jim, recovering himself and stumbling over me. I rolled to one side and found myself under a bunk.

“I was down,” said Buckrow. “What ye trying to do—make a Punch and Judy show of yerself? Ye come down like a lubberly farmer, and then blame it on me. What made ye tumble like that?”

“I thought ye was down.”

“I was down—well clear of ye and waiting for ye.”

“Then how come ye under my bleedin’ feet. Mind yer eye now, or the two of ’em’ll be down on us. That mate is a bad un, I tell ye, Bucky—bad as the nigger in the *Southern Cross*. No end of trouble with him, if ye remember as I do.”

“Aw, stow the gab,” whispered Buckrow, “We’re working now. Mind what yer about. I’ve got another gun from Thirkle.”

“Thirkle here?” asked Long Jim. “W’ere be ye, Thirkle?”

“Standing by,” was the whispered reply. “Shoot if they come down, but keep still a minute. Fire up before they have a chance to drop on you, and stand clear, with the gun around the bulkhead at that side, while I let go at them from this side.”

“Below thar!” called Harris down the scuttle. “All hands on deck and look lively, or I’ll make a tailor’s dummy of the last up.”

“Don’t say a word, but let him have it when he gets well down,” whispered the man who had been addressed as Thirkle, which mystified me.

“Below thar! I want the man as killed the Dutchman! All hands up and one at a time, or I’ll let daylight through ye all. Hear me below?”

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“Don’t say a word,” cautioned Thirkle.

Riggs and Harris were talking together, but we could not make out what they were saying. I lay under the bunk at the very feet of Buckrow, dazed and bruised from my fall, yet keenly aware of the situation and strangely cool, thrilled and fascinated with the drama being played about me.

I knew that I had small chance of escaping with my life if my presence should be discovered by the men who lay in wait for Harris and the captain; but it was not fear which kept me an auditor when I might well have been an actor to good purpose. I desired to see what would be the end of the act, and, far from being terrorized as I should have been, I enjoyed the invisible scene. It was not that I was unmindful of the danger, but that I was surprised at myself for feeling no fear.

“I’ll give all hands a minute to get up, and if they ain’t, I’ll be down,” thundered Harris. “I know yer down thar, Buckrow, along with Jim and the red chap, and I know yer game. If I have to go down I’ll kill a couple of ye, lay to that; so ye can come up and save yer necks, or take yer chances if I go below.”

“Pass him some insolence,” said Thirkle. “We’ve got to get out of here. Give him lip, Buckrow, so he’ll come down, or he’ll batten down on us until morning, and ye know what that means.”

“What ye want of me?” called Buckrow.

“Ye stabbed the Dutchman, ye murderin’ hound,” said Harris. “Ye know what I want ye for well enough, and if ye don’t come up I’ll see that Jim and Petrak swing with ye.”

“I didn’t kill nobody,” said Buckrow. “Ye want to blame it on me, don’t ye, ye big monkey.”

“It was you that stabbed him and then took a shot at me. I know ye, Buckrow, and I’ll have the life of ye if ye don’t come up.”

“Petrak was the one what killed the mate,” said Buckrow. “It was Petrak done for the Dutchman, sir. I ain’t no murderer, sir, Mr. Harris, but a sailorman what does his duty as he sees it, sir.”

“Come on deck then and we’ll see about that,” said Harris, who seemed to think that Buckrow’s play of fear of him was genuine.

“Come down and get me. Ye don’t dare come down, ye big bucko. I know the likes of ye! Come down and get me, if ye dare.”

“Is this mutiny? I’ll have the lot of ye hanged! I don’t stand for no such business aboard me,” cried Captain Riggs, and the trio below stifled their laughter.

“Naow let me handle this, cap’n,” we heard Harris say. “I’ll go down and break this myself. This ain’t no time to argue ’bout mutinies; this ain’t.”

“Give him a dirty insult, Bucky,” whispered Thirkle. “Give it to him hard or the old master will argue him out of coming down.”

“Come down, ye swine! Come down ye low-born coward and take me if ye can. That’s what I say to ye. It’s me, Buckrow, foremast hand that’s talkin’ to the mate of the *Kut Sang*, who’s a dog.”

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This brought a cry of rage from Harris, and we heard him enter the scuttle, while Captain Riggs begged him not to go down.

“Stay up here, Mr. Harris, and let the murdering dogs stay there. We’ll fix ’em fast enough when day comes.”

“Leggo me, cap’n! I say I’ll break that spawn’s neck! Let me down!”

“I can’t let you risk your life this way, Mr. Harris. I can’t, I say. Where will I have officers if ye get hurt down there? Let ’em stop for now.”

“Leggo my arm!” shrieked Harris. “Cap’n, if ye don’t leggo my arm I can’t say what I’ll do. I never let no man talk to me like that!”

“But, Mr. Harris! Ye know what it means! Ye know I can’t work the ship! Ye know what’s below and what they want! Mr. Harris! Mr. Harris!”

“Now, will ye let go?” demanded Harris, and then he crashed down the wooden ladder. The forecastle was illumined by a flash, and Buckrow’s pistol boomed, and then a second flash on the other side of the forecastle showed me the face of the Rev. Luther Meeker at the entrance to the forecastle behind a pistol which had sent a second bullet at the mate. And the Rev. Luther Meeker was the man who had been addressed as Thirkle, and who seemed to be in command of the others.

Something rolled into the smoke-laden hole and sprawled on the planks near me, and I could hear it gasping and choking.

“Leggo my coat, cap’n. Leggo my coat!” said the form, and I knew it was Harris wounded to death. In a minute he was still, and then the scuttle above rattled peremptorily.

“Mr. Harris! Be ye hurt, Mr. Harris? Oh, Mr. Harris!”

“We got him all right,” whispered Buckrow. “That settles Mr. Matey, well and good. Hey, Thirkle?”

“Good, clean job,” replied Thirkle. “Good, clean job, Bucky, and smart as could be the way you drew him down. See what you can do with the skipper now.”

“Anything wrong, Mr. Harris?” called the captain from the scuttle. “Good Lord! ain’t I to have no officers? What’s to become of my ship with such a crew aboard me? Sally Ann! Sally Ann!”

“Come on down, cap’n,” said a voice startlingly like Harris’s. It was Meeker, or Thirkle, as his men called him, imitating the high-pitched nasal twang of the dead mate.

“That you, Harris?” cried Riggs hopefully. “What’s the matter, Mr. Harris?”

“I hurt myself, cap’n. Come on down,” pleaded Thirkle in a constrained voice like a man in pain. “I done for Buckrow, but I hurt my ribs. Why don’t ye come down? I can’t navigate this way—I’m hurt.”

“Who was my mate in the *Jennie Lee*?” demanded Riggs. “Tell me that, Mr. Harris, and I’ll come down, and not before.”

“We’ll have to go up and get him,” whispered Thirkle. “He’s too wise an old crab to be caught that way. I’ll take the lead, Bucky, and Long Jim last, and we’ve got the ship. We can let the fire-room chinks and the nigger go until morning. We’ll take the bridge and keep the old tub going until day and then pick out a good place to drop her when we’ve got what we want. Petrak’s got the wheel now, and we can do for the chinks, come day. Blessed if I know what has become of Trenholm, but we’ll find him in time and attend to him proper. Remember: make for the bridge once we’ve got the skipper. Quick now!”

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The three of them sneaked up the companionway.

CHAPTER X

THE DEVIL'S ADMIRAL

For several minutes I listened breathlessly, waiting for some sound which would indicate that Captain Riggs had been killed or captured by the three who had gone up the companionway after him. But when I heard no cry, or shot, or sounds of a struggle, I began to formulate plans for getting back to my room or finding the captain and begging him to let me help him fight against Thirkle and his men.

Lying huddled under the bunk in the bilge-water, which swung from side to side as the vessel rolled, I must admit that I would have presented a sorry spectacle to any one who could have seen me, clad only in the trousers of my pajamas, and suggesting anything but a fighting man.

But, in spite of the poor part I had taken so far in the fighting, I had no fear of an encounter with the men who seemed likely enough to take possession of the *Kut Sang* and murder all on board. I told myself that it was not my fault that I had been stripped of my arms and made a prisoner, and blamed Captain Riggs for allowing Thirkle—in the character of the Rev. Luther Meeker—to throw all the suspicion of the murder of Trego on me and hold his own liberty and good-standing as a passenger.

I fully realized the danger which confronted me and the ship, and as I crawled from under the bunk in the forecastle I had little hope of ever escaping from the vessel alive. It was no time to go over past mistakes, no time to moan over what had happened. I longed for action, but, with both Captain Riggs and Thirkle and his men against me, it looked as if I would have little chance, no matter which side was victorious in the battle that was being fought for the ship.

I had to crawl over the body of the mate in order to get clear of the tier of bunks, and, thinking it possible that Harris might have a pistol in his clothing, or had dropped one as he fell into the forecastle, I examined his pockets. I got no pistol, but did find a box of matches, and, standing with my back to the scuttle to protect the flame from the wind, and also to shade the light from the open scuttle, I struck a match and hurriedly looked over the littered deck of the forecastle.

I struck several matches at intervals in this way, waiting between lights to make sure that no one had seen the flashes from the upper deck. If Harris had had pistols his murderers must have taken them. I did find a dozen or more cartridges of heavy calibre loose in the side-pocket of his coat, but those and the matches were all that resulted from my ghoulish work.

In the brief illuminations of the forecastle I had seen clothing of the crew hanging from nails, and I dressed myself in light-blue nankeen frock and trousers which had belonged to a Chinese sailor, for the jacket buttoned in the back and smelled strongly of opium, as did the whole forecastle.

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The ports were all fast, but leaked, and what little air came in descended through the scuttle, so the place still reeked with acrid powder-smoke that bit the throat and eyes. The deck was strewn with panniers and cups, that clattered to and fro with the motion of the ship. The water under foot, and the accumulations of refuse, rice, and food, made it difficult to keep a footing without clinging to the bunks at either side.

There was a slush-lamp swinging from a string, and I had a mind to light its rope wick and search through the chests for a weapon; but I did not want to remain too long below, although I could not bring myself to leave empty-handed the only place which offered a weapon.

Making a hasty search in the dark, I found a broken knife and an iron belaying-pin. The knife-blade was broken within a couple of inches of the handle, but diagonally from the point, so that it presented an end that might be dangerous at close quarters.

Ten minutes were probably spent in my exploration of the forecastle, although in my nervous haste it seemed an hour, and I stopped frequently to listen for intruders, and for some indication of how the fight was going on deck.

With the handle of the belaying-pin gripped in one hand, and the knife in the pocket of my nankeen jacket ready for an emergency, I felt my way along the port side toward the foot of the companion, determined to get out of the stinking hole and try my chances in the open. My plan was to find Riggs, if I could, and, if he were besieged, attack Thirkle and his men from the rear, although I knew full well my disadvantage against them, armed as they were with plenty of pistols.

But I trusted to the darkness, and hoped that I might outwit them by a bluff that I, also, had firearms. Unless I could outmanoeuvre them before daylight and join forces with Riggs I knew we had small chance against them in daylight, if, indeed, they had not already eliminated the captain from the fight.

I had a gleeful picture of myself challenging Thirkle in the dark, and urging him and Buckrow, Long Jim, and Petrak, to come and take me, telling them at the same time that I would give them shot for shot, and cautioning my imaginary force to hold fire until the enemy was close at hand. I imagined that a bold manner, and the surprise they would receive at my appearance in the fight would diminish their confidence and give them a wholesome respect for me until I could gain the saloon-deck and ally myself with Riggs.

Then all my brave plans went to smash as I heard some one sneaking down the companionway. For an instant I was in a panic of terror and chagrined that I had lingered long enough to give the enemy time to return. But I determined that I might as well fight there as anywhere else, and, bracing myself against the bunks, I drew my knife and raised the belaying-pin, prepared to begin the attack as soon as my visitor got within reach.

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I could hear him breathing gently as he came down one step at a time, and from the light “smack” on each succeeding board I knew that he was barefooted. He was feeling his way along, as if in strange territory, and I knew that it could be neither one of the Chinese crew nor one of Thirkle’s band.

As I stood there waiting for him to come within reach I heard a peculiar fluttering which puzzled me, until my memory served me, and I remembered that this queer swishing sound belonged to Rajah, the dumb Malay mess-boy. I knew it must be Rajah, probably seeking for Riggs; but I also knew that he would have his deadly kris, and I shivered for myself at the prospect of being dealt a blow from that awful, irregular blade which he could wield so expertly.

Now, I did not want to kill or wound Rajah, for, if Riggs were still alive, the boy would be a valuable member of our party; and, if Riggs were dead, I hoped that I might win the boy to my side. I could have struck him down with the heavy iron pin as he groped his way out of the companion; but there would be small satisfaction in killing him, for it would simply be doing a job which would please Thirkle and make his task of taking the ship all the easier.

Neither did I expect to be able to explain to the Malay that I was not his enemy, for he could not make any reply to my pleadings, and the only answer I might get would be the awful kris.

I thought of crouching in his path and adopting football tactics—tackling him low as soon as he stumbled upon me. But that way had its dangers, for he would undoubtedly have his knife and would make short work of me before I could overpower him.

As it happened I had no choice in the matter, and we came together suddenly and unexpectedly with a lurch of the vessel. He was nearer to me than I imagined, and as he threw up his knife-arm toward the bunk the blade clanged against the boarding, and his shoulder struck me.

I grabbed for his wrist, and at the same time dropped the pin, which must have fallen on his foot. Twisting his arm, I made him drop the kris; and then, as I flung him backward over a chest, went with him, and, startled by the attack, I had him pinioned to the deck and helpless before he knew what had happened.

“Rajah! Rajah!” I whispered frantically as he attempted to squirm out of my grasp. “Number Four! Number Four! Good man—no fight Number Four!”

That was my number at the saloon-table, and I thought he must recognize me by that. He hissed in the manner which he had to convey that he understood an order, but I held him as gently as I could for a minute and tried to demonstrate to him that I meant him no harm, and spoke the peace-language of pidgin-English, common enough in the Orient.

He lay quiet and made no resistance, hissing, and I let go of him and fumbled for his kris. I found it, and then patted his head as he still lay upon the deck, and he patted my hand in turn and kissed it; and then I gave him his blade, at which he was overjoyed.

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I struck a match then, that he might see me, and by sign-language tried to make him understand that we should go on deck and search for Thirkle and the others.

Before we had finished our silent parley I heard a noise at the scuttle, and then Riggs whispered: “Rajah! Rajah!”

I was wondering what I should say to him, afraid that I might frighten him away again, or that when he recognized my voice he would be all the more convinced that I was against him, or make some startled exclamation which would betray his presence to Thirkle, and also give him the information of my whereabouts. Before I made any sound Rajah had rapped a signal to him, and I heard him coming down.

Rajah scratched my hand and felt for the matchbox in my pocket, and as Captain Riggs reached the foot of the companion I struck a match and held it before my face, between Rajah and myself.

“Good God!” cried Riggs, and he backed toward the companion, holding up his hands in terror as he thought that I had captured Rajah.

“Captain,” I called as the match went out, “it’s Trenholm, ready to fight with you. I’m not with that murdering crew. I didn’t kill Trego. Don’t be a fool, but give me a chance to help you.”

“Didn’t kill Trego!” he said, amazed. “I know you didn’t kill Trego, but you had the red chap do it for you.”

“No, I didn’t. The money I gave that little devil was for bringing my bag on board, and he told you that I paid him for killing Trego so that Meeker, or Thirkle, would get me out of the way. I tell you that I am not with that gang. Give me a gun, and I’ll help you in this fight.”

“Who’s that dead man on the deck?” he asked. “How come you down here?”

“That’s Harris. Thirkle and Buckrow killed him.”

“Thirkle! There’s no Thirkle aboard here. Thirkle! Why, that’s—”

“Thirkle,” I said, “is the Rev. Luther Meeker. He is the head of the whole gang.”

“Then poor Harris was right,” he moaned, feeling for a chest and sitting down upon it. “Harris was right.” I could hear despair in his voice—he was master no longer, but a broken, dispirited old man.

“Cheer up, captain; we’ll beat them yet,” I said as cheerily as I could.

“We’re lost,” he moaned. “Light the slush-lamp,—they won’t bother us now.”

“But let’s get on deck and give them a fight,” I said. “It won’t do any good to stay down here—”

The board at the scuttle rattled, and we listened. I stooped and groped for the belaying-pin.

“They got below,” growled Buckrow. After a minute he slammed the scuttle-board shut, and we heard a heavy, thumping sound and the clanking of a chain.

“We’re lost!” moaned Riggs. “They are making the scuttle fast with rail-chains. All hands lost, and the Lord have mercy on us! Light the slush-lamp, Mr. Trenholm—we’re dead men!”

“What is their game?” I asked, in doubt as to the meaning of what he said about the rail-chains, although I was dismayed by the ominous sounds at the scuttle and knew that we must be prisoners in the forecastle.

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“There is no escape from here,” said Riggs. “They hold the ship now, and they’ll scuttle her before day comes.”

I struck a match and lit the swinging slush-lamp, which made a dismal, smoking flame and added to the heat and the multitude of smells which made the forecastle a hole of torture. But the light was comforting, and Rajah crept to his master’s side and clung to his arm, the boy’s mouth open and his eyes full of questions.

“So they got poor Harris,” said Riggs, still sitting on the chest and gazing at the body of the mate. “I told him not to come down, but he would have his way. I thought I could get down here and find one of his pistols.”

“They are gone,” I told him. “I made a search for them, and was about to get out of here when I heard Rajah coming down. It is lucky I didn’t kill the boy—or that he didn’t kill me. But that’s all done and over, captain, and we ought to begin to plan for our escape. Is there no way out of here?”

He put his pallid face in his hands and shook his head, and it was then that I realized his age and his helplessness. He had given up the fight.

“You don’t realize our situation, Mr. Trenholm, or what all this means, or the men we are against. That forecastle bulkhead is lined with sheet-iron on the other side to keep the crews from broaching cargo, and, even if we should cut through it, we would come against cargo in the hold, and would be no better off. I admire your pluck, but you don’t know the odds against us. They’ll loot her and scuttle her before the sun is well up, and we’ll go down in this trap. Help me lift poor Harris into a bunk.”

We stowed the body of the mate in a lower bunk and covered it with straw and some of the clothing of the Chinese. Riggs sat down again and stared at the littered deck.

“But we must fight to the last minute,” I said. “We can’t give up like this, even if we are trapped. You certainly do not intend to surrender now. I know, captain, that the odds are great; but we can fight, can’t we?”

“You don’t know!” he almost wailed, beating his knees with his hands. “You don’t know what it all means, of course. I tell you they’ll loot her and scuttle her when they have done their work aboard, and we’re doomed men!”

“But what is there to loot in this old tub?” I asked, preferring to have him tell me of the mysterious cargo than to take the time of explaining how I had followed him and Harris below.

“That’s what they want,” he said, talking to himself more than to me. “Harris was right, but we found out too late. They got Mr. Trego before he could warn us. And it’s not my

fault if I die for it. Me, J. Riggs, master of sail and steam for thirty years, and never a ship lost nor a dishonest dollar in all my life, not to know what's in my ship!

"It's not me that lost her, God knows; but that's what the owners will say, and that's what everybody will say—if they don't say something worse when the truth comes out. 'Riggs gone, and his ship gone,' they'll say, and then others will wink and whisper: 'And you know the *Kut Sang* was ballasted with gold,' and who's to know I never stole it?"

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“Gold!” I said. “You say there is gold aboard?”

“Yes, gold!” he almost shouted at me. “Chests of gold coin, a dozen or more! That’s what they’re after, and that’s what they’ll get, and that’s what it is all about—Trego and all the rest of it!”

“And you never knew?” I asked, more to take his mind off his troubles and rouse his fighting spirit than for the information, for the details mattered little to us now.

“Mr. Trenholm,” he began with fervor, “if I had known there were any dangers I could have met them. I’ve faced death enough in my day not to fear it, and I’m no weakling if I am an old man. But a master should know what’s in his ship and what’s before him, and not be caught in a mess of lies and sneaking. But perhaps the owners didn’t know—the ship’s in charter for the voyage, and Mr. Trego took charge at the last minute.

“Looking back now, I’m minded to think they were afraid I’d turn pirate at the sight of a few chests of gold. They thought they were slick; but there were others just as slick, laying lines to beat ’em; and here I am, without officers or crew or ship, and jailed in my own fo’c’sle. Doggone it! I guess all hands knew about that gold but me!

“What do they do? Kill my bos’n ashore, take the lampman for it, and make me so short-handed that I ship a gang of pirates as passengers. It was understood that there were to be no passengers this trip; but the owners saw a chance to make a few dollars extra, and the charter party says all right. I heard that much, and then the banker, who acted for the charter party, says to another: ’It will make it look more ordinary to carry passengers if there is some care exercised.’

“Some care! They give me a parson that’s a pirate, and he makes me suspect you of a murder; and you bring one of his very men aboard—and me, like a fool, ship him—and the other two he brings with his organ.”

“But the gold—why should they ship so much gold in this manner?”

“For the Russians,” he said. “I went through Trego’s papers, and the best I can make out of a lot of foreign writing is that it is going to Hong-Kong to buy coal for the Baltic fleet. At first they were going to make their headquarters in Manila and do the business there; but the most of the tramps—colliers—are British, and they found it easier to do business out of Hong-Kong, I suppose, because the Japanese could keep close watch of suspicious vessels making Manila a port of call.

“Ye see, all the banks out here are full of spies—Chinese clerks and all hands—and they are watching day and night. The masters of the colliers and the blockade-runners into Port Arthur won’t take checks or other money—they want it slap down in solid gold before they will sail, and this gold had to be landed in Hong-Kong.

“The Japs might send a couple of cruisers for it if they shipped it openly, so they try to sneak it through like this, and with all their hiding and lying and sneaking there was a leak somewhere, and these fine chaps aboard us laid lines to git it—and here we are.”

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“And still fighting, captain,” I said.

“Did you ever hear of the Devil’s Admiral, Mr. Trenholm?”

“I never did. Who is the gentleman?”

“I never believed in the stories myself, but Harris did; and now I am sure that he is right. Two years ago a ship left Singapore for Bombay, and never was heard from until her chronometer turned up in Swatow or somewhere. A Portuguese Jew had them in a pawnshop, and he said he bought them from a chink for seven Mex dollars. They never found the chink; but there was the ship’s name, or the captain’s name written in the case with a pencil.

“Then last year the steamer *Legaspi* left Manila for Hong-Kong with cattle and Christmas goods and passengers, and never was heard from. Some said she went out to run the blockade before Port Arthur, and the Japs sunk her, but the others said the Devil’s Admiral got her; and then the stories began, and when a ship was overdue or never heard from, people began to say the Devil’s Admiral had her.”

“But who is he, captain?”

“That’s it, Mr. Trenholm. Nobody knows. He never leaves a man alive to tell the tale. Some say he’s a big chink, some say he’s a big black man from the African coast who was mate in a whaler, some say he was an officer in the British navy.

“They found a man dying from starvation and wounds in a boat that got away from him, and the poor chap told a crazy story that they couldn’t make head or tail of, and he died before he told enough to help any, but he said it was the Devil’s Admiral and his crew that got ’em.

“Pearlers he went after first, and then he got bolder and went after sailing-ships; and now they say he went after steamers and got the *Legaspi*, and, Mr. Trenholm, I believe he’s aboard here now.”

“But who—”

We heard heavy blows struck against a bulkhead, and the shriek of a door as it was torn from its hinges.

“They are breaking into the storeshold,” explained Riggs. “They have got the gold, and the next move will be to get away with it in the boats after they have opened her sea-valves, and down we’ll go with the old *Kut Sang*.”

“But what makes you think we have this Devil’s Admiral aboard?” I asked.

“Thirkle is supposed to be the name of the Devil’s Admiral.”

“And Thirkle is—”

“Our Rev. Luther Meeker, Mr. Trenholm. We are dead men.”

CHAPTER XI

A COUNCIL OF WAR

“We are dead men,” repeated Riggs, smiling grimly. “We’ll never see another day. This slick devil will be back in Manila or up the China coast, praying his way out of the country with the gold cached somewhere to wait until he comes for it. He can take enough of it with him to buy a schooner—part of it is in Bank of England notes—but the Rev. Luther Meeker will never be heard from again, because *he* sailed in the *Kut Sang*.”

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“He won’t!” I raged, testing the weight of the belaying-pin. “I’ll batter my way out of here and take him by the throat if it’s the last act of my life! If you won’t fight, I will!”

I braced my feet on the plunging deck of the forecastle and shook my head like a maddened animal. The seas outside assailed our bows, and their fury thrilled me, and seemed a part of my desire to slay. I tore off my jacket and started for the scuttle with the belaying-pin gripped in my hand, bent on battering down the barrier which kept us from the upper deck.

“Not that,” said Riggs, seizing me. “You’ll have them down upon us, or they’ll turn the firehose down the scuttle and drown us like rats. I’ve broken too many mutinies, Mr. Trenholm. You can’t do that.”

“But let’s do something,” I pleaded. “We might as well be planning something as to be sitting here weeping over what has happened.”

We stopped to listen as the hammering between decks grew louder. The pirates were smashing the chests that held the gold, and to us in our prison the noise of their work was ominous—as if they were building a gallows and we were condemned men.

“They’ve got it,” said Riggs. “When they’ve stowed the boats with it they’ll open her sea-valves, and down we’ll go. If there was a chance in the world, Mr. Trenholm, I’d fight; but, being a landsman, you don’t understand how these things work out. They are probably driving her toward the coast now—we’ve been making an easting, as I can tell from her roll, and, as they’ll be well off the steamer-lanes by daylight, they may wait until they can see where they will make their landing.

“But, if we give them trouble, they’ll make sure of putting us out of the way before they abandon ship. Take it calm, and we may see a way out of it; but there is nothing to gain by opening the fight again, fixed as we are.”

“It’s a dismal outlook,” I confessed, impressed by his coolness in spite of his surrender to the situation.

“You may be right, but if you will put your wits to work you may see a way.”

“If I had any cartridges—”

“Cartridges! Have you a pistol?”

He drew a heavy revolver from his pocket and dropped the empty cylinder into his palm, and I gave a roar of joy at the sight of it, for I knew that it would take the bullets I had found in Harris’s pocket.

“A forty-four! Here! These will fit!” and I plucked a handful of the precious cartridges which were suddenly transformed from so much useless lead and powder into deadly missiles which might yet save our lives and the ship.

“Our luck has turned!” I cried, slapping him on the back and putting six of the greasy slugs into the cylinder and snapping it back into position.

“We can fight them now, captain. Only let me get sight on one of those murderers and I’ll drill him—Thirkle and Buckrow and the whole lot of ’em!”

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“You won’t get the chance,” he said. “They are too wise to come prowling around if there is a chance of getting a bullet, and they won’t bother their heads with us now—it’s the gold they want—there they go again.”

There was a shot on deck, and then we heard heavy shoes pounding over the deck and a wild yell over our heads as a man got a bullet or jumped into the sea.

I ran up the companion to the scuttle-hood and listened, and, with the pistol ready, tried to make out what was going on. I could hear Thirkle calling to Petrak, and then the screaming of Chinese, shots in rapid succession, and the patter of bare feet scampering on the iron deck-plates.

In a few minutes the battle seemed to be transferred to the superstructure and the after-deck, and from then until the ports of the forecastle became gray disks in the false dawn there was scarcely a quarter of an hour that was not marked by a pistol-shot or the death-cry of a victim. We knew it was a ruthless slaughter, and that Thirkle was working out the ancient creed that dead men tell no tales.

I lingered in the scuttle, and tried my luck on it with the broken knife, hoping that I might cut an aperture which would admit the muzzle of the pistol, or my hand, so that I might grasp the chains on the outside and pull them free. After an hour or more of labour I managed to split away a small piece of board, but in the dim light from the swaying slush-lamp I made slow progress.

In my cramped position I had to hold fast with one hand, and, swaying with the motion of the ship, work away splinters from the thick panel which moved from right to left in an iron groove. The scuttle was built on an iron frame, securely bolted to the deck, and I knew it could resist any attempt we might make to break it off by working in the narrow companion, which was not wide enough for two men.

It was weary work, for the smoke below sought an outlet up the passage and made my eyes ache; the wind that whirled through the cracks of the hood brought spray with it and the water dripped constantly, and the thunder of an occasional sea as it swept the forecastle-head made such a dreadful noise that I was sure each visitation meant that we were overwhelmed.

Captain Riggs crawled up to where I was, and asked me if I had solved the problem of getting out.

“I don’t guess you’ll make much of a job of it,” he whispered. “It’s an even bet they’ve got a ton of chain lashed over the hood; and, if ye dug through the wood, ye’d need a file after that. Come on down and have a bite. I found a sack of old sea-biscuit and a bottle of water stowed in one of the spare bunks.”

I went below with him, and we made a sorry meal of mouldy biscuit that had been in the forecastle a year or more; and shared the water, which was satisfying—even though warm, greasy, and unpalatable. Rajah had gone to sleep in an upper bunk, and we ate in silence for a few minutes.

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I was on the verge of despair as I saw that Riggs had given up, in spite of my efforts to hearten him. After the stories he had been telling that very evening about mutinies and wrecks and fights against odds, it seemed unbelievable that he should submit so tamely to Thirkle and his men. As he sat opposite me on the sea-chest and ate mechanically of the broken bits of biscuits, I observed him closely, and it seemed that he had aged twenty years in the last few hours.

His hair seemed whiter, his face grayer, the lines in his cheeks and forehead deeper, and his chin and jaw had lost their firm set which proved him a commander of men. As I considered all these things and saw the pity of it I forgot his age and was angered. I was bound to make him do something—put my youth and strength and hopefulness and fighting spirit with his experience and knowledge of ships and find a way out.

I determined to make him do something, anything, rather than mope and whine, even if I had to threaten him with his own pistol, which I had taken from him without so much as asking him for it. He didn't want it, anyway.

"Now, Captain Riggs," I began, "I know you have been a fighter all your life, and I know you can suggest something better than—"

"That's right," he broke in, raising his hand to stop me. "I've lived too long, and my fighting days are over. My years have come upon me all at once, and they are a burden—too much of a burden to bear and fight, too. I am weary from fighting. I'm older than I thought I was. I have been in these waters too long, and these latitudes take the mettle out of a man when he has reached my age.

"I never felt it as I do now, and I guess the owners knew it, and that's why I didn't get one of their new boats. But this ain't my fault, Mr. Trenholm. Don't you see it ain't my fault? I should have known what was aboard, and then I could have been prepared. As it is, this thing is too big for me now, and I'm ready to strike my colours. It's my honour that frets me now."

"Your honour! It wouldn't be the first ship that's been lost, captain, even if it is the first one you have lost, and—"

"I know what you are thinking of, boy. You think I'm afraid. Well, I'm ready to die—that's nothing. If I thought I could save you and Rajah here, I'd do it—it is my duty. I've been in harder places than this, and I was a hard man to handle; and I've had my battles and mutinies and worse, some of 'em before ye were born, lad. They all weigh me down now, and it's not what's ahead of me that's fretting me now; but what's after me—the things they'll say, some of 'em who don't know me well. Don't you see, they'll think I made off with the gold?"

I hadn’t considered the case in that light; but now I saw that he was worrying of what would be said, while I was thinking only of my life—he considered that he would lose life and honour; and, as he still had his New England conscience, honour weighed deeper in his scales. I felt ashamed that I had planned to make his last hours harder.

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“I know how it will go,” he said. “It’s been done and told of before, and the master is always blamed; and this is no decent end for me. I’m known from Saddle Rocks to Kennebunkport as a brave man and a capable master, even if old.

“I stayed out here because I had a good billet with the Red Funnel people up to the time the Japs bought their ships. Then I took the *Kut Sang*, only for a year it was to be; but I held on longer, waiting to get a big ship to take back home, and then quit.

“My boy is a lawyer in Bangor—and smart, too—and I’ve got a daughter a schoolma’am in Boston, and they’ve both been begging me to come home; but somehow I hated to go back since my wife died.

“Mr. Trenholm, I don’t want to bother you with all this now; but it’s no decent end for me, I say. All the men scattered over the globe to-day, some that went as boys with me, will have to hear old man Riggs turned pirate at the last and scuttled his own ship. That’s how it will go, boy, and you can’t understand. Fight! I’d walk into hell in my bare feet, with never a thought of the way back, if I could die with an honest name—but this ain’t no way for me to go, along with a passel o’ gold!”

“Then, if you are concerned about what will be said of the mystery of the loss of the *Kut Sang*, there must be a way to let the world know of our end and the fate that overtook the ship, and at the same time a chance of making trouble for our Mr. Thirkle after we are gone.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Some message,” I said, more to find something to interest him and brighten him. “The story of the *Kut Sang* and the Rev. Luther Meeker, Thirkle, the Devil’s Admiral, or whatever he is called, should be told; and, as it is my business to deal in information, I can write it all down, and we will seal it in this bottle and set it adrift. How’s that, captain?”

“A good scheme,” he said, smiling at me. “The very thing, Mr. Trenholm. I have some papers and envelopes here in my jacket, and a stub of pencil for the log-book, and while you are at your writing I’ll fashion a stopper for the bottle and a buoy.”

We poured out the last of the water in a pannikin and kept it for Rajah, and I ripped open a couple of envelopes and set to work on them with a stub of pencil, while Captain Riggs took my knife and began to whittle a piece of board.

I put down briefly but clearly the story of how the Rev. Luther Meeker, and Buckrow, Long Jim, and Petrak came aboard the *Kut Sang*, giving their descriptions as well as I could remember. Then I told of the killing of Trego, and all that had happened aboard

the steamer, and about the gold and the plight we were in, “skeletonizing” the narrative, much as if it were to be filed as a news-cable.

Then I put down the names and addresses of my relatives, and those of Captain Riggs. It was a queer job, writing one’s own obituary in the forecastle of the old *Kut Sang*, putting down the names of streets in Boston and Bangor and San Francisco, and making our wills—which we did when we found the space at our disposal getting scant, although I had little enough to give or bequeath, chiefly a pair of Chinese jingals and a good pair of riding-boots with silver spurs.

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It took a deal of time, for I wrote in the smallest possible characters, and was careful to make them legible—no small task, considering that the vessel was still rolling and pitching, although it grew calmer toward morning.

We did not have any method of measuring the time, for no bells were struck—at least, none that we heard—and Captain Riggs did not have his watch with him, for he had not been back to his cabin from the time I saw him leave it with Harris to explore the mysterious cargo in the storeroom.

As I wrote I was hammering my brains for some solution of the problem before us; for, although I took pains to make the story complete, I was hoping that Captain Riggs would finally hit upon some scheme which would release us from the forecastle and give an opportunity to do battle with our captors.

I took a measure of pride in writing the story, too, for I knew there was a good chance that it might be my last, and I had visions of it being printed in the newspapers some day.

“I’ll cut a little pennant from Rajah’s *sarong*,” said Riggs with a grin, and he reached up to the sleeping boy and hacked off a bit of his skirtlike garb. “We’ll make a fancy job of it, Mr. Trenholm, while we’re at it. The backs of those sheets, with the stamps and postmarks and the address to me, will be good proof that it is not a hoax.

“Folks don’t put much stock in bottles washed up by the sea these days, and we’ll have to offer a reward for having it forwarded, say to my son, and then he’ll be sure. I guess he’d give a hundred dollars to know what become of his old daddy—and the girl, too. Put that in, Mr. Trenholm.”

“And I’ll put in as a sort of P.S. that Captain Riggs intends to make a fight for his ship as soon as he has signed this,” I said.

“You better not put that in,” he said wearily. “It ain’t so, and I’m something of a churchman, even if it was only to please the wife. I’m no hypocrite, and I don’t want to have anything in that sounds like a brag. Just sign it and let it go at that.”

“No, I’ll put that in,” I insisted, looking at him seriously. “I won’t have them say after getting this that you gave up and took your fate too easily, which they might. You have been a fighter all your life, and I know you don’t intend to quit now.

“Here is what I’ll say: ’Captain Riggs wishes it understood that, after setting this message adrift, he and Trenholm and Rajah determined to die fighting rather than go to their doom at the pleasure of Thirkle and his men. As this is launched upon the waters of the China Sea, the whole story is not told, and we are confident that the Devil’s Admiral and some of his men will yet die.’”

“Oh, that sounds like a boy, Mr. Trenholm—you better leave it out.”

“No, sir. This is my story, and you will please sign it now for what it is worth.”

“It isn’t the truth,” he demurred.

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“But it is,” I said; and he signed it, and I knew that he was taking new hope.

He unscrewed one of the ports to leeward, and, although we let much water into the forecastle, he threw the bottle out at an opportune moment, and then slammed the port shut again.

“Mr. Trenholm,” he said, as he climbed down from the top bunk, dripping and smiling, “I guess you were right about what you wrote there last—I calculate that there’s a bit of a fight left in Captain Riggs yet, although I don’t for the life of me see what chance I’ve got of fighting anybody. But, if you’re ready to try, I’m ready to see what can be done.”

“I knew it, captain!” I cried, taking his hand, “If you’ll do the planning I’ll do the work, and we’ll beat them yet.”

CHAPTER XII

THE BATTLE ON THE BRIDGE

Now, it was all very well for Captain Riggs and me to sit down there in the forecastle of the *Kut Sang* and consider ways and means of saving ourselves and the steamer from the Devil’s Admiral; but, although we made many plans, we had to drop them all. There was no way out of the place except through the scuttle, and we worked at that and schemed about it; but the wooden frame was bound inside with steel ribs, and on the outside with chains, and we had no tools equal to the task. Nothing but a jack-screw could wrench the covering from the deck.

When the starboard ports turned gray with the light of morning we had given up. There was nothing to do but wait for something to happen, and all we could foresee was our doom in the vessel.

The sea had calmed, and Captain Riggs unscrewed one of the ports and looked out just as the sun popped up over the hills of the Philippine coast.

“Land!” shouted Captain Riggs, as he opened the port, and I climbed up on the bunks and opened a port for myself. “That’s the Zambales coast of Luzon, and they have been making a good easting all night; but we are running north now—see that point ahead? It’s really an island—the Little Sister, I am sure—and Dasol Bay lies to the north up the channel between the island and the mainland. He’s running to get into that channel behind the island and scuttle her there—he knows his business.”

In a few minutes the island stood clear of the coast, and I could make it out, low and green and fuzzy, with a rim of white sand running back to the fringe of the jungle and a ruffle of combers on the shingle. We could hear the boom of the waves ashore, beating at the base of the barren brown hills of the coast.

“He’s well off the track of the steamers here,” said Riggs, “but he won’t delay much longer now, unless he can get in behind the island and then he can take his own time, because he can pick up a sail before he is sighted through the ends of the channel. That island caps a little bay, and he’ll be snug as a bug in a rug to do his work. Let’s have a look on deck and see what’s up.”

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Rajah leaped out of his bunk, and, after looking around for a minute in confusion at his strange quarters, drank the water we had saved for him in the pannikin, and then put his face to a port-hole and surveyed the land.

I took the lead up the companion with the pistol ready, hoping that one of the pirates might be close to the tiny slit I had cut in the board and would offer a target. I applied my eye to the hole.

The Rev. Luther Meeker, still in his suit of duck and pongee shirt and battered pith helmet, just as I had seen him on the mole in Manila, was pacing the bridge in the calm, commanding way that marks the man accustomed to command. He was puffing contentedly at a cigar, and there was something amusing in the manner in which he cocked his head to one side to survey the sea and then the land with a critical eye.

From side to side he tramped, swinging on his heel at each end of the bridge like a grenadier sentry, and giving Petrak, who had the wheel, a stern look as he passed. Buckrow was at the port end of the bridge, with a glass to his eyes scanning the rim of the sea; but Meeker, or Thirkle, kept aloof from his men, and he might well have been an admiral on the bridge of his flagship—the Devil's Admiral, indeed!

"Take a look at them," I whispered to Riggs, and made way for him at the scuttle peephole.

"Blast him!" raged Riggs as he saw the scene on the bridge. "I never thought I would live to see the like of that!"

"But how does he keep her engines going? The fireroom crew must know what has happened," I said.

"What's left of 'em do," said Riggs. "He's likely got a few men below who think they will get a share of the loot if they keep up steam. Perhaps the Filipino chief is at his post keeping the chinkies going—leave that to the devil on the bridge—he knows his game."

He drew back into the companion, and I looked out again. I could see a pair of shoes sticking out past the donkey-engine, just abaft the foremast; but the machinery hid the man from me. Presently a strip of canvas fluttered in the breeze, and Long Jim stood up, with a sail-needle and a length of sail-twine in his teeth, and cut out a square of tarpaulin on the deck.

"Look at the cockney," I said to Riggs. "I can't make out what he is up to."

He studied the sailor for a minute, and then drew back and whispered:

"Sewing sacks to carry the gold away. They are getting ready to scuttle her. The starboard boats are hanging in the davits, ready to lower away when we are behind the

island. There is a channel a mile wide in there, and deep soundings. He may find an anchorage until night and then get away in the dark, but I'm afraid he won't take that long, because he knows a coast-guard cutter is liable to spy him out. This coast is being watched pretty close by the navy and the Japs and the customs, because there is so much blockade-running."

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“It may be that he is planning to maroon us on the island.”

“That wouldn’t be his way. The Devil’s Admiral never leaves a man alive. Four men will get out of the *Kut Sang*, and you know who they are. He ain’t the man to take a chance of meeting you or me, or even letting us tell about him. It’s ‘Dead men tell no tales’ with him, you may be sure of that.”

I took my turn at the little window, which was not wide enough to let the muzzle of my pistol through, or I would have fired upon them. They each wore a pair of pistols, big, black, long-barrelled weapons. Thirkle’s were quite plain, for he swung them from a belt over his white jacket, as I could see when he approached the openings at each end of the bridge where the ladder-heads ended.

“It will take about an hour at this clip to have the island abeam,” said Riggs, after he had gone below and looked through the ports. “They are driving her again. Likely he has an agreement with the black gang to stick to the fireroom; but whatever it is he won’t keep his word. It’s death for every man Jack of ’em when he has finished with ’em.”

Long Jim was plying the needle again, and Buckrow and Thirkle were holding a conference at the wheel and studying a chart. I could see the red head of Petrak nodding to them as they submitted some point to him; but he kept his eyes ahead of the steamer, evidently steering for some point of land. Thirkle finally folded up the chart and tucked it in his pocket; and Buckrow took his post again at the port end of the bridge and studied the western horizon.

I saw a Chinese in blue nankeen come out of the starboard passage below the bridge and cautiously look up at the bridge. He did not see Long Jim, so intent was he on looking up; but when the cockney drew a pistol he screamed shrilly and fled into the passage, his long queue sticking out behind like an attenuated pennant, so swift was his flight.

Thirkle and Buckrow came down to the fore-deck and gathered the sacks which Long Jim had fashioned. Before they went down the ’tween-decks companion Thirkle looked forward toward the forecastle and hesitated a minute, as if he were in doubt about our being secure enough. But he went down after the others, and we heard hammering behind the bulkhead again.

Petrak remained at the wheel, a jaunty figure with a white canvas cap on his flaming head and one of Captain Riggs’s best Manila cigars between his teeth. He managed the wheel with one hand, holding a pistol ready with the other, and looking the ship over from time to time.

“They are steering to pass in behind the island,” said Riggs, as I went below. “It is about four miles ahead now, and they are at half steam again, because the reefs are bad in

here—coral-banks and ledges running out from the mainland. When they get her in the lee of the island they'll make a quick job of her, and us, too."

"If I don't make a quick job of them with the pistol," I said.

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“You keep three bullets—you’ll need them when the green water is spilling in here,” and he gave me a significant look.

Despair was upon him again, but I could not bring myself to feel that death awaited us. Weak and hungry and thirsty, life was still strong, and the desire to live, if only to have vengeance on Thirkle and his men, kept up my courage.

“There is some way out—some way we can get the upper hand. When the water comes in I’ll be ready to give up, but not until then.”

He smiled sadly and shrugged his shoulders, looking pityingly at Rajah, who was playing at some sort of a game with grains of rice in a pannikin. We went up the ladder again to see what the pirates were about, for it was quite still in the hold, and silence seemed more ominous than a telltale clatter.

Buckrow and Long Jim came up with a bulging sack slung in a rope. Thirkle gave them a hand up the ladder to the boat-deck, but he let them do the hard work.

Petrak slipped a lashing over the wheel and leaned over the bridge-rail, grinning down at them, and made some remark which caused Buckrow to laugh so inordinately that he dropped his end of the rope, and the sack fell on the head of the ladder. He pulled it up on the deck, and, thrusting his hand into his trousers-pocket, drew out a handful of gold coins and hurled them up at Petrak.

They struck the remnant of the storm-apron and rattled to the fore-deck, some of the glittering disks pelting Thirkle, who was halfway up the ladder. Petrak threw out his hand to catch the coins, and I saw that his wrists were still encircled by steel bands.

Thirkle reprimanded them, and Petrak went back to the wheel, and Buckrow and Long Jim hoisted the sack into the boat and stowed it. While Petrak held the spoke of the wheel with one hand, he rasped at the iron upon it with a file, cutting away the heavy manacle.

Riggs and I took turns at the scuttle, and saw Thirkle and Buckrow and Long Jim carry up a dozen or more sacks. Some were put in the second boat, farther aft and out of the range of our vision, hidden as it was from us by the corner of the superstructure.

During the time they were below we could hear them smashing the treasure-chests. While they were busy in the storeroom I hacked away at the scuttle-board, which was thick and of hard wood, well seasoned by continual wetting and drying in the tropic sun.

To make matters worse, I found that it was full of brass nails driven in from the outside, and Riggs told me some sailor had put a border of nails round the board and made a crude nameplate by spelling out the name of the vessel with nail-heads. The blade of

my knife encountered these nails, and I made slow work of cutting a hole large enough to admit the muzzle of our pistol.

When they had all the gold up they stowed the boats with tinned goods and casks of water. Then they opened a bottle of wine and drank its contents, and Thirkle hurled it toward the forecastle, and it smashed on the iron plates within a few feet of us. Buckrow and Long Jim disappeared in the saloon after this, and Thirkle looked his chart over again and motioned to Petrak to alter the helm.

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“He’s heading her in for the strait,” said Riggs. “He had better allow for that tide-rip that comes down through, or she’ll have her head swung round at this speed before he knows where he is at.”

The steamer seemed to be gradually losing headway, and the throbbing of her engines was becoming less pronounced. I observed, also, that the smoke from her funnel was beginning to hang over her and curl down upon the bridge. But, in spite of her slowing down, the musical ripple at her bow increased, and Riggs said it was due to the set of the current against us, which came through the channel very strong, as the island cut out a deep current and brought it to the surface of the sea in the narrow passage between the island and the mainland.

“It’s a bad hole in there,” he said. “He needs more speed to handle her right in there and—”

“Something is up!” I told him, as I saw Thirkle listen a second and step quickly to the engine-room telegraph and throw it over.

I could hear the sharp clang of the bell; but the next instant there was a terrific roar, and the superstructure began to vomit steam through the engine-room skylight just abaft the little wheel-house.

“The boilers!” yelled Riggs. “She’s blowing off, and there is a steam-pipe gone, or somebody below has opened her whole insides up.”

The *Kut Sang* was a white volcano amidships, and I saw Thirkle yelling frantically, and Buckrow and Long Jim appeared in the passage below and yelled to Thirkle, waving their arms, and then dashed up the ladder to the bridge.

Suddenly they started back and grouped themselves about Petrak at the wheel with drawn weapons, and the next instant I saw a half-dozen forms emerge from the welter of steam and dash at the pirates.

They were Chinese and Filipino stokers, but one of them seemed to be the leader, and he wore an engineer’s cap and was stripped to the waist. I saw the puffs of smoke from the pistols of the four pirates—Petrak put his back to the wheel and fired over Thirkle’s shoulder—but the awful racket of the steam-pipes drowned the reports.

Two of the Chinese fell at the first volley, and a third, evidently wounded, turned in his tracks and jumped over the rail. Another hacked viciously at Thirkle with a long knife, but he could not reach him. Thirkle stood with his feet wide apart, and his helmet on the back of his head and fired coolly and swiftly.

The Filipino in the engineer’s cap dropped the iron bar with which he had advanced in the rush, and put both hands to his stomach, and stood within six feet of Thirkle, looking

at him in a surprised way, and finally threw up his hands as if he had lost his balance and curled over backward to the deck.

A Filipino toppled over the bridge-rail and struck in a heap on the fore-deck, and lay still, but I could not tell whether it was the fall or a bullet that had killed him.

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One Chinaman slid down the ladder-rail whirling like an acrobat in the air before he landed, and another followed him, but they were the two last, and Buckrow and Long Jim started after them. The first started for the forecastle and began to throw off the chains, standing between me and the deck, so that I could not see what was happening for a minute. He worked frantically, jabbering all the while, and, as I thought, calling to his companion.

He couldn't have been at work more than a minute, but to me it seemed an hour or more, and I prayed that he might succeed in opening the scuttle, and I wondered at his surprise if he should throw back the sliding-board and see me come out with upraised pistol.

But a pistol spoke close at hand, and the narrow slit in the board let in the sun again and I saw the Chinaman fall just outside. Buckrow and Long Jim were running back to the bridge. Thirkle yelled something to them and they nodded and went through the starboard passage.

The uproar of the escaping steam was dying out, and I told Riggs what I had witnessed. The Filipino in the cap was the chief engineer, and we knew that he had led a last sortie against the pirates, determined to die in a last effort to defeat them rather than be shot down or left to drown.

"Sally Ann!" said Riggs. "If that chinkie had cleared away the chains there we might have got out of here and put in a hand's work, too. He won't have steerage way on her —her engines have gone dead now. Feel her swing with that current?"

"They've started again," I said, feeling a tremor in the vessel.

"Here we go!" cried Riggs. "They've opened her sea-valves!"

We listened and stared at each other for a minute while the water sucked and gurgled and the *Kut Sang* began to vibrate from the flood pouring into her. Gradually her head began to swing to seaward away from the island, as the current caught her, and, as I looked out I saw Thirkle and Buckrow in the forward boat, lowering away.

"There they go!" I yelled, and we dashed below, hoping that we would have a shot at them as they got clear of the vessel, but, as the ship was swinging outward, and our ports were so far forward, we were kept swinging away from them, and all we had was a bare glimpse of the two boats pulling away from the ship, one of them being towed.

The island was close at hand, a half-mile or more, although it seemed almost within reach, but we lost sight of that in a minute as the head of the *Kut Sang* stood toward the open sea, and her stern began to settle.

“They had to get out of her when Pedro cut her engines out and lowered her boilers. It rushed their game, because he wanted to hide her in behind the island, but it won’t make much difference now, Mr. Trenholm—hear that? She’s filling rapidly.”

We were drifting broadside in the current now, sweeping down the coast and sinking at the same time.

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I ran up the companion and began to struggle with the scuttle-board again, hoping that the Chinaman who was seeking shelter from the pirates' bullets had made it possible for us to escape. The board was looser, and I slipped it to one side nearly an inch, and then it jammed again.

"Trenholm! Trenholm!" yelled Riggs frantically from below.

"What is it?" I called, hating to lose a second in my efforts to get the board free.

He did not answer, and I called to him again. Before the words were out of my mouth I was sprawling on all fours on the deck below.

CHAPTER XIII

WE PLAN AN EXPEDITION

I had been thrown down the companion by an appalling crash and a sudden lurch of the steamer as she careened to port. It seemed to me that the bottom plates were being ripped out of her and she was settling on her side with a succession of thumps which I took to be her last effort to keep afloat. The sea was almost to the open ports on the port side; and, as I tried to gain my feet on the tilted deck of the forecastle, I fell against the outboards of the line of bunks.

"She's aground!" screamed Captain Riggs at me. "She's gone smash flat into a bed of coral! See that green streak running away from us to seaward? That's a reef running out from the mainland and we've piled up on it, and if we don't slip off we're safe until it comes on to blow."

He ran to the starboard side and climbed the bunks to look through the ports there.

"It's all around us! Hear her settling? She's making a bed for herself in the coral-patch and she's not taking any more water. She's safe as a church, Mr. Trenholm. If the tide don't lift her off enough to pull her into deep water, or the current swing her, she'll hold until the sea comes up; but she's pretty deep and lays steady. She'll break up right here."

"That's small comfort for us," I said, nursing my bruises.

"They've gone in behind that point and made a landing," said Riggs, still looking through the port. "We'll be out of here in jig-time now. Where be my matches? Here! You and Rajah fish for water with these tins on a string, and wet down all these rags. Pull all the water in here you can."

He lit the slush-lamp again, and I wondered what he was about. I was not quite sure whether he knew of a way to get out of the forecastle, or had lost his reason. He was all bustle and business in a minute.

“I thought we wanted to keep the water out,” I remarked.

“Stow that talk and obey orders,” said Riggs sharply, digging grease out of the can of the lamp with his fingers and picking the wick to make it burn better. “Look lively now with that water and I’ll show you a trick or two now that they’ve abandoned ship. I’ll take a hand in this business myself.”

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

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“Burn the cussed scuttle off a mite at a time. Grease a bit of the board and then hold the flame of the lamp on it, and, when it gets too lively, heave some water on and put it out and begin again. Haul a couple of barrels of water in here and spill it under the bunks so we can git at it with the pans if the fire starts to git away from us. Clap on, man; we need every minute now.”

Rajah and I rigged them with strings and set to drawing water through the port-holes on the port side, which was not a hard job, for the swells came within a couple of feet of our hands as we held the tins outside. We filled sea-chests, the rubber crowns of a couple of old sou’westers, and dumped water through the slats of the tiers of bunks so that it lodged in the angle between the side of the ship and the deck.

While we were at this task Riggs was up in the scuttle, and from time to time we could hear the crackle of flames, and then the hissing of the water as he extinguished the burning planks. The thick smoke came down the companion and burned our eyes and nostrils as it escaped through the ports.

Riggs came down every few minutes to get a supply of water. He was black as a chimney-sweep, but he reported good progress and grinned at our discomfort from the smoke and heat.

Finally we heard Riggs hammering at the charred board with the belaying-pin.

“I’ve got it through!” he yelled to us from a smoking shower of black fragments of the board, and I ran up to him and saw the sun through the chains around the frame of the scuttle. The links were glowing with heat and we dashed water on them. In a short time we had wrenched them apart so Rajah could get through the strands. Then he threw off the bars of our prison, and Riggs and I gained the hot plates of the sloping fore-deck, crawling over the body of the dead Chinese, which we rolled into the sea.

“They are clean gone,” said Riggs, crawling up to the starboard side and scanning the island and the channel. “They went in behind that point, and it’s a good chance they’ll be back if they see she’s still afloat.”

“Let them come,” I said. “Are there any more weapons in the ship?”

“I’ve got a few guns stowed where even Thirkle couldn’t find ’em, or at least Harris hid some away. Always afraid of mutiny, he was, and he got one with a vengeance, poor chap. It’s my ticket to a penny whistle we’ll find Thirkle and his men on the island.”

“Then you’ll go after them, captain?”

“Well, I’d rather guess so,” he said vehemently. “I’m on fair ground now, and if they don’t come back to burn the ship I’m the man to hunt them out of their holes ashore. But what I’m afraid of is they will hide the stuff and make for the mainland, or put off to

the north in the boats to see if they can't be picked up by some steamer for the north coast.

"They'll report the *Kut Sang* lost, and Thirkle'll figure on getting back here before folks are suspicious. Of course the people who shipped that gold may smell a rat and keep tab on him, but he'll see that he gets clear. He'll report her foundered far from here—-leave that to him. I doubt if he'll quit this place as long as he sees a foot of the *Kut Sang* above water. Are you game to go after him, Mr. Trenholm?"

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“I’m with you to the end of the whole game—I want to see it played out now, win or lose.”

“I knew you would. I suppose I’ve been a bit of an old woman, Mr. Trenholm, but I never looked for the likes of what was aboard last night. There I was, alone, you might say, blind as an owl on what was going on around me, and when things began to go bad they had you mixed in it so I took you for one of ’em. They had me flat aback for a time there—I didn’t know my own name from Sally Ann’s black cat. It looked like the whole ship was against me, and, when I saw Harris go, I was clean out of soundings.”

I told him that he had realized the danger better than I did, and that I had not been hampered by the sense of responsibility or the possibility of disgrace.

“Oh, I lost my wits for a time there, and we can’t get away from it—I was all fuddled, but I’ll show ye I’ve got more fight in me than ye look for, if ye’ll see me through with it.”

“All or nothing,” I said. “We’ll give him a gamble for the whole pot now, and I think it’s time they got a run for their money. In my way of thinking they have had it too easy.”

“That’s business,” said Riggs. “Doggone my cats, but we’ll give ’em some lead to go with the gold or my name ain’t Riggs! We’ll find out if this Devil’s Admiral, or Thirkle, or the Rev. Luther Meeker, or whatever he calls himself, is so bad as he makes out to be—eh, Mr. Trenholm?”

We shook hands on the compact, lying there on the sizzling iron deck-plates that reflected the rays of the sun in shimmering heat-waves, making our exposed position intolerable after the thirst and smoke and hunger we had endured in the forecastle.

“Then that’s settled, Mr. Trenholm. Now we’ll have to step careful until I look up what’s left of the weapons, and we can’t know what traps they’ve laid for us about here. Come on, and keep close.”

We scrambled along the port side, taking care of our footing, for the rail-chains were stripped off the stanchions, and with the deck at an awkward angle there was danger of slipping into the water. Captain Riggs led the way up the saloon-deck ladder and we entered the passage.

The captain and Rajah went to his cabin, the first door, and I ran aft to my stateroom, hoping to find my pistols. The room was ransacked and my bag empty and the pistols gone. Some of my garments were thrown into the passage, and I got a duck suit, a pair of deck-shoes, and a cap.

“Here are my guns,” said Riggs. “Had ’em stowed down back of the chart-locker—three of ’em—and you’ll find a canister of ammunition for that big gun of yours in Mr. Harris’s

room. That gives us two guns apiece, and I guess we can give ’em some lively times if we come across their bows again.”

We belted on the weapons and hurried into the saloon, which we found a wreck. There were bundles of tinned meat on the table and a litter of ropes and bits of canvas. Bottles of mineral water had been hurled at the bulkheads and into the sideboard mirror. Curtains were torn down, table-covers gone, and the pivot-chairs smashed and the fragments piled in a corner, partly burned.

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“They were going to fire her,” said Riggs, “but that trouble with the black gang and the loss of steam made ’em change their minds. They were afraid the smoke would attract the attention of some passing ship. That’s once Thirkle made a mistake—we never would have got out of her if he had left this fire going.”

We gathered tins of biscuits and bottles of mineral water, and had a feast out of what the pirates had discarded. Rajah had his kris in the forecastle. While Captain Riggs and I enjoyed our cigars, Rajah went out on an exploring trip through staterooms and galley and in the bridge wheel-house.

“It’s near noon now, Mr. Trenholm, and we ought to get away in an hour or so. The boats they left are smashed, but I can rig a raft with hatch-covers good enough to take us to the island.

“We’ll take plenty of grub and water, and if they don’t give us a fight from shore before we land, we can cache our supplies and take our time looking for that sweet gang. We’ll keep out of sight as much as we can before we leave, and we might wait until dark, but I’m for getting off in jig-time, unless we see them coming back.”

“I would like to see Thirkle and the others rowing out here,” I said, having a mental vision of an ambuscade for them as they drew alongside in the boat.

“It’s ten to one they will if they ain’t too busy hiding the gold or having a fight over it. All I’m afraid of is they’ll get away from us in their boats; but before they leave it’s a sure thing they’ll take a look at the *Kut Sang* to see if she’s topside yet, and then come out to burn her—which means stand by to repel boarders for us.

“Likely they’ve got their eyes on us now, or on the ship, but we’ll keep a sharp lookout, and if they come snooping back we’ll blow ’em out of the water. If Thirkle sees the steamer ye can leave it to him to come back and see how we are and make a clean job of it. I’m not so sure he didn’t plan that, anyway. Devil of a fine joke we’ll make of it for him, if he does come out and thinks we’re still cooped up in the fo’c’sle.”

We set about the work of getting ready to leave the ship, keeping to the starboard side, which was low in the water and away from the island. Rajah was posted in the chart-room on the bridge with an old spy-glass Riggs dug up, and the black boy kept steady watch on the island and the channel, with an occasional turn to the open sea in the hope of raising a vessel.

The chronometers were gone, along with the other navigating instruments, the log-book, and manifests. The cabin clock was stopped at twelve, and Captain Riggs’s watch, which had hung over his bunk, was missing.

We found two dead Chinese in the galley, bullet-splintered woodwork, dried blood, and empty shells and burned rice on the galley stove. The ship's carpenter had barricaded himself in his workshop, a little deck-house on the after-deck. The door was open, and we gathered that he had deserted his stronghold when he heard the water rushing into the hold, but whether he had been shot or drowned we had no way of knowing.

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He had provided himself with a bucket of rice and bottles of water, evidently with the intention of preparing for a siege. Spent cartridges at the head of the stoke-hole ladder told of a desperate fight there, probably before the attack on the bridge by the engineer and his men.

But we wasted no time over these signs of what had happened during the night, simply observing them as we went over the vessel to see if any of the crew were in hiding, and seeking such things as might be of use in building the raft.

All the tools were carried forward, and I helped the captain get off the hatch-covers of the forehold, and he nailed them together with planks from the top of the cargo. In this way we made a rude catamaran some twenty feet long and five feet wide. A plank was put on its edge all around, making a low freeboard to hold our provisions and to serve as a protection against bullets in case the pirates should fire upon us while running ashore.

Life-lines were fastened to the sides, so we could take to the water in an emergency, and, with our bodies partially submerged, use our pistols to good advantage and offer poor targets. Captain Riggs seemed to foresee every possible danger, and went about his preparations to meet the pirates as calmly and methodically as if he were fitting out to go on a picnic.

Thirkle had taken every precaution to make the *Kut Sang* another mystery of the sea, without so much as a life-buoy being found with her name on it. We found the ring-buoys hacked to bits, especially that section of them which had the steamer's name painted on the side. The name painted on the two smashed boats had been ripped from their sterns, and everything that would float was locked securely in cabins or made fast.

Captain Riggs fashioned a sail out of a tarpaulin, and stepped a mast well forward, and with other things we took signal-pennants and a British ensign, and from the foremast of the *Kut Sang* he flew a signal of distress and a message in the international code about pirates or some such thing, so that, in case Thirkle should get away in the boat and be picked up, he would have a great deal of difficulty in explaining about himself if the same vessel should sight our coloured flags.

"Take a look and see that the boy ain't busy up there at a nap," said Riggs, and I mounted to the bridge, keeping well covered and to the seaward side of the chart-house. Rajah was wide awake, lying just inside the coaming of the chart-room door, chewing contentedly at his *betel*, and holding the spy-glass over the brass doorplate directed toward the island. He grinned at me as I entered through the door on the port side.

I took the glass and searched the horizon of the sea, but there was no sign of a sail or a smear of smoke; neither could I find any trace of the pirates on the island, which had a pile of volcanic rock rising out of its northern end. I sought for some sign of human habitation on the brown, bare hills of Luzon, baking in the sun, but that part of the coast was a wilderness, desolate and forbidding.

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The *Kut Sang* was lying secure as if in a dock, sprawled out on the coral floor of the sea like some dead thing, her stern completely under water, and her port rail, almost to the break of the forecastle head, at the crests of the gentle swells. The island gave us a lee from the strong current, but at the first sign of heavy weather she would break up.

A school of small sharks scouted around her, and one big fellow, with his fin out of water like a trysail, loafed at a distance, as if sure of his prey. The combers purred on the shining stretches of beach, and the ripples of the current whispered at the side of the vessel, and in the peace that surrounded us Riggs's hammer made a terrific clatter.

"Keep a sharp lookout, Mr. Trenholm," he called up to me. "I've got a job for'ard which must be attended to now, and I'll call for you in a bit of a while."

He went down the forecastle ladder with his arms full of new canvas, and by the time I had finished another cigar he was up again, beckoning to us. I went below to him, and he took me into the forecastle, and I saw what I knew to be the body of Harris sewed up and ready for burial.

"I know he'd want to go into the sea, rather than be buried ashore or be left here, so I've done the best I could for him," said the captain. "We'll take him along to deeper water, and, if you don't mind, we'll drop him away from the cattle that have gone down hereabout, and nothing will ever disturb him. I'll say some sort of a prayer."

We carried the body up and got the catamaran over the side and stowed with food and water and cigars and such things as Riggs knew we would need if we had to make a camp on the island.

I also wrote out a brief account of what had befallen us since leaving Manila, closing with the explanation that we were going after the pirates. We left this message between the covers of an old book, and nailed to the saloon table, with chalk arrows drawn on the floor and about the ship pointing toward it. There any person who should board the vessel in our absence would find directions to come to our assistance.

But about the gold we said nothing, simply stating that there had been a mutiny and that pirates had looted the ship, and offering a reward of ten pounds to each man in the party who should come to our rescue, and a thousand pounds, or five thousand dollars, in general to the man who should direct the party to seek us—this to be claimed either by the master of the vessel or the owners of the vessel which furnished the expedition.

Before embarking we had a hasty meal and drank a toast to our success and the confusion of the Devil's Admiral and his men. We looked to our pistols and ammunition, and, thrilled with the prospect of battle, felt better than we had since the death of Trego.

As the ship was listed over so far, we had little trouble in getting the raft into the water. As it floated alongside I felt like giving a cheer, but as Captain Riggs had done most of the work and had gone about his tasks as dispassionately as if he were building a hencoop, I stifled my emotions and held her off while Riggs stepped aboard.

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We caught the breeze from the land as soon as we cleared the steamer, and we rounded her bows and headed for the island, steering to pass the point of rocks which jutted out from the island into the channel. Riggs said that he would cut her in toward shore, or the coast of the mainland, before reaching the point, unless the pirates showed themselves.

“We’ll make a northing up the channel,” he said, “If they think we are getting away they may take after us in a boat, or fire from the shore; but if we show we are going to land they will keep hidden and take us by surprise. If we should head straight in now they would likely hide in the brush and pot-shot us as we land when we are in the surf; but you watch old Cap Riggs, and if we don’t give this Devil’s Admiral the fight of his life before this little party is wiped out, I’ll go back on the farm in Maine. He can’t come aboard me and perform like that without getting paid for it—Bloody Thirkle, Devil’s Admiral, nor nobody else. You watch my smoke, young man.”

The leg-o’-mutton sail pulled steadily and we slapped along through the water at a merry pace, with the water bubbling at the lee rail and the ripples frothing up through the seams in the planks. It was a wet craft, but we were in our bare feet, with our trousers rolled up.

Rajah was in the bow with his *sarong* twisted into a belt, and his black shoulders and arms bare to the sun, his head swathed in a turban made from a faded green port-curtain, giving him an outlandish aspect, reminding me of a pilgrim returning from Mecca.

“We’ve got Johnny Sharkee for an escort,” said Riggs, pointing aft, and I saw the fin of the big man-eater cutting the water in our wake. “If he don’t sheer off by the time we are ready to make a landing, we may have to give him a bullet or two, but I want to get in without any racket if I can.”

We were soon in deep water, and Riggs made fast his tiller while he read a burial service out of a pocket-testament, and we dropped the body of Harris over the side. It was a brief enough ceremony, and I was inclined to believe that Captain Riggs made it altogether too much a matter of little account, until I saw there was a tear in his eye, and he hastily used the binoculars on the island.

“Put your helm to starboard,” he directed. “I want to keep screened behind the point and gradually work in toward shore. Then we’ll make a quick run for it in near the point, if they don’t show by the time we have the inlet on this side of the rocks abeam. They probably went around the point, and we’ll hunt for ’em on that side if we can make a safe landing.”

We slopped along for another while, and slowly worked in until we had the beach less than five hundred yards away.

“Swing her for the open sea again,” said Riggs. “I’ll trim the sail, so if they are watching us they’ll think we are making a board to run out. Keep low, all hands, and at the first shot drop to the deck and keep covered, and we’ll manoeuvre out of reach until dark. If they press us, we’ll let ’em get up close, so they’ll think we have no weapons, and then we’ll open up on ’em at close range and settle it.”

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The raft went about clumsily on the other tack and heeled over so that her port side was deep in the water, which afforded us good protection from the island. We kept close watch on the edge of the jungle, but nothing menaced us, although the tangle of brush and creepers might have been full of men and we little the wiser.

“Over with the helm now, but not too quick, and hold her steady when she stands for the land and don’t get scared at a little surf. Keep her head on until she grounds, and then take to the water and rush ashore with some of the gear while I get the rigging down.

“See that you keep your pistols out of the water, and dump the gear in the brush. Rajah will hold her steady while we lighten her a bit, and then we’ll drag her in with the swells.”

The raft turned in a great circle and plunged for the rollers straight before the breeze. The captain cut away the stays just before she struck and we went into waist-deep water on a hard, sandy bottom. The heave of the incoming swells threatened to break her open in the middle as she swung broadside against the hard shingle.

We lost a few things which didn’t matter much, but, as our matches and biscuits and spare ammunition were sealed in oil cans, along with salt and cigars, most of such stuff as broke loose floated ashore and we saved it. Our chief difficulty was in saving the small casks of water and the sack full of cooking utensils and camp tools.

I danced a lively jig as I ran into the burning sand, and Riggs had to laugh at me as I retreated out of it and put on my shoes while standing in the water, but he took the same precaution. When we had hidden our stores just inside the fringe of the jungle, we sank the raft close under the ledge of rocks by filling her with big stones; and, while we were busy at this work, Rajah went up on the point and concealed himself among the boulders in a position where he could get a view of the beach beyond.

We kept our pistols slung about our necks on shortened belts, and, whenever the opportunity offered, watched the beach and jungle. We were kept on the alert, for we could not shake off the disconcerting feeling that we were being watched from the brush by the pirates, getting ready to ambush us at their leisure the minute we relaxed our vigilance.

“Look at Rajah,” I said to Riggs. “He looks like a big red and green and black lizard crouched up there in the rocks.”

“That black boy is a big help,” said Riggs. “The lad has more savvy than ye’d think. He seems to know just what to do in any emergency. And fight! A mad Arab that I shipped in Aden made for me one day in the Red Sea. I didn’t mind the chap till he was ’most on me, and a bit more and he’d had me. Rajah got him with the kris.

“Lucky for Thirkle the boy had lost it last night when they had me going over the bows! He was after Thirkle then, when a sea come over and upset him, and away went his knife and—”

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A pebble hit the water near us, and we looked up to see Rajah wildly waving his arms to us. He had spied something on the other side of the point.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PURSUIT ASHORE

Seizing our pistols we hurried ashore, and, when Rajah saw us coming, he turned his attention to the beach again and levelled the glass in the direction in which he had found danger.

The ledge was covered with loose fragments of soft volcanic stone, and Riggs and I had to be careful in making the ascent to the top of the ridge, for every time we sought a foothold we threatened to bring down an avalanche of debris, and, not knowing what Rajah had seen, or how close the pirates might be, we were afraid of giving the alarm with a crash of loosened rocks.

I gained the top first, and bracing myself between a couple of boulders, took a careful survey of the beach on the other side before crawling over to Rajah. The point was an angle in the shore, and the beach ran off sharply to the left, five hundred yards away.

The glare of the sun bothered me at first, and I thought the black boy had given us a scare for nothing, until I detected a movement in the fringe of the jungle close to where the shore line merged with the water of the channel. I watched it closely for a minute and made out the figure of a man moving cautiously.

Rajah wriggled himself over to me and I took the binoculars; and, when I had put them on the man in the distance, I saw Buckrow walking slowly in our direction with his head bent to the ground, as if searching for some object. He was so close in the glass that I could see the stripes in his cotton shirt and the buttons down the sides of his navy trousers.

“What is it?” gasped Riggs, breathing hard after his climb, and testing the rocks before he climbed up to where I was perched between two pinnacles of slatey stone.

“Can you see anything, Trenholm?”

“It’s Buckrow. He’s acting queerly, and I can’t make out just what he is doing. Take a look and see if you can tell.”

He took the glass and studied the pirate, who was loafing along in an aimless fashion, stopping every few steps to scan the hills of Luzon.

“He’s taking bearings on that mountain-peak or some other beacon,” said the captain. “He’s got a small compass.”

Without the glass I could see Buckrow get down on his knees in the sand and put something down before him. Then he stretched at full length, with his hands raised from his elbows to shade his eyes from the sun.

“He’s taking sights on the big peak,” said Riggs. “It looks to me as if they got a bearing on it from where they have stowed the gold, and Buckrow wants to get the same bearing from the beach and leave a marker as a middle point and a guide to where the treasure is concealed. The opposite reading of the compass from the bearing of the peak would be a leader to the cache. The bearing he takes, extended behind him, will run pretty near to where the gold is hidden. He’s particular as a Swede skipper with that sight he’s taking.”

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Finally, Buckrow crawled into the jungle again and disappeared. We waited for a quarter of an hour, keeping close watch on the beach, but we saw him no more.

“He made a little beacon with three stones,” explained the captain. “I ain’t sure just what it means, but Thirkle ain’t the man to leave such work to Buckrow. You can bet Thirkle will know how to find the gold again without asking Buckrow for the bearings. There is some deviltry afoot, and my best guess is that the pirates ain’t getting along none too well among themselves with that treasure.

“We’ll have to scout along the beach and pick up their trail and run ’em down carefully. Anyway, I’m glad they are here, but we’ll have to hustle along now or they’ll be cutting out of this, and if they get the boats into the water, we’ll have to let ’em go without a shot. That’ll give us a hard job, because we’ll have to take a chance of leaving the gold to get help and having them come back for it while we’re gone.”

We were well satisfied to know that the pirates were on the island and that we had found them before they were aware of our escape from the *Kut Sang*. Now we had a good opportunity to stalk them and give them a surprise.

We scrambled down from the burning rocks, and filled our pockets with extra ammunition and biscuits, and each took a small bottle of water. Our clothes were well dried, and, altogether, we found ourselves ready for battle.

“If we can crawl up on ’em while they are all together and turn loose with our pistols from cover, we’ve got ’em,” said Riggs. “The three of us ought to lay them out before they know what’s up.”

“We ought to even the numbers before our pistols are empty,” I said. “Two of them ought to drop at the first volley.”

“It’s no quarter, either, Mr. Trenholm, unless we have one of ’em, so he can’t do any damage, and then we might give him a chance to live so he can hang. But they’ll have no mercy on us if they get the upper hand.”

“I’d like to take Thirkle back to Manila alive just to get at his history.”

“I’d like to get Thirkle myself, Mr. Trenholm; but it’s Thirkle we’ll have to get first of all, if we can. He’s more dangerous than all the others, and, as you’re the best shot, keep plugging at him until you get him. But I’m afraid it ain’t going to be so easy as we figure out.

“One thing is in our favour: they don’t know we got out of the *Kut Sang*, and it’s likely they’ve been so busy burying the gold they don’t know the steamer is above water; but if they get a sight of her before we drop on ’em, then we’ll have a pretty pickle on our hands.”

The backbone of the point ran back into the jungle and we found it a hot and hard climb through the tangled vines and thick shrubbery. After we had reached the other side we crawled out on the beach and made a careful reconnaissance to the north.

We progressed slowly along the rim of sand, where the brush was sparse, allowing us to keep a good lookout ahead. We went along a few yards at a time, stepping out occasionally to reconnoitre the sand-reaches ahead. We found that the northern end of the island was higher than we supposed at first, a labyrinth of ravines sloping down to the sea.

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“We ought to pick up the trail before long,” said the captain. “We’ll probably find the boats in some of these gullies where the water comes close up; but they couldn’t very well cover their tracks if they pulled the boats out, and they wouldn’t be minded to be so careful, not looking for anybody to be after them this early.”

The captain and I kept close together, sneaking along with our pistols cocked, quiet as possible. Rajah brought up the rear, and in this formation we marched along, alert for danger. At times the rustle of a bush in the breeze put us on our guard, and we crouched down with muscles tense and pistols raised; or the flutter of a bird over our heads, or the shrilling of an insect, or the creak of a tree sounded an alarm which would delay us. But Rajah’s sense of hearing was very keen, and whenever we stopped from such sounds he would grin at us and push on ahead. We trusted a great deal to his woodcraft, for he was at home in the jungle.

Riggs was a few yards ahead of me when I saw him stop abruptly and motion me forward with a gesture of caution. He pointed through the bushes, and as I crept up I saw a white patch through a tangle of green leaves.

“It’s a boat,” he whispered. “It’s here they made their landing and we’ll have to go slow now. Maybe Buckrow or some of the others are about, sleeping or keeping watch.”

We crawled up carefully, letting Rajah go ahead to scout. We found both boats hidden in a patch of *colgon* grass, screened from the sea by a rank growth of vines and young bamboo. The boats were covered with freshly cut palm-leaves and a litter of dead, dry vines pulled from an uprooted tree. There was a little inlet running right up into the jungle, so the pirates had had little trouble in getting the boats ashore, using a block and tackle on a convenient cocoanut-palm.

The grass and bamboo thicket were well trampled, and we could see the marks in the moist ground where the sacks of gold had been piled. One of the sacks had evidently burst, for we picked up several gold coins in the mud, and found a sail-needle in a loop of twine where they had repaired the sack.

“Now,” whispered Riggs, when we were sure none of the pirates was lurking about, “we’ll take the plugs out of the boats and hide them and the oars, and take a look around to see where our lads have gone. It’s no easy job to go very far with that gold, and they won’t hurt themselves with work, knowing they have plenty of time and thinking there is nobody to be after them.”

We took the oars and boat-plugs quite a distance away up the beach and buried them in the sand opposite a tree of peculiar formation, and then began to skirt the territory around the boats to pick up the trail of the pirates. We found where several bamboo poles had been cut close to the dry, rocky bed of an old stream, and the remnants of ropes.

“They cut these poles to pack the sacks away,” said Riggs. “Their cache can’t be far away and we’ll have to work like cats now.”

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The old water-course led back into high ground through a canon, and there were unmistakable signs that the pirates had followed the waterway. Patches of sand where pools had formed during the rainy season were full of tracks in both directions, and we knew they had made several trips from the boats up the canon, and we set out upon the trail.

We let Rajah take the lead this time, for he had a way of getting through the overhanging branches silently, and his bare feet moved among the loose stones and sand with as little noise as a snake might make. Bent nearly double with his kris gripped in his right hand he kept in advance of us. We might easily have been taken for pirates ourselves as we skulked along, with our pistols raised, crawling under low bushes, dodging behind tree-trunks, and peering ahead into the dim places of the jungle.

In spite of the shade it was hot in that ravine. Labouring under the excitement of the man-hunt, and suffering from loss of sleep and the weariness of the siege we had undergone in the steamer, the heat weakened us.

The bed of the stream, full of dead twigs and loose stones, in places a succession of steps where there had been cascades in the torrential little river, was a hard road. It would have been hard enough to travel with no efforts at caution, but we were forced to pick every step, and keep bent low or fall flat to avoid a fall and racket.

Captain Riggs made hard going of it, and had to stop every few yards to regain his breath. Although he made no complaint, I suspected that his heart was troubling him, for he kept putting his free hand to his side, and when he got out of breath his face took on a purplish tint.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to rest a bit,” he whispered to me during one of these attacks. “I’ll be all right in a little while, but I’m too old to keep up to the pace of you and the black boy there.”

He crawled into the brush a few feet and lay down, and I saw he had about reached the limit of his efforts for the day. He was more exhausted than I had realized. We called Rajah back, and while Riggs was resting I went ahead a way, with the idea of watching for the pirates to return and preventing them from surprising us.

“Don’t go too far or stay too long,” cautioned the captain, as I set out. “We ought to keep close together, Mr. Trenholm, and fight together.”

Assuring him that I had no intention of leaving him with Rajah, I went up the trail a few rods, and as I was about to turn back I saw a level stretch ahead, where the trail of the pirates led away from the bed of the stream into a patch of high, thick grass. Thirkle

and his men had cut a narrow lane through this grass by trampling down the stalks, and my curiosity got the better of my caution, and I decided to explore a little farther.

Stooping low, I ran through this open space and gained the jungle on the other side and found myself near a ledge or low, rocky cliff that was so overgrown with rank weeds and vines and giant ferns it was hardly noticeable until I was close against the wall.

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The cliffside was damp and green with mosses, and the ground was moist and springy. The cool of the place was grateful after the heat of our climb up the rocky bed of the creek, I was about to return and urge Captain Riggs to press on to this place when I heard the subdued murmur of voices away to the right and the swishing of foliage.

I was puzzled and alarmed to discover that the voices were in the direction I had come from, or back across the trail. Fearing that the pirates were returning to the boats by some short route which might take them to where Riggs was hidden, I ran through the grass lane again, and, finding that the persons I was stalking were still farther away, I left the trail and sneaked some twenty yards into the foliage, anxious to see who they were and what they were about.

They were making slow progress, seemingly going a few yards, and then stopping to talk in low tones, when they would go on again, and, by moving ahead while they were pushing through the brush and proceeding with caution while they stopped, I rapidly overtook them, although they were a good distance off the trail.

“Keep over to port,” I heard Long Jim say. “Mind them brambles, or ye’ll have the eyes of me bloomin’ well knocked out! I’m all skinned about the neck from ‘eavin’ away at these poles. Drop it a bit, Red.”

CHAPTER XV

TWO THIEVES AND A FIGHT

There was a metallic thud as they let down a burden, which I knew must be a sack of gold. I lay quiet for a minute, and then began to wriggle through the brush to get a glimpse of them, and, in case it proved to be the camp, learn what might be the most advantageous method for our attack.

“My back is broke,” I heard Petrak whine. “What with packin’ the whole blasted cargo into the hills and this jaunt now. Why couldn’t he leave it close to the beach, I want to know? Who wants to be packin’ it out again some day like a coolie? Snug enough, I say, close down to the water, and who’s to know? Think we was buryin’ of it for Kingdom Come! Fine job he’s makin’ of it!”

“’E’s no bloody monkey, Thirkle ain’t,” said Long Jim. “It’s us that’s the bloomink idiots! ’My last ‘aul,’ says ’e. ’Your last haul, ‘ell!’ says me to him. I tells him to mind the rest of us ’as a ’and in the gold as well as in the gittin’ of it. Ye think ‘e’s goin’ to let us in on this? Not Thirkle, Reddy.

“It’s every bloody man for ’imself now, and the devil take the ’indmost, which he will, I say. Thought ’e’d ’ave the whole of it all to himself, did he? I knowed ’e’d give us dirt

when it come to some big cut like this, and that's why I'm for gittin' mine and goin' on with it this wise. 'Eave up, Reddy, and skip for it."

I crawled up and peered through the bushes just as they were shouldering a bamboo pole from which was slung the sack of gold. They went on, and I followed them, confident that they would lead me to Thirkle's camp, although the direction of their march puzzled me; and I could make no sense of their complaints other than that they disliked the labour of transporting the gold.

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As I fell in behind them, following almost in their tracks, I discovered that they were following no trail, but were making a new way to the beach. And when they came to where the going was easy they rushed ahead in such a panic that I suspected they were in flight from Thirkle, and when they began to argue over the direction they should take I realized that they were running away from Thirkle. They were stealing a sack of the gold and making for the boats to escape with it.

“Bear to port, I say!” said Long Jim. “Keep off the old road, or ye’ll have the beggar after us. Keep to port if ye know what’s good for us.”

They let down their burden again, and I saw Long Jim stoop to peer back; but I was off on their flank again, and kept well concealed.

I was in a quandary now as to what to do. It might be better for us to let them escape, for then we would have only Thirkle and Buckrow to fight, and a sack of gold mattered but little. Yet I knew that they might take both boats; and then Captain Riggs and I and Rajah would be marooned on the island, except for the raft, which was not a fit craft to put to sea in.

We would be but little better off on the mainland, and it would be weeks, probably months, before we could be rescued by a vessel, or could reach a native town on the coast. I had a mind to fire on them; but I did not know where Thirkle was, and I was afraid of Captain Riggs getting lost if he set out in search of me on hearing the shots.

“Told ye that, did he?” asked Long Jim. “Told ye to do for me, hey?”

“That was the lay,” said Petrak. “Told me he’d send ye down the trail with me, and to keep drawed up close to ye; and when I see my chance to hook a knife into ye, and be sure and make a clean job of it.

“But I’m no man for that, Jim. Mind when ye split a bob with me in Riccolo’s boardin’-house in St. Paul’s Square? I don’t do for no man what split a bob with me, and we was shipmates before we ever knowed Thirkle; and we’ll be shipmates again, Jim.”

“With this ’ere?” asked Long Jim. “Ye think I’d look at a bloody ship short of bein’ owner myself, when we get away with this sack of guineas? It’s a pub for the two of us in Liverpool, down near the Regent Docks, like gentlemen, or I’m a beggar.”

“Blow me if I didn’t forget about the gold!” said Petrak, laughing. “But I meant it the way of shipmates, Jim: and that’s why I couldn’t do for no such as he said. ’Hook yer knife in him, quick and sharp, under the kidneys,’ says Thirkle to me. He says he’ll make a gent of me, being as there would be only himself and Bucky and me left. There’d be upwards of ten thousand pounds, man and man, share and share alike, and all the same.

“That’s Thirkle for ye, Jim—that’s Thirkle. It was all fine long as we didn’t make no great hauls, just enough for a bit of a good time ashore; but now we’re rich, and he wants to shut us honest chaps that helped get it out of the cup, up.

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“I’ll take this sack for mine and split fair with ye, Jim; and it’s better than Thirkle would give the two of us, and I ain’t savin’ as how he wouldn’t slit our throats in the bargain to get back again what little he give. We best give him a wide berth, and he’ll do for Bucky, too; mind what I say.”

“That ’e will,” said Long Jim. “’E’s thick with Bucky now, but mind yer eye when ‘e gits Bucky close hauled goin’ ’ome. Think Bucky’ll ever find ’is way back to this place? Thirkle’ll do for ’im—right ye are, Red—just as ’e’d done for the two of us, Red.”

“Bucky was a good sort, too.”

“We was all good sorts,” said Jim. “We was all good sorts and fine men, Reddy, when the bloomink loot was coming and there was windpipes to slit, and ’e had to ’ave ’ands to do the work for ’im. Ye mind what he told me, Reddy?”

“What was it Thirkle told ye, Jim? I’d give a bob to know. Was it about me, Jim?”

“Tells me the same bloody thing ’e told ye,” said Jim, shutting one eye and making a grimace to impress Petrak.

“What’s that, Jim? I don’t remember of what ye mean.”

“Tells me to do for ye down the trail.”

“The beggar!” said Petrak.

“Gawd strike me blind if ’e didn’t! ’Take a walk for yerself down the trail with Petrak,’ he says. ’Mind when ye get a chance and ’ook a knife in his kidneys, and do it neat and clean; and then there’ll be only three of us to cut this pile ’ere three ways—me, Bucky, and yer own self, Jim.’

“That’s what ’e said, Reddy; strike me blind! Like you did, I says I’ll do it. Ye see his gyme? We’d do for each other in a fight, and so take the job off ’s ’ands. Buckrow and ’im think it’s done now; but ’e’ll get Bucky at the last, too, or I’m a beggar.

“That’s ’is gyme, Red—do for all of us and ’ave the gold all to ’imself—and no sailormen what know what ’e’s been up to out ’ere coming around to tap on ’is window of a night when ’e’s asleep and ask for the price of a drink, or ’e’ll have the police down on ’im and tell Scotland Yard’ e’s the Devil’s Hadmiral. He wants the pile to ’imself, and never a bit more does ’e care for the likes of us than for the throats we’ve cut for ‘im for the gettin’ of it all.”

“Sure,” said Reddy. “He wants it all for himself, to be a fine gentleman and a church member and have his tipple and fine eatin’. We better move on a bit now, Jim, or they’ll be after us.”

They shouldered the pole again and went on, and I followed them for a time, trying to estimate the position of Captain Riggs on the trail from where I was; but in the excitement of following Petrak and Long Jim I had lost my bearings.

Their course through the jungle had been devious and without much clearness as to a general direction, for first one would advise one way, and then the other another; and there were times when they had been compelled by the brush and gullies to go out of their way.

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But I had a general idea that by turning sharply to the right I might come across the trail, and, even if it happened to be below where the captain and Rajah had stopped, I could soon come up with them.

There was nothing to gain by keeping after Reddy and Long Jim, now that I was sure they were running away from Thirkle's camp rather than toward it. I thought it would be much better to let them go than to fire upon them, and so either alarm Captain Riggs or warn Thirkle and Buckrow that there were others they had not counted upon on the island.

Even Petrak and Long Jim might not get away very easily when they found the oars and boat-plugs gone. I reasoned that if we could come upon Thirkle and Buckrow, and make short work of them, we might even overtake the pair of thieves and capture or kill them.

As we went along the jungle thinned, and we came into a forest where the trees were sparse and there was little underbrush; and, as there was an open space ahead, I concluded not to cross it, but to wait and see them go out of sight, and then try to pick up the trail. When they entered the clearing they dumped the sack and fell upon the ground, and as they lay looking in my direction there was nothing for me to do but drop behind a convenient shrub and wait for them to go on before I moved.

They lit cigars and fell to gossiping, evidently in some argument, for their gestures betrayed their vehemence, although I could not make out what they were saying. They continued the conversation until I lost my patience, and began to begrudge the time I was wasting to no advantage, while Captain Riggs was probably fretting about me, and might go away to search for me. I waited another ten minutes; but they showed no disposition to go on, and I stealthily began to draw out of the bushes.

We had come through a grove of wild hemp-trees, and, keeping the bush that had concealed me between me and the pirates, I crawled to one of these wide-spreading bunches of gigantic leaves drooping to the ground, and managed to get behind it. But as I rolled under the stalks a bird rose near me and screamed shrilly in long-drawn cries of alarm, and several of its young, hunting for cover, set up a racket in the dead leaves on the ground.

I lay still for a minute, hoping that the two pirates would not think anything amiss; but the mother bird wheeled above me, screaming and darting down, and I heard Petrak and Long Jim cursing and running toward me. I jumped up behind the tree, and, looking through the big leaves, saw them coming with drawn pistols.

"Blow me if it ain't the bally pressman!" said Long Jim, stopping within a hundred feet and peering through the tree. "That's Trenholm there, or I'm a Dutchman!"

“That’s who it is,” I called to them, cocking my pistol. “Come on and see what you get!”

“You’re in the *Kut Sang*” said Petrak queerly, his knees shaking as if he had seen a ghost. “You’re dead in the *Kut Sang*!”

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“Have it your own way,” I told him. “Maybe I am dead in the *Kut Sang*, along with Captain Riggs and the rest of them. For that very reason you had better not bother with me.”

I kept my pistol resting in the hollow of a hemp-stalk, thinking it would be better not to let them know I had a weapon, for I knew they had no more relish for using their firearms than I did. If I showed the gun to them they would then keep in cover, and could attack me from two sides.

If I could keep it a short-range fight, I had the advantage as long as I held the tree against them, and they would not hesitate to expose themselves to my fire.

“What ye doin’ of ’ere?” demanded Long Jim. “Where’s the skipper and all the rest we left aboard?”

“That’s for you to find out,” I said. “You wouldn’t shoot a helpless man, would you?”

“Not a bit of it,” he grinned. “Come on out and ’ave a bit of a parley.”

He let his pistol drop, and he and Petrak exchanged glances which betrayed their glee at having me in their power, as they thought.

“Go away and let me alone,” I said, simulating fear of them. “I don’t want to have anything to do with you. Leave me alone.”

“Ye was a follerin’ of us,” said Long Jim. “Where the bloomink ’ell ye been? Ye seen Thirkle?”

“Where is Thirkle?”

“Where ye’ll never clap eyes on ’im, ye can be bloody well sure of that. Cut round t’other side of ’im, Red, and we’ll settle ’is ’ash!”

Petrak started off to the left of him to circle and get behind me, and Long Jim began to draw near, cocking his pistol again and raising it and leering at me.

“Don’t ye turn about or move!” he said. “Turn yer ’ead and yer a dead ’un!”

He was within five yards of me, and I saw him making a signal to Petrak, who was approaching me from behind. I glanced back quickly and saw the little red-headed man stealing up on me with his knife on his hand.

I lifted the pistol, and saw Long Jim stop and open his mouth in surprise. I fired at the triangle of his naked breast where the shirt was unbuttoned from the neck. He curled

over backward, as if broken in the middle, and fired his pistol straight up into the sky and then lay still.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GOLD AND THE PIRATES

Certain that Long Jim was dead, I turned on Petrak and presented my pistol at him. The little fiend was surveying me blankly, taken aback at the sudden shot. He stood within twenty paces of me, with his legs wide apart and his knees bent as if he were on the deck of a plunging vessel, dismay on his face and the blade he had intended for my back held limply before him.

I could see the butt of a big pistol hanging from his belt in a holster he had made from the top of an old shoe, but he made no motion to reach for it. The fingers of his left hand were twitching, splayed out as if from fear, and his mouth was open showing his yellow teeth.

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“If you move I’ll kill you!” I said, having a mind to take him and compel him to lead Riggs and me to Thirkle’s camp.

“Don’t shoot!” he whined. “Don’t shoot! Where did ye git the gun, sir? We never knowed as how ye had it. Don’t shoot, Mr. Trenhum! Ye mind how I took yer luggage aboard!”

“Where’s Thirkle and Buckrow?” I demanded.

“Up there,” he said, swinging his free hand in the direction we had come, and I saw the familiar crafty look come into his eyes.

“How far?”

“Quite a bit, sir; in a cut of a clift with the booty.”

“How far?”

“Not far it ain’t, Mr. Trenhum. Roundaboutish, but not far; and I’m thinkin’ I might lead ye on to ’em, sir, if ye’d let me have the sack we had, sir. Ye done for Jim right enough, but that’s my sack now.”

“Throw down that knife and unbuckle your belt, and see that you don’t reach for a pistol,” I said.

There was something in his manner that led me to believe he had a trap for me; either he had seen Long Jim move, or thought Thirkle and Buckrow might come down upon us if he could keep me talking.

He dropped the knife, and as he reached for the buckle of the belt I turned my head in an involuntary movement to make sure that Long Jim had not recovered, an action bred by the suspicious manner of Petrak. The pirate was lying as he had fallen, with his arms over his head and his pistol a yard away; but the little red-headed man turned and ran in the flash of my eye. I fired at him as he scurried behind a sprawling hemp-tree, but missed; and he never stopped, and I stood and listened as he crashed through the brush.

It would have been senseless to pursue him. As he had kept on toward the beach, away from the direction of Thirkle’s camp, I knew he was not going back to the others, and reasoned that he would hardly dare to return to Thirkle, who had probably missed the sack of gold, or would demand explanations which Petrak would have difficulty in giving.

I picked up the knife and went and looked at Long Jim. Seeing he was dead I took his pistols; but gave him scant attention, being afraid Thirkle or Buckrow might be about,

investigating the sound of the shots. Petrak's estimates on the distance of their hiding-place had been rather vague.

I turned away to the west in the direction I felt sure the trail must be, and, when the ground was clear, ran as fast as I could. I made about half a mile in as straight a line as I could, and then began to worry; for, although the ground had sloped in front of me, I felt that I should have crossed the bed of the stream which was the trail we had followed.

I kept on, my face and hands scratched by prickly vines and my clothing torn by fighting through thickets, and a panic began to grow on me that I was lost, although I refused to admit it. I soon had to stop running from exhaustion, the torment of the heat and thirst; and the four big pistols dragged at my belt and the ammunition in my pockets began to hang heavy. I began to fear that darkness would come on before I could find the trail.

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Despair began to get the upper hand, when I caught the dull boom of a pistol-shot, and it so startled me that I could not decide the direction it came from. I stopped to listen, afraid that Thirkle had found Captain Riggs and Rajah.

Soon there was another report, and then a third, and what puzzled me most was that they seemed to be just where I had come from. The echoes came back to me from the hills and died away in dismal reverberations in the jungle. It seemed to be some signal, but, whether from the captain or Thirkle, I had no way of knowing.

I was tempted to fire a shot in reply, but, deciding to wait for another, I turned in my tracks and started back, although not on the same trail I had come over, but to the right of it.

I blamed myself for leaving the captain, for I should have kept with him, no matter what happened. I had made a fine mess of my scouting trip, but found some excuse for myself in the fact that I did right in following Long Jim and Petrak, and had a good reason to believe that they were going to the pirate camp.

I tried to reason out the significance of the three shots I had heard. They might mean that Captain Riggs had fired on Thirkle, or that Thirkle had fired on him. In a kind of frenzy at my own helplessness I figured the various combinations of the three shots as I went along, but all the time I was in a frantic haste to find the trail.

Finally I found the dry bed of a little stream; but a careful search showed no signs of any person having been over it, and it seemed to me, in my upset sense of direction, that it should lead the other way. But, remembering that I had left the bed of the creek to follow Long Jim and Petrak, I came to the conclusion that the pirates had abandoned the creek, or had turned off from it to cache the gold.

I started down it, hoping that it was the one which would lead me to the captain. My courage was freshened, and, taking a slow trot jumping from stones to the hard sand, dodging over-hanging branches, and scrambling up on the banks to avoid creepers, I covered a great deal of ground in a short time. I kept close watch on the clear spaces for tracks, and carried my two pistols in the front of my belt, Long Jim's pair well behind.

I was running and jumping along in this way, as quietly as possible, when I heard a low, peculiar gruff growl. I stopped in my tracks and listened. Crawling into the bushes I rested on my knees with a pistol in each hand, my mouth wide open so as to breathe silently, for I was panting from my flight.

"Ye didn't look to Bucky for this, did ye?" I heard Buckrow say, so close at hand that, it startled me. There was no reply to his question, and after a few minutes I crawled toward him. I found myself in an outcrop of volcanic rock, and beyond the face of a

sheer ledge. The soil was moist ten feet away from the bed of the stream, and bamboo and the thick, coarse *colgon* grass was as high as my shoulder.

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Keeping well hidden in the bamboo and grass I crept to a high spot, and right under the edge of the cliff I saw Thirkle sitting on a sack of gold, with his hands across his knees, holding a piece of rope and gazing down at it as if in doubt what to do with it. His bare, bald head was bowed low.

Buckrow was lying in front of him, with his chin propped in his hands. He was smoking a cigar and looking at Thirkle. Behind them were piled the sacks of gold, close to a wide crack in the cliff, a sort of canon, wide enough for a man to enter, and overgrown at the top with brush and green fronds, for the cliffside was wet and dripping, and veiled with mosses.

“Got it in yer old skull that Bucky was a fool, hey?” said Buckrow, blowing a cloud of smoke at Thirkle. “Well, I’m Bad Buckrow, and I was Bad Buckrow afore ever I saw ye, and I had a bit of brains of my own afore ever I met up with ye, Thirkle. Ye can bear that in mind. See how ye come out when ye monkeyed with me. Them other two fools went off in the wood and plugged one another, but that ain’t me, Thirkle. Yer sharp, Thirkle; ye always was a sharp one, but ye ain’t sharp enough for Bucky, and it’s me that’s tellin’ ye that.”

Thirkle made no reply, but kept his head down, staring at the rope in his hands, as if he were considering some weighty problem.

“Wanted it all, hey?” went on Buckrow. “Think I’m goin’ to put my neck in a rope for ye and then let ye hog it all, hey? Maybe ye can fool the others, but I’m Bad Buckrow, I am, and I don’t let the like of you, Mr. Thirkle, hang nothin’ on me—leastways, not so easy as ye looked for. Why, I had my eye on ye and every move ye made after ye sent Reddy and Jim away to slit one another’s throats! Thought I’d fall for it, did ye? See what come of it? Ye see, don’t ye? I’m Bad Buckrow.”

Thirkle moved uneasily and cleared his throat, but did not lift his head or give any answer. But, when he put his head to one side and shook it, I saw a red patch on his scalp over his right ear, and a smear of blood down his cheek. Then I realized that the rope over his hands made him a prisoner, and that Buckrow had turned against him.

“Wanted to do for me too, did ye. I knew yer game, old boy! I saw them eyes of yours on me, and murder in ’em, and it’s me ought to know when ye plan to cut a man down —I know Thirkle.

“Knew ye’d turn on me some day this way when we made it rich. The lot of it was small pickin’, but here’s half o’ London under our feet to be split four ways; but ye wanted it all, and ye wanted us out of yer way so ye could sleep o’ nights. Nice game it was. Fine gent ye’d be, with all of us dead here, and nobody to ever tell who Thirkle was, or about the *Kut Sang*, or the others.

“Get away in the boats, ye would, and come back some day for the gold and then cut it for London, prayin’ yer way out of the country, and folks’d wonder what come of the Devil’s Admiral and his crew when no more ships was lost the way we made ’em go.”

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“Don’t worry me, Bucky,” said Thirkle quietly.

“Don’t worry of ye! Don’t bother, Thirkle. Yer sharp, but yer good as dead now. It’s me that’ll be the fine gent and wear walkin’-about clothes, and have my drink and comfort, and nobody to split on me. I’ll play yer own game, and leave ye here to rot. How like ye that, Thirkle?”

“Ye are on the wrong tack, Bucky,” he said quietly, without lifting his head. “Dead on the wrong tack and shoal water ahead.”

“Nasty weather ahead for you, Thirkle—never fret about Bucky.”

“Dead on the wrong tack,” repeated Thirkle, as if talking to himself. “I looked to you for better than this, and trusted you too. I wanted to play fair with ye, Bucky, because ye’ve got brains, which a man wouldn’t think to hear ye now.”

“Brains enough not to be cut down like a bullock by Thirkle, when the last comes to the last.”

“Reddy and Jim were not fit men to trust with a heap of gold like this, Bucky, and it’s you that knows the truth of what I say. They would have the whole thing cut open in a week once they got into some port with their pockets full of sovereigns and their skins full of rum, and their mouths full of babble in the public houses of their wealth and how smart they be.

“First we’d know Petrak would be telling how we took the *Southern Cross* and the *Legaspi* and the *Kut Sang*, best of all, and last. Now wouldn’t that be the way with him once he got at the gin? Hey, Bucky?”

“He could be watched and his lip kept shut,” said Buckrow.

“Would you want to trust yer neck to Petrak’s close lip? Tell me that, Bucky. Could ye sleep with Petrak and his bragging, and Long Jim and his bragging, and the two of ’em whispering together, considering the friends they make when drunk. Why, Bucky, man! Long Jim would tell the whole tale to a barmaid for a smile, as he come near telling that girl in Malta, with the whole Mediterranean fleet ashore in Valetta.

“If it wasn’t for me we’d been in a jam, what with the stories that were going the rounds about us then, and a P.O. out of the *Implacable* trying to chum with me. I wanted to play fair with ye, Bucky, because yer too smart to let the drink get the better of ye—but what’s the use. I don’t want to argue with ye. Go on and play it alone if ye think ye can.”

“Well, right ye are,” said Buckrow scornfully. “That’s the true words ye speak now, Thirkle. Ye don’t want to argue with me. Right-o—a man can’t argue with cold steel—-

and what's more, ye won't, if I'm Bad Buckrow. I know ye've got a smooth lingo when ye get in a trap, but ye can't squirm out this time. I'll hold the weather of ye this commission, Thirkle."

"Ye'll never get away with it, Bucky. It takes more brains than ye've got to handle half a ton of gold. Not that ye ain't got the brains so much as ye don't know how to handle 'em. There's many a man foremast with more brains than his skipper, but that don't make him skipper."

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“It don’t take no skipper to handle cargo of this sort,” said Buckrow.

“Ye can’t do it alone, Bucky. How about coming back for it? What’ll ye tell the crew that comes back with ye? Didn’t I plan it all out to get it? I planned this job and made fair weather of it, didn’t I?

“You and the others couldn’t done it alone, you know that. Well, ye won’t get away with it, ye can be sure of that. It isn’t in ye, Bucky, to do the job. The hardest is to come yet, as ye’ll see when ye go about getting this away all clear.”

“Never ye fret about me, Thirkle. I turned a couple of tricks afore ever I crossed yer bows, lay to that. I ain’t the dog of a sailor ye take me for. I was a gent once, and I’ll be a gent again, and no thanks to ye, Thirkle. It don’t take no brains to spend a guinea at a time, even if a man knows he has a house full of ’em, and I can be respectable, too, and take my drink alone in my own house.”

“I’ll grant ye are no fool, Bucky. It all looks nice and easy, but who took ye out of the gutter in Sarawak? Where would ye be to-day if it wasn’t for Thirkle? Tell me that, Bucky?”

Buckrow puffed at his cigar a minute, and seemed to consider the matter before replying.

“I was down and out right enough then, Thirkle, but I ain’t the kind to stay down long, Thirkle. What with fever and jail, and a bad cut in the hip, I was in a bad way, but no fault of mine, only my cussed luck. I’ve had my hard goin’ in my life, and now I’m to take it snug.”

“The hangman was around the corner that time in Sarawak, and close-hauled on a course that would fetch him alongside ye in no time,” said Thirkle, looking up and smiling wearily.

“Never ye mind about the hangman, Mr. Thirkle! He was around the corner with ye, too, for that, and more than once. Ye mind Hong-Kong? Who saved ye from the hangman in Hong-Kong? I ask ye that. It was Bucky; but that had no stop on ye here when ye planned to do for me. I saved ye from the hangman, too, and now the score is even, and ye can’t whine if I come yer own game on ye.”

“I don’t deny ye served me a turn in Hong-Kong, Bucky, and that’s why I was to play fair and above board with ye here. Ye think ye know me, and who I am, and who I was, but ye don’t, Bucky, and if ye did ye’d have more thought about what yer up to here. Thirkle I’m known as, and as Thirkle I’ll die, and I’m rough in my ways and language because I have fallen into those ways with my men.

“When I’m a sailor I’m as sailors are, and when I’m a parson I know how to play it, but ye’ve never seen me as a fine gentleman. Maybe ye’d like to know who I was before I was Thirkle and got to be the Devil’s Admiral, as they call me for the want of something better, seeing I have played my game careful and kept them all in the dark.”

“It’s naught to me who ye was or are, Thirkle. Ye can’t oil me out of it with all yer fine talk—I’m to do for ye when I’m minded, and yer slick talk can’t save ye.”

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Buckrow got up and slung a rope over his shoulders and began to make a sling so that he could balance a sack of gold on each end of it.

“I was an officer in the navy, Bucky,” said Thirkle, with a sly grin.

“An officer!” exclaimed Buckrow, halting in his work.

“An officer in the navy with the queen’s commission at my back and an admiral’s flag ahead,” said Thirkle, pleased with the impression he had made. “That’s what, Bucky. Now ye see I was the lad to finish the job here in fine style. That’s why I can get away with this gold, which you can’t. I can show a wad of five-pound notes and not have Scotland Yard at my heels, or charter a ship and crew and go about it businesslike, and take my time at it.

“Nice job ye’ll make of it, coming back here for this gold. You’ve got the whip hand now, and I’ll let it go at that; but when they’ve got ye on the gallows, which they will, remember what Thirkle told ye, sitting here in the thick of it, which ye think ye’ll spend for high life in London. Before ye ever get it to London ye’ll find it’s another tune ye’ll play. Maybe ye think ye can fill a ship with gold and sail to the dockhead and lift it out and let it go at that—they’ll take the gold and hang you, that’s what.

“No doubt ye think the owners of this gold won’t have a word to say when they find the *Kut Sang* overdue. Maybe ye think the looting of her was the easiest part of it; but ye’ll find murder is easy, while keeping it quiet is another tale and another trick. Any man with a knife can go out and stab a man in the back, but he finds what comes after, the worst of it.

“It looks easy to ye because we got away with the *Southern Cross* and the *Legaspi*—but when ye mount the gallows ye’ll see the best of old Thirkle’s tricks was to keep his tracks clear and things running sweet. They’ll take you and wring it all out of ye, the whole murderous story, and swing ye from a high place. Ye’ll end on the gallows, Bucky.”

“Never ye fret about the gallows. I’ll get this gold away neat and clean if it takes me twenty years, and I’m the lad that can wait until the time is ripe.”

“Maybe ye can,” said Thirkle, “but all I want you to remember is that Thirkle said ye couldn’t, and my words will come to ye when ye take those thirteen steps up to the rope. Just keep that in mind, Bucky.”

Buckrow made no reply, but busied himself again with the sling, and as he got down on his knees with his back toward me, I decided that it was time that I took a hand in the proceedings. With Thirkle bound, I had nothing to fear from him, and I began to draw

myself up from the ground, intending to get on one knee and then empty my pistol into Buckrow, who was not a dozen yards away.

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If it had not been that there was a great deal of high, dry grass, that would crackle if I tried to run through it, I would have attempted to rush in on Buckrow and knock him senseless with the butt of a pistol. But as Thirkle sat facing in my direction, and there was little chance of getting to Buckrow before Thirkle would see me and give the alarm, or Buckrow hear me coming, I knew the only thing to do was to kill or wound Buckrow, even though I had to shoot him in the back. It seemed an unfair advantage, and nothing better than the act of an assassin; but I reasoned that Thirkle or Buckrow would have little mercy on me if I fell into their power.

So I arose cautiously, and, parting the grass before me, reached for my pistol.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ART OF THIRKLE

“So Jim’s done for, ye say,” said Buckrow. “Good job ye made of it coming back this way, and good job for me ye did, and the worse for Thirkle.”

“Clean job all around, Bucky, and I’m back to have my cut of the pile,” and then I was sure of dreaming, for that was the voice of Petrak, and it seemed to me that Petrak ought to be millions of miles away, although I could not quite settle in my mind just how it was, except that I knew it couldn’t be Petrak speaking—I was dreaming it, and yet I couldn’t be dreaming that awful pain in my head. I tried to open my eyes, but couldn’t.

“Then the *Kut Sang* didn’t go down at all,” said Thirkle’s voice. “Nice job you two will have getting clear of this place with the gold now. Our dear friend, Mr. Trenholm isn’t alone, I’ll bet a hat on that.”

“Bet yer hat with the devil himself for all the good it will bring,” growled Buckrow. “This ain’t none of your affair, Mr. Thirkle, and I’ll thank ye to pipe down and wait until we ask ye to talk.”

“What’s up now, Bucky?” asked Petrak. “What’s wrong now, and what’s wrong with Thirkle’s head? Been up—”

“We got Thirkle, too, that’s what. He tried to do for me and I sapped him, and there he is, nice as pie. Wanted it all, he did, Reddy. Don’t he look calm and peaceful there, with his hands crossed like a dead one? That’s Mr. Thirkle for ye, all nice and snug, so he can’t cut a man’s throat when a chap ain’t minding of him. Tried it on me no sooner as ye and Long Jim was gone, and I give him what he come for.”

“Blow me for a blind beggar!” said Petrak, and I opened my eyes and saw the three of them, Thirkle, facing me, and Buckrow and Petrak standing over me as I lay on my back on the damp ground.

“That’s Mr. Buckrow,” sneered Thirkle. “He wants it all, Reddy, and he’ll play you the same when he gets it. He wants it all, and don’t waste your time counting up the guineas ye’ll have, because Buckrow will have ’em all, and you and I dead and gone under ground hereabouts.”

“So Thirkle wanted to do for ye, hey, Bucky? Who looked for it? But he ought to knowed better as to come any smart tricks with ye, Bucky, and we’re pals, ain’t we, Bucky? Say we’re pals if ye like and I’ll do my part.”

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“Pals we be, Reddy, and never ye mind enough of what he says to put in yer eye. We can split the gold ourselves and leave Mr. Thirkle here with this friend of ours. Ye know I’ll play fair with ye, Red—ye know that, don’t ye?”

“Sure,” said Petrak. “Here’s my paw on it, Bucky, and good luck to us and long life and merry times. That’s a heap of gold for two, Bucky.”

“Shake for a square show,” said Buckrow, and the two villains shook hands across my body. I had closed my eyes again, but peeped through partly opened lids as often as I dared.

“And how come ye done for Long Jim?” asked Buckrow, and Petrak moved uneasily and cleared his throat.

“Jim played nasty with me, Bucky. Never looked to him for it, but we was down the trail a bit and he ups and turns on me with a knife. Cussed if I knows what for, and I didn’t have time to ask him particulars, but had to drill him, and drill him I did, as I’m no man to stand for knife-play, and as I was trotting myself back who should I come on but the writin’ chap, here, stretched in the grass, so for a time I thought he had been stretched for good when up he pops and reaches for a gun, and I give him the butt fair behind of the ear.

“Lucky job, Bucky; lucky for ye and lucky for me, as he’d done for ye clean in another turnabout, and then, with Thirkle there as he is, a fine time I’d had of it. But it wasn’t myself I was mindin’, nohow, Bucky, but you, as I had my gun and could have drilled him after he drilled you; but I couldn’t stand to see ye get it in the back as he minded to give it. Lucky for ye, hey, Bucky? We can play fair on that score, can’t we, Bucky? Not for me and he’d have ye and—”

“Oh, stop yer whining and lying!” said Thirkle. “It was yer own pelt ye took care of, and now ye want to get thick with Bucky, but it won’t do ye a bit of good, Reddy. He’ll do for us all now; but if ye got any sense stir up Mr. Trenholm here and find what’s become of the ship and his mates.

“Step on the gentleman’s neck and see if he’s dead. While yer gamming away here ye don’t know how many more are in the bushes hereabout with guns ready to chip ye. Stir him up and let’s see what happened to the *Kut Sang* that he’s here at all. It’s plain she didn’t go down.”

Petrak kicked me in the ribs, and I groaned and opened my eyes as if I had just recovered consciousness, for I did not care to let them know I had been listening to any of their conversation.

“What’s all the trouble?” I asked, looking about, and then sitting up and gazing at the three pirates as if I were still confused.

“Everything lovely,” said Thirkle, grinning at me. “Your old friend, Mr. Petrak, put you to sleep. I am indeed surprised to find you so well after all that happened on board the *Kut Sang*, and your belt there, which Bucky removed, seems to be well filled with weapons. What became of my old friend, Captain Riggs? And where is the *Kut Sang*?”

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“She went down,” I said, knowing that my time would be short if they knew the steamer was still above water, for every minute it lay on the reef there was a possibility that it would be sighted by some passing vessel. I knew that if I told them it was still there Buckrow would probably murder Thirkle and me and hasten away, either to burn the vessel or escape in the boats.

“And how did you get away, and where is Riggs?” persisted Thirkle.

“I cut away the forecastle scuttle with a knife and crawled through the chains just as she went down, but Captain Riggs could not get out.”

“That’s all very fine,” said Thirkle; “but you collected a good deal of hardware out of a sinking ship. How come you with four pistols? And, if my eyes serve me right, two of those belonged to Long Jim.”

Petrak winked at me at this, and I took the cue.

“I found Long Jim dead in the trail and took his two pistols, and the others were my own which I had when I went into the forecastle, and I had hoped to use them on some of you fellows, but you got the better of me.”

“And how did you and Captain Riggs get along together?”

“We did very well after I had convinced him that I had no hand in the murder of Trego. You gentlemen certainly know your business, I must say.”

“Oh, don’t include me in the compliment,” said Thirkle, bowing to Buckrow and Petrak. “These are the men who are entitled to the credit for the success of the expedition so far, and, now that they have the gold, they have decided to dispense with my services; and, whatever is done, I will have no further hand in it.

“We will wish them luck, my dear Mr. Trenholm; and, as we are in the same boat now, I trust that what little animosity you may have borne against me in the past can now be forgotten. Mr. Buckrow has the game in his hands now.”

“Ye say the *Kut Sang* went down clean?” asked Buckrow.

“Not a sign of her,” I said. “Captain Riggs and the black boy went with her, and I hadn’t a minute to spare. Perhaps it would have been just as well if I had gone with her, too.”

“Good!” exclaimed Thirkle. “You see, Buckrow, I told ye she’d go like a lead and bury her truck. I knew it would be a clean job, and now ye can go ahead—I quit.”

“Small thanks to you,” growled Buckrow.

“Fine pair of fools ye’ll make!” laughed Thirkle.

“Stretch me, and the two of ye’ll hang. Remember that, Reddy! The two of ye’ll hang. It took Thirkle to plan the job, and it’ll take Thirkle to finish it. Mr. Petrak, will you kindly look in my jacket-pocket over there; there’s a bottle in it, and I’d like a bit of stimulant.”

Buckrow and Petrak ran for the bottle, and both took a long pull at it.

“Give Thirkle a bit,” said Petrak, who still seemed to have a good deal of respect for the prisoner. “That was a nasty smash ye give ’im, Bucky.”

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“Give it him, if ye mind, Reddy, but be polite to him. He was an officer in the navy afore he turned pirate, Reddy.”

“A navy officer? Thirkle a navy officer?” asked Petrak. “I was a navy man myself when I was a boy.”

He stepped to Thirkle and held the bottle to the prisoner’s lips.

“Was ye an officer—a navy officer, Thirkle?” he asked, somewhat awestricken at the idea.

“We had a little chat, Mr. Buckrow and myself, while you were away,” said Thirkle, after he had had his drink. “Real chummy we got.”

“Ho, yes; real chummy, Thirkle! So chummy, Red, he was ready to let a knife into me, and now he says he was in the navy; well up to his flag, too, and the queen’s commission, all nice and handy. He thinks he’s too nice to mix with the likes of us; he says as how we won’t know how to blow the loot ladylike and decent. Mind that, Reddy? Ho, ho, ho!”

“It’s this way, Reddy,” explained Thirkle. “Our old friend Bucky thought I was jealous of him, and wanted it all to myself. But I never had such a thought. Long Jim was the one I didn’t like, and never did, but you and Bucky are two after my own heart and—”

“He likes us, Reddy,” interrupted Buckrow. “He likes us both, and you best; but he likes us. Give him another drink and he’ll cry for his sins.”

“Mr. Buckrow, I mean every word I say,” declared Thirkle, and he meant it, for the shrewd rascal was talking for his life. “There’s gold enough here for all of us, and we’ll divide it now, and each take his share and split it to the dollar. Leave it to me and I’ll get it off for you, safe and easy; but try to go it alone and the two of ye’ll hang. Hang! Understand that, Reddy? The two of you’ll hang; and it’s Thirkle that says it, and Thirkle knows. But Thirkle can help ye if ye let him.”

“Taffy he’s givin’ us now, Reddy,” said Buckrow, seeing that Petrak was being impressed by Thirkle’s argument.

“Ye’ll hang, the two of ye,” said Thirkle. “Taffy, if ye like, Mr. Buckrow.”

“They’ll have to take me first, and that’s not so easy as ye make it,” blustered Buckrow. “Don’t mind him, Reddy.”

“They’ll get ye,” said Thirkle, nodding his head. “They’ll get ye the minute ye land anywhere with a dozen of them gold pieces. Where’ll ye go with it? That’s what I want to know. Where’ll ye clear from? Tell me that. No doubt ye’ll land in Manila with a boat-

load of gold and say yer out of the *Kut Sang*, and she went down, and all were lost but you two and the cargo of gold. And they'll let ye keep it and send ye on yer way, with no questions asked."

"Ye mind what he says, Bucky?" Petrak was getting nervous.

"Mind what he says, if ye like," said Buckrow. "I'm man enough to get away with it, Thirkle or no Thirkle."

"That sounds very big, Mr. Buckrow; but where will ye go? Easy enough it would be if this island was off the track of ships, but the minute ye make a westing ten miles with a boat-load of gold, or empty-handed, pop! ye go into the hands of a coast-guard cutter or a ship. Fine time ye'll have telling ye found it, or that ye got out of the ship by yerself. Back to Manila ye'll go, and slam into Bilibid prison, and all about ye in the papers, and all about the gold; and then ye'll be in a nice fix.

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“Ye think, because it was secret cargo, the owners of the gold won’t kick up a row when the *Kut Sang* is a minute overdue? Ye think they’ll take yer yarns when they find ye went in the *Kut Sang*, as the whole Sailors’ Home knows? They’ll stretch a rope for ye and Petrak—if ye let Petrak along—and the two of ye’ll drop together into the deepest hole ever ye clapped eyes on.”

“Of course, Mr. Thirkle could pack a ton of gold about, and it would be different, and not a word said,” sneered Buckrow. “Perhaps ye know better than me what to do—hey, Thirkle?”

“Thirkle has his plans made for the last of it as well as he had for the first of it, and don’t ye forget that, Mr. Buckrow, and never mind what they are. You go on now and play the string out, and I wish the two of ye luck; but remember that Thirkle said ye’d hang, and hang ye will. When they put the rope on yer necks and the black caps over yer heads, just remember Thirkle said it would come out that way. They’ll make a nice job of ye.”

Petrak shivered and looked at Buckrow, who stood with arms folded, staring at the ground.

“Oh, stow that gab, Thirkle!” he said. “Never ye fret about me and Reddy; ye’ll be dead, anyhow, and ye won’t mind.”

“Ye can thank Bucky for it,” went on Thirkle, craftily turning his conversation to Petrak, who was more easily influenced and had a hearty dread of death or prisons.

“Thank Bucky when ye start up the thirteen steps. They’ll be the hardest thirteen steps ye ever took in yer life, Reddy—and the last. A man’s in a bad way when the shadow of the gallows falls across his bows and the priest begins to pray. I looked for a better end for ye than that, Petrak; but go ahead and take his advice, and see where ye come to.”

“Don’t mind him, Reddy,” said Buckrow hoarsely. “Pass the bottle and let the old devil croak. You stick to Bucky.”

“Now, here’s where I stand,” went on Thirkle. “It’s the last I’ll say on it, and I’ll give you two chaps another chance to save yerselves. Take the ropes off me and I’ll bear no arms. You two take the pistols, and I won’t have a knife. That gives you two the upper hand, and ye can do as ye please, and I’ll take my share and orders, and see that I get ye away clear.

“Once we make it safe ye can go about yer business, and I’ll go about mine. Come on, now, lads—how’s that? I ought to be worth that just to plan it out for ye and make sure ye get away. Better a third and a long life than the whole and a rope afore ye spend a hundred pound of it, if ye get as much as a drink out of it alone. How now, Bucky?”

“Real sweet of ye, old cock,” said Buckrow, lighting a cigar. “A third and yer life looks better than none and a pile of bones. Thirkle has a bit of a way to look to his own ends; what, Reddy?”

“Ye don’t stand to lose anything, do ye? I’m not the man to squeal when I’m down; but we went into this thing together, the whole of us, with our eyes open, to split it even. Here’s the three of us, and we’ll count it out right here by the piece or the sack. Then ye leave it to me to get it away for ye, clean and neat. I’m a gentleman, I am, and I can play a gentleman’s game, which ye two can’t.

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“I can buy a schooner or a yacht and look natural about it, and no questions asked; and make a big show and live at the best hotels, and nothing thought of me having plenty of money. But you two—why, show a guinea, sober or drunk, and they’ll grab ye on suspicion ye stole it. Ye’d look real nice, Mr. Buckrow, buying a ship to come back here for it, wouldn’t ye—or mayhap ye’d leave that part of it to Petrak.”

“How’ll ye get away with it if yer so sharp about it?” demanded Buckrow. “What can ye do outside what we can do—hey, Thirkle?”

“I’ve got it all planned out, ye can bank on that. I didn’t get this gold here without knowing what I was at, or how I was going to draw through. That isn’t my way, as ye know. I have in mind a sloop-rigged yacht, lying in Shanghai, waiting for a buyer. Pretty little white thing she is, and I can get her for a song, and take enough of this with me to turn the job.

“I can play Meeker again, which you chaps don’t seem to know. I told the *Times* man on the waterfront over the telephone, five minutes before we sailed, to make a personal item about how the Rev. Luther Meeker, missionary, would sail next week for Hong-Kong in the *Taming*, and to tell the shipping-office to reserve a ticket for me. Nobody knows I went in the *Kut Sang* for sure, and I could drop into Manila to-morrow as Meeker, and not a man the wiser.

“We’ll buy this little yacht, and I’ll turn her into a missionary boat, buying her with funds furnished by the London Evangelical Society, as I’ll tell ’em. I’ll call her the *Bethlehem* and cruise along the China coast, putting in at ports to hold services. Then we’ll sneak away some day and drop down here, with chinks in the crew, and we’ll get this gold aboard in such way they won’t suspect what it is.

“Then it’s an easy matter to make away to any port we want and fill away for London in a liner, with the gold strewn along in the banks here and there, or packed with books or other junk and freighted. How’s that, mates?”

“And when it’s all done we can go to the devil and you’ll take the gold. I know the palaver, Thirkle. If ye please, I’ll take my chances alone with the gold,” said Buckrow.

“Then hang! I wash my hands of the two of ye, and may the devil mend ye!”

Thirkle raised his bound hands as he said this, and there was tragedy in his grim old face, and pity for the two on whom he had apparently pronounced the death-sentence. But I could see in his shrewd eyes that he was acting a part—he was laughing at them while pleading for liberty.

Petrak began to whimper, and he looked at Buckrow appealingly.

“Let him loose, Bucky,” he begged. “Let Thirkle loose, or we’ll hang, as he says, and we’ll split it share and share alike.”

“Let him loose so he can do for us!” raged Buckrow. “Let him loose so he can make off with it, and then knife us when it comes handy! I know his black heart!”

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Yet, Buckrow was in a quandary and, in spite of his fear of Thirkle, seemed inclined to free him, evidently finding it hard to make his own decisions, and preferring to have some one to give the orders. He tossed his cigar away, and stood watching Thirkle chewing a blade of grass.

“Ye can deal with me, mates, but ye’ll find ye can’t argue with the judge,” went on Thirkle in a quiet tone, keeping his eyes on the ground. “Ye’ll find ye can’t talk the turnkey into liberty, and it will be too late the morning the hangman opens the door and says ‘Come!’ and—”

“Stow that gab, or I’ll let a knife into yer hide!” snarled Buckrow, and he went over to the pile of sacks and began kicking the brown canvas nervously.

Thirkle began to chuckle quietly, swaying his shoulders from side to side in his simulated hilarity. Petrak, who was standing close to him, looked at him in surprise.

“It will be a fine joke,” said Thirkle in a low tone, as if speaking to himself. “They do love to hang a red-headed man! Poor Petrak! They’ll have a great joke with him—Oh, ye there, Petrak, my lad! Well, I’m sorry for ye; but ye can’t blame me if Bucky gets ye in a jam. He says he can go it alone now, and doesn’t need Thirkle; but wait until the death-watch is pacing outside the door like a Swedish skipper, and ye’ve only got an hour left on earth, and then ye’ll wish ye’d stuck to Thirkle.

“I’ll bet all this gold here ye’ll wish ye had Thirkle then, but Thirkle won’t be there to help. I say stick to Bucky if ye like, but ye’ll find he ain’t Thirkle. Good-bye, Reddy. I never looked for ye to come to this; but I can say ye’ll hang if you go it with Bucky.”

“I didn’t do it, Thirkle; I didn’t put ye where ye be,” whimpered Petrak. “I’m for cuttin’ ye loose, but Bucky ain’t.”

“He’s mad at me, and I can’t argue with him, but if ye say a word or two he’ll mind ye; and remember, Petrak, if ye can’t make him see it right, ye’ll hang—the two of ye—and ye know Thirkle always has it as it is.”

Thirkle whispered something to Petrak which I did not catch, and then the little rascal went over to Buckrow and began to talk with him quietly, and finally began to plead for Thirkle.

“Ye’re afraid of him,” sneered Buckrow. “Ye’re afraid of Thirkle with reef-knots on his hands, and ye’ll be afraid of him when he’s dead, ye coward!”

“I ain’t afraid of him, Bucky, but he says we’ll hang; and so we will if we don’t let him have a hand gettin’ this gold clear away.”

“He’ll do for us; and then what good will the gold be to us? Reddy, ye know the devil as I do; jind now he’s got this pile he’ll settle us when he sees his way to it.”

“Let him go, Bucky; let him go. The night’ll be on us in an hour or so, and then what’ll we do? Leave it to Thirkle and it’ll come out all right; and I know it and you know it, Bucky. There’s the two of us to him, and we’ll make him play it fair now.”

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“The two of us’ll play it fair without him,” said Buckrow. “Come on and stow this gold, and have done with the job.”

“That’s an end of it,” said Thirkle. “No use to talk of it more. Do for me now; I ain’t got much longer to live, anyhow. But I’ll tell you chaps what I’ll do, so ye won’t have to ask no favours at the end.”

“What now, Thirkle?” asked Buckrow.

“They tried to make a preacher of me in my young days, and it was no go; and they put me in the navy, and I made a mess of that. But I’m good as a navy chaplain at saying a prayer; and if ye’ll bring me the little Bible ye’ll find in my jacket-pocket I’ll say the burial service of the Church of England over ye two, fine as a bishop would and good enough for anybody, with all the frills. How’s that for Thirkle?”

“Let him go, Bucky,” whined Petrak, with quivering knees and terror in his face.

CHAPTER XVIII

BIG STAKES IN A BIG GAME

“I’d look a fine fish letting of him go now, after what’s passed between us!” laughed Buckrow. “Ye mind what he’d do the minute he got his paws free. Reddy, if ye don’t shut yer trap I’ll drill ye, that’s what.”

“No arms for me,” suggested Thirkle. “I bear no arms; and both of ye have the bilge on me with all the knives and pistols in yer own hands.”

“That’s all very fine for ye to say now, Thirkle; but what of when ye get in reach of a gun or a knife? What then?”

“I’ll bear ye no grudge,” said Thirkle. “Never a word will I say, Bucky. That’s done and gone, and we all have our little quarrels. Never a hand will I turn against ye, Bucky, and Petrak here to witness what I say.”

“No grudge ag’in’ me for what I done?” demanded Buckrow doubtfully. “Ye mean ye’ll let this go and never a word ag’in’ me, Thirkle?”

“Never a word. We’ll slip all that and turn to at getting this gold away. What’s a little mistake against all this here? Going to let a bit of a row stand between us and good times? I say no. Give me a chance to get ye all off here with the gold and I won’t likely forget it if ye let me go, Bucky. I’m not the man to hold a small mistake of judgment against a mate like you, what’s fought and worked with me so long, and ye was always ready, Bucky, when there was a hard job ahead.

“Nearly two years we’ve been together, mate, and it would be a pity if we smashed things now, when we’ve got a ship-load of gold. It’s time we quit and took our comfort, and no more chances of getting a rope at the end of it. We’ve about played the game out, and we’d better not play a good thing too far or we’ll find ourselves catching a crab one of these fine days. I said we’d stop if we made it safe with the *Kut Sang*, and we have and now that we’ve got plenty ahead, with eating and drinking and a good bed the rest of our days, let’s square away for home.

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“We’ll start fair and square again, mates, as we did when we first put our heads together for this fortune, and no grudges and all equal now, as the worst of the work is over and the next is to get away with it, easy enough if ye let me pilot the job. In a month we’ll be in London, and ye and Reddy, with a pub all yer own, and living at ease like gentlemen.”

“All equal from this on, Thirkle? Each has his say, and one as good as the other?”

“Nothing without a council and two votes to decide, so ye two’ll be yer own masters, having the two votes against me, with my advice for help. There’s fifty thousand pounds for each of us, and we’ll separate in London and go our own ways if ye like. I’ll swear a black oath to that, and my word’s good, as ye both know.

“Did I ever break it to ye? Didn’t I always cut the loot as I agreed? I’m Thirkle, and when I say a thing I mean it. Now, Bucky, think it over before it’s too late. Will ye go it alone, or will ye give me a fair play at the game, and come out with yer life and a fair share of the gold? It’s for you to decide, and see ye don’t make a mistake.”

“No arms for ye, split three ways, and do as we please when we’re away clear with the gold?” asked Buckrow.

“That’s it, Bucky. That’s what I said and what I say, and I’ll stick to it.”

“Swear to it, and nothing in yer mind.”

“I swear to it and nothing in my mind. It’s a square enough thing, and I never laid to do for ye as ye think. It was all a mistake, Bucky.”

Buckrow began to whisper with Petrak again, and Thirkle held his hands up and called to them sharply: “Here! Cut this rope!”

Petrak started for Thirkle with a sheath-knife, but Buckrow pulled him back.

“I’ll let him go,” he said. “This is my job, Thirkle,” continued Buckrow, approaching his prisoner. “I’m atween two minds with ye, and one is to slit yer neck, as I won’t deny; but ye’re a sharp cuss, and I guess ye can do this work better than I can. But I want to say to ye now, if ever ye turn on me after this ye’re a dog.

“I’ll take my chance with ye, but ye bear me no love, and I know it; and ever ye reach for a knife or a gun, mind that I don’t see ye. It’s play fair from now on, but show a claw and yer done for if I can do it.”

He stooped down and slipped the blade of his knife through the bonds he had put upon Thirkle, and then stepped away from him, with the knife held in guard, as if he expected the pirate to leap at him once he had his hands free.

But Thirkle sat still for a few minutes, rubbing his wrists, and then called for the bottle. Petrak handed it to him, and he sipped the brandy and bathed his wounded head with it, sending Reddy to a pool of water at the base of the cliff to wet his handkerchief, and then bound it around his head.

“It looks bad, but it didn’t hurt much, Bucky,” he said, smiling. “What hurt me more was to have ye turn on me the way ye did; but that’s all passed and gone, and we won’t mention it again.”

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“Mind ye, don’t,” growled Buckrow, who was still in an angry mood and perhaps thought he had made a mistake in giving Thirkle freedom again.

“Oh, limber up a bit, Bucky,” said Thirkle. “What’s the use of us all going to Kingdom Come over a little fight, when we’ve had so much fighting to get this? The gold turned all our heads, no doubt, but we can’t be fools through it. The stuff’s no good here—the job’s not done yet, but I’ll get ye all clear now if ye mind me and keep sober in port. Shake, old mate, and let’s be friends again.”

He held out his hand to Buckrow, who took it, but awkwardly. I could see that he feared Thirkle, even unarmed, and knew him for his master.

“I’m cussed sorry, Thirkle, for what I done; but I felt ye wanted to do for me, and I couldn’t stand for that,” he said, with his eyes on the ground.

“All square now, Bucky, and never a word. Ye always did yer work well, and never a slip.”

“And didn’t I do the same, Thirkle? Didn’t I stand by?” asked Petrak, surveying his chief with an expression of surprise that he had been overlooked in commendation, much as a dog would seek petting.

“You, too,” assented Thirkle, beaming on the little red-headed man. “Never was a better man when there was to be a knife used quick and neat; I’ll say that for ye. Now, I want to take a little rest for a few minutes, and if I was to have a word to say I’d suggest that you two get the sacks stowed in the hole there. I want a little confab with Mr. Trenholm here, and I’ll give a hand presently. If ye think it’s fair, I’ll rest a bit; but we ought to get that stuff snug away, and there’s no time to be lost.”

Buckrow took away the belt and pistols, which had been unfastened from me after my capture, and he and Petrak set to work carrying the sacks of gold into the cleft in the cliff.

“It looked bad for me a while back, Mr. Trenholm,” said Thirkle, sitting beside me and offering a cigar, which I took. “I wasn’t quite sure that I could get myself out of that tangle.”

“You had a pretty good argument,” I commented, lighting the cigar, although my head throbbed so painfully that I knew I would not enjoy the smoke. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to have any plan to help you get away with the gold and so earn my own life.”

“My dear Mr. Trenholm, I’m sorry you didn’t go down in the *Kut Sang*. Really I am, for you know I took quite a fancy to you in Manila. You are of such an unsuspicious nature.”

“Oh, I had my suspicions well enough, but they were on the wrong track; in fact, I could not have done you justice—my imagination is not equal to it. The best I could do for you was to mistake you for a spy—an inadequate estimate, after what I have seen and heard of you.”

“You flatter me, my dear Mr. Trenholm. But it is entirely your own fault that you are where you are. I tried to warn you, but you couldn’t expect me to tell you my plans regarding the *Kut Sang*. I didn’t want you in her, and I did my best to keep you out. Really remarkable, in a way.”

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“What do you mean?”

“That you should happen to be a passenger—such an insistent passenger—and as if you knew nothing about what was going in the ship. Really, you and Trego did well.”

“I think Trego made rather a mess of it,” I said. “If I had been in his boots I would have told the captain what it was all about.”

“Why didn’t you tell him? You could have told him about the gold as well as Mr. Trego.”

“Indeed! Then, you believe I knew about the *Kut Sang’s* cargo.”

“I don’t believe it, my dear Mr. Trenholm. I never accept a theory as a fact. There was a time when I thought your connection with the affair ended when you brought the orders from Saigon, but your persistence in pretending to buy a ticket in the *Kut Sang* rather puzzled me for a time, and then I was afraid that you suspected me, and that I had gone too far in trying to keep you out of the vessel.”

“You are talking enigmas now.”

“But what surprised me most,” he resumed, disregarding my remark, “was that I purchased a ticket in the *Kut Sang* at all. I looked for a trap there, and if the game hadn’t been so big I might have quit at the last minute.”

“I am sure I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“My dear Mr. Trenholm! Really, your attitude offends me. I cannot see what you expect to gain by pretending you knew nothing about the gold in the *Kut Sang*. That is absurd. You brought the order for it from Saigon, and helped get the thing fixed, and yet you pretend that it is all a mystery to you. When I am willing to be so frank I cannot see why you should assume this manner.”

“Then, I knew all about the gold from the first, did I?”

“Certainly. What do you think Mr. Petrak and I kept so close at your heels for in Manila?”

“Well, it did rather puzzle me for a while. Everywhere I turned you or the little red-headed rascal seemed to be near.”

“And never seemed to remember having seen us in Saigon?”

“In Saigon? Were you in Saigon when I was there?”

“Left before you did, when we knew you had the order for the gold from Commander Kousmitch.”

“Never met the gentleman.”

“Of course not. He got the cable-operator to have you deliver the order in Manila for him. But I heard him and the cable-operator talk it over, and that was all I wanted, and left. So you didn’t see us in Saigon? I told Petrak you didn’t, but he thought you did. That’s one reason we got so bold in Manila.”

“But the cable-operator told me the message didn’t amount to much, and that he would send duplicates by mail, anyway.”

“Of course he did. It didn’t amount to much, except to give a code order about shipping this gold. And you dropped it in the bus, and I picked it up, and you were rather rude to me, which proved that you either had no suspicions about me, or knew it all and wanted to throw me off my guard. I believe you were actually laughing at me the last few hours in Manila. I couldn’t understand, unless you had things rigged to trip me the minute we sailed.

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“I was looking for it at dinner the minute we cast off; and what a scrimmage there would have been at that table if you had drawn one of those pistols! Why, Petrak and Buckrow and Long Jim were in the passage with pistols ready to come in, and I would have shot you first, and then Trego, for I knew Captain Riggs had no arms on his person. If I made away with you and Trego the next would have been Rajah, for the lad could have given a nasty cut with that kris. And I had to keep a close eye on Mr. Trego’s malacca cane.”

“Oh, you did! I never suspected for a minute that you regarded Mr. Trego as a dangerous character.”

“He never told you?”

“Never told me anything. I was introduced to him in a most casual way in the bank, and was surprised to find him a passenger in the *Kut Sang*”

“He never told you about his cane? Most beautiful rapier you ever saw in it. Always had it by him, but he overlooked it when he got up from the table in the saloon last evening. Undoubtedly he was going for a pistol, but we had to get him when the time offered; and, besides, he was getting ready to tell Riggs all about me and my crew. There wasn’t a second to lose. I met him as he was coming back and held him for Petrak, and we did the job quietly.”

“It was something to be proud of,” I remarked. “I never would have given the Rev. Luther Meeker credit for it.”

“That’s what made the character so valuable,” he grinned, feeling the bandage about his head tenderly. I saw that he was weaker than he had led us to believe, and that he was suffering from his wound.

“But you puzzled me when they found the body. I expected you to denounce me; but you foolishly kept in front of me, and I was ready to blow your back out if you said a word, and we were all ready for the finest kind of a fight, although I did not want to precipitate matters so soon. Really, you had me guessing for a time, and I couldn’t understand your attitude, knowing what you did about me and the gold. Then I saw that you had plans of your own, and wanted it yourself.”

“It is you who flatter me now,” I told him, surprised at his revelations.

“But you did want it, although I couldn’t see how you figured to take it away from me, or why you didn’t tell Captain Riggs what you knew.”

“But I didn’t know anything. I thought you were a spy, who mistook me for one, and I was letting you have your little joke out.”

“You didn’t know about the gold, or Trego, or me?” he demanded.

“I regret exceedingly that I didn’t. If I had I would have blocked your game at the first opportunity. I suspected you were not a missionary, but I had never even heard of the Devil’s Admiral.”

“Most extraordinary.”

“I agree with you.”

“I mean that you didn’t know about the gold, when I thought you did. I must confess that I made a tremendous mistake there. Really, it came near being a failure—it would have been if Captain Riggs had not been led to suspect you. I advised him to put you in irons after you were sent to your room—it seemed to be the easiest way to get you out of the fight. I was really afraid of you, Mr. Trenholm.”

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“You seem to have gotten over it. This seems to be getting more of a tangle all the time, and a sort of mutual-admiration society. I have no objection to keeping up the conversation, but you pique my curiosity as to how it is all going to come out. As I have already remarked, I can’t see any argument that would lead you to let me walk away from here unless I tell you, as you told Petrak and Buckrow, that you’ll hang.”

“Now, tut, tut! You can’t play my game. I thought you had more originality than that. You know too much now, and it would be premature to tell the story of the *Kut Sang* for several years. I’m afraid that I’ll have to write my own memoirs, but for posthumous publication, of course.”

“I’m sure I would like to read them. You have turned murder into a fine art—you should have been a contemporary of the Borgias.”

“Do you know, Mr. Trenholm, I have thought of something like that myself. I am quite proud of my success. I would like if my career could be written down by a good hand at such things; but of course that is impossible, for no man ever knew the Devil’s Admiral and lived. I regret to say that you will be no exception in that respect, Mr. Trenholm. I’m sorry you didn’t go down in the *Kut Sang* and save me what is bound to be a disagreeable job.”

“In that case I would have missed the little drama between you and Mr. Buckrow. I rather enjoyed it. You seem to be an artist at other things besides slaying men.”

“I am glad you liked it, but Bucky is rather hard to handle at times. There will be another act or two, and I’ll give you a chance to see the climax.”

“That’s kind of you, although you upset dramatic conventions and I will find it rather hard, I am afraid, to be a competent critic. Besides, I might be prejudiced, having a personal interest in the outcome.”

“That won’t matter much,” he smiled. “My critics are always short-lived. Bucky there came nearest to getting me, though. If it hadn’t been for Petrak I never could have handled him. They can’t bear the thought of a rope. Whenever there was a hanging I took them to see it. Being a man of the cloth, I was admitted to all sorts of places, and, while I didn’t travel openly with my men, I could mingle with them more or less in the character of a missionary.”

He looked up at Buckrow, who stood over us scowling suspiciously, and his hand was close to his pistol.

“What’s wrong, Bucky?” purred Thirkle, moistening a cigar between his lips and giving Buckrow a searching glance.

“I don’t like that place in there for the gold, Thirkle. It’s too wet to suit me.”

“The dampness won’t do any damage, Bucky. That’s the best place on the island, to my thinking; but, of course, if you don’t like it we’ll consider it.”

“The gold will rust in there,” said Buckrow; and I knew he was in a dangerous mood again.

“Gold don’t rust, Bucky,” called Petrak, standing in the crevice and grinning at Thirkle.

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“That’s the best place on the island,” said Thirkle soothingly. “This is the ideal place. But if you don’t like it in there, we won’t put it in there, and that’s an end of it, Bucky.”

“But it’ll all rust up into great gobs if it’s left any great while—I don’t like so much water drippin’ over the place, Thirkle.”

“Gold don’t rust, Bucky,” called Petrak, and he laughed immoderately and slapped his knees with his hands.

“But what better place is there, Bucky? It’s getting late now, lads, and that’s the best place for it.”

“Then I vote to stow it and pipe down with the gabbin’ with the writin’ chap,” said Buckrow savagely. “It’s time we got clear of here and took to the boats by dark, Thirkle. I’m not for cruising over this blasted island in the dark, and I don’t fancy ye and the writin’ chap gettin’ so thick all of a sudden. If there’s to be talk, we want to know what it’s about, and I don’t see no great gain in so much gossipin’.”

“That’s entirely my idea, Bucky. My vote is that we put it in the crack there and slick up around here so nobody can know what’s been afoot. But I want a rest, and there are some things I want to say to Mr. Trenholm here that will be of use to us. Clap on, lads, and I’ll be there soon.”

“That’s my vote,” assented Petrak, grinning at Thirkle. “No argument there, Bucky.”

“Then, lay on again, ye fool,” growled Buckrow, turning to the sacks once more. “Cuss ye, Reddy, yer goin’ to side with Thirkle ag’in’ me, I can see that.”

They picked up a sack and staggered into the canon with it, and Thirkle grinned at me, and lit his cigar again.

“See that, Mr. Trenholm? If I had let Bucky rule then I would have been as good as dead. I had another chap in my crew like that. After he saw the way I worked the game he wanted to kill me and take command himself. While he was making his plans to settle me the police got him for a murder he didn’t do, and I trumped up the evidence against him, but never appeared at the trial.

“When he was condemned I told him I’d get him out all right. I had turned the trick before, with saws in the binding of Bibles, for some of my men in prison, and he had absolute faith in me, as all my men have. I went away on a little expedition after pearls down Mindanao way, and got back the day he was to hang. I visited him an hour before he was to swing, and told him it was all right and he was to escape at the last minute.

“I walked up to the trap with him, and, while praying with the prison chaplain, kept whispering it was all right, and he kept quiet until they had the cap over his head, and

then he knew I had him. He tried to yell that I was the Devil's Admiral——but it was too late then. I felt that I was justified——he would have killed me the next day. But it was a fine joke, to my mind, Mr. Trenholm."

"Ain't ye goin' to quit gammin' with that chap and give us a hand here?" demanded Buckrow. "Is that what ye call all bein' equal, Mr. Thirkle? If ye do, I don't."

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He came toward us in a threatening manner, and Thirkle, seeing that he must submit with good grace, got up and met him with a smile.

“By all means, Bucky, we are equal, but I didn’t think ye’d begrudge me a little time after what happened. How does the gold fit in there?”

“Wet as a junk. We put the first sack in the eyes of her, but it’s no kid’s play, and we ought to have help, Mr. Thirkle, if we get clear away from this island to-night. We can’t swear there won’t be no moon, and, moon or no, we want to be out of the jungle and at the boats by sundown. And what’s the game with the writin’ chap here? I’m minded to have him do a bit of this work.”

“Gold don’t rust, do it, Thirkle?” asked Petrak. “I told Bucky gold don’t rust but he don’t like the water in there.”

“Oh, dry up!” growled Buckrow. “What with yer talk we’ll be at this job all night—”

“I vote—” began Petrak.

“To the devil with ye and yer votin’!” said Buckrow. “It’s time we got to work, all hands, and so we will, and the writin’ chap’ll turn to and do his bit, or I’ll know why. If he ain’t to do his part, or we don’t make no use of him, I say we’ll up and do for him now and have it done with. Next ye know he’ll make his getaway, and then a nice mess we’ll be in.”

“We don’t intend to let Mr. Trenholm get away,” said Thirkle. “I was just thinking, lads, that there are three of us, but counting Mr. Trenholm we make four, and we can rattle him down so he can lift and carry, but not much else.”

“Then, lash his flippers down and put a bight on his legs,” said Buckrow; and he brought rope and began to fashion it into knots.

There was a minute when I was tempted to jump and run for it; but it would have meant certain death, for the three of them stood over me, two of them loaded down with pistols, and I would have had a poor chance of getting away.

There was a promise of delay in the work to be done; and, not knowing what had become of Captain Riggs, there was the bare possibility that he might come upon the pirates’ camp and attack them from ambush when he saw that I was a captive.

If I made the slightest resistance to the hampering ropes they put on me, with the cunning knots known to seamen, I knew they would not hesitate to make an end of me. So I stood up and allowed Buckrow to lash my wrists to my knees in such a way that I was bent nearly double, but with my hands sufficiently free to grasp a burden, and my feet hobbled for short steps.

We began the work of putting the sacks of gold into the hole in the cliff, and I set at the task with a prayer that before it was finished and my life was of no further value to the pirates I might find an opportunity to escape.

CHAPTER XIX

“ONE MAN LESS IN THE FORECASTLE MESS”

“Ye can let him work with ye, Thirkle,” said Buckrow. “As ye and the writin’ chap seem to have a lot of chin, pair off with him; and, as the two of ye don’t bear arms, he can’t get his paws on a gun or knife that way. You two work ahead of me and Petrak, and then we can keep an eye on the both of ye.

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“It strikes me you and the writin’ chap is gettin’ thick—too blasted thick to suit me, Thirkle, if ye want to know. Mind ye don’t come none of yer smart tricks now, or I won’t wait for ye to go explainin’ of what ye mean. Savvy that?”

“Tut, tut, man!” said Thirkle. “How can you have any doubts about what will happen to Mr. Trenholm? I suppose you think I want to take him along with us so he can write this all up for the newspapers? I’m surprised at you, Bucky. Don’t you know my ways yet?”

“That’s all right,” growled Buckrow, who was in an ill humour. “We was to work even, and ye ain’t been doin’ yer part, Thirkle. A bargain’s a bargain I’d have ye know, and I’m to see ye keep to yer part of it.”

“Pipe down—pipe down, Bucky,” said Petrak, who seemed in glee after the brandy he had had. “It’s the drink talkin’, Bucky. We’re all good chaps, and Thirkle’s A No. 1, and we got the gold to stow.”

“Don’t come no bos’n manners to me,” retorted Buckrow savagely. “I ain’t goin’ to stand for none such from ye, Red. Yer sidin’ with Thirkle, and I know that, and I’m as good a man as Thirkle; and I’m boss here, even or no even. I’m boss! Understand that? Thirkle and ye can have yer votes if ye want; but I’m boss, and I’ll drill the two of ye.”

“Ye ain’t goin’ to fight, be ye Bucky?”

“I’ll put all hands under ground—that’s what, if ye don’t turn to; and there’s too much gammin’ and gabbin’ here to suit me, I’d have ye know.”

Petrak looked at Thirkle as if in doubt about Buckrow’s sanity, and Thirkle gave him a look that seemed to me to be a message, and he made a furtive signal which I was not able to interpret.

“Steady as she goes, mates; steady as she goes,” purred Thirkle. “This is no time to quarrel. We’ll have a gunboat down on us if we don’t get away soon, and there’s a lot to do yet before we leave. Let Bucky alone, Red.”

“Then ye and the writin’ chap lay on and move lively,” snarled Buckrow, and Thirkle had me take hold of a sack behind him, and, with him leading the way, we carried it into the miniature canon.

The sacks were heavy, but were bound with ropes which served as handles, and were not hard to move until we got into the narrow cleft, where I found that my shoulders bumped along the walls as I swayed from side to side, or missed my footing on the damp, slippery ground.

Buckrow and Petrak followed us in with another sack, and when Thirkle had gone as far as he could he pulled our sack forward under his feet and stowed it in the angle where

the walls joined. Then I had to pass the second sack on to him, taking it from Petrak, who was next to me, and then we turned in our tracks and went out again.

The brush on the top of the cliff overlapped the crevice, so that it was quite dark a few feet from the entrance. The walls were slippery with a thick, funguslike moss, from which cool water dripped.

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“That gold will rust in here sure as a nigger’s black,” grumbled Buckrow, as he felt his way out. “I don’t like this place at all.”

“Best place on the island,” whispered Thirkle. “Tell him it’s the best place on the island, Reddy.”

“It’s the best place on the island, Bucky. I don’t see as we could do better.”

“I don’t care what ye think of it; I say it’ll rust in there,” said Buckrow.

“You had better go in backward this time,” said Thirkle. “You may find it a little harder, Mr. Trenholm; but perhaps it will be more convenient.”

“What’s that?” demanded Buckrow. “Who go in first?”

“It will be easier if Mr. Trenholm goes in first,” said Thirkle. “He’ll have to go backward, but he’ll find it easier to navigate.”

“Oh, no, he won’t!” said Buckrow. “I see your game, Thirkle. Ye want to come out behind Mr. Petrak and borrow a gun. We’ll let you go in first, and the writin’ chap can come out atween ye and Petrak. Don’t come none of them games on me, Thirkle. I’m too old a fish.”

We went in with the second lot of sacks in the same order, but I saw another exchange of signals between Thirkle and Petrak before we stooped for our burdens.

Before we had gone ten feet inside the crevice Thirkle coughed, and Petrak, close behind him said: “Gold don’t rust.”

“I say it do,” declared Buckrow. “Six months’ time in here’ll have this stuff with whiskers on it like a Singapore tramp that hasn’t been docked in a dog’s age.”

“I say gold don’t rust,” persisted Petrak. “How about it, Thirkle? Does gold rust? I say it don’t, and Bucky says it do.”

“You’re right, Reddy, but don’t quarrel now,” said Thirkle. “It won’t rust because gold doesn’t rust.”

“I don’t give a tinker’s hang what Thirkle says!” cried Buckrow, throwing down his end of the sack. “I’m here to say gold will rust if it’s kept wet, and that’s an end of it. Gold do rust, Thirkle or no Thirkle, and I say it.”

“All right,” agreed Reddy. “Lay on, Bucky, and let’s get this job over and done with!”

“White-livered little fool!” I heard Thirkle mutter. “He doesn’t dare do it!”

I heard Petrak and Buckrow coming on, and we were soon at the end of the black hole.

“This is a fine place, lads,” said Thirkle. “It will keep in here as well as if buried in white, dry sand.”

“Maybe it will and maybe it won’t,” growled Buckrow. “I don’t call no wet hole like this fine, and never did, and I’m minded to bury the rest of it outside.”

“Never a bit of hurt in the water, Bucky,” said Petrak cheerily. “We’ll put many of these shiners over the bar of the Flag and Anchor, Bucky, and have many a pipe over our drink.”

“Ye don’t catch me in no Flag and Anchor. I’ll have my drop of liquor in the Flagship and you can go to the devil for yours, for all I mind. What if this blasted hole closes up some day? What then? It’ll be a fine place then, no doubt. Hey, Mr. Thirkle? What then?”

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“No fear of that,” said Thirkle. “It’s wider at the top than at the bottom, and the tops hang away. I looked into all that when I decided to put it in here. There isn’t as much water as ye think, Bucky; and it’s under foot what there is of it, and, the way we’ve got it stowed here, one atop of the other, only the bottom one’ll be very wet—and gold don’t rust.”

“These guineas will be thick with scale, and ye’ll need a chipping hammer to clean ’em when ye have ’em outside again. Ye talk about folks bein’ suspicious of gold, but I say they’re quicker to turn up their noses and say things about gold that’s been stowed in the wet and turned black.”

“But gold don’t rust, Bucky. That’s sure—gold don’t rust,” said Petrak.

“That’s all very well: but I mind when I dropped half a crown in a pool back home, and in a fortnight it was thick as my hand. Think I’m a fool? I know what I’m talkin’ about, if ye don’t. Go ahead and side with Thirkle if ye like.”

“That was silver, Bucky. Gold don’t rust like that. I always knew gold don’t rust, and now Thirkle says it don’t, and Thirkle knows, as he always did. Mind we always asked Thirkle?”

“I’m not asking him any more if ye want to know, vote or no vote. My vote is as good as Thirkle’s, and it’s good as yours; and ye can side with him if ye want.”

“But gold don’t rust,” said Petrak mockingly.

“Ye think I’m a fool?” shrieked Buckrow, turning on Petrak. He was nearest the outside, and I could see his figure silhouetted against the light at the entrance. He stooped down and put his face close to Petrak.

“Fool or not, gold don’t rust, I’m telling ye Buck—”

“Then take that from a fool!” And Buckrow struck him square in the face with his fist, hurling him back on my shoulders, so that I fell forward on my hands.

“That’s rotten mean, Bucky,” I heard Petrak whining. “That’s rotten mean in here in the dark, Bucky.”

“That *is* rotten mean, Petrak,” said Thirkle indignantly. “I wouldn’t stand for that if I were you.”

“Oh, ye wouldn’t, hey? Well, we’ll see what ye stand for soon’s ye come out into the clear—that’s what we’ll see, Thirkle.”

“It’s rotten mean,” whimpered Petrak. “I wouldn’t do the likes o’ that to ye, Bucky; not if ye never agreed along with me—it’s rotten mean.”

“Ye’ll get worse as that is. Now, does gold rust, ye little runt? Say it! Does gold rust?”

“That’s hardly fair, Bucky,” said Thirkle. “That’s hardly fair on the little chap after he’s stood by ye so long.”

“Fair enough for me, Thirkle, and fair enough for ye it’ll be when ye come out.”

“What do ye mean by that, Buck?” demanded Thirkle, speaking over my shoulder; and then he whispered to Petrak: “Give it to him, Red—now’s yer chance. Quick, lad!”

“Soon enough ye’ll find out what I mean, Thirkle; that’s what. If the two of ye think yer going to side together ag’in’ me, well and good; but look out for Bad Buckrow, I say. I’ll make my meanin’ blasted clear, too. Mind that.”

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“My jaw’s broke!” cried Petrak, struggling to his feet, breathing hard. Then without warning he sprang on Buckrow’s back with a snarl like an animal, and the two of them went down in the narrow passage.

“Gawd a’mighty!” screamed Buckrow, with every bit of air in his lungs, and I heard Petrak strike again.

“Red—he got me—he—”

“Good!” said Thirkle into my ear, as if speaking to me. “I never thought the little chap had the innards for it, but he did as long as he could strike from behind.”

Petrak was holding Buckrow down, and his victim was breathing hard and writhing under him, with his face buried in the ground. He coughed twice, as if there was something caught in his throat, and then was still.

“Did ye get him Petrak?”

“I done for him, Thirkle. I done for him good. That’s the last of Bucky. Mind how I fooled him, Thirkle? Said my jaw was broke.”

“Good work, Reddy, lad. Good work, but be sure or he’ll wing ye yet. Sure he ain’t playing chink with ye?”

“Oh, he’s done right enough. That leaves two of us—hey, Thirkle? Ye know Bucky would a done for ye but for me—wouldn’t he, Thirkle? Ye know that’s right—don’t ye, Thirkle?”

“That’s right, Reddy,” said Thirkle. “It’s a good job he’s done for—and now there is two of us, you and me, Reddy. I never did like Bucky; but I like you, Red. He wanted his fight, and he got it. I knew ye wouldn’t take that from him. No man could stand for such as that in here.”

“That leaves all the more for us—don’t it, Thirkle?”

“All the more for us, Reddy. Drag him out, and now we’ll settle this navvy’s job. It’s one man less in the fo’c’sle mess, and dead men tell no tales; and now we’ll have to do the work a bit short-handed; but we can clean it up between us now, and no more fighting going on.”

Petrak pulled the body out after him, and Thirkle helped him carry it into the brush, where they dumped it without ceremony, and Thirkle found another bottle of brandy and offered it to Petrak.

“I’ll just take a pair of these pistols, Reddy,” he said, relieving him of the belt he had taken from Buckrow. “You don’t need all those pistols, now that Bucky is done for.”

“But ye was to bear no arms, Thirkle,” grinned Petrak.

“That’s what I told Bucky, but you and me’ll get along better than we did with Bucky; and ye don’t intend to hold me to that—do ye, Red?”

“I was only joking a bit, Thirkle. We’re together now on the split, ain’t we? Well, friends don’t have to make such agreements. I sail with you, and you sail with me; and no articles signed beyond that, I say. What, Thirkle?”

“That’s what. Have another drink, Red. That was a good job ye did for me with Bucky, even if he did play you mean.”

“He was a bad one, all right,” agreed Petrak, wiping his mouth and giving Thirkle the bottle. “Bad Buckrow they called him when I first knew him, and bad he was to the end; but I never looked to give to him, leastwise not the way I did, in a hole like that. Howsome it be, I don’t stand for no smash in the mouth like he give me—ain’t that right, Thirkle?”

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“Right you are, but it’s time we had this stuff cleaned up now. You and Mr. Trenholm set at it while I put Bucky under ground.”

Petrak and I resumed the work of carrying the sacks into the crevice, while Thirkle busied himself at digging a grave in the soft sand near the place they had deposited Buckrow’s body. The little red-headed man began to whistle a music-hall tune softly, but Thirkle cautioned him against making any unnecessary noise.

I was in an agony from my cramped position, and tugging at the sacks served to increase my torture. The tangle of ropes which Buckrow had put on my ankles caught in loose stones and chafed the flesh until the blood came; and my wrists, pulled down with tight knots, which I had to strain against to keep my balance, throbbed and pained and tingled, my arms being numbed by the blood in the bound arteries.

Petrak kept before me, with the sacks between us, and his bloody knife pulled to the front of his belt. After he had stowed each sack he helped me back out, or assisted me to turn, which was always a hard task for me.

If I let my end of the sack slip out of my fingers he was ready for me with knife or pistol, so there was no opportunity to take a pistol or knife from him, even if I had not been helplessly hobbled.

“Mind ye don’t try any monkey-business with me,” he warned the second time we went in. “If ye do, I’ll give ye what Bucky got, and ye mind that. I’m no gent to fool with, as ye ought to savvy by this; and if ye think I be, try something.”

But, for all his warning, I was ready to risk death if I saw the chance to make a fight. I hoped that Thirkle would give him more of the brandy, but Thirkle kept the bottle to himself. When we pressed into the crevice I wore the ropes on my wrists against the stones as much as I could, trying to cut the bonds on the rough points of the walls. Once I stumbled and fell and groped for a splinter of stone, but he menaced me with his knife and kicked me until I got to my feet again.

I had given up hope of being rescued by Captain Riggs. Even if he found the camp, I doubted that he would attack until it would be too late for me, as he would naturally suppose Buckrow and Long Jim to be near by.

It was coming on toward twilight, and there were still seven sacks to be carried in. Thirkle had finished burying Buckrow, and set to dragging the sacks close to the entrance of the crevice, so we would not have to carry them so far.

Petrak made several attempts to talk with him; but Thirkle made short answers, for when he took the pistols he had dropped his mask of affability and assumed his old commanding airs.

“It’ll be dark before we get back to the boats,” suggested Petrak, as we stood over the five sacks which were left.

“Mighty dark,” said Thirkle gruffly, sitting cross-legged, counting a packet of English banknotes.

“That’s what ye want, aint’ it?” asked Petrak, who noticed that Thirkle was not so friendly as he had been.

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“You keep to work and never mind so much talk,” said Thirkle. “If ye stand there that way, it’ll be morning before we get away.”

“I’m workin’, ain’t I? Can’t a man stop to breathe, himself, I’d like to know?”

Thirkle made no reply, but went on running his thumb over the ends of the notes. I stood and watched them, waiting for Petrak to stoop and take a sack.

“Yer goin’ to play fair with me—ain’t ye, Thirkle?” whined Petrak, a trace of fear crossing his face. “We’re in together, share and share alike now—ain’t we, Thirkle? I can ask that, can’t I?”

“Ye’ll get yer share, Reddy,” said Thirkle, smiling.

“That’s half—ain’t it, Thirkle? Ye mind what I done for ye with Bucky, don’t ye?”

“Aye, half of it, of course, Red. Reef that jaw of yours now, lad, and clap on. Don’t stand there like a Jew and wrangle over the loot. Want to stop and count it now, lad?”

“Ye told Long Jim to do for me—didn’t ye, Thirkle?” Petrak grinned, and his fingers twitched toward the butt of a pistol. I knew what was in his mind.

“What’s that?” demanded Thirkle. “Oh, run along now, Red, like a good chap, and get the gold stowed. Didn’t I tell ye to get Long Jim, and didn’t ye get him? What more’s to be said? Run along now, Reddy, and pack it away.”

“That’s what Long Jim said,” insisted Petrak doggedly. There was murder in his eyes, while his face was livid with fear.

“Then he lied, and ye ought to take my word against his. Don’t be a fool now, Reddy, like the others. Ye’ll get your share, bank on that. Yer a good sort, Petrak; and I need ye to help me get it away, and we’ll share and share alike, as I told ye. Do you think I’d play dirt with ye after all we’ve been through together, Reddy?”

“Course not. Don’t mind my lip, Thirkle, old chap. No harm done, is there?”

“No harm done, Reddy,” said Thirkle, glancing at me suspiciously, as if he thought I had been turning Petrak against him.

“No harm in what I say, Thirkle,” and Petrak took up the end of the sack. His mistrust of Thirkle gave me an idea, which I put into play as soon as we were well inside the crevice.

“Petrak,” I whispered dropping my end of the sack, and compelling him to let it down.

“What’s up now?” he whispered.

“He’ll kill you, too, Reddy. He’s planning it out; and if you let him, he’ll kill both of us before he quits this island. Are you going to let him do it, Reddy?”

He growled out something and fumbled at his belt, and it was touch and go with him whether he would knife me and then run out and tell Thirkle to gain credit with him.

“His mind is made up, Reddy. He may let us help him get a boat into the water, but that’s all. He’ll murder both of us like dogs.”

“Old Thirkle’s all right,” he said weakly, as if he felt the truth of what I said, but lacked courage to attack Thirkle.

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“Reddy, he’ll kill you!” I went on, seeing that I was on the right track, and that fear of death at Thirkle’s hands was uppermost in his mind.

He had caught enough in Thirkle’s manner since the death of Buckrow to see that he was not going to get a just division of the loot, at the very least, and, knowing the ruthlessness of his master, he had doubts about escaping with his life. Besides, I believed he had been tempted by the thought that he might kill Thirkle and then have it all to himself.

“He told Long Jim to kill you? Don’t you see the way the devil had it planned to get rid of you? He planned to kill you all, once he had this gold on the island. You should never have come back after I shot Long Jim. Why did you come back? You know he’ll kill you.”

“I wanted to see where they hide the gold, that’s what. Then, when I raised you there in the grass it come in my head to grab ye, and come in for my share of the gold, seeing Long Jim was done for.”

His friendly mood encouraged me, but, if I let him ramble on with his own affairs, I would not be able to convince him that Thirkle was plotting to slay him. So I began with him again.

“Thirkle will kill the both of us. You heard what he said about being a gentleman. He has been an officer in the navy, Reddy, and he won’t want you or any other man to know he was a pirate when he goes back to London. He wouldn’t feel safe if he let you live. He cares no more for you than he did for Buckrow or Long Jim—you ought to know that.”

“Oh, Thirkle is all right,” he said in a way that exasperated me.

“He wouldn’t look at you twice in London or anywhere else. He’ll rid himself of you as soon as he needs you no more, which will be as soon as the gold is stowed and he has a boat in the water. Now is your chance if you ever had it.”

“Thirkle is all right.”

“He had it planned to kill Buckrow. Then he argued the two of you into letting him go. Can’t you see that he is playing the game to have it all for himself? Are you going to be a fool all your life, man?”

“Then ye’d do for me after I done for him,” he said.

“Give me a gun and cut me loose and I’ll shoot him myself and I’ll see that you get your share of the gold, which you won’t from him. You can have it all if you’ll let me kill him,

and if he kills me you can say I cut my hands loose and grabbed a gun. You don't stand to lose anything—come on. Cut me loose and I'll take the chance you don't dare to."

"Thirkle's all right," he droned, picking up the sack again. "I know your game—ye want to do for the both of us and have it all for yourself. Fine job that would be! Nice I'd look givin' you a gun, wouldn't I! Lay on that sack."

"He's all very pleasant now," I went on as I stooped for the rope. "Wait until he has finished with us and the gold is packed, and then see what will happen—you'll wish you had listened to me."

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“Pipe down with that,” he growled, and I saw the uselessness of trying to make the lout see reason. I now began to fear that he would tell Thirkle what I had said to him.

When we went out for another sack, Petrak looked over at Thirkle and hesitated as if he wanted to say something, but Thirkle was writing in a little book, with a pistol between his feet.

“Well, what is it now?” he demanded truculently, having seen something suspicious in Petrak’s manner. “What’s the lay now? What have ye got yer hand so close to that gun for? Take a shot at me if you want—go on, take a shot at old Thirkle, if ye’re that game.”

“Only a habit o’ mine, keepin’ my gun well for’ard, Thirkle,” whimpered Petrak, shivering. “I have to keep a close eye on the writin’ chap, Thirkle. No offence, I hope.”

“Look lively now, lad,” said Thirkle, turning amiable again, but only to reassure Petrak. “Here’s the last of it and get it away and we’ll get under way.”

We carried another sack in and I waited until we were at the far end and had dumped it before I began again with Petrak. I knew his natural treachery was near the surface, and it needed but little urging to bring him to the point when he would turn against Thirkle.

“We might as well say good-bye now,” I said as mournfully as I could. “You remember I treated you pretty well in Manila, and I’m sorry for you now. It doesn’t matter much with me how I end now, because Thirkle has the drop on me, but I’m sorry for you—you ought to have your share of it, and Thirkle ought to play fair with you, but he won’t. That devil out there will kill us both in the next ten minutes unless you give me a gun and let me kill him. I’m not afraid of him—give me a gun!”

“Thirkle ain’t bad,” he said, as if trying to convince himself that he was not afraid of Thirkle. “He ain’t bad—he said he’d play fair with me, and he will.”

I laughed gently.

“Yes, he’ll play fair—with himself. He’s out there now putting down directions for getting back here—alone. Give me a gun, and let me free, and I’ll kill him for you. When I’ve settled him I’ll call you, and if he gets me it’s all the same—except that you’ll lose in the end.

“But with me you have a chance to win—can’t you see that? You haven’t a chance with Thirkle. If he gets me, don’t trust him—shoot him the minute you can get the muzzle of your pistol on him. If you let me try you have two chances at him, and you can kill me if you choose afterward—or give me a knife if you don’t dare to let me have a gun.”

“He’ll do for ye. Not a chance for ye with Thirkle in gun-play.”

“But give me a chance to fight for my life,” I pleaded. “If I can put him out of the way, so much the better for you; but it’s death for both of us if we go on this way. Give me a gun, and I swear I’ll let you go free if we ever get off this island.”

“He’ll kill you and then come and get me,” he whined. “There ain’t a chance to get Thirkle as easy as that. He’ll do for me if you take a shot at him.”

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“Of course he will if we stand here and argue about it until it is too late!” I stormed at him. “Pass me a gun—don’t be a fool, Reddy. Quick! Cut these ropes from my hands and give me a pistol and let me show you how to draw your Mr. Thirkle’s teeth!”

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST

“What’s all this social chatter between you two?” demanded Thirkle from the entrance to the crevice. I did not know how much he had overheard, but I determined to make one more effort to get the pistol.

“Quick,” I whispered to Petrak. “Hand me the gun and free my hands!”

“It ain’t me,” whined Petrak. “It’s the writin’ chap here. Get along out,” and he struck me over the head and I knew I had lost, although there was a doubt that Petrak would ever have given me the pistol.

“What’s he up to now, Reddy? What’s the nice young man trying to do?”

“Wanted to do for ye, that’s what, Thirkle. Wanted a gun, but he got no gun from me. Said you wouldn’t play fair with me, Thirkle, but I said ye would.”

“So ye want to take a hand in things here, do you, Mr. Trenholm?” said Thirkle as I came out. “Still got an idea you can beat old Thirkle at his own game. Learning new tricks, I see. Before long ye’d be ready to boss the job. Didn’t take ye long to forget what I told ye of the other smart chap who wanted to settle me and take command himself, did it?”

“You stick to your pen and typewriter, Mr. Trenholm, and let me run my own crew—nice pirate ye’d make, with silk underwear and a typewriter,” and he and Petrak laughed loudly at the joke,

“I told him you would kill him, and so you will,” I said, mustering as much defiance as I could under the circumstances.

“Kill Mr. Petrak here! Ha, ha, ha! Why, he’s my partner, Mr. Petrak is, and we’re going to share this gold together, share and share alike, as gentlemen do.”

“He wanted to do for ye, Thirkle,” said Petrak, flattered by his master and unable to see the sly sarcasm of Thirkle in his joy at being assured of his position, and of getting his share of the gold. “I never give him the chance, Thirkle. Now if it was some—say Buckrow or Long Jim, they might give him a gun, but not Petrak. Ye know I ain’t the

kind to turn on a pal, Thirkle, and I say you stick to me and I'll stick to you, come what do. Ain't that right, Thirkle?"

"Reddy, yer true blue," and he took Petrak's hand and shook it vigorously, and patted the little rat on the back. "Stick to Thirkle and Thirkle will stick to you like a Dutch uncle, and never mind what Mr. Trenholm has to say. He's not in this, or won't be long, and it won't be many days before we are counting out the gold between us.

"I've got enough five-pound notes here to buy the little yacht, and I'll take some of the gold, but not much. We'll be back here before the month is out, all slick and snug, and then away for London."

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“I’ll stick like paint, Thirkle; lay to that,” said Petrak, grinning at me. “I knew he was on the wrong course when he come that gun talk to me, and I told him Thirkle was all right, and that I knowed ye better than him, and so I do—hey, Thirkle?”

“You had better give me your pistols until you are done, Reddy. Ye can’t trust these gentlemen who write—they have too much imagination, and they are too foxy for men like you and me, Reddy. There’s no telling what he might do in there if you have guns and knives on ye. Pass ’em over, Reddy, or he’ll do for us yet.”

Petrak gave up his weapons joyfully, not realizing that he was being disarmed for the very purpose I had warned him about—Thirkle was getting ready to finish his job in earnest.

“Now get along and dump the last of it in there, and move navy style or we’ll be here at dark. No more soldiering, Petrak: and see that ye keep yer jaw battened down, Mr. Trenholm, or I’ll take a hand in this that ye won’t relish and attend to ye in a way ye won’t fancy.”

“Ye’ll play fair with me, won’t ye, Thirkle?” asked Petrak.

“Fair as ye deserve. Move along with that cargo.”

Petrak began to whine to himself, and I said nothing more until we went in with the last sack.

“You fool, he’ll kill you as I told you he would, but you are too late now.”

“Oh, Thirkle’s all right,” he grumbled; but he seemed worried since he had given up the pistols, and he saw plainly enough that Thirkle’s manner had changed in no undecided way since Petrak had surrendered his weapons.

“All clear,” said Thirkle, as we came out. He was measuring rope, and had his jacket on and a bundle rolled up, and all the camp litter was removed and dead leaves scattered over our tracks.

“Can I have my guns now, Thirkle? I don’t like to go down the trail without a gun—no knowin’ what might happen.”

“Never would do yet, Reddy. Take this knife and cut the lines away from Mr. Trenholm’s feet, and we’ll fix him so he can navigate back to the boats. You take the lead back, Reddy, because you know the way better than I do, and I’ll make Mr. Trenholm fast to ye, and follow on. We’ll need to look sharp to make the beach before dark.”

“But I want my guns, Thirkle. Fair play’s fair play, and I want my guns.”

“Never mind the guns, I say. Mr. Trenholm will be right at your back all the way down, and we can’t take any chances now, Reddy. I’ll settle him when the boats are off, and then you won’t have anything to worry about. Cut his feet loose.”

“What style of a funeral would suit him?” asked Petrak, busy with the cords at my feet.

“We’ll have to select something special for Mr. Trenholm. How about the same go-off we gave Caldish? Remember Caldish? Wanted to say his prayers. Quick and neat it was, and no mess.”

“If he helps with the boats, how about a tow out at the end of a painter, Thirkle? He’ll make good shark bait, only some skinny.”

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“That would do for him nicely, Reddy. We’ll let him push the boat well out, and, when he has her clear, pull away and give him plenty of line. That’s a capital idea, Reddy, and we’ll use it.”

They bound my arms to my sides, and put the end of the rope round Petrak’s waist, so that I was about five feet behind him when it was taut. In this way we set out for the beach, with Petrak in the lead and Thirkle, carrying his bundle and smoking a cigar, treading on my heels, to make me keep close up.

The sun was not quite down, but the jungle was filling with shadows, and, once the sun got below the horizon, night would close down on us with the tropical swiftness that knows no twilight, and the day would go out like a candle under a snuffer.

Thirkle had been drinking of the brandy, and was in a jolly mood, and he had given Petrak a good swig of it to lighten the little rascal’s feet, but I refused the bottle when it was offered to me, for, low as my spirits were, and racked as my body was, I could not come to accept their ghastly hospitality.

If I let the rope tighten between me and Petrak, Thirkle prodded me with the point of a knife, and, as I was faint with hunger and thirst, and utterly worn out, I frequently stumbled and fell, when they both set upon me and beat me to my feet. Petrak pulling me up with the rope, while Thirkle scourged me with a leather thong.

We had been on the road about half an hour when I recognized the spot where Captain Riggs had crawled into the brush to rest, and I began to complain loudly and made as much noise as possible, hoping that the captain and Rajah might still be concealed near by.

“Keep close!” yelled Petrak, as I let the rope tighten and hung back.

“Get along or I’ll flay ye alive!” thundered Thirkle, which was what I wanted him to do.

“Then don’t let those low limbs fly back on me,” I cried as loudly as I dared without exciting their suspicion of my purpose. “They knock me off my feet, and that’s why I can’t keep close up.”

“Shut yer jaw,” said Thirkle, and I stumbled along again, wondering what had become of Captain Riggs, and wondering if he had been lured into the jungle by the shots I had exchanged with Long Jim, and was lost.

I kept straining at the cords about me, but although I hurt the wounds on my wrists until I was weak from pain, I could not free myself. If nothing better offered, I was determined to make a dash at Thirkle if he freed my hands to work at the boat. If I could not surprise him in the dark and get hold of a knife or pistol, I could at least give him a fight

even if I died in a last attempt to save myself. I much preferred to die fighting than at the end of a rope in the water, as Petrak had suggested.

I knew they would have to find the oars before they could get a boat away, and the missing plugs might cause them a deal of trouble if they launched the boats without noticing their loss. I hoped that I might find a chance of escape in the darkness if the boat filled with them after they got it into the water.

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Finally we came to level ground, and I knew we were close to the beach, for we could hear the rollers. The brush was thicker in the marsh, and we got off the trail, but we could see patches of the moonlight on the water ahead, and caught the white flash of the waves tumbling on the shingle.

Petrak left the bed of the brook and pushed his way straight ahead through the dense foliage which shut us off from the beach. I fell and made a great racket, setting up a wail about my leg and swearing that I had broken it, and begging Thirkle to help me.

He struck at me with his thong, and, although he missed, I screamed at the top of my voice, as a warning to Captain Riggs, in case he should be lurking about. Besides, I hoped my play that I had been badly crippled would give me a better opportunity to escape or to attack them, as they would be more careless if they thought I was perfectly helpless.

“I’ll give ye something to yell about soon,” said Thirkle. “Just wait a while and I’ll give ye something to make a real fuss about. Maybe ye think there’s a ship near—maybe there is; but it won’t do ye much good, so let’s not have any more of this bawling. I thought ye was gamer than that, my fine Mr. Trenholm.”

“Here we are, Thirkle!” cried Petrak, pushing the wall and bushes aside and showing us the moonlit sea and the loom of the mainland shouldering up into the stars. “It can’t be far to the boats, Thirkle.”

We went out into the still warm sand. The moon, lean in its first quarter, hung over the top of the island, silvering the sand and playing with the gaunt shadows of the palm-trees, distorting them into queer shapes and making grotesque patterns under our feet. The breeze, the snoring of the waves, the sense of freedom after the hot, reeking jungle, refreshed me, and I almost forgot the doom that threatened. Thirkle stood a minute and scanned the channel, muttering to himself.

“Looks all clear, sir,” said Petrak.

“All clear, Reddy. Push on, lad; the boats are right ahead.”

“Here we are, sir, all snug,” called Petrak, and I saw the indistinct pile in the shadow of the brush which marked the cache of boats.

“No matches, Reddy. Mind ye don’t make a flash or we’ll have some craft on the prowl along here. We can’t take any chances.”

“Cut me loose from this cussed line, Thirkle. We can take a turn on a tree and hold the writin’ chap until we have need for him.”

Thirkle cut him free from me, and they bound me to a broken palm-stump. I pleaded to be put on the ground, complaining about my leg, and Petrak finally wrapped the rope about my legs and threw me to the ground, more to keep me quiet than to ease my supposed suffering. They left me laying helpless in a thicket of young bamboo shoots, with my head and shoulders in the sand. I managed to wriggle on my side so that I had view of the boats, and, what was better, I got my teeth into the rope on my hands and began gnawing it desperately.

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“Which boat has the stores, Reddy? I’m twisted all around.”

“The nighest, Thirkle. The nighest has the stores, and the other the tackle.”

“You go round the other side for the block, Reddy. We better take the spare boat with us and set it adrift after we clear the channel, or load it with stones and let it go down after we are clear of the island. Then we’ll get the wind and slip down the coast to the first native town. That’s better than waiting to be picked up and having to answer questions that wouldn’t carry by. No Manila-bound boat for us, to land about the time the *Kut Sang* was reported overdue.”

“Right ye are, Thirkle,” said Petrak, stumbling about in the dark. “It’s black as a Kroo boy in here,” and presently he began to drag the block through the dead leaves and brambles.

“’No need for the tackle, sir, once we get clear of the sand, in my mind. We can skid ’em with oars, and lighten the stowed one—hey, Thirkle? I ain’t for leavin’ no marks hereabouts, and we can drag some bushes over the wake we leave in the sand, so—”

“We’ll see about that when we get clear,” said Thirkle gruffly. “Hold yer lip now.”

Thirkle was busy pulling the palm-leaves from the boats and clearing the litter with which they had covered their cache. I could hear him tugging at the sail which they had spread over the outer boat. The moonlight was getting brighter, and more stars were coming out, and the jungle was beginning to awaken. A lizard set up a monotonous croak in the branches overhead, and insects and unseen things began to stir in the foliage.

“Blast this mess of halyards and gear Bucky strewed alongside—”

I heard Thirkle draw his breath sharply as he left the sentence unfinished. He drew away from the boat in a quick, involuntary movement, and I managed to twist my neck so that I could observe him. He stood motionless for a minute, his figure a queer fretwork of light and shadow from the creepers and palms.

“Reddy!” he called cautiously. “Oh, Petrak!” Something in his tones—a suggestion of suspicion that everything was not right—thrilled me. Petrak did not hear him as he was fumbling with the block in the sand and muttered about a jammed rope.

“Petrak!”

“Aye,” said Petrak. “I’ll give ye a hand next minute, sir.”

“Come here,” commanded Thirkle with a hand on a pistol.

“What’s up?” demanded Petrak, getting to his feet. “Can’t ye start it—what’s wrong, Thirkle?”

“Come up here and haul out some of the gear in this boat—move navy style, lad—we can’t be wasting the whole night! Reach in there and clear that mess of halyard.”

But Petrak did not move. He knew something was wrong; but whether it was Thirkle he feared, or what Thirkle seemed afraid of, I did not know. I thought he suspected treachery.

“What’s wrong, Thirkle?” he demanded.

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“Come on up here, can’t ye?”

“What ye want, Thirkle? No funny business for me. Speak out what ye want. Ye ain’t goin’ to do me dirt, be ye, Thirkle—not Reddy?”

He was whining now, and he was in terror of Thirkle.

“Oh, shut up!” growled Thirkle. “It’s nothing, but it give me a turn.”

“What was it, Thirkle? What frightened ye?”

“I thought I put my hand into a mess of hair and—”

“Oh, ho!” laughed Petrak. “That’s a ball of spun yarn Bucky left. It’s naught but spun yarn, Thirkle. I minded it myself,” and Petrak turned to the block again.

Thirkle moved toward the boat, saying something about how he was getting old and nervous, and I saw him bend over the gunwale. I watched him closely, for a hope had sprung up in my withered heart—a hope which I hardly dared tell myself might possibly be true, after the train of disasters which had overtaken me since I went aboard the *Kut Sang*.

I saw a form spurt up out of the boat, and, as it arose, like the fountain that pops out of the sea after a shell strikes, there came a heavy blow and a deep-throated grunt, followed by a hiss that was merged with a shrill death-cry.

“Black devil! Black devil!” said Thirkle in a quiet, matter-of-fact way, and then he began to sob and squirm; but the figure that had come up like a jack-in-the-box held him pinned across the gunwale, with his shoulders and arms inside the boat, and his legs writhing and thrashing in the dead palm-leaves.

“What’s wrong, Thirkle? What’s wrong?” wailed Petrak.

He stood a second waiting for an answer, and then he started for the boat, but stopped at the edge of the shadows.

“What’s wrong, Thirkle? Sing out, can’t ye? What’s gone amiss?”

Thirkle’s legs were quiet now, but I could hear his heavy breathing, and it reminded me of the steam exhaust from an ice-factory.

In spite of the mystery about me, I set my brain to work trying to remember what particular ice-factory sounded just like Thirkle’s breathing.

“I’ll hold him, Rajah,” said Captain Riggs. “Go get the other,” and the figure of the Malay boy sprang from the boat and leaped toward Petrak. The little red-headed man gave an incoherent gurgle, and he took to his heels down the beach. Rajah let him go, and ran to me, where I was tossing about like a dying fish. He hissed to me and swiftly cut me free, and I rushed to the boats, with a tangle of rope still clinging to my feet.

“Captain Riggs,” I cried, “it is I, Trenholm!” and he lifted his hand from the shoulder of the dying Thirkle and took mine.

“All’s well,” he said calmly. “Glad to see ye alive, Mr. Trenholm. I gave ye up, and we came back here and went to sleep in the boat, but Rajah was on watch when he heard ye coming back, and I guess he’s made an end of this beauty. Here, strike a match and let’s look at him.”

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I held the flame down to Thirkle's face, and his clenched teeth grinned at me through snarling, open lips, but his eyes were glazed with death. We stripped him of his arms and lay him down in the palm-leaves, quite dead.

"Did that other rascal get away?" asked Riggs. "We'll have to wait a bit and see if we can't find him. But probably we better get to sea. Ye know where ye left the plugs and oars? That little red-headed chap can't do much harm, and if he gets away we'll find him some day. We'll be back here in the shake of a lamb's tail, anyhow."

We rigged the tackle and hauled the boat into the sand with little trouble, and, while Rajah held her on an even keel, we tugged at the painter and soon had the water lapping at her bows. The stock of provisions and water was restowed, and then we smashed the extra boat and took the oars. We covered Thirkle with sand, but Riggs said he would carry him back to Manila with the gold.

Rajah was in the boat, and we were prying it off the shingle and waiting for a favouring wave when we were startled with a hail from the jungle.

"Cap'n Riggs! Oh, Cap'n Riggs!"

"Who's there?" I shouted, although I knew.

"Petrak—don't leave me here, cap'n! Take me away from this cussed place—please, sir, please. I'll be good, only don't leave me on the beach—I'll die afore mornin', sir."

We took him. He came creeping out of the jungle, sniffling and wailing, and begging not to be hanged, and saying Thirkle and the others had done it all. We bundled him into the bows, telling him he was a dead man if he made a suspicious move; but the little cur never had enough courage to fight unless he could stab a man in the back.

Once in the channel we filled away to the south, scooting past the black upper-works of the *Kut Sang*, as we caught a stiff breeze from the north. Then Captain Riggs made me sleep.

It was long after daylight when the captain shook me, and right over us was a square-rigged ship. She was hanging in stays, and a boat was coming to us from her when I looked over the gunwale. She was an oil-carrier from Kobe to Manila.

"Four men out of the *Kut Sang*, ashore on a reef," said Captain Riggs, as we went over her side. "You may put the red-headed gentleman in irons, if you please, sir. Thank you."

And so we went back to Manila, where Petrak was hanged, and the only men who ever sailed with the Devil's Admiral and lived to tell of it were Captain Riggs, and Rajah, and myself, and the story was not written until after Captain Riggs had fallen asleep under

the poplars of his Maine home and forgot to awaken. As I write the last of the tale, the wind howls in the chimney, and the fleecy fog is coming over Russian Hill from the Pacific, and hiding the ships in San Francisco Bay, and the last sheets from my pen are gathered up by Rajah, wearing in his girdle the kris that killed Thirkle.

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THE END