

ENGLAND

GEORGE ALLAN

CURSED

George England

Cursed

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Cursed

CHAPTER I

AT BATU KAWAN

Slashed across the copper bowl of sunset, the jagged silhouette of tawny-shouldered mountains, fringed with areca-palms in black fretwork against the swift-fading glow, divided the tropic sky. Above, day yet lingered. Below, night's dim shroud, here and there spangled with glow-lights still or moving, had already folded earth in its obscurity.

Down from that mountain crest the descending slopes fell through grove and plantation to the drowned paddy-fields and to the miasmatic swamps, brooded by settling mists like thin, white breath of ghosts that in this Malay land all men gave faith to.

Nearer still, it reached the squalid *campong* of Batu Kawan. Batu Kawan, huddled in filth, disorder and disease between the steaming arsenical green of the lowlands and the muddy idleness of the boat-jammed Timbago River. Batu Kawan, whence the New Bedford clipper-ship, *Silver Fleece*, should have sailed two hours ago on the high tide, this 18th day of February, 1868. Batu Kawan, pestilent, malodorous, sinister, swarming with easy life, hemmed round with easier death.

William Scurlock, mate, was looking townward, leaning with crossed arms on rail. The umber smudge of half-light in the sky, fading over the torn edge of the mountains, revealed something of his blond bigness, freckled, weather-bitten, with close-cropped hair, a scarred jaw and hard teeth that gripped his cutty-pipe in bulldog fashion.

Scurlock seemed to be engaged with inward visionings, rather than outward. The occasional come-and-go of some dim figure in the waist of the ship, the fan-tan game of four or five Malay seamen – for the *Silver Fleece* carried a checkerboard crew, white, yellow and brown – as they squatted on their hunkers under the vague blur of a lantern just forward of the mainmast, and the hiccouging stridor of an accordion in the fo'c's'le, roused in him no reaction.

Nor, as he lolled there under the awning, did he appear to take heed of the mud-clogged river with its jumble of sampans and house-boats, or of the thatched huts and tiled *godowns* past which the colorful swarm of Oriental life was idling along the bund. This stewing caldron of heat, haze, odors, dusk where fruit-bats staggered against the appearing stars said nothing whatever to the mate. All he could see in it was inefficiency, delay and loss.

Not all its wizardry of gleaming lights in hut and shop, its firefly paper lanterns, its murmuring strangeness could weigh against the vexing fact that his ship had missed the tide, and that – though her full cargo of tea, rattan, tapioca, cacao and opium was under hatches – she still lay made fast to the bamboo mooring-piles. What could offset the annoyance that Captain Alpheus Briggs, ashore on business of his own, was still delaying the vital business of working downstream on the ebb?

“Devil of a cap'n!” grumbled Scurlock. He spat moodily into the dark waters, and sucked at his pipe. “Ain't it enough for him to have put in a hundred boxes of raw opium, which is liable to land us all in hell, without stealin' a nigger wench an' now drinkin' samshu, ashore? Trouble comin' – mutiny an' murder an' damnation with trimmin's, or I'm no Gloucester man!”

Savagely he growled in his deep throat. Scurlock disapproved of Batu Kawan and of all its works, especially of its women and its raw rice-whisky. The East grated on his taut nerves. Vague singing in huts and the twangle of musically discordant strings set his teeth on edge. He hated the smells of the place, all seemingly compounded of curry and spices and mud and smoke of wood fires, through which the perfumes of strange fruits and heavy flowers drifted insistently.

The voices of mothers calling their naked little ones within their doors, lest Mambang Kuning, the yellow devil who dwells in the dusk, should snatch them, jarred upon his evil temper. So, too, the monotonous *tunk-tunk-tunk* of metal-workers' hammers in some unseen place; the snuffling grunt of carabaos wallowing in the mud-swale beyond the guava clump, up-stream; the nasal chatter of gharry-drivers and Kling boatmen; the whining sing-song of Malay pedlers with shouldered poles, whence swung baskets of sugar-cane and mangosteens. Scurlock abominated all that shuffling, chattering tangle of dark, half-clad life. The gorge of his trim, efficient, New England soul rose up against it, in hot scorn.

"Damn the Straits!" he grumbled, passing his hand over his forehead, sweaty in the breathless heat. "An' damn Briggs, too! It's my last voyage East, by joycus!"

Which was, indeed, the living truth, though by no means as Scurlock meant or understood it.

A plaintive hail from the rough brick coping of the bund drew his atrabilious attention. The mate saw that a brown, beardless fellow was making gestures at him. A lantern on the quarterdeck flung unsteady rays upon the Malay's nakedness, complete save for the breech-clout through which a kris was thrust. In his left hand he gripped a loose-woven coir bag, heavily full. His left held out, on open palm, three or four shining globules. Scurlock viewed with resentment the lean, grinning face, lips reddened and teeth jet-black by reason of long years of chewing lime and betel.

"Turtle egg, sar, sellum piecee cheap," crooned the Malay. "Buyum turtle egg, sar?"

Scurlock's answer was to bend, reach for a piece of holystone in a bucket by the rail, and catapult it at the vagabond who had made so bold as to interrupt his musings. The Malay swung aside; the holystone crunched into the sack of eggs and slid to earth.

The screaming curse of the barbarian hardly crossed the rail ahead of the flung kris. The wavy, poisoned blade flickered, spinning. Scurlock stooped away; the fraction of an eyewink later would have done his life's business very neatly. Into the mizzen-mast drove the kris, and quivered there.

Scurlock turned, strode to it and plucked it out, swearing in his rage. The Malays at fan-tan by the gleam of the slush-light under the awning grew silent. Their fantastic little cards, of gaudy hue, dropped unheeded; for they had heard the name of Ratna Mutnu Manikam, god who brings death. Wherefore they shuddered, and turned scared faces aft; and some touched heart and forehead, warding off the curse.

Back to the rail, kris in hand, ran Scurlock.

"*Juldi*, you!" he shouted, with an oath unprintable. "Top your broom, you black swine – skip, before I come ashore an' split you! *Juldi jao!*"

The Malay hesitated. Scurlock, flinging "*Sur!*" at him, which in the *lingua franca* denominates a swine, started for the gangway. Silently the Malay faded into the little fringe of brown and yellow folk that had already gathered; and so he vanished. Scurlock was already setting foot upon the gangway that led slantwise down to the bund, when through the quickly coagulating street-crowd an eddy, developing, made visible by the vague light a large head covered with a topi hat wrapped in a pugree. Powerful shoulders and huge elbows, by no means chary of smashing right and left against the naked ribs, cleared a passage, amid grunts and gasps of pain; and once or twice the big man's fists swung effectively, by way of make-weight.

Then to William Scurlock's sight appeared a tall, heavy-set figure, rather dandified, in raw yellow bamboo silk and with very neatly polished boots that seemed to scorn the mud of Batu Kawan. A first glance recorded black brows of great luxuriance, a jungle of black beard contrasting sharply with a face reddened by wind, weather and hard liquor, and, in the V of a half-opened shirt, a corded neck and hairy chest molded on lines of the young Hercules. This man would be going on for twenty-eight or so. Fists, eyes and jaw all lusted battle.

Alpheus Briggs, captain and part owner of the *Silver Fleece*, had returned.

CHAPTER II

ALPHEUS BRIGGS, BUCKO

For a moment, Briggs and Scurlock confronted each other, separated by the length of the gangway. Between them stretched silence; though on the bund a cackle and chatter of natives offended the night. Then Captain Briggs got sight of the kris. That sufficed, just as anything would have sufficed. He put his two huge, hairy fists on his hips; his neck swelled with rage born of samshu and a temper by nature the devil's own; he bellowed in a formidable roar:

“Drop that knife, Mr. Scurlock! What's the matter with you, sir?”

A wise mate would have obeyed, with never one word of answer. But Mr. Scurlock was very angry, and what very angry man was ever wise? He stammered, in a burst of rage:

“I – a Malay son of a pup – he hove it at me, an' I – ”

“Hove it at you, did he, sir?”

“Yes, an' – ”

Tigerish with drunken ferocity, Briggs sprang up the plank. A single, right-hand drive to the jaw felled Scurlock. The kris jangled away and came to rest as Scurlock sprawled along the planking.

“*Sir*, Mr. Scurlock!” fulminated Briggs – though not even in this blind passion did he forget sea-etiquette, the true-bred Yankee captain's “touch of the aft” in dealing with an officer. No verbal abuse; just the swinging fists now ready to knock Scurlock flat again, should he attempt to rise. “Say *sir* to me, Mr. Scurlock, or I'll teach you how!”

“*Sir*,” mumbled the mate, half dazed. He struggled to a sitting posture, blinking up with eyes of hate at the taut-muscled young giant who towered over him, eager for another blow.

“All right, Mr. Scurlock, and don't forget I got a handle to my name, next time you speak to me. If any man, fore or aft, wants any o' my fist, let him leave off *sir*, to me!”

He kicked Scurlock heavily in the ribs, so that the breath went grunting from him; then reached down a gorilla-paw, dragged him up by the collar and flung him staggering into the arms of “Chips,” the clipper's carpenter – Gascar, his name was – who had just come up the quarterdeck companion. Other faces appeared: Bevans, the steward, and Prass, the bo'sun. Furiously Briggs confronted them all.

“Understand me?” he shouted, swaying a little as he stood there with eager fists. “Where's Mr. Wansley?”

“Asleep, sir,” answered Bevans. Wansley, second-mate, was indeed dead to the world in his berth. Most of the work of stowing cargo had fallen on him, for in the old clippers a second-mate's life hardly outranked a dog's.

“What right has Mr. Wansley to be sleeping?” vociferated the captain, lashing himself into hotter rage. “By God, you're all a lot of lazy, loafing, impudent swine!”

One smash of the fist and Bevans went staggering toward the forward companion ladder, near the foot of which a little knot of seamen, white, brown and yellow, had gathered in cheerful expectation of seeing murder done.

Briggs balanced himself, a strange figure in his dandified silk and polished boots, with his topi hat awry, head thrust forward, brows scowling, massive neck swollen with rage and drink. Under the smudgy gleam of the lantern on the mizzen, his crimson face, muffled in jetty beard, and the evil-glowing eyes of him made a picture of wrath.

Briggs stooped, snatched up the kris that lay close by his feet, and with a hard-muscled arm whistled its keen edge through air.

“I'll keep order on my ship,” he blared, passionately, “and if I can't do it with my fists, by God, I'll do it with this! The first man that loosens his tongue, I'll split him like a herring!”

“Captain Briggs, just a moment, sir!” exclaimed a voice at his left. A short, well-knit figure in blue, advancing out of the shadows, ’round the aft companion, laid a hand on the drunken brute’s arm.

“You keep out of this, doctor!” cried Briggs. “They’re a mutinous, black lot o’ dogs that need lickin’, and I’m the man to give it to ’em!”

“Yes, yes, sir, of course,” Dr. Filhiol soothed the beast. “But as the ship’s physician, let me advise you to go to your cabin, sir. The heat and humidity are extremely bad. There’s danger of apoplexy, sir, if you let these fellows excite you. You aren’t going to give them the satisfaction of seeing you drop dead, are you, captain?”

Thrown off his course by this new idea, Briggs peered, blinked, pushed back his topi and scratched his thick, close-curling poll. Then all at once he nodded, emphatically.

“Right you are, doctor!” he cried, his mood swiftly changing. “I’ll go. They shan’t murder me – not yet, much as they’d like to!”

“Well spoken, sir. You’re a man of sense, sir – rare sense. And on a night like this – ”

“The devil’s own night!” spat Briggs. “God, the breath sticks in my throat!” With thick, violent fingers he ripped at his shirt, baring his breast.

“Captain Briggs!” exclaimed Scurlock, now on his feet again. “Listen to a word, sir, please.”

“What the damnation now, sir?”

“We’ve lost the tide, sir. The comprador sent word aboard at four bells, he couldn’t hold his sampan men much longer. We should be standin’ downstream now, sir.” Scurlock spoke with white, shaking lips, rubbing his smitten jaw. Hate, scorn, rage grappled in his soul with his invincible New England sense of duty, of efficiency, of getting the ship’s work done. “If they’re goin’ to tow us down to-night, by joycus, sir, we’ve got to get under way, and be quick about it!”

Briggs dandled the kris. Its wavy blade, grooved to hold the dried curaré-poison that need do no more than scratch to kill, flung out vagrant high-lights in the gloom.

“For two cents I’d gut you, Mr. Scurlock,” he retorted. “*I’m* master of this ship, and she’ll sail when *I’m* ready, sir, not before!”

“Captain, they’re only trying to badger-draw you,” whispered Filhiol in the bucko’s ear. “A man of your intelligence will beat them at their own game.” Right well the doctor knew the futility of trying to get anything forward till the captain’s rage and liquor should have died. “Let these dogs bark, sir, if they will. You and I are men of education. I propose a quiet drink or two, sir, and then a bit of sleep – ”

“What the devil do you mean by that, sir?” flared Briggs, turning on him. “You mean I’m not able to take my ship out of this devil’s ditch, to-night?”

“Farthest from my thought, captain,” laughed the doctor. “Of course you can, sir, if you want to. But this mutinous scum is trying to force your hand. You’re not the man to let them.”

“I should say *not!*” swaggered the captain, with a blasphemy, while low-voiced murmurs ran among the men, – dim, half glimpsed figures by the mizzen, or in the waist. “Not much! Come, doctor!”

He lurched aft, still swinging the kris. Ardently Filhiol prayed he might gash himself therewith, but the devil guards his own. With savage grimace at Scurlock, the physician whispered: “Name o’ God, man, let him be!” Then, at a discreet distance, he followed Briggs.

Scurlock nodded, with murder in his eyes. Gascar and Bevans murmured words that must remain unwritten. Under the awning at the foot of the forward companion, white men from the fo’c’sle and Malays from the deck-house buzzed in divers tongues. Briggs, the while, was about to enter the after companion when to his irate ear the sound of a droning chant, somewhere ashore, came mingled with the dull thudding of a drum, monotonous, irritating as fever pulses in the brain of a sick man.

Briggs swerved to the starboard quarter rail and smote it mightily with his fist, as with bloodshot eyes he peered down at the smoky, lantern-glowing confusion of the bund.

“The damned Malays!” he shouted. “They’ve started another of their infernal sing-songs! If I could lay hands on that son of a whelp – ”

He shook the kris madly at a little group about a blazing flare; in the midst squatted an itinerant ballad-singer. Tapping both heads of a small, barrel-like drum, the singer whined on and on, with intonations wholly maddening to the captain.

For a moment Briggs glared down at this scene, which to his fuddled senses seemed a challenge direct, especially devil-sent to harry him.

“Look at that now, doctor, will you?” Briggs flung out his powerful left hand toward the singer. “Want to bet I can’t throw this knife through the black dog?”

He balanced the kris, ready for action, and with wicked eyes gauged the throw. Filhiol raised a disparaging hand.

“Don’t waste a splendid curio on the dog, captain,” smiled he, masking fear with indifference. Should Briggs so much as nick one of the Malays with that envenomed blade, Filhiol knew to a certainty that with fire and sword Batu Kawan would take complete vengeance. He knew that before morning no white man would draw life’s breath aboard the *Silver Fleece*. “You’ve got a wonderful curio there, sir. Don’t lose it, for a mere nothing.”

“Curio? What the devil do *I* care for Malay junk?” retorted Briggs, thick-tongued and bestial. “The only place I’d like to see this toothpick would be stickin’ out of that swine’s ribs!”

“Ah, but you don’t realize the value of the knife, sir,” wheedled Filhiol. “It’s an extraordinarily fine piece of steel, captain, and the carving of the lotus bud on the handle is a little masterpiece. I’d like it for my collection.” He paused, struck by inspiration. “I’ll play you for the knife, sir. Let’s have that drink we were speaking of, and then a few hands of poker. I’ll play you anything I’ve got – my watch, my instrument case, my wages for the voyage, whatever you like – against that kris. Is that a go?”

“Sheer off!” mocked Briggs, raising the blade. The doctor’s eye judged distance. He would grapple, if it came to that. But still he held to craft:

“This is the first time, captain, I ever knew you to be afraid of a good gamble.”

“Afraid? Me, afraid?” shouted the drunken man. “I’ll make you eat those words, sir! The knife against your pay!”

“Done!” said the doctor, stretching out his hand. Briggs took it in a grip that gritted the bones of Filhiol, then for a moment stood blinking, dazed, hiccoughing once or twice. His purpose, vacillant, once more was drawn to the singer. He laughed, with a maudlin catch of the breath.

“*Does* that gibberish mean anything, doctor?” asked he.

“Never mind, sir,” answered Filhiol. “We’ve got a game to play, and – ”

“Not just yet, sir! That damned native may be laying a curse on me, for all I know. Mr. Scurlock!” he suddenly shouted forward.

“Aye, aye, sir,” answered the mate’s voice, through the gloom.

“Send me a Malay – one that can talk United States!”

“Yes, sir!” And Scurlock was heard in converse with the brown men in the waist. Over the rail the captain leaned, staring at the singer and the crowd, the smoky torches, the confused crawling of life in Batu Kawan; and as he stared, he muttered to himself, and twisted at his beard with his left hand – his right still gripped the kris.

“You damned, outrageous blackguard!” the doctor thought. “If I ever get you into your cabin, God curse me if I don’t throw enough opium into you to keep you quiet till we’re a hundred miles at sea!”

Came the barefoot slatting of a Malay, *pad-pad-padding* aft, and the sound of a soft-voiced: “Captain Briggs, sar?”

“You the man that Mr. Scurlock sent?” demanded Briggs.

“Yas, sar.”

“All right. Listen to that fellow down there – the one that’s singing!” Briggs laid a hand on the Malay, jerked him to the rail and pointed a thick, angry finger. “Tell me what he’s sayin’! Understand?”

“Yas, sar.”

The Malay put both lean, brown hands on the rail, squinted his gray eyes, impassive as a Buddha’s, and gave attentive ear. To him arose the droning words of the long-drawn, musical cadences:

Arang itou dibasouh dengan ayer
Mawar sakalipoun tiada akan poutih.
Satahoun houdjan di langit ayer latout masakan tawar?
Sebab tiada tahon menari dikatakan tembad.
Tabour bidjian diatas tasik tiada akan toumbounh —

On, on wailed the chant. At last the Malay shook his head, shrugged thin shoulders under his cotton shirt, and cast an uneasy glance at Briggs, looming black-bearded and angry at his side.

“Well, what’s it all about?” demanded the captain, thudding a fist on the rail. “Sayin’ anythin’ about me, or the *Silver Fleece*? If he is – ”

“No, sar. Nothin’ so, sar.”

“Well, what?”

“He sing about wicked things. About sin. He say – ”

“*What* does he say, you cinder from the Pit?”

“He say, you take coal, wash him long time, in water of roses, coal never get white. Sin always stay. He say, rain fall long time, one year, ocean never get fresh water. Always salty water. Sin always stay. He say one small piece indigo fall in one jar of goat-milk, spoil all milk, make all milk blue. One sin last all life, always.” The Malay paused, trying to muster his paucity of English. Briggs shook him roughly, bidding him go on, or suffer harm.

“He say if sky will go to fall down, no man can hold him up. Sin always fall down. He say, good seed on land, him grow. Good seed on ocean, him never grow. He say – ”

“That’ll do! Stow your jaw, now!”

“Yas, sar.”

“Get out – go forrard!”

The Malay salaamed, departed. Briggs hailed him again.

“Hey, you!”

“Yes, sar?” answered the brown fellow, wheeling.

“What’s your name – if pigs have names?”

“Mahmud Baba, sar,” the Malay still replied with outward calm. Yet to call a follower of the Prophet “pig” could not by any invention of the mind have been surpassed in the vocabulary of death-inviting insult.

“My Mud Baby, eh? Good name – that’s a slick one!” And Briggs roared into a laugh of drunken discord. He saw not that the Malay face was twitching; he saw not the stained teeth in grimaces of sudden hate. Gloom veiled this. “I’ll remember that,” he went on. “My Mud Baby. Well now, Mud Baby, back to your sty!”

“Captain Briggs,” the doctor put in, fair desperate to get this brute below-decks ere blood should flow. “Captain, if you were as anxious as I am for a good stiff game of poker and a stiffer drink, you wouldn’t be wasting your breath on Malay rubbish. Shall we mix a toddy for the first one?”

“Good idea, sir!” Briggs answered, his eyes brightening. He clapped Filhiol on the shoulder, so that the man reeled toward the after-companion.

Down the stairway they went, the doctor cursing under his breath, Briggs clumping heavily, singing a snatch of low ribaldry from a Bombay gambling-hell. They entered the cabin. To them, as the door closed, still droned the voice of the minstrel on the bund:

*Sebab tiada tahon menari dikatakan tembad,
Tabour bidjian diatas tasik tiada akan toubounh.*

One drop of indigo spoils the whole jar of milk;
Seed sown upon the ocean never grows.

CHAPTER III

SCURLOCK GOES ASHORE

Sweltering though the cabin was, it seemed to Dr. Filhiol a blessed haven of refuge from the probabilities of greivous harm that menaced, without. With a deep breath of relief he saw Briggs lay the kris on the cabin table. Himself, he sat down at that table, and while Briggs stood there half-grinning with white teeth through black beard, took up the knife.

He studied it, noting its keen, double edge, its polished steel, the deft carving of the lotus-bud handle. Then, as he laid it down, he offered:

“It’s a genuine antique. I’ll go you a month’s wages against it.”

“You’ll do nothin’ of the kind, sir!” ejaculated Briggs, and took it up again. “The voyage, you said, and it’s that or nothing!”

The doctor bit his close-razored lip. Then he nodded. Filhiol was shrewd, and sober; Briggs, rash and drunk. Yes, for the sake of getting that cursed knife out of the captain’s hands, Filhiol would accept.

“Put it out of harm’s way, sir, and let’s deal the cards,” said he. “It’s poisoned. We don’t want it where we might get scratched, by accident.”

“Poisoned, sir?” demanded Briggs, running a horny thumb along the point. His brows wrinkled, inquisitively. No fear showed in that splendidly male, lawless, unconquered face.

“For God’s sake, captain, put that devilish thing away!” exclaimed the doctor, feigning to shudder; though all the while a secret hope was whispering:

“Heaven send that he may cut himself!” Aloud he said: “I’ll play no game, sir, with that kris in sight. Put it in your locker, captain, and set out the drink. My throat’s afire!”

“Poisoned, eh?” grunted the captain again, still with drunken obstinacy testing the edge. “All damned nonsense, sir. After that’s been run into the Oregon pine of my mizzen, a couple of inches – ”

“There’s still enough left to put you in a shotted hammock, sir, if you cut yourself,” the doctor insisted. “But it’s your own affair. If you choose to have Mr. Scurlock take the *Silver Fleece* back to Long Wharf, Boston, while you rot in Motomolo Straits – ”

With a blasphemy, Briggs strode to his locker. The doctor smiled cannily as Briggs flung open the locker, tossed in the kris and, taking a square-shouldered bottle, returned to the table. This bottle the captain thumped down on the table, under the lamp-gleam.

“Best Old Jamaica,” boasted he. “Best is none too good, when I win my doctor’s entire pay. For it’s as good as mine already, and you can lay to that!”

Speaking, he worried out the cork. He sniffed at the bottle, blinked, peered wonderingly at the label, and sniffed again.

“Hell’s bells!” roared Briggs, flaring into sudden passion.

“What’s the matter, sir?”

“Old Jamaica!” vociferated the captain. “It *was* Old Jamaica, but now smell o’ that, will you?”

Filhiol sniffed, tentatively. In a second he knew some one had been tampering with the liquor, substituting low-grade spirits for Brigg’s choicest treasure; but he merely shrugged his shoulders, with:

“It seems like very good rum, sir. Come, let’s mix our grog and get the cards.”

“Good rum!” gibed Briggs. “Some thieving son of Satan has been at my Jamaica, and has been fillin’ the square-face up with hog-slop, or I never sailed blue water! *Look* at the stuff now, will you?”

He spilled out half a glass of the liquor, tasted it, spat it upon the floor. Then he dashed the glass violently to the boards, crashing it to flying shards and spattering the rum all about. In a bull-like roar he shouted:

“Boy! You, there, boy!”

A moment, and one of the doors leading off the main cabin opened, on the port side. A pale, slim boy appeared and advanced into the cabin, blinking up with fear at the black-bearded vision of wrath.

“Yes, sir? What is it, sir?” asked he, in a scared voice.

Briggs dealt him a cuff that sent him reeling. The captain’s huge hand, swinging back, overset the bottle, that gurgled out its life-blood.

“What *is* it?” shouted Briggs. “You got the impudence to ask me what it is? I’ll learn you to step livelier when I call, you whelp! Come here!”

“Yes, sir,” quavered the boy. Shaking, he sidled nearer. “What – what do you want, sir?”

“What do I *want*?” the captain howled; while Filhiol, suddenly pale with a rage that shook his heart, pressed lips hard together, lest some word escape them. “You swab! Catechisin’ me, are you? Askin’ *me* what I want, eh? If I had a rope’s-end here I’d show you! Get out, now. Go, tell Mr. Scurlock I want him. Jump!”

The lad ducked another blow, ran to the cabin-door and sprang for the stairs. Ill-fortune ran at his side. He missed footing, sprawled headlong up the companion stairway.

With a shout of exultation, Briggs caught up from a corner a long, smooth stick, with a polished knob carved from a root – one of the clubs known in the Straits as “Penang-lawyers,” by reason of their efficacy in settling disputes. He grabbed the writhing boy, now frantically trying to scabble up the stairs, in a clutch that almost crunched the frail shoulder bones. Up the companion he dragged him – the boy screaming with terror of death – and hurled him out on deck, fair against the wheel.

The boy collapsed in a limp, groaning heap. Briggs laughed wildly, and, brandishing the Penang-lawyer, advanced out upon the dim-lit planking.

An arm thrust him back.

“You ain’t goin’ to hit that there boy!” shouted a voice – William Scurlock’s. “Not while I’m alive, you ain’t!”

A wrench and the club flew over the rail. It splashed in the dark, slow waters of the Timbago.

Briggs gulped. He whirled, both fists knotted. Then, swift as a cobra, he sprang and struck.

Scurlock dodged. The captain’s fist, finding no mark, drove against one of the spokes of the wheel with a crash that split the hickory. As Briggs had never cursed before, now he cursed. For a second or two he nursed his damaged hand.

The brief respite sufficed. Scurlock snatched up the boy. He started forward, just as the doctor appeared at the top of the companion.

“Captain Briggs, sir!” cried Filhiol, in a shaking voice. Still he was hoping against hope to keep the peace. “Are you hurt, sir?”

“To hell with you!” roared Briggs, now forgetting sea-etiquette – surest indication of the extremity of his drunken passion. He lurched after the retreating Scurlock. “Back, here, you bloody swine! Drop that brat, and I’ll show you who’s boss!”

Scurlock laughed mockingly and quickened his stride. Mad with the rage that kills, Briggs pursued, a huge, lunging figure of malevolence and hate. Before he could lay grips on Scurlock, the mate wheeled. He let the fainting boy slide down on deck, whipped out a clasp-knife, snicked open the blade. Holding it low, to rip upward, he confronted Briggs under the glimmer of the mizzen-lantern.

Now this was raw mutiny, and a hanging matter if Scurlock drew one drop of the captain’s blood. But that Scurlock cared nothing for the noose was very plain to see. Even the crimson rage of Briggs saw death knocking at the doors of his life. Barehanded, he could not close for battle. He recoiled, his bloodshot eyes shuttling for some handy weapon.

“Damn you, if I had that kris – ” he panted.

“But you ain’t, you lousy bucko!” mocked Scurlock. “An’ you turn your back on me, to go for it, if you dare!”

Briggs sprang for the rail. He snatched at a belying-pin, with wicked blasphemies. The pin stuck, a moment. He wrenched it clear, and wheeled – too late.

Already Scurlock had snatched up the boy again. Already he was at the gangway. Down it he leaped, to the bund. With the unconscious boy still in the crook of his left arm, he shoved into the scatter of idling natives. Then he turned, raised a fist of quivering hatred, and flung his defiance toward the vague, yellow-clad figure now hesitating at the top of the gangway, pin in hand:

“I’m through with you, you rum-soaked hellbender! He’s through, too, the boy is. We’ll take our chances with the Malays an’ the plague.”

Scurlock’s voice, rising out of the softly-lit tropic evening, died suddenly.

“Come back, Mr. Scurlock, and bring that boy!” cried the doctor, from the rail.

“I’ve got nothin’ against you, sir,” answered Scurlock. “But against *him*. God! If I come back, it’ll only be to cut his black heart out an’ throw it to the sharks. We’re done!”

A moment Briggs stood drunkenly peering, half minded to pursue, to match his belying-pin against the mate’s dirk. Gurgling in his throat – for excess of rage had closed upon all speech – he panted, with froth upon his black beard, while dim figures along the rail and on shore waited great deeds. Then all at once he laughed – a horrible, deep-throated laugh, rising, swelling to mighty and bestial merriment; the laugh of a gorilla, made man.

“The Malays and the plague,” he thickly stammered. “ – He’s said it – let ’em go! They’re good as dead already, and hell take ’em!”

He swung on his heel, then strode back unsteadily to the companion. Down it he lunged. Still laughing, he burst into the heat and reek of the cabin.

“Come on, doctor,” cried he, “our cards, our cards!”

CHAPTER IV

THE CURSE OF NENEK KABAYAN

“He’ll steal no more of my Old Jamaica,” exulted Briggs, flinging himself into a chair by the table. “And that sniveling boy will give me no more of his infernal lip! Skunks!” He picked up the bottle, still containing a little rum, and poured a gulp of liquor down his throat. “On my own ship!”

“Where are the cards, sir?” asked Filhiol. His voice, quivering, was hardly audible.

“Petty game,” burst out the captain, “no good. Make it a real one, and I’ll go you!”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Stakes worth playin’ for! Man-size stakes! You got money in Boston, sir. Some fifteen thousand. I’ll play you for that, plus your wages this voyage!”

“Against what, sir?”

“Against my share of the ship’s cargo, and my share of the *Silver Fleece*, herself. And if I scuttle her, as scuttle her I may, in case the insurance money foots bigger than the ship’s worth and the cargo, I stake that money, too!”

The doctor pondered a moment, while Briggs pressed a hand to his thick neck, redly swollen with heat and rum. Suddenly the captain broke out again:

“That’s an A1 gamble for you, sir. When I land my West Coast natives at San Felipe, and slip my opium into Boston, there won’t be a shipmaster walk up State Street that will be better fixed than I’ll be.”

“Bring out the cards, sir,” answered the doctor. “But the kris goes in as part of the wager?”

“Yes, damn it, and I’ll be generous,” slavered Briggs. He jerked open the table drawer and fetched out a well-thumbed pack of cards, which he flung on the green cloth. “I’ll put up a stake that’d make any man’s mouth water, sir, if he *is* a man! Though maybe you’re not, bein’ only a sawbones!”

“What’s that, sir?”

“The yellow wench asleep in my berth – Kuala Pahang!”

“Done!” exclaimed Filhiol, humoring the ruffian to all possible limits, till liquor and heat should have overcome him.

“Deal the cards, sir!” cried Briggs. “I may be a bucko, and I may be drunk to-night, but I know a man when I see one. I’m not too drunk to add your wages and your savin’s to my plunder. Deal the cards!”

Filhiol had just fallen to shuffling the pasteboards when a groan, from behind the door of the captain’s private cabin, arrested his hand. Frowning, he swung around. In his tensing hand the cards bent almost double.

Briggs buffeted him upon the shoulder, with huge merriment.

“*She’s* not dead yet, is she?” exulted he. “No, no, not yet. Even though everybody in this devil’s hole claims the wenches will die first, before they’ll be a white man’s darlin’.” His speech had become so thick as to be hardly speech at all. “All infernal liars, sawbones! *She’s* been here already two days, Topsy has. An’ is she dead yet? Not very! No, nor not goin’ to die, neither, an’ you can lay to that! Nor get away from me. Not while I’m alive, an’ master o’ the *Silver Fleece*!”

The doctor’s jaw set so hard that his tanned skin whitened over the maxillary muscles. Very vividly Filhiol still perceived the danger of general mutiny, of mass-attack from Batu Kawan, of fire and sword impending before the clipper could be got down-river and away. Come all that might, he must cling to Briggs, warily, humoringly.

After all, what was one native girl, more or less? The doctor shuffled the cards again, and dealt, under the raw light of the swinging-lamp. A louder cry from the girl turned Briggs around.

“Damnation!” he blared, starting up. “If the wench gets to howling, she’ll raise the town. I’m goin’ to shut her jaw, and shut it hard!”

“Quite right, sir,” assented the doctor, though his deep eyes glowed with murder. “But, why not get under way, at once, drop down the river to-night, anchor inside Ulu Salama bar till – ”

Briggs interrupted him with a boisterous laugh.

“Even Reuben Ranzo, the tailor,” he gibed, “could give you points on navigation!” He stared at Filhiol a moment, his face darkening; then added harshly: “You stick to your pills and powders, Mr. Filhiol, or there’ll be trouble. I won’t have anybody tryin’ to boss. Now, I’m not goin’ to tell you twice!”

For three heartbeats their eyes met. The doctor’s had become injected with blood. His face had assumed an animal expression. Briggs snapped his thick fingers under the physician’s nose, then turned with an oath and strode to his cabin door. He snatched it open, and stood there a moment peering in, his face deep-lined in a mask of vicious rage.

“Captain Briggs!”

The doctor’s voice brought the ruffian about with a sharp turn.

“*You* mutinous, too?” shouted he, swinging his shoulders, loose, hulking, under the yellow silk of his jacket.

“By no means, sir. As a personal favor to me, however, I’m asking you not to strike that girl.” The doctor’s voice was shaking; yet still he sat there at the table, holding his cards in a quivering hand.

“You look out for your own skin, sawbones!” Briggs menaced. “The woman’s mine to do with as I please, an’ it’s nobody’s damn business, you lay to that! I’ll love her or beat her or throw her to the sharks, as I see fit. So now you hear me, an’ I warn you proper, stand clear o’ me, or watch out for squalls!”

Into the cabin he lunged, just as another door, opening, disclosed a sleepy-eyed, yellow-haired young man – Mr. Wansley, second-mate of the devil-ship. Wansley stared, and the doctor stood up with doubled fists, as they heard the sound of blows from within, then shriller cries, ending in a kind of gurgle – then silence.

The doctor gripped both hands together, striving to hold himself. The life of every white man aboard now depended absolutely on seeing this thing through without starting mutiny and war.

“Get back in your cabin, Mr. Wansley, for God’s sake!” he exclaimed, “or go on deck! The captain’s crazy drunk. If he sees you here, there’ll be hell to pay. Get out, quick!”

Wansley grasped the situation and made a speedy exit up the after-companion, just ahead of Briggs’s return. The captain banged his cabin door, and staggered back to the table. He dusted his palms one against the other.

“The black she-dog won’t whine again, for *one* while,” he grinned with white teeth through his mat of beard. “That’s the only way to teach ’em their lesson!” He clenched both fists, turning them, admiring them under the lamp-light. “Great pacifiers, eh, sawbones? *I* tell you! Beat a dog an’ a woman, an’ you can’t go far off your course. So now I’ll deal the cards, an’ win every cent you’ve got!”

“The cards are dealt, sir,” answered Filhiol, chalky to the lips.

“Yes, an’ you’ve been here with ’em, all alone!” retorted the captain. “No, sir, that won’t go. Fresh deal – here, I’ll do it!”

He gathered the dealt hands and unsteadily began shuffling, while the doctor, teeth set in lip, swallowed the affront. Some of the cards escaped the drunken brute’s thick fingers; two or three dropped to the floor.

“Pick ’em up, sir,” directed Briggs. “No captain of my stamp bends his back before another man – an’ besides, I know you’d be glad to knife me, while I was down!”

Filhiol made no answer. He merely obeyed, and handed the cards to Briggs, who was about to deal, when all at once his hands arrested their motion. His eyes fixed themselves in an incredulous, widening stare, at the forward cabin door. His massive jaw dropped. A sound escaped his throat, but no word came.

The doctor spun his chair around. He, too, beheld a singular apparition; though how it could have got there – unless collusion had been at work among the Malays in the waist – seemed hard to understand.

So silently the door had slid, that the coming of the aged native woman had made no sound. Aged she seemed, incredibly old, wizened, dried; though with these people who can tell of age? The dim light revealed her barefooted, clad in a short, gaudily-striped skirt, a tight-wrapped body-cloth that bound her shrunken breast. Coins dangled from her ears; her straight black hair was drawn back flatly; her lips, reddened with lime and betel, showed black, sharp-filied teeth in a horrible snarl of hatred.

Silent, a strange yellow ghostlike thing, she crept nearer. Briggs sprang up, snatched the rum-bottle by its neck and waited, quivering. Right well he knew the woman – old Dangan Jouga, mother of Kuala, his prey.

For the first time in years unnerved, he stood there. Had she rushed in at him, screamed, vociferated, clawed with hooked talons, beaten at him with skinny fists, he would have knocked her senseless, dragged her on deck and flung her to the bund; but this cold, silent, beady-eyed approach took all his sails aback.

Only for a moment, however. Briggs was none of your impressionable men, the less so when in drink.

“Get out!” he shouted, brandishing the bottle. “Out o’ this, or by God – ”

The door, opening again, disclosed the agitated face of Texel, a foremast hand.

“Cap’n Briggs, sir!” exclaimed this wight, touching his cap, “one o’ the Malays says *she*, there, has got news o’ Mr. Scurlock an’ the boy, sir, that you’ll want to hear. He’s out here now, the Malay is. Will I tell him to come in?”

“I could have you flogged, you scum, for darin’ to come into my cabin till you’re called,” shouted Briggs. “But send the pig in!”

The bottle lowered, as Briggs peered frowning at the silent hag. Uncanny, this stillness was. Tempests, hurricanes of passion and of hate would have quite suited him; but the old Malay crone, standing there half-way to the table, the light glinting from her deep coal-black eyes, her withered hands clutching each other across her wasted body, disconcerted even his bull-like crassness.

The seaman turned and whistled. At once, a Malay slid noiselessly in, salaamed and stood waiting. Texel, nervously fingering the cap he held in his hands, lingered by the door.

“Oh, it’s you again, Mud Baby, is it?” cried the bucko. “What’s the news Dangan Jouga has for me? Tell her to hand it over an’ then clear out! Savvy?”

“Captain, sahib, sar,” stammered Mahmud, almost gray with fear, every lean limb aquiver with the most extraordinary panic. “She says Mr. Scurlock, an’ boy, him prisoner. You give up girl, Kuala Pahang. No givem – ”

The sentence ended in a quick stroke of the Malay’s forefinger across the windpipe, a whistling sound.

Briggs stared and swore. The doctor laid a hand on his arm.

“Checkmated, sir,” said he. “The old woman wins.”

“Like hell!” roared the captain. “I don’t know what the devil she’s talkin’ about. If Scurlock an’ the boy get their fool throats cut, it’s their own fault. They’re bein’ punished for mutiny. No girl here, at all! You, Mud Baby, tell that to old Jezebel!”

Mahmud nodded, and slid into a sing-song chatter. The woman gave ear, all the while watching Briggs with the unwinking gaze of a snake. She flung back a few crisp words at Mahmud.

“Well, what now?” demanded Briggs.

“She say, you lie, captain, sar!”

“I *lie*, do I?” vociferated the bucko. He heaved the bottle aloft and would have struck the hag full force, had not the doctor caught his arm, and held it fast.

“My God, captain!” cried Filhiol, gusty with rage and fear. “You want mutiny? Want the whole damned town swarming over us, with torch and kris?”

Briggs tried to fling him off, but the doctor clung, in desperation. Mahmud Baba wailed:

“No, no, captain! No touch her! She very bad luck – she Nenek Kabayan!”

“What the devil do *I* care?” roared Briggs, staggering as he struggled with the doctor. “She’s got to get out o’ my cabin, or by – ”

“She’s a witch-woman!” shouted Filhiol, clinging fast. “That means a witch, Nenek Kabayan does. If you strike her, they’ll tear your heart out!”

Mahmud, in the extremity of his terror, clasped thin, brown hands, groveled, clutching at the captain’s knees. Briggs kicked him away like a dog.

“Get out, you an’ everybody!” he bellowed. “Doctor, I’ll lay you in irons for this. Into the lazaret you go, so help me!”

The witch-woman, raising crooked claws against him, hurled shrill curses at Briggs – wild, unintelligible things, in a wail so penetrantly heart-shaking, that even the captain’s bull-like rage shuddered.

From the floor, Mahmud raised appealing hands.

“She say, give girl or she make *orang onto* kill everybody!” cried the Malay. “*Orang onto*, bad ghost! She say she make *sabali*– sacrifice – of everybody on ship.” His voice broke, raw, in a frenzy of terror. “She say Vishnu lay curse on us, dead men come out of graves, be wolves, be tigers —*menjelma kramat*– follow us everywhere!”

“Shut your jaw, idiot!” shouted Briggs, but in a tone less brutal. The man was shaken. Not all his bluster could blink that fact. The doctor loosed his arm; Briggs did not raise the bottle, now, to strike. On and on wailed Mahmud:

“She say *chandra wasi*, birds of ocean foam, poison us, an’ Zemrud, him what keep life, leave us. She say blind face in sky watch you, cap’n, sahib, an’ laugh, an’ you want to die, but you not die. She say you’ life be more poison than *katchubong* flowers – she say evil seed grow in you’ heart, all life long – she say somethin’ you love, cap’n, sar, somethin’ you love more than you’ life, sometime die, an’ you die then but still you not die! She say – ”

Briggs chewed and spat a curse and, turning to the table, sat down heavily there. Astonished, Filhiol stared at him. Never had he seen the captain in this mood. A wild attack, assault, even murder, would not have surprised the doctor; but this strange quietude surpassed belief. Filhiol leaned over Briggs, as he sat there sagging, staring at the witch-woman still in furious tirade.

“Captain,” he whispered, “you’re going to give up the girl, of course? You’re going to save Mr. Scurlock and the boy, and keep this shriveled monkey of a witch from raising the town against us?”

Briggs only shook his head.

“No,” he answered, in a strange, weary voice. “She can’t have her, an’ that’s flat. I don’t give a damn for the deserters, an’ if it comes to a fight, we got our signal-cannon an’ enough small-arms to make it hot for all the natives between here an’ hell. The girl’s plump as a young porpoise, an’ she’s mine, an’ I’m going to keep her; you can lay to that!”

Mahmud, still stammering crude translation of the witch-woman’s imprecations, crawled to Briggs’s feet. Briggs kicked the man away, once more, and burst into a jangle of laughter.

“Get ’em all out o’ here, sawbones,” said he, his head sagging. The life seemed to have departed from him. “I’m tired of all this hullabaloo.” He opened his table drawer and drew out an army revolver. “Three minutes for you to get ’em all out, doctor, or I begin shootin’.”

In the redness of his eye, bleared with drink and rage, Filhiol read cold murder. He dragged Mahmud up, and herded him, with Texel and the now silent witch-woman, out the forward cabin door.

“*You* get out, too!” mouthed the captain, dully. “I’ll have no sawbones sneakin’ and spyin’ on my honeymoon. Get out, afore I break you in ways your books don’t tell you how to fix!”

The doctor gave him one silent look. Then, very tight-lipped, he issued out beneath the awning, where among the Malays a whispering buzz of talk was forward.

As he wearily climbed the companion ladder, he heard the bolt go home, in the cabin door. A dull, strange laugh reached his ears, with mumbled words.

“God save us, now!” prayed Filhiol, for the first time in twenty years. “God save and keep us, now!”

CHAPTER V

THE MALAY FLEET OF WAR

Dawn, leaping out of Motomolo Strait, flinging its gold-wrought, crimson mantle over an oily sea that ached with crawling color, found the clipper ship, whereon rested the curse of old Degan Jouga, set fast and fair on the sandspit of Ula Salama, eight miles off the mouth of the Timbago River.

Fair and fast she lay there, on a tide very near low ebb, so that two hours or such a matter would float her again; but in two hours much can happen and much was destined to.

At the taffrail, looking landward where the sand-dunes of the river met the sea, and where tamarisk and mangrove-thickets and pandan-clumps lay dark against the amethyst-hazed horizon, Dr. Filhiol and Mr. Wansley – now first mate of the *Silver Fleece*, with Prass installed as second – were holding moody speech.

“As luck goes,” the doctor was growling, “this voyage outclasses anything I’ve ever known. This puts the climax on – this Scurlock matter, and the yellow girl, *and* going aground.”

“We did the best we could, sir,” affirmed Wansley, hands deep in jacket pockets. “With just tops’ls an’ fores’ls on her – ”

“Oh, I’m not criticising your navigation, Mr. Wansley,” the doctor interrupted. “The old man, of course, is the only one who knows the bars, and we didn’t dare wait for him to wake up. Yes, you did very well indeed. If you’d been carrying full canvas, you’d have sprung her butts, when she struck, and maybe lost a stick or two. Perhaps there’s no great harm done, after all, if we can hold this damned crew.”

Thus hopefully the doctor spoke, under the long, level shafts of day breaking along the gold and purple waters that further off to sea blended into pale greens and lovely opalescences. But his eyes, turning now and then towards the ship’s waist, and his ear, keen to pick up a more than usual chatter down there under the weather-yellowed awnings, belied his words.

Now, things were making that the doctor knew not of; things that, had he known them, would have very swiftly translated his dull anxieties into active fears. For down the mud-laden river, whose turbid flood tinged Motomolo Strait with coffee five miles at sea, a fleet of motley craft was even now very purposefully making way.

This fleet was sailing with platted bamboo-mats bellying on the morning breeze, with loose-stepped masts and curiously tangled rattan cordage; or, in part, was pulling down-stream with carven oars and paddles backed by the strength of well-oiled brown and yellow arms.

A fleet it was, laden to the topmost carving of its gunwales with deadly hate of the white men. A fleet hastily swept together by the threats, promises and curses of old Degan Jouga, the witch-woman. A rescue fleet, for the salvation of the yellow girl – a fleet grim either to take her back to Batu Kawan, or else to leave the charred ribs of the *Silver Fleece* smoldering on Ulu Salama bar as a funeral pyre over the bones of every hated *orang puti*, white man, that trod her cursèd decks.

Nineteen boats in all there were; seven sail-driven, twelve thrust along with oars and paddles cunningly fashioned from teak and *tiu* wood. These nineteen boats carried close on three hundred fighting men, many of them head-hunters lured by the prospect of a white man’s head to give their sweethearts.

A sinister and motley crew, indeed; some of chief’s rank, clad in rare feather cloaks, but for the most part boasting no garment save the *de rigueur* breech-clout. Among them rowed no less than eight or ten Mohammedan *amok* fanatics, who had sworn on the beard of the Prophet to take a Frank dog’s life or else to die – in either event surely destined for paradise and the houris’ arms. And one of these fanatics was the turtle-egg seller, with special hopes in mind which for the present cannot be divulged.

Under the leadership of Dangan Jouga and a lean, painted *pawang*, or medicine-man, the war fleet crawled downstream. Spears, axes, stone and iron maces with ornate hafts bristled in all the long war-canoes, high-prowed and gaudy with flaring colors. Blow-guns, too, were there, carrying venomous darts, and kris blades by the score – wavy-edged blades, heavy and long, that, driven by a sinewed arm, would slice through a man’s neck as if it had been *ghee*, or melted butter; would open a man’s body broad to the light of day; or, slashing downward, split him from crown to collar bone.

The morning shafts of sun glinted, too, on gun-barrels – old flintlock muzzle-loaders, with a few antique East India Company’s rifles that in some obscure channels of trade had worked their way up the east coast of the Malay Peninsula to Batu Kawan. Some bowmen had long arrows wrapped in oil-soaked cotton pledgets. Such fire-balls, shot into the sun-dried canvas of the clipper, might go far towards leaving her bones ableach on Ulu Salama.

Nor was this all. More formidable still was a small, brass cannon, securely lashed in the bows of a seagoing proa, its lateen sail all patched with brown and blue; a proa manned by fifty chosen warriors, and carrying the medicine man and Dangan Jouga herself. True, the Malays had only a scant dozen charges for their ordnance, but if they could catch the hull of the *Silver Fleece* between wind and water, as she careened on the bar, they might so riddle her that the up-coming tide would pour her full of brine.

Down the fever-smelling river, steaming with heat and purple haze under the mounting sun, the war-fleet drove, between lush banks now crowded with sandal and angsa trees all clustered with their lolling, yellow blooms, now mere thickets where apes and screaming parrots rioted amid snarled labyrinths of lianas, now sinking into swamps choked with bamboo and lalang grass.

In some occasional pool, pink lotus-blossoms contrasted with fragrant charm against the vivid, unhealthy green of marsh and forest. And, louder than the crooning war-songs that unevenly drifted on the shimmering air, the loomlike whir of myriad trumpeter-beetles blurred the waiting day whose open eye shrank not from what must be.

Here, there, a fisherman’s hut extended its crazy platform out over the sullen waters. From such platforms, yellow-brown folk with braided top-knots shouted words of good augury to the on-toiling warriors. Naked, pot-bellied children stood and stared in awe. Flea-tormented curs barked dolefully. And from such fisher-boats, as lay anchored in the stream, rose shouts of joy. For, in the mysterious way of the Orient, the news of the great, black deed done by the devil-captain, Briggs Sahib, had already run all down the Timbago.

Thus the war-fleet labored downward to the sea, coming [towards the hour that a landsman would call eight o’clock,] to salt water. Withered Dangan Jouga, crouching snake-eyed in the proa, caught sight of the long, turquoise line that marked the freedom of the open.

She pointed a skinny arm, flung a word at Akan Mawar, the medicine man, and clutched more tightly the thin-bladed knife which – so all had sworn to her – she, and only she, should plunge into the heart of the black-bearded devil. Silently she waited, as the seascape broadened. The sunlight, sparkling on that watery plain, dazzled her eyes like the shimmer of powdered glass, but still she peered, eager to catch a glimpse of the *Silver Fleece*. Her betel-reddened lips moved again. She whispered:

“My daughter I shall have. His blood, his blood I shall have, even though he flee from me *diatas angin*, beyond the back of the wind! King Surana, who reigns in the watery depths, will give him to me. Even though he flee through the Silken Sea, at the end of the world, I shall have his blood! *Tuan Allah poonia krajah!* It is the work of the Almighty.”

“*Tuan Allah poonia krajah!*” echoed old Akan Mawar; and other voices raised the supplication. Back drifted the words from boat to boat; the whole river murmured with confused echoes: “*Tuan Allah poonia krajah!*”

Now silence fell again, but for the lipping of cleft waters at many prows, the dip of oars, the little whispering swirl of eddies where paddles lifted. Bright-yellow sands, here and there gleaming pearl-

white with millions of turtle-eggs, extended seaward from the river-mouth, pointing like a dagger of menace at Ulu Salama bar eight miles to sea; the bar that Alpheus Briggs so easily could have left to starboard, had he not been sleeping off the fumes of samshu in the cabin with Kuala Pahang.

Cries from the proa and the war-canoes echoed across the waters. No longer could savagery repress its rage. Already, far and dim through the set of haze that brooded over Motomolo Strait, dimming the liquid light of morning, eyes of eager hate had seen a distant speck. A tiny blot it was, against the golden welter on the eastern horizon; a blot whence rose fine-pricked masts and useless sails.

And spontaneously there rose an antiphonal *pantun*, or song of war. Up from the fleet it broke, under the shrill lead of the hag, now standing with clenched, skinny fists raised high. She wailed:

Adapoun pipit itou sama pipit djouga!

Others answered. A drum of bamboo, headed with snake-skin, began to throb.

Dan yang enggang itou sama enggang djouga!

As the echoes died, again rose the witch-woman's voice, piercing, resonant:

Bourga sedap dispakey!

The others then:

Layou – dibouang!¹

The song continued, intoned by the witch-woman with choral responses from the fighting men. From lament it passed to savage threats of death by torture and by nameless mutilations. Maces began to clatter on shields, crises to glint in sunlight, severed heads of enemies to wave aloft on spears.

And out over the liquid rainbow surface of the strait rolled a long echo, blent of war-cries, shouts of vengeance, the booming of snake-skin drums – defiance of the human wolf-pack now giving wild tongue.

Dr. Filhiol and Mr. Wansley stopped in their speech and raised peering eyes landward, as some faint verberation of the war-shout drifted down upon them. The doctor's brows drew to a frown; he narrowed his keen eyes toward the line of hot, damp hills. Mr. Wansley pushed back his cap and scratched his head. Together they stood at the rail, not yet glimpsing the war-fleet which still moved in partial concealment along the wooded shore.

Into their silence, a harsh, liquor-roughened voice broke suddenly:

“Empty staring for empty brains! Nothin' better to do than look your eyes out at the worst coast, so help me, God ever made?”

Neither answered. Mr. Wansley surveyed in silence the hulking, disordered figure now coming forward from the after companion. The doctor drew a cigar from his waistcoat pocket and lighted it. Complete silence greeted Briggs – silence through which the vague turmoil trembling across the mother-of-pearl iridescence of the strait still reached the *Silver Fleece*.

¹ This chant, freely translated, bespeaks the horror of the Malay at any admixture with a foreigner, thus: “Let the sparrow mate with but the sparrow only, and the parrot with the parrot only. While a flower is pleasing to man, he wears it. When it fades, man throws it away.”

CHAPTER VI

COUNCIL OF WAR

A moment the two men eyed the captain. Malay voices sounded under the awning. Forward, a laugh drifted on the heat-shimmering air. Briggs cursed, and still came on.

A sorry spectacle he made, tousled, bleary-eyed, with pain-contracted forehead where the devil's own headache was driving spikes. Right hand showed lacerations, from having struck the wheel. Heavy shoulders sagged, head drooped. Angrily he blinked, his mood to have torn up the world and spat upon the fragments in very spite.

"Well, lost your tongues, have you?" he snarled. "I'm used to being answered on my own ship. You, Mr. Wansley, would do better reading your 'Bow-ditch' than loafing. And you, doctor, I want you to mix me a stiff powder for the damnedest headache that ever tangled my top-hamper. I've had a drink or two, maybe three, already this morning. But that does no good. Fix me up something strong. Come, stir a stump, sir! I'm going to be obeyed on my own ship!"

"Yes, sir," answered the doctor, keeping his tongue between his teeth, as the saying is. He started aft, followed by Wansley. Briggs burst out again:

"Insubordination, mutiny – that's all I get, this voyage!" His fists swung, aching for a target. "Look what's happened! Against my orders you, Mr. Wansley, try to take the *Fleece* to sea. And run her aground! By God, sir, I could have you disrated for that! I'd put you in irons for the rest of the voyage if I didn't need you on deck. Understand me, sir?"

"Yes, sir," answered Wansley, with exceeding meekness. Briggs was about to flare out at him again, and might very well have come to fist-work, when a hard, round little concussion, bowling seaward, struck his ear.

At sound of the shot, the captain swung on his heel, gripped the rail and stared shoreward.

"What the hell is *that*?" demanded he, unable to conceal a sudden fear that had stabbed through the thrice-dyed blackness of his venom.

"I rather think, sir," answered Filhiol, blowing a ribbon of smoke on the still morning air, "it's trouble brewing. By Jove, sir – see that, will you?"

His hand directed the captain's reddened eyes far across the strait toward the coastal hills, palm-crowded. Vaguely the captain saw a long, dim line. At its forward end, just a speck against the greenery, a triangle of other color was creeping on. Briggs knew it for the high sail of a proa.

"H-m!" he grunted. Under the bushy blackness of his brows he stared with blood-injected eyes. His muscles tautened. Suddenly he commanded:

"Mr. Wansley, my glass, sir!"

The doctor pursed anxious lips as Wansley departed toward the companion.

"Trouble, sir?" asked he.

"I'll tell you when there's trouble! How can I hear anythin', with your damned jaw-tackle always busy?"

The doctor shut up, clamwise, and leaned elbows on the rail, and so they stood there, each peering, each listening, each thinking his own thoughts.

Mr. Wansley's return, brass telescope in hand, broke both lines of reflection. Briggs snatched the glass, yearning to knock Wansley flat, as he might have done a cabin-boy. Wansley peered at him with bitter malevolence.

"You hell-devil!" muttered he. "You've murdered two of us already, an' like as not you'll murder all of us before you're done. If the sharks had you this minute – "

"By the Judas priest!" ejaculated Briggs, glass at eye. He swung it left and right. "Now you lubberly sons of swabs *have* got me on a lee-shore with all anchors draggin'!"

“What is it, sir?” demanded Filhiol, calmly.

“What *is* it?” roared the captain, neck and face scarlet. “After you help run the *Silver Fleece* on Ulu Salama bar, where that damned war-party can close in on her, you ask me what it is! Holy Jeremiah!”

“See here, Captain Briggs.” The doctor’s voice cut incisively. “If that’s a war-party, we’ve got no time to waste in abuse. Please let me use that glass and see for myself.”

“Use nothing!” shouted Briggs. “What? Call me a liar, do you? I tell you it *is* a war-party with five – eight – twelve – well, about sixteen boats and a proa, I make it; and you stand there and call me a liar!”

“I call you nothing, sir,” retorted the physician, his face impassive. In spite of anger, Filhiol comprehended that he and Briggs represented the best brain-power on the clipper. Under the urge of peril these two must temporarily sink all differences and stand together. “You say there’s a war-party coming out. I place myself at your orders.”

“Same here, sir,” put in Mr. Wansley. “What’s to be done, sir?” Urgent peril had stifled the fires of hate.

“Call Mr. Prass and Mr. Crevay,” answered the captain, sobered. “You, doctor, mix me up that powder, quick. Here, I’ll go with you. You’ve got to stop this damned headache of mine! Look lively, Mr. Wansley! Get Bevans, too, and Gascar!”

In five minutes the war-council was under way on the after-deck. Already the doctor’s drug had begun to loosen the bands of pain constricting the captain’s brow. Something of Briggs’s normal fighting energy was returning. The situation was already coming under his strong hand.

Careful inspection through the glass confirmed the opinion that a formidable war-fleet was headed toward Ulu Salama bar. The far, vague sound of chanting and of drums clinched matters.

“We’ve got to meet ’em with all we’ve got,” said Briggs, squinting through the tube. “There’s a few hundred o’ the devils. Our game is to keep ’em from closing in. If they board us – well, they aren’t goin’ to, that’s all.”

“I don’t like the look o’ things forrard, sir,” put in Crevay, now bo’sun of the clipper, filling the position that Prass had vacated in becoming second mate. “Them Malays, sir – ”

“That’s the hell of it, I know,” said Briggs. He spoke rationally, sobered into human decency. “If we had a straight white crew, we could laugh at the whole o’ Batu Kawan. But our own natives are liable to run *amok*.”

“We’d better iron the worst of ’em, sir, an’ clap hatches on ’em,” suggested Crevay. “There’s seventeen white men of us, an’ twenty natives. If we had more whites, I’d say shoot the whole damn lot o’ Malays an’ chuck ’em over to the sharks while there’s time!” His face was deep-lined, cruel almost as the captain’s.

Silence followed. Gascar nodded approval, Bevans went a trifle pale, and Wansley shook his head. Prass turned his quid and spat over the rail; the doctor glanced forward, squinting with eyes of calculation. Under the brightening sun, each face revealed the varying thoughts that lay in each man’s heart. Filhiol was first to speak.

“Those Malays are valuable to us,” said he. “They make excellent hostages, if properly restrained in the hold. But we can’t have them at large.”

“We can, and must, all of ’em!” snapped Briggs. His eye had cleared and once more swept up the situation with that virile intelligence which long had made him a leader of men. His nostrils widened, breathing the air of battle. His chest, expanding, seemed a barrier against weakness, indecision. The shadow of death had blotted out the madness of his orgy. He stood there at the rail, erect, square-jawed, a man once more. A man that even those who most bitterly hated him now had to respect and to obey.

“We need ’em all,” he repeated, with the resonance of hard decision. “We’re short-handed as it is. We need every man-jack of them, but not to fight. They won’t fight for us. We daren’t put so

much as a clasp-knife in their murderin' hands. But they can work for us, and, by the Judas priest, they shall! Our pistols can hold 'em to it. Work, sweat, damn 'em – sweat the yellow devils, as they never sweat before!”

“How so, captain?” asked the doctor.

“It'll be an hour before that fleet lays alongside. There's a good chance we can kedge off this damned bar. Twenty natives at the poop capstan, with you, Mr. Bevans – and I guess I'll let the doctor lend a hand, too – standing over 'em with cold lead – that's the game.” Briggs laughed discordantly. “How's your nerve, Mr. Bevans? All right, sir?”

Sea-etiquette was returning. Confidence brightened.

“Nerve, sir? All right!”

“Ever shoot a man dead in his tracks?”

“I have, sir.”

“Good! Then you'll do!” Briggs slapped Bevans on the shoulder. “I'll put you and the doctor in charge of the natives. First one that raises a hand off a capstan-bar, drill him through the head. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Bevans. The doctor nodded.

“That's settled! To work! We won't want the natives at large, though, till we get the kedge over. We'll keep 'em in the 'midships deck-house for a while yet. Doctor, you stand at the break and shoot the first son of a hound that sticks his nose out. Mr. Wansley, muster all the white men aft for instructions. Mr. Prass, take what men you need and get up all the arms and ammunition. First thing, get out that stand of rifles in my cabin. Here's two keys. One is my private locker-key, and the other the key to the arms-locker. In my locker you'll find a kris. In the other, three revolvers. Bring those.” The captain's words came crisp, sharp, decisive. “Bring up the six navy cutlasses from the rack in the cabin. Mr. Gascar will help you. Mr. Gascar, how many axes have you got in your carpenter's chest?”

“Four, sir, and an adz.”

“Bring 'em all. Tell the cook to boil every drop of water he's got room for on the galley range. Get the marline spikes from the bo'sun's locker and lay 'em handy. Cast loose the signal-gun lashed down there on the main deck. We'll haul that up and mount it at the taffrail. God! If they want war, they'll get it, the black scuts!”

“We're short of round-shot for the gun, sir,” said “Chips.” “I misdoubt there's a dozen rounds.”

“No matter. Solid shot isn't much good for this work. Get all the bolts, nuts and screws from your shop – all the old iron junk you can ram down her throat. How's powder?”

“Plenty, sir.”

“Good! We've got powder enough, men enough and guts enough. To your work. Mr. Crevay!”

“Yes, sir?” A lank, bony man, Crevay, with fiery locks and a slashed cheek where a dirk had once ripped deep. An ex-navy man he, and of fighting blood.

“I'm goin' to have you serve the gun when ready. You and any men you pick,” the captain told him, while the others departed each on his own errand, tensely, yet without haste or fear. “Meanwhile, I'll put you in charge of kedgin' us off. Cast loose and rig the kedge-anchor, lower it away from that davy there to the long-boat, and sink it about a hundred fathom off the starb'd quarter. With twenty Malays at the capstan-bars, we ought to start the *Fleece*. If not, we'll shift cargo from forrard. Look alive, sir!”

“Yes, sir!” And Crevay, too, departed, filled with the energy that comes to every man when treated like a man and given a man's work to do.

As by a miracle, the spirit of the *Silver Fleece* had changed. Discipline had all come back with a rush; the battling blood had risen. No longer, for the moment, were the captain's heavy crimes and misdemeanors held against him. Briggs stood for authority, defense in face of the peril of death. His powerful body and stern spirit formed a rallying-point for every white man aboard. And even those who had most poisonously grisled in their hearts against the man, now ran loyally to do his bidding.

Forgotten was the cause of all this peril – the stealing of Kuala Pahang, in drunken lust. Forgotten the barbarities that had driven Mr. Scurlock and the boy ashore. Forgotten the brutal cynicism that had refused to buy their liberty at the price of giving up the girl. Of all these barbarities, no memory seemed now to survive. The deadly menace of twenty Malays already growling in the waist of the ship, and of the slow-advancing line of war-canoes, banished every thought save one – battle!

Once more Captain Alpheus Briggs had proved himself, in time of crisis, a man; more than a man – a master of men.

Thus, now, swift preparations had begun to play the game of war in which no quarter would be asked or given.

CHAPTER VII BEFORE THE BATTLE

Strenuous activities leaped into being, aboard the stranded clipper ship.

All the Malays were herded in the deck-house, informed that they were sons of swine and that the first one who showed a face on deck, till wanted, would be shot dead. The doctor, with a revolver ready for business, added weight to this information.

Under the orders of Mr. Wansley, all the white sailors came trooping aft. Noisily and profanely they came, making a holiday of the impending slaughter. A hard company they were, many in rags, for Briggs could never have been called other than conservative regarding credits from the slop-chest. Rum, however, he now promised them, and whatever loot they could garner from the Malay fleet; so they cheered him heartily. They, too, had all become his men.

Bad men they looked, and such as now were needed – three or four Liverpool guttersnipes, a Portuguese cut-throat from Fayal, a couple of Cayman wreckers, a French convict escaped from the penal ship at Marseilles, and the rest low-type American scum. For such was the reputation of Alpheus Briggs, all up and down the Seven Seas, that few first-class men ever willingly shipped with him before the mast.

Workers and fighters they were, though, every one. While black smoke began to emerge from the galley funnel, on the shimmering tropic air, as the cook stuffed oily rags and oil-soaked wood under all the coppers that his range would hold, divers lines of preparation swiftly developed.

Already some were casting loose the lashings of the signal-gun and rigging tackle to hoist the rust-red old four-inch piece to the after-deck. Others fell to work with Mr. Crevay, rigging the kedge-anchor or lowering away the long-boat. Another gang leaped to the task of getting above-decks all the rifles, cutlasses, powder, ball-shot and iron junk, the axes and revolvers; of loading everything, even of laying belaying-pins handy as a last line of hand-to-hand weapons.

Briggs supervised all details, even to the arming of each man with the butchering-tool he claimed to be most expert with. The best were given the rifles; to those of lesser skill was left the cutlass work. A gun crew of two men was picked to serve the cannon with Mr. Crevay. Three were detailed to help the cook carry boiling water.

“Mr. Bevans will stand over the natives at the capstan,” directed Briggs. “And you, doctor, will act in your medical capacity when we get into action. If hard-driven, you can be useful with the kris, eh? Quite in your line, sir; quite in your line.”

Briggs smiled expansively. All his evil humors had departed. The foretaste of battle had shaken him clean out of his black moods. His genius for organizing, for leading men, seemed to have expanded him to heroic proportions. In his deep, black eyes, the poise of his head, the hard, glad expression of his full-blooded, black-bearded face, one saw eager virility that ran with joy to meet the test of strength, and that exulted in a day’s work of blood.

A heroic figure he, indeed – thewed like a bull; with sunlight on face and open, corded neck; deep-chested, coatless now, the sleeves of his pongee shirt rolled up to herculean elbows. Some vague perception crossed the doctor’s mind that here, indeed, stood an anomaly, a man centuries out of time and place, surely a throwback to some distant pirate strain of the long-vanished past.

Imagination could twist a scarlet kerchief ’round that crisp-curling hair, knot a sash about the captain’s waist, draw high boots up to his powerful knees. Imagination could transport him to the coasts of Mexico long, long ago; imagination could run the Jolly Roger to the masthead – and there, in Captain Briggs, merchant-ship master of the year 1868, once more find kith and kin of Blackbeard, Kidd, Morgan, England, and all others of the company of gentlemen rovers in roistering days.

Something of this the doctor seemed to understand. Yet, as he turned his glance a moment to the line of war-craft now more plainly visible across the shimmering nacre of the strait, he said, raising his voice a trifle by reason of the various shouts, cries and diverse noises blending confusedly, and now quite obliterating all sounds from the war fleet:

“You know what those canoes are coming after, of course.”

“The girl! What of it?”

“And you know, sir, that old Degan Jouga is bound to be aboard. There’ll be a medicine man or two, as well.”

“What the devil are you driving at?” demanded Briggs.

“That’s a formidable combination, sir,” continued the doctor. “We’ve got twenty Malays on board that will face hell-fire itself rather than see any harm befall a native *pawang* or a witch-woman. We’ll never be able to hold them to any work. Each of them believes he can reach paradise by slaughtering a white man. In addition, he can avenge harm done to the old woman and the girl. Under those circumstances – ”

“By God, sir, if I didn’t need you, sir – ”

“Under those circumstances, my original suggestion of holding them all under hatches, as hostages, has much to recommend it, if we come to a fight. But need we come to a fight? Need we, sir?”

“How the devil can we sheer off from it?”

“By giving up the girl, sir. Put her in one of the small boats with a few trade-dollars and trinkets for her dowry – which will effectually lustrate the girl, according to these people’s ideas – and give her a pair of oars. She’ll take care of herself all right. The war-fleet will turn around and go back, which will be very much better, sir, than slaughter. We’ve already lost two men, and – ”

“And you’re white-livered enough to stand there and advise taking no revenge for them?” interrupted Briggs, his voice gusty with sudden passion.

Briggs struck the rail with the flat of his palm, a blow that cracked like a pistol-shot; while the doctor, wholly unhorsed by this tilt from so unexpected an angle, could only stare.

“By the Judas priest, sir!” cried Briggs furiously. “That’s enough to make a man want to cut you down where you stand, sir, you hear *me*? And if that yellow-bellied cowardice wasn’t enough, you ask me to give up the girl – the girl that’s cost me two men already – the girl that may yet cost me my ship and my own life! Well, by the Judas priest!”

“Don’t risk your life and the ship for a native wench!” cut in the doctor with a rush of indignation. “There are wenchies by the score, by the hundred, all up and down the Straits. You can buy a dozen, for a handful of coin. Wenchies by the thousands – but only one *Silver Fleece*, sir!”

“Devilish lot you care about the *Fleece*!” snarled Briggs. “Or about anything but your own cowardly neck!”

“Captain Briggs, don’t forget yourself!”

“Hell’s bells! They shan’t have that girl. Witch-women, medicine men or all the devils of the Pit shan’t take her back. She’s mine, I tell you, and before I’ll let her go I’ll throw her to the sharks myself. Sharks enough, and plenty – there’s one now,” he added, jerking his hand at a slow-moving, black triangle that was cutting a furrow off to starboard. “So I want to hear no more from you about the girl, and you can lay to that!”

He turned on his heel and strode aft, growling in his beard. The doctor, peering after him with smoldering eyes, felt his finger tighten on the trigger. One shot might do the business. It would mean death, of course, for himself. The courts would take their full penalty, all in due time; but it would save the ship and many white men’s lives.

Nevertheless, the doctor did not raise his weapon. Discipline still held; the dominance of that black-bearded Hercules still viséed all opposition into impotence. With no more than a curse, the doctor turned back to his guard duty.

“Are you man or are you devil?” muttered Filhiol. “Good God, what *are* you?”

Already the defense of the *Silver Fleece* was nearly complete; and in the long-boat the kedg-anchor was being rowed away by four men under command of Mr. Crevay. The war-fleet had drawn much nearer, in a rough crescent to northwestward, its sails taut. Flashing water-jewels, swirled up from paddles, had become visible, under the now unclouded splendor of the sun. More and more distinctly the chanting and war-drums drifted in.

The off-shore breeze was urging the armada forward; the dip and swing of all those scores of paddles gave a sense of unrelenting power. But Briggs, hard, eager, seemed only welcoming battle as he stood calculating time and distance, armament and disposal of his forces, or, with an eye aloft at the clewed-up canvas, figured the tactics of kedging-off, of making sail if possible, and showing Batu Kawan’s forces a clean pair of heels.

“Look lively with that anchor!” he shouted out across the sparkling waters. “Drop her in good holdin’ ground, and lead that line aboard. The sooner we get our Malays sweatin’ on the capstan, the better!”

“Aye, aye, sir,” drifted back the voice of Crevay. And presently the splash of the anchor as the boat-crew tugged it over the stern, flung cascades of foam into the heat-quivering air.

The boat surged back bravely; the line was bent to the capstan, and Briggs ordered the Malays to the bars. Sullen they came, shuffling, grumbling strange words – lean, brown and yellow men in ragged cotton shirts and no shirts at all – as murderous a pack as ever padded in sandals or bare feet along white decks.

Among them slouched Mahmud Baba, who, like all the rest, shot a comprehending glance at the on-drawing fleet. Up the forward companion-ladder they swarmed, and aft to the capstan, with Briggs, the doctor and Wansley all three on a hair-trigger to let sunlight through the first who should so much as raise a hand of rebellion. And so they manned the capstan-bars, and so they fell a-heaving at the kedg-line, treading with slow, toilsome feet ’round and ’round on the hot planks, where – young as the morning was – the pitch had already softened.

“Come here, you *surkabutch!*” commanded the captain, summoning Mahmud Baba. “*Juldi, idherao!*”

The Malay came, gray with anger – for Briggs had, in hearing of all his fellows, called him “son of a pig,” and a Mohammedan will kill you for calling him that, if he can. Nevertheless, Mahmud salaamed. Not now could he kill. Later, surely. He could afford to wait. The Frank must not call him son of a pig, and still live. Might not Allah even now be preparing vengeance, in that war-fleet? Mahmud salaamed again, and waited with half-closed eyes.

At the capstan the *thud-thud-thud* of twoscore trampling feet was already mingling with a croon of song, that soon would rise and strengthen, if not summarily suppressed, and drift out to meet the war-chant of the warrior blood-kin steadily approaching.

Click-click-click! the pawl and ratchet punctuated the rhythm of feet and song, as the hawser began to rise, dripping, from the sea. Briggs drew his revolver from his belt, and ground the muzzle fair against Mahmud’s teeth.

“You tell those other *surkabutchas,*” said he with cold menace, “that I’ll have no singing. I’ll have no noise to cover up your plotting and planning together. You’ll all work in silence or you’ll all be dead. Understand me?”

“Yas, sar.”

“And you’ll hang to the capstan-bars till we’re free, no matter what happens. The first man that quits, goes to glory on the jump. Savvy?”

“Yas, sar.” Mahmud’s voice was low, submissive; but through the drooping lids a gleam shone forth that never came from sunlight or from sea.

“All right,” growled Briggs, giving the revolver an extra shove. “Get to work! And if those other sons of pigs in the canoes board us, we white men will shoot down every last one o’ *you* here.

We'll take no chances of being knifed in the back. *You'll* all have gone to damnation before one o' *them* sets foot on my decks. You lay to that, my Mud Baby! Now, tell 'em all I've told you, and get it straight! *Jao!*"

Briggs struck Mahmud a head-cracking blow with the revolver just above the ear and sent him staggering back to the capstan. The song died, as Mahmud gulped out words that tumbled over each other with staccato vehemence.

"Get in there at the bars!" shouted Briggs. "Get to work, you, before I split you!"

Mahmud swung to place, and bent his back to labor, as his thin chest and skinny hands pushed at the bar beside his fellows.

And steadily the war-fleet drew in toward its prey.

CHAPTER VIII

PARLEY AND DEATH

In silence now the capstan turned. No Malays hummed or spoke. Only the grunting of their breath, oppressed by toil and the thrust of the bars, kept rough time with the slither of feet, the ratchet-click, the groaning creak of the cable straining through the chocks.

“Dig your toe-nails in, you black swine!” shouted Briggs. “The first one that – ”

“Captain Briggs,” the doctor interrupted, taking him by the arm, “I think the enemy’s trying to communicate with us. See there?”

He pointed where the fleet had now ranged up to within about two miles. The mats of the proa and of the other sailing-canoes had crumpled down, the oars and paddles ceased their motion. The war-party seemed resting for deliberation. Only one boat was moving, a long canoe with an outrigger; and from this something white was slowly waving.

“Parley be damned!” cried Briggs. “The only parley I’ll have with that pack of lousy beggars will be hot shot!”

“That canoe coming forward there, with the white flag up,” Filhiol insisted, “means they want to powwow. It’s quite likely a few dollars may settle the whole matter; or perhaps a little surplus hardware. Surely you’d rather part with something than risk losing your ship, sir?”

“I’ll part with nothin’, and I’ll save my ship into the bargain,” growled the captain. “There’ll be no tribute paid, doctor. Good God! White men knucklin’ under, to niggers? Never, sir – never!”

Savagely he spoke, but Filhiol detected intonations that rang not quite true. Again he urged: “A bargain’s a bargain, black or white. Captain Light was as good a man as ever sailed the Straits, and *he* wasn’t above diplomacy. He understood how to handle these people. Wanted a landing-place cleared, you remember. Couldn’t hire a man-jack to work for him, so he loaded his brass cannon with trade-dollars and shot them into the jungle. The Malays cleared five acres, hunting for those dollars. These people can be handled, if you know how.”

The captain, his heavy brows furrowed with a black frown, still peered at the on-drawing canoe. Silence came among all the white men at their fighting-stations or grouped near the captain.

“That’s enough!” burst out Briggs. “Silence, sir! Mr. Gascar, fetch my glass!”

The doctor, very wise, held his tongue. Already he knew he was by way of winning his contention. Gascar brought the telescope from beside the after-companion housing, where Briggs had laid it. The captain thrust his revolver into his belt. In silence he studied the approaching canoe. Then he exclaimed: “This is damned strange! Dr. Filhiol!”

“Well, sir?”

“Take a look, and tell me what you see.”

He passed the telescope to the doctor, who with keenest attention observed the boat, then said: “White men on board that canoe. Two of them.”

“That’s what *I* thought, doctor. Must be Mr. Scurlock and the boy, eh?”

“Yes, sir. I think there’s still time to trade the girl for them,” the doctor eagerly exclaimed. A moment Briggs seemed pondering, while at the capstan the driven Malays – now reeking in a bath of sweat – still trod their grunting round.

“Captain, I beg of you – ” the doctor began. Briggs raised a hand for silence.

“Don’t waste your breath, sir, till we know what’s what!” he commanded. “I’ll parley, at any rate. We may be able to get that party on board here. If we can, the rest will be easy. And I’m as anxious to lay hands on those damned deserters o’ mine as I was ever anxious for anything in my life. Stand to your arms, men! Mr. Bevans, be ready with that signal-gun to blow ’em out of the water if

they start trouble. Mr. Gascar, fetch my speakin'-trumpet from the cabin. Bring up a sheet, too, from Scurlock's berth. That's the handiest flag o' truce we've got. Look alive now!"

"Aye, aye, sir," answered Gascar, and departed on his errand.

Silence fell, save for the toiling Malays, whose labors still were fruitless to do aught save slowly drag the kedge through the gleaming sand of the sea-bottom. Mr. Wansley muttered something to himself; the doctor fell nervously to pacing up and down; the others looked to their weapons.

From the fleet now drifted no sound of drums or chanting. In stillness lay the war-craft; in stillness the single canoe remained on watch, with only that tiny flicker of white to show its purpose. A kind of ominous hush brooded over sea and sky; but ever the tramp of feet at the capstan, and the panting breath of toil there rose on the superheated air.

Gascar returned, handed the trumpet to Briggs, and from the rail waved the sheet. After a minute the canoe once more advanced, with flashing paddles. Steadily the gun-crew kept it covered, ready at a word to shatter it. Along the rail the riflemen crouched. And still the little white flutter spoke of peace, if peace the captain could be persuaded into buying.

The glass now determined beyond question that Mr. Scurlock and the boy were on board. Briggs also made out old Dangan Jouga, the witch-woman, mother of the girl. His jaw clamped hard as he waited. He let the war-craft draw up to within a quarter-mile, then bade Gascar cease displaying the sheet, and through the speaking-trumpet shouted:

"That'll do now, Scurlock! Nigh enough! What's wanted?"

The paddlers ceased their work. The canoe drifted idly. Silence followed. Then a figure stood up – a figure now plainly recognizable in that bright glow as Mr. Scurlock. Faintly drifted in the voice of the former mate:

"Captain Briggs! For God's sake, listen to me! Let me come closer – let me talk with you!"

"You're close enough now, you damned mutineer!" retorted Briggs. "What d' you want? Spit it out, and be quick about it!"

Another silence, while the sound traveled to the canoe and while the answer came:

"I've got the boy with me. We're prisoners. If you don't give up that girl, an' pay somethin' for her, they're goin' to kill us both. They're goin' to cut our heads off, cap'n, and give 'em to the witch-woman, to hang outside her hut!"

"And a devilish good place for 'em, too!" roared Briggs, unmindful of surly looks and muttered words revealing some disintegration of the discipline at first so splendidly inspired. "I'll have no dealin's with you on such terms. Get back now – back, afore I sink you, where you lie!"

"See here, captain!" burst out Filhiol, his face white with a flame of passion. "I'm no mutineer, and I'm not refusing duty, but by God –"

"Silence, sir!" shouted Briggs. "I've got irons aboard for any man as sets himself against me!"

"Irons or no irons, I can't keep silent," the doctor persisted, while here and there a growl, a curse, should have told Briggs which way the spate of things had begun to flow. "That man, there, and that helpless boy –"

He choked, gulped, stammered in vain for words.

"They'll hang our heads up, and they'll burn the *Silver Fleece* and butcher all hands," drifted in the far, slow cry of Mr. Scurlock. "They got three hundred men an' firearms, an' a brass cannon. An' if this party is beat, more will be raised. This is your last chance! For the girl an' a hundred trade-dollars they'll all quit and go home!"

"To hell with 'em!" shouted Briggs at the rail, his face swollen with hate and rage. "To hell with you, too! There'll be no such bargain struck so long as I got a deck to tread on, or a shot in my lockers! If they want the yellow she-dog, let 'em come an' take her! Now, stand off, there, afore I blow you to Davy Jones!"

“It’s murder!” flared the doctor. “You men, here – officers of this ship – I call on you to witness this cold-blooded murder. Murder of a good man, and a harmless boy! By God, if you stand there and let him kill those two – ”

Briggs flung up his revolver and covered the doctor with an aim the steadiness of which proved how unshaken was his nerve.

“Murder if you like,” smiled he with cold malice, his white teeth glinting. “An’ there’ll be another one right here, if you don’t put a stopper on that mutinous jaw of yours and get back to your post. That’s my orders, and if you don’t obey on shipboard, it’s mutiny. Mutiny, sawbones, an’ I can shoot you down, an’ go free. I’m to windward o’ the law. Now, get back to the capstan, afore I let daylight through you!”

Outplayed by tactics that put a sudden end to any opposition, the doctor ceded. The steady “O” of the revolver-muzzle paralyzed his tongue and numbed his arm. Had he felt that by a sudden shot he could have had even a reasonable chance of downing the captain, had he possessed any confidence of backing from enough of the others to have made mutiny a success, he would have risked his life – yes, gladly lost it – by coming to swift grips with the brute. But Filhiol knew the balance of power still lay against him. The majority, he sensed, still stood against him. Sullenly the doctor once more lagged aft.

From the canoe echoed voices, ever more loud and more excited. In the bow, Scurlock gesticulated. His supplications were audible, mingled with shouts and cries from the Malays. Added thereto were high-pitched screams from the boy – wild, shrill, nerve-breaking screams, like those of a wounded animal in terror.

“Oh, God, this is horrible!” groaned the doctor, white as paper. His teeth sank into his bleeding lip. He raised his revolver to send a bullet through the captain; but Crevay, with one swift blow, knocked the weapon jangling to the deck, and dealt Filhiol a blow that sent him reeling.

“Payne, and you, Deming, here!” commanded he, summoning a couple of foremast hands. They came to him. “Lock this man in his cabin. He’s got a touch o’ sun. Look alive, now!”

Together they laid hands on Filhiol, hustled him down the after-companion, flung him into his cabin and locked the door. Crevay, guarding the Malays at the capstan, muttered:

“Saved the idiot’s life, anyhow. Good doctor; but as a man, what a damned, thundering fool!”

Unmindful of this side-play Briggs was watching the canoe. His face had become that of a devil glad of vengeance on two hated souls. He laughed again at Scurlock’s up-flung arms, at his frantic shout:

“For the love o’ God, captain, save us! If you don’t give up that girl, they’re goin’ to kill us right away! You got to act quick, now, to save us!”

“Save yourselves, you renegades!” shouted Briggs, swollen with rage and hate. His laugh chilled the blood. “You said you’d chance it with the Malays afore you would with me. Well, take it, now, and to hell with you!”

“For God’s sake, captain – ”

Scurlock’s last, wild appeal was suddenly strangled into silence. Another scream from the boy echoed over the water. The watchers got sight of a small figure that waved imploring arms. All at once this figure vanished, pulled down, with Scurlock, by shouting Malays.

The exact manner of the death of the two could not be told. All that the clipper’s men could see was a sudden, confused struggle, that ended almost before it had begun. A few shouts drifted out over the clear waters. Then another long, rising shriek in the boy’s treble, shuddered across the vacancy of sea and sky – a shriek that ended with sickening suddenness.

Some of the white men cursed audibly. Some faces went drawn and gray. A flurry of chatter broke out at the toiling capstan – not even Mr. Crevay’s furious oaths and threats could immediately suppress it.

Briggs only laughed, horribly, his teeth glinting as he leaned on the rail and watched.

For a moment the canoe rocked in spite of its steadying outrigger, with the violence of the activities aboard it. Then up rose two long spears; spears topped with grisly, rounded objects. A rising chorus of yells, yells of rage, hate, defiance, spread abroad, echoed by louder shouts from the wide crescent of the fleet. And once again the drums began to pulse.

From the canoe, two formless things were thrown. Here, there, a shark-fin turned toward the place – a swirl of water.

Silence fell aboard the clipper. In that silence a slight grating sound, below, told Briggs the kedging had begun to show results. A glad sound, indeed, that grinding of the keel!

“By God, men!” he shouted, turning. “The forefoot’s comin’ free. Dig in, you swine! Men, when she clears, we’ll box her off with the fores’l – we’ll beat ’em yet!”

Once more allegiance knit itself to Briggs. Despite that double murder (as surely done by him as if his own hand had wielded the kris that had beheaded Mr. Scurlock and the boy), the drums and shoutings of the war-fleet, added to this new hope of getting clear of Ulu Salama, fired every white man’s heart with sudden hope.

The growl that had begun to rise against Briggs died away.

“Mr. Crevay,” he commanded, striding aft, “livelier there with those pigs! They’re not doin’ half a trick o’ work!” Angrily he gestured at the sweat-bathed, panting men. “You, Lumbard, fetch me up a fathom o’ rope. *I’ll* give ’em a taste o’ medicine that’ll make ’em dig! And you, Mr. Bevans – how’s the gun? All loaded with junk?”

“All ready, sir!”

Briggs turned to it. Out over the water he squinted, laying careful aim at the canoe where Scurlock and the boy had died.

The canoe had already begun retreating from the place now marked by a worrying swirl of waters where the gathering sharks held revel. Back towards the main fleet it was circling as the paddlemen – their naked, brown bodies gleaming with sunlight on the oil that would make them slippery as eels in case of close fighting – bent to their labor.

On the proa and the other sailing-canoes the mat sails had already been hauled up again. The proa was slowly lagging forward; and with it the battle-line, wide-flung.

Briggs once more assured his aim. He seized the lanyard, stepped back, and with a shout of: “Take this, you black scum!” jerked the cord.

The rusty old four-inch leaped against its lashings as it vomited half a bushel of heavy nuts, bolts, brass and iron junk in a roaring burst of smoke and flame.

Fortune favored. The canoe buckled, jumped half out of the water, and, broken fair in two, dissolved in a scattering flurry of débris. Screams echoed with horrible yells from the on-drawing fleet. Dark, moving things, the heads of swimmers already doomed by the fast-gathering sharks, jostled floating things that but a second before had been living men. The whole region near the canoe became a white-foaming thrash of struggle and of death.

“Come on, all o’ you!” howled Briggs with the laughter of a blood-crazed devil. “We’re ready, you *surkabutchas*! Ready for you all!”

With an animal-like scream of rage, a Malay sprang from the capstan-bar where he had been sweating. On Crevay he flung himself. A blade, snatched from the Malay’s breech-clout, flicked highlights as it plunged into Crevay’s neck.

Whirled by a dozen warning yells, the captain spun. He caught sight of Crevay, already crumpling down on the hot deck: saw the reddened blade, the black-toothed grin of hate, the on-rush of the *amok* Malay.

Up flung his revolver. But already the leaping figure was upon him.

CHAPTER IX

ONSET OF BATTLE

The shot that Wansley fired, a chance shot hardly aimed at all, must have been guided by the finger of the captain's guardian genius. It crumpled the Malay, with strangely sprawling legs. Kill him it did not. But the bullet through his lower vertebræ left only his upper half alive.

With a grunt he crumpled to the hot deck, knife still clutched in skinny fist. Shouts echoed. Briggs stood aghast, with even his steel nerve jangling. The quivering Malay was a half-dead thing that still lived. He writhed with contorted face, dragging himself toward Briggs. The knife-blade clicked on the planking, like the clicking of his teeth that showed black through slaving lips.

"Allah! il Allah!" he gulped, heaving himself up on one hand, slashing with the other.

Why do men, in a crisis, so often do stupid, unaccountable things? Why did Briggs kick at him, with a roaring oath, instead of shooting? Briggs felt the bite of steel in his leg. That broke the numbing spell of unreason. The captain's pistol, at point-blank range, shattered the yellow man's skull. Blood, smeared with an ooze of brain, colored the stewing deck.

"Allah! il Al – !"

The cry ended in a choking gurgle on lips that drew into a horrible grin. And now completely dead even beyond the utmost lash of Islamic fanaticism, the Malay dropped face down. This time the captain's kick landed only on flesh and bone past any power of feeling.

At the capstan-bars it was touch-and-go. Crevay was down, groaning, his hands all slippery and crimson with the blood that seeped through his clutching fingers. For a moment, work slacked off. Wansley was shouting, with revolver leveled, his voice blaring above the cries, oaths, imprecations. Things came to the ragged edge of a rush, but white men ran in with rifles and cutlasses. Briggs flung himself aft, trailing blood.

Crazed with rage and the burn of that wound, he fired thrice. Malays sagged down, plunged screaming to the deck. The captain would have emptied his revolver into the pack, but Wansley snatched him by the arm.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "That's enough – we need 'em, sir!"

Prass, belaying-pin in hand, struck to right, to left. Yells of pain mingled with the tumult that drowned the ragged, ineffective spatter of firing from the war-fleet. The action was swift, decisive. In half a minute, the capstan was clicking again, faster than ever. Its labor-power, diminished by the loss of three men, was more than compensated by the fear of the survivors.

"Overboard with the swine!" shouted Briggs. "Overboard with 'em, to the sharks!"

"This here one ain't done for yet, sir," began Prass, pointing. "He's only –"

"Overboard, I said!" roared Briggs. "You'll go, too, by God, if you give me any lip!"

As men laid hands on the Malays to drag them to the rail, Briggs dropped on his knees beside Crevay. He pulled away the man's hands from the gaping neck-wound, whence the life was irretrievably spurting.

"Judas priest!" he stammered, for here was his right-hand man as good as dead. "Doctor! Where the devil is Mr. Filhiol?"

"In the cabin, sir," Prass answered.

"Cabin! Holy Lord! On deck with him!"

"Yes, sir."

"And tell him to bring his kit!"

Prass had already dived below. The doctor was haled up again, with his bag. A kind of hard exultation blazed in the captain's face. He seemed not to hear the shouts of war, the spattering fusillade

from the canoes. His high-arched chest rose and fell, pantingly. His hands, reddened with the blood of Crevay, dripped horribly. Filhiol, hustled on deck, stared in amazement.

“A job for you, sir!” cried Briggs. “Prove yourself!”

Filhiol leaned over Crevay. But he made no move to open his kit-bag. One look had told him the truth.

The man, already unconscious, had grown waxen. His breathing had become a stertorous hiccough. The deck beneath him was terrible to look upon.

“No use, sir,” said the doctor briefly. “He’s gone.”

“Do something!” blazed the captain. “Something!”

“For a dead man?” retorted Filhiol. As he spoke, even the hiccough ceased.

Briggs stared with eyes of rage. He got to his feet, hulking, savage, with swaying red fists.

“They’ve killed my best man,” he snarled. “If we didn’t need the dogs, we’d feed ’em all to the sharks, so help me!”

“You’re wounded, sir!” the doctor cried, pointing at the blood-wet slash in the captain’s trouser-leg.

“Oh, to hell with that!” Briggs retorted. “You, and you,” he added, jabbing a finger at two sailors, “carry Mr. Crevay down to the cabin – then back to your rifles at the rail!”

They obeyed, their burden sagging limply. Already the dead and wounded Malays had been bundled over the rail. The fusillade from the war-canoes was strengthening, and the shouts had risen to a barbaric chorus. The patter of bullets and slugs into the sea or against the planking of the *Silver Fleece* formed a ragged accompaniment to the whine of missiles through the air. A few holes opened in the clipper’s canvas. One of the men who had thrown the Malays overboard cursed suddenly and grabbed his left elbow, shattered.

“Take cover!” commanded Briggs. “Down, everybody, along the rail! Mr. Wansley, down with you and your men. Get down!”

Indifferent to all peril for himself, Briggs turned toward the companion.

“Captain,” the doctor began again. “Your boot’s full of blood. Let me bandage – ”

Briggs flung a snarl at him and strode to the companion.

“Below, there!” he shouted.

“Aye, aye, sir!” rose the voice of one of the foremast hands.

“Get that wench up here! The yellow girl! Bring her up – an’ look alive!”

“Captain,” the doctor insisted, “I’ve got to do something for that gash in your leg. Not that I love you, but you’re the only man that can save us. Sit down here, sir. You’ll bleed to death where you stand!”

Something in Filhiol’s tone, something in a certain giddiness that was already reaching for the captain’s heart and brain, made him obey. He sat down shakily on deck beside the after-companion. In the midst of all that turmoil, all underlaid by the slow, grinding scrape of the keel on the sand-bar, the physician performed his duty.

With scissors, he shore away the cloth. A wicked slash, five or six inches long, stood redly revealed.

“*Tss! Tss!*” clucked Filhiol. “Lucky if it’s not poisoned.”

“Mr. Gascar!” shouted the captain. “Go below!” Briggs jerked a thumb downward at the cabin, whence sounds of a struggle, mingled with cries and animal-like snarls, had begun to proceed. “Bring up the jug o’ rum you’ll find in my locker. Serve it out to all hands. And, look you, if they need a lift with the girl, give it; but don’t you kill that wench. I need her, alive! Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Gascar replied, and vanished down the companion. He reappeared with a jug and a tin cup.

“They’re handlin’ her all right, sir,” he reported. “Have a drop, sir?”

“You’re damned shoutin’, I will!” And the captain reached for the cup. Gascar poured him a stiff drink. He gulped it and took another. “Now deal it out. There’ll be plenty more when we’ve sunk the yellow devils!”

He got to his feet, scorning further care from Filhiol, and stood there wild and disheveled, with one leg of his trousers cut off at the knee and with his half-tied bandages already crimsoning.

“Rum for all hands, men!” he shouted. “And better than rum – my best wine, sherry, champagne – a bottle a head for you, when this shindy’s over!”

Cheers rose unevenly. Gascar started on his round with the jug. Even the wounded men, such as could still raise their voices, shouted approval.

“Hold your fire, men,” the captain ordered. “Let ’em close in – then blow ’em out o’ the water!”

CHAPTER X

KUALA PAHANG

The doctor, presently finishing with Briggs, turned his attention to the other injured ones. At the top of the companion now stood the captain with wicked eyes, as up the ladder emerged the two seamen with the struggling, clawing tiger-cat of a girl.

The cruel beating the captain had given her the night before had not yet crushed her spirit. Neither had the sickness of the liquor he had forced her to drink. Bruised, spent, broken as she was, the spirit of battle still dwelt in the lithe barbarian. That her sharp nails had been busy to good effect was proved by the long, deep gashes on the faces and necks of both seamen. One had been bitten on the forearm. For all their strength, they proved hardly more than a match for her up the narrow, steep companion. Their blasphemies mingled with the girl's animal-like cries. Loudly roared the booming bass of the captain:

“Up with the she-dog! I'll teach her something – teach 'em all something, by the Judas priest! Up with her!”

They dragged her out on deck, up into all that shouting and firing, that turmoil and labor and blood. And as they brought her up a plume of smoke jetted from the bows of the proa. The morning air sparkled with the fire-flash of that ancient brass cannon. With a crashing shower of splinters, a section of the rail burst inward. Men sprawled, howling. But a greater tragedy – in the eyes of these sailormen – befell: for a billet of wood crashed the jug to bits, cascading the deck with good Medford. And, his hand paralyzed and tingling with the shock, Gascar remained staring at the jug-handle still in his grip and at the flowing rum on deck.

Howls of bitter rage broke from along the rail, and the rifles began crackling. The men, cheated of their drink, were getting out of hand.

“Cease firing, you!” screamed Briggs. “You'll fire when I command, and not before. Mr. Bevans! Loaded again?”

“All loaded, sir. Say when!”

“Not yet! Lay a good aim on the proa. We've got to blow her out o' the water!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” And Bevans patted the rusty old piece. “Leave that to me, sir!”

Briggs turned again to the struggling girl. A thin, evil smile drew at his lips. His face, under its bronze of tan, burned with infernal exultation.

“Now, my beauty,” he mocked, “now I'll attend to you!”

For a moment he eyed Kuala Pahang. Under the clear, morning light, she looked a strange and wild creature indeed – golden-yellow of tint, with tangled black hair, and the eyes of a trapped tigress. Bruises wealed her naked arms and shoulders, souvenirs of the captain's club and fist. Her supple body was hardly concealed by her short skirt and by the tight Malay jacket binding her lithe waist and firm, young breast.

Briggs exulted over her, helpless and panting in the clutch of the two foremast-hands. “To the rail with her!” he ordered.

“What you goin' to do, sir?” asked one of the men, staring. “Heave her over?”

Briggs menaced him with clenched fist.

“None o' your damned business!” he shouted. “To the rail with her! Jump, afore I teach you how!”

They dragged her, screeching, to the starboard rail. All the time they had to hold those cat-clawed hands of hers. From side to side she flung herself, fighting every foot of the way. Briggs put back his head and laughed at the rare spectacle. Twice or thrice the sailors slipped in blood and rum upon the planking, and once Kuala Pahang all but jerked free from them. At the capstan, only the

pistols of the three white guards held her kinsmen back from making a stampede rush; and not even the pistols could silence among them a menacing hum of rage that seethed and bubbled.

“Here, you!” shouted Briggs. “Mahmud Baba, you yellow cur, come here!”

Mahmud loosed his hold on the capstan-bar and in great anguish approached.

“Yas, sar?” whined he. The lean, brown form was trembling. The face had gone a jaundiced color. “I come, sar.”

Briggs leveled his revolver at the Malay. Unmindful of the spattering bullets, he spoke with deliberation.

“Son of a saffron dog,” said he, “you’re going to tell this wench something for me!”

“Yas, sar. What piecee thing me tell?”

“You tell her that if the boats don’t go back to land I’ll heave her over the rail. I’ll feed her to the sharks, by God! Alive, to the sharks – sharks, down there! Savvy?”

“Me savvy.”

“And she’s got to shout that to the canoes! She’s got to shout it to ’em. Go on, now, tell her!”

Mahmud hesitated a moment, shuddered and grimaced. His eyes narrowed to slits. The captain poked the revolver into his ribs. Mahmud quivered. He fell into a sing-song patter of strange words with whining intonations. Suddenly he ceased.

The girl listened, her gleaming eyes fixed on Mahmud’s face. A sudden question issued from her bruised, cut lips.

“What’s she asking?” demanded Briggs.

“She ask where her mother, sar?”

“Tell her! Tell her I’ve shot the old she-devil to hell, and beyond! Tell her she’ll get worse if she don’t make the canoes stand off – worse, because the sharks will get her alive! Go on, you black scut o’ misery, tell her!”

Mahmud spoke again. He flung a hand at the enveloping half-circle of the war-fleet. The nearest boats now were moving hardly a quarter-mile away. The gleam of kris and of spears twinkled in the sun. Little smoke-puffs all along the battle-front kept pace with the popping of gunfire. In the proa, oily brown devils were laboring to reload the brass cannon.

Mahmud’s speech ended. The girl stiffened, with clenched hands. The sailors, holding her wrists, could feel the whipcord tension of her muscles.

“Tell her to shout to the proa there!” yelled the captain in white fury. “Either they stand off or over she goes – and you see for yourself there’s sharks enough!”

Again Mahmud spoke. The girl grunted a monosyllable.

“What’s that she says?” demanded Briggs.

“She say no, sar. She die, but she no tell her people.”

“The hell you say!” roared the captain. He seized her neck in a huge, hairy paw, tightened his fingers till they bit into the yellow skin, and shook her violently.

“I’ll break your damned, obstinate neck for you!” he cried, his face distorted. “Tell your people to go back! Tell ’em!”

Mahmud translated the order. The girl only laughed. Briggs knew himself beaten. In that sneering laugh of Kuala Pahang’s echoed a world of maddening defiance. He loosened his hold, trying to think how he should master her. Another man grunted, by the rail, and slid to the deck, where a chance bullet had given him the long sleep.

Briggs whirled on Mahmud, squeezed his lean shoulder till the bones bent.

“*You* tell ’em!” he bellowed. “If she won’t, you will!”

“Me, sar?” whined the Malay, shivering and fear-sick to the inner marrow. “Me tell so, they kill me!”

“If you don’t, *I* will! Up with you now – both o’ you, up, on the rail! Here, you men – up with ’em!”

They hoisted the girl, still impassive, to the rail, and held her there. The firing almost immediately died away. Mahmud tried to grovel at the captain's feet, wailing to Allah and the Prophet. Briggs flung him up, neck and crop. Mahmud grappled the after backstays and clung there, quivering.

"Go on, now, out with it!" snarled Briggs, his pistol at the Malay's back. "And make it loud, or the sharks will get you, too!"

Mahmud raised a bony arm, howled words that drifted out over the pearl-hued waters. Silence fell, along the ragged line of boats. In the bow of the proa a figure stood up, naked, gleaming with oil in the sunlight, which flicked a vivid, crimson spot of color from a nodding feather head-dress.

Back to the *Silver Fleece* floated a high-pitched question, fraught with a heavy toll of life and death. Mahmud answered. The figure waved a furious arm, and fire leaped from the brass cannon.

The shot went high, passing harmlessly over the clipper and ricocheting beyond. But at the same instant a carefully laid rifle, from a canoe, barked stridently. Mahmud coughed, crumpled and slid from the rail. He dropped plumb; and the shoal waters, clear-green over the bar, received him.

As he fell, Briggs struck the girl with a full drive of his trip-hammer fist. The blow broke the sailors' hold. It called no scream from Kuala Pahang. She fell, writhing, plunged in foam, rose, and with splendid energy struck out for the canoes.

Briggs leaned across the rail, as if no war-fleet had been lying in easy shot; and with hard fingers tugging at his big, black beard, watched the swimming girl, her lithe, yellow body gleaming through the water. Watched, too, the swift cutting of the sharks' fins toward her – the darting, black forms – the grim tragedy in that sudden, reddening whip of brine. Then he laughed, his teeth gleaming like wolves' teeth, as he heard her scream.

"Broke her silence at last, eh?" he sneered. "They got a yell out of the she-dog, the sharks did, even if I couldn't – eh?"

Along the rail, hard-bitten as the clipper's men were, oaths broke out, and mutterings. Work slackened at the capstan, and for the moment the guards forgot to drive their lathering slaves there.

"Great God, captain!" sounded the doctor's voice, as he looked up from a wounded man. "You've murdered us all!"

Briggs only laughed again and looked to his pistol.

"They're coming now, men," said he coolly. To his ears the high and rising tumult from the flotilla made music. The lust of war was in him. For a moment he peered intently at the paddlemen once more bending to their work; the brandished crises and long spears; the spattering of bullets all along the water.

"Let 'em come!" he cried, laughing once more. "With hot lead and boiling water and cold steel, I reckon we're ready for 'em. Steady's the word, boys! They're coming – give 'em hell!"

CHAPTER XI

HOME BOUND

Noon witnessed a strange scene in the Straits of Motomolo, a scene of agony and death.

Over the surface of the strait, inborne by the tide, extended a broad field of débris, of shattered planks, bamboos, platted sails.

In mid-scene, sunk on Ulu Salama bar only a few fathoms from where the *Silver Fleece* had lain, rested the dismantled wreck of the proa. The unpytting sun flooded that wreck – what was left of it after a powder-cask, fitted with fuse, had been hurled aboard by Captain Briggs himself. No living man remained aboard. On the high stern still projecting from the sea – the stern whence a thin waft of smoke still rose against the sky – a few broken, yellow bodies lay half consumed by fire, twisted and hideous.

Of the small canoes, not one remained. Such as had not been capsized and broken up, had lamely paddled back to shore with the few Malays who had survived the guns and cutlasses and brimming kettles of seething water. Corpses lay awash. The sharks no longer quarreled for them. Full-fed on the finest of eating, they hardly snouted at the remnants of the feast.

So much, then, for the enemy. And the *Silver Fleece*– what of her?

A mile to seaward flying a few rags of canvas, the wounded clipper was limping on, under a little slant of wind that gave her hardly steerageway. Her kedge cable had been chopped, her mizzen-topmast was down, and a raffle of spars, ropes and canvas littered her decks or had brought down the awnings, that smoldered where the fire-arrows had ignited them.

Her deck-houses showed the splintering effects of rifle and cannon-fire. Here, there, lay empty pails and coppers that had held boiling water. Along the rails and lying distorted on deck, dead men and wounded – white, brown and yellow – were sprawling. And there were wounds and mutilations and dead men still locked in grapples eloquent of fury – a red shambles on the planks once so whitely holystoned.

The litter of knives, kris, cutlasses and firearms told the story; told that some of the Malays had boarded the *Silver Fleece* and that none of these had got away.

The brassy noonday fervor, blazing from an unclouded sky, starkly revealed every detail. On the heavy air a mingled odor of smoke and blood drifted upward, as from a barbaric pyre to some unpytting and sanguinary god – perhaps already to the avenging god that old Dengan Jouga had called upon to curse the captain and his ship, “the Eyeless Face that waits above and laughs.”

A doleful sound of groaning and cursing arose. Beside the windlass – deserted now, with part of the Malays dead and part under hatches – Gascar was feebly raising a hand to his bandaged head, as he lay there on his back. His eyes, open and staring, seemed to question the sun that cooked his bloodied face. A brown man, blind and aimless, was crawling on slippery red hands and knees, amidships; and as he crawled, he moaned monotonously. Two more, both white, were sitting with their backs against the deck-house. Neither spoke. One was past speech; the other, badly slashed about the shoulders, was groping in his pockets for tobacco; and, finding none, was feebly cursing.

Bevens, leaning against the taffrail, was binding his right forearm with strips torn from the shirt that hung on him in tatters. He was swearing mechanically, in a sing-song voice, as the blood seeped through each fresh turn of cotton.

From the fo’c’s’le was issuing a confused sound. At the wheel stood a sailor, beside whom knelt the doctor. As this sailor grimly held the wheel, Filhiol was bandaging his thigh.

“It’s the best I can do for you now, my man,” the doctor was saying. “Others need me worse than you do.”

A laugh from the companionway jangled on this scene of agony. There stood Alpheus Briggs, smearing his bearded lips with his hirsute paw – for once again he had been at the liquor below. He blinked about him, set both fists on his hips, and then flung an oath of all-comprehensive execration at sea and sky and ship.

“Well, anyhow, by the holy Jeremiah,” he cried, with another laugh of barbaric merriment, “I’ve taught those yellow devils one good lesson!”

A shocking figure the captain made. All at once Prass came up from below and stood beside him. Mauled as Prass was, he seemed untouched by comparison with Briggs. The captain’s presence affronted heaven and earth, with its gross ugliness of rags and dirt and wounds, above which his savage spirit seemed to rise indifferent, as if such trifles as mutilations lay beneath notice.

Across the captain’s brow a gash oozed redly into his eye, puffy, discolored. As he smeared his forehead, his arm knotted into hard bunches. His hairy breast was slit with slashes, too; his mop of beard had stiffened from a wound across his cheek. Nothing of his shirt remained, save a few tatters dangling from his tightly-drawn belt. His magnificent torso, muscled like an Atlas, was all grimed with sweat, blood, dirt. Save for his boots, nothing of his clothing remained intact; and the boots were sodden red.

Now as he stood there, peering out with his one serviceable eye under a heavy, bushy brow, and chewing curses to himself, he looked a man, if one ever breathed, unbeaten and unbeatable.

The captain’s voice gusted out raw and brutelike, along the shambles of the deck.

“Hell of a thing, this is! And all along of a yellow wench. Devil roast all women! An’ devil take the rotten, cowardly crew! If I’d had that crew I went black-birding with up the Gold Coast, not one o’ those hounds would have boarded us. But they didn’t get the she-dog back, did they? It’s bad, bad, but might be worse, so help me!”

Again he laughed, with white teeth gleaming in his reddened beard, and lurched out on deck. He peered about him. A brown body lay before him, face upward, with grinning teeth. Briggs recognized the turtle-egg seller, who had thrown the kris. With a foul oath he kicked the body.

“*You* got paid off, anyhow,” he growled. “Now you and Scurlock can fight it out together, in hell!”

He turned to the doctor, and limped along the deck.

“Doctor Filhiol!”

“Yes, sir?” answered the doctor, still busy with the man at the wheel.

“Make a short job o’ that, and get to work on those two by the deck-house. We’ve got to muster all hands as quick as the Lord’ll let us – got to get sail on her, an’ away. These damned Malays will be worryin’ at our heels again, if we don’t.”

“Yes, sir,” said Filhiol, curtly. He made the bandage fast, took his kit, and started forward. Briggs laid a detaining hand on his arm – a hand that left a broad red stain on the rolled-up sleeve.

“Doctor,” said he, thickly, “we’ve got to stand together, now. There’s a scant half-dozen men, here, able to pull a rope; and with them we’ve got to make Singapore. Do your best, doctor – do your best!”

“I will, sir. But that includes cutting off your rum!”

The captain roared into boisterous laughter and slapped Filhiol on the back.

“You’ll have to cut my throat first!” he ejaculated. “No, no; as long as I’ve got a gullet to swallow with, and the rum lasts, I’ll lay to it. Patch ’em up, doctor, an’ then – ”

“You could do with a bit of patching, yourself.”

The captain waved him away.

“Scratches!” he cried. “Let the sun dry ’em up!” He shoved the doctor forward, and followed him, kicking to right and left a ruck of weapons and débris. Together the men advanced, stumbling over bodies.

“Patch those fellows up the best you can,” directed Briggs, gesturing at the pair by the deck-house. “One of ’em, anyhow, may be some good. We’ve got to save every man possible, now. Not that I love ’em, God knows,” he added, swaying slightly as he stood there, with his blood-stained hand upon the rail. “The yellow-bellied pups! We’ve got to save ’em. Though if this was Singapore, I’d let ’em rot. At Singapore, Lascars are plenty, and beach-combers you can get for a song a dozen. Get to work now, sir, get to work!”

Life resumed something of order aboard the *Silver Fleece*, as she wore slowly down Motomolo Strait. The few Malays of the crew, who had survived the fight and had failed to make their escape with the retreating forces, were for the present kept locked in the deck-house. Briggs was taking no chances with another of the yellow dogs running *amok*.

The number of hands who mustered for service, including Briggs, Wansley and the doctor, was only nine. This remnant of a crew, as rapidly as weak and wounded flesh could compass it, spread canvas and cleaned ship. A grisly task that was, of sliding the remaining bodies over the rail and of sluicing down the reddened decks with buckets of warm seawater. More and more canvas filled – canvas cut and burned, yet still holding wind enough to drive the clipper. The *Silver Fleece* heeled gracefully and gathered way.

Slowly the scene of battle drew astern, marked by the thin smoke still rising from the wreckage of the proa. Slowly the haze-shrouded line of shore grew dim. A crippled ship, bearing the dregs of a mutilated crew, she left the vague, blue headland of Columpo Point to starboard, and so – sorely broken but still alive – passed beyond all danger of pursuit.

And as land faded, Captain Alpheus Briggs, drunk, blood-stained, swollen with malice and evil triumph, stood by the shattered taffrail, peering back at the vanishing scene of one more battle in a life that had been little save violence and sin. Freightened with fresh and heavy crimes he exulted, laughing in his blood-thick beard. The tropic sun beat down upon his face, bringing each wicked line to strong relief.

“Score one more for me,” he sneered, his hairy fists clenched hard. “Hell’s got you now, witch-woman, an’ Scurlock an’ all the rest that went against me. But I’m still on deck! They don’t stick on *me*, curses don’t. And I’ll outlaugh that Eyeless Face – outlaugh it, by God, and come again. And so to hell with that, too!”

He folded steel-muscled arms across his bleeding, sweating chest, heaved a deep breath and gloried in his lawless strength.

“To hell with that!” he spat, once more. “I win – I always win! To hell with everything that crosses me!”

CHAPTER XII AT LONG WHARF

Four months from that red morning, the *Silver Fleece* drew in past Nix's Mate and the low-buttressed islands in Boston Harbor, and with a tug to ease her to her berth, made fast at Long Wharf.

All signs of the battle had long since been obliterated, overlaid by other hardships, violences, evil deeds. Her bottom fouled by tropic weed and barnacles that had accumulated in West Indian waters, her canvas brown and patched, she came to rest. Of all the white men who had sailed with her, nearly two years before, now remained only Captain Briggs, Mr. Wansley, and the doctor. The others who had escaped the fight had all died or deserted on the home-bound journey. One had been caught by bubonic at Bombay, and two by beri-beri at Mowanga, on the Ivory Coast; the others had taken French leave as occasion had permitted.

Short-handed, with a rag-tag crew, the *Fleece* made her berth. She seemed innocent enough. The sickening stench of the slave cargo that had burdened her from Mowanga to Cuba had been fumigated out of her, and now she appeared only a legitimate trader. That she bore, deftly hidden in secret places, a hundred boxes of raw opium, who could have suspected?

As the hawsers were flung and the clipper creaked against the wharf, there came to an end surely one of the worst voyages that ever an American clipper-ship made. And this is saying a great deal. Those were hard days – days when Massachusetts ships carried full cargoes of Medford rum and Bibles to the West Coast, and came back as slavers, with black ivory groaning and dying under hatches – days when the sharks trailed all across the Atlantic, for the bodies of black men and women – hard days and evil ways, indeed.

Very spruce and fine was Captain Briggs; very much content with life and with the strength that in him lay, that excellent May morning, as with firm stride and clear eye he walked up State Street, in Boston Town. The wounds which would have killed a weaker man had long since healed on him. Up from the water-front he walked, resplendent in his best blue suit, and with a gold-braided cap on his crisp hair. His black beard was carefully trimmed and combed; his bronzed, full-fleshed face glowed with health and satisfaction; and the smoke of his cigar drifted behind him on the morning air. As he went he hummed an ancient chantey:

“Oh, Sharlo Brown, I love your datter,
Awa-a-ay, my rollin' river!
Oh, Sharlo Brown, I love your datter,
Ah! Ah! We're bound with awa-a-ay,
'Cross the wide Missouri!”

Past the ship-chandlers' stores, where all manner of sea things lay in the windows, he made his way, and past the marine brokers' offices; past the custom-house and up along the Old State House; and so he came into Court Street and Court Square, hard by which, in a narrow, cobbled lane, the Bell-in-Hand Tavern was awaiting him.

All the way along, shipmasters and seafaring folk nodded respectfully to Alpheus Briggs, or touched their hats to him. But few men smiled. His reputation of hard blows and harder dealings made men salute him. But no man seized him by the hand, or haled him into any public house to toast his safe return.

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