

GOLD OUT OF CELEBES



CAPTAIN
A. E. DINGLE

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Natalie stepped softly beside them and gazed over their stooping backs, to swiftly step back with a choking sob of horror. Frontispiece. See page 175.

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GOLD OUT OF CELEBES

BY

CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

GEORGE W. GAGE

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To

WAGGLES AND BUBBLES

MY DAUGHTERS

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GOLD OUT OF CELEBES

CHAPTER ONE

Perhaps it was Jack Barry's own fault that he had spent three weeks loafing about Batavia without a job. Fat jobs were to be had, if a fellow persevered and could grin at rebuffs; but when he discovered that shore jobs for sailors were usually secured through the Consulate, and that his own country's Consulate Service was limited, as service, to cocktails and financial reports to Washington, he decided to avoid that combination and stick to his own profession. He had been mate of the *Gregg*, when that ancient ark foundered off Kebatu, and also held a clean master's ticket; but somehow he found that masters and mates were a drug on the Batavian market just then; hence his three barren weeks of idleness.

"An American has no business with the sea these days," he reflected moodily. "Confound this stodgy port and its stodgy Dutchmen!"

Legs wide apart, hands thrust deep into his pockets, he puffed fiercely at his pipe and surveyed the scene before him. He stood on the gigantic quay overlooking the seething activity of the inner Tandjong Priok harbor, and beyond this stretched the two monster jetties and the outer port. Eyeing the trading craft that lined the quays, Barry frowned and cursed his luck afresh.

He did not notice a man coming up behind him, who now stood scrutinizing him admiringly from top to toe.

"Hullo, my noble American sailorman!" The voice at his back brought Barry around with a jerk. He glimpsed a figure which might have stepped direct from Bond Street or Fifth Avenue,—natty, trim, wide-shouldered. Under a soft panama hat a keen, shrewd face smiled so infectiously that the disgruntled seaman smiled back in spite of his grouch.

"Well, what of it?" he demanded. "Might as well be a wooden Indian in this one-hoss town."

The other advanced with extended hand. His eyes narrowed in appreciation of Barry's sturdy, powerful frame and clean-cut face.

"Spotted you right off the bat, hey? My name's Tom Little. Glad to know you," he greeted.

"Barry—Jack Barry," returned the sailor.

Their hands met, and in the grip each recognized in the other no mere wastrel of Eastern ports, but a man of energy, virility.

"Sailor from sailortown, I'll bet," smiled Little. "Hey? Splice th' mainbrace!—Heave-ho, me bullies!—all that stuff, hey? How about it?"

"You win," laughed Barry, amused at his new acquaintance's conversational powers. "But I'm a rat in a strange garret here. Nothing doing. Can't get a ship for love or lucre."

"I knew it," Little nodded. "Look as if you'd lost your last copper cash and wanted to join the Socialist Party. But tell me; is this straight? D' you really want a job?"

"Have another," parried Barry. "D' you need a skipper?"

"Who—me?" Little began to roll a smoke, chuckling happily. "I'm a typewriter salesman," he said, "or was, until last night. I quit the job." He watched Barry keenly while lighting his smoke, then suddenly asked: "Where d' you hail from, Barry?"

"Salem, where the sailors used to come from," growled Barry. He was disgusted again, sensing simply another waste of time in Little's manner. Little saw the change of expression, and puffed silently awhile.

"Look here," he remarked presently, "I've sold typewriters for two years, from the Ditch to Nagasaki, and from the land o' rubies clear to the land of apes, and I'm doggone sick of toting literary sausage grinders around. I see a chance to horn in on a prospect that's sure to pay exes and maybe pan out a pile, but I need a good man of your profession in with me. How about you?"

"I'd jump into anything clean," asserted Barry promptly. "But what's the golden hoodle?"

"A brigantine and sealed orders," grinned Little, with an air of mock mystery. "Are you a sure-enough skipper, though?"

Barry nodded, then turned. Along the wharves were junks, island schooners, cargo tramps, and ruffraff of the Seven Seas, but only one brigantine. It was an uncommon rig in the port. The craft lay far down the quay, and even at that

distance looked old and desolate.

"That?" he asked, pointing.

"Good eye," chuckled Little admiringly. "How d' ye guess?"

"She's the only brigantine in the port...."

"Oh, glory! Real story-book salt, hey? Show you a hunk o' wood, and you'll tell me the family history of the skipper of the hooker it came out of, hey? Barry, you're all to the mustard!"

Little clapped him on the shoulder, and Barry gazed into his snapping black eyes for a moment.

"Mr. Little," he said quietly, "if you're always as easy in your choice of men you're not the wise owl I thought you at first sight."

"Me? Good guesser, that's all," returned Little, unrebuked. "Think I'm an easy mark, hey? Muggins from Muggsville? Come again, Barry. Beg pardon, Cap'n Barry, I should say. Haul th' bowline! Jack up th' fo'c'sle yard! See, I'm also a tarry shellback way down deep."

Barry laughed outright. It was impossible to maintain a frown or a doubt in the salesman's breezy presence. "Just what is your proposition?" he asked at length.

"Sh! Clap a stopper on your jaw-tackle!" Again that air of mock mystery came into Little's face. "Say, d' you know old Cornelius Houten?"

"Heard of a trader by that tally. Don't know him."

"Same man," Little nodded. "Only one like him. Known him a long time. Sold him a parcel of machines for his Government. He's a queer old duck. Made me a proposition last night. Millions in it. Chucked up my job by cable right away. Sorry this morning, though. Like a dream. I wanted to hunt up a fellow who could put me wise on binnacles and charts and things like that. Get me?"

"As far as you've gone," chuckled Barry.

"Well, Houten likes my style. Thinks I can do this job as well as I sold typewriters. I like you, too. See the drift? Come to his office with me and give the thing the once over. If you say O.K., you come in on it, and we'll sign up right away. I told Houten I was going to find a man."

Barry eyed the other quizzically. Liking Tom Little at first sight, he liked him more now.

"You're putting a lot of faith in a stranger," he warned.

Little cut him short. "Cut out the cackle and talk hoss," was the retort. "I size up men first pop. My bet's down now on your blue eye. Let's get a rig. I don't know a darn thing about this part of the world except the drummers' hotels. But Houten takes a chance on me. And if I'm his blue-eyed boy, you're mine. I'm taking a chance without a qualm, Barry."

Little passed an arm through his companion's, and they turned towards the railroad station. As they picked out a *sadoe* from among the waiting vehicles, Barry strove desperately to recover a grip on himself. He had been all but swept off his feet by Little's cheery optimism and breezy confidence. Jack Barry was also accustomed to sizing up men quickly. Despite the typewriter salesman's slangy, easy-going way, he saw underneath a man shrewd, efficient, utterly dependable. And as the *sadoe* rattled at the heels of the tiny Timor pony along the wide avenue, past the dirt-choked canals of the old port, he fell into rosy, perhaps premature, dreams of the future. Little awakened him with rapid-fire speech.

"Selling typewriters out here is easy. Like getting rid of pink lemonade at a kid's party," chattered the salesman. "Was doing a wildfire business. Chucked the job clean, on Houten's face. Imagine how he struck me to make me do that." Perhaps thirty seconds of silence—a long silence for Little—then, "How'd you get stranded, Barry?"

Barry told of the foundering of the *Gregg*, and though the recital was in the plainest of sailorese terms, Little's eyes popped in amazement.

"Holy smoke! You've been shipwrecked? Floating around in an open boat? Didn't believe it was done, except in Perilous Polly Feature Fillum Bunk! Ph-ew!" and Little relapsed into a real, awed silence.

They passed into old Batavia, amid its swamps and silted canals. Further along lay Welterreden, the new city, with its magnificent avenues and residences; but the business in hand lay in the older section. Here, among clustering mangroves, huge rooted and malarial, Chinese and native *kampongs* huddled in the shadow of decaying ruins. Here was a deserted city, with jungle creeping over Dutch waterways and red-brick houses, whose quaint gables and leaded windows spoke

of eighteenth-century Holland rather than of twentieth-century Java. One involuntarily looked for windmills. A few of the old houses were still occupied as offices, and at one of these, where a native *kampong* nestled and stank beneath the rank shrubbery to one side, the *sadoe* drew up.

"Houten's," announced Little, recovering speech. Bidding the *sadoe* driver wait, he led Barry inside the office.

A Javanese boy bowed them into a room where nothing was in evidence save a punkah, a giant porcelain stove, a huge desk and chair, and a monster man. Cornelius was fleshy to enormity. He was very like a mammoth but benevolent spider. Wealthy as he was fat, while many men had cursed him, many more had blessed him. His business interests were wide and complex, reached into many fields, and usually came to a good end. Also, to be the accredited agent of Cornelius Houten was in itself a recommendation as to probity and worth greatly to be desired. Rarely did his judgment err; the men who had failed to measure up to his estimate of them were extremely few.

He acknowledged Barry with a grunt to Little's introduction, and motioned his visitors to two chairs silently produced by the Javanese boy. He sat in ponderous silence for a space, his piggy eyes dwelling on Barry with steel-point steadiness, his great hands resting idly on the desk before him. Then he spoke,—in thick, heavy English.

"Good man. You will command my *Barang*, Captain Barry?"

"Not too swift, Mynheer," chimed in Little. "Run over the business again for Barry, hey? Give him a chance to kick."

Houten maintained his steady gaze. "You have master's papers, of course, Captain Barry?"

Barry produced his certificate and discharges and laid them on the desk. Houten glanced through them and pushed them back with a nod. Then his gaze switched to Little.

"You can tell him," he said, and Little leaped at the chance to talk again.

"This is it," the ex-salesman began eagerly. He watched Houten incessantly for hint or encouragement. "Houten made one of his rare miscues on a man, Barry. One time in a thousand. Englishman, name of Gordon. Manager of a trading post in Celebes. Gordon sends back small parcels of trade but sends a lot of gold dust

to a fellow in Surabaya—old capital of Java, y' know.

"Evidently Gordon has located a gold-bearing river on the concession and is swiping the dust. Tells Mynheer a lot of lies to quiet him, Houten wants me to ferret out this Surabaya duck, get the hang o' things, then go out after Mister Gordon, chop-chop. You know—not the dust, but the principle of the thing, et cetera. Millions for justice but not a plugged Straits dollar for graft. Catch on?"

"Why not invoke the law? No lack of it here, I understand," put in Barry innocently. Houten's vast frame shook with a silent chuckle.

"Go on," he gurgled. "Captain Barry is no fool."

"Act two—curtain!" Little complied quickly. "Surabaya chap is called Leyden, half Dutch, half English. Trader of sorts, see? Well, Leyden is bound for Celebes right now; hunt up the source of supplies, y' know. Up the Sandang River, where the post is, there's a missionary outfit that Houten is interested in. One of the Mission lot is a girl, and Leyden has boasted openly he's going to make a hit with the little frock. Houten aims to empty Gordon out, euchre Leyden, and give the good Mission people an object lesson on bad men in general, with Leyden as the horrible example. Savvee? Sure you do."

Barry eyed Houten in some perplexity. Knowing little of the man, he was more than slightly suspicious of this tale.

"I gather your intention is to interfere between this girl and Leyden more than anything else," he remarked slowly. "Well, frankly, I'd like to know why. It doesn't sound any nicer than the usual man-and-woman affair out East. It's too altruistic."

Houten's steady eyes seemed to fire Little to further explanation.

"Not a bit, Barry," Little went on warmly. "This fellow Leyden isn't a clean sport, by a jugful. Puts on heaps of side; carries a swagger front. Put over some shady jobs in the island already, and Houten's sick of it. Don't imagine our friend here has any interest in this particular Mission lady beyond befriending her and her kind. He hasn't. I'll guarantee that.

"He wants to hand Leyden a swift kick, business and personal. Also save the little Mission toiler from contamination by personal contact with the bad man, or words to that effect. We take train to Surabaya—the *Barang* picks us up there—size up Leyden's outfit, and put a spoke in his wheel that'll give us a start of him.

"If we locate the gold river, we get half the loot, see? Forget the altruism of it—an old sea-dog has no business with a word like that, anyway. I know Houten, and I'll answer for his motives. How about it, Barry?"

Barry thought for a moment, scanning both of his companions keenly the while, then: "Suits me," he said quietly. "I suppose we descend upon Surabaya as a pair of pop-eyed tourists, eh?"

"Right, first shot!" cried Little jubilantly. "Then the *Barang* picks us up. Cap'n Barry takes command. And it's Yo-heave-ho! on the briny billows in a bouncing brigantine! Coming, ain't you?"

"Sure!" grinned Barry, and thrust his free brown fist into Houten's great paw. Little was pumping furiously at the other hand.



CHAPTER TWO

In mid-forenoon of the second day's train ride, Little and Barry were forced to cool their heels at Solo Junction while the train waited for the tardy Samarang connection.

The typewriter salesman was a keen man in his line of business, but he had never used his senses to much ulterior purpose while traveling about the East; he was much more concerned with a prospective customer's financial status than with the surroundings in which the customer lived.

Now while fuming over the delay, Little stepped out on the platform and abruptly awoke to the fact that sheer beauty was riot in Java, if one's eyes were but opened to it. Hedges of lantana were not new to him, they were common from end to end of the island; but not until now had he appreciated the warm magenta coloring of gorgeous poinsettias and bougainvillea, the glowing-hearted, waxy white flowers of frangipani; not until now did he realize the prodigality of Nature towards Java in the matter of weird and awesome fruits and vegetables.

He stood in wonder, gazing at the pendant fruit of a heavily laden sausage tree, for all the world like queerly colored, succulent sausages, garnished with brilliant green foliage; his wonder lasted until a coolie passed to windward of him munching on a great chunk of prickly durian, which fruit combines the flavor of ambrosia with the odor of a gasworks. He retreated incontinently, bursting in upon Barry who had remained in the train, and almost knocking over a lady who was hastily leaving. Apologizing confusedly, Little bore down on the sailor.

"Phe-e-ew!" he gasped. "You're one wise old fox, Barry. Seen all this stuff before, hey? Say, there's a coolie outside eating armor-plated limburger, ten years defunct! Enjoying it, too. And I've just seen a tree full o' hot-dogs! Honest, Barry—Hullo, old boy, why the blushes? Why all the figuring?"

Barry sat in the big soft seat of the first-class carriage, a scrap of paper on one knee, a pencil chewed to splinters between his teeth. His brow was puckered into deep lines above troubled eyes which stared absently at a Mesdag picture in blue and white tile set in the compartment wall. He smiled at his friend's exuberance

and dropped pencil point to paper.

"How in thunder do you figure this confounded Dutch money, Little?" he asked. "What's the fare in real money? Fifty gulden sounds like conic sections to me."

"Why, fifty gulden is—But what for, son? Why the financial statement?"

"Want to start right, that's all. You've paid for everything so far, Little, and I'm busted clean. Keeping tally, that's all."

"Forget it," smiled Little. "I've got a note on Houten's bankers in Surabaya for the exes. Pitch that pencil out o' the window before it gives you indigestion. But there's something else," he accused, watching Barry closely. "Darned if I don't think you've started an affair! Who was the lady?"

Barry got up quickly, stepped to the window and drew Little after him. After a swift scrutiny, he pointed out a graceful figure in cool white and answered Little's query.

"See her? Yes, that woman just going into the crowd. Same one you nearly bowled over in the doorway. Came to me the minute you went out; greeted me as an old friend, though I never saw her in my life before. D' you know her?"

Little stared hard at the retreating figure, trying to glimpse her face. The woman turned, gazing up the track towards Samarang, and the vivid sunlight irradiated her face with startling clearness. It was a striking face, full of mature loveliness, yet holding something in the deep expressive eyes that hinted at more than a woman's share of hard contact with the world.

"No," Little said slowly, "never saw her, Barry. But I believe I'd like to meet her at that. Some queen, hey? What's she want?"

"Wanted a passage in my ship!" exploded Barry. "See here, Little, I thought this job was on the quiet. I haven't said a word to anybody," and he fixed an accusing eye on Little.

"Me too," retorted the ex-salesman, as warmly returning the other's quiz. "Maybe you're oversensitive, though. How much did she seem to know?"

"Can't tell," hesitated Barry. "Perhaps she startled me by simply talking ship. I suppose almost anybody can spot me for a sailor. But she seemed to be so darned certain that I was in command of a vessel leaving Surabaya, and she asked me

for a passage, and be darned if I savvee why, since even Hawkeye himself couldn't tell where the ship is bound for, unless we blabbed it."

"What did you tell her?"

"That my ship was bound for Europe," grinned the sailor. "She came right back, too; said that's just where she wants to go. She was urging me to sell her a berth when you came in and saved me."

Little glanced out again then suddenly pulled Barry from the window.

"Come out and watch the crowd," he said. "Some of these people are worth watching. The Samarang train is due." With the announcement Little leaped from the train and impatiently awaited his companion.

"Easy to see the people worth watching," laughed Barry, joining him.

Little walked up the platform towards the knot of folks with whom the lady was last seen, and the sailor followed with an indulgent grin. Together they reached the locomotive of their train, and like a vision the strange lady emerged from nowhere and approached them, smiling brilliantly.

"How do you do, Mr. Little," she greeted, and Little's politeness was scarcely proof against his astonishment. He stared in amazement at her ready use of his name. And he was certain now that he had never set eyes on this radiant being before. The lady prattled on, with a note of reproof: "Captain Barry refuses to accommodate a lady in distress. Won't you persuade him to sell me a passage in his ship, Mr. Little?"

Little was sharp-witted. But even he was nonplussed to find their errand so obviously known in part. As for Barry, simple, straight sailor that he was, he was dumbfounded.

What the outcome might have been was left in doubt. The warning whistle of the incoming train jarred the warm air, and the crowd surged every way, creating a diversion that precluded reply. The train from the north drew in and disgorged its passengers, voluble or stolid, according to whether they were of the native subjects or the Dutch masters. Out of the scrambling chaos of chugging trains, first, second, and third-class passengers were directed or driven to their respective locations amid hoarse or shrill orders of guttural European or musical Javanese trainmen.

Until the last few passengers were mounting the train steps, Barry and Little lingered, watching the human kaleidoscope and awkwardly conscious that they made poor figures before the lady at their side. Then they were attracted by an altercation going on farther along the station platform, and when they turned again the mysterious lady had as mysteriously vanished.

"She's gone!" breathed Barry, with relief.

"Good egg!" echoed Little, then seized Barry's arm. "Come on, Barry, we must hustle too. Gosh! See that?"

A mild-mannered, soft-eyed Javanese porter had set down a heavy suitcase and was apparently trying to persuade its white owner to pay his small fee for carrying it. The white man, keen-faced, overbearing, immaculately dressed, cursed the porter in venomous Low Malay and picked up the suitcase himself. As he turned to board the train, leaving the fee unpaid, the porter trotted beside him with outstretched palm, asking civilly enough for his wage. The white man swung around, kicked him viciously, and sprang on the train, leaving his victim squirming in agony on the platform.

"Here, I'm going after that duck!" gritted Barry, buttoning his jacket and starting forward. "That's the sort of white man that makes me glad I'm sun-tanned brown!"

"Not here—not now," warned Little, seizing the sailor's sleeve. "We've got to hustle to keep our seats, son. Ain't that sort o' thing regular with white men in a black man's land? It is with these lordly Dutchmen, anyway."

"Regular? Huh! Not if I can stop it," snorted Barry. "Would you see a dog kicked like that? Not much you wouldn't. I don't like that white man."

"We'll sure agree not to like him, Barry, old scout; but for the love o' Mother Dooley don't start something that'll tie our hands this early in the game."

Little led his obstinate friend to his seat, and until their fellow travelers melted away in the crowd at the Surabaya station he kept a wary eye on him. Barry snorted like a pugilist stung hard on the nose when the white corrector of insistent coolies marched from the station as if he owned the town; and the ex-salesman was forced to use all his diplomacy to restrain Barry from an outbreak.

"Have a heart, Cap, have a heart," he pleaded, when Barry barely escaped collision with a speeding barouche while following with his eyes his unknown

enemy. "We're a pair o' tourists, remember. You'll get all the scrapping you can handle when we get away from here. If you go after every white fellow you see slugging a coolie, we'll have no time to attend to our own business."

"You're boss of the job; I'm dumb," grunted Barry. "All the same, I'd pass up Houten's proposition for the pleasure of pushing that chap's jib three inches further inboard. Let's get something to drink. I'm on fire."

Little led the way to a quiet hotel whose veranda commanded a wide view of the harbor and the Island of Madura across the straits. He had stopped here many times in his capacity of salesman, had sold the landlord a typewriter, and was still a welcome guest in spite of it. Ordering two tall schooners of imported beer, the only kind drinkable even in that hotel, he took the proprietor aside and made some inquiries. Presently he sauntered back to Barry.

"Going up town, Jack," he announced. "Too late for the bank. I'll go to the banker's villa for our *gulden*. Unless the bottom drops out of the *Barang*, she'll be in before morning, and we can't lose any time.

"When you've lowered that bar'l o' beer into your hold—more nautical stuff, see?—you get busy too. Mynheer host tells me Leyden's schooner, the *Padang*, is hauled out for caulking. The job's done. They float her on this evening's tide. He says Leyden drops in about sundown whenever he's in town. He'll surely be here to-night, being busy about his ship.

"Now, old salt, that schooner can sail rings around any shovel-nosed old boat with those funny little crosspieces on her masts. Houten admitted that. We must hinder that schooner, long enough to beat her to the Sandang River. That's your job, sailor. But don't pull stuff raw enough to get us clapped into the calaboose. Report back here. I'll be back like a shot. Then we'll camp on Leyden's trail and size him up."

Barry set down his empty beer mug and stood up, glad of the chance of action. He hesitated, though, and said doubtfully:

"If she's hauled out still, it's easy to fix her. But I'd feel easier about it if I knew that Leyden is actually the dog you say he is. If it turned out that he's only a keen fellow who's got to windward of Houten by straight methods, I'd feel as if I'd knifed him in the dark by playing tricks on his schooner to get a start of him."

"Oh, splash!" ejaculated Little. He was hot and looked it. "I thought you were

satisfied about that. Look here; go ahead, pull whatever stunt is up your sleeve. I give you my word that if you see Leyden and feel as you do about him then, we'll hold back our own vessel until he's under weigh, no matter what we lose by it. Does that soothe your blessed Quixotic scruples?"

"Good enough," agreed Barry heartily, throwing off the half-felt doubts that had obsessed him. "I shouldn't have said anything like that at all, after taking you up. That coolie business got me heated. I'll probably feel better with something to do."

They parted on the hotel steps, and Barry, after inquiring of the proprietor the whereabouts of the slipway where Leyden's schooner was, swung off in the given direction. Past wharves and warehouses he strode, throwing back his wide shoulders and inhaling great drafts of spicy ozone as he found himself once again among shipping, in the atmosphere that was meat and drink to him.

At the northern extremity of the water front the craft in port dwindled from steamers and deep-water square-riggers to "country" ships, schooners, junks, and other small fry; and among the forest of masts his experienced eye picked out two spars, straighter and more shipshape than the rest, which guided him unerringly to the *Padang*.

Blocked up on a tidewater slipway, every detail of the vessel was visible, even to the last fathom of oakum now being hammered into her port garboard seam. White painted and trim, she spelled speed and weatherliness in every line, and a note of admiration escaped Barry as he regarded her clean underbody from a safe distance. A trickle of water was already creeping up towards her stern; the rudder would be wet again within an hour.

From the vantage point of a huge pair of sheer-legs Barry reconnoitered. He saw the last muddy toiler crawl from beneath the keel and scramble ashore. It was getting rapidly dusk as the sun dipped, and a lone figure high up on deck went around placing lanterns in readiness for working the schooner off when the tide served. Besides the solitary watchman, not a soul was visible. Barry stepped out cautiously and hastened down to the floor of the slip.

One of Jack Barry's most cherished possessions was a weird Yankee contraption that cost him heavily in the shape of worn pockets. Its maker named it a knife; as a matter of fact, the knife part was worthless; but snugly and cunningly fitted into the stout buckhorn handle was a serviceable file, a hacksaw, and a marlinespike.

In the brief time before the slipway employees and the schooner's crew returned from their supper, Barry worked swiftly and silently. He ripped out fathom after fathom of fresh caulking in the garboards, making assurance doubly sure, by thrusting his knife-blade clear through the seam in a dozen places. The anchor, hanging at the cathead ready to let go when the schooner floated in the harbor, he loosely connected with one of the chain-plates by a length of small wire rope, so that, when let go, it would hang a few feet under water and the schooner must drift, possibly ashore, before another anchor could be cleared and put over.

In little over half an hour he climbed out of the slip again, dripping sweat, minus the skin of all his knuckles, and blistered as to palms and knees, but with a cheerful grin that spoke of a satisfied soul. He confidently depended upon the darkness, now absolute, and native unthoroughness, for his work to remain undetected until the sea came up and concealed it.

After a bath at the hotel he sought Little and reported his achievement.

"Good work!" chuckled his friend. Then Little whispered: "And who d 'ye suppose Leyden is, after all?"

"Search me," said Barry, his eyes on a group of men along the veranda. "Who?"

"Your coolie kicker of Solo!"

A flash of joy lighted Barry's bronzed face, to be shaded in a moment.

"That's the best news in months, Little. But Gosh! If I'd known, I could just as easily have ripped out another ten fathom of caulking!"

As he spoke, Barry leaned forward suddenly. The group of men along the veranda had drawn his attention by their noisy laughter and greetings, and now he saw his man of Solo appear in their midst. Leyden was flushed and in high good humor; that he was hail fellow well met was obvious. He flung himself into a long cane chair and plunged into a recital that induced a gale of merriment in his listeners. Barry's eyes glittered like points of flame and bored into Leyden's back as if to force notice.

"Go easy, Jack," warned Little, sensing trouble. "Don't start a fuss."

"Shut up!" growled Barry, holding his gaze. "I won't start anything. I'll make him start something though; then I'll sail into him like a rat up a pump!"

Leyden had finished his story, and the class of it was patent from the guffawed comments it excited. Another of the group capped it with another, grosser yet, and the party burst into an uproarious hilarity. Then a flabby-jowled, paunchy fellow urged in throaty gutturals:

"Come, Leyden, tell us about the new flame. It's too good to keep to yourself. She's a good girl, isn't she—as yet?"

No attempt was made to keep the conversation private. The whole party oozed a blatant superiority over any possible audience, easily traceable to the copious flow of schnapps at their table. Leyden alone, Barry noticed, drank nothing. A roar greeted the last speaker's shrewd hint at Leyden's reputation as a ladies' man, which he replied to by taking a fat wallet from his breast pocket. This he opened ostentatiously, and after a suitable pause, produced a cabinet photograph which he pressed to his lips with a theatrical flourish.

Barry crouched in his chair, feet drawn under him, hands gripping the chair arms and supporting most of his weight. Little watched the group curiously, for the moment forgetting his inflammable friend. The picture went around, to the accompaniment of coarse jests, the burden of which indicated that the Celebes Mission field was due to either gain a convert in Leyden or lose a valued worker in the person of the picture's original.

Leyden replied with a remark that would have procured him a beating in a sailor's dive, and Barry lurched to his feet with a lurid, rumbling oath. Little started up, too, but half-heartedly, then sat down to follow the action of his friend. He too had caught that last remark, and his fingers itched to feel Leyden's windpipe throb under them.

Barry staggered across the veranda, cleverly simulating drunkenness. Furious as he was, he was cool enough to play a definite and reasonably safe game. He lost his balance ten feet from Leyden's chair, recovered himself with a damp hiccough and maudlin apology, then darted forward and sprawled among the hilarious group with hands outstretched for the table to support himself.

Mumbling incoherently, he slowly raised himself and glared owlishly around, caught sight of the picture in Leyden's hand, and grabbed for it.

"Pretty, pretty," he gabbled, leering at Leyden and prodding that fuming gentleman in the ribs with a hard finger. "'Zat your sister?"

An awkward laugh burst from the party. Recalling the remarks they had been bandying about, they considered how little sport they would have caused Leyden had the original of that picture been in truth his sister. Leyden flushed to his hair roots, then paled with fury. He seized Barry by the shoulder, picked up a glass of schnapps, and flung the stinging liquor into the sailor's face.

Barry's pose dropped in a flash. He made an expertly short job of the coolie kicker now the opening had come. Ramming a right fist like a jib-sheet-block hard into Leyden's solar plexus, he brought the same hand up streaking to the jaw; his left shot out as his man staggered to fall, and crunched home with a smash into the now distorted features.

Uproar ensued. The landlord ran in, feigning distress. Little joined, and the supposedly drunken sailor was hauled away from his fallen adversary. A rapid exchange of crisp sentences passed between the host and Little, and the former nodded. He busied himself with Leyden and his vociferous friends, had the damaged man taken to a private room, and made the way clear for Little to hustle Barry out of the hotel and into a barouche.

"I can't blame you, Jack," grinned the salesman as the carriage rolled away. "It was what we wanted, after all; but it may cause trouble yet. Some hothead, old scout! I'll look out I keep off your corns myself. Now we'll get to the front and watch for the *Barang*. She's about due, and the town's too hot for us after this."

An hour later an anchor was let go somewhere out in the night. Little had secured a boatman, and the two friends put off to the brigantine full of self-congratulatory chuckles; for, whether Leyden had pulled strings to arrest his assailant or not, the mannikin at the end of the string had as yet shown no signs of jumping.

As they neared the dark shape of the vessel, two market boats left her shadow, and voices came across the water, signifying the correct tally of sundry stores. Then the *Barang's* anchor came up again immediately her new skipper set his foot on deck, the topsail yard, lowered to the cap on anchoring, was jerked aloft, and the brigantine stood silently out of the roadstead.



CHAPTER THREE

Cape Lapa, at the east end of Madura Island, was smoky and indistinct on the port quarter when Captain Barry came out of his stateroom after two brief hours of sleep. He had kept the deck through the night until the brigantine was well away; now, with a natural curiosity, he rose early to take a survey of his new command and her crew. Coming on board at black midnight he had sensed rather than seen his first officer. How far that first shadowy impression had satisfied him was evident when he permitted himself to sleep without verifying it by daylight. His crew he had only seen as noiseless shapes between dark bulwarks as they slid rather than ran in response to the officers' orders in getting to sea.

The *Barang* had a deckhouse companion,—that is, a square house built over and around the head of the companionway stairs, forming a convenient chart room for the officers or a snug smoking lounge for possible passengers. By the open door of this house Barry stood for a few moments, gazing intently at the picture he had snatched from Leyden, and which had remained in his pocket after the encounter. Out from the oval of the mount a sweet girlish face smiled at him. It was the face of a woman grown, yet retaining the utter innocence and trust of a girl. The picture had been taken in a studio, the Sumarang photographer's name was stamped on the card, and Barry felt a wave of anger creeping over him at the thought that Leyden could get such a picture. Then he thought it possible that the picture had been bought; for native photographers are not beyond taking money for pictures they have no right to sell; and the thought pleased him. He turned the card over, and was again absurdly pleased to find no signature on the back.

"That's it!" he muttered. "She didn't give him this." He smiled back at the charming face and fancied it smiled up at him. Such a vision of fresh, wholesome loveliness had never crossed his horizon before. The level brows shaded eyes that looked straight out at him, fearless, unconcealing; the richly curved lips were parted in a dazzling expression of happiness. Barry gladdened at the sight, then frowned at the recollection of the discussion at Leyden's table. Such frank, unsophisticated loveliness was tender prey for the likes of Leyden.

"Not if I know it, he won't!" the skipper muttered under his breath. He slipped the picture into his pocket and stepped out on deck, taking in every detail of ship and crew that came into his line of sight.

In the strengthening sunlight of rising morning the brigantine would not have appealed very strongly to a landsman, or even to a yachtsman. As Barry discovered later, at breakfast, Little was sadly disappointed at the lack of polished brass-work, the bareness of the paint, the all-round creakiness of the ancient fabric. But to a seaman's eye the absence of brass meant a pleasing lack of irritating work on ornamentation; the worn paint showed sound timber beneath; there was just enough creakiness to indicate an amount of free play that made for pliability and strength.

From forward came the musical swish of brooms and water as the bare-legged watch scrubbed decks. A burly Hollander stood on the spare topmast lying in the port scuppers, one leg crooked over the bulwark rail, scooping water from the ocean with a draw-bucket and discharging it with consummate skill among the brown legs of the scrubbers.

Barry took notice of the big Dutchman, receiving an impression of quiet, ponderous efficiency that was yet strangely suggestive of a velvet-covered steel trap. This impression, however, was only a fleeting one as to the latter part; it struck Barry just once in that first early morning view of his ship, when the Hollander gave a softly spoken order to a brown Javanese, smiling ruddily as he spoke, and the sailor leaped to obey with fear so apparent in his face and movements that Barry was forced to grin at the ludicrousness of it.

But the outstanding figure in the scrubbing party was Little, and the skipper quickly forgot the seaman's fright in amusement at his friend's antics. Broom in hand, his trousers rolled above his knees, and his shirt flying open at the neck, his face glowing with the exercise, the late typewriter salesman darted in and out among the other scrubbers, leaving the spot he was working on to pounce upon any fresh space of planking sluiced by the water. Getting in everybody's way, tripping himself with his own broom, hopping like a cat in a puddle when his toes were jabbed by the bristles, he displayed three men's energy and accomplished the work of a one-armed boy.

But his enthusiasm was pleasing to behold. It assured Barry that Little was not making the trip with a view to growing corpulent in the lazy luxury of immaculate attire and cabin cushions. The amateur shellback caught sight of Barry, standing regarding him with an amused grin, and he ceased his labors. Thrusting his broom into the hands of a sailor, Little gave a fore-and-aft hitch to his pants in approved Dick Deadeye style, plucked his forelock, and his joyful voice rang along the decks.

"Ahoy—ahoy! Slack away for'ard, leggo aft! Tara-ra, tara-ra—A life on the ocean wave is better than going to sea! Keelhaul th' main scuppers; lash th' anchor to th' mast! Whe-eee! Say, Barry, but this is th' life, hey?"

Barry beckoned him, and Little sauntered aft, rolling like a deep water man getting rid of a twelve-months' payday.

"Look here, skipper," he said, halting at the deckhouse door, "I can't see why you don't give me a regular job in this boat. Dutchy there says I'm a born sailor, by the way I handle a broom. Suppose you sign me on as chief broom-rastler, or corporal of the starboard bucket rack, or something, hey? I know I've got Viking blood in me, the sea chatter comes so natural to me. I ought to be an officer, too; my appetite's much too good for a common sailor."

"Glad to hear about the appetite, because breakfast is ready," grinned the skipper, casting a comprehensive glance around his ship before leading the way below. "Better slick up a bit, though, before going to table, Little. A piratical atmosphere's all right in its place, but I'll feel as if I ought to pack a pistol or two if I sit down to eat with a tough looking specimen like you."

The chief mate ate at the first table that morning, and Barry took the opportunity to make himself familiar with some general details of the ship's company. The brigantine was a relic of an ancient period of shipbuilding, and her main cabin fitted her excellently. Dark, full of deep recesses in which great square windows opened to the ocean's free breezes; cosy with an old-world cosiness; picturesque with spacious skylight dome, in which swung a mahogany rack full of tinkling glasses and ruby and amber decanters; full of weird, whispering voices of aged bulkheads and cheeping frames. Such was the cabin. And the chief mate fitted the cabin as that apartment fitted the ship.

Square as one of the stern ports, his face tanned and grained to the semblance of a piece of the skylight mahogany; honest as the timber that went into the building of the ship, Jerry Rolfe attempted no bluff, either in his table manners or his professional duties. As he ate, his shoulders swung to the heave of his arms, attacking the food on his plate as an enemy to be downed catch-as-catch-can style, no holds barred. Little stared in amazement at first. He shot a quizzical glance at Barry when the mate absorbed a cupful of scalding coffee with one gurgling, sucking swallow. But Barry expected only sailorly qualities and loyalty from his officers; on the first count he was satisfied with Rolfe, and his doubts were few on the second. He inquired now about the other member of the

afterguard,—the burly Hollander who had superintended the washing-down.

"Hendrik Vandersee 's his name; bo'sun, acting second mate's his rating," replied the mate in a plain, official tone. "Dunno anything about him, sir, only that Mr. Houten sent him aboard and said he's been highly recommended by somebody as knowing more about the place we're bound for than any other man in the East."

"Well, what d' you think of him? Good second mate, eh?"

"Oh, Barry," Little broke in exuberantly, "he's the jolliest fat sailor that ever swabbed a deck. Why, he told me I was a whale of a shellback, and he's going to teach me...."

"This is business, Little," Barry interrupted, with a trace of irritation. "Come, Mr. Rolfe; if you've finished your breakfast, you can relieve Vandersee for his. We can talk as well on deck."

The second mate was relieved and went below. Barry examined him casually as he passed, and again he was conscious of that same feeling that had swept through him earlier in the morning. Again there was that vague suggestion of a steel trap covered with velvet, or kidskin. Not to any one feature, either, could this suggestion be traced; the man's ruddy face was open and bland, his eyes sparkled like gems, his bearing was that of a man who owes no man, either in money or favor.

Barry felt faintly angry with himself for harboring fancies and turned back to the chief mate.

"I asked what opinion you had formed of the second mate, Mr. Rolfe," he said, joining the other on the weather side of the poop.

"I never form an opinion of an owner's man, sir—not to talk about it, anyhow," returned Rolfe slowly. "In any case, you've known him almost as long as I have; you'll form your own ideas, no matter what mine are. I only know that Vandersee knows his work, and that he's supposed to know the Sandang River like one of its own fish."

Barry knew by the length of the mate's speech that he thought little of his big junior officer. A good, or even fair opinion would have been simply expressed as yes, or good enough. Having in view the possibility of conflict when their destination was reached and the necessity for singleness of purpose among the ship's company, he went quietly to work on a mental register of every man on

board from chief mate down to cook, to the end that he might have to depend on nobody's judgment save his own.

The *Barang* wallowed through the islet-studded seas in a fashion that brought many a grimace to the skipper's face. Frequently he caught himself gazing astern and persuaded himself it was the wake he was looking at; but when he snatched his eyes away from the stern and bent them forward at the blustering, smashing bow-wave thrown off to the leeward by the snub-nosed brigantine, he knew that his own wake was one of his lesser worries. Leyden's schooner was the cause of his uneasiness; for it would be a sluggish vessel indeed, of her rig and lines, that could not easily allow the *Barang* a full day's start in the run to the river.

A brisk breeze holding steadily southeast gave the *Barang* the fullest advantage of her square rig and lessened the skipper's anxiety in some degree; and the Celebes coast stretched along to leeward like a roll of vapor in due course without any disquieting gleam of canvas having popped up over the stern-ward sea line.

Then came a day of calms and baffling airs, and a sickening swell rolled in from the south that made of the brigantine a staggering, squealing platform, hammering all the Viking spirit out of Little for a while and forcing him to run to cover like a very greenhorn. Barry visited him in his cabin from time to time and at first ridiculed his weakness; but Little was undergoing a treatment in which he had a faith proof against ridicule. He waved a cheery hand at Barry, and a sickly smile puckered his pale yellow face.

"'Vast, y' lubber!'" he cried, in no manner abashed. "I'm not seasick. Just undergoing redecoration inside. At present I have a beautiful greenish-orange feeling in my lower hold; in an hour or so it'll change to purplish-pink and my face will change from yellow to green. Then I'll be all right again. Fit to take command when you curl up, old boy."

"Don't you want anything?" inquired Barry, grinning admiringly at the sufferer's grit. "Brandy or something?"

"Nothing, thanks. Vandersee's been in every half hour during his watch below; he's got some stuff that goes down like oiled honey and kicks hard when it lands. He's all right, Barry. His smile's worth a hogshead o' rum. Says, if I keep quiet here for an hour or so more, he'll have me fit to fight a roast turkey."

The second mate stepped out of his own berth as Barry left Little, and the

skipper regarded him with a new interest. The ruddy face wore a soft smile, and the big frame passed across the main cabin on feet light as a dancer's. He carried a glass of some mixture in his hand and entered Little's cabin, giving the skipper a deferential nod as he went by. Barry joined the mate on the poop.

"Queer fellow, Vandersee is," smiled the skipper, joining stride with the other in his short walk. "You'd think he was a qualified nurse by the way he's coddling Little. I'll share his watch when he relieves you, Mr. Rolfe. He may want to administer a few more doses to his patient."

"Huh! I'd be pretty sick before I'd let a smooth duck like him give me any doses—Beg pardon, Captain Barry. Yes, sir, I think he's quite a nurse," returned the mate, half committing himself before he could pull up. Barry let the slight outburst pass without comment.

Vandersee relieved the deck for the first watch, from eight o'clock until midnight, and Barry remained on deck with him. A red sun had dipped below the sea line two hours before, and a faint breeze sprang up at his setting. Now the *Barang* leaned slightly to full canvas and snored easily through the phosphorescent seas with a pleasant tinkling of running wavelets along her sides. Overhead the heavens were luminous with sparks of ultra brilliance; the decks and sails of the ancient brigantine were bathed in soft radiance, ruled across and along with bars of blackest shadow. A softly noisy chorus of sea voices kept rhythm to the swaying of the tall spars, and from somewhere out in the shimmering sea came the sob and suck of a broken swell over a submerged reef.

A brown man stood at the wheel like a brown wooden figure, his arms and face vaguely illumined by the glow from the binnacle lamp. Forward the decks were silent and deserted, except in one spot. Here a thin bar of yellow light slashed in two the shadowed shape of the galley, eclipsed at intervals as the cook inside moved to and fro in his business of preparing dough for the morning's bread.

The spell of the night fell over Barry. He sent his thoughts ahead, dreamily, trying to peer into the future as if to see what it would hold for him. But the picture invariably dissolved as soon as it was conjured out of the mists, and in its place glowed the vision of a girl in Mission dress, simple and sweet: the girl whose good name he had defended; whose picture now lay in the lid of his chronometer box, where he must see it every time he went to his room.

Vandersee asked permission and went below to see Little. As he went, he remarked that it would be the last time his attentions would be necessary; the

seasick Viking would be his own good man again by morning. Barry was dragged out of his dreams when the second mate spoke to him; now he shook off his fancies and walked aft to the compass. Satisfied with the steering, he passed along the poop towards the deckhouse and leaned against the lee forward corner of it, scanning the lofty, indistinct leeches of the forward canvas.

Up through the companionway floated Little's voice, and the skipper smiled at the altered tone of it. It was the voice of a man conscious of a growing healthy appetite. Vandersee's voice chimed in and died away, as if the man had gone somewhere else, perhaps in search of food for his hungry patient. There ensued a space of perhaps ninety seconds when no voice was audible. Then, like a ghostly hand out of the black beyond, something whirred past Barry's face, touched the skin lightly in passing, and thudded into the bellying mainsail.

Like a flash the skipper swung on his heel. As he turned he caught sight of the cook at his galley door; his eyes next fell upon the motionless figure of the helmsman; with the one motion he shoved his head through the deckhouse window and swept a keen searching look around the interior. It was undoubtedly empty.

He stepped over to leeward without remark and looked for the missile in the hollow of the sail foot. Nothing there. But following the canvas upward, he detected a clean slit in the cloth and passed under the boom to follow his clue. Then, by the rail in the coil of the main-gaff-topsail-halliards, he saw something glitter and picked it up.

"A pretty joke gone adrift!" he muttered, balancing the glittering thing in his palm. "Now who the devil threw that?"

The missile that had fanned his cheek was a heavy-bladed, double-edged knife, a knife made for throwing if ever one was: such a weapon as no sailor ever had need of; a thing that could mean only murder when it left a thrower's hand. And it had come from one of only two possible directions: from aft, or from the deckhouse; and the deckhouse was empty. Barry walked swiftly aft and confronted the man at the wheel, holding up the knife.

"What did you throw this for?" he snapped, boring into the man's placid face with blazing eyes.

"No t'row heem, sar—no can do—No see 'eem knife lika dat, sar," denied the little brown man, merely raising his eyes to look at the knife, then stolidly

fastening his gaze upon the compass again.

Barry scrutinized the man keenly and shrugged his shoulders in disgust. He could have no doubt the man spoke truth. The little, soft-mannered Javanese people are not as a rule addicted to murder. Like a shadow the skipper sped to the taffrail and peered over. Nothing was there, save the big square ports, triced up by chains to admit the air into the saloon. Back again, Barry asked the sailor:

"Did you see a man up here just before I came aft?"

"No see nobody, sar," replied the man with cherubic simplicity. "Small bird, I t'ink, he fly by my face one time. Das all."

"Little bird, hell!" snorted the skipper, moving away. He was inclined to make little of the occurrence, since the solution seemed so hopeless; but he did not permit himself to blink the fact that mystery had already crept into the cruise, and that mystery of a deadly sort. It was only in so far as it concerned him in person that he belittled it. Vandersee appearing at the companionway, however, reminded him of Rolfe's partly expressed opinion. He joined the second mate, peered into his face, and tried to detect some sign that might give him an opening. The Dutchman's face was bland as ever; his eyes sparkled with humor as he made some trifling remark about Little's improved condition.

Barry had put the murderous knife into his pocket. He took Vandersee's arm now, turning him until he faced the mainsail.

"See that slit, Mr. Vandersee?" he said casually, yet watching the man's face closely. "Might have a man patch that in the morning. Don't think it's necessary to unbend the sail, is it?"

"No sir. Lower away to the first reef. That'll do. How did it happen, sir? That's a stout piece of canvas."

"Stout's right, Mr. Vandersee," drawled Barry. "A bird flew through it. Pretty stout bird, hey?"

"Bird? Surely you're joking, sir," laughed the second mate, his round face glowing with a jolly grin. "But I'll see that it's attended to."

Barry went below, looked in on Little, who slept like an infant now, then sat in his own stateroom smoking and feasting his eyes on the precious photograph in his chronometer case until he heard a seaman knock at the chief mate's door to call him at midnight. When the seaman had gone on deck, the skipper stepped over to Rolfe's berth.

"Mr. Rolfe," he said, "did you hold any communication with the shore before Mr. Little and I came on board?"

"Ye-ow-ow!" yawned the mate, rubbing his eyes vigorously. "Beg pardon, sir. Communication with the shore? Why, yes—just before we dropped anchor in Surabaya a boat came off with fresh provisions that Mr. Houten had ordered by telegraph. That's all, sir."

"Didn't ship anybody, hey?" pursued Barry.

"Ship? Why, no, sir, unless some rat stowed away," returned the puzzled mate, struggling into his jacket. "Why?"

"Never mind," returned the skipper shortly and retired to his own berth.

He undressed now, putting aside all further consideration of his mystery until he could attack it in daylight. But on second thoughts he looked closely to his pistol and placed it beneath his pillow. Then he shot the bolt of his door and was satisfied that all proper precautions had been taken.

"Just a little peep at dainty Miss Mission, to say night-night," he smiled, unfastening the catch on the chronometer case. "Then I'll sleep on the dirty knife business."

He raised the box lid, started back in doubt, left the box open and glanced around the desk. Then he rummaged through all the litter on his table, opened drawers and left them open. He swore torridly, grinding his teeth with vexation.

The photograph had vanished.



CHAPTER FOUR

For a moment Barry blazed with a desire to turn the ship inside out, and if necessary search every man clear down to his bedclothes. But the thought of that flying knife came back to him, and the combination of mystery gave him pause; there must surely be some connection between the two occurrences, and the train of thought led directly to the notion that somewhere in the dark recesses of the brigantine lurked the person responsible.

The voices of the two mates, one relieving the other, sounded softly through the open skylight, and Barry decided to curb his impatience. He mounted to the poop again and gave orders to both officers to keep close watch as the land was approached and to see that nobody left the ship. Once more he felt that vague suggestion of a cloaked trap in the second mate's smiling acceptance of the instructions, but now, strangely, the feeling did not bother him. The hint remained nebulous; he shook it off and went to sleep on the more important mystery.

He was called at daybreak and went on deck to find the brigantine stemming the yellow current of a river estuary. A mile ahead the turbid waters churned and slopped over the sand bar, forming a sluggish but powerful eddy across half the river's breadth. Pieces of rotten wood and heaped masses of forest grasses swirled into a floating tangle in the lee of the bar.

Preparations were going forward for bringing up, and the skipper's intention to apprise Little of the events of the past night was perforce laid aside. It was not until the ship was docked that Little heard the story. Rolfe was busy on the forecastle getting ready the anchors, while Vandersee, the bulky Hollander, had stretched out a new lead line along the poop and was carefully marking it off, after well wetting it. For a moment Barry failed to see Little. Even the cheery voice was not in evidence. Then the clattering of iron links, as the cables were ranged for letting go, was followed by a whoop of interest, and the ex-salesman popped into sight in the bows, deep in an examination of the tumbler gear that released the big anchors.

Barry scanned the river mouth closely, dubiously. The available channel was barely wide enough to pass, even with good luck. The breeze blew straight into

the river and across the current, causing a confused welter of water that made the picking out of a passage doubly difficult. If the wind had weight enough to overcome the stream, and remained fair, the passage might be accomplished, given shrewd pilotage; but a very slight swerve from the straight and narrow course would place the ship in the grip of that big eddy and inevitably on the bar. That was unthinkable. It could scarcely be hoped that Leyden's navigator would repeat such an error when he arrived, and such a mishap would at once wipe out the advantage gained through Barry's attentions to the schooner in the dry dock.

Vandersee finished his task and coiled up the new lead line. He stepped over to Barry and with respectful confidence said:

"If you know the channel, sir, I'll get into the chains with the lead myself. There's a bad shoal patch this side of the bar, and with the water slicking over it to the out-draw of that eddy, it looks like deep water."

"All right, Mr. Vandersee—Oh, thunder!" Barry flung out the expression in petulance. "Why, you were sent aboard because you know this river, weren't you? I forgot."

"Yes, sir," smiled Vandersee. "I'm fairly well acquainted here. Shall I take her in?"

"Yes. Take the wheel and sing out your directions. Where had we better anchor? Can't go right up, I suppose?"

"Tide's right, sir, and with this breeze, if we manage to avoid swinging across stream in making past the bar, we can carry our draft two miles up, anyway. If we have to bring up before that, there's a snug creek—there, see?—fifty fathom to the eastward of those trees—where we can lie moored fore and aft to the shore."

Barry took up a position at the fore end of the poop, scanning the narrow entrance a trifle anxiously. He had no desire to cast his new command away in making her first port. But Vandersee undoubtedly knew his business. The *Barang*, for all her slowness, answered to the master touch on her helm and edged surely up for the deep water until the slop of the bar bore well abeam.

For a moment the skipper held his breath as she lurched heavily to the suck of the current. He saw that smooth, flowing patch of oily water, which the second mate had said was in reality a real shoal, draw steadily astern; and he brightened

at thought of the danger overcome. Then out of a clear sky came the unforeseen.

From the forecastle head sounded the crash and rattle of chain and a resounding splash. The roar of cable followed, amid a volley of thumping deep-sea oaths from Rolfe directed at the devoted head of Little; and the *Barang* snubbed up with a jerk, her stern swinging swiftly around towards the bar.

Little stood aghast, replying nothing to the mate's harsh epithets. Barry bawled a demand as to the trouble and turned to the wheel. Again that subtle suggestion of padded steel struck him as he surprised a fleeting but unmistakable smile on Vandersee's calm face.

"I think Mr. Little has unwittingly slipped the tumblers, sir," smiled the big Hollander, stepping away from the useless wheel.

"To hell with Little!" shouted Barry. "Get a boat out, before we plow up that sand!"

Then he hailed forward:

"Mr. Rolfe! Get lines. Carry them to those trees. Hurry!" and to Little he barked: "You, Little, get aft here, and for God's own sake, keep your meddling hooks off things as you come!"

Little started aft, abashed at last. The careful manner in which he avoided contact with crew or gear would have made Barry grin under any other circumstances; but now near disaster impended, simply on account of the irrepressible salesman's voracious appetite for knowledge.

As he approached the poop ladder, Little grimaced up at the skipper and shrugged his shoulders resignedly in anticipation of the storm. Barry's face was flushed and angry, and his strong teeth shone white over his compressed nether lip. The brigantine's stern was awfully close to the edge of the bar, in spite of the swift action of Vandersee, who, in leaving the wheel and before going down to his boat, let go the big mainsail and took the after pressure off the vessel. Now the big second mate hailed from the top of the midship house.

"This boat's all open, sir. She won't float a minute!"

"Oh, blazes!" howled the skipper, flinging his cap on the deck. "Send a man to swim with the line. Any of them. They're all water rats."

"Can't make a man swim here, sir," returned the Hollander, and even now his voice was velvety soft. "Alligators are too thick."

Little paused on the bottom step of the ladder. He measured with his eye the distance to the nearest point ashore. Fifty yards it was; and on the water's edge grew a tangled mass of slimy roots, rising to gnarled, moss-covered trunks, monstrosities rather than trees. Even at that distance suspicious logs could be seen lying half in, half out of the water; but a space ten yards wide, including some of the biggest and ugliest of the trees, seemed bare of those logs.

Barry sent a hail along to the forecastle to avast heaving on the cable; for some of the watch had remained on deck, when the rest went below to pass up lines, and were now taking spasmodic, aimless jerks at the windlass. The mate drove his brown-skinned men to marvellous feats with coiling lines, determined to be ready with his part when the boat was ready. He had not heard Vandersee's report on the boat.

Now on the port side, that farthest from the bar, heaps of cleverly faked-down small lines were ranged along the waterways, in preparation for any emergency of drifting boat. The big Manila hawser lay coiled on the fore hatch, all ready to bend on when a small line was safely ashore. All these things Barry took in with quick professional perception. But now he was stumped. He was the last man on earth to send a man where he himself dare not go; and those filthy, suspicious logs had only too well corroborated the second mate's hint of alligators.

He was aroused from his contemplation of them by a shout from Rolfe, echoed by Vandersee, and followed immediately by a tremendous splash and the whiz of small line running over a teakwood rail. A soft-eyed Javanese seaman worked feverishly near the fore rigging, flinging coil after coil of line overboard until the end was at hand. Then he stooped swiftly, seized the end of a fresh coil, and stood ready to repeat.

Barry looked for Little now and missed him. He ran to the side. An excited chattering among the crew forward, and gesticulating arms, directed his gaze, and he gasped with amazed admiration. Surging through the muddy tide with a powerful trudgeon stroke, making a wake of swirling bubbles across which snaked the black coils of a heaving line, Little headed for the shore. Once he disappeared, as a freak of churning waters gripped several coils of line and jerked him back and under. But the innocent cause of all the trouble made no false estimate of his ability to rectify his error. He forged straight for his mark—

that mass of slimy roots and mossy trunks—and soon he was seen to rise waist high from the water, stumble heavily as his feet sank deep in the sticky ooze, and, recovering, plunge headlong up the bank with his line.

A cry of helpless apprehension burst from the brigantine's company as one of those suspicious logs stirred into reptilian life. A great, warty snout jutted upwards, with a swift half-turn towards the intruder, and the yellow water was swept into a furious whirlpool as the saurian secured leverage to turn by a convulsion of his powerful tail.

The cry rose to a shout of warning, and with the shout Barry sprang below to his cabin. He returned on the run with a big-game rifle in time to hear a ripple of relief run from end to end of the ship; and his eyes opened wide with astonishment when he saw the cause.

Other muddy logs had come to life on the foreshore and Little's attitude would have been ludicrous but for the terrible risk he ran. He stared at the suddenly awakened monsters as the sexton of a church might stare if one of his gargoyles suddenly spoke to him. But there was no fear in his bearing; simply the natural wonder of a man faced by a situation which, more than likely, he had disbelieved the possibility of until that moment.

He had kept tight hold of his line, and as Barry watched, he gathered up the slack and with a whoop jumped nimbly over the back of the nearest alligator, charging now with open jaws. As he landed on his feet, he dodged behind a root, and his clear cry rang over the water.

"The big rope, Barry, quick! I can dodge these big lizards. It's a cinch!"

The mate bent on the hawser, and men picked up great coils of it and flung them overboard. Barry stood silent, dumbfounded, and watched Little haul in his line, only pausing from time to time to pass from one side of the tree to the other, as the alligators closed in on him. The eye-end of the hawser splashed up the shoal water, was wrapped securely, but in sorry landsman's fashion, about the big roots, and in response to a howl of triumph from the shore, Barry sang out:

"After capstan here! Get a strain on the line, Mr. Rolfe!" And while the dripping rope crawled in through the fair-lead, cracking and twanging to the strain of the ship's arrested drift, he stood at the rail, rifle in hand, and muttered:

"He's a comic-opera sailor, all right; but Lordy! what a man he'll make with his

feet on dry earth! Let go my anchor, hey? By Godfrey, he can let go the forestay when we're going about, and I'll forgive him after this."

The ship's stern answered to the steady pull of the line and dragged away from the edge of the sand until she pointed fair into the channel again. Forward, men hove in the cable until the anchor was underfoot; aft, men tailed on to the main halliards and sent the great mainsail aloft with a will. Barry waved the second mate back to the wheel and sent Rolfe forward to finish picking up the anchor. Then he swung around at a shout from the shore. He had momentarily forgotten Little.

"Damnation!" he breathed, and jerked his rifle to his shoulder. Then he dropped his elbow to the rail, took snap-sights and fired.

The greatest alligator of them all, the patriarch of all saurians, had attacked Little. That agile young man saw his foe in time to avoid the rush by leaping over the straining hawser, knee-high, and the ugly jaws closed with a crash on the rope. Barry's shot rang out simultaneously with the singing snap of a Manila strand, and the heavy bullet chugged home in the vulnerable skin on the alligator's throat.

The *Barang* gathered way, and the hawser sagged into the water as the strain was released. Whatever Little's limitations were as a seaman, he lacked nothing of common sense; he saw that the ship was independent of the line now, and Barry received another shock while trying to decide how to get his friend safely on board again.

"That's the stuff, Barry!" Little shouted, capering madly as the alligator rolled over towards the river. "Keep your blue eye on these fellows and haul away on the rope!"

With the words he was sawing away busily at the Manila with a fearsome knife he had invested in as part of a sailor's outfit.

"Stop! You're crazy!" bawled the skipper. Rolfe cursed luridly, and even Vandersee's sleek face clouded.

If Little heard, he made no sign. Without a wasted second after the line parted, he followed the running end down to the water, took a grip on it, and plunged in with a shout:

"Pull away! Watch out for my toes, Barry!"

The little brown men of the crew needed no order to pull. The sheer intrepidity of the man on the line had ensured their reverence and loyalty, and the heavy hawser came inboard with a whiz. At the end of it struggled Little, striking out frantically with his legs and free hand to keep his head above the water at the pull of those eager arms. As he took the water, from four separate points along the bank great reptiles slithered; their snouts and protuberant eyes left behind them sinister ripples as they converged on the swimmer.

Barry watched with set lips and glittering eyes. He well knew the improbability of hitting a vulnerable spot in a swimming alligator; his marksmanship was scarcely equal to the certainty of finding one of those wicked, armor-lidded eyes. It was with a hard gulp of fear in his throat that he pressed the trigger for a second shot.

The bullet took the foremost reptile on the point of the snout, checking the beast and causing a flurry among its companions. Little gained a few precious feet, and as a patch of dirty gray belly showed for an instant in the over-roll of the smitten beast, Barry fired again, and his friend gained a little more.

Another factor now entered into the contest, and the ex-salesman was safe. The brigantine was steadily stemming the tide, and now fairly past the bar had reached far beyond the point to which the hawser had been made fast. As she forged slowly ahead, with gathering speed as she left behind the influence of the big eddy, the rope trailed more and more astern and the ship's speed was added to that of the incoming hawser.

Little was hauled up to the quarter, and Barry himself let down the boarding ladder and went over the side to assist the half-drowned swimmer on board.

When Little had coughed several pints of muddy river water from his system, he looked up at Barry with a whimsical grin, as if prepared now to take the calling down that his recent action had delayed. But the skipper had nothing to say about the escapade with his anchors. He gripped his friend's hand with a hard squeeze and took him below for a warming shot of rum with a simply spoken:

"Thanks, Little. That's the greatest thing I ever saw. You're free of the ship forever!"



CHAPTER FIVE

Late in the afternoon the *Barang* rounded a bend in the river and came in sight of the trading station. The yellow, muddy stream swirled at her blunt bows, and the matted verdure on the banks reduced the hot breeze to a zephyr that barely gave her headway.

Bamboo thickets alternated with patches of dark forest; cane-walled native houses peeped from beneath overhanging trees; silent, sarong-clad people suspended their leisurely activities to stare at the passing ship, and noisy birds and chattering monkeys redoubled their din at the apparition.

A slimy reed-grown creek opened out to starboard, and evil miasma arose from the rotting tree trunks across its mouth; the entire scene was one of dreary, soul-searing repulsiveness and made a sorry jest of the strongly stockaded trading post whose defensive armament could be plainly seen peeping over a woven cane parapet.

"Heavens, what a dismal hole!" ejaculated Little, as the brigantine swung slowly around the bend. "Mean t' tell me white people live here, Barry? I wouldn't swap a shop-soiled typewriter for the whole box and dice!"

"Sure white people live here. Why would we be coming, else?" retorted Barry impatiently. He was scanning the buildings. Several white-clad figures passed and repassed among the huddle of squalid huts, all apparently bound towards the river wharf to meet the ship.

"Wonder where the Mission is," the skipper went on musingly, to himself rather than to Little.

"I get your drift," Little grinned back. "Yes, I wonder where she lives, too."

Something gleamed in Barry's eyes that warned against jesting on that subject, and Little stepped aside with a shrug and watched Vandersee as that stolid worthy piloted the ship up to the crazy wharf with consummate skill.

An anchor dropped in mid-channel stopped her way, and the forward canvas was hauled down. A pull to windward on the mainsheet backed the big mainsail and drove the stern towards the dock, whereon a mob of naked brown men awaited

the casting of shore lines. The starboard quarter grated against the piling, and the open stern windows overhung the stringpiece for a moment. Barry was deeply interested in the probable location of the Mission—far too deeply interested for a shipmaster docking his ship—and Little, too, had his mind and eyes on the scene of his imminent adventures to the exclusion of all else. Rolfe, the dour chief mate, was where a good mate should be, on the forecastle head, looking out for lines and fenders. Vandersee alone appeared capable of handling his duties and giving attention to the shore at the same time. Never relaxing his vigilance for a moment in placing the brigantine advantageously in her berth, the burly Hollander nevertheless had an eye open for other things. A cloud passed over his shiny face as the stern touched; he stepped swiftly to the rail and peered over; two natives stood by, and he sent them hurrying forward with a Low Malay expletive that made them jump in fright. Then he peered over the side again, his face cleared, and he returned to his post at the stern fair-lead, shouting to his men to carry along the sternfasts. Barry turned at the shout, as if just awakening from a dream, and the second mate told him respectfully:

"It would be as well to have the stern windows closed, sir. The natives here are not too honest, in spite of the Mission's good work."

Barry gave the necessary order through the skylight and shook himself into a more vital interest in his work. He opened his mouth to direct the mate in some detail of mooring ship, and it remained open until he half-closed it in a whistle of surprise and seized Little violently by the arm. His eyes were fixed upon a figure walking easily and unconcernedly along the wharf.

"Look!" he breathed, and Little winced with the pain of his grip. "Look! How in thunder did she get here ahead of us?"

"She? Who?" stammered Little, gazing shoreward. "Oh, the woman who tried to scrape an acquaintance at Solo, isn't it? Steamer, I suppose. Gee! I thought you'd seen the little missionary by the savage way you bit into my wing. Hope I ain't in reach when you do catch sight of her, old scout. You're too blamed carnivorous."

"Oh, shut up!" growled the skipper, shaking the irrepressible salesman furiously. "There's no joke in this. Wanted to go to Europe, didn't she? Wasn't that her reason for begging a passage? Well, you darned lunatic! Is this Europe? Or anywhere near it? Let me tell you, there's no steamer touching here from Surabaya or anywhere else. Sanjai's the nearest steamer port—a ship a month; besides, no man or woman other than a breech-clouted deer-footed native could

get here from Sanjai in less than a week. She looks as if she just hopped out of a Paris trunk!"

Little made no verbal response. He left Barry abruptly, sprang to the bulwarks, and leaped to the dock, not waiting for the gangplank to be run out. Then, assuming his best salesman's smile, he walked directly over to the woman and raised his hat.

"Glad to meet you again, Madam," he smiled. "Small place, this old globe, isn't it? Didn't expect to see you until we reached Europe. How on earth did you get here so quickly?"

"How do you do, Mr.—er—let me see—is it Mr. Little, or Captain Barry?" she beamed, extending a small, shapely hand frankly. "Mr. Little? Thanks. I'm so glad to see you. Business demanded that I make a call here before going home; but I never dared to hope that I would meet old friends here. I must visit your ship and renew the Captain's acquaintance," and she dazzled Little with a sunny smile.

"Surely, do," invited Little. The sunniness of his own smile increased. "Please forgive me if I have forgotten your name?" She flashed a quizzical glance at him. "Mrs. Goring," she said. She indeed looked entirely desirable in that sweltering, reeking, jungle post. Her dress was of some flimsy white material that billowed and rustled with her every movement. The big sun-hat shaded her face and enabled her to maintain an aspect of fresh, delightful coolness. Her lips and eyes seemed in their moistness to resemble dewy flowers peeping out of a sheltering glade.

How much was due to art Little cared nothing. It was, to his buoyant heart, like encountering a cool breeze in the desert to hold converse with such a creature in such a place. Besides, Little was bent on business first, last, and all the time; business might not be permitted to suffer from any incivility on his part. He asked, joining step with her as she moved along the rough planking:

"But tell me how you got here so quickly. When we saw you in Solo, we understood you were bound for Europe. We might have given you a passage, you know."

"But you were going to Europe, too, weren't you?" she laughed, and her violet eyes grew black. "Of course, I was only joking about sailing in your ship. I knew such a vessel did not usually go such long voyages. But you see I beat you here,

didn't I?"

"Yes, but how?"

"Oh, that's a State secret, Mr. Little." The woman laid a slim finger on her red lips in mock seriousness. "My brother arranged it for me, and I arrived just as you docked. But I'm going to visit you as soon as I've been up to the post. I have a friend there. Good-by, Mr. Little. Please give my warmest regards to the Captain, won't you?"

Little walked slowly aboard the *Barang*, never turning his head once to look after Mrs. Goring. He went directly to Barry.

"Barry," he said, "you were right. There's no joke about this. Mrs. Goring is as deep as the Bottomless Pit! There's something back of those big violet eyes of hers that burns clear through you. She's coming to see you presently. What d' ye think about her being here at all?"

"How do I know, yet?" Barry laughed harshly. "I'm glad these things have happened so soon, though. You see now, right from the start, this thing is real business and no moving-picture bunk."

"Things? What else has happened?"

"Don't you call that knife business something happening?" grunted the skipper, busy with some papers on his desk. "Don't you attach any importance to the theft of that photo from my chronometer case? That wasn't taken by any native thief. Never mind what picture it was, or what value I placed on it; whoever took it didn't swipe it for the value of it to them. Then this mysterious woman turns up as soon as we haul alongside, and now Rolfe tells me that the fo'c'sle hands say Mindjee slipped ashore as we came up the river, and a search proves it."

"Mindjee? The Malay who had the wheel that night? No, sir! He's certainly not on board now," exclaimed Little, a queer bewilderment creeping into his face. "But he didn't swim ashore, unless he swam mighty fast and then ran some. I just saw Mindjee back of the godown! Thought you had sent him ashore for something, so didn't notice him particularly. Wouldn't have remembered which of the brown-skins it was, if it hadn't happened to be the one at the wheel when that knife was buzzed at your head."

"Behind the godown? Where? What doing? Where was he going?" Barry was alert now.

"I only saw him over Mrs. Goring's shoulder as I talked to her. He was sliding along pretty fast towards the stockade."

"Then the fun starts right now, Little," said Barry quietly. "From now on, never go without your artillery and keep a hand on the butt, no matter whether it's man, woman, or missionary you're talking to. Come on. I'll post the mate; then we'll walk up and interview Mr. Gordon."

Jerry Rolfe appeared surprised, and in a measure chagrined, to find that the second mate had not yet asked leave to go ashore. His opinion of the big Hollander was an open secret in the ship. It was easy to see that the total destruction of the *Barang* and her people would have better fitted in with that opinion than the safe and expert passage of the tortuous river to a snug berth.

"You ain't going to trust that fellow with a gun, sir?" the mate demanded, after receiving Barry's orders.

"Why not?" returned the skipper, with a frown. "You must drive that notion out of your head, Rolfe, or you won't be able to trust anybody. We need all the men we can depend on, and I want you and Vandersee to pull together. I trust him, so does Mr. Little, and so does Houten, obviously. You and he will remain in charge of your regular watches, though you need not keep sea watches, and right now you'll decide whom you can trust with arms. We may not have to use 'em; but there's a big chance we will."

On the way to the stockaded post the skipper told Little of the mate's doubts and suggested that it might be arranged for one of them at all times to be in touch with the ship after this first visit to Gordon. For, he said: "I'm not too sure of the man myself, Little, though something tells me I misjudged him at first. That subtle hint of steel under velvet sort of got me, and for a moment I suspected him of heaving that knife at me. But against that is his treatment of you while you were sick, and other things have helped to change my views."

"Don't know what to think, myself," rejoined Little. "At first I thought there could not be another sailorman in the wide world like him. I was ready to lick his boots those first few days at sea. He filled all my ideas of what a rollicking sea dog ought to be, and I was tickled silly at the wrinkles he taught me. Then came that fool stunt of mine, letting go the anchor in a bad place, and it looked then that I had been purposely set to meddling with that gear just to bring that off. What d' ye think?"

"May have been accidental. Anyway, better take my lead as long as you're doubtful. Rolfe is looking after him now, and we'll keep him in view between us. But my advice is, show him that we trust him. Won't do to anticipate trouble by making enemies."

They walked on until the stockade opened to view through the jungle, and they turned into a narrow track leading to a strong gate ridiculously disproportionate to the strength of the stockade. Artillery might have battered in vain at the gate: one might force the walls with the gunner's ramrod. As they swung around the last twisting angle of the path, a flutter of white contrasted with the dark greenery for an instant, then came the sound of a gate crashing shut, and the vision vanished.

"Another gate," remarked Barry, stepping up to the main gate and hammering on it with a piece of rock. "Was that a white woman? You saw it, didn't you?"

"Looked like the fair Mrs. Goring," replied Little, staring in the direction where the glimpse of white had been seen. "It may have been one of the Mission folks, though. How about the gate? This wasn't where the frock came out."

"This is the great main gate Houten told us about. He said it faced sou'west by west and had a green skull on top, didn't he?"

"Sure thing! And there's the green head all right." Little whooped with delight at the touch of old-time ghastliness. "And I forgot for the moment you are a 'Heave-ho-me-Bully-Boy sailor!' able to spot a place from afar off by the direction of the sun at midnight. Gee! This is regular stuff, Barry. Mystery, secret gates, skull and crossbones, and nobody home! Knock again."

Little heaved with all his strength at a huge boulder, intent upon gaining entry. Barry coolly placed his foot on the stone, hauled Little away, and fell to work with his knife on the wattles which bound together the bamboos of the stockade. Then the gate was opened suddenly, and a yellow dwarf with jagged teeth that chattered bade the visitors enter.

"Gordon Tuuan he see you. Come." The custodian of the gate turned and dog-trotted up to a large, low building. One rambling, cane-walled hut filled most of the space inside the stockade, and under the same wide, leaf-thatched roof were all the departments of the post. A few small native huts were scattered along the fence, but apparently Gordon believed in working and living as nearly as possible in the same spot. Their guide brought Barry and Little to the main hut,

ushered them into a dim, screened veranda and disappeared, leaving them blinking in semi-darkness.

"Come in!" invited an unseen host in a high-pitched, quavering voice.

"Come in! Where?" echoed Barry, his hearty sea-bellow shaking the flimsy structure. "If that's Gordon, come out, or have the civility to remember that we haven't got bat's eyes. We're from Batavia, Houten, and—"

"All right, old chaps, all right. Sorry to keep you waiting. Wasn't expecting you so soon. I'll be out right away."

On the heels of the announcement came the clink of glass and a shuffle of chairs. Then softly slippered feet shambled out of the darkness, and Gordon stood revealed as well as the light would allow.

Little and the skipper felt a burning curiosity as to the man they were sent to deal with, and pity was the feeling that entered Barry's breast now they were face to face. The trader had the frame of an athlete and a head and face that must in years gone by have caused many a flutter in feminine hearts: But now the eyes were bleary and sunken from alcohol, the high forehead was hidden under a mat of dirty, nondescript hair that was once undoubtedly a glorious tawny blond. The wide shoulders stooped, the back bent forward from the waist, and the hands, yet retaining hints of care, trembled at the ends of bony, jerky arms. And, in the half-light of the veranda, the sodden features smirked and grinned, scowled and leered, with an incessant twitching at the corners of the mouth that showed teeth still white.

"From Houten, you say? Come in. I'll get you a drink."

Gordon led the way inside, stepping among the littered furniture with the instinct of a cat. He shouted an order, unintelligible to his visitors, and an entire side of the hut was raised, admitting the strong, pouring sunlight.

"What does Houten want now?" he asked, his hands writhing nervously. "I sent him the last lot of dust with the last lot of trade. Didn't he get it?"

"Yes, some of it," returned Barry, scrutinizing the nervous wreck puttering about the stained table, muddling with bottle and glasses. "That's why we're here, because he only got some of it. No, no drink, thanks; and it won't be a bad notion if you leave it alone for a while, until we settle our business. Why, man, you look ready to tumble into your wooden suit right now!"

"That's all right, old chap," grinned Gordon, pouring out a strong peg of Hollands and gulping it down like water. "I've had a shock to-day; that's all that's wrong with me. I can talk business with you all right."

"So we gave you a shock, hey?" chuckled Little knowingly.

"You?" An undercurrent of contempt marked Gordon's tone.

"No, you didn't shock me a bit, old fellow. Not many men can. It was a—er—a lady." The voice broke into a grating laugh.

"Who? What? Was it Mrs.—" burst out Little incautiously.

"Mr. Little!" Gordon snarled, his teeth showing viciously, "you forget yourself, I think. Remember you're in a gentleman's house, even though that house is only a hut and the gentleman's infernally drunk. That part of my business concerns neither you nor Houten."

"Sorry," Little apologized awkwardly, blushing like a girl. "I ought—"

"That's all right," broke in Barry shortly. "Mr. Gordon will understand that. At present we can't talk much business. The atmosphere doesn't seem right. Come, Little, we'll get back to the ship, and perhaps Gordon will come aboard to dinner to-morrow, eh, Gordon?"

"Certainly, Captain, thanks. I'll be glad to eat at a white man's table again," cried the trader, obviously relieved at the departure of his guests. "What time?"

"Well, say about noon; then we can talk business for an hour. By the way, can you direct me to the Mission?"

"Just behind the stockade, Captain. Not a hundred yards away. But you can't see it for trees until you get there. Won't find anybody there now, though; it's the time of day when all the men are out teaching, and the women are visiting the huts to teach the mothers to look after the kids."

Barry concealed his disappointment and departed for the ship. Little was silent, too; he was trying to gather up the threads of the connection between Mrs. Goring, the missing seaman, and the trader. He wasn't sure the threads led anywhere; but Barry discouraged conversation, and the volatile ex-salesman could not exist without either talking, surmising, or planning things. So they arrived in silence at the wharf, and neither raised his head to notice their

whereabouts until Little tumbled over the *Barang's* breast line. Then both looked up. Simultaneously they glanced up at the poop; they darted questioning glances at each other as Vandersee broke from a group and ran to the rail to meet them, his ruddy face alight with a redoubled glow.

"Now what has he got to do with Mrs. Goring!" muttered Little. The wonder was lost on Barry, for that worthy mariner had seen something which effectually obliterated all thought of Mrs. Goring from his mind.

"It's the little Mission lady!" he breathed reverently, looking past Mrs. Goring and straight into the sparkling eyes of a very human looking, merrily smiling girl in plain Mission print. He was abruptly awakened to the proprieties by Vandersee stepping forward and introducing him.

"Captain Barry, Mrs. Goring wants you to meet Miss Natalie Sheldon, of the Mission. You've met Mrs. Goring, I think."

Barry acknowledged the introduction awkwardly; he felt himself flaming to the roots of his hair, unable to control his tongue or his eyes. For many days he had dreamed of this moment. Now it was here, he felt he was making an ass of himself, and that Little was grinning at him for his clumsy behavior. The amused salesman jogged his ribs and brought him back to earth. He advanced with extended hand to the smiling young Mission worker, and in an instant he was transported into a world where she and he alone mattered; the other people, the ship, the stagnant stream, all went out of his ken like things that were not.

"How do you do, Captain Barry," the girl greeted him, flushing under his unwavering gaze, yet amused at it.

"Miss Sheldon, I have wondered if it were possible that you could be like your picture—and you are," he returned with true sailorly bluntness. He had no knowledge of the usages of society in such first meetings; he only knew that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and that was his course now. He suddenly became aware that the girl was regarding him curiously, and she asked in manifest surprise:

"My picture? Why, where have you seen my picture, Captain?"

In a flash Barry realized the difficulty of the question. Perhaps later he would feel at liberty to explain; but now no words that he was acquainted with could possibly explain without requiring further explanations to supplement them. Yet

he could not think of letting go this chance of basking in the sunshine of his realized dream. He met Miss Sheldon's query with a warm smile and took her by the elbow.

"I saw one in Java, Miss Sheldon," he said. "And ever since I have doubted the existence of an original anything like it. But you are; the picture doesn't do you justice. Let me show you my ship," he concluded, urging her towards the ladder away from the rest.

To Barry it seemed that fifteen minutes sped like one. He never remembered, afterwards, whether he showed Miss Sheldon the ship, or not, or at least, how much of it. He only knew that he trod on air, and his ears were thrilled with music, that his blood leaped and tingled with the warm personality and rippling laughter of this pretty Mission lady. He suddenly found himself back on the poop by her side, and his foot stumbled on the top step because his eyes would not leave her piquant face. And together they rejoined the others, surprising upon two faces, at least, something that was not expected to be seen.

Little stood by Mrs. Goring's side, frankly enjoying the spectacle of Barry's captivity. He glanced smilingly at Miss Sheldon, and Barry saw the rich color mount swiftly to the girl's throat and cheeks. But it was between Vandersee and Mrs. Goring that the tableau centered. The big second mate stood behind Little and looked sharply into the big, dark eyes of Mrs. Goring over the salesman's shoulder. And she, on her part, returned the gaze with interest that was nevertheless gone in a flash, to give way to a returning expression of polite indifference.

But in that passing flash, Barry caught the unspoken message that leaped from eye to eye. It was as plain as if those two people had said, one to the other:

"Right into our hands! Barry's caught, and the rest is clear!"

The situation threatened to become strained, for Barry showed signs of questioning his second mate. The visitors were Vandersee's, and that able officer turned the circumstance to good use. Politely, yet insistently, he drew Mrs. Goring to the gangway; she in turn called Miss Sheldon, and before Barry could prevent their going, they had stepped ashore and departed in different directions.

As they separated, Mrs. Goring spoke to the girl and then hurried away with a cordial hand-wave and a very softened smile. The girl stared after her for a moment, as if not understanding that which she said, then slowly turned to

follow her own path. But in turning, she paused almost imperceptibly to flash another look at the ship; and Barry caught it, levelled full at himself.

Wonder, doubt, unbelief were in that look. The pretty round chin was firm and hard, and in the expressive eyes the light was shot with specks of flinty coldness. But doubt predominated. Miss Sheldon resumed her way, and as if in final endeavor to learn the answer to a puzzling question, she looked back over her shoulder at Mrs. Goring. That lady, too, looked back at that instant, and again Barry caught a flashed message.

Mrs. Goring's face was alight with emotions—gratification, love, hope—and the greatest of these was hope.



CHAPTER SIX

Little overhauled his instructions from Houten early next morning and by breakfast time was ready to get down to business with Barry. The day dawned muggy and windless; one of the native seamen in a commandeered canoe paddled up from his observation point near the river mouth to report and get his relief. There was no sign of Leyden's schooner, nor did the day promise a wind that could possibly bring her in.

The mate left the table early and relieved Vandersee, who went into his cabin before sitting down, leaving Barry and Little alone for a moment.

"What d 'ye think of Mrs. Goring, and—oh, everything, old scout," Little began. "You saw her face last night. Is she stuck on you, or me, think? Or why the interchange of cryptic eyes between her and little Miss Mission?"

"Drop the josh, Little," Barry retorted, none too well pleased at the subject. "How in blazes can she be stuck on either of us, when we only saw her once before yesterday? As for cryptic glances, I'm not very good at puzzles."

"Oh, all right, sobersides. But have you figured out how the lady got here, and why?"

"No. I don't propose to clutter my head with stuff that does not concern my business here, Little. We're here to check up on Gordon and call Leyden's hand when he arrives. That's plenty for two ordinary men. The why and wherefore of mysterious women has nothing to do with me."

"We-ell," Little drawled, lazily lighting a cheroot, "anything you say suits me, but I'll tell you my idea right now: That Goring woman came here in this blessed brigantine, Barry!"

Barry stared at his companion in open amazement. Amazement slowly changed to mild scorn, and a sarcastic opinion of such an idea was on his lips when Vandersee emerged from his berth, dressed to go ashore, and halted the expression of it.

"The first part of my contract is completed, Captain Barry," the second mate said respectfully. He smiled at Little and laid an open letter before the skipper. "This

will explain, sir."

Barry stared at the man for a moment, then frowningly perused the note. It was in the heavy hand of Cornelius Houten, written on the trader's business stationery. In brief, it was authority for Vandersee to leave the ship, if he so desired, immediately he had docked her at the post, and to rejoin her one day before she was ready to leave. Houten emphasized the point that Vandersee enjoyed his utter confidence, and anything he wanted that the ship afforded was to be at his service. Houten desired Barry to understand that his absolute command of the *Barang* was in no way interfered with: simply that Vandersee was engaged on a definite and separate mission for the house, but had agreed to act on the passage as second mate and to pilot the ship up the river.

"You know the contents?" Barry queried, peering up at the big man beside him.

"Perfectly, sir."

"Well? Anything you want?"

"Not much, Captain. Simply permission to go at once and to take a box of ammunition specially placed on board for my Luger automatic pistol. I shall send a boy each morning with any news that should interest you and to receive any information you care to give me regarding the future sailing of the ship."

"All right, Vandersee. You may go. Going on a still hunt after the gold dust I'm supposed to unearth, hey?"

"No, sir. I'm not meddling with your affairs in the least. My business is entirely apart from yours, though our paths may cross to our mutual advantage. And I wish to say, Captain Barry and Mr. Little, that I am anxious for your success; far more so than you can possibly imagine. We have much in common, which I cannot speak of now. But if you need me in any tussle that may develop, I shall be at hand. I shall not be more than an hour's run distant, and if you want me at a time when my boy is not available just say to the dwarf at the stockade gate: 'The Dog Bites!' and I shall be with you quickly. But I ask you not to turn in that message until you feel you cannot handle things without me."

Vandersee departed, leaving behind him an impression of subtle power and iron determination. Little looked thoughtful for a space. He fumbled with his inside coat pocket, withdrew his hand, hesitated, then went back to the pocket again, while Barry stared moodily up through the skylight, listening to the sound of the

second mate's retreating footsteps.

"Mystery, and more of it!" the skipper muttered at last. He regarded Little whimsically and surmised aloud: "Next thing, I suppose you'll flash a document that deposes me and puts the cook in charge."

"Hardly that, Barry, but I've got a paper," replied Little, coloring deeply. He produced the cause of his embarrassment from the inside pocket. "I wasn't to play this until Gordon was present," he said. "But since Houten apparently keeps hold of all the strings, even at this distance, I'd better lay all my cards on the table," and he handed the letter to Barry.

The skipper glanced through the note perfunctorily, then some part of it riveted his notice, and he read the rest avidly. Like Vandersee's letter, it was brief and comprehensive. It authorized Little to supersede Gordon at the trading station, if in his opinion the situation seemed to warrant such a course. And, as in the Hollander's orders, Little's letter concluded with the definite statement that Barry was not in any degree less captain of the ship and commander-in-chief of the expedition. In the last recourse, every man who had sailed in the ship from Surabaya was to hold himself at the skipper's orders.

The two friends regarded each other intently when the letter was laid down, Little almost shamefacedly, the skipper as if on the border line of a disgusted withdrawal from the involved business. Presently Little ventured:

"Sorry Houten thought it necessary to make all this mystery, Barry; and if you say so, I'll relinquish any powers this letter gives me to you. We should have no secrets between us; I've simply carried out my employer's orders. It isn't my wish."

"Don't fuss yourself," retorted Barry grimly. "I don't blame you. Just don't fancy sailing under sealed orders, that's all. I've got my own instructions, and I'll carry 'em out, never fear. But I hate to feel that just when things get tight, somebody may flash another bit of paper on me and tell me I mustn't shoot, because the green man with the pink eyes is in charge of that department, or something."

"I can assure you there are no other letters of authority, Barry," stated Little definitely.

"All right, then. Since I'm still in command of this fine ship, I'll stop the order for Gordon's lunch. Come on. We'll go to him and thrash the thing out at once,"

announced Barry, rising.

At the station they found a pitiful wreck. Gordon was cold sober, and it was as if all his vital fluid had evaporated. His face was ghastly, his nerves utterly out of control, and his tongue stumbled as though it were hung by the middle with both ends at odds. Yet for all his shocking physical condition, something in the wastrel Englishman appealed to Barry as no part of the man had done the previous evening. Something hinted at a long deeply buried spirit struggling for release, and Gordon's speech, if stumbling, at least strove to be serious.

"Glad you came, skipper," he greeted them, with a contorted smile that puckered his face and made plainer the hideous inroads of a life's dissipation. "Shan't be able to keep that luncheon engagement."

The trembling fingers pushed a heap of papers and books over to Barry and immediately resumed the task of filling a battered portmanteau with crumpled clothes.

"We came to talk business, Gordon. For God's sake, take a drink and steady yourself, man!" Barry jerked out, a great pity for the hopeless wreck coming over him. Gordon affected the sailor like a fine ship broken and disintegrating on a devilish reef.

"Thanks, old chap. I'm all right. Business? I'm as capable now as I'll ever be. Come to chuck me out, haven't you? Go ahead. There are the records, stock lists, and the rest of the mess. Help yourself."

An inquiring glance and a nodded assent passed between Barry and Little, and the latter gathered up the records, pushing Houten's letter over to Gordon as his authority.

"Don't know how you heard of it, Gordon, but that will verify your supposition. You're not fired, y' know, unless you want to be—at least, not yet. Simply superseded during the period of the stay of a certain Mr. Leyden."

The Englishman dropped the packed bag with a bang and gripped the table to steady himself.

"Go on, Mr. Little, don't mind me," he muttered, groping for the bag again. "I'm a little off color to-day. Ought not to chuck up the booze so suddenly, I suppose. But I'll survive it. Go on."

"Only one thing I want explained," said Little slowly. "The rest can be gathered from your books, I understand." The ex-salesman looked straight into Gordon's furtive eyes and uttered his words very distinctly. "How much of Houten's gold dust have you sent to Leyden? And where is the accumulated result of the past six months of washing?"

Gordon's mouth twitched at the corners, imparting to his face the expression of a partially decayed skull. The breath whistled from his tightly drawn lips, while he fought with his nerveless legs for support. At last he mastered himself and stood upright, for the moment seeming to expand and straighten into something approximating a clean, complete man.

"What Leyden has had can't be brought back," he said. "But you'll find in that leather book—last entry, made this morning—the sum due to me from Houten up to the end of this month. You'll find it entered in the credit side of the trade account. If I'm permitted to remain here after you've cleaned up, a similar sum will go down in the same column until what Leyden had is paid for. The rest of the dust is packed in bags. It was all ready for Leyden to call for. You get it now. The gargoyle-faced dwarf at the gate will show you where it is. Now, if that's all, I'll thank you both to get to blazes out of here and let me finish packing. I'm still trader here until I pass out."

"Where are you going, Mr. Gordon?" asked Barry civilly. He was more and more drawn to this self-wrecked human being, so obviously once a gentleman. "There's a cabin aboard my ship, if you care to use it."

"It's none of your damned business where I'm going!" Gordon snarled, with grinning teeth. Then his face softened, and he added: "Much obliged for the invitation, though, skipper. I'm a beast. But please remember that I'm a drunken beast trying to become a sober beast. Will you please go now?"

"So long," Barry gave him shortly, and walked out. Little followed, calling back: "Better take that cabin, Gordon. Hotels must be pretty rotten here, hey? No? Well, so long, and good luck."

They passed out by the big gate and caught sight of the brown dwarf on the parapet of the stockade. Pausing a moment, they debated whether to immediately demand the gold bags or to go first to the ship and get men to carry them on board. Barry peered dubiously at the entrance to a narrow trail winding about the stockade and disappearing into the thick, odorous jungle. Then he glanced at the sky and the tree tops. The sun told him it was yet far from noon; the foliage

sleepily indicated the prolonged absence of a breeze.

"Leyden can't get up to-day, Little," he decided. "Go and tell Rolfe to give you the men you need. Take the dust aboard and lock it in the safe. It's your job, anyhow. I'm going to hunt up the Mission."

For a moment the Imp of Mischief prompted Little to perilous speech. He caught Barry's glittering eye in time and merely replied: "Aye, aye, sir. Don't forget what you told me: with man, woman, or missionary, keep your gun butt handy. That bush looks shivery. Be good and look after yourself."

He swung off down the wharf path, and Barry stepped into the side trail. The sailor had not covered twenty feet, shivering involuntarily at the uncanny hush of the jungle, when he heard a faint rustling behind him. Before he could turn, a queer *whirr* whistled in the air, followed swiftly by a hollow thudding sound as of an ax biting into a rotten log. Then an unearthly shriek rang out that chilled his blood.

Just in time he leaped aside and avoided a flying creese that shot from the outflung brown hand of a fallen Malay. And, sticking in the man's naked back, between the shoulder blades, was the haft of a heavy throwing-knife similar to that which had so narrowly missed his own head on board the *Barang*.

He savagely stirred the dead man with his foot and rolled the body over, face up. The next instant his shout recalled Little at a run.

"Look, Little! Know this fellow?" he uttered.

"Mindjee—the missing sailor!" gasped Little, wide-eyed.

"Wait," snapped Barry. He plucked out the knife and ran back to the gate, still plainly in sight. On the parapet, in his old place, the brown dwarf squatted, expressionless as the Sphinx.

"Here, Johnny, you throw this?" Barry demanded, holding up the knife.

"Me t'row, all right. Give it." The skinny brown paw reached down for the weapon. All interest had apparently departed for the gatekeeper with the return of his knife. Barry was not so easily satisfied.

"That won't do for me," he persisted. "Did you mean to hit that Malay, or did you just miss me, hey? Where did you get this sticker, anyhow? I've seen it before."

Talk quick, now!"

"You savvee dat fella got creese? All right. I send um knife, eh? Big fella man give it knife to me. You no bodder, Tuuan. You no kill, eh? Give it knife. I want um." The clawlike hand reached down insistently. "I tell you no bodder. I Gordon man. Gordon he Houten man. You Houten man too, eh? An' Houten he all right fine fella. You no 'fraid, Tuuan. Give it dat knife."

Barry hesitated, not clear as to the man's meaning. He stared curiously at the stained blade in his hand, then passed it up with a shudder. He rejoined Little in silence, and they walked to the ship together, the Mission visit shelved for the time being. Arriving on board, Barry went to his cabin, made a swift examination, and burst out upon Little.

"I've got the big fellow!" he shouted. "That knife is the same one, Little. Vandersee is the big fellow, and he stole that knife out of my room. What the devil is the meaning of this ruddy mess? Mindjee hove that knife at me first. He was Leyden's man, beyond doubt. He gets his knife back in the gizzard, and that wipes out one score. What next? What about Gordon? How did he get his information so soon? Begad! I'm at a loose end, Little."

"Foggy to me, too, skipper," returned the other thoughtfully. "One sure thing, though, is that some sweet little cherubs are looking after us, and that death's-head at the gate is a good Joss, apparently. I'll go and get the gold bags, Barry, then I'd better take up quarters at the post. What d' ye think?"

"Go ahead, son. And pick out say four men to stay there with you. The fun seems to have started. Pack your guns, too. I'll clear out the safe before you get back."

The sun had passed meridian when Little returned, his men carrying fifteen small, heavy canvas bags. The dust was duly entered in a brand new book, after being roughly weighed on the cook's scales. Then the ship's company went to dinner, while the mate remained on deck until Barry could relieve him, for they stood watch and watch now, since Vandersee's departure.

The meal was but half finished when a shout was followed by running feet on the deck overhead. Rolfe burst into the saloon without ceremony and reported:

"Schooner coming up, sir! Just rounding the last reach. Got some sort of launch alongside, towing her. She'll be up in fifteen minutes."

Little sprang up, his animated face aglow. This was the moment he had dreamed of ever since setting foot aboard the *Barang*. Barry acknowledged the report but remained seated. He remarked:

"All right, Rolfe. Don't show fight. Keep six men on deck and have them in easy reach of their arms. I'll be up in a minute. You, Little, sit down and finish your meal. It may be long enough before you get another regular lunch. When you're through eating, hike up to the post. You'll find that gatekeeper worth asking, if you need advice."



CHAPTER SEVEN

After Little had gone, Barry tried to map out his plans, and the deeper he got into the matter, the less sure he felt. The measures he had ordered seemed, on cool reflection, to be the very measures likely to defeat his ends. For beyond doubt Leyden had not made this voyage without a definite object in view; he had been to the trading post surreptitiously, often before, knew the country around, probably knew the precise location of the gold-bearing sands, and was intimate with Gordon. Knowing Houten's clear title to the trading concession, he was scarcely likely to bring his vessel up the river on an avowed piratical errand; and there was, too, the matter more important to Barry of Leyden's ambitions with regard to the Mission worker.

"Won't be any fight of my starting," decided the skipper, preparing to relieve the mate. "Any fuss that's started, he'll start. I'll go up to the Mission. I'll get there this time and beat him to it."

That Mission visit had been too long delayed already. He waited no longer than to give the mate time to eat lunch. Then, repeating the order to keep a keen watch on the schooner's people and to permit none of them on board the *Barang*, he stepped ashore.

"If anybody tries to come on board, Rolfe, tell 'em I'm ashore and won't be back until evening."

Then he struck off through the huddled village and took to the bush path which Gordon had told him led to the Mission. Bamboo thickets alternated with patches of lush jungle, and life seethed in both. The chirruping chafe of bamboo shoots were so many voices that hummed in harmony with the cries of birds and the chattering of monkeys. In among the tall, golden stems, short-statured brown ghosts moved, sarong clad; little people whose eyes gazed at the intruder with soft inquisitiveness as he strode sturdily forward. And a patch of gorgeous jungle was entered to the whisk and flirt of graceful heads and slim, swift legs, all the visible signs revealed by herds of startled deer.

Barry noticed each passing thing of life with a start, for his steps kept time and rhythm with his thoughts, which ever flew back to the original of the photograph he had stolen and lost. His one brief meeting with Miss Sheldon in the flesh had

enabled him to judge the status of the photographer, and the artist was placed very low in the scale of his craft. The living original of that picture could never be done justice to on a photographic plate, in the skipper's opinion.

"This is no place for such a woman," he soliloquized. Then the hotel scene in Surabaya recurred to him, and his teeth clicked sharply. "And such a flower shan't wither in filthy paws like Leyden's!" he spoke aloud.

He trudged on, wondering if he had lost his way, for as yet there was no indication of a clearing or any cultivation that must surely mark the habitation of white people in a foreign land. As he gazed around at the matted verdure, his ears caught a strange sound which was yet not utterly strange. It was a roaring, throaty voice, such as is only developed in the stress of storm and thundering canvas. It was raised in raucous song:

'Arf a ton o' white paint, 'arf a ton o' black,
'Arf a ton o' 'nammellers, an' paint pots in th' rack.
Ship's a bloomin' paint shop, a sailor's got no show;
So sink th' blarsted Navy, an' ol' Admiral Furbelow!

The song was cut off abruptly as the singer tore through a mat of vines and stepped out right in front of Barry.

"Ahoy! And who 'm you in this fine black man's country?"

The man stood on widespread, deeply bowed legs, quizzically regarding Barry. Then a pair of sea-blue eyes twinkled, and a salt-toughened face wrinkled in a grin.

"Holystones an' *sujee*! You 'm a sailorman, ain't you? Is there a real ship in this river o' mud at last? Not one o' them bamboo an' string-tied proas, or sich?"

Barry returned the fellow's quizzical gaze, and in spite of his recent thoughts, he had to grin. Partially clad in the remnants of a navy working rig—tattered canvas jumper and wide trousers—the man looked the embodiment of one of Neptune's hoariest veterans. Where the skin showed through his rags it was tattooed blue and red in the numerous designs beloved of old-time seamen. A great ship sailed turbulently across his massive chest, her sails and rigging blackened ludicrously by the mat of close-curved hair that flourished on the human background. The rising sun of Japan blazed above her trucks, on the wearer's treelike neck; weird serpents and smoke-breathing dragons writhed about his arms from wrist to shoulder, and a red star on the back of one gnarled hand kept watch and watch with a blue star on its opposite member. Barry chuckled audibly as, in a casual flourish, one great arm was half turned, showing the comparative white of the underarm upon which was blazoned a pair of gory hearts in collision, impaled on a harpoon apparently. Around this work of art a flamboyant motto announced to the world: "I love Polly."

"Ah, them's the follies o' youth," the tattered salt remarked sagely, noting Barry's attention. "Never have none o' that junk stuck into yer, Mister, leastways, not no woman's tallies."

"Dangerous, hey?"

"Wuss ner that. Why, I thought a lot o' that 'ere gal. Bought her a mangle when I

stopped wi' her on leave once, so's she could do wi'out my 'arf-pay and wouldn't have to run up no bills wi' the meat an' bread pirates. Then I j'ined my ship, an' when I come home again she's sloped wi' a bloomin' leather-necked Marine wot used to peel orf his ruddy tunic an' turn th' mangle for her! Don't have 'em tattooed, Mister. Paint 'em on while yer with 'em, same's I do, then you kin wash 'em orf when you feels like a change."

"Good stuff," agreed Barry, interest in the queer old fellow in some degree modifying his impatience. "But what about a ship? Want to ship out of here?"

"That's me. I clumb down th' cable out of a man-o'-fight, all on 'count o' th' paint an' scrape an' polish of a new Old Man we got. Walked on th' bleedin' hoof, too, from Macassar to here, an' cadged at th' Missions an' stole from th' traders, an' slept wi' the niggers fer more'n a month, waitin' fer th' blessed ship they all said was due. That's me, Mister. Anything a-doin' in your craft?"

Barry considered for a moment and concluded that he could do with such a recruit. In any case he was strongly attracted to the man from a strictly human point of view. He took out a pocket pad and pencil, and replied, while he scribbled:

"I'll ship you. What's your name?"

"Bill Blunt—'ere."

"Then, here—" handing him a hastily scrawled note to the mate—"take this aboard the *Barang*, and the mate will fix you up. Look out you don't get shot going aboard. Show your note at the gangway. And be sure you get the *Barang*, not the *Padang*—my ship's the brigantine."

"Your ship? Be you skipper then, sir? Beg pardon; didn't know," and the gnarled right hand snatched at the scanty forelock and the sturdy body bent awkwardly in exaggerated salute. Then a twinkle shone in the keen blue eyes, and Bill Blunt grinned: "Shootin', d' ye say, sir? Ain't goin' to tell me fun's afoot, be ye? 'T would be too good!"

"Quite likely, Blunt. But you get aboard. If you get on the right side of the mate, perhaps I'll make you acting second mate when I come back." This apparently hasty half-promise was made with good reason. Barry saw a possible acquisition in the typical old sailor and made the partial promise as the best and quickest means of discovering what the man had in him. If good, he would prove himself

in hope of the reward; if worthless, Rolfe could be depended on to find it out. He put a question as the man started off: "Tell me how far is the Mission?"

"Just through that bamboo thicket, Cap'n. Ain't twenty fathom away. That's it," he sang out, as Barry thrust aside the close-standing stems.

The skipper entered the thicket, and the closing stems shut out the roaring song with which Bill Blunt struck off for the ship. Almost before he was aware of the proximity of any habitation, he stumbled out of the brake into a neat, prosperous garden, surrounding a cluster of clean frame huts all under one immense galvanized-iron roof. A small number of natives worked desultorily among the plants, and farther off a stooping figure in a white dress and wide sunbonnet straightened up at the skipper's approach.

Barry blushed like a big boy and halted, for the lifted sunbonnet revealed the piquant face of Natalie Sheldon, and her white teeth gleamed in a rippling smile as she recognized her visitor.

"Welcome, Captain Barry," she cried, stepping into the path and approaching him. "I'm afraid I can't be very hospitable, for all our men folks are busy in the village. I have to make a visit myself, but I shall be glad to have your company if you care to come."

Big Jack Barry, the man who remained cold and unruffled in vital physical crises, met this second encounter with a very unformidable girl in different manner from the first. His mouth opened to reply and remained open; his eyes burned with the up-rushing flood that suffused his bronzed face, and the roots of his hair tingled to the blush. Then he realized that he was staring rudely at Miss Sheldon and had not yet responded to her greeting. He discovered, too, that the brim of his hat was suffering grievous damage in the grip of his nervously twisting fingers, and that the sun was beating on his bare head intensely.

"Thanks, Miss Sheldon," he stammered at length. "I'll be glad to come with you if I may." Then, his hat replaced on his head, he found two awkward great hands at liberty, with nothing whatever to do with them. "Can I carry something for you?" he asked, more at ease in the prospect of some physical employment.

"Oh, will you? I shall be glad if you'll carry a basket. It will save taking one of the boys, and I'd really rather not take one, as it happens."

She went into the main hut of the Mission and presently returned with a big cane

basket, covered with fresh leaves, which she gave to Barry. She herself carried a smaller bundle that might contain cloth or other soft material.

"Come, then," she said, leading the way into the bush by another path. "I've got a patient, Captain, one of Mr. Leyden's men, you know. A white man, broken down by the awful loneliness."

"Leyden's man?" blurted Barry. "Why, surely nobody's come ashore from his vessel yet? He only came up the river an hour ago."

"Oh, this time, yes, Captain. But Mr. Leyden has been here many times, you know. We know him very well, indeed. We do whatever we can for him, for, you know, he has helped me—us—in many ways."

Something in her speech drew the skipper's gaze to her animated face. Something he saw there brought a fleeting scowl to his own. There was no shred of doubt at that moment that Leyden had made considerable progress in intimacy with the Mission people. Miss Sheldon's speech and expression were such that Barry would have given an eye or a hand for the same.

"You see, we hoped Mr. Leyden would arrive much sooner, Captain," the girl went on, striding freely along the narrow path which bent towards the upper reaches of the river. "We thought your ship was his, and that induced my visit last evening. The extra suspense played havoc with Mr. Gordon, for—"

"Gordon! He's no man of Leyden's, Miss Sheldon! He's my own employer's man, if you mean Gordon from the trading post. I wondered at his attitude when we superseded him temporarily."

The girl darted a swift glance at Barry and suddenly cut short the chat. She went ahead, giving no reply to the skipper's outburst, and he followed dumbly, wondering what new piece of trickery was to be revealed when Gordon's sudden illness was investigated. For fifteen minutes he followed in the girl's wake, attempting to reopen conversation and receiving brief replies; and gradually his irritation and puzzlement passed; he was fascinated by the easy grace of the girl; every step he took was as a rivet hammered into the armor of his determination to scuttle Leyden's ark of success at the earliest possible moment.

His mind was set on means to that end when he at length looked ahead and discovered that the girl had vanished. In a dozen steps he came to a still narrower path leading riverwards, and here she was awaiting him.

"I'll take the basket now, Captain. Will you wait for me here?" she said, looking into his face with a cool and plain hint that his further attendance would be inconvenient.

"I may as well come right along," he returned, holding on to the basket. "I know Gordon. I'm sorry he's ill. I'd like to see him."

"It will not be convenient, Captain Barry," she insisted firmly. "Mr. Gordon is too ill to see strangers. This cannot be the Gordon you know. He is a friend of Mr. Leyden. Please wait for me here."

"Now what the devil have I struck!" Barry grumbled, when the girl had swept out of sight. The swish of her cotton dress could be followed through the canes and lantanas, and the impulse was upon him to ignore her command and plunge after her.

"Gordon a friend of Leyden!" he soliloquized, restraining his impulse while he puzzled the problem out. "That's no mystery; suspense knocked him out when I got here first. That's no puzzle either. But how in thunder did Leyden get so solid with the little lady? That's my riddle."

The tangle was too involved for the sailor's matter-of-fact mind. He obeyed his first impulse and dived ahead into the narrow path, bound to see Gordon himself and thrash out the matter with him in front of Miss Sheldon.

He parted the cane thicket, and immediately all about him began the rustle and subtle movement of living things in concealment. He recalled in a flash that something very like this had preceded that whirring through the air, and that thud into flesh that had announced the attempt on himself and the death of Mindjee, back at the stockade gate. But no tangible obstacle fell in his way this time. It was a voice, sounding ghostly in the whispering canes, from an invisible yet very close speaker.

"You no go, sar. Go back. Fren' for you say it."

"Now by James, that's enough!" swore the sailor, leaping straight in the direction of the voice. "Come out here and let's see who's running this Pepper's Ghost hoodle!" With the challenge he pulled his pistol.

He found nothing and nobody. But from the spot he had just vacated came the same voice again.

"You no shoot, sar. You shoot fren's, dat's all. Go back."

"I go back when I see what this humbug means. I'll shoot man or animal that runs across my bows!"

Barry stumbled forward, and again the subtle rustling surrounded him, but no voice now. The sound seemed to vibrate and run before him, yet faster than he could travel afoot. Then, so suddenly that it startled him, he came alongside a stout tree, and other voices sounded,—voices of white people. For the moment he was at a loss; then the truth flashed upon him and he looked up into the umbrageous foliage of the tree.

Above his head almost—he was still in the shade of the cane brake—he discerned the platform of a rough tree-dwelling from which depended a vine-stem ladder, steadied by pegs driven into the ground at the base of the trunk. And, peering over the rim of the platform, like a sailor looking over the edge of a ship's spreading top, he saw Miss Sheldon, displeasure clouding her face. Another face was at the Mission girl's shoulder, and impatience was the most prominent emotion on it. Barry had time to recognize Mrs. Goring in that second apparition; then swift and silent as a cobra's attack he was taken from behind.

No word was spoken. Arms like steel bands smothered his limbs; his pistol hand was snatched back irresistibly, yet, he noticed even then, with no violence, and the weapon was taken from his powerless fingers. A piece of coarse cloth was flung over his head; vicelike hands gripped his ankles; he was borne with no apparent effort from the spot.

After a brief initial struggle, Barry resigned himself to his captors perforce. Where he was bound for was beyond conjecture; he only heard, faintly through his hood, the cheeping and rustling of the canes; bush tendrils swept along his body and told him that he was being carried through the trackless part of the jungle. His journey was short. In ten minutes he was laid on the ground, still with no word from his captors, and in two long breaths no sound remained near him except the voices of the foliage. He lay still a moment, wondering what his fate was to be; then, involuntarily, he moved in his bonds, and found they were loose; he was unfettered.

Hurling aside the muffling cloth, he started to his feet, and the grass bands fell from his arms and legs. He was in a dense grove, and his first thought was to hurl himself headlong into the bush in the frenzied hope of overtaking the men who had left him there. His foot struck a hard object, and he looked down. There

was his automatic pistol, intact, but the precaution had been taken of slipping out the cartridge clip. He picked both up, reloaded the weapon, and pondered.

"Sure thing they don't want me around there!" was the whimsical thought foremost in his mind. "Don't want to damage me, either. But they leave me in a blind alley of the jungle to dig my own way out!"

As he cooled off, his senses resumed their normal alertness, and the ripple of running water regaled his ears. He tore through the jungle in that direction and burst out upon the river bank. Looking up and down stream, he stifled an exclamation of surprise; for, not a hundred yards away, down stream, stood the rickety old wharf, and alongside lay his ship, while at his feet a dugout canoe squatted nose-up on the muddy foreshore of the river. Just astern of his own ship the *Padang* had hauled in, and a knot of excited men, white and native, were milling about the *Barang's* gangway.

"Time you got aboard, Barry!" he muttered and shoved the canoe off.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Barry reached the wharf, tied his canoe to a pile, and arrived at his own gangway to find Leyden at bay. Rolfe's sturdy figure barred the ladder; Bill Blunt grinned happily over the rail, tapping the wood playfully with the biggest iron belaying pin the ship afforded; while natives on deck and on the wharf looked on full of curiosity considerably tempered with apprehension.

Leyden's face was deathly white with rage, and his right hand had gone to a hip pocket; but it remained there under the persuasion of a little round hole in the end of a cold blue tube displayed carelessly by the mate. Leyden caught sight of Barry as he came up and started violently, then forced a smile.

"Why, are you Captain Barry?" he stammered. Whatever his knowledge of Houten's plans might be, it apparently had not included the association of the *Barang's* skipper with the rude sailor who had upset him on the hotel veranda in Surabaya. If he harbored resentment for that affair, he concealed it now and tried to assume an expression of relief.

"I'm glad you've come," he explained, with a sour smile that was meant to be pleasant. "Your mate is oversuspicious. He refuses to allow me on board."

"Quite right, too," growled Barry, openly glaring his dislike for Leyden. "My orders. I expect them to be carried out. You can have no business with my ship, anyhow."

"You're not very cordial, are you?" Leyden smiled back. "I wanted to inquire about one of my men who ran from me in Surabaya. I believe he joined you. My skipper said a brigantine came in for an hour or so about the time the man disappeared, and this is the only brigantine that's been in the port in months."

Barry's keen eyes bored into Leyden so coldly and fixedly that, studied as he was in worldly encounters, that gentleman shifted uneasily on his feet. The *Barang's* skipper knew well enough about that missing man, and also where he had gone to. He knew, also, that it was not in Surabaya that he entered the brigantine, but in far subtler manner, as a legitimate, signed-on seaman in Batavia. There was still a patch in the mainsail, a little more than man-high, to recall the man; somewhere near the stockade gate the insects and ground vermin were at that

moment industriously engaged in stripping a skeleton which might have interested Leyden. But the blunt sailor, simple and straightforward though he was, was endowed with sufficient elementary cunning to cope with Leyden in that worthy's present state of irritation.

"No strangers in my ship, Mr. Leyden," he said. "Try another tack. Sorry I can't stay to talk with you; I'm busy." He mounted the gangway without a further glance at Leyden, leaving that gentleman staring up after him with tight lips drawn back from grinning teeth and a quivering of the arm which was bent back to the hip pocket.

"Don't try it!" warned Rolfe, edging aside as Barry passed him.

"Shove orf, me son," added Bill Blunt and squinted along his belaying pin straight at Leyden.

"Oh, leave the man alone!" growled Barry angrily. "You weren't put here to start something. So long as he stays off the ship, I don't expect you to stir him up."

"Barry, just one moment," cried Leyden, and his face had assumed a smirk of contempt. Barry turned without replying. "I'd be thankful if you'd tell your pirates to leave this theatrical stuff until it's called for," Leyden laughed. "I've been trying for five minutes to get my tobacco pouch out of my pocket, and every time I move a finger one of your bold desperadoes wiggles a gun at me, and the other buccaneer draws a bead on my unoffending head with that ferocious pin."

Barry stared hard at the fellow, and as he saw the utter change that had come over Leyden, a tiny shiver ran rippling up his spine. All Leyden's anger and irritation had gone; the crafty, calculating man of the world peered out through glittering eyes; if Barry had entertained any foolish notions of the man's mettle before, they were dissipated now. Yes, there was no doubt of it. Leyden was laughing at him.

"Nobody's stopping you getting your pouch," Barry blurted hotly. He preferred taking a beating at any time, if necessary, to being laughed at. "The whole wharf is open to you. But I advise you to move along a bit before pulling that pouch. My men don't like the smell of Dutch tobacco."

To Rolfe he said: "Leave Blunt here and come below. I want to speak to you. Wait though," he suggested, "Blunt hasn't signed on yet. How does he suit you?"

Bill Blunt's ears twitched with anxiety until the mate replied: "Good man, sir! Darn glad to have him. Coolest hand I ever saw—and a sailor."

"Good. Stay here. I'll bring up the Articles and sign him on here. Then he can stand gangway watch with you. I don't want to leave the gangway without a white man on it so long as that craft lies ahead of us."

Bill Blunt entered into the company of the *Barang* and took up his post at the gangway with a roaring sea-song rumbling in his mossy throat. Some of his stout, devil-may-care spirit had gone into the native crew, and there was less of furtiveness and more of confident satisfaction with their job as the little brown men listened to the jovial harmony of their new white shipmate.

Rolfe followed the skipper below, and at the table Barry told him as much of the day's events as seemed vital. Regarding the Mission, it was merely mentioned as being in some manner connected with Leyden's obvious familiarity in the trading station.

"He's gone off that way now, sir," remarked the mate. "I noticed him beating up for the path as you brought up the Articles." Rolfe halted suddenly at the sound of grinding teeth and stared at the skipper in wonderment. But Barry cast off the spasm of rage and went along with business.

"Now, Rolfe, you know what we're here for as well as I do. Much has happened that I didn't expect, but the main thing remains. On or near this stream gold is being taken out that belongs to my employer. It's getting into other pockets. And the man who owns those pockets knows more about the location of these gold sands than either I or Houten, and what's more, Gordon has been running this post not exactly on the level.

"So long as that schooner lies there, I want her looked after. So you and Blunt stay aboard with half the hands and watch for funny business. But first, before I start up river, run up to Mr. Little and get an inventory of his spare men and arms. Spares, mind: those he can do without for a few days. Hurry back."

Jerry Rolfe started without comment. That was his conception of duty. He had scarcely reached the deck when he was recalled. Barry could not erase from his mind that picture of Leyden, at that moment perhaps enjoying an intimate chat with Natalie Sheldon. And the more he thought of it,—the thought swept through his mind in a flash—the hotter he became, and he no longer restrained the impulse to follow, though the folly and possible danger of it was clear to him.

"Rolfe!" he shouted. "Never mind. I'll go to the post myself. Stay here and get together all our own spares. You know them better than I do."

The mate received this new order as complacently as the first. It suited him better. In that steaming, reeking river station he was more at home about his ship than tramping through an odorous village on shore business.

Barry hustled up to the post and found Little deep in a stock-taking revel, as enthusiastic as a boy in his new sphere. The typewriter-sailor was more at home here than on board the ship, in utter contrast to Rolfe; and Barry grinned perforce at the formidable armament he had strapped about his body. He looked the part of a fiction trader, with pen behind his ear, big cheroot in his teeth, and two mighty revolvers in holsters at his waist.

"Ship ahoy, me tarry shellback!" he shouted as Barry entered. "Snug as a bug already. Everything's fine—first-chop, except the station hands. Can't find where they're working, Barry, though the pay sheet shows fifty or more taking wages from Houten. But what's the trouble? You look as solemn as that crocodile you plunked on the beezer as he was investigating my free-lunch department."

"Nothing's the matter," replied Barry shortly. "It's about the hands I want to see you. How many men, with guns, can you spare me for a few days? I'm going up river."

"Whoopee!" yelled Little, dancing. "Up river? Me too. Say, we can take—"

"We nothing, Little. You stay right here. I want about six good men, that's all, to join up with one watch from the ship."

"Oh, say now, that ain't fair, Barry. There's nothing to keep me here now the dust's aboard. Besides, Vandersee was here, half an hour ago, and mentioned the same thing. Said it as if he knew what he was talking about, too. Told me to tell you he was in reach of us all the time, and that we might safely leave the station."

"Vandersee here?" cried Barry. "I'd give something rich to know exactly what piece he plays in this band!"

"Same here, Barry. But never mind him. I feel safe about him. I'll come, hey? How about it?"

Barry considered awhile, his forehead deeply wrinkled and his eyes aglitter.

Soon he brightened, and, "Just as you say," he replied. "Get those six men. If you can't find them yourself, ask the gateman for them. Get 'em to the ship as soon as you can. I've got a little business to attend to yet."

He left Little in ecstasies and tramped down the path and around the stockade. Scarcely directing his steps, he walked towards the Mission, knowing no reason except impulse. And he travelled swiftly, coming to the cane-brake dividing the post from the Mission before he was well aware of his progress. Here he was brought to an abrupt halt by nearby voices, and he could not possibly avoid hearing some of the conversation.

The voices were those of Mrs. Goring and Leyden, and anger was the keynote of the discussion.

"I tell you, Juliana, I won't stand this hounding!" Leyden was saying. "Remember you are not in Batavia now; and if you drive me to extremes, this jungle can hide a secret."

"I fear neither the jungle nor you any more," Mrs. Goring returned, and Barry shivered at the intensity of her voice. "As for hounding you, I warned you. I came here to prevent this, your latest piece of rascality, and I'll do it. You might as well go back to Java."

"I suppose so," retorted Leyden sneeringly. "You've no doubt spread your lies to good effect already, eh! Do you expect to be believed against my word? You are foolish. I stand too high here for you to harm me."

"Stand high, fall deep," laughed the woman. "No, I have spread neither lies nor truth about you—yet. I can do that—"

"Not yet, eh? Then, by the Lord Harry, you shall not!" cried Leyden, and there was a crackling of underbrush as he made a forward movement. Barry peered through the thicket, ready to leap to the aid of Mrs. Goring; but he saw his help was not needed and drew back.

"Stop!"

The word was sharp as a pistol shot, and Leyden was brought to a halt by the menacing muzzle of a small automatic pistol in Mrs. Goring's firm, tremorless hand.

"Don't move a pace farther. I know you only too well, Mr. Leyden. The day has

long gone by when I could be fooled by you. My advice is that you go back to your ship and to Java. There is nothing here for you. Your schemes have all gone awry."

"Then your tale has been told! Vixen!"

"Vixen, perhaps," and a low, mellow laugh accompanied the acceptance of the epithet. "At least you will find me one, if you persist. I have not mentioned your name to any one, yet. But I tell you now that each day you stay in Celebes adds to the weight about your neck that shall finally drag you down. There is one stronger than I keeping your account, and, have no false hopes, it will be paid in full. I warn you to go because of what I once thought you. Be wise in time and go."

"Yes, I'll go,—to the Mission and find out what lies you have spread. For I don't believe you have let that chance slip, no matter what you tell me." Leyden's tone was truculent; yet he respected the warning of that small, steady pistol. "It is you who should take warning and go, Juliana. For as sure as you cross my plans, you shall suffer."

"I can suffer no more," returned the woman bitterly. "As for the Mission, I can save you the trouble, for there is nobody there. You had better go and see Gordon. He'd like to talk to you, now that he has sobered."

"Yes, Gordon!" snarled Leyden. "Another of your pretty tricks. Where is Gordon? He's not at the post. I tried to enter there and was refused admittance."

"Naturally. It isn't your post, you know. But as you've tried, that too will be wasted time, won't it? So you'd better go to your ship, as I suggested at first." Mrs. Goring suddenly closed the interview by walking away from Leyden, keeping her face towards him, however, and retaining firm hold on her pistol. She almost brushed Barry as she passed, and as she glided swiftly and lightly along the Mission path, Leyden swung away with a curse in the opposite direction.

Barry hesitated for a few seconds; he wanted to go to the Mission, too; but he believed Mrs. Goring had spoken truly when she said there was nobody there, and the only other place he could imagine where Miss Sheldon might be was at the tree-dwelling. To that secret bower he hurried, to be again halted by warnings from unseen guardians in the jungle fastnesses. This time he did not press his intention to penetrate, but stepped back until the whispering warnings were no

longer heard and there waited, hoping that patience might be rewarded.

It was. In a little while he heard some one coming along the path and stepped out of the snug couch of leaves he had made for himself and suddenly confronted the Mission girl. She started back in fright, then laughed in confusion as she recognized him. She bore two empty baskets, and Barry reached out for them.

"May I carry them?" he asked simply.

"Surely, Captain Barry. But you startled me. I was not expecting to meet anybody here."

"Perhaps better me than others," replied Barry cryptically. "How is Gordon, Miss Sheldon?"

"He is improving," the girl replied, and her eyes narrowed as she gazed quizzically at him. "But what is the riddle about better you than others? I don't understand."

"Never mind," smiled Barry. "It doesn't really matter, since I was the lucky one, does it? But have you discovered whose man Gordon is, after all?"

"Why, no, Captain. It isn't necessary, I think. Mr. Gordon has always been accepted by my fellow workers as Mr. Leyden's man, and we have known Mr. Leyden a long time. We don't know you so well, you must admit."

"That's very true, Miss Sheldon. But I hope you will know me better before long," replied Barry, flushing at the implied doubt as to his own *bona fides*. He remembered, in time to avoid a bad break, that it was no part of his business in Houten's interests to show his credentials to Mission folks, no matter how devoutly he desired to place himself on a secure footing with them. His visit was entirely on Houten's account, and anything else was a side issue. So instead of blurting out an offer to produce his credentials, he remarked quietly:

"If you will ask Mrs. Goring, she will tell you better than I can."

"Mrs. Goring?" echoed the girl. "Why, I don't know her any better than I know you, Captain Barry. Why should I ask her to disavow something that needs no disavowal?"

"Don't know her?" queried Barry, astonished. He had thought Mrs. Goring an old acquaintance at least, if not actually a friend.

"No. We never saw her until the day your ship arrived. She brought a letter, though, from mutual friends in Batavia, so we have accepted her gladly. She has proved a wonderful nurse, too. Mr. Gordon could not be better cared for by mother, wife, or sweetheart."

Miss Sheldon's face softened with the thought. She irradiated the spirit of Christian helpfulness while praising Mrs. Goring's work for Gordon, and Barry uneasily realized that his persistence in casting doubts on Leyden was likely to prove detrimental to himself. The feeling intensified when the girl added with enthusiasm: "So you see, Captain, Mrs. Goring is far too busy to be bothered with inquisitive questions about a gentleman whom she probably has never heard of."

"Oh, yes, she has heard of Leyden, Miss Sheldon," Barry burst out unguardedly. "Not only heard of him, but knows him better than you do!"

The girl stared at him in amazement. Then slowly the rich color mounted to her fair cheeks, and her eyes glowed with something as near anger as such a woman could feel.

"If Mrs. Goring had known, she would certainly have told me," she said. "She has not said one word to suggest there is any truth in the very strange story you have tried to impress on me, Captain Barry. I can only think that you are mistaken."

With which charitable remark, having come to the branch of the Mission path, Natalie Sheldon held out her hands for the baskets and dismissed the skipper.

"Thank you. I can manage now," she said, smiling rather pityingly at him. "I hope you will find your mistake before you offend Mr. Leyden."

"If I do, I'll let you know quickly," he retorted, nettled to discover how very solid Leyden had made himself. "Meanwhile, I can only offer my services in any way you may need them, Miss Sheldon, and suggest that you make a confidante of Mrs. Goring. Good-by."

He left her gazing after him curiously and strode down the path towards the wharf. And as he entered the last narrow track in the labyrinthine bush, one of his native crew broke through the canes and told him:

"Masser Rolfe he say come quick, sar! Schooner boats he go up ribber chop-chop. He got many many men."

CHAPTER NINE

If, in the events already narrated, Barry has showed an unaccountable indecision, it must be remembered that he was a simple seaman, straight and clean, unused to subterfuge and trickery. When action was afoot, he knew what to do; while waiting for action on the part of his adversary, he was at a disadvantage. But the fact made for increased vigilance, and with the news that the *Padang's* people were starting something moving, he cast everything except his own counter move from his mind.

It was late afternoon when he finally looked over the situation and had to make a prompt decision. Rolfe, ably seconded by sturdy Bill Blunt, had collected a party of spare men and arms for the river trip, which, supplemented by Little and his five perplexed station hands, gave the skipper a very full crew for his largest boat, a lugger-rigged longboat.

"Has the schooner's boat started?" Barry asked, scanning the yellow stream that flowed greasily past and bore no sign of life or floating craft.

"Yes, sir," replied the mate. "She went up just after I sent the messenger to you. Leyden wasn't in her, though, so I sent a couple of men up the bank, to keep her in view and give you the direction as you picked them up."

"Then call away the boat!" snapped Barry. "If that fellow sneaks up some creek, we'll pass him surely in the dusk, and—"

"Oh, he won't do that, Barry," interjected Little. "I got at least this from Gordon's records, that the gold-bearing sands are on the main stream."

"Were the men armed?" asked the skipper.

"Not that I could see, sir. That looked queer to me," said Rolfe. "And that steam launch started so fast—"

"Steam launch! Here, Little, get your men into the boat. I don't know what this all means, but I don't trust Leyden, after what I saw and heard to-day." Barry leaped below to his cabin and gathered up a few necessities for the boat trip, then returned on a run and entered the longboat.

"Give way!" he ordered, and the oars flashed in rhythm, driving the boat out into midstream where she could set her sails free from the blanketing influence of the jungle-clad shore.

"Good luck, sir!" growled Blunt, gazing down at the boat with sorrow in his jovial face. "Ain't no chance o' coming wi' yer, I suppose?"

"No, Blunt. Stay here. You'll get your share of the fun if the dog bites!" Barry called back with a short laugh.

"Then all as I hopes is that he bites, sir!" and the old salt walked away from the rail, unable longer to stand the pang of seeing that boat go adventuring.

The longboat slipped along under her big lugs almost as swiftly as a launch could travel; the power craft would derive the fuller advantage from her engine when the twisting of the river put the sailboat on a beat. The stream quickly narrowed and shoaled when the post had been left astern, and in one place ran swiftly through a high-banked gorge that cut off the breeze and brought out oars again. Here the first watchman was picked up, standing on the high crest beside a tree and calling attention by a shrill whistle.

"How long since the launch passed?" queried the skipper, when the man came aboard.

"S-sh! She no go far, sar," replied the man, with a gesture of caution. "She right dar, 'longside dat big bush," and he indicated an outjutting clump of dense jungle that stood on the right bank a hundred yards ahead.

Barry and Little peered through the gathering dusk in vain for sight of her; without slanting clear across the river, it was impossible to see past that point. After a very brief moment of thought, the skipper waved silently to the oarsmen and headed the boat back to the place whence the watchman had just come.

"Come, Little," he said quietly, "we'll go and see what's afoot. She's no doubt waiting to pick up Leyden, and he hasn't stayed behind without reason."

Like silent shapes they stole through the jungle, creeping along to the end and crest of the outflung point. Here, or rather beyond, the river widened out again,

and the trees on both banks were farther apart, admitting more of the waning light to the muddy flats alongshore; and snug under the very roots of the matted bush lay the schooner's launch, steam swirling about the brass smokestack, the fire glowing redly as the engineer put in a stick of wood. All else was quiet; no sound came from the crew, though they could be plainly seen crouching on the locker seats and thwarts, some smoking, some dozing.

"Looks innocent enough," remarked Little, a little chagrined. He had expected to plunge straight into lurid encounters and felt an almost irresistible impulse to draw two revolvers, let loose a yell of defiance, and shoot up that tantalizingly peaceful steamboat.

"Hm! Looks!" Barry grunted. "Maybe is, too; but I have my doubts. Keep still, and we'll soon see. At least we're upsides with the chase."

The darkness dropped down suddenly once the sun had set, and myriads of fireflies gathered like star-dust to match the galaxy overhead. The pipes of the smokers in both boats glowed brighter; but neither was in sight of the other, though from the crest where Barry and Little waited both were visible. All around the silent watchers the jungle voices whispered and crooned. In the trees above them monkeys chattered at the unheard-of intrusion of boats and men on the privacy of their sleeping places. A belated deer thrust his head through a thicket and gazed foolishly at Little's astonished face, then, with a whisk and flirt, he bounded back into the bush, sending twigs and leaves flying in his alarm.

The noise served to arouse Barry, for his senses had been lulled by the dark soft night voices, and he had been dreaming again. He sprang alert in a moment at the deer's sudden commotion, and now his keen ear caught another, harsher sound; the sound of booted feet approaching.

"Here's some white man!" he whispered, drawing Little back into hiding, for that ardent young man was yet staring open-eyed after the vanished deer.

"Leyden!" breathed Little, and a voice from the as yet unseen stranger bore out his guess. Leyden came to the river bank without any attempt at caution. He sent earth and rushes scattering beneath his feet, and he hailed his boat's crew in a voice that carried clear over the river.

"Start her up, lads," he cried, stepping down the bank where two men waited to hand him into the launch. "Give her all she'll carry, engineer. The luck's right

with us!"

The launch broke into sudden bustle, and sparks flew from the smokestack. The crew chattered freely and much merriment was mixed in the chatter. But the thing that shocked Barry, and gave even the unthinking Little cause for reflection, was Leyden's tone. If ever utter and complete triumph and exaltation were expressed in man's voice, they were ringing then in every word the man uttered.

No particular word was spoken to give excuse for the feeling in the skipper's breast; but in every note and syllable Leyden uttered, even the bare order to cast off lines, there was jubilation and mirth. And mirth, in a man like Leyden, meant mischief, according to Jack Barry's ideas. When, after the launch floated away from the bank, the man actually began to sing a cheerful little song about ripe pomegranates and passion flowers, Barry's teeth had all but loosened themselves through sheer grinding rage.

"Get aboard!" he growled into Little's ear, plunging down towards the longboat. "If only that rat would give me a chance to peep along sights at him!"

The lugsails were useless until the gorge was passed; and in the narrowed river the current swept down with doubled velocity, making the stout oars crack as the seamen bent their backs to offset it. And when at last the wider stream was entered, and the sails began to draw, the launch had passed out of sight; only the distant and diminishing chug of her propeller gave indication that she was ahead. With gathering speed as the night breeze gained strength, the boat sailed on, and until she had suddenly to haul up at a square bend in the river, she equalled the chase in speed. But then, tacking close inshore to get a long board for the next bend, she suddenly grounded, silently, easily, with an absence of shock or grating that told only too plainly of sticky, fast-holding mud.

"Confound such a ditch!" swore Barry irritably. "Why in thunder didn't that fat swab of a Houten tell me what the river was like! Overboard, every man," he ordered, with swift decision. "Over, and lighten her. Shove her into midstream, and we'll row it out."

"Alligators!" Little whispered, much as he might have said "Skittles."

"Damn the alligators!" retorted Barry, and set the example by leaping into the turbid river.

Little struck the water almost with the same splash, and the boat's crew started to clamber over the sides, shamed into obedience. Barry stayed where he had jumped, and the position of his head could only be determined by the volley of disgusted anathema that peeled from his lips.

"Don't jump deep, men!" he cried. "You'll stick up to the neck in this filth! Fall flat on the water and swim with the boat."

"Sure, like me," chimed in Little, seizing the gunwale and striking out with strong leg strokes. The seamen joined their efforts, and with twelve expert swimmers thrusting the boat forward, the skipper was dragged out of the tenacious mud with a loud sucking sound.

"Pull, confound you!" Barry panted, all but torn in two. "Another like that—Oh, blazes! There's my other shoe gone!"

Before the great splash which followed his release had died out, from the near bank came the "plop plop!" of heavy bodies dropping into the water. Little swam around the seamen and surged up alongside the skipper, whispering into his ear so that none other could hear: "Gators, skipper!"

"Kick out harder!" breathed back Barry, and thrashed the water violently to drown the noises from shorewards that told of a great number of those inquisitive reptiles cruising to investigate the commotion in their river. It was impossible to keep the men long in ignorance of their danger, for as the boat crept into deeper water, their swimming made less noise, and the approaching saurians' progress was easier marked.

"All aboard!" cried Barry at last, feeling, but never hinting that he felt, a hard, nuzzling snout brush by his leg. "Hurry, men, the breeze is shifting."

The breeze was not shifting, but in the swirl of water at his side he heard the sudden sob of fear that told him the man beside him had realized that something else than current ripples was about him.

Little sensed the peril, too, and like the fearless swimmer he had proved himself, he let go his hold on the boat and started in a close, loud-thrashing circle to round in the seamen who were trying with the clumsiness of fright to climb aboard. Barry, far less able swimmer, started around in the opposite direction; and between them they gave a hand here, darted off to drive away an alligator there, and got all aboard but one man. And this man, panic-stricken, strove alone

to climb over the stern. His legs and feet were sucked in under the boat, and he hung by the elbows, unable to move a hand to get farther, and powerless through fear to let go for a fresh grip.

"Let go, man!" shouted Barry, coming up on one side as Little ranged up on the other. "Let go and get hold along the gunwale. Here, Little, tear him loose; the man's crazed!"

The seaman suddenly let go, and a shriek pealed from his throat. He disappeared from between Barry and Little with a swift downward plunge that almost took them as well; and the tremendous commotion in the water told only too plainly what agency had taken the man. And, as if in echo to the man's shriek, a second shrill whistle from the bank indicated the presence of the other watchman.

"Come, we can't help him, Little," gasped Barry. "Save your own legs, man."

"Poor devil! But I guess you're right," muttered Little, and helped by willing hands they clambered over the gunwale and fell panting into the bottom of the boat.

They got sail on the longboat and stood straight up midstream, the oars driving her until she reached the next bend, where her altered course brought the wind to a sailing point. And in response to shouted orders, the man on the bank kept pace with them, until deeper water permitted the boat to edge in and take him on board.

"Where's the launch now?" queried the skipper. The river had become as dark as a pocket. From ten fathoms out both shores were merged in one black smudge.

"He go fast, sar, long time gone," replied the man, and his teeth chattered with excitement, for he had heard his shipmate's death cry.

"Gone long time!" echoed Barry angrily. "Then what are you doing here? Why didn't you follow farther?"

"No can do, sar. 'Nother ribber join here, sar."

Investigation verified this. The man had been halted by a broad tributary stream, and fear had prevented him from swimming over. And he was not sure, either, whether the launch had gone straight up the main stream or taken the tributary. She had stolen along past him without lights, he said, and he could not follow her definitely by hearing. But the fact of her falling into silence warned Barry

that she was nearing some destination or halting place, for she had left her last stop noisily enough.

"Better keep to the river and make for the sands," suggested Little. "He's sure to go there."

"I suppose he is," returned Barry, in puzzlement. "But which is the main river? I can't make it out in this coal pocket."

"Think we'd better tie up and wait until daylight, or the moon rises?"

"The only thing to do," grunted Barry. "And that means nearly daylight. There's no moon until morning."

The sails were lowered, and the boat poled cautiously into the bank. She slid over viscid slime that scarcely impeded her and came to rest against the twisted roots of a malodorous tree from which drooped heavy, damp masses of moss, felt, but unseen. Barry gave orders to stretch a sail for an awning, sensing a heavy dew before darkness lifted; and setting a watch fore and aft, he bade the crew snatch what sleep they might.

And silence had hardly settled over the boat when the underbrush crackled above them, and a quiet voice called out:

"Given us the slip, Captain, hey?"

Following the soft query, a huge bulk dropped nimbly and expertly down by an overhanging vine, and Vandersee sat on the stern boards beside Barry.



CHAPTER TEN

The big Hollander's sudden and unperturbed appearance in the boat seemed to cast a soothing spell upon the rattled nerves of the native crew. The night was yet too dark to distinguish faces; but every man in the boat, from Barry himself down to the greenest hand, knew from intimate association that soft, musical voice. Vandersee lit a black cheroot, passed some around, and remarked impartially to Little and the skipper:

"Our task will be finished sooner than I expected."

Such apparent coolness and breezy optimism at a moment when things looked to be at a dead end made Barry gasp in renewed amazement at this unfathomable second mate, who was so obviously something infinitely more than a second mate.

"Sooner?" he echoed sharply. "You've got cat's eyes, haven't you, Vandersee?"

"Not exactly, sir." The reply was enwrapped within a low chuckle. "I have fairly good eyes, though, and a very good equipment of the other senses."

"Then for the love of Moses Malachi, don't talk in riddles!" snapped Barry. Little leaned forward, fascinated by the small circle of Vandersee's florid face illumined by the glowing tip of his cheroot.

"Excuse me, Captain Barry," smiled back the Hollander. "I am forgetting that you have been tied to ship's business and have not had my opportunities. I mean, by the task being finished sooner, that Leyden has cast aside all subtleties and is going straight for his mark in spite of you. There is little to do now except to go out openly for him and get him. He has this evening finally persuaded Miss Sheldon, I believe, to accompany him when his schooner leaves—"

"What!" shouted Barry, springing up to the imminent peril of the boat.

"Sh-h," warned Vandersee respectfully yet irresistibly pulling the skipper down. "Sh-h! Nothing is to be gained by anger. Will you take my assurance that Miss Sheldon is at present in even better hands than your own? Oh, I know something of your mind, Captain. I have similar hopes and expectations for you with regard to the little Mission lady. And I can put you easy in your mind. Miss Sheldon is

not for Leyden. Nor is any other woman in this world. That is all I can tell you now; but I swear it."

Barry sat silent for some moments, cooling off before he would trust himself to speak. And the influence of Vandersee spread over all like a beneficent spirit, instilling calmness and confidence where a short time before had been bewilderment.

"But you admit yourself he has slipped us, Vandersee," said Barry at length.

"For the moment, yes. But you may be sure Leyden is still in the river, and you are between him and his ship. That is one fact that makes the thing simple. I came down merely to tell you that he has struck, and that in spite of him Miss Sheldon's situation need not worry you, Captain. I felt that you would be easier for the knowledge."

"Then you know where he's flown to?" Little queried, breaking a long silence during which he had sat motionless, staring up at the vague outlines of the Hollander's face.

"Not precisely, Mr. Little, but near enough to give Captain Barry a useful hint. For one thing, he's at this moment picking up arms, which he left his ship without for purposes of policy regarding the feelings of his friends at the Mission."

"Oh, cut it short," interjected Barry impatiently. "I admit your greater knowledge in this, Vandersee. What shall I do? Wait here for daylight, then try back after him?"

"Wait for daylight, yes. But instead of trying back, my advice is that you proceed straight up the river and find Mr. Houten's gold sands, Captain. I have other work, not connected in any way with gold dust, but our paths must surely meet shortly. When I told you that I was always in reach of a message delivered to the gateman I meant just that. I shall be within reach of you, too, wherever you are; and so long as you have left orders regarding that message with Mr. Rolfe, we shall all come out right. If I may presume to remind you, your first duty is to clear up the mystery of those gold deposits for Mr. Houten. Until that is done our tasks lie apart somewhat. But the moment you have satisfied yourself and Mr. Little on that score, I shall call on you for assistance in my own work, if you care to render it. It is not obligatory on you, though."

"All right," returned Barry; "then since you appear to hold all the trump cards perhaps you can give me a hint where this gold washing is done, for all Little has found out is that it's somewhere on the main river."

"Yes, Captain. If you hug the left bank all the way you'll find water enough, and there is no baffling stream on that side to give you uncertainty. You can't miss it. You'll find Houten's men working there, and it's only twenty miles up from here. Is there anything else?"

"No, unless I repeat that I'd like to know more about the side issues of this thing, for I'm darned if I like this blind alley work."

Barry's tone was disgruntled, and even the volatile spirit of Little had lost its bubbling quality with the night's mystery and darkness. Vandersee laughed softly, pleasantly, and replied:

"Sorry I can't give you more light just now. It would injure my own plans, which, as I have told you, are apart from yours at present but will merge very soon. One thing, though, if you intend waiting for daylight it would be better to shift over to the other side of the river before you tie up. Now I'll go, gentlemen, for I hear one of my boys with news. Good luck to you."

Nobody had heard a sound, save the indescribable night voices of the jungle and the rippling of the black waters; yet the big Hollander's ears had heard something different, and as he spoke he swung his huge bulk out of the boat and up the bank by the vines that had served him in coming, disappearing from sight and sound swiftly and silently as a great cat. Little and Barry leaned towards each other, seeking to discern features and expressions. It was hopeless in the blackness, but Barry's feelings were revealed in his tone.

"Stow this awning!" he growled, rising to his feet and furiously casting off the stern line. "Little, if you need sleep, catch it now. I'll wait no longer for the answer to this riddle." Then to the crew he barked: "Cast off for'ard; shove off, bow; step the masts and make sail!"

Again the boat moved smoothly through the water, the near bank faded into the general smudge of night, and she stood over until the farther shore appeared like a darker patch on a dark screen. Then two seamen with keen eyes were told off to keep the bank in view, and they alone served as guides for the blind course.

For hours they stemmed the stream, brushing overhanging vines and mosses

with their masts at times; then a great round moon peeped over the tangled trees and shed a ribbon of vivid light upon the river, ever intensifying and widening until the surrounding country stood revealed to them as clearly as in noontime.

Little sat beside the skipper, wide-eyed and alert as himself, and now they could see something of the windings of the stream. Barry's chart had shown the river only as far as navigation was possible for vessels coming up from the sea, and that stopped at a very short distance above the trading post. Here, a few miles beyond the point where they had left Vandersee, the banks trended ever in a wide sweep, reach after reach, until, allowing for the moon's hourly passage, something in her position proved to Barry what he had for some time begun to suspect.

"Say, Little," he remarked, "we've sailed or rowed almost twenty miles now, and be darned if I don't think we're within five miles of the post yet!"

"Anything's likely to me, Barry," returned Little carelessly. "If you said we'd gone the other way and would sight Surabaya in fifteen minutes, I'd believe you, old sailor. This darkness and light, racket and hush, mud flats and moss on the masts, all in one evening, has got me flummuxed. But I've got one little thought myself," he added dreamily.

"Ye Gods!" ejaculated Barry sarcastically. "What?"

"Oh, just whether Leyden knows Vandersee's here or not."

"I suppose so. The Mission folks and Mrs. Goring know it, don't they? And everybody knows more about this affair than you or I, don't they?"

"I don't know," drawled Little, and without another word he pulled his hat over his eyes, snuggled down, and gave Barry his answer in the shape of a soft, prolonged snore.

The moon sailed overhead and dipped with dimming luster behind a ridge of jungle giants whose upper branches were waking into life. Monkeys and parrots with higher, keener vision than that of the boatmen heralded the gray light breaking low down in the east, and with the swiftness of the moon's coming, dawn turned the black of the river to gray, then to yellow.

But now the yellowness was clear and transparent, different altogether from the muddy foulness of the lower reaches. And the country around lost the density of matted jungle and undulated in a succession of grassy stretches through which

cropped great round hummocks of sandy hills. The stream narrowed to a swift running gorge between two such hummocks, then suddenly widened out to five times the width, and the water rippled over sandy shoals that barred further progress in the loaded boat. Barry searched the scene eagerly, bringing the boat to the wind to arrest her way; then suddenly he awoke Little with a shake.

"Come to life, man, we're here!" he said.

Little sat up, rubbing his eyes in confusion at the total change in his surroundings, for he had not opened them once since falling asleep. To be there meant to him that he had arrived among gold dust and romance, and he sought as eagerly as Barry for signs of their arrival. He was disappointed, frankly and utterly.

"Gosh, Barry, this can't be it!" he gasped. "Why, man, where are the red shirts and the faro joints?"

To the eye Houten's gold sands offered little of allure. On both shores the river seemed exactly as other rivers, except for a small cluster of ramshackle grass huts under a clump of dwarf trees and a rough raft of logs tied with grass ropes to a stake set in the bed of the river itself. Of life there was none visible; but as oars rattled in the boat to swing her inshore, a sleepy native emerged from one of the huts, and his swift cry brought a score of his fellows to stare at the intruders.

"Don't look like El Dorado, at that!" grunted Barry, steering inshore and running the boat up on the sand.

"El Dorado? The gold washers look more like collar washers to me!" retorted Little disgustedly. "And is this what I gave up a decent drumming round for? Gosh!"

Profiting by early lessons, Barry warned his men to keep a sharp lookout. He divided them into two watches, bidding them to cook some food for all hands against his return, and giving permission for them to rest or sleep if they wished to, so long as half of them remained awake. Then followed by Little in abashed silence, he went up to the huts and announced his mission.

"Gol' dust, sar? No catchum here," was the response in a chorus.

"No catchum, hey? Very quick I make catchum," retorted Barry grimly. The little brown men stared at each other and then at the white men, some grinning openly, others shifting uneasily under the skipper's scrutiny.

"This is Cornelius Houten's gold camp, ain't it?" put in Little, addressing a man who seemed to be pushed forward by his fellows.

"Ho yis, sar, dis Misser Houten's camp," the man replied, "but he no got gol' dust here. I don' know what Misser Gordon send us here for, sar," he concluded, with a grin of enlightenment.

"Don't know, hey?" burst out Barry, shoving the man aside and entering the biggest of the huts. "Keep your eye on these chaps, Little," he cried. "If they budge a finger don't wait. Shoot."

There was no shooting. Barry found himself in a squalid interior, containing all the discomforts of native bachelordom with no compensating comforts. Remnants of food and dilapidated sleeping mats strewed the dirty floor. But the thing that sent the skipper outside on the run was the sight of a heap of gold-washing implements piled in a corner and bearing no evidence of more than very casual usage. Anything approaching the appearance of an active gold camp escaped his eye, and his eye was unwontedly keen.

"Little, bring up half the boat crew!" he ordered, rejoining his friend outside. "Have 'em bring their guns quickly. And bring all the small rope there is. There's some queer business here."

The skipper drew out his own pistol, huddled the wondering natives into a bunch, and kept them under his muzzle. When his sailors arrived, he lined out every man clear of the huts, compared their number with the figure on Little's list brought from the post, and then pulled out the spokesman by the ear, holding his pistol to the man's head. The boat crew held their rifles threateningly.

"What's up, Barry?" demanded Little, in a mental fog.

"Shut up!" snorted the skipper and turned to his captive. Giving the man's ear a twist, he demanded:

"What's your game here? Speak up, or I'll shoot you!"

The man squirmed uneasily, scared out of most of his wits; but in his fright he retained some sense, and what was better, some loyalty.

"No game, sar," he cried. "Me Misser Houten's man. We all Misser Houten's man, sar. I tell you true; dere is no gol' dust here. Suppose you want to steal gol' dust, some other place, maybe. Here no gottit."

"Steal? Why—Oh dammit, Little!" Barry exclaimed, "the fellow thinks we've come to rob Houten. Show him your letter, or whatever it is. Better yet, let one of the hands tell him who we are. I'll never make him understand."

The *bona fides* of the party established, the atmosphere was cleared to the extent of faces smiling where faces had looked frightened before; but no other answer could be got from the gold washers.

"We been here many weeks—months, sar—but no gol' dust got. Very soon we all go back; no got food no more; nobody come here. Misser Gordon tell us stop along here until he say come back. Many days we wash sand in de river, but no gol', sar, no, sar."

Barry was nonplussed. He glared at Little, seeking inspiration from a man as dumbfounded as himself. Little grinned sheepishly back at him and remarked:

"I expected this, Barry. It didn't seem right, somehow, for me to ever find honest-to-gosh gold sands. All my adventures have proved dreams. This is about right."

"Right! Then sleep on it. It isn't right to me, by a jugful, Little. Here!" he called one of his crew. "Bring that rope, and I'll see whether these fellows are playing straight with us."

One by one the sailor passed down the line of natives, tying each man securely until only the spokesman remained free. This man Barry turned towards the hut, and said to him:

"If you speak truth, you're all right. Lie, and you're all wrong, my lad. Take the gear you want for washing and get out into the river. Go right to it, if you want to save your skin. Let me see if there's gold or not there." He turned to the rest and told them: "You'll all have a chance. The man who brings me dust is free. The others—" he finished with a suggestive gesture that they could not misunderstand.

"All ri', sar," replied the man, taking up his gear, "suppose I die, no can help. I tell you no gol' here, sar, dat's true." And as the fellow waded into the river, his companions echoed in dismay:

"No, sar. No gol' in dis river. He some udder place."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The cry of the gold washers did not alter Barry's plans; he followed the native to the river and kept him under close observation from the bank. But Little thought he had detected a note of sincerity in that dismal wail and undertook a little scrutiny himself. He, like Barry, was ignorant regarding the business of gold seeking; but the native sense and shrewdness that had carried him to a high point of salesmanship fitted him to at least read signs if such signs were. He opened a bulky wallet which served him for a travelling case, and from among a litter of shaving gear, hairbrush, and spare sock-suspenders, he took a huge reading glass, purchased in Batavia with a vague idea of studying insect life in the primitive wilds.

This he carried into the hut and diligently sought with it for traces of glittering metal. Common sense told him that if gold had ever been found here, it must have been carried away or stored against transportation, and in so crude a plant it was conceivable that specks of gold would be discovered somewhere about the floor. Thus he scrutinized every square foot of the floors of all the huts, pulling off roofs and knocking out walls wherever necessary to get sufficient light. But no trace of metal did he find; nothing but a populous colony of virile insects that at last drove him out to the river, shedding clothes as he ran.

Barry met him with a grin on the bank and helped him peel off his garments.

"Struck it rich, hey?" chuckled the skipper, amused out of his scowling disgust. "Find any gold?"

"Gold color, Barry, and they bite like gold-bugs!" chirped Little, irrepressible even in his discomfort; for red ants bite hard and deep. "How about you?" he shouted over his shoulder, as he floundered into the water to rid himself of his tiny tormentors.

"I believe the man's right," returned Barry. "I never saw gold washing done, but if there's any gold in this river it's a long way from here. It don't *look* like gold sand to me."

Little emerged from his bath and sluiced out his clothes. While dressing, he began to see something more than a temporary fault in the search for Houten's

gold. These few men from the post were undoubtedly loyal to his employer and Barry's; but why they should have been sent to this place to make a palpable bluff at gold mining, even to building huts and carrying up washing gear and food, beat him as a problem. And Barry was no clearer on the matter.

"I believe I begin to see why Leyden showed such cocksureness," muttered Barry, taking his companion's arm and returning to the huts. He shouted to the man in the river to come out and gave orders for the others to be released; then, with a quiet hint to his own crew to keep an unobtrusive watch over the liberated men, he and Little walked upstream to a piece of high ground, and there they sat down to discuss the situation where they had under their eyes every yard of country within a five-mile radius.

Upstream the river speedily dwindled to a creek, and its headwaters were apparently fed out of a maze of low jungle land that looked feverish and uninviting. Beyond the stream, the land rolled away for a mile in smoothly alternating downs and hills; on the near side, two miles of open country lay spread before them, fringed at that distance by a dark and luxuriant forest of stout trees. In the direction from which they had come, the river ran into the narrow pass, and disappeared from view; but the nature of the country beyond was well known to them by having passed through most of it by bright moonlight.

"I don't mind being fooled like this, but what gets me is Vandersee's attitude again," remarked Barry, with his eyes roving keenly over the stretch of land that terminated in the forest.

"That's what I can't understand," agreed Little. "He knows so much that he must know about this fake. If he does, what could be his object in letting us come up here?"

"It beats me, Little," the skipper grunted. His gaze had fixed upon a point in the forest fringe, and for a moment he said no more; then he said with sudden interest:

"You've got good eyes; what d' ye make of that?" and pointed.

Out from the forest trees a party of people had emerged, and they seemed to be lined up in some sort of definite order. Little stared awhile, then replied:

"In uniform, ain't they? Sailors or soldiers, hey?"

"Look like naval seamen to me—natives too—wonder if the Dutch Navy has native crews out here."

"There's at least one white man, Barry. Two—no, three—coming over here, too. Here, let's get back to the boat. Perhaps we'll find out something about this mix-up."

"Bright boy," rejoined the skipper, rising. "Get ready to make the talk. You speak Dutch, don't you?"

"Enough to sell typewriters," grinned the ex-salesman. "I can say gold, and point, anyhow."

Back to the boat they hurried, and Barry first made his men stow their arms out of sight. Armed expeditions were not in favor with the authorities. The action did not escape the gold washers, and they drew together in a huddle, chattering among themselves. They had no arms visible, and the skipper took little heed to them; his entire faculties were working on the problem that faced him. Little, too, stood beside him, waiting for the strangers to come in sight above the hummocks that rose between river and forest. It was one of the gold seekers who startled them into swift life.

"Oh, sar! Dat man he run! He queer fella, sar; no good, dat man!"

Barry swung around, followed the direction of the speaker's outflung arm, and saw a brown figure running like a deer towards the down-river gorge. He had run the minute Barry disarmed his men.

"Fire after him!" he shouted, then remembered that his men had no guns at hand now. He whipped out his own pistol and fired. But the distance was too great for such a short-barrelled weapon, and the fugitive ran on, bounding like a rubber ball over sand and grasses until he vanished from sight over the river bank.

"After him and bring him back!" cried Barry, shoving two of his own men in that direction. The seamen followed with true sea clumsiness in running; but as they ran they gained speed, and they were not two hundred yards behind the chase when they too reached the river and vanished.

"Now what's up, I wonder," muttered Little, staring from his skipper to the open-mouthed gold washers, who expressed alarm beyond suspicion of connivance. "Here, you!" he demanded of the man who had been spokesman; "what fashion that man, hey?"

"He no man for us, sar," chattered the shivering native. "He bring de last lot of rice for us. Me no know him before, sar. He new man, I t'ink."

"New man?" echoed Barry, still more at a loss. His face had darkened, and the scowl that sat on his forehead reminded Little of a certain scene on a hotel veranda in Surabaya. Further speech or thought was cut short then by a cry from one of the *Barang's* crew, and topping the last rise of the river bank marched three white men in the uniform of naval officers, followed by twelve stout natives in seamen's rig. They advanced towards the waiting men of the *Barang*, lined up at a sharp "Halt!" and the white men came forward alone. They were keen-eyed men, tanned and capable, yet they impressed Barry as contrasting very poorly with the naval officers he had known. The men were poorer yet; they were utterly slovenly in their address, holding their rifles at as many different positions as there were men,—and even Little noticed that the arms were not all from the same factory. But the strangers were before them, and now one of them spoke curtly:

"Your business here?" addressing Barry in English.

"What is yours?" retorted the skipper as curtly.

"Answer me!" snapped the officer. "I am seeking just such a party as yours."

"What if I don't choose to tell you?"

"In that case—" the man shrugged and smiled evilly. "Never mind, my friend. I, as an officer of the Dutch Navy, demand your business here."

"Oh, since you speak officially, I am seeking gold for my employer on land that your Government has leased to him," Barry replied. The result was surprising.

"Gold!" The officer croaked the word as if derision were choking him. He stared from Barry to Little and then at his companions, and they, too, broke into derisive grins that sent Barry's anger mounting.

"Gold? A pretty tale, my friend. It is interesting to know that gold is to be found here. I must look into your boat and see what instruments you use to seek gold where no gold is. Search that boat!" he snapped, and another white went off with two men to the river bank. In a few minutes they were back, and they bore all the rifles lately stowed therein.

"So!" sneered the leader. "All one needs to secure gold in Celebes is a rifle—yes

—" he swiftly counted heads—"a rifle to each man. Stop!" he cried, as Little's hand slipped to his pocket. "You are my prisoners."

His own pistol was presented at Barry, and beside him another man held an unwavering muzzle at Little. He gave some rapid commands in the native tongue, and two men stepped out and securely tied the hands of Barry and his friend. Another man stepped into the biggest hut, emerged, and searched the rest in order. When he at last rejoined his fellows, he carried some tins in his hand, and at sight of them a look of satisfied cunning passed between the Dutch officers.

"Very good!" ejaculated the leader, and a cruel expression lurked in his eyes. He conversed in whispers for a moment with his mates, then nodded his head. "Easy to pick sheep from wolves here," he remarked, looking swiftly over the native seamen and the gold washers. "These men are all we want," and he indicated Barry and Little and the *Barang's* party.

A shuffling formation took place, and half of the Dutch sailors ranged up beside the prisoners; the other half remained and herded the gold washers together. Barry tried to look around, but a pistol at his head warned him not to try it again, and out of a corner of his eye he caught the grimace on Little's face which told of a similar disappointment.

"Forward—march!" shouted the officer, and the party struck off towards the forest. Behind them the sound of axes told of a dismantled boat; when that sound ceased, another more ominous sound struck dismay into the captives. It was the sound of a fusillade of musketry, and echoing the reports came the shrill, entreating cries of the unfortunate gold washers. Shot after shot rang out, and cry after cry, until the cries ceased and only a few scattering reports indicated that perhaps one poor wretch had sought safety in the river only to afford sport for his assassins.

"You infernal murderers!" gritted Barry and flashed about, all bound as he was, to rush at the leader.

"Right about face!" the fellow growled, and a long knife in his hand pricked deeply into Barry's upper arm. "March, you dirty smugglers!" he growled again, and the column moved on.

"Smugglers!" Little echoed, ignoring his own guardian and swinging around at the taunt. "Look here, old chap, if that's your idea, you're dead wrong. We're no

smugglers—"

"March, I said!" came the order, and Little also subsided, perforce at the persuasion of cold steel.

Across the open they trailed in a long line, the rear brought up by the party hurrying up from the river. They entered the forest and struck into a trackless jungle, where Barry and Little suffered the torments of damnation from insects and swinging creepers that stung, neither of which could they avoid with their hands bound. As for their men, of such small importance did their captors think them that they were permitted to march unfettered, simply under the eyes of their guards.

As the forest grew deeper and darker, the party straggled out more and more, until Barry began again to peer about him for an opening of escape. It seemed hopeless. At his side, and at Little's side, stalked one of the white officers, no matter how dense the thicket they passed; if it were too thick for two abreast, the officer would shove his captive ahead of himself to break the way, and until the breach was clear, a knife-point pressed sharply into the back effectively prevented a dash. But the seamen were not in such a fix. Little, in bursting through a cane brake, cringing with the pain of a sharp stab between his shoulders, found himself momentarily alongside one of the sailors of his own ship; and, daring even further visitation of the knife, he let fly the canes with a rattling crash into his guard's face and whispered fiercely to the seaman:

"Run! Tell Mr. Rolfe!"

His guard burst through, swearing vilely, and rewarded the temerarious typewriter expert with a twisting prod that kept him gasping for the rest of the journey, now nearing its end. But Little was satisfied. When at length they broke through a mat of bush and came out into an open glade dotted with great, bare, brown humps, his pained eyes twinkled at Barry with some of his old cheery spirit and, speechless though they were under coercion, imparted hope to the skipper.

They were given little time to wonder what their fate was to be. Presuming they had been carried to this place for a midday halt, and that their journey would

soon be resumed, Barry and Little flung themselves down to rest and maintained a careless attitude in the face of their captors. But this attitude was swiftly dispelled for, idly staring at the sailors, barely wondering at what they saw, they suddenly awoke to a fear that turned them cold.

"Look!" muttered Barry hoarsely. Little needed no such reminder.

One by one the *Barang's* seamen were taken to trees and fastened securely by tough vines. No distinction was made between seamen and the men from the post, since neither wore uniforms but were simply dressed in flimsy cotton pants and shirt. In a wide circle they were placed, and gradually it dawned upon Barry that he and Little were in the center of the circle.

Now the leader of the naval crew called his fellows, and they approached their white prisoners with ropes—vegetable vines. And with the leer of a devil, the officer leaned down and flung Barry over on his face.

Swiftly both captives were secured, and with no tyro hands. Then they were dragged apart a bit, and each lifted and carried by head and feet until they were fairly over two of those bare, brown humps of earth. Here they were dropped, and a heavy stake at head and foot, driven into the ground, made tethering posts for their bonds.

"My God! Ants!" gasped Barry, struggling madly. A laugh above him chilled his blood, and a drawling voice replied: "Yes, my brave gold washer. Ants. A fit amusement for such as you."

Barry twisted his purple face to catch Little's eye. In the ex-salesman, so swiftly transferred from an atmosphere of peaceful trade to one of lurid tragedy, the skipper saw a pale, awed fear of the horrible; but not one trace of weakness was there: none of the coward. Little returned his friend's gaze and, bravely trying to conceal the effort it cost him, he winked slowly, whimsically, then wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"In case you may not be sufficiently amused, we will make sure of good quick action," sneered the officer, and a man came forward with a pail of sticky native sugar. This he smeared over both the bound men, then laid trails of the mess in radiating lines to the edge of the ant hills to attract other vermin.

And when all was done, the Dutch party withdrew, and Little's soul surged with renewed hope. He called softly yet clearly to Barry:

"There's a chance yet! They'll go now. I sent a man to the ship!"

"It is just a chance," returned Barry more hopefully. Then his heart sank again, and he groaned: "Not a chance, Little, old scout. Look! The fiends are camping. They mean to watch us out!"



CHAPTER TWELVE

Aboard the *Barang* Mr. Rolfe and happy Bill Blunt kept a wary watch upon the vessel moored astern. For an hour after the boat had departed, an air of stupendous readiness for anything that might turn up pervaded the old brigantine, and her remaining crew showed in their attitudes their realization of the necessity for all these impressive measures.

Then, as the evening drew on, something about the schooner astern caused the mate to secretly regard his newly shipped watch and mate, and in turn made Bill Blunt make many a trip to the shelter of the galley whence he inspected his superior quizzically. At length, when the hands were getting their supper, eating on the forecastle head in order to maintain their attitude of alertness, the mate joined Bill and remarked tentatively:

"Seems quiet aboard there, don't it?"

"Werry nice, sir, that it do," rejoined Bill, masticating a colossal quid with enjoyment.

"Almost think she was—"

"Deserted, sir? Took it right outa my mouth, you did," Bill filled in, and the two men peered into each other's faces questioningly.

The *Padang* did look deserted. In fact, ever since the big launch left, and a few hands had been seen about the wharf busily adjusting the lines that apparently needed no adjustment, no life had been conspicuous aboard her. The villagers had long since gone to their homes, since there was no work for them at the dock after Houten's small parcel of trade goods had gone up to the post, and the two vessels lay as quiet and peaceful as if in some humdrum port of concrete wharves and steam cranes. But now, as if to answer the doubts of the brigantine's people, a gangway light shone out on the schooner, and another, dimmer and partly obscured, sent yellow rays from the half-open galley door.

"Somebody there, anyway," muttered Rolfe, and satisfied once more that vigilance was necessary, if not quite as vital as before, he split the men into watches, sent one half to sleep, and partook of a final pipe with the old navy man

before turning in himself.

And as the still, dark night enveloped them, and the river chill struck up, they made themselves more comfortable in the shelter of the deckhouse, one dozing on the lounge while the other remained awake, both ready for an instant call.

It was the same black, opaque night as Barry and his crew spent up the river, waiting for the moon; and the mysterious night noises from the shore were lulling and drowsy. Gradually the schooner blurred into a vague mass of shadow, out of which the two lights twinkled uncertainly. And mingling with the chirp of insects and the fitful cries of dreaming monkeys came a gnawing and rasping of wood that seemed to echo throughout the silent *Barang*.

"What's that?" growled Blunt, sitting up and listening.

"Rats," returned Rolfe sleepily. "Th' darned old wagon's alive with 'em."

"Them's proper rats, I bet," rejoined Bill, snuggling down again. "Reglar bandicoots, sounds like."

Silence again descended upon the brigantine, and darkness broken only by the paling lights on the schooner and the red glow of the mate's pipe. Then out of the quiet came the sharp twang of a hawser, and the brigantine shivered. Both watchers started up and ran to the side, striving to penetrate the blackness. The lines ran down to their proper bollards, as usual, and the river sluiced swiftly alongside, swirling musically between the rotten piles of the ramshackle wharf.

"Some current!" grumbled the mate, testing a line with his full weight thrown on one foot. "Better give her a bit more on all the lines, Blunt. Not much. Couple of feet or so. Seems as if the river rises at night. Hill water, I expect."

The lines were surged and made fast again, and the *Barang's* people resumed their silent vigil. But the absence of alarms worked against true vigilance. Profiting by the example of their officers, the little brown men coiled themselves away in corners and dozed, ready for a call, truly, but willing to wait for it. Aft, the two officers sat in their deckhouse, willing enough to watch, but inevitably rendered dull of sight and sense by the mystery of the night and the quiet peace of the river.

Once, twice, and again the hawsers twanged, and now they twanged at will, for with such a stream running it was excusable for even such a worthy officer as Jerry Rolfe to put something down to natural causes. And incessantly the rats

gnawed, gnawed, and ripped at the wood beneath them until even that sound helped to soothe instead of alarm.

Then, suddenly leaping to his feet, shaking Bill Blunt furiously as he arose, the mate stared towards the schooner and cried, with arm flung out:

"Ain't she moving? Is she—Holy smoke, it's us!"

"We 'm adrift all right, sar," agreed Blunt, scrutinizing the schooner, which was now close aboard and growing visible.

Both men ran to the lines, Rolfe forward, Blunt aft, and now the mystery of those twanging hawsers was clear. The ropes hung down into the water, and the *Barang* moved on the stream until she was almost rubbing alongside the schooner, on whose decks men enough were visible now.

"Aboard the *Padang*!" shouted Rolfe. "Catch my lines, will you? We're adrift."

"Sheer off," came back the answer, and the voice was full of menace. "Anchor, you no-sailor! Fight your own troubles."

"By Godfrey, I'll fight some o' you, soon's I get fast," roared the mate furiously, and stumbled to the windlass.

The anchor Vandersee had dropped in midstream in docking the ship was on a long cable, and the *Barang* was gliding swiftly down over it. His men were at hand, but Rolfe needed little time to decide that it would be quicker to bring up on a fresh anchor than to heave in enough of the first chain to snub her way. He started to cast off the shank-painter of the second anchor, when Bill Blunt's hoarse bellow pealed from aft.

"Hey, Mister Rolfe, she's sinkin'!"

It required but one keen glance over the side to prove the fact, and now, after one staggering moment of unbelief, the truth flashed upon the mate. The mystery of those gnawing rats, too, was clear.

"You dirty swine!" he screamed at the schooner. "You and your crook of a skipper'll pay for this!"

He snatched up a trailing hawser, saw the ends which had been cut through strand by strand, and with a grasp of the situation that had been better applied earlier, he ran aft, shouting to his crew as he ran:

"Loose a jib and hoist it! Lively! You, Blunt, give her a sheer with the wheel—across the river—that's you."

Sarcastic mirth murmured aboard the schooner, once more fading into a blur; but Jerry Rolfe had his plan, and as the forward canvas rattled up the stay, and the vessel slued across the current, drawing in for the farther shore, he shook his fist at the *Padang* and growled:

"Cut me adrift and scuttle me, will ye? And, by Hokey, you stay where you are until this ship's afloat again!"

That was his plan, and it worked like a charm. When she had left the schooner a hundred yards up the river, the *Barang* stuck her nose into the soft mud, slid greasily forward, shuddered and stopped; and every minute she sank deeper, until in ten minutes she stood upright and firm, planted snugly in the river bottom, fair across the channel, leaving no passage fore or aft for anything of bigger craft than a canoe or ship's boat. And after a silence that might almost be felt, uneasy voices began to sound aboard the schooner, until a chorus of furious howlings announced the discovery of a sad miscarriage of an unseamanly trick.

"That's where they get theirs!" chuckled Rolfe, listening rapturously, forgetting for the moment his own sorry plight.

"My respects, sir. You 'm all the mustard in the sangwidge!" Bill Blunt rumbled in grinning admiration.

The decks were almost awash, and the holds and cabins were full of muddy water, but aboard the *Barang* there was gratification mixed with the mate's anger, for without a doubt the schooner was shut in as completely as if she were in dry-dock with the gates closed at low tide. In truth it was but fair reprisal for the trick played on Leyden's vessel by Barry in Surabaya; but Jerry Rolfe had not been aware of that exploit, and this last coup was to him simply a piece of bald wickedness, swiftly turned against the perpetrators.

The pumps were tried once more—they had been going, of course, while the brigantine kept afloat—but with all brakes working full force, and both mates lending a hand, the water came in faster than it went out, and by the time the moon bounded up over the trees, the situation was accepted as demanding measures beyond mere pumping. And Rolfe stood glaring over at the now clearly visible schooner, debating the wisdom of attempting to carry her by boarding. Bill Blunt joined him, and the old sea dog hitched his trousers, shifted

his quid, and hinted:

"Skipper talked 'bout some dawg a-bitin', didn't he, sir?"

"Halleluja! Yes," shouted Rolfe, suddenly reminded of what he should never have forgot. "Let's see what the big Dutchman knows about dogs!"

Without raising his voice, he sent Bill Blunt around to the crew, and like brown phantoms the little Javanese sailors worked at the gig falls, flitting here and there, and appearing twice as strong in numbers as they were, showing themselves over the rail, yet trying to give an impression of aiming at secrecy. And when the gig dropped into the water, on the blind side from the schooner, all save two slipped down into it and lay along the bottom boards, leaving the boat apparently manned by two oarsmen and the stout old navy man. Jerry Rolfe gave a final look around and below, to satisfy himself that there was nothing in the ship accessible to possible marauders, then he joined the men in the boat's bottom and gave the word to shove off. Keeping on the edge of the moonlight, dodging between light and shadow, the party pulled along past the schooner and landed abreast of the stockade, while the gig kept on with noisy oars as if bound straight up the river in search of Barry and help.

With the mate and Blunt there were eight men, and besides the officers' own two revolvers, there were no arms save boat-stretchers, for the party with Barry had taken all available weapons. But the lack was soon to be made up. Rolfe left his men in the bush and went alone to the great gate, where the guardian peered over at his soft hail, alert as if he were but one of many watchmen instead of being, as it seemed he was, the only one.

"Wassa matta you?" the grinning head whispered.

"Dog bites," replied Rolfe, grimacing as he gave the word, curious yet unbelieving. His matter-of-fact sailor mind was incapable of completely throwing out his earlier aversion to Vandersee. He was ready to find now that this "dog biting" password was simply a piece of theatrical bunkum. He was to be swiftly put right.

"Ho much he bite?" came the rejoinder, unruffled, without outward interest.

"Th' whole piece!" growled Rolfe. "Ship's sunk."

"All ri'. Bring men here. Wait till to-morrow. Eve'thing proper. You no bodder, sar."

"No bother, hey? Damned simple, ain't it?" swore the mate, striving to scrutinize the impassive gargoyle face above him.

"No bodder. I know. My man, he see eve'thing. Schooner no can sail, hey? All ri'. Bring men here. To-morrow p'isen dat dog, I tell you. Misser Vand'see, he say so. He know all things, sar."

Rolfe turned away, more than half impressed in spite of himself. Growling and swearing he rejoined his men, and, sending a messenger to bring back the two men from the gig, after leaving her hidden in the riverside jungle, he led the party to the stockade. Now the gate was open to them; they passed inside and were shown into the big main hut of the post, where they might have been expected for weeks, so complete were the accommodations awaiting them.

"Something creepy in this!" muttered the mate, gazing around. Beds were ready on the floor; a table was spread with a rough but hearty supper; things seemed to come out of the shadows, for not a man appeared to them once their guide had left them. But to calm any suspicions Jerry Rolfe might have excusably entertained, under the table lay a pile of rifles, and to each was tied a full cartridge belt. Even a last flickering doubt was set at rest; for examination satisfied the mate that every cartridge was a live one.

"Reg'lar bloomin' fairy tale, I calls it, sir," whispered Bill Blunt hoarsely. "Too good to be true, be dummed if 't ain't. Here's weepins, an' powder an' shot, all sammee navy style, and ther' ain't a bloomin' paint pot in th' hull shebang! I be awake, ain't I, sir?"

"Wide," returned Rolfe, grinning at the old salt's query. "If we'd been as awake two hours ago, we wouldn't have lost our ship."

"Mebbe, sir. An' we wouldn't ha' started on what looks to be a reg'lar man's landin' party. Will I keep fust watch?"

"Turn in, Blunt. I won't sleep to-night," replied the mate. And in two minutes the old navy salt filled the hut with deep-sea nasal noises, to the sleepy admiration of his little brown men who only snored in whistles.

As the night turned to morning, Jerry Rolfe experienced a change of feeling, and when silent-footed natives brought in food for breakfast, he had arrived at a state of confidence that permitted him to sleep for two hours after eating, no longer hampered by doubts. As for Blunt, that very self-possessed seaman had accepted

the situation immediately he had satisfied himself about those cartridges. He had slept well, eaten well, and now while the mate slept, he assumed with relish the job of issuing rifles and ammunition to his crew.

A little uneasy as the forenoon wore on without a word from outside, noon found Rolfe and Blunt seeking the guardian of the gate for information. The gargoyle-faced native was absent, and the gate was barred; but while they lingered around the stockade the watchman came in, bringing two of the *Barang's* men who had gone with Barry.

These were the men who had run down river in chase of the flying gold washer, and their tattered clothes and bewildered faces gave the mate a jolt.

"We follow dat man, sar, an' he come close to dis place," one of them chattered in reply to Rolfe's brusque demand. "Den he go some place we no can find, an' we see dis station fence. We no t'ink we so near, sar."

"So near?" echoed Rolfe. "How far are the others from here?"

"No can tell, sar. Boat he sail and row all night, an' we t'ink he very far. Den we run for dat man, an' in one hour—two, mebbe—we come here. I t'ink dat ribber he twist, sar."

Then, so swiftly that it shocked, out of the forest stumbled another of the *Barang's* seamen, panting, thorn-slashed, and frightened.

"Oh, sar!" he gasped, "Cap'n Barry an' Misser Li'l, an' all mans dey pris'ner in de woods, an' de gol' washers dey all kill, sar!"

"Hey, don't faint yet!" roared Rolfe, seizing the trembling seaman and hauling him back to his feet. "Prisoners where? Who's got 'em? Leyden?"

"No, sar. Dutch navy man he come an' cotch us, sar. Misser Li'l he fly cane in de man's face an' say to me, 'Run!' Oh, verry bad, sar."

The man collapsed at the mate's feet, and Bill Blunt sent two men to carry him inside the hut. When he rejoined Rolfe, he found that perplexed worthy staring in fresh puzzlement at Natalie Sheldon, then coming in through the gate, flushed and excited.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rolfe awkwardly awaited the torrent of questions that obviously trembled on the girl's lips. He saw behind her the dwarf of the gate, shrugging his deformed shoulders in disgust at the intrusion of a feminine factor at such a time. Miss Sheldon came directly towards him and spoke hurriedly, agitatedly.

"Mr. Rolfe, some wickedness is going on. What is it? Why have you come here to shatter our little people's peace?"

"Me? I ain't shattered anybody's peace, Miss," returned Rolfe, as puzzled as she. "Wickedness—yes, ma'am, I know that. But it ain't wickedness of mine, nor my skipper's. D' ye think we'd be wicked enough to sink our own ship?"

"Sink—your ship? Why—how—"

"Yes, Miss, our ship. And what's more, if you don't mind, I can't stop chawing the rag here; Captain Barry and Mr. Little are in danger o' their lives, by all accounts."

"Then it was true!" cried Natalie, her eyes gleaming with a hope that had almost gone from her. "They have been caught, as Mr. Leyden told me they would. Why did you begin your hateful work here?"

"What did Leyden tell ye, mum?" old Bill Blunt put in, with gruff gentleness. He saw Rolfe's utter bewilderment.

"Oh, you are a new man," she cried. "You cannot know that the men you are with are engaged in planting the curse of opium in this beautiful land, where our Mission has almost reaped the fruits of years of labor."

"Opium be damned—beg your pardon, lady," exploded and apologized Rolfe, near bursting with rage. "If opium's being run in here, I can guess who's doing it. Not to mention names, ma'am, his tally begins with Leyden. None came in the *Barang*, I'll swear."

"Me too, Miss," rejoined Blunt heartily. "New man I may be, but I ain't new among men, an' it ain't men like Cap'n Barry as runs p'isen to poor niggers."

All the while they were arguing the matter, Rolfe's men were busy preparing for their march to Barry's assistance. Food and water and emergency medical supplies had to be rummaged for and packed; a wood-wise guide had to be obtained through the agency of the gateman. Miss Sheldon hovered nervously about them, struggling hard with some emotion within her, gazing searchingly from face to face as if to find there an answer to the problem that troubled her.

The *Barang's* men certainly looked anything but the rascals she had been told they were; she had never seen sailors more utterly peaceable in their demeanor. When the preparations were nearly complete, and but a few minutes could remain before the party set out, she forced a decision herself.

"Mr. Rolfe, I am afraid," she said in low, tremulous tones.

"Nothing to be afraid of in us, ma'am," growled the mate, hauling a second cartridge belt tight about his waist.

"No, not of you, but of everything. Wait, please," she begged, seeing signs of impatience in the sailor's face. "Let me tell you; then advise me, please. This horrible traffic is being carried on, without any doubt. It has broken Mr. Gordon and has drawn nearly all our native men from their lawful work and the Church. All the Mission men now are away in the jungle trying to bring back the foolish boys to the village and the Mission. I am alone here, except for Mrs. Goring. I am nervous now."

"Why are you staying, then?" demanded Rolfe, staring rudely into her dusky eyes.

"Because I have—I—I have resigned from the Mission, Mr. Rolfe. I am waiting for Mr. Leyden's return. He has offered me a passage to Java and suggested that I go on board to wait until the *Padang* sails. But I can't rest easily there. There is something in the crew that makes me shudder. I never met men of their kind before."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I can't offer you accommodations on our ship. She's on the bottom of the river just now—put there by Mr. Leyden's orders, no doubt. I haven't got any men to spare, either, nor no time, Miss. Tell me quick what you want me to do."

Jerry Rolfe slung a water canteen over his shoulder, handed pistol cartridges to Bill Blunt from his own pocket store, and looked around impatiently for the

guide.

"I don't know what to do," cried the girl. She was not hysterical in the least; she seemed quite capable of revealing a wide streak of calm, helpful courage, if only her doubts might be set at rest. She went on hurriedly: "I cannot move hand or foot except between the Mission and here. Everywhere I go I hear, but cannot see, whispering men who follow me like my shadow. Why, Mr. Rolfe, I feel like a prisoner! Won't you let me come with you?"

"That's impossible," grunted the mate and met Bill Blunt's horrified eye. "Why, lady, d' ye know where we're going and what for?"

"I understand you are going to try to find your captain, of course. But I won't be a burden to you. I'll do just what you tell me, and I may be able to help, if—if—well, you may have wounds or anything, you know. Won't you let me come?—Oh, do take me, Mr. Rolfe. I cannot stay here alone!"

The mate bawled loudly for the tardy guide, as much to conceal his uneasiness as to bring the man, for the gateman was even then chattering voluble instructions to a lithe, breech-clouted native who had just come in. There was nothing he desired less at that moment than to have a woman in the party; yet his stout heart reproached him for designing to leave the girl to her fears. His uncertainty was dispelled for him by the appearance of Mrs. Goring, as fresh and dainty as she had appeared that first day on the dock. She advanced with a smile of greeting, and Miss Sheldon met her eye with a guilty blush.

"I am trying to persuade Mr. Rolfe to take me away with his party," the girl said. "You know how uneasy I have been here, Mrs. Goring, since you are so much away."

"Yes, I know, my dear," the woman replied, and her mature face glowed tenderly. "And unfortunately I cannot avoid being away just now, as you know." She turned her smile upon Rolfe and Bill Blunt, soothing their awkwardness with consummate tact. "Take her, gentlemen, won't you?" she pleaded. "I know it will be all right."

"All right?" echoed Blunt. "Say, marm, d' ye know what we take these playthings fer?" he asked, handling his pistol and rifle.

"Yes, I know. Still it will be all right. Miss Sheldon will be in no danger with you that she would avoid here. Besides, Mr. Rolfe, I give you my word that Mr.

Vandersee would approve of it."

"Vandersee?" Rolfe glared from Mrs. Goring to Miss Sheldon. Slow-thinking as he usually was, he needed no mental jolt now to see something wonderful and strange in the association of Vandersee with both of these women, whose apparent interests were so diverse. He had thought of Vandersee as perhaps likely to be interested in Mrs. Goring's activities, because he had been on the *Barang's* quarterdeck when the big Hollander introduced her to the skipper; but if one thing was more certain than another, it was that Vandersee had nothing whatever in common with Leyden, save enmity, and here was a girl avowedly friendly to Leyden accepting the advice of Vandersee's friend. He squinted at Miss Sheldon, puzzled, and stammered:

"Would you take Vandersee's advice, Miss? Ain't he dead set against your friend Leyden?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think about Mr. Vandersee," replied the girl, in distress again. "I know that he is with and for you, which suggests his antagonism to Mr. Leyden, who I am sure doesn't know him. But I know, too, that he is a gentleman, and I am satisfied to trust him on Mrs. Goring's word. Say I can go with you, please." Her sweet face clouded, and tears started into her eyes. Gruff old Bill Blunt clapped a huge hand on her shoulder and growled:

"Dry yer eyes, my pretty, dry 'em, do. We ain't goin' to make gal's eyes waterfalls, no we ain't—" and he rumbled in an aside to Rolfe, intended for his ears only, but filling the hut with sound—"Let th' purty gal come, sir. Blimee, I'll carry her meself, if she tires. It's a bloody nuisance, but 't ain't a sarcumstance to havin' a paint-an'-polish bloomin' Hadmiral along in a ship. Take her, says I, an' Gawd bless her."

They set out, Natalie marching between Rolfe and Blunt with the free, supple swing and stride of a real girl of the outdoors. At least she gave little promise of hindrance in the actual journey, no matter what the outcome might be when action was afoot. And as they threaded their tortuous way through odorous jungle and sickeningly sweet-scented thicket, at the nimble heels of the silent guide, Natalie surprised glances of awed admiration on the faces of her stout escorts.

Jerry Rolfe became so nearly converted to her side as the journey grew hotter and heavier, seeing her maintain her pace as well as himself, if not better, that he found himself stumbling every few yards sheerly through his inability to keep

his eyes from her. He was bursting to talk; there was yet a problem unsolved in his mind; and when a stretch of level glade gave him back his breath, he spoke.

"Tell me, Miss," he panted, "just what is that Vandersee?"

"Why, Mr. Vandersee is connected with the Holland Naval Service, I believe, Mr. Rolfe. Why?" answered Natalie, with a cool smile.

Jerry Rolfe glared at her, his lips working furiously to no effect. He could not speak; and Bill Blunt, who had caught question and answer, seemed in as bad case. They sought each other's eyes, and the silent interchange of thought between them solved the puzzle, at least as far as the mate was concerned. He grew hot and almost choked; but his lips could only utter:

"Naval service? Hell!"

He muttered an apology, but for the rest of the journey Natalie walked in absolute bewilderment. She could have no idea of the effect of her reply, except as outwardly evidenced in the mate's attitude. She could not know that in the breast of Rolfe, as in that of Bill Blunt, she had resurrected the demon of distrust towards Vandersee. All the voyage's suspicion that had troubled Rolfe resurged to the top now; knowing that Barry had been taken by supposed navy officers, the honest mate saw no room for doubt that the big Hollander had deliberately insinuated himself into the second mate's berth aboard the *Barang* for no other purpose than to defeat his skipper. And now he had done it properly. Jerry Rolfe was sure of it. He told his decision to Blunt, who knew Vandersee by report only; and the old sea-dog replied characteristically,—by spitting into his palms and loosening his cutlass in the sheath with a creepy rasp and crash.

Natalie Sheldon sensed the strain that had come upon her escorts, and she felt less at ease in her journey. Never once had she faltered or complained, though she was sadly hampered by her totally unsuitable garments for such a walk. In the gloomy forest the heat was stifling; the trackless jungle was full of creeping life; at every step the feet tripped over fallen logs or crunched with shivery suggestion into rotten shells of storm-torn tree limbs. Bright eyes gleamed at them through the thickets, to vanish swiftly; monkeys in the foliage overhead chattered and howled, swinging from tree to tree in alarm, and glaring down upon the intruders with faces convulsed with rage.

The girl shuddered violently when a thick, gorged snake squirmed from under her feet and scrawled like a monstrous slug into a bush. She simply must talk, or

drop, she thought, so attempted Jerry Rolfe again.

"Mr. Rolfe, I don't understand why you are upset at what I said concerning Mr. Vandersee," she ventured.

"Huh," grunted Rolfe. "Naval man, you said, didn't you?"

"Why, yes. But how can that make you so fierce and grumpy?"

Old Bill Blunt grinned happily at her tone. He too had felt the oppressiveness of a speechless march. Sufficient for the moment being sufficient for him, the old salt had long since put aside all thoughts of Vandersee and the Holland Navy, content to have all the trouble in one parcel when it should come. He wanted to chatter, and cared nothing what about.

"Be we grumpy, Missy?" he chuckled. "Then bust me binnacle if we ain't swabs! Asks yer pardon, then—"

"Shut your trap!" growled Rolfe surlily. He muttered, for Natalie's ear alone: "S'pose you heard that Cap'n Barry and Mr. Little was euchred by a naval party, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course. But that cannot be in any way connected with Mr. Vandersee. He's on leave, you know, for private business. He cannot possibly be conducting official business now; and it's quite ridiculous to think of him as being responsible for Captain Barry's misfortune. Why—oh, Mr. Rolfe," she burst out, laughing a trifle unsteadily, "it's too silly. Mr. Vandersee is about the one man here that speaks well of your party."

"That's easy," retorted Rolfe, unconvinced. "Private business, o' course he's on. Speaks well of us? Why not? Ain't he a slick, smart fellow? Why wouldn't he speak well of us! He's got the skipper and Mr. Little buffaloed by such tricks; I know that."

Miss Sheldon gave up in despair, turning to Blunt for relief from Rolfe's surly silence. She found in the old sea dog a ready companion, and he rattled along in his whimsical, uncouth language, spinning endless yarns of a "Hadmiral as prayed to a paint pot" and "cleaned his bloomin' teeth wi' holystone," until the girl unconsciously resumed her brisk, tireless step and found herself laughing merrily in spite of her disease of mind.

"An' there's our blessed Cap'n, ma'am," went on Bill, warming under the girl's

happiness. "Gennelmun if ther' ever wuz. Sees me, he do, a roarin', ragged, bacca-chawin' ol' swab, an' I ses to him, 'Giv 's a job,' an' he up an' makes me a bloomin' orf'cer! Me, as never knowed nuthin' 'cept drawin' me grog rations twice. Missy, there's a man for ye. If ever yer wantin' a real sailorman to steer yuh clear o' shoals, Cap'n Barry's th' blue-eyed boy—Oh, blast my eyes!" Bill burst out, "I forgot he's in the bilboes, Miss. Now ain't that a dummed shame?"

"I begin to think it is," replied Natalie seriously. She had rippled with laughter while the old fellow chattered, had colored warmly at his rough eulogy, and now felt a sinking of the spirits that harmonized not at all with her earlier feelings.

"But what can you do, if he is in the hands of the naval authorities?" she asked. "You wouldn't dare attack Government officers?"

"I dunno, Missy," returned Bill, scratching his trowsled head in perplexity. "That's fer Mr. Rolfe to say. I only knows as I'd tackle th' Great High Hadmiral o' H—Beg pardon, lady, but you knows what I means, I 'spect—I'd tackle him if 'twas to get Cap'n Barry offen a lee shore."

The girl relapsed into thoughtful silence, and the party plunged into a belt of jungle so thick that single file was forced upon them. Here the messenger despatched by Little, who had stayed behind at the post until he recovered from his exhaustion, overtook them and told Rolfe that it was here he last saw Barry's party.

"Get ahead with the guide," Rolfe ordered him, and the march was conducted with stealth and painful slowness. A broken cane here and patch of dead leaves crushed into the black mold there gave slender hints that a party might have passed that way; and every ear was attuned to preternatural keenness for human sounds, for the eye could not pierce the thicket a yard before.

Out upon this tense atmosphere burst a ghostly brown native, own brother to their guide in appearance, appearing so suddenly that Natalie uttered a little shriek of alarm. Bill Blunt, cool as a cucumber, charged his rifle chamber and clapped the muzzle against the brown man's breast without a word. The man stopped, amazingly unafraid, ignored Bill, and handed a piece of cane to Rolfe, picking him out as the leader unerringly.

Jerry stared at the small stick, turning it over and over in his hand like some backwoods denizen receiving a letter for the first time in forty years and scared to open it. Then Natalie detected a loose end to the stick and suggested that it

might contain something of value. Rolfe stripped a rice leaf from the cane, opened it, and found a message written on it in a fair hand.

"On no account attack naval party. Barry and party are safe. Vandersee."

Rolfe glowered at the brief missive and looked up to find the messenger gone and Bill Blunt staring at the muzzle of his rifle which had a moment before been jammed against the man's brown skin. The mate read the words aloud and sought for an answer in Miss Sheldon's eyes. She brightened swiftly and cried out with relief:

"Oh, I said so, didn't I? Your captain and his party are safe in Mr. Vandersee's hands if they have done no wrong."

"Safe in Vandersee's hands," repeated Jerry slowly, as if groping for inspiration. "In—Vandersee's—hands! Pi'zen my soul, but that's what I've believed all along! Come on—March!" he gritted, and plunged ahead.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The trail became more open shortly, and progress was swift. Natalie kept her place with increasing difficulty, but never a murmur escaped her. Her shoes had long since become shapeless envelopes of soggy leather; her skirt was tattered like a Foreign Legion battle flag. Her hands and face were scratched and swollen with insect bites, but her eyes were dry and her lips firm, for some inward voice told her that she was about to learn some part of the truth that had been hidden from her. For all her earlier assertion that Vandersee was Barry's friend and a man to be trusted, a stubborn question had taken root in her breast since that message was delivered. If Vandersee was the man who had taken Barry's party, what became of all the previous suppositions and arguments regarding their relative relations with Leyden?

If the question were not to be answered quickly, at least it was to be forced aside by more vital affairs; all doubts were to be settled by one swift decision. The guides suddenly ran back, chattered volubly and murmuringly together, then stepped aside, waved Rolfe forward with a warning of caution, and joined their fellows who had been carrying their guns for them.

Rolfe parted the thicket, peered through, swore fiercely under his breath and didn't apologize for it. He beckoned Blunt, and that dour old salt squinted at the sight that had staggered the mate. Natalie stepped softly beside them and gazed over their stooping backs, to swiftly step back with a choking sob of horror.

"Navy party all right!" gritted Rolfe, squirming in every inch of his skin with the tremendous responsibility confronting him. None knew better than he what the consequences must be of attacking a party of Government sailors. But the sight he saw—the sounds he heard!

He looked out across a wide circle of sward, dotted with hummocks of brown earth. The trees surrounding it held fruit of Nero's kind. To each trunk a writhing, moaning *Barang* seaman was lashed, his face and body smeared with sticky stuff that was alive with crawling ants. A man squirmed and whimpered within five feet of Jerry Rolfe's eyes; the havoc of those busy insects was only too horribly apparent.

And on two of the brown hummocks, spread-eagled with vine ropes that cut

deep into wrists and ankles, lay Barry and Little, grimly silent as to complaint, but with the haze of gnawing terror in their eyes. Their bodies swarmed with scurrying life; the heat had melted the native sugar on their naked skin until it had run in sticky rivulets to every part of their tortured bodies. Under the heaving multitude at Barry's throat, blood was trickling; an awful hint of a frightful end not far away.

Lounging at their ease, smoking or eating, lay a party of men in naval uniforms, three of them white men, the rest native Celebes. They chatted and laughed together with callous indifference for their captives' agonies; and at these white men—officers, by their dress—Rolfe found Bill Blunt glaring with eyes that were puzzled at first, then blazing with fury.

"Mr. Rolfe, pile into 'em!" the old salt growled hoarsely. "Give 'em hell an' blazes. Them ain't no more Dutch Navy men than you be! Gawd! Ain't I manned gangway fer th' Hollanders often enough to know 'em? Them swine is fakers!"

Old Bill moistened his palm again, charged his rifle under his coat, and got on his toes waiting for the mate's word. Rolfe needed no other excuse to attack. Even though Blunt's announcement proved simply a ruse to force his hand, he cared nothing now. He led Miss Sheldon back to a clump of great trees, put a native by her, and handed her his own pistol.

"Stay here, Miss," he commanded sharply. "I'll come for you when it's safe. Don't move!"

Natalie took to her hiding place trembling, but not with fear. She had seen and heard that which chilled her blood and filled her head with redoubled doubts. But she had no time for considering those doubts; Rolfe darted back to his men, divided them into two parties, and, carefully assuring himself that the entire band of captors lay before him, he sent Blunt around to an opposite point on the glade and awaited the prearranged whistle.

Soon it came—a cleverly imitated boatswain's pipe for All Hands!—and suddenly the moaning ceased, the guards sat up in swift alarm.

"Give 'em hell, bullies!" roared Rolfe, and in a flash the glade crashed to the discharge of a dozen rifles. The first shots went astray, because the boatswain's pipe brought the captors to their feet after the first surprise; but a second discharge took heavy toll, and the three white officers rallied back to back, shouting frenziedly to their men to stand.

"Ay, they'll stand—stiff!" growled Bill Blunt, swinging his rifle end-for-end and jamming the butt into the face of a panic-stricken native seaman. A bullet from Rolfe passed through the head of the leader, and out of a whizzing shower of lead from the *Barang's* men another white went down. Then the native guards broke and ran, flinging guns away in their panic. The remaining officer, glaring around with savage hate in his eyes, turned to run too, but before leaving the spot he sprang over to Barry and placed his pistol to the prostrate skipper's head.

Then from the forest rang another shot, echoed by a sobbing cry, and the fellow pitched headlong across Barry, dead, his pistol exploding harmlessly, his throat pouring out his life. And Bill Blunt, following up that shot, came upon Natalie Sheldon, fainting on the edge of the glade, a warm pistol gripped tightly in her rigid hand.

Rolfe and his men had gone immediately to the aid of the tortured captives, and the two guides were despatched hotfoot after water. Then, with willing hands busily washing pained bodies free from sticky sugar and fiercely fighting ants, some distance removed from the spot where other hands were setting fire to the grass to beat back the scurrying hordes, Jack Barry and Little began to draw breath free from pangs and scrutinized each other in silent appraisal of damages. Neither had given sign of the agony sustained, save an occasional inevitable moan; yet neither had escaped without grievous injury that was painful if not more serious. But Little's bubbling spirits had not been utterly quenched, only damped; and now he grinned at the skipper with a brave effort at humor.

"Ain't very big, but ain't their darned feet hot!" he said, shrugging his shoulders suggestively.

"Huh!" grunted Barry, swabbing away at his throat, which still bled. "Only thing that bothers me is that a white man can't very well reciprocate the same way. I'd lose an eye to change dispositions with Leyden for just one hour and have him in my hands!"

"Cheer up, old hoss," grinned Little. "Go to it, if the chance turns up, and maybe the missionaries will convert you back to whitemanship again."

Their thoughts were turned into a pleasanter channel by the arrival of Miss Sheldon, recovered from her faintness and eager to be of service to them. She knelt between them, Rolfe's medicine kit in her hands, and began to cleanse and bandage their more painful hurts. The seamen, cut down from their trees, were in the hands of their shipmates.

"This is horrible, Captain Barry," murmured Natalie, avoiding his eyes. A flush overspread her fair face as she strove to utter the thoughts nearest her heart. "I am terribly upset about this," she said. "It seems impossible that sailors of any civilized government could do things like this."

"They don't, Miss," returned Barry grimly. He sought her eyes, and her gaze met his for an instant, to be immediately lowered. "These fellows were no more sailors than you are. Perhaps you will be disagreeably surprised to hear that your friend Mr. Leyden looked in on us while the ants were feeding."

"Mr. Leyden? Impossible!" cried the girl, drawing back and regarding Barry with horror. "Surely you are mistaken."

"I thought you wouldn't believe it," rejoined Little, with a wry smile. "True, though, Miss, and he said he'd look in on us again before the ants took their dessert."

"What about Vandersee, Cap'n Barry?" blurted out Rolfe, coming up and breaking in on the talk without ceremony.

"Vandersee?" queried the skipper. "What of him, Rolfe? I'd have given a lot to have him around when this happened. I'll bet we never would have got into this mess."

"But didn't he get you?" Jerry Rolfe's voice went to a squeak with astonishment.

"Get us? What's biting you, man?"

Rolfe showed the skipper the message he had received from the big Hollander, and Barry scanned it narrowly, then passed it on to Little.

"I don't quite understand this," replied Barry, puzzled. "Perhaps he meant real navy men. These were fakes, as you have found out by now."

"Sure, but I'd have been leary about firing on 'em at that if Blunt hadn't spotted their imitation uniforms first, sir."

"Well, Vandersee had nothing to do with this, Rolfe. As I have told Miss Sheldon, it was Leyden who looked in on us; and it was Leyden's men who got us, fooling me with their official attitude."

"Oh, what does it all mean?" cried Natalie, gazing from face to face in perplexity. "Are you sure that Mr. Leyden has done this thing? He told me you

were opium smugglers, Captain Barry, and I believed that he was aiding the Government to stamp out the traffic."

"Opium!" gasped the skipper furiously. "That's what the fake navy officer pulled on us up the river. He contrived to find a can or two in the shacks, too."

"And is it untrue?" The girl's low tone held a tremor of hope.

"Untrue! Good God, Miss Sheldon, what do you take us for?"

The girl was silent. She lowered her face and went on with her work of alleviating pain, and all talk ceased. Every man there realized that somewhere behind the outward show of chance hostility lay a deeper, more sinister problem yet to be solved. Barry found himself peering up at the girl, wondering if after all she was out of his reach. Her touch thrilled him, and when her eyes met his in fleeting glance they glowed warm and moist, her lips trembled as if she were fighting to restrain tears. And for what? Barry hoped, then feared. Only a sight of Little's quizzical grin fastened upon him prevented him uttering a speech that must have embarrassed the girl.

The silent stress was relieved by the gruff, deep-sea voice of Bill Blunt, leading somebody into the little jungle covert where the injured men lay.

"I tell ye we didn't pitch into no navy party, Mister," the old fellow growled. "All as we done wuz to knock seven bells outa a mob o' dirty murderers. Come on an' see th' skipper hisself. He kin tell ye."

Vandersee emerged from the bush, strode across to Barry, and knelt beside him. His face was dark with irritation.

"I am sorry to see this, Captain," he said softly, and his usual smile swept across his face, to leave it dark again. "I particularly wished to avoid this attack, though. It's very unfortunate."

"Unfortunate!" snapped Barry, amazed at the man's cool attitude. "Wasn't it more unfortunate for us to be making a meal for a few million ants? I'm darned glad Rolfe attacked, and I don't understand your message telling him to hold off."

"Let me explain, sir," replied Vandersee, and now he was entirely like his old self,—suave, smiling, soft-spoken. "I wanted to get Leyden myself. That is why I am here. I missed him by minutes when he first visited you to gloat over you; and I had him followed and knew he was coming back. He killed my man, so I

had nothing to do but wait here for his second visit. Now he won't come back, for his men who got away have rejoined and are with him by now."

"See here, Vandersee," exploded the skipper angrily, "I want to know more about your part in this mess. I have been held up as an opium smuggler; there is no gold in Houten's river—never has been—yet Leyden got dust through Gordon; and when Little and I and all Houten's men are threatened with annihilation by some of Leyden's men masquerading as Dutch sailors, you coolly tell me our rescue is unfortunate. Houten sent you here, didn't he? Then what's the answer?"

Vandersee smiled gently and regarded Miss Sheldon with a wonderful depth of tenderness, strange to see in a man of his bulk. Then he shrugged slightly and answered:

"I think I must tell you, since matters have turned out this way. It will interest Miss Sheldon, too, I hope, and perhaps it won't hurt my plans very much after all.

"I am an officer in the Holland Navy. On leave now, I am completing some private business of my own while doing some work for my Government. Only to tell you what immediately concerns you, I am out to catch Leyden's band of opium runners."

"Mr. Leyden an opium runner!" breathed Natalie, dumbfounded.

"I'm sorry to say he is, Miss Sheldon. Oh, have no fear—" he interjected, seeing the pain in her eyes—"he would never have been permitted to carry you from here, Miss. You have been in good keeping, before and since you left the Mission. There was a reason for letting Leyden go so far; a reason which I must withhold still. But there is a definite limit set to his progress, which I hoped would be reached to-day. Now, unfortunately, he has escaped me for the moment; but have no doubts, you, Captain Barry and Mr. Little, that at the proper time you will be let in on what seems no doubt a mystery just now."

"Mystery's right," retorted Little. "You know, Vandersee, I have always looked upon you as a sort of Admirable Crichton among sailors. Yet you let me make that awful mess back at the river entrance, letting go the anchors by meddling with the gears you had showed me. Now here you crop up, when I am half eaten, and tell me when the proper time comes I'll know all! It's like a yellow-backed novel."

Vandersee smiled broadly. He admired the cheery ex-salesman. He rose to his feet, carefully dusting off his knees, and replied:

"That accident with the anchors was nothing but chance, Mr. Little. If I smiled, it was simply because there was an element of humor in your amazement at the result of your meddling. I assure you that was all."

"Then why not push right after Leyden now and get the thing settled one way or the other?" blurted Barry. "All this stuff about opium smuggling doesn't concern us much. We came here on a definite errand for Cornelius Houten, and it seems that's a flivver. What's to hinder Little and myself clearing out from here? Your affair with Leyden isn't our affair, is it?"

"Oh, Cap'n, I forgot to tell you the *Barang's* sunk," put in Jerry Rolfe, who had approached and had been listening. "It clean slipped my mind, in the excitement."

"*Barang's* sunk?" echoed Barry and Vandersee together. And queerly enough, Vandersee evinced the greater alarm.

"Sure. She was scuttled by some water rats, and her lines cut. I just managed to get her down river and across the channel, so as to block up the *Padang*; then she settled in the mud."

"Thank Heaven!" burst from Vandersee, and his round face, which had gone dead white, became normal in color again. Barry and Little stared at him in amazement, but his smile told them nothing.

"I'm thankful even that your ship is sunk, Captain, since it is sunk as a barrier to the *Padang*," he said, and left them still in a fog. "But I am forgetting, and you, Miss Sheldon, are permitting me to forget, that our friends here need more comfort than we can give them in the jungle."

"I need no comfort!" growled Barry, staggering to his feet. Little followed his example with a twisted grin. Both tottered and pitched to the earth again, groaning dismally.

"I know, gentlemen," Vandersee said, motioning to some of the *Barang's* crew. "I have seen much of this sort of thing. It will be several days at least before you recover from your ordeal. Meanwhile I suggest that you have your men carry you back to the post. Mrs. Goring is caring for Gordon there and will gladly take care of you, assisted by Miss Sheldon."

"I shall be very glad to do anything," the girl responded, and suddenly Jack Barry felt the need for comfort he had disdained a moment before.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cornelius Houten's trading post was no longer a place of commonplace commerce. With the return of the injured men, the dim, cool main hut was transformed into a quiet hospital, in which two sore and weary men were ministered to by two gentle, capable nurses. There was something amazingly mysterious in the swift change; for Barry and Little were carried inside, placed on ready cots, and soothed with cooling unguents without a moment's delay, as if they had been expected in just such a fashion ever since their advent on the river.

Mrs. Goring came in without the least visible surprise and with her usual sweet smile, her low voice was that of a woman intent on a customary duty; she directed Natalie Sheldon in the work and received her unquestioning obedience. When the side of the hut was raised to admit the afternoon sunlight, Little sought Barry's eyes with whimsical wonder, and the skipper shook his head painfully and growled back:

"Oh, what's the use! May as well hold tight and give the cure a chance. No good asking me what I think of it all. I give it up. No good at conundrums!"

The last words drawled out, and Barry fell asleep. Then Natalie bent over him, drew a mosquito curtain around his head, and gazed down at him with a soft, uncertain light in her luminous eyes. Mrs. Goring watched from a dark corner, and when the girl moved away from Barry's cot and approached Little, the older woman smiled with great sympathy and went quietly out.

The ex-salesman watched too; and his eyes twinkled when Natalie bent that searching look upon Barry. He noted with a grin her tender little touches at the skipper's couch and settled himself complacently in expectation of similar attention. His eyes closed, and he folded his hands placidly over his chest as Natalie stepped to his side, and then he peeped slyly at her, ready to give her some characteristically humorous greeting.

But to his discomfiture he saw tears brimming her eyes, and the small hand that drew his curtains trembled piteously. Tom Little lost all his humor and lay quite still until she turned away. Then, with a sob, she ran outside after Mrs. Goring, and so unsettled by her trouble was Little that the sleep which should have placed him on the road to recovery utterly deserted him, and the heat became

suddenly oppressive.

So he tossed and writhed through the hours, while Barry slumbered peacefully and breathed in new strength. Little was aware of a subtle drone and hum all around the place; he placed it to the further credit of pestiferous insects and cursed them dully. From the river crept in a rank odor of musk and mud that mingled with the sleepy sounds to lull him, yet his brain refused to rest. He sweat and twisted in the depths of dire discomfort.

Wondering how many hours went to a Celebes minute, how many ages into an hour, he was suddenly aware of a silent figure that crept into the hut and sat on a low stool beside the medicine chest. It was a man, shod, therefore a white man; and some vaguely familiar, yet utterly strange gesture gave Little a hint of his identity.

"Gordon!" he whispered, and the man sprang up with a muffled exclamation of annoyance.

"It is Gordon, isn't it?" whispered Little, welcoming any break to the awful monotony, doubly glad that it was Gordon who made the break. "I can't sleep, old chap. Come and chat, there's a good sport."

"I'll give you a draft to help you sleep," muttered Gordon, searching out a bottle. Little noticed even in the poor light that this was a different Gordon from the shattered wreck he had first seen. There was no tremor, no uncertainty, in the fingers that unstopped a small bottle and poured out a draft; when the man leaned over him, drawing aside the curtains, the eyes that looked down at Little were bright and clear, true windows of a healthy soul.

"Drink this and try to sleep," urged Gordon gently. "I ought not to talk to you at all, you know. You're a pretty sick man, Little, and I'm only convalescent yet. Come, drink it; it's harmless and very efficacious."

"I'll swallow that stuff if you'll talk to me a bit, Gordon," Little bargained. "Unless it's powerful dope, it won't make me sleep. I simply can't sleep."

"Drink it then, and I'll chat with you until you drop off," replied Gordon, and his tone revealed uneasiness. He pressed the glass into Little's fingers and repeated, "Drink it."

Little gulped the stuff down, and a glad warmth shot through his veins, soothing him, to his surprise. He returned the glass and grinned up at Gordon. Already the

heat seemed less oppressive, the outside sounds more lulling.

"That's fine stuff, Gordon. Some class to our hospital. Glad to see you've benefited by it too. But when do our fair nurses come on duty again?" His eyes drooped, and Gordon regarded him with a smile of understanding.

"Oh, very soon, very soon, Little. I'm only lending a hand while they attend to your crew. You were supposed to be asleep, or I would not have come inside. Now sleep, man, sleep. When you wake up, one of the ladies will be here."

Gordon gazed into Little's dulling eyes, and as he watched, his head was bent alertly as if to catch outside sounds. Voices were heard approaching, and Gordon started with faint alarm as Little's eyes opened wide. The next minute a peaceful grin overspread the sufferer's face, the wide eyes closed, and Little fell into a deep, healing sleep.

And into the hut stepped Vandersee, silent as a great cat, and with him two other men in uniform,—naval uniform and legitimate this time. A silent question was flashed at Gordon, and he nodded relievedly; then Vandersee stepped over and peered at Barry, giving a deft and tender touch here and there to displaced bandages. For a long moment the big Hollander regarded the sleeping skipper, then moved over to Little's cot and repeated the scrutiny. His blond face was soft and serious, his large round eyes glowed with pity. He turned at length to his companions, and they saluted him with deep respect.

"This would be only well repaid if we permitted Captain Barry to fix the payment," he murmured to them. "Such fiendish barbarity deserves payment in kind; and if it were only an official matter, gentlemen, I would gladly send you and your men away and stand by while settlement was made. As it is, I cannot permit these men to rob me of Leyden. That foul devil is mine by all the laws of God and Justice."

Gordon stood by, his gaze fixed full on Vandersee, his face alight with the fervor of high hope. When the Hollander paused, Gordon moistened his lips and whispered:

"Mine too, Hendrik! Can't you let me do this? I'm fit now, a man again. Let him be mine."

Vandersee smiled back, compassionately and understandingly, and laid a tremendous hand on Gordon's shoulder.

"I know, old fellow, I know," he said. "Nobody knows as I do. But half of our vengeance would be defeated should anything happen to you. No. This is mine, Gordon, and—"

Barry stirred, and Vandersee stopped speaking; shooting a hurried look at the skipper and then motioning to the others to follow, he went swiftly out of the hut. Gordon remained and stared full into the wide-open eyes of Barry.

"What was Vandersee doing here?" demanded Barry, not yet distinguishing Gordon's face.

"You've been dreaming, skipper," returned Gordon, busying himself with fresh bandages to avoid facing Barry for a moment.

"Dreaming my aunt!"

"I think you have," insisted Gordon, and now he came to the cot and began to remove Barry's bandages. "Let me renew your dressings."

"Oh, it's you, is it, Gordon?" exclaimed Barry, now wide awake, if he had been dreaming before. "Then you'll tell me the truth, won't you? If that wasn't Vandersee I saw a moment ago, and two naval officers with him, my brain's cracked, that's all."

"Not cracked, Captain. That's the effect of the medicine you've taken. No doubt Mr. Little will have some queer notions, too, when he wakes up. It's better for you to throw out all these notions as soon as they form. They only hinder your recovery. Now let me fix you up."

"Not one damned bandage! If I'm to be treated like a baby, I'll act like one. Let Miss Sheldon do it. She won't lie, anyhow."

Gordon laid down his dressings and left the hut without a reply. And Barry lay there, fuming, sore, and sick, waiting for the nurse who never appeared. Hours seemed to pass; certainly one hour had gone; then it was Mrs. Goring who came in, swiftly hiding a troubled expression beneath a sunny smile of greeting.

"I'll have to inflict myself on you, Captain," she said, deftly removing his bandages, in spite of his petulant objections. "Miss Sheldon has not yet returned," she went on. "She visited your men, you know. She will come to you as soon as possible, for she considers you her own private patient."

Mrs. Goring beamed kindly upon him, and the skipper's irritation passed under her sympathetic touch.

"Tell me," he begged cajolingly, "wasn't that Vandersee in here awhile ago?"

"Oh, he's been here many times, Captain," smiled back Mrs. Goring.

"Yes, yes, I know. I mean while Gordon was here with us."

"Why, didn't you ask him?"

"Oh, tell me, or say you won't," Barry burst out angrily. "Of course I asked him. He said not. Gordon's a liar!"

"S-sh!" she soothed, laying a cool hand on Barry's heated forehead. He failed to catch the look of pain his words brought into her eyes, or he must have cringed with shame. "This is not like you, Captain Barry, to say such things behind one's back."

"I beg your pardon," mumbled the skipper humbly. And he relapsed into sullen silence, feigning sleep again simply to escape her steady gaze. She watched him awhile, then giving an inquiring glance at Little, adjusting his curtains and pillow, she left the room, and silence once more settled down that lasted until Little emerged from his drugged sleep and sat up with a noisy yawn.

"Say, Barry; what did you dream about?" he cried, rubbing his eyes furiously as if to clear cobwebs from his brain. "Did you have any dope in your physic?"

"I don't know," growled the skipper. "I know I saw Vandersee here, the moment I woke up, with some sailors, and they tell me I dreamed it!"

"Oh, then, it's all right," replied Little carelessly. "You must have had the same dope. I dreamed they were here just as I dropped off to sleep. Was Gordon with you, too?"

"He was, and he was no dream!"

"That's right, too. He gave me some dope that made me sleep like an infant. I suppose it's the poison of those ants that makes us imagine creepy things."

"By Godfrey, I don't imagine anything!" cried Barry, and he tore down his curtains and leaped to the floor. "I'm going to dress and put an end to this Hobson-Jobson flummery!" He tottered, clawed wildly at the air, and pitched

headlong beside Little's cot.

"There! It's the poison," moaned Little, squirming out of his bed and trying to lift his friend up. Then his own world spun around him, and he fell beside Barry, every inch of ant-bitten skin a blazing patch of torture.

Mrs. Goring and Natalie, entering together five minutes later, found them there; and all the good already accomplished had to be done over. It was two days now before the patients were able to recognize their nurses; but when recognition came, at least one of the women sighed thankfully to notice that Barry no longer harped upon naval officers and Vandersee. His relapse seemed to have driven all earlier ideas from his head; his bodily weakness was so intense that Mrs. Goring found him a babe in her hands, and Natalie could scarcely tend him for the weakness that attacked her at sight of him.

But the day came when he and Little were permitted to walk, and then the stockade formed their promenade ground. With a nurse for each, their convalescence could have been no more agreeable in the midst of civilization. And as Barry gained strength, yet before Jerry Rolfe was allowed in to worry him about the ship, he found himself and Natalie, Little and Mrs. Goring, pairing off in their slow rambles, and once more awkwardness of speech descended upon him like a wet blanket. He had caught a suggestive look on Little's face, and an answering smile on Mrs. Goring's, that told him as plainly as words that his opportunity was thus given to him.

So, while his heart burst with sentiment, and his arms ached to take Natalie in them, his tongue declined its office and left him a gaping, speechless sailor. Natalie did not help him either; for as his awkwardness increased, he sensed at first, then saw, that she was consumed with some powerful emotion that certainly was not love for him. Then he surprised her regarding him with fixed attention, when he had turned away to gather a flower for her hair; and in a flash he saw what her emotion was. It was dull, rankling uncertainty, and all the lover fled from him, leaving only the keen sailor with a keen sailor's sense.

"Miss Sheldon, I was just going to call you Natalie and tell you something very near to my heart," he blurted out. "I'm going to forget that, now, and wait until you get what's troubling you off your mind."

"Why, Captain Barry!" she cried, blushing furiously, "whatever do you mean? There is nothing troubling me, except the trouble that has come upon this peaceful little station."

"I beg your pardon, but there is," persisted Barry bluntly. "You still doubt me and my business and feel that I have painted Leyden black out of spite. Now, if Vandersee and Mrs. Goring and the rest can't convince you, I'm going to let you see it for yourself when the time comes. Let me tell you one thing, though; if Leyden were on the square, he'd be down at his ship seeing about getting her out of this hole. You don't see him around, do you?"

"No!" the girl cried hotly. "Of course we don't. What is the use of Mr. Leyden staying here when your ship blocks him in? He told me he was going to the other side of the island for official help."

"Official help!" gasped Barry, peering hard into the girl's eyes, in amazement at her utter belief. "He told you! Why, he can get all the official help right here, any time Vandersee's around. He don't dare, though. What did he sink my ship for?"

"He would dare, I know, if Mr. Vandersee's friends were true sailors. Mr. Leyden has told me repeatedly that those naval seamen are false; and since Mr. Vandersee disappeared a few days ago, never inquiring into the matter of these two ships in the river, I'm inclined to believe him, though I was almost persuaded that you were right and he was wrong."

"But my ship! He sunk her, didn't he?"

"I don't believe he did, Captain Barry," returned Natalie simply. "Whether you know it or not, and I'd rather think you did not, I believe somebody in your own crew sank your ship simply to annoy Mr. Leyden."

The skipper panted heavily, almost choked by his rising spleen, tottering shakily, as temper battled with imperfect recovery of strength. His lips opened and remained open, speechless; and his face grew purple, then white, until Miss Sheldon cast off her own trouble and saw in him only a patient needing the tenderest care. She assisted him back to the hut and saw him safely on his cot; then he was given a strong sleeping draft and slept clear through the night, awaking with clearer head and a determination to say no more to Natalie until things had straightened themselves out.

In the morning Mrs. Goring entered hurriedly and her first words were: "Captain Barry, Miss Sheldon's disappeared! Gone utterly!"



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The announcement staggered Barry and caused Little to gape like a stranded codfish. The ex-salesman, not having suffered such a relapse as the skipper, got in motion first and darted outside to get a better grasp on things in the open air. Mrs. Goring and Barry, left alone, looked at each other closely for a silent moment, then the skipper gasped:

"Leyden's work!"

"I'm afraid it is," replied the woman, and her soft eyes moistened at his agony. "His work or his agency, Captain."

"Mrs. Goring," Barry's voice grew level and cold, "will you tell me what relationship there is between that sweet girl and that utter scoundrel? She saw some of his fine work when Rolfe found us on those ant heaps; she heard all about Leyden's fake sailors, by whom we were taken; she told me over and over that she believed in Vandersee—yet last evening she returned to the same old story, doubting me and my business, and intimating that Leyden was the wronged innocent. I'm no lady's man—I'm a simple sailor—and I'm blessed if I can fathom it!"

Mrs. Goring was silent for several minutes, gazing into his face with deepest sympathy. She was troubled too; but under the pain a glad resignation seemed to shine out. She said, very softly:

"My dear friend, a woman's heart is a wonderful enigma. A girl's first love is far more wonderful. It is beyond reason, beyond understanding, incapable of analysis. And that is all the mystery with Natalie. She is the soul of purity, Captain, and more honest than honor. You have seen, and others have seen, that she likes you and aches to believe in you; but, innocent soul that she is, Leyden met her first, was the first man to apply himself to winning her affections, and he has fascinated her. You know she has left the Mission to go back to Java with him? Yes—Then, knowing what you do of her, can't you see that this is only another example of the splendid loyalty that actuates her? My good fellow—" Mrs. Goring's tone became almost motherly, and Barry worshipped her for it—"poor Natalie is to experience a sad disillusionment very soon; she will suffer; but from the suffering she will emerge as clean as before in mind and body, and

when her loyalty is enlisted in the proper place, the fortunate man will be glad that such loyalty is in her."

"That is all very well," Barry retorted hotly. "But why is she to go through all this trouble? Surely you have had chances enough to put her right. Leyden should have been run off the place when he first arrived. Vandersee is full of mystery, too, and I can't for my life see why he, if he is, as he says, a Government man, can't take charge of the schooner there, flog the jungle with trackers, and finish Leyden and his opium runners off-hand. Why, he has had a dozen chances. If my hands had not been tied by secret orders and later circumstances, I could have potted the beggar myself, easily. Now Miss Sheldon is gone. Where? You say Leyden fascinates her. Well, has she joined him? Where can she find him, in this maze of poisonous bush?"

"Let me assure you again, Captain Barry, that Mr. Vandersee is just what he has represented himself to be. Though things have happened to make you doubt him perhaps, believe me if I say that Leyden will not be killed by any chance bullet; he will be caught, and caught when his capture will have the result of bringing all the tangled threads together in the presence of every one vitally concerned. There is something far, far more serious than opium smuggling, or Houten's affairs, or his conflict with your party, for him to answer for. He will answer for all in the one great instant. Won't you please, please, Captain Barry, throw aside all doubts of Mr. Vandersee?"

She clasped both hands about his arm, gazed pleadingly into his dark face, and her red lips quivered piteously.

"I'd be glad to, Mrs. Goring, only for Miss Sheldon," replied Barry, his brain whirling again. "I have always believed in Vandersee, except at moments like these, when I think I ought to be taken more into his confidence. Can you wonder why I doubt, when that innocent girl vanishes like a ghost, and we all know what kind of snake waits in the grass for her?"

"Oh, I wish my—Mr. Vandersee—would come!" panted Mrs. Goring. "What can I say to you, Captain? I understand, perfectly, your emotions. Yet I can only repeat what seems to you a parrot cry, that Miss Sheldon shall not suffer one jot at Leyden's hands, except the suffering that must come with disillusionment. I say it again, and I swear it by the God that shall kill me if I lie!"

Barry rumbled his hair in perplexity. He did believe this pleading woman, usually so capable but now so piteous. But everything that had lately happened

went to make chaos more chaotic in his mind. He placed his hand gently on the woman's shaking shoulder and soothed her:

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Goring, I believe all you say about Vandersee and am trying to believe the rest. I want to, because I have long since ceased to puzzle myself over your errand here or the manner of your arrival, and only see in you a woman bravely carrying on some great struggle that I know nothing of yet. But you ran in here five minutes ago, crying out that Natalie had vanished—the one thing on earth to send me headlong through the place with murder in my soul—and now you try to prevent me doing a thing towards finding what's happened to her."

"Oh, I can't explain it, Captain," she cried, but her face was brighter now. "I'm only a woman, too, and Natalie's disappearance shocked me, although I had expected it. I ran in on an impulse; an impulse forced me to try to restrain you; and I made a bad mess of it altogether, I'm afraid. It is so utterly vital, so tremendously imperative, that Leyden comes to no serious harm before Mr. Vandersee is ready to strike, that I feared to let you or Mr. Little seek him out in hot temper to kill him perhaps. But I do care about Natalie. Though I know quite well that she will suffer no harm at Leyden's hands here, my blood curdles at the thought of her being near him at all," Mrs. Goring shuddered violently, and Barry saw in her face a look of furious loathing that implanted still another question for future investigation in his already burdened mind. She went on: "If I have persuaded you of the necessity for leaving Leyden's fate in Vandersee's hands, Captain, I shall see you start out to find Natalie with glad heart, and God speed you."

"Then speed me now," laughed Barry, buckling on a cartridge belt and looking to the magazine of his automatic pistol. "Tell me one thing, though, to quite settle my doubts: What makes you so certain that Leyden can't harm Natalie, if she is in his hands? Then I'll go like a shot."

"You saw the dwarf at the gate?"

"Oh, yes, and he's a good hand at flinging a silent knife!"

"There's your answer, Captain. He, or another of his tribe, is within knife-throw of Leyden every minute!"

"Oh, good!" cried the skipper. "Then if I find gargoyle-face, I find Miss Sheldon too, eh?"

"If she has joined Leyden, yes, Captain. I hope you find her and can bring her back. I will tell Mr. Vandersee where you have gone. I expected him before this. Good luck."

Barry went out, grimacing sourly in spite of himself. Always Vandersee! Every turn in the course Vandersee!

"Oh, well," he grinned, regaining his good temper as he caught sight of Little coming towards him, armed to the teeth, "I'm skipper of a ship that's a home for mud-eels at present; so I may as well do as friend Little does, take all in good part until my boss says fight, then take all my grouch out of the fellow I scrap with."

Little swung in alongside of the skipper, and as they went out through the stockade gate, he chattered on:

"Been snooping around, Barry, while you were flirting with the fair lady inside, and I found out that our friend over the gate has gone off on a job too. Figuring out the things that have gone before, I conclude perhaps he's trying to trail Miss Natalie, hey? Good Sherlock stuff, what?"

"Mighty good, but late," grinned the skipper. He briefly recounted what Mrs. Goring had told him, and Little's face drew down in dismay.

"Gosh!" he grumbled. "Every time I put two and two together they make five! When I sold typewriters, if I sold twice as many machines on a trip as I did the trip before, I used to figure that the demand had doubled: but out here in the jungle, by golly, if I get a lot o' clues and map out a plan o' campaign from 'em, I find that my clues are old stuff and a little bow-legged skeezics with a face like a cancelled Chinese stamp has already eaten up most of my plan o' campaign! Ain't it a shame?"

"Shocking!"

"You said it! But allee samee, it's good to be moving again, ain't it? There's ginger in the air, Barry. Smells like something going to happen, to me. Good. Let 'er come! I'm tired of being fed with a medicine spoon, and only let me get a sight o' Leyden at the end of my six-gun, and blooey! Hey?"

"I wish it could be, Little, but I'm afraid it won't!"

Barry and Little halted sharply and swung to one side at the sound of a soft voice

that came out of the cane thicket. The canes parted, and Vandersee emerged, followed like a small shadow by the deformed gatekeeper.

"Oh, good, Vandersee!" Barry exclaimed, preparing to overwhelm the big Hollander with a rush of questions long sizzling in his brain. "You can tell me a lot of things now. But what's the gateman doing? I thought he was shadowing Leyden; and hoped to find him to get some dope on Miss Sheldon's whereabouts." Barry had passed beyond the stage where Vandersee's sudden appearance might have startled him. He had come to expect such things lately. But the big man's placid face clouded at the skipper's words, and obviously he was startled out of his calm.

"Miss Sheldon's whereabouts?" he echoed. "Since when?"

"She disappeared this morning," cried Barry angrily. "Do you mean to say that's news to you? Ask the dwarf there. He's been close to Leyden, hasn't he?"

Vandersee spoke swiftly to the dwarf in his native dialect, and the little man nodded his head vehemently.

"This is bad news, Captain," said the Hollander seriously. "This man has followed Leyden all night until relieved by his mate; but Miss Natalie has not been seen." Thinking silently for a moment, the great human enigma suggested with his old suave smile: "This is a matter better left to the natives, Captain, unless it should be found that Miss Sheldon is still nearby about her own affairs. I can assure you that no harm shall befall her—"

"Oh, confound you!" burst out Barry furiously, "all the time it's assurances, assurances! Mrs. Goring had me almost crazy with that word; now you pile on the agony, and I'm damned if I make another move at your suggestion. I'm more interested in the safety of that girl than in whatever schemes you have in hand. My business here is—"

"Pardon me, Captain Barry," interrupted Vandersee, with quiet yet utter authority, "I understand your business to be the care of your employer's best interests. Your interests concerning Miss Sheldon are not precisely business, although I am ready to admit without reservation that they do you credit. In spite of that, I must remind you that Cornelius Houten's vessel is still in the river mud, and your contract calls for her return to Batavia or a report from yourself that your expedition has failed." Barry gestured wildly, bursting to speak, and Little looked on with a puzzled grin.

With a soothing smile the Hollander concluded: "Personally I don't believe Miss Sheldon has gone far away. She certainly is not with Leyden. So let me assume responsibility for immediate search for her. You shall be kept informed. At present my business is with you entirely—oh, you too, Mr. Little—and I have come a long distance to see you, since my messenger informed me of your near recovery. If you will walk back to the post with me, I have a plan to lay before you which will be in keeping with your real business and at the same time help along the work of cleaning up my own affairs."

Together they retraced their steps, Little accepting the sudden switch with his usual good temper, Barry gradually coming out of his dark mood under the influence of Vandersee's quiet, capable presence that refused to notice temper just then. They reached the main hut and found Gordon seated at the table—his own old table of trading days—looking fit and well, but wearing an air of intense boredom. He rose as they entered, and Vandersee stopped him with outstretched hand.

"Stay here, Gordon," he said, with a kindly smile; "you look almost ready for work, hey? Feeling fit again?"

"Fit as a fiddle, thanks to you and Ju—Mrs. Goring," replied Gordon, in a voice that rang with the pressure of clean, healthy lungs. "I want to do something. I'm infernally weary of this booby trap, playing hospital, and climbing trees to go to bed, and laying around like a pampered Sybarite. I'm coming out with you when you start again!"

"Not with me, yet," smiled Vandersee, and his eyes twinkled with pleasure to see Gordon's complete rejuvenescence. Little and Barry, too, stared amazedly at the change in the man, although they had seen something of him during their own sicknesses and might have been prepared for his improvement. "But I have plenty of work you can do, if you don't mind chipping in with the skipper here. D' ye mind, Barry?"

"I'd be glad to have Gordon with me," growled Barry surlily, "if by having him I can get into action. I too am weary—wearily to death—but it's at the mystery and theatrical mumbo-jumbo rather than at inaction. What's your scheme now?"

"This, gentlemen." Vandersee produced a folded map and smoothed it out on the table. It was a map of Celebes, and across the face of it ran red lines. Celebes is shaped like no other island on earth. It is like a nightmarish starfish shaved clean of legs on one side. It is nothing but a series of peninsulas, and along each

peninsula runs a mountain range, from which rivers small or fairly big run either way into the sea. It was across the peninsula partially drained by the river they were on that the red lines were exclusively traced, and Barry noticed with a seaman's eye that the marked soundings showed the river survey to have been very complete, while less frequent soundings on the ocean side gave a condition of bottom utterly obstructive to navigation. He caught instantly the significance of the map from a naval viewpoint but was puzzled at its significance for him or his ship. He glanced up to find Vandersee regarding him intently.

"Good map, Vandersee," he remarked and looked his further question.

"It is a good map, Captain. And I'll show you how it will concern you very deeply. Then I have no doubt you will see your duty lies in raising the *Barang* without delay.

"You see the ocean side of this map is poorly surveyed. That is because we have decided that the coast offers no attractions for deep vessels. The rivers are better—and this is about the best. But over on that side—" pointing to the ocean—"lies a thick population, and there is Leyden's great opium market. We have driven the traffic away from there; at least, we made it impossible for vessels to run the stuff there; but there happens to be a tremendous combination of attractions between here and there which has caused all this trouble.

"First there is a trail across to here—very bad, but easily passable for natives, even fairly well burdened—and then up the mountains, right where the trail crosses, gold is found in abundance. Begin to see?" he smiled at his audience. They looked rather less puzzled, but still uncertain, and he went on:

"Don't you see Leyden's scheme? You, Gordon, know it, of course." Gordon flushed uncomfortably, and Vandersee patted him on the arm gently. "Well, gentlemen, the first thing was to report a gold find on this river. Pardon me, Gordon, if I have to keep mentioning you in this; but I think the soreness will wear off in time. The gold find was reported to keep Houten quiet, since Gordon was essential in the scheme, and it was best to have him remain as Houten's agent than have a change and get old Houten out here to see for himself. By the way, it was Leyden's greed that at last forced Houten to send you fellows here to search out that gold source. Now, Leyden arranged to have carriers from the other side come here for their opium, bringing gold in payment for it, and Gordon received a share as his payment. He had to send some to Houten, to keep the supply of trade goods coming in; but at last Leyden's greed got so intense

that he forced Gordon here even to pay in trade for the small amount of gold he got, and so latterly Houten had not only received no gold dust, but his trade goods have shown no profit."

Gordon's face had cleared as the talk went on, and when Vandersee finished, he raised his eyes and met the gaze of all of them fearlessly, confident in his own recovery from a hateful bondage.

"May I ask if there is anything more against Leyden than opium running?" inquired Little quietly.

"No doubt you have heard there is," smiled Vandersee, but his smile was sad. "My Government want that business cleaned up, of course. I think Houten will be satisfied with your work, when it's finished, and I give him my report too; but there is another side to the business which is mine entirely, at least until it comes to a head, when you shall all share in the harvest. You know, don't you, Gordon?"

The big Hollander appeared sorely agitated, and his utter alteration of countenance sent a pang to Barry and Little. They ceased to wonder and decided to accept Vandersee without question, when Gordon quietly responded: "Yes, God knows I know! And when it's over, gentlemen, you'll hate yourselves for ever doubting!"



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Vandersee folded away his map and then outlined the plan he had formed. While he spoke, Gordon shifted uneasily to the other side of the room, merely saying, though Little had not spoken:

"Don't look at me like that, Little. I'm clean now, if I wasn't when you first met me; please let that be my excuse for the present for anything I may have done to offend you or Houten, won't you?"

Little colored deeply and looked embarrassed. He found he had been staring rather inquisitively at the man he had come to supersede, and with his native courtesy and honesty he thrust his hand over the table to grip Gordon's. Neither man uttered another word; but Gordon's eyes unmistakably said, "Thank you."

Vandersee watched this little side play, pausing in his explanation, then resumed:

"You see, Captain, as long as your brigantine is blocking up the river for his schooner, Leyden is not likely to hang around here. And the trails over the island are so many and divergent that I believe all the men I have at my command can scarcely hope to track every one of his gang. Of course, we want him most; but every man of his crew is wanted, too, and unless the *Barang* is raised and moved, to give him hope of escape, I'm afraid he will prove slippery for sometime yet. One other thing is, that through his cunning and lies, the Mission folk here fully believe that Cornelius Houten is the rogue, and their reports to my Government are becoming quite harmful to our friend in Batavia.

"I might say here that Houten is on his way to us by now." An exclamation of fresh surprise from the skipper halted the big Hollander, and Gordon's face went livid again. Vandersee hastened to add: "Don't be alarmed, Gordon. You have suffered, and I give you my word that Houten fully understands everything." He turned to the rest: "I sent one of my runners to the coast with a cable to Houten the moment I knew surely that there was no gold in his river. I thought it best.

"Now, Captain Barry, how long will it take to raise your ship?"

"With Rolfe and Blunt and a full crew I can get her afloat in two tides, unless her leaks are bigger than her own and some extra pumps can check," the skipper

replied confidently. "How's the mud here?"

"Mere slime. Pumps ought to suck it out. As for your mates and the crew, they are all living in the village. Plenty of huts there now, since most of the male natives have gone over to Leyden. Two tides then?"

"Plenty. What do you want me to do with her when she floats?"

"Take her downstream to that swampy creek I pointed out in coming up. I'll have some men clear away the grasses at the entrance, and she will float inside there easily. You can leave her there, hidden from the river, until one is almost abreast of her; and if luck favors us to the extent that Leyden falls into the trap, we can haul out quickly and get his vessel as she comes down, with all her crimes in evidence aboard of her."

"But suppose she slips us before I can get the *Barang* clear? What of Miss Sheldon then, if she's on board?"

"Once more I ask you to rest easy about that, Captain," Vandersee smiled back, and suddenly Jack Barry felt complete trust take hold of him. He nodded, without further question, and turned to Gordon. "How about you, Gordon? Want to lend a hand?"

"To raise your ship? Like a shot, skipper. And the harder the work you give me, the better I'll like it. I'm in need of hardening."

The river soon seethed with activity again. Bill Blunt came down from the village, leading the crew with great importance, for he was going to a job that would call forth all his exhaustive knowledge of the sailor's craft. Jerry Rolfe scouted for boats, and by half-ebb tide the *Barang's* wet decks were filled with men.

Rigging extra pumps occupied all the time until low water, and as the sluggish stream paused at slack, just before turning, every available hand in the ship ground away on brakes and chain pumps until the old brigantine gushed yellow water at every scupper. Barry, hanging over the hatch coaming, peered anxiously into the dark hold, hoping against hope that the pumps were gaining. The sight of swirling waters that surged upward from the sides and spread oilily over the lowering surface proved that the leaks were too serious to be completely checked, and it was necessary to do something else.

"Have to send divers over and try to plug those leaks," he announced and stared

doubtfully at the panting crew. Gordon asked some questions of Rolfe, then stepped beside the skipper.

"You can see about where they are, can't you, Barry?" he asked, peering down at the foul water inside the ship.

"So far, yes. But they must be near water line, or the rascals could never have made 'em. Unluckily we can't raise her to her water line; and I hate to send men down into that slime. It might mean suffocation. Don't you smell the gas?"

"But why not outside?"

"Too smooth, Gordon. Inside there are stringers and frames to claw on to while feeling around; outside her skin is too slick for anything except a barnacle to grab hold of."

Gordon coolly flung off his jacket and kicked off his shoes. And little, at first not seeing the move, suddenly sprang to join him, throwing aside his own clothes with a whoop of joy.

"Gosh, Barry! Why didn't you say you needed a fish?"

The skipper grinned at him in spite of his uneasiness at letting men go down there and shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"Go ahead, both of you. If Gordon's as much at home in the water as I've seen you, our job is done. Don't know how I forgot your mudlark proclivities, Little."

There was a glow of enthusiasm on Gordon's face as he followed Little over the hatch coaming, and Barry thrilled to see it. There was needed no better proof of the man's complete emancipation from the alcoholic curse that had made him a willing and pliable tool in Leyden's crooked schemes. For a moment the skipper watched the two men, not quite satisfied of their safety, ready in an instant to order them up or go after them himself, should they get into trouble. But he was soon reassured. First Little came up, snorted choking mud from his nostrils, inhaled a breath of clean air, and plunged down again. Gordon followed, and at the second plunge both reported having found a leak.

"Holes about an inch across, in groups of five in a space as big as a plate, skipper," gasped Little, resting before taking another dive farther forward. Gordon had found a similar leak; and another search discovered a series of such places running half the length of the ship.

"Holy smoke!" growled Barry in wonderment. "Must have had twenty water rats working on her to do that in such a short time. Rolfe must have been dreaming not to hear anything."

But Rolfe and Bill Blunt were away in the boats, picking up the upstream anchor which could not be hove in, simply because the ship could not be brought over it. And watching their arduous labor, Barry put aside his rising irritation and postponed the warm reproof he was bursting to hurl at them. Instead, he set men busily to work making plugs for the holes, and when the pumps were still for the moment he dropped into a canoe alongside and paddled down to join the boats.

"Got it, hey?" he remarked, nodding with approval as Blunt's boat hauled the great anchor dripping between his boat and Rolfe's, where the mate's crew made it fast, swinging on both gunwales by a baulk of timber laid across, ready to be either let go again, or taken under the brigantine's bows and hove up with the windlass.

"She sartainly sucks hard, sir," said Blunt, straightening his broad back and taking out a huge plug of tobacco. "If that there mud sticks to th' ship like it stuck to this yer mudhook, then we'll need sheer-legs to raise her, Cap'n."

"Saw a pile o' empty oil drums behind the stockade," rumbled Jerry Rolfe, avoiding the skipper's eye as if expecting to hear some scathing comment on the ship's situation.

"How many?" Bill Blunt demanded, without waiting for Barry to speak. "Be they big uns? Is ther' plenty of 'em? Holy Sailor! Beg pardon, Cap'n, but them's what we want, ain't they, now?"

"What can you do with them, Blunt? You'd need a thousand to raise the *Barang* a foot. And how will you fasten them? Can't get lines under the keel."

"Beg pardon, sir, fer a-shovin' in me oar," returned Bill, with a grotesque tug at his forelock. "I seen som'at o' the sort done once, though, an' if so be as you ses so, I'll do me best, sir."

"Oh, go ahead, Blunt. Go right ahead. I suppose whatever you do won't put her in any worse a pickle. No doubt she'll come up herself when the holes are plugged and the pumps get going again."

They pulled aboard the *Barang*, and while the boats were sent ashore to bring down all the empty drums, Bill Blunt assumed a comical air of study and

thought out his plan. He first asked about the holes and what had been done with them. By this time the tide had risen a foot, and the plugs were almost ready to be driven in. Barry watched the old fellow with a grin, and when Bill began to count laboriously on his gnarled fingers, stepping from the bulwarks to the hatch and back again, peering over the side and down the hold, the skipper said with mock apology:

"I suppose you're wondering why we're going to drive in the plugs from inside, hey?"

"No, sir. I never wonders at what my skipper does. It's allus right. That's what you be skipper fer, I take it. No, sir. I sees as it ain't easy to drive plugs into holes as you can't reach, and them holes seems to be away below the mud outside. Course, some clever sharks as I knows on might say as you was wrong, and that the water outside 'ud drive them plugs back into the belly o' the wessel. But 'tain't so. No, sir." The ancient mariner maintained his bearlike pacing to and from the hatch, and his speech was astonishingly longwinded for him; still he kept on chattering, and presently Barry began to listen with real interest, and Little and Gordon, waiting for the plugs, stared at the sailor in awed admiration.

"No, sir," went on Bill, "them plugs has to be druv from inside; an' makin' free, genelmen, I'd make 'em twice as long as them you have ready."

"Twice as long?" snorted Barry. "D' you mean these are all useless?"

"P'raps not quite useless, Cap'n, but they ain't no blessed good, an' I bet my head on that. See, if you drives all them plugs well through her, and they sticks out good an' proper outside, it ain't so hard to grope around under the mud an' grab a holt on 'em. Then 'tain't very hard, genelmen, to paddle away a bit o' mud about each bunch o' plugs, an' when that's done, 'tis about all done. I'll lash a wire to them long plugs, and stretch her right along th' ship. That keeps them plugs in, don't it? an' it's some'at to hang short lines to, ain't it? Werry well then; say we has a hundred or two hundred short lines bent on to that wire, genelmen, an' on each short line is a hempty drum, bunged up tight—"

"And at dead low water next tide we fasten those drums down short, the tide 'll help raise her, hey?" finished Barry, persuaded that it might be done. "But how about the other side?"

"She don't matter, sir," the old fellow asserted. "We got plenty o' time afore next tide. Plenty o' time to cut fresh plugs an' git lines ready. Then when tide rises

again, them drums 'll roll her over if they won't lift her. Ain't it easy then to get at them leaks? Better'n layin' her ashore somewheres fer caulking, if yuh don't know this yer river very well."

Barry needed but one minute to see how infinitely better was the old sailor's plan than the one he had formed himself. Merely to raise the vessel and then to lay her on the alongshore flats to stop the leaks, left a serious loophole for the swift escape of the schooner; but the simple scheme of Bill Blunt left the *Barang* in her blockading position until she was fit to move anywhere under her own sail power.

The river rose rapidly after half-tide, and it had reached full height by the time the fresh plugs were ready and the wire and short lines prepared. Evening fell, too, before the stream turned again, and the hands rested against the time when Gordon and Little could get down to driving in the plugs.

Then the work was resumed with feverish haste, for much small detail in the dim light took plenty of time. The old brigantine rang and rumbled to the thumps of hammers below, sometimes ringing clearly until the hammers struck beneath the water, then sounding dull and soggy as iron met wet wood. Over the side Blunt hung on to a line and felt for the outer ends of the plugs with his bare prehensile toes; then, lowering himself still more, he paddled industriously in the liquid mud until he had cleared a space around one bunch of plugs. Afterwards it was simply a matter of setting the crew to work right along the line, and long before the river reached its lowest level again, nimble fingers had firmly seized a strong wire rope to the long plugs stretching along more than a third of the ship's length.

Then came low water, and every man in the ship except Gordon and Little—too exhausted from their own submerged labors to be of much use for a while—went to work fastening the tight empty drums to the wire by their short lines, until the ship's side rumbled to the bobbing of the waters like an immense tom-tom.

"All right here, sir," reported Blunt from forward. "All right aft," echoed the mate, and Barry ordered all hands aboard.

"Now pump her!" he cried, and the muggy air of the night throbbed to the clank of the brakes.

The decks gushed with water that became more and more plain mud as the water lowered in the hold; the sounding rods showed the decrease inside to have at last

overcome the outside rise; still Barry, looking anxiously overboard, saw no sign of the vessel rising herself. That mud held like Fate. Jerry Rolfe remained forward, in readiness to drive his watch to making sail or anchoring, should the ship actually float beyond expectations; Bill Blunt hung over the rail beside the skipper, and Little and Gordon joined them in silent wonder, neither of them quite clear about the results of this queer undertaking.

"Say, Barry," whispered Little, unable to keep quiet any longer, "if she rises as you expect, won't she float entirely? What's the necessity of all this drum business? The leaks are plugged, and she either floats or she don't, so far as I can see."

"Went up under sail on top o' high water, sir; slid through mud as is hardening like glue, an' she ain't got drift enough to suck clear," replied Blunt, taking the answer out of Barry's mouth. He had seen the skipper's increasing doubts and felt the need of speech to ease his own impatience. "If she rolls up wi' them drums, genelmen, she'll bust a hole fer herself, d' ye see?"

Pop!—Boom!

"There's a drum bust loose!" cried Rolfe from the foredeck.

The increasing strain had broken a small line, and the released drum popped to the surface, letting its fellows in the bunch come together under water with a hollow crash.

"Can't do anything but hold on," growled Barry, all but convinced that every drum would burst loose before that horrible mud let go. And so they watched, every eye, and still the pumps clanged and clattered; still their feet were sluiced with out-gushing liquid that was now merely slime. And then the first pump sucked—sucked hoarsely and throatily—and another, and another—yet the mud clung tenaciously to the vessel's keel and bilges.

"She rises! Th' bloomin' ol' lady rises!" roared Blunt, and Barry stared at him in disgust. No other ears had heard, no other eyes had seen, the signs that the old seaman had sensed above the sucking of the pumps.

"She rises, I tell ye!"

Then from the swirling water alongside, rising swiftly as the tide made, came a long, hollow sound like a Gargantuan boot being tugged out of a morass. The *Barang* moved, shivered, and heeled slightly; then came one tremendous,

prolonged sucking sound, and she rolled lazily over until the drums floated high on the surface and rattled together like drums of victory.

"Guy out the booms to keep her down!" shouted Barry; "Rolfe! shift everything heavy over to that side, too. You, Blunt, get a boat away and carry out a kedge astern. When you're through, set a watch on deck and let the hands turn in. We can fix the leaks in a couple of hours in daylight at low water again. Thanks, Blunt! You're one real sailor, anyway."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gordon took the canoe and went ashore to sleep after the work was finished; the *Barang* was the epitome of malodorous discomfort after her submersion, and even the crew preferred to coil up on deck rather than risk the dampness and possible intruding river life of the forecastle. Little looked at the departing canoe with humorous envy in his face, for he had not yet reached the point in sea-hardness where he preferred an uncomfortable bunk on board the ship to a comfortable couch ashore.

"Want to go with him?" queried Barry, shuddering himself at the prospect of a steamy wet night to be followed by a chilly damp dawn without a dry covering. "Call him back then."

"Not I!" retorted Little. "Think I'm no better a sailor than that, after all I've learnt? Shame on you, Jack Barry! Me, I eat oakum and drink tar, and if I can't sleep in water, I'll keep awake. Turn in, you poor old fish. I'll keep watch."

Barry went into the deckhouse, grinning, and the watch was set, leaving the brigantine to the silent night. Little curled up inside the deckhouse also, but shivering at the touch of sodden couches, he returned to the deck outside and fell to pacing back and forth in hope of adding to the fatigue earned in the hold. Tired he was—even to pain—but while his limbs would keep still when he lay down, his eyes refused to close, and every tiny sound from nearby waters or distant jungle hummed and burbled in his ears until his head was full of waking thoughts that absolutely prohibited sleep.

He gave up the struggle after a short while and determined to remain awake. The whimsical idea came to him that by so resolving he would surely drop asleep. But with the resolve came a wider wakefulness; and as the lagging moments crept by, he found a new interest in the vague and shadowy outline of the *Padang* at the wharf. The schooner was deserted to the eye, even in daylight. Certainly there were a few men aboard her, and a watchman never failed to oppose an attempt to mount the gangway, but visible activity had been absent from her vicinity for days. Now Little found himself watching her dark blurr with keen vision, and the feeling stole upon him that she was full of men.

There were no audible voices to convince him. Rather it was an indefinable

murmur that rose from her decks, an aura of sound. Sight gave him no corroboration, although he went aloft halfway to the main crosstrees with the shrewd idea that by so doing he would secure a downward sight that must surely reveal a gleam in the skylight if any of her official crew were in the cabin.

He saw nothing, but Little was no longer a complete greenhorn. "Covered the skylight up, of course!" he muttered, and watched the schooner closer yet because of his decision.

At length, after an age of watching that made his eyes hot and weary, he caught a swift, almost fanciful, yet undoubted flash of light at a porthole in the quarter. It was the sort of flash that would be seen through an imperfectly curtained porthole of a stateroom if the door from the lighted saloon were quickly opened and shut.

"Cabin's occupied, that's sure!" decided Little and ran to wake Barry.

"Losing no time, are they?" muttered the skipper, waking in an instant with all his senses alert. He concluded that Leyden's men had watched the operation of raising the *Barang*, and everything was being held ready for a dash down the river the moment the raised vessel swung aside from the channel. Together the two friends peered at the schooner, striving to distinguish more than bare hints of sound or sight; then suddenly the hum ceased; not suddenly, either, but as if a crowd of men walked away, chattering as they went, and gradually passed beyond earshot.

"Say, Barry, isn't that a tiny streak o' light about where the forward stateroom porthole should be?" whispered Little presently.

"I don't see it—wait, get my night glasses from the companionway." The glasses rendered the schooner perfectly clear as to outline; they revealed a ship deserted to all outward sign; but they also revealed a slender streak of light where Little's keen eyes had detected it.

"You're right!" said Barry. "That's a light supposed to be covered by the curtains, and badly done or purposely foozled. I'm going over to look—see. Coming?"

"What d' ye suppose? Think Miss Sheldon may be there?"

"Just what I do think. And I'm going to find out. If she's there under restraint, I'm going to haul her out if it busts all Vandersee's plans higher than a kite. If she's there of her own free will, she can stay, and I'll wish her good luck of her choice.

Here, give me a hand with this paint punt; it's the smallest thing that'll carry us."

A paint punt is a small, flat, square-ended raft with raised sides, used for floating around a ship's water line to renew the boot-topping paint. A single oar, used as a scull, a pair of oars, or a paddle, are all equally capable of navigating such a craft; and Barry and Little shoved off with a paddle apiece, sending the tiny float softly and easily across the river. They entered the patch of shadow cast by the schooner and dipped their paddles with greater caution. But no challenge greeted them; they pulled up under the overhanging stern of the vessel itself without obstruction.

And as they reached the side, the tiny streak of light above their heads vanished,—not as if suddenly curtained, but as if utterly extinguished.

"Here, look around for something to get up by," whispered Barry, hauling the punt along the side by digging his fingers into the above-water seams which the long sun-blistering had opened. The main rigging was the first available means of access, and the skipper clambered nimbly into the channels, making no more noise than a cat. He raised himself above the rail and peered down upon dark, mysterious decks, untouched by a single ray of relieving light. And his breath stopped painfully at the shadowy sight that struck upon his senses out of the darkness: silent, ghostlike shapes that moved as noiselessly as shadows themselves, vanishing over the open main hatchway,—two score even as he watched. And vague as it all was, he knew that they were no sailors, nor even Mission natives; their headdress and crouching gait betrayed them as natives from the interior.

Barry glared helplessly, fearing to move either way lest he make some noise that should attract these jungle-men to his own disaster; and again his popping eyes stretched wider, and all his muscles quivered, for out of the schooner's main cabin, by way of the main-deck doors, stepped a figure in white, a female figure, walking quickly across the deck to the gangway.

"It's Natalie!" breathed Barry, bewildered. He watched the girl until she topped the gangway and went down it, a vision of utter freedom and ease of mind. He dropped silently into the punt and startled Little with his news.

"Just visiting, hey?" remarked the salesman. "Seems to like his company, anyway. Suppose we'd better leave her to her own affairs."

"I suppose so," growled Barry forlornly. "Let's shove in under the wharf a

minute, Little. I want to say something to her. She's going to the post, apparently, and here it is long past midnight."

"Go ahead," grunted Little. "Barry, if we ever come across one single man in this goose chase that isn't wrapped in mystery, I'll kiss him, by Hokey!"

They drew the punt under the wharf well astern of the schooner, wondering, with all those men on board, why the *Padang* kept so careless a watch. Barry climbed up a pile and walked swiftly in the direction of the stockade, to intercept Natalie, and soon he saw a white figure hurrying towards him. He stepped out with a greeting and an excuse, and for the second time in ten minutes received a shock that almost paralyzed speech.

The woman was not Natalie—it was Mrs. Goring—and her face showed confusion at meeting him.

"I beg your pardon—I thought you were Miss Sheldon," stammered the skipper, doffing his hat awkwardly.

"Did you really expect to meet Miss Sheldon at this hour of the night, here?" she returned. Her tone was sharp.

"No, but I was near the schooner, and thought I saw her come ashore. You know the last thing I heard of her was that she had vanished. It was natural that I should want to see her, wasn't it?"

"Oh, forgive me, Captain," the woman cried, and she was again the cheery friend. "I had forgotten that. Of course. Well, I'm sorry for your disappointment. But shouldn't you be on board your ship, Captain? I believe there is something about to move on that schooner."

It was perfectly plain that Mrs. Goring did not intend to be communicative regarding her own errand or business with the schooner. Barry felt that, and bit back the impatient speech that welled to his lips. Whatever this woman turned out to be in the end, it was certain that at present Barry was not in her complete confidence any more than he was in Vandersee's; and after all, his own affairs were solely concerned in his ship. But he knew, apparently, a detail that she did not.

"Let 'em start something, Mrs. Goring," he replied sourly. "They can do no more now than during the past week. My ship still lies across the channel, even though she is raised. She stays there, at least until ready to move in any direction."

"Oh, I wish I had known that an hour ago!" the woman cried. "Are you sure?"

"I am her skipper and should be sure," he retorted and continued: "Well, if you've left something undone, there's lots of time to repair the omission. From what I can see you have undisputed entry to the schooner. It's easy to go aboard again, isn't it?"

"Captain, you are very patient, but you have not yet learned to believe in your friends," she replied very softly and with a world of tenderness. "You are angry now, and really I can't blame you. But if it will ease your mind and prevent you worrying continually, I can tell you that Miss Sheldon is found—is not far away—and is safe. What I said about knowing of your situation an hour ago simply concerned Natalie's comfort, which might have been provided for more fully."

"Oh, I don't pretend any more to understand anything," Barry replied, "so must accept what you say without question. I might ask how it happens that you are so free of the *Padang*, but I won't. Live and learn—wait and see! Good night, Mrs. Goring."

"Good night, Captain," she cried back at him, and so utterly relieved was her tone that the skipper dropped down upon Little, swearing like a half-smothered coal heaver with hot irritation.

"What's biting you now?" grinned Little.

"Shove off and shut up!" retorted Barry and dug his paddle furiously into the river, careless of noise.

They reached the brigantine without having raised a sound from the schooner; but they saw no more lights aboard her, and the chill dawn broke and found all hands busy while yet the skipper wrestled with his bewilderment. Little kept away from him, until they met while taking a little food as the sun came up; then his bursting curiosity got the better of his restraint.

"Don't be so darned grumpy, Barry," he protested. "Didn't I share the trip? Ain't I entitled to know what happened?"

Barry grimly related his experience on the wharf, and as he spoke he detected a light in Little's wide eyes that grew from astonishment at his tale to unbelieving contempt for his own denseness. "What's the joke now?" he demanded bearishly.

"Gee-hos-o'-phat!" gasped Little. "D' ye mean to say you didn't tumble to it?"

Why, man alive, because you saw Mrs. Goring leaving the schooner at midnight, when you expected to see Miss Sheldon, that don't prove Miss Sheldon wasn't aboard there!"

"Hey, Rolfe!" the skipper roared, "keep an eye on that schooner and hurry up with those leaks! Stand by until I get back!"

In a couple of minutes Barry was in the punt and well away from the ship, paddling swiftly towards the wharf astern of the schooner. He tied up his tiny craft, ran along to the *Padang's* gangway, and mounted to her deck with arms swinging and fists tight, determined to meet any opposition with force.

And he found his entry ridiculously easy. A little brown man at the gangway grating stared at him with faint interest; another little brown man stepped aside for him at the main-deck doors to the cabin, and neither of them showed either concern or hostility. For a moment this very circumstance halted Barry, whose temper had not entirely burned up his shrewdness. He made the rest of his way to the saloon with caution, but without any more hesitation, and while his hand closed on the pistol in his pocket he kept it there. He listened for pattering feet, or closing doors; but no trap was sprung on him, and he entered the great saloon and was brought to an abrupt stand at sight of Miss Sheldon sitting calmly and comfortably at the table engaged on some trifle of feminine sewing.

"Good morning, Captain," she said brightly, rising and extending her hand. "This is an unexpected visit, isn't it?"

"I expect so," he returned, gazing hard into her smiling face. As her smile grew brighter, his own face darkened, until she began to look embarrassed at his boorish temper. "I want you to tell me, once for all, Miss Sheldon, that you are here of your own choice and free will," he blurted out. "If I'm uncivil or rude, excuse me. I can't feel any other way until I know this. Ever since you were reported missing, I pictured you in trouble, and I have been told not to worry about you. Do you think I could avoid worrying?"

He met her eyes with a troubled stare, and he gulped at the expression that had come into her face. She smiled at him still; and in the smile was a depth of kindness and great pity that illy matched her words.

"Two days ago I should have cared little whether any one worried or not, Captain," she said quietly. "Now I value your interest; yet I must tell you that I am here entirely of my free will and remain here of my own choice."

"And Leyden?" Barry choked it out.

"I have not seen him recently; but I hope to see him here very soon, Captain." Again that wonderful pity glowed in Natalie's eyes and made the puzzle more puzzling yet for Barry. Since he had first met her, he had never seen anything so flattering to himself in her face as this; yet it was utterly contrary to her expressed thoughts.

"And truly, I am glad to see you, Captain Barry," she added, "but for your own safety and my own comfort I must beg of you not to remain here. Every minute that you are away from your ship is vital to all of us."

"All of us? I dare say. But which of us?" he demanded. "I don't know a thing about this muddle of motives, but I do know that my ship and yourself are my two vital interests, Miss Sheldon. I will go immediately if you will prove to me that you are really at liberty; that you are a free agent and can leave this ship if you really want to. If that is so, I have no further concern with your affairs."

The girl stepped out on deck without a word, but in her glorious eyes beamed a light that Jack Barry would have given an eye to see with the other. She walked down the gangway, turned to await him, then smiled softly at him and said:

"There, Captain. Does that satisfy you? Let me tell you that I am comfortable, quite safe, and wholly desirous of your good success and happiness. Good-by now; I cannot keep you longer."

Jack Barry stumbled away towards the stockade like a man in a trance. Here was mystery piled on mystery. Natalie Sheldon, at liberty on board Leyden's schooner, happy and comfortable, yet being visited at midnight by Mrs. Goring, friend of Leyden's fiercest foe, and wishing the *Barang's* skipper success and happiness!

Barry plunged straight along for the stockade gate.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Inside the main hut the skipper burst upon a little tableau that sent him hastily back with apologies in place of the hot inquiries he had prepared. Gordon and Mrs. Goring were standing in the middle of the hut, and the man's arms were holding the woman closely, while her face, upturned to his, glowed with a love that irradiated the place. They started at the intrusion; then, recognizing their visitor, Gordon called to him.

"Don't run away, Barry. I'm coming on board with you."

"Yes, wait a moment, Captain," Mrs. Goring rejoined. "I have something for you."

Barry returned, doubting the good of anything that might be for him. But Mrs. Goring took something from the table and went to him, smiling.

"There, Captain," she said, proffering the thing she had picked up. "You may have it now."

Barry took from her the picture of Natalie Sheldon that had been stolen from his chronometer case on the voyage from Surabaya. He stared at it, then at the giver, and from one to the other in a daze.

"How did you get this?" he stammered helplessly.

"Oh, it came to me," she smiled. "You will know how, all in good time. But I can tell you why you lost it, if you care to know. It was stolen from you—as you stole it yourself, you know," she rippled—"but with different motives. You lost it in order that you might be kept hot in the service of its original."

"Then it worked! Have I ever cooled? It seems to me that I have been required to keep cold and hold off."

"Yes, Captain. Events have turned out rather differently from our expectations, but they are running smoothly now. You may safely have the picture. And I believe you will find little restraint upon your actions from now on."

The skipper gazed at the photograph for some time without speaking, then he

laid it down on the table and said quietly:

"I don't want it now. If that picture ever takes a place in my cabin again, it will be placed there by Miss Sheldon. That is not very likely to happen. Thank you, just the same, Mrs. Goring, and if I never know how it was lost, it won't bother me much. I'll go aboard and move my ship down river. Coming, Gordon?"

Gordon embraced Mrs. Goring again and kissed her, totally unembarrassed by Barry's presence, then followed the skipper out and down to the wharf. As they paddled out to the ship, Barry eyed the schooner narrowly but saw nothing unusual aboard her. He wondered about all those silent figures he had seen entering her hold the night before; but somehow in the past hour he had lost much of his interest in Leyden's ship. He felt a growing desire to get away out of the river into the clean salt ocean.

The *Barang's* crew had made great progress with their work; and Rolfe hailed as they approached the side to say that the ship was ready to drop down at high water. Out in midstream Bill Blunt and a boat's crew were returning after laying out an anchor to a great coir-fiber hawser, springy and stout, and a glance at the shores showed rapidly rising water.

"Get a strain on the hawser and keep taking in," ordered Barry as soon as he got on deck. "Gordon, if you want to harden up, take a handspike and have a turn at the capstan. Where's Little, Rolfe?"

"Little?" Jerry Rolfe looked alarmed. "I haven't seen Mr. Little since you went ashore, sir."

"I seen him a-swimmin' over by the schooner, awhile ago," remarked Blunt, bringing the boat painter aft to make the boat fast astern. "I thought he wuz goin' arter you, sir."

Barry suddenly renewed his interest in the *Padang*. Smothering a curse at Little's meddlesomeness, he snatched up his glasses and focussed them on the schooner. There was nothing to be seen out of the ordinary; but as he looked, that indescribable hum arose from her deck, and it intensified to a snarl. Then a flying figure appeared at the schooner's rail, and Little leaped over and into the yellow river with a yell.

As he struck the water, a shower of missiles followed him, and throwing clubs and short spears whizzed around his ears. He came up from his plunge into the

midst of potent death, and with something like the cheery yell with which he had greeted the alligators, he took in a great breath and dived again, coming up the next time halfway to the *Barang*. So with successive plunges he approached, and after the second discharge of missiles from the schooner, he was permitted to reach his ship in peace. He clambered aboard, grinning sheepishly, and Barry met him with no word of praise, congratulation, or censure, but with a wide-open stare of fresh amazement.

"Who are they?" the skipper gasped.

"Cannibals, I think," grinned Little. "Am I all here?"

The schooner's rails were bare of heads again; but while Little was being bombarded, all eyes had stared wonderingly at a line of tufted headdresses surmounting faces belonging to inland savages.

"They're what I saw last night, going into the hold," said Barry. "But they didn't bother me, Little. How did you stir 'em up?"

"I don't know. I clambered aboard, thinking to find you there. I just took a peep down the hatchway and must have interrupted some ceremony. There was a white man powwowing to 'em—no, it wasn't Leyden—and one of 'em grunted when he saw me, and the white chap sicced 'em after me. Gosh! but I'm getting all the joy out o' life!"

"I've got all I want for the present," growled Barry sourly. "Perhaps I'll feel better out of sight of this post and that schooner."

"Not going to quit, are you?" Little gasped, staring at his friend with horror. "Is this the bold Jack Barry I picked out on the dock fer a partner?"

"Quit nothing! I'm going to see this thing through, but I'll follow Vandersee from now on. I wouldn't bother that schooner again on my own account for all the gold that ever came out of Celebes. If Leyden starts something, I'll meet him; but for my personal part he is welcome to keep what he's got aboard there."

In mid-forenoon the *Barang* yielded to the strain on her hawser and slid into deep water. A faint breeze downstream filled her sails, and slowly she swept

around the bend out of sight of the post. Barry had watched the pilotage coming up, and conned his ship down with the knowledge gained, bringing up abreast of the swampy creek pointed out by Vandersee shortly after the noon meal. He stared at the place in doubt for a moment, then cried out to Little with utter relief.

"This is the first time I've felt easy in weeks! See that? Vandersee said he'd have the entrance cleared. It's like magic. You could float a thousand-tonner in there now!"

Vandersee had kept his word. The creek, which had been hidden behind a maze of swamp grass when the *Barang* entered the river, now lay fair and open, and a boat sent in to sound reported water enough for her full-load draft. And as the vessel was slowly warped in, two great mooring posts were found in the shore at precisely the best place for her to lay. Still there was no visible sign of the big Hollander himself.

"Come on down to the entrance awhile," said Barry to Gordon and Little, when the vessel was moored. "There must be somebody or something to give us a lead. We were never sent down here just to lie idle, and unless Leyden means to carry his schooner to sea with those cannibals as crew, she can't be ready to leave yet."

"I expect you know as much as I do, Barry," put in Gordon, "but it might help if I mentioned that news came down from Van last night that his men had got the opium chaps in a semicircle and were driving them quickly towards the river."

"Leyden, too?"

"I understand you saw Miss Sheldon on the schooner, Captain," replied Gordon.

"Oh, do cut out the riddles!" snapped Barry. "Can't you answer a straight question either? What has Miss Sheldon got to do with Leyden being driven this way?"

"He is not being driven. He's too smart for that. He is coming down of his own free will and will come the sooner because Miss Sheldon has accepted guest's quarters in his ship."

"Oh!"

Barry made no further remark but led the way back to the point where the main

river rolled by in full sight. Both banks of the creek were rank with lush jungle; great, warped trees seemed to stagger, so gnarled were their trunks; while immense beards of moss depended from their hideous branches almost to the water. A sullen, ominous splash under the bank was sufficient warning against frivolous bathing.

They stood on a tiny patch of bare ground at the mouth of the creek and gazed far up and down the turbid stream, sending up its simmering steam under a hot sun, and evil with feverish reek. Little stood with his back to a lone tree in the bare patch of earth and pulled his hat over his eyes to shade them from the water's glare, and something touched him on the shoulder from above.

"Ouch!" he yelled, springing away in deadly fear of great serpents that roosted in such trees as that. He looked up, and his companions stared at him in amusement. And a long, lean, brown arm reached down, and in the skinny, black-nailed hand a stick was gripped,—a stick such as had once before been handed to Jerry Rolfe in the jungle.

"Big fella talk," came a thin voice from the tree limb. "Look-see. Me lookout."

Almost proof now against surprise, Barry took the stick and unrolled the leaf cover. It was a brief note, signed Vandersee, and read: "Leyden has learned my plans. He knows where you have laid your ship. Will attack you to-night with inland savages. Have no fear. I shall be close by. Halt Houten and take him on your ship."

Again that thin voice from the tree, and the long, skinny arm handed down a second stick, more bulky than the other.

"Gib to odder big fella. You no see. He for Missy Houten."

"Everything laid out like a stage set," chuckled Little. "We are surely horning in on the deep, deep stuff, skipper. I suppose Houten will drop in on us next, appearing out of a pink cloud, or something. Golly! Houten with cherub's wings riding down on a pink cloudlet!" he laughed outright. Cornelius Houten wasn't built for wings.

"Time enough when he comes, and it doesn't matter how," returned Barry. "Main thing is that at last there is something definite to do. Say—" he called into the tree—"suppose you see ship you tell me, hey? Suppose see big fella, allee same, hey?"

"Me here for dat, sar. You no bodder, Tuuan. I tell you."

The quiet, utterly unruffled, pipelike voice filled the three white men with confidence, and it was a new Jack Barry that led the way back to the ship and prepared her for defense against the promised attack. Little received the orders with his own matchless grin of boyish expectation; but Gordon's handsome face took on a look of serious purpose that gave deep thought to the skipper. And another surprise was in store for Barry, for Gordon suddenly gripped his hand, looked straight and hard into his eyes, and said with a depth of earnestness that thrilled:

"Here is to be the scene of such a retribution as will settle a dozen crimes in one. Now I can tell you, Barry, that your happiness is not lost, as you think. My own is so near that I must tell you this, for you have been such a good sport all through a maze of subterfuge that would easily have disgusted another man. Don't ask me more; but this much I tell you, so that you can make your plans with an easy mind."

"All right, Gordon," Barry laughed easily. "Thanks for the kind thought; but I have quit worrying over the future. At present I'm simply going to carry out orders and fight for my ship. I'll gladly find a good place for you if you'll tell me what you prefer—risk or safety."

"Safety? Say, Barry, I want to be placed, if possible, where I can do good work without getting popped off by some footling little arrow before the big game arrives. That's the only safety I want. I don't ask to be guarded even to secure that; but if I can keep on my feet until Vandersee comes, I'll die happy. That's how I feel."

"Vandersee? You mean Leyden, don't you?"

"Both. They'll get here together, skipper. Oh, I know."

"I see," returned Barry shortly, and set about his plans.

Bill Blunt was called into the consultation, for the old shellback had established his worth as a man of action. The *Barang* could muster sixteen men besides the skipper, mate, Little, Gordon, and Blunt,—twenty-one in all. And the surrounding land offered a vast and impenetrable concealment for foes from that side.

"An' that's whar she'll bust, genelmen," stated Blunt with decision. "Cos why? Y'

see, I figgers as the only reason why they wants to bust us up at all in this yer crick is to stop up a-sailin' out an' ketchin' that schooner as she passes. Ain' that it, cap'n?"

"No doubt of it, Blunt."

"Well, then, if so be as it's inland savages as is to do it, they ain't werry fond o' water fightin', they ain't. Don't I know 'em? I tromped clear through their country afore the cap'n found me and I knows 'em like my own toes. Them ain't werry savage at that, gents. More 'n likely them is some o' Leyden's opium eaters, an' it'll take a hull dollop o' dope to make 'em fight at all—"

"By Heavens, I believe you've hit it!" Barry interrupted. "They can be set on us as the ship that has stopped their opium. And at the same time they may be left to fight until they drop, while Mr. Leyden is coolly getting away."

"He won't get away, Captain," put in Gordon quietly, "but your notion is right. It's exactly what Leyden is counting on, I'll wager a hat."

"Sure! That's why they are all on the schooner now!" cried Little. "Of course they chased me out, when I spied on 'em. Oh, Corks!"

"All right, then we'll haul out into the middle of the creek," decided Barry. "Rolfe, carry out a warp over there, and as soon as an alarm comes in, we'll haul her clear of the bank and fight 'em in the water. Blunt, rustle up all the arms and get plenty of rock ballast out of the hold too. Maybe we can save shells by dropping stones on 'em. Quieter, too."

Evening was drawing down when the preparations were completed, and an air of anxiety pervaded the decks; for the creek had become hushed and still, the jungle noises alone broke the stillness, and that medley of faint sound might easily conceal the whispering of a thousand men. Supper was eaten on deck, and Barry sent many an anxious glance towards the creek entrance, expecting at any moment to see the lookout approaching.

It was almost dark when at last he came running, and his thin voice piped: "Misser Houten he come, Tuuan. Come quick see!"

Barry leaped into his own boat, and she shot out of the creek into the river just as a big, seaworthy, fast launch hauled abreast. She was manned by half a dozen natives; but there was no mistaking that great, ungainly, shapeless figure in the stern, nor that immense, round, benevolent face that surmounted it. Barry sent

his boat out to meet the launch, and Houten waved to his man to stop her. Then he suddenly recognized the skipper and stood up with incredible alertness.

"Hullo, Captain Barry," he rumbled, sticking out a hand like a ham. Barry slipped his message into it at the same instant as he grasped it, and swiftly followed his greeting with a statement of the *Barang's* situation. Meanwhile Houten read his message by the light of the setting sun.

"So!" he chuckled at length. "It is goot, Captain. I have a goot report about you, mine friendt. Come. We shall soon arrive at the big game, yes? Take you the wheel and guide us to your ship. It is long since we ate dinner. I am starved."

In this cool, matter-of-fact way did Cornelius Houten, the mammoth, benevolent human spider we saw for an instant in Batavia, accept a situation to which it had taken Jack Barry weeks to reconcile himself.

The launch slid alongside the brigantine, towing the rowboat, and Houten was landed on deck with much pulling and hauling that only evoked silent, shaky chuckles from his huge frame. Little met him and presented Gordon, then choked down a curse of self-censure for his thoughtlessness as he caught Barry's angry look. In the moment of greeting he had forgotten his own errand to the river; forgotten that it was a discredited Gordon he had been sent to find. But Cornelius Houten seemed to be of a kind with Vandersee in his uncanny knowledge of things. He simply gripped Gordon's reluctant hand and rumbled deeply, yet with a laugh running through the rumble: "Goot, Mister Gordon. I am glad to see you loog so well. I have heard aboutt you. It is goot. Now gif me some food in my hand and we shall see what dose leedle native mans will do mit us."

The darkness became black, and still the jungle gave out no sounds beyond its own. Houten walked the deck with Barry, his great paws full of cold food, chuckling and rumbling incessantly. His beady eyes roved keenly around the wall of darkness, his nose sniffed the air as if he could scent the presence of foes.

Yet nothing occurred for an hour after the light failed. The sentries around the rails kept trying all the lines to the shore, in hope of surprising some such method of attack. Barry and Little listened intently in expectation of hearing some signal from the lookout in the tree at the creek mouth. No sight, no sound. Then, swift as darting serpents, rivulets of flame ran over the water, and the entire creek soon blazed into hellish radiance. Shrieks and howls resounded on the shores, and a shower of arrows flew over the brightly illumined decks.

"Ach! I am a fool!" grunted Houten. An arrow stuck in his fat arm, pinching up an inch of his plenteous flesh. Coolly as he might pare his nails, he broke off the slender shaft, pulled out the head where it emerged from his skin, and held out his arm and handkerchief to Gordon, who expertly bound up the profusely bleeding but harmless flesh wound. Houten grumbled on: "All the time I schmell him—schmell dot stuff—und I know not enough to say it is oil! My own oil, I will bet, by der Great Horn Spoon! Me, I t'ink dot schmell was joongle, by Gott!"

"Haul in all lines!" roared Barry. "Rolfe, hustle up all the spare junk and sand. Lads, keep under cover until I call you out."

All around the ship the water glared with Satanic fires. The blazing oil roared and leaped hungrily at the *Barang's* tarred sides.



CHAPTER TWENTY

The order to take cover was given barely in time, for from every tree and bush along the creek flew showers of small arrows and throwing spears that whizzed and whirled over the crouching crew. And ever the flames leaped higher. From a source unseen, but cunningly selected to utilize wind and stream, fresh oil was poured on the water; the sides of the brigantine crackled and blistered with an overpowering stench of tar and oakum.

Seek as they might, their enemies remained invisible, and still the shower of missiles kept up its intensity until the decks rang and pattered with their falling, and left no space of a yard in area where a man might stand safely. Barry watched through a scupper port, trying to detect any one place from which arrows came thicker than elsewhere; and at last, when one after another his white companions had called to him about the precarious situation of launch and boat, he decided he had found it.

"Here, all hands," he ordered, and shoved his rifle out of the scupper. "Get an ax, Rolfe, and burst out a plank of the bulwarks." The ax was swung, and a plank crashed into splinters, leaving a narrow loophole, a foot wide and twelve feet long, through which the roaring flames darted viciously. "When I give the word, all aim at that tree—" he pointed out a round-headed, dwarfed clump of foliage that seemed to hiss with twanging bowstrings—"then fire all together. That's the next best thing to a riot gun I can think of." The crew crouched along the broken plank, every muzzle converged on to a patch of leafy concealment a fathom square, and the skipper barked:

"Fire!"

Twenty rifles crashed in one tremendous discharge, and the tree ceased to vomit arrows as if suddenly capped with a vast extinguisher. But at the same moment the flames roared in through the broken bulwarks and drove every man away, scorched and singed. Houten handled his rifle expertly and unhurriedly, though his fat face and immense body streamed sweat at every pore, and his clothes were steaming with the fierce heat. Blood dripped from his injured arm, but gave him not the slightest concern. He said nothing, did not attempt to advise Barry, simply kept up his end as one man of the crew, as if the last thing on earth he

worried about was the imminent destruction of thousands of guilders in property. And Barry gave him silent thanks, untrammelled in his command of the unequal fight. His own keen eyes told him the *Barang* was doomed; and any chance remaining for the crew hinged on that big launch alongside. He peered over the rail. The launch was smoking. Her line was almost burned through.

"Gordon and Little, follow me quickly," he cried, swiftly making his decision. "Rolfe, Blunt, haul in on that line—easy now, or you'll break it—and Mr. Houten, here's my cabin key. Take some men and get your gold dust out of the safe."

Houten's streaming face lighted in a fat smile, and he beamed his appreciation of Barry's thoughtfulness for his employer's interests under the terrible circumstances. The mate and Bill Blunt hauled cautiously on the launch painter until the big boat bumped alongside, her white paint blistered and blackened, her white canvas awning a tattered torch of smoldering rags. Then Barry sprang up, threw himself over the rail, and Little and Gordon followed in silence. A small brown man jumped after them and went directly to the launch's engine.

"Good man!" breathed Little, suddenly realizing that none of the others knew anything about a steam engine. He gasped and gazed in awe at a tongue of fire that snaked up the brigantine's side, twisted about the fore rigging and roared about the tall masts of pine.

The fires were banked. The native engineer opened them up and applied a small patent blower, while Barry and his companions crouched behind the engine casing and kept their guns popping until steam began to hiss. On board the ship the mates leaped from line to line, cutting adrift those that had withstood the fire, and soon the current took hold and moved her towards the entrance. Now that the creek was ablaze with light, it was seen that the entrance cut through Vandersee's agency was simply a channel scythed through the matted weeds and grasses, big enough to admit the vessel if the way remained unobstructed. But the creek's usually sluggish current was trebled in velocity by the outside siphon effect of the rapid river rushing past the narrow entrance. The matted grasses could be seen waving and writhing under the swift flow with a terrible suggestion of remorseless power in their stems should any unfortunate chance to be plunged among them.

Houten staggered on deck, followed by the men laden with the small, heavy canvas bags taken by Little from the post. He stood a moment, gazing abroad at

the fiery expanse. He noted Barry's intention of towing the brigantine out, and now he asserted his authority as owner.

"Don't bodder for the ship, Captain Barry," he shouted. "Take eferybotty in dot launch to the odder side ouf the riffer. Neffer mind why. I schall tell you in goot time. Let the ship drift by herself where she will."

"Then get a move on, all hands!" shouted Barry. "This launch will be ablaze too in five minutes."

Gordon left their task of pouring water over the straining towline they had fastened around the red-hot brass bits and tore down the scraps of fiery canvas from overhead. From the brigantine men leaped into the smaller craft, kept in order and saved from panic by sturdy old Blunt's cool advice, backed up by his never-failing good humor. And when Rolfe and Houten and the old seaman alone remained, the launch was loaded to her utmost capacity and was on fire in a dozen places.

"Come on down with you!" roared Barry angrily, for the three men left were playing dignity, each seeking to be the last man to quit. "Blunt, Rolfe, take told of Mr. Houten and dump him in if he won't move."

"Here ye go then, sir, excusin' me," said Bill, seizing the huge Dutchman by an arm. Rolfe took the other one, the injured one, and Houten laughed shakily and shook loose rather than suffer from the mate's determined grip.

"Yoomp, with you den," he rumbled and mounted the rail. The others were with him, and as all three poised to jump, the foremast fell with a terrific smash, erupting sparks and flame, covering the decks and the water around with fragments of fiery splinters, charred blocks, and smoking serpents of rope.

"Oh, jump together!" Barry screamed, dancing on his own hot place and blowing on his hands which were in agony from contact with the metal wheel. The three leaped; and the launch's stern dipped perilously under the tremendous influx of weight; the flaming oil alongside licked ravenously at their smaller and nearer prey.

"Now keep your guns shooting!" was the skipper's final order, and he sent the launch straight for the entrance, while the unseen foes on the banks transferred their aim from the brigantine and made the forest ring with their howls of rage.

In the narrowed entrance, forced to scrape the matted grass by the eddying

current, the launch soon resounded with the cries of wounded seamen. Barry kept his hands on the wheel by sheer force of will, for the little circle of brass scorched to the touch. The rifles burned the hands of the men who used them; native riflemen began to look piteously at their white leaders, afraid to slip fresh cartridges into smoking breeches. And the arrows fell thicker than ever, the smoke from the launch's furnace streamed away full of flame, the boat itself roared and crackled from the water line to the gunwale. But the oil thinned out as they sped; those rifles that kept shooting took heavier toll as the range closed, and Barry prayed that his hands would hold out. His white companions stood grimly to their guns, uttering no sound save to encourage and soothe the natives. Then a cartridge exploded in a man's hand, and the rifle was flung overboard with a howl of terror. Still another shell burst with the fierce heat, and panic threatened. Bill Blunt stopped it.

"Here ye go, then, Bullies!" he roared, flinging down his own gun. "Put 'em down, me sons, and git busy like me. Here's th' river close aboard, lads, an' in a minit ye'll all be freezin'."

Tearing off his jacket he dragged it in the river when he came to a spot bare of oil, then fell heartily to work beating down the fire along the gunwale. The seamen gained heart, once safely quit of their dangerous rifles, and followed the old fellow's lead, until the business of fire-fighting drove from their minds the fear of flying missiles from shoreward.

"Here iss the riffer, mine friendts," Houten rumbled at last, and the launch shot into the main stream, drawing thin threads of fire into her eddying wake, leaving behind her the flying death and the devouring blaze. Barry guided his craft straight over the river to the farther bank, seeking for relief to his burning eyes in the cool blackness of night. His hair and eyebrows were singed off close, his skin was a scorched torment; but a glance at his companions proved that others had suffered too, and he held on to his fast-cooling steering wheel while old Bill Blunt led a final attack on the clinging fire about the launch.

They shot into the shadow of the bank and looked back on a scene of terrific grandeur. As their faces cooled, and the air revived their dulled vitality, a deeper significance in the picture came home to them. For some minutes their brains could only grasp the fact that they had escaped the fire as well as their enemies' range; but a shaft of fire roared up through the trees, and the howl that responded hinted at the truth.

"Gee! They're getting roasted in their own fire!" gasped Little.

So it was. The jungle on all sides of the creek began to blaze, and the roar filled the river channel. At first only small patches of dead wood and leaves burned, but when great hanging masses of moss caught fire, the jungle drew the flames like a huge furnace, and in some of the trees a score of men were trapped.

"Poor devils! Dose mans are murdered by Leyden," growled Houten. "He shall pay, jah! It iss on his bill."

But despite the awful peril facing them, the little brown men over on the creek worked on as if with a definite aim beyond the mere destruction of a ship and the dispersing of her crew. Figures dancing in the firelight were feverishly busy about the creek entrance, towards which the blazing *Barang* was drifting, gathering speed with every fathom by which she drew nearer to the tremendously faster river stream outside. Gradually the surface oil about the vessel thinned out and died, as if the supply had been suddenly cut off. And the moment the water ceased to blaze, canoes shot out from the shore, and frantic little savages pushed and hauled at the bigger craft in obvious anxiety that she should not reach out beyond the entrance. They succeeded in pushing her on to the edge of the cleared channel, then the swift current gripped her, swung her broadside in the entrance against the matted grasses, and there she lay, heeling over slowly, burning away merrily above water, but safe to stay there in the opposing elements of fire and water whose contest must come to a climax when fire reached water line.

"There goes the old *Barang*, sir," groaned Barry, his thoughts on his ship as a good shipmaster's should be. "I could have saved her by towing her out and sinking her. No trouble at all to raise her again. Did it before, you know. Now she's gone."

"It iss better so," replied Houten. The amazing man was scanning the nearby shore and gave no glance to his ruined ship. The skipper stared at him blankly, meanwhile swabbing at his burns with oiled waste. "Yat, it iss better so, mine friendt. It wass not arranged like this, but it iss much better so, now ve haf lost no mans, after all. Schall ve put into dot schmall cove dere, captain? It vill hide us from the riffer, unt pretty soon our friendts vill be dere. The boat iss too full; unt dese mans need cool grass."

Barry picked out the cove indicated, immediately opposite the flaming creek, hidden from riverwards by an outflung, bush-capped hummock of earth. There

the launch was moored, and the last trace of fire danger was beaten out with wet grasses and leafy branches. Of the entire party but five men had escaped unhurt, but none of the hurts were more serious than Houten's flesh wound unless the arrow that Gordon still carried neatly spiked between two ribs proved serious. But Bill Blunt thought not, and Houten produced his medical and surgical kit from the launch in order that Bill's assertion might be tested. The seamen soothed each other's burns, and those of them who had received arrow or spear wounds waited in fear for the result of Blunt's attentions to Gordon.

"Try an' laugh out loud, sir," muttered old Bill, as he snapped off the arrow stem and Gordon winced involuntarily. "I knows it pinches, but we got to fix up them natives too, an' them ain't werry brave, sir. Grin, won't ye?"

Gordon laughed, but his lip ran blood. The arrowhead was pulled through and out, and the cut bound together, and after that the seamen submitted to the same surgery like sheep. Blunt kept them quiet by subtle blarney, telling them they couldn't let white folks beat them out for stoicism.

In this manner the camp settled into quiet rest, food and water, spirits and fresh clothes coming from the fully equipped launch. Then came a cry from their lookout on the hummock crest, and they climbed up beside him. The man pointed silently back over the flat country beyond the tangle of the river margin, but nothing could be distinguished in the darkness.

"No look—lissen, sar!" chattered the sailor.

There was no sound save the rustling of grasses and the lapping of waters. Then, after a moment of hush, far away in the black void a shot rang out, followed by others in swift succession. Silence again, and more shots, nearer than before, and a solitary cry. The ensuing period of quiet was longer than the last; but when again rifle shots crashed out, they were so near that the watchers on the hummock could see and count the flashes.

"Seven, I counted," said Little. "What is it?"

"Cap'n, there's men right beside us, along th' bank," Bill Blunt reported. "They ain't natives, neither. More like them navy chaps."

"Better line out in case they're like those fellows who put you on the ant hills, Barry," said Gordon anxiously. "Of course, they may be right, but—"

"Haf no fears, mine friendts," rumbled. Houten, looming up like a hill in the

blackness. "All dis iss planned. Dose mans beside us are real navy mans. I toldt you all iss vell. It iss mooch better dis vay."

"Then it must be Vandersee's big drive," exclaimed Barry, suddenly enlightened. "How about a little light to help him, hey, Houten?"

"Goot. Jah, make a fire, Captain."

Rolfe and some hands hastily built a huge bonfire of dry brushwood on the damp grass behind the hummock, and beaters were set to prevent the fire spreading out of hand. Then, as a match was set to it and little tongues of flame began to take hold, Barry lined out his men and waited for a clear sight of events. Shots now crashed out so near that the men firing could be seen in the intensifying light of the crackling fire; still no shot came back in answer. The steady, relentless pursuit drew near, and the fugitives began to whimper and howl in panic. They broke and drove blindly for the river, to meet the colossal bulk of Houten, silent, impassive, standing out like a mountain to bar their flight; and the *Barang's* men, lined beside him, joined the first of a line of cool, steady naval seamen whose end numbers were still beyond the lighted area.

"Throw down your guns, or we'll drop you!" cried Barry, and the flying fugitives halted in dismay while two white men, the leaders, cursed them venomously and bade them fight.

"Stop, Barry, don't fire!" came back the level, placid voice of Vandersee, and then the completeness of the spider's web could be distinguished. For from up river and down, the silent line of naval seamen drew near, herding the trapped fugitives into a circle that always narrowed in diameter. Then, as the cordon seemed complete beyond escape, the two white men broke into a desperate dash and plunged for the river.

With one impulse Little and Barry sprang out to intercept them; and even in his heat the skipper wondered why, now that the time had come, neither Gordon nor Vandersee was anxious to get his hands on Leyden. For that Leyden was one of those two plunging whites neither doubted.

But Rolfe's bonfire blazed higher, and every face and form stood clearly revealed. The skipper and Tom Little hurled themselves headlong at their quarry's legs and brought them down in a smashing football tackle, then, from their position on the ground, astride of their captives, they took in the surprising circle about them. Vandersee's red, smooth face shone in a beatific smile as he

directed the seizing and securing of the trapped men. He had no apparent interest in the two whites,—and an interchange of scrutiny satisfied Barry and Little that neither of their men was Leyden. Instead of giving thought to the white captives, Vandersee merely left them in their captors' hands until their turn came to be tied up, and gave Barry still another amazing shock by stepping over to Houten and embracing him in full view of all hands. And big, emotionless Houten, with no change of demeanor, returned the embrace in kind.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mysteriously the naval seamen and their captives disappeared down the river, yet leaving a vague impression of a line of keen-eyed sentries somewhere behind the mists of night. That was the impression always left upon Jack Barry by Vandersee of late: the feeling of eternal wakefulness, incessant vigil, sure and inevitable success. The old, original feeling came back, in short,—of a velvet-covered steel trap, yet there was now no fear of the trap in Barry's mind.

"Come, we have six hours to wait for the next arrival at our party," Vandersee smiled, now coming forward and greeting Gordon with special warmth. In spite of his determination to accept every situation without question since realizing how big a part Vandersee played, how small his own, Barry could not conceal his irritation at this fresh indication of his own inconsequence in the great game. Though always expecting it now, there was something that irked the skipper in this continual hint of events in motion in which he might or might not figure without having the slightest bearing on the inevitable result. And Houten saw and understood. He made room for Barry on his own blanket, and his deep rumbling voice droned in the skipper's ear, gradually soothing that harassed shipmaster until he subsided to the influence of the beneficent Goliath.

"Soon I shall tell you, Captain," said Houten. "Yoost now I say all iss vell, ja. Yoost now I am glad my *Barang* iss lost, mine friendt; eferything iss goot, unt dere iss to be no more accidents."

Barry settled down to rest, gazing thoughtfully across the silent river. The more distant reaches of the stream were still tinged redly with the fierce jungle fire that grew and spread back to the flat lands. There was some unfathomable influence that persuaded the skipper of the superfluity of keeping watch now Vandersee was there, but the influence could not tranquilize minds so utterly awakened as were those of the destroyed ship's company. Gordon was restless and edged ever nearer to the recumbent Vandersee; Little had fallen asleep but was obviously dreaming what the others were wakefully thinking. Beyond the circle of resting men Bill Blunt groaned away at an endless, tuneless ditty concerning "A sailorman as fell overboard in a gale, an' fell wi' a gal wi' a tail, an' got marri-e-d to a little marmaid an' wuz changed into a marman, an' never arterwards could he see th' use o' the seaboots he wore when he fell overboard,

'cos how could ye tell which boot 'ud fit a bloomin' flapper as wuz naither right, ner left, but 'twartships?"

One by one the seamen slept, until only the white men around the smoldering fire remained awake. Gordon peered continually into Vandersee's smiling face, and when he dropped his gaze for a moment and met Barry's bent full upon him, the two men saw in each other a fear that was emphatically not for themselves, but nevertheless would not quiet. It became too intense for concealment; the two big Hollanders detected it, and a nod passed from Houten to Vandersee.

"You two gentlemen are anxious," smiled Vandersee. "Perhaps we can dispense with a little of the mystery now, though even at this stage a small slip will ruin all. I can tell you this, however, that the fire over there that destroyed your ship, Captain, was unforeseen. My sentry, who gave you my messages, was killed by an arrow from over the creek; my men at the river saw his body floating down. Otherwise you would not have been in that peril from fire." Barry met his eye with a wry smile, as if to question whether it might not have been well to warn the shipmaster, instead of keeping him and his ship in the safe keeping of a little brown man in a tree. Vandersee explained: "I had lookouts from end to end of the river, Barry, on both sides, and above and below here. That is the strength of my net. But the killing of that one watchman was about the last thing to be expected. It was a slip of mine, of course; but to me that one man in particular was invisible and undetectable. But that is past, and all of you are here yet. You are worrying about the personal welfare of two ladies, I know."

Gordon's face darkened, and his lip was drawn between his teeth. The big Hollander regarded him very softly and went on: "Both are now on board the *Padang*—" Gordon choked down a curse, and apologized, and Vandersee ignored the interruption—"Aboard the *Padang*, both safe and well, and in no danger whatever. The schooner is due abreast here just after dawn; her master is due about the same time, in his own steam launch. He knows that Miss Sheldon is there; in fact she is practically in charge of his vessel, so infatuated is he at his imagined triumph in spite of you, Barry; but Mrs. Goring is there unknown to anybody except Miss Sheldon and ourselves, and solely to give Natalie the support of her presence and advice in what is going to be a very difficult situation for a young girl."

Barry kicked at Little, to awake him to listen, and asked:

"Say, Vandersee, that sort of thing's a habit with Mrs. Goring, isn't it?"

"Habit? Reassuring people, do you mean, Captain?"

"I mean sailing aboard of ships unknown to owners or skippers."

"Yes," put in Little, awake at last, "if she didn't arrive here in our ship, I'll eat what's left of her—the ship, I mean."

"She certainly didn't leave Java before us, and she was undoubtedly in this river as soon as we, and besides, there's a matter of a photo—" Barry was rattling on, and Vandersee stopped him.

"I see you smell the rat, Captain." Houten was shaking like a vast jelly with silent amusement. "I may as well tell you now that Mrs. Goring did come in your ship. It was vital that she get here to the station before Leyden, and unknown to him. I took care of her on the passage, and saw that she got ashore safely while we were docking. Yes, she is rather noted for doing unusual things, I think." The speaker glanced meaningly at Gordon, who flushed and turned away with glistening eyes.

"Then she did steal Miss Sheldon's picture from my room, hey?"

"Yes, she took it, and I believe she told you why, Captain, although she did not admit taking it at that time. Among our other necessities was that you arrive here deeply interested in Miss Sheldon, and that was considered the easiest way of keeping you piqued at Leyden. It was necessary that my own presence here remain unknown to Leyden, too, and right to this minute he doesn't know who is responsible for certain little mishaps that have befallen him. That was one reason why I shipped with you." Vandersee paused, gazed out at the silent, swift river, and said more seriously: "But why not let the event answer all questions, Barry? In a few hours the whole thing comes to a head, and there is not a chance on earth now for my plans to fail. Miss Sheldon will tell you what you want to know when you see her, and tell it far, far better than I can. If it will aid you to patience, though, I will assure you that Miss Sheldon is absolutely beyond Leyden's influence; free as the air, she knows everything now; Mrs. Goring is with her, and they know they are surrounded by friends too strong for Leyden to combat. Leyden is now making his way by a roundabout track to the stream where he left his steam launch, believing he has escaped my line. He intends to overtake the schooner here, lift the gold dust out of the *Barang*, and board his own schooner, which cleared direct from Surabaya for Europe."

"Europe!" Barry gasped at the slender margin standing between Natalie's safety

and utter catastrophe. Here was a piece of cunning not expected even from Leyden. To clear for Europe meant, with Natalie on board—Barry could not think clearly. He stared at Vandersee like one fascinated.

"Snatch a little sleep, Captain. You too, Gordon," Vandersee advised. "We all need fresh heads and cool nerves in the morning. With all his crimes, Leyden is a clever rascal, and he must be taken alive!"

"Seems to me you'd better shoot him from as far off as your gun will carry," retorted Barry, still thinking of the extremely tiny slip necessary for the *Padang* to pick up her master and sail out into the vast ocean clear of pursuit. "Suppose he doesn't wait to loot the *Barang*?" he said. "Maybe he's heard that we have taken the dust out of her. He must be well posted on her situation since he's got as many men about him as you have, apparently."

"No, Captain," returned Vandersee, very softly. "He doesn't know that the dust is taken out. He doesn't know, yet, that your ship is burned. He simply expected his people to bottle her up in that creek and kill or drive you off. That was what he was assured would be the case by the chief of the savages he hired. Their own discovery of the oil may well upset all his schemes, although they were upset whether the oil was found or not."

"Oh, well, I won't think about it any more. Next thing you'll tell me that Houten knew all about this attack, and that he came up just in time to save us on a prearranged plan."

"Not exactly, but nearer right than you imagine," chuckled Houten. "I haf been in communication with Hendrik unt his mans effer since t'ree days ago, mine friendt. I pring opp mine launch as a part ouf a plan, unt it vas goot, ja? I toldt you it vas goot. Now schleep. I am heavy for schleep."

Barry dozed, and his last waking thought was of a spider-web of gigantic size, with two great, fat, laughing spiders in the midst. As his brain lost its power to register, the spiders changed into smiling, red, fat faces, and all about the web hung white men and brown who smiled back at the spiders and watched intently while flies were drawn by some power, unseen but irresistible, into the web. And the greatest fly, the fly that struggled, the fly that broke the web over and over, yet never once forced the fat red smiles from the fat red spiders, was Leyden.

Gray dawn was creeping up in the east when a soft shake awakened Barry, and he sat up to find the camp astir. During the last hour or two Vandersee had mustered his far-flung sentries, and now, besides the crew of the *Barang* and Houten's men, twenty sturdy naval seamen stood by, armed and alert.

"The schooner is in sight," Gordon told him. The Englishman was cool and emotionless now, in face of the approaching crisis in his affairs. Peering over the hummock, the *Padang* was dimly seen emerging out of the river mists, and as she drew near the devastated creek, sharp voices could be heard on her forecastle head directing the preparing of an anchor. But, leaving nothing to chance, Vandersee had manned Houten's big launch and she was ready, held by a single line; and as the schooner swung around the last bend and let her canvas shake, the big Hollander called Barry and Gordon.

"Come, friends," he said, "here is work for us all, and in particular for you."

They boarded the launch, and she swung out of the cove and headed out across the schooner's course. As they shot into sight, a cry of alarm pealed out from the *Padang's* quarterdeck, and an order halted work on the anchor. Vandersee replied with a sharper order that was punctuated by a rifle shot, and on the bank abreast appeared a file of sailors with rifles aimed at the schooner. The anchor was let go in a hurry, and the launch stormed alongside a hurriedly flung ladder, Vandersee starting to climb the moment his foot could reach a rung.

"Come up, Barry," he called, and the skipper followed, with Gordon and eight naval seamen after him. The schooner's crew, but a half of her full complement, stood in attitudes of bewilderment. They had expected a very simple, cut-and-dried halt, getaway, and reward; instead, here were intruders who forced obedience by mysteriously produced riflemen on the river shores. The Dutch sailors were businesslike in their acts now, and before the alarm had subsided, the schooner's men were lightly hand-tied and passed down to the launch. In their places remained the eight naval seamen, and Vandersee said, as he prepared to leave with his new prisoners:

"You are in command, Captain Barry. I shall remain alongside until you can get the anchor off the ground again, in order to give you a shove over near the creek. Then all I expect you to do is to make sure that once Leyden comes into our trap he does not get out by way of this schooner. Apart from that, you have little to do beyond comforting and reassuring two ladies whom I see aft."

Barry looked up from the waist, where they stood, and saw Miss Sheldon at the quarterdeck rail; and as he looked, Mrs. Goring joined her, winking with the sudden transition from the cabins into the vivid morning light. The seamen were already taking up the slack cable, and Barry stared at the big Hollander and Gordon, helpless for the moment from the shock they gave him. It was shock after shock for Barry. Here was Vandersee, smiling cherubically, taking Mrs. Goring into his great arms. He gently pressed her head back and kissed her warmly full on the lips, and she responded to his caress with glad submission. And there stood Gordon, looking on with no trace of jealousy; smiling rather, as if he enjoyed the spectacle of another man embracing the lady.

Barry looked helplessly at Miss Sheldon. Her face wore a smile which plainly said she approved the whole business. So Barry once more repressed his curiosity and gave the lady good morning.

"I'm so glad to see you again, Captain Barry," she responded, her cheeks very pink and her eyes sparkling, notwithstanding the impending crisis in her life. "This morning, at least, I can express my true sentiments."

"Which are?" Barry would have let all go to hear her reply to that query.

"A sincere hope for the eventual success of your expedition."

"Is that all?" Barry persisted, holding her hand and watching with a thrill the rich color that flooded her cheeks under his gaze.

"Pardon me, Captain," Vandersee interrupted, bringing relief to Natalie. "Pardon, but time is short. I am ready to give you a push over. Then anchor again, right across the creek mouth. If Leyden smells the trap, he will try to board the ship. If so, you will welcome him and make him secure." The big Hollander checked himself, then added, with an awful change of expression: "On your life, Barry, don't you dare to kill him. I want that man alive and sound!"

The big man had gone livid. He violently regained control of himself, stepped to the ladder to reenter the launch, and as he went he smiled softly at the women and said in adieu:

"Juliana, you will keep out of sight, of course, for a while. Miss Sheldon, we are depending on you to play an important little part. Don't forget, now. And if your heart fails you now, please let me know before I go. Upon you depends all."

"Have no fear for me," replied Natalie, paling slightly, but with a firm set of her

round, dimpled chin. "I am fear-proof now I have such able protectors around me," and she smiled at Gordon and Barry.

The schooner was brought over near to the creek mouth, and when her anchor was again let go she swung to the stream almost parallel to the wreck of the *Barang*, and within a short biscuit-toss. The steam launch shot back to the cove and took up the men left there in Houten's charge; then she steamed over to the creek, landed Rolfe, Blunt, Little, and three seamen on the down-river bank of the creek, and swung back alongside the blackened hulk of the brigantine.

Barry intently watched the maneuvers of that launch, for, with Natalie beside him, and Gordon on deck by the companionway door talking quietly to Mrs. Goring concealed inside, the air seemed suddenly charged with portent. The wrecked *Barang* lay close by like a stranded, decayed monster on a desolate shore. She was black and jagged with burned stumps of timbers down to the water line; on her upper part, where decks had been, and houses, half-consumed beams supported planks that were charcoal rather than wood; part of the poop remained, with one side of the deckhouse-companion, and down under them, where they had fallen under their own weight through the burned planks, lay two great iron tanks that had contained the spare fresh-water supply, and it was their contents, discharged when they fell, that had quenched that part of the fire. Besides these trifles of salvage, the vessel was swept bare of all semblance to a ship, and the black, pointed stumps of masts and stanchions stuck up in awful desolation.

Into this black horror Vandersee waved six seamen, armed with rifles. He then gave some instructions to Houten, and the launch shoved off and entered the head of the creek, taking cover behind a great mass of charred weed and moss, whose dampness had prevented their utter incineration. Vandersee himself stood for a moment gazing down the river from the top of the remaining part of the deckhouse, then he turned to the *Padang*, waved a hand cheerily, and vanished inside the blackened shell of debris. Barry stared in surprise for an instant, for Vandersee's disappearance reminded him that six men were also there, hidden somewhere. All had vanished as utterly as if the ship were complete and built for purposes of concealment.

But looking in the direction in which Vandersee had waved, Barry saw farther down the main river yet another big steam pinnace, full of uniformed seamen. He just caught sight of her as she swept alongside the near bank, and a party of men poured out of her and started to double towards the creek. They too dipped

out of sight the moment they left the bank, and the steamer backed off, turned, and followed the general example of concealment.

"Why, a rat couldn't get through this net!" exclaimed the skipper, addressing Natalie, who appeared not in the least surprised. And Gordon replied for her and for himself.

"That's the right word, Barry. Rat he is. We know all his evil cunning, and most of us have seen the rattish, yellow streak that runs clear through him. But you know what a rat will do? Well, you can expect this rat to try his best to run; but let him once see the ring completely around him, and he'll fight as a rat will fight."

Barry covertly watched Natalie while Leyden's rattish characteristics were under discussion. She showed no agitation; no sign of personal shame at having ever fallen to such a spell; but at that instant a shrill whistle sounded upstream, quite near, and she paled, then flushed hotly, and at last recovered her balance but with a trembling lip.

Then the sound of engines was heard, and on the still river brooded an atmosphere of imminent Fate. In the devastated creek no sound or sigh broke the barren stillness. The waters swirled and eddied around the entrance; the matted grasses and weed-stems writhed and twisted in the grip of the current like slimy, clutching fingers waiting for prey to clutch and hold to strangled death. For just one second a man's head appeared above a clump of blackened roots where Rolfe's party had landed. Barry saw it was the irrepressible Little bent on seeing the sights; then a great, gnarled hand shoved the head down, and all was barren again.

Now the oncoming launch came in sight; the same launch that had carried Leyden up the river, which Barry had lost track of on that dark night before he was taken and given to the ants; and she foamed straight down between the schooner and the creek with creaming bow-wave and flying funnel-sparks. Leyden was in the bows, jaunty and triumphant; but as he came near the schooner and saw nobody on her decks, his face clouded, and he waved to his engineer to stop. Then Barry, from his hastily taken hiding place, watched Natalie, curious about her part in this crisis.

Stepping over to the rail, she turned her smiling, morning-fresh face upon the launch and waved her hand airily at Leyden. All Barry's doubts resurged upon him. He felt choky, and red spots danced before his eyes. Then in a God-given

instant of clarity he saw it all: saw Leyden's own doubts vanish, and the launch move on to the wreck; and he saw, too, that Natalie tottered and panted, still fighting bravely to maintain her attitude in sight of Leyden, yet in dire need of comfort the moment her friend could render it.

Leyden called back a clear, exultant greeting to the girl, and the next moment his launch ran alongside the *Barang* and her bowman made his boathook fast.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Natalie swayed and would have fallen had not Mrs. Goring run from her hiding place to catch and support her. Barry recalled Vandersee's express order that Mrs. Goring should not show herself prematurely, and he mentioned it softly. The elder woman smiled at him and replied:

"It matters nothing now, Captain. The trap is sprung."

Barry and Gordon looked again at the wreck, and the force of those quiet words was made apparent, for in that hushed, breathless moment Leyden sprang up and stood on the ruined deck of the *Barang*. His face was alight with greed, and as he turned and the sunlight played upon him, triumph flashed in his eyes. He stayed to signal another message of self-praise to Natalie, and then for the first time he saw Mrs. Goring on board his own vessel. The swift change in his aspect was terrible. Fury replaced the smooth satisfaction of a few seconds before, and he seemed on the point of springing into his launch again to visit his fury on the woman. But cupidity proved too strong. He turned again to enter the wrecked companionway, for somewhere beneath those shattered timbers lay, to his belief, fifteen bags of the gold dust that he had jeopardized his immortal soul to get.

His men alongside evinced lively signs of uneasiness in the silent, gruesome creek, and they held the launch off at the length of a boathook as if afraid of closer contact. Their eyes were raised to follow their master, and then it was that the watchers on the schooner saw Houten's launch slide out from her nook and, gathering speed, shoot swiftly over and run aboard the other launch. Leyden's men uttered one chorused, uncertain growl of alarm, then they found themselves under the rifles and bayonets of twice their number of capable, stolid Dutch sailors.

They were silenced; but the one sound they had made recalled Leyden in haste from the shattered companionway, startled and increasingly suspicious. He glared at the strange launch, almost on a level with himself, owing to the listing over of the brigantine and the burning down of her bulwarks; and he turned white with fear and passion at sight of Houten, big, imperturbable, motionless, gazing up at him with beady eyes glittering from out of his placid, fat face.

With the instinct and movements of the rat he had been compared to, Leyden

flashed around as if to seek an outlet that need not be won over such a barrier as Houten. He sprang across the deck, and a cry of jubilation burst from his lips. There was no boat there; no foes to bar his way except the river. But at the next step he stopped in new fear; for from behind a burned stanchion, to which clung pieces of charred planking, peeped six inches of a rifle muzzle, and the cold round hole in the end was aimed at his heart.

Still no human being came into sight on that creepily weird wreck. Leyden took fright now with no pretence at concealing it; for at his ensuing move he came up to one of the great water tanks, and out of the manhole peered another cold blue tube, held unwaveringly at his head. He turned again, darting towards the stern; and here he was met full front by the cool, smiling, unarmed person of Vandersee, stepping out of the companionway and barring the way.

Then it was that Leyden realized to the full the strength and completeness of the trap that had snared him in the moment of his highest hopes. He screamed his rage at the unimpressed being before him and pulled a pistol from his pocket.

"So it's you, is it?" he shrieked. "The devil reward you for dogging me, you Dutch fool!" He brought up his pistol, aimed at Vandersee's body, and the onlookers on the schooner held their breath in fear. Barry tugged futilely at his own weapon; Mrs. Goring turned white; a gasp burst from all four. Then as if sent from the Gods of Justice a shot rang out, and Vandersee still stood. Those who had watched closely only saw Leyden's weapon fly from his hand simultaneously with a sharp jet of fire somewhere in the boat alongside; the report came a fraction of time later, and then, curling lazily up from Houten's great, ham-like hand, was a tiny wreath of smoke. The huge trader moved not an inch; his face altered not a bit; immovable as a statue, unruffled as the Sphinx, he still stared up at the wreck. Vandersee stood still, showing no surprise, nor apparently interested in the least in the little piece of clever gun-play that his big compatriot had accomplished. But Leyden now showed all the traits of the cornered rat. His pistol spun away from his numbed fingers, and dumbly he seemed to sense that it had been shot out of his grip by a snap bullet fired from Houten's hip. He saw no weapon, but Houten's hand could easily conceal such a trifle as a pistol. He wrung his tingling fingers once, then with a snarl that was more than a curse he sprang at Vandersee, snatching a hunting knife from his shirt as he sprang.

Lookers-on could comprehend the scene in its entirety; and with Leyden's tigerish leap another element came in. Out from the blackened jungle pealed the

cries of savages, and a flight of arrows directed against Houten's launch gave ample evidence of the side the bowmen favored. Barry touched Gordon's arm, and together they emptied their pistols into the trees, a useless expenditure of ammunition at that distance. But their efforts were unnecessary; the trap required no bolstering; for with the first cries from the jungle came an answering shout, and behind the ridge where Rolfe and Little and old Bill Blunt lay appeared these watchful guards with a dozen Dutch seamen alongside them; and the arrows had barely reached their mark, harmless, when a single, blasting volley of musketry drove the intruding natives shrieking to cover, never to risk another attack.

The little incident had taken but a few seconds, yet when rifles ceased barking and silence again enveloped the gloomy creek, the deadly grapple on the wreck had reached its climax. Leyden was upon Vandersee's breast, one hand clutching desperately at his throat, the other gripping a murderous knife yet unable to use it, for the big Hollander had a grip on the wrist that could not be broken.

"Like a rat!" muttered Gordon. "Lord lean to Justice!"

Barry suddenly found Natalie in need of support, for her courage, once past the crisis, was not proof against the sort of soul-revolting conflict she was now forced to witness. Barry drew her to him with an arm about her shoulders, and she rested against him with a little sigh of relief. His own eyes refused to leave the scene on his old ship; but beside him he heard voices, and he knew that Mrs. Goring too had found the stress too great and had sought comfort in Gordon's arms. Yet those two people had reason, too strong to be downed, for witnessing Leyden's atonement; and while on that blasted and corpse-like wreck two men fought, one in awful, cold, remorseless silence, the other with broken screams of insane fury that availed him nothing, Mrs. Goring murmured between racking sobs:

"Not vengeance for my pain, dear God! Only repayment for the golden years he stole from the man who loved me!"

The sobs ceased, and the murmuring hushed, and the two women were spared the rest. With a terrific outburst of shrill railing against everything human or divine that could have any possible hand in his defeat, Leyden gathered superhuman strength out of his desperation and tore loose his knife hand. His other hand, at Vandersee's throat, had grown white and numb from its own efforts that had not changed the Hollander's expression one bit; but now, in a last

swift up-stroke of the knife, the cornered rat saw victory beckoning to him.

He drove in his thrust, and Barry went cold at sight of it. He wondered angrily at Houten's indifference. The great trader stood in his launch as unruffled as if in his office; his men, although they retained their rifles in hand, offered to use them for no other purpose than keeping their prisoners quiet. And just beside them, that murderous blade swished through the air fair aimed at Vandersee's breast. Then the big Hollander stepped back, and stumbled.

"Gone!" Barry and Gordon cried hoarsely together. Yet they saw Houten in his old, apparently indifferent attitude, and could not force themselves to move. Men sprang into full sight where Rolfe and his party were, and they, too, remained in their places. The thing was uncanny: the colossal trader exercised a compelling influence over everybody about him, bordering upon the supernatural. Not a hand was raised in Vandersee's vital peril. Then the utter confidence of the man was revealed.

With his stumble Vandersee drew back from his antagonist three feet, and Leyden plunged forward, tripped by his own balked impetus. The knife flashed upwards, missing its mark by a foot, and while yet the sun played on the steel in midair Vandersee recovered, smiling now with terrible assurance, and his great bulk leaned, his long, powerful arms enwrapped his foe in a hug that paralyzed every limb. The knife fell through Leyden's clutching fingers, and the point quivered for a moment in Vandersee's shoulder before it fell to disappear through the broken planks. The next breath brought both men heavily against a gaunt, charred stanchion, and Leyden's terrified cry pealed over the water.

Alongside the wreck, on the schooner, ashore, wherever a man was stationed, faces looked on in fascination. Still Houten stood in his place, his placid visage regarding the conflict unmoved; no line of his immense figure revealing anything in him save a sort of bovine indifference in the result. In a flash everything was changed in him. The sudden impact of those two struggling bodies was the final strain the stanchion could bear; the blackened timber burst into splinters, and Vandersee and his foe crashed through and pitched headlong into the swirling current of the creek entrance.

Then Houten's real interest was shown, and swiftly. His guttural voice barked a brief order in Dutch, the concealed men on the wreck sprang into sight and covered Leyden's men in the launch, and like the dart of a shark Houten drove his own craft out into the stream after the vanished combatants, his great red face

gone ashy, his beady eyes gleaming anxiously.

On board the schooner Barry drove his men to boat-falls in hasty endeavor to get a boat over; but the effort could have only proved fruitless, for the stream ran like a mill race around those writhing, twisting grasses that endlessly bent, straightened, and twined, and the undertow was appalling. Houten's launch rounded the *Barang's* stern and the trader searched the waters with outthrust head that contrasted strongly with his previous attitude of nonchalance.

Something rolled upwards on the surface at the very edge of the grasses and disappeared again. In a few seconds it appeared again, and now Vandersee's red, strangling face emerged from the water. The launch shot towards him and picked him up, twenty yards from the spot where he had plunged in grips with Leyden. When he regained his breath, he pointed inshore beside the wreck, and the launch put back. Still there came no sight of Leyden; and soon the boat headed for the schooner, Vandersee's men bringing Leyden's launch in response to an order. And the two burly Hollanders came on board the *Padang* in quiet mood, mounted to the poop and met their friends with a subdued, almost sorrowful smile. Mrs. Goring and Gordon could not restrain their anxiety, however, and Vandersee answered their looks of inquiry.

"It is finished," he said very seriously. "Not by my hand, but by the inevitable hand of Justice. We fell beside that weed bank, and separated as we struck the water. I came up outside the eddy; being the heavier the current had more action on me; but he plunged deep into the grass. I went down again to try to release him, but it was out of my hands then." Vandersee shuddered slightly, then his soft, placid smile returned, full of quiet reverence for the name he now used. "God had taken vengeance from me and had substituted his infallible Justice. Leyden lies down there under that bank, with a rope of weed about his neck that no strength of mine could break."

"It iss better so!" grumbled Houten, after a silence that thrilled. He stepped over to Gordon, took his hand in a short, warm grip, then gently put him aside, and gathered Mrs. Goring into his tremendous arms, kissing her on the lips and soothing her with rough, kindly whispers.

Barry felt the general stress and knew that it was not yet time for further questions. He knew that much remained a mystery; and much would doubtless be cleared up in the good time of these two inscrutable Dutchmen. He dully wondered just who or what Mrs. Goring could be, for he had seen three men successively take her in a warm embrace, with no sign of resentment in either. He simply left it with the rest to be explained, and felt a swift and grateful glow pervade him in the close and confident proximity of Natalie, who had relaxed with a little shiver into his arms, her fair face hiding its trouble on his breast, her sunny hair caressing his cheek.

"Come, Captain, let me take her below," said Mrs. Goring at length, coming forward with her own brave face composed to calmness. "She will soon get over this experience now that it is finished."

Barry helped Natalie inside the companionway, and as Mrs. Goring took her in charge, the girl lifted her face to Barry and gave him a wan smile that nevertheless carried its message to him. He, all unversed in such matters, suddenly found knowledge and stooped to kiss her lips; then as suddenly restrained himself, with all the past in his mind, and pressed his kiss on her hand instead. Mrs. Goring seemed to flash approval to him, then took her charge to her cabin, leaving the skipper to rejoin the men and gather up the remaining threads of the situation.

Over on the creek shore Houten's launch was taking on board Rolfe and Little and their party, having returned for them after seeing Leyden's men secured. Farther along the bank a party of naval seamen were waiting for a big steam pinnace speeding up the river from its downstream concealment. Leyden's own steam launch had been commandeered into the service, and was taking up the scattered guards from the farther bank; somewhere in the blue and yellow haze of the sea beyond the river sounded the hoarse, prolonged blast of a steamship's siren; and Houten was giving expert first aid to the knife-cut in Vandersee's shoulder, while that stolid individual insisted in shame-tinged gutturals that it was nothing.

"Here iss the captain now," rumbled Houten as Barry appeared. "In a leedle

while we are reatty to leave, yes. If you can hoist oop Leyden's launch und make t'ings snug for sea, my boat und Hendrik's will be taken oop by der gunboat now oudside waiting for us."

"Yes, Captain Barry," rejoined Vandersee, with his old suave smile, "and I owe you some explanation before we leave. If you will get the schooner ready, it will give the ladies time to recover a little, and when my sister is herself again, everything shall be made clear to you which appears puzzling now."

"Your sister?" exclaimed Barry.

"Yes, Captain, Mrs. Goring as you know her, or Miss Vandersee as she is, is my sister. Mr. Houten is our uncle, also. Perhaps you will connect things slightly now, by the time we are ready," replied Vandersee, while Cornelius Houten chuckled deep down in his cavernous chest and shot a twinkle from his beady eyes at the astonished skipper.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Barry's thoughts kept him busy along with his duties for half an hour, by which time the schooner had taken up her boat, and a general transfer of men had been accomplished. The big pinnace, which belonged to the invisible gunboat, took on board the Dutch seamen and the survivors of Leyden's band, leaving the *Barang's* crew under Rolfe and Blunt on board the schooner with Barry. Tom Little was in close conversation with Houten, and Gordon stood by as if quietly awaiting the outcome of it. Old Bill Blunt was forward, making the decks rattle with his lusty roar as he drove the little brown sailors to their jobs of preparing for sea. Outwardly the old fellow had managed to keep intact; it was only when he cut himself a quid of tobacco by jamming the plug into the sheave of a block and sawing at it with one hand that it could be noticed his left hand never left his belt and that his sleeve was dark and soggy.

Mrs. Goring and Natalie Sheldon appeared on deck while Little and Houten were still talking, and they had regained their color and self-control, only revealing a slight shudder of recollection when their eyes fell upon the devastated creek. Houten noticed this and cut short his consultation.

"So, dot iss settled, Mister Leedle," he said abruptly and met the ladies with a vast and paternal smile. "Captain Barry, when dot launch I had comes back from dot gunboat, we schall sail. Mister Leedle has agreed to go back to the station unt take charge until Mister Gordon returns, unt he takes dot launch unt some navy mans to stay mit him in case dose leedle brown mans ouf Leyden's make more bodder. So now mine boy Hendrik schall tell you somedings, yes?"

Barry kept silent, merely nodding. Vandersee spoke in low tones to Gordon and Mrs. Goring for a moment, received their acquiescence to his question, then faced the skipper with an expression of resignation to a task not entirely to his liking.

"Some of the story is not very pleasant, Barry, so I'll make it brief," he said. "It's due to you and to Little, otherwise I'd ask you to let your doubts remain unanswered. Beginning with my uncle's engagement of Little and yourself, at that time everybody concerned believed that gold was to be found on this river, —everybody, that is, except Leyden and Gordon here. Gordon desires me to tell the entire story, so I am not going to waste time by repeated apologies. The chief

thing in this gold business is that Houten believed it implicitly, and naturally he wanted to know where his property was going to. Hence your engagement.

"Now to explain some of the mystery that has bothered you, Captain, it was discovered by my government some time back that Leyden was operating a tremendous opium smuggling business, and the entire interior of the island was in his grip. You'll see now how he could command such numbers of native fighters to drive you out or kill you. Eventually I was detailed to the duty of running him down. I am, as you perhaps have gathered, a lieutenant in the Dutch navy."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Barry, interested, yet hotly impatient to arrive at matters more closely concerning him personally. "That is all right, Vandersee. I know that, and that Mrs. Goring is your sister, and that she came here in my ship and stole my picture and why," he ran on, giving the lady a reassuring grin as he mentioned the theft of the photo by the brutal name. "I know, too, the connection between the opium running and the gold-dust swindle; you told me that; but I can't see yet why there was any necessity to compel me to keep my hands off that fellow, since we were all out for him, though on different errands. Seems to me a lot of useless waste of energy when he could have been taken weeks ago if you had made me acquainted with the inside of the business."

As he spoke, Mrs. Goring's face paled, and pain entered her eyes. Gordon patted her shoulder tenderly, and Natalie soothed her with soft speech. Vandersee waited for a moment until the pain had been banished by a brave smile and she nodded to him resolutely, then he resumed in reply to Barry:

"That is the real story, Captain. Juliana and I have not been blessed with parents since childhood. Mr. Houten is the only parent my sister has known. While she lived in his house, she met Gordon, and they soon became engaged to each other. I think you'll spare her the details, Barry, when I tell you this: While Gordon was absent on a business trip Leyden entered Juliana's home, became very intimate with my uncle, and was soon trusted utterly. Then subtle tales began to trickle in to Juliana and Mr. Houten about Gordon; and after a while they forced belief. They grew worse, and as they got blacker, Leyden's influence with my uncle increased until Houten accepted him as a partner and as a suitor for my sister's hand." Mrs. Goring shuddered violently, and Barry sensed that the climax to her story was near. Vandersee went on: "Barry, my sister fell under the spell of that man, and—"

Vandersee's calm was not equal to his task. It was Gordon who took up the story, and his voice vibrated with passion:

"The beast took her away and then flung her adrift on the port of Singapore, Barry! There was a little truth and a lot of lies in those tales circulated about me. True, I had been using liquor rather more than was good for a white man out here; but when I heard of this last piece of villainy, I simply went a complete mucker. I got so low and vile that I gradually lost my resolve to find him and choke the foul life out of him. When, after years, he came to me in this river and made his proposition about using the post as an entry port for his drug under cover of the gold-dust myth, I was even so far gone down the track as to agree to everything, if only I could be kept supplied with liquor. I willingly robbed Houten, although everything I ever had, this post, the last chance anybody on earth would give me, I owe to him." Gordon paused, passed a caressing hand along Mrs. Goring's arm, and concluded: "I only came to my senses, and to a promise of life again, when this lady came here and found me. Barry, a noble woman is a wonderful work of God!"

"I believe that," replied Barry quietly. "So that is why you stowed away in my ship, Mrs. Goring? If I had known, you should never have been refused a passage when you asked."

"That was not all, Captain," smiled the woman, her face transfigured by her triumph. "I came chiefly to be at hand when this sweet girl needed a friend," she said, patting Natalie's hand. "We knew she was to have a terrible awakening. We, I particularly, knew the man who had fascinated her. Besides that, I came to help my brother; and, above all, Captain, I came to satisfy myself whether love could really die."

Natalie had listened intently to a story she already had heard, and at Mrs. Goring's concluding words she shivered slightly and added: "And by God's grace, it cannot—if it is love."

Barry glanced inquiringly at the girl, and she blushed rosily. He said softly: "You have something to say in this, I'm sure, for you made a remark about the success of my expedition that was quite at variance with some of your earlier remarks to me."

"Why—I have scarcely anything to say," Natalie hesitated with heightened color. "I ought to tell you why I seemed to doubt you, though. That is due to you, after you have lost your ship and everything in my behalf. I am ashamed to tell it, but

I was completely fascinated by that man. I believed in him utterly, and so did the Mission folks. You can believe that when I gave up the Mission work at his word and placed myself under his protection from your crew of pirates, as he called you."

"Go on," urged Barry, as she paused.

"That is all, I think, Captain. While I believed him, of course I doubted you, whom I had met but once or twice. Then after Mr. Gordon recovered and I heard a dispute one day between him and Leyden, when Gordon and I had been left alone for an hour, I saw a light and demanded to know the truth of Mrs. Goring, whom I had grown to love. The story she told was duplicated by Mr. Gordon, and again by Lieutenant Vandersee, backed up by a stolen glimpse at the *Padang's* papers, showing she had cleared for Europe, and not for Batavia, as I had been led to believe. I was forced to see the horrible situation I had placed myself in; for if this schooner ever got out to sea—" She stopped in distress, and Barry pressed her hand gently. He asked quietly:

"And you believe in me now, Natalie?"

"I have never doubted you since that horrible day I saw you on the ant hill. But since that day I, too, have played a part. Mrs. Goring's proved wrongs and my own narrow escape steeled me to help Vandersee, as he asked me. I did my poor best, Captain; but I am so glad it's all over."

Barry realized that the tale was told. His first impulse was to give Gordon a hard hand-grip of friendship; his second to tell Mrs. Goring his high opinion of her courage and loyalty. He followed both impulses, but felt a little embarrassment in addressing the lady of various names. He took Mrs. Goring's hand in his and remarked with a smile:

"I scarcely know how to address you now. Is it Mrs. Goring? or have I got it wrong? Should it be Mrs. Gordon? Pardon me if I'm floundering."

"Not Gordon, yet, Captain," she replied, and again the hint of pain in her eyes was banished by a resolute smile. "I am still Miss Vandersee. I have never been married. I took a married name after—after—well, there was a little one, you know," she murmured softly, "a tiny life to be guarded from the poison of tongues. So I stole a name for its sake. It is dead now. I am Miss Vandersee."

A deep silence was marked by the men walking away and leaving the two

women to their own thoughts; and the relief was welcomed when Vandersee reported the steam launch in sight. In five minutes it was alongside, and the men in her held the ladder for Little. The ex-typewriter salesman travelled light enough now, for all his worldly belongings reposed somewhere among the drenched and shattered interior of the brigantine.

"Well, so long, Jack Barry, old scout!" he shouted, after he had made his *adieux* to the rest. "We've had a lot o' sport since I dug you out o' the dumps in Batavia. I'm staying here until Mr. and Mrs. Gordon come to relieve me; then I'll see you again, either in Java, or at the post, if you decide to try Celebes again. Stick to Cornelius, Jack. He's tickled silly with you; never mind about the ship you lost. So-long, all!"

The cheery fellow dropped into the launch and waved her on her way up the river with a lordly air of command that brought a grin of reminiscence to Barry's face. Then Houten's rumbling voice boomed in his ear, and he heard his destiny and that of all hands.

"Captain Barry, you have done well. Noddings dot I expected you to do vas undone. I am satisfied. Friendt Leedle iss to be mine superintendent in Java ven Gordon unt the niece he iss stealing from me are retty to return to the post. Yah, Captain, dot iss deir choice. Gordon iss to be mine partner, anyvay. As for Captain Barry, I dondt know," he chuckled, regarding the skipper with eyes that twinkled and shot between Barry's face and Natalie just behind him. The girl colored like a peony, as if some unsuspected instinct within her told her whither his words were driving. "I haf better ships as the old *Barang*, Captain, unt in my launch alongside I haf some pags ouf goldt dust dot iss to be a wedding present for a leedle lady I know ouf py der name ouf Natalie. Yes? No? How iss it, mine childrens?"

Natalie ran below, overcome with confusion. The old trader turned to Barry, his whimsical humor giving place to cold business. "For now, Barry, I haf to say take this schooner to Surabaya. It iss at the orders ouf dot navy mans. Hendrik has to rejoin his ship, unt it will take a week or so to clean oop all dose leedle things left py dose opium runners, I come mit you, too, unt if you are short ouf a mate, I can stand a watch yet. Now schall we start? Hendrik joins his ship outside."

"Man the windlass, Rolfe, and heave away!" shouted Barry, alight with excitement at what he had surprised on Natalie's face as she ran below. The

mention of wedding presents might be a little premature; but Jack Barry knew enough to seize his chance and at least do his best to make it mature. He saw the mate take his men to the windlass, and cast a look at the boom-sails, all ready to hoist, since they had simply been let go when the schooner anchored and not made fast.

"Blunt!" he hailed.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Can you handle a watch with that crippled fin?"

"Crippled? Bless ye, Cap'n, I ain't crippled!"

"That arm, man."

"Huh! Ain't I got one left? Come on, Bullies! Clap on to them halliards!"

"All right," cried Barry. "Hoist away. Mains'l first."

Barry ran below to look out charts and rulers and the other navigating implements necessary for simple point-to-point navigation. He found Natalie sitting in the main saloon with her chin in her cupped hand, gazing into the future. Her eyes grew dusky and her face flooded with color as he stopped by her chair and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Well, lady mine," he said, finding sudden boldness in her confusion. "Are you thinking of what old Cornelius said?"

"Not entirely," she replied, meeting his gaze with eyes that swiftly changed to disconcerting clearness. "Why should it be necessary for Mr. Houten to say anything?"

Barry had graduated from the awkward class, though perhaps not long ago. He swept her up in his arms, triumphantly aware that she struggled and submitted, and his lips sought hers in a first kiss. But suddenly, when her submission seemed absolute, Natalie revealed a strength that amazed and puzzled him. She writhed free from his grasp and said with a low little laugh:

"I was not thinking about what Cornelius said—but of what you once said to Juliana—Jack!"

He was staggered for a second, then he remembered, and would have followed

her. But she ran into her own cabin and shut the door upon him. His duties compelled him to hurry, for the cable was coming in fast, and overhead the heavy canvas began to rattle and flap in the wind as the schooner swung. He entered the cabin that had been used as a chart room and rummaged the desk for parallel rulers and dividers; but a soft step behind him brought him to a stand quickly. Natalie stood beside him, a soft glow on her face, her eyes shining like stars now, and in her hand she held out a photograph to him.

"You said that when next you took this, it would be when I placed it in your cabin," she said, meeting his eyes with a blushing challenge.

Their souls met, spoke, and understood. She did not refuse him her lips now but surrendered with glad abandon. The hoarse roar of Rolfe, reporting the anchor apeak, and the bellowing bass of old Bill Blunt giving the word to belay the peak halliards, failed to disturb them. A second shout from the mate was answered by Barry's:

"Avast heaving a bit! I'm not ready yet."

But Natalie shyly looked up into his face and gave him her first order:

"No, Jack, tell them to heave away—that's how you say it, isn't it? Let us hurry home, before I tire of my terrible pirate."

"Pirate gladly, girl of mine. Am I not taking gold out of Celebes?"

"Sordid creature!" she pouted, averting her lips in mock displeasure. But in her face was a light that shone from her heart, and that heart knew quite well what gold Jack Barry was carrying away from Celebes.

End of Project Gutenberg's Gold Out of Celebes, by Aylward Edward Dingle

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