

THE
BLACK PEARL
OF PEIHOO

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THE BLACK PEARL OF PEIHOO

EVERY BOY'S BOOKSHELF

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The Black Pearl of Peihoo. By S. P. HYATT.
Adventures in the South Pacific.
Old Schoolfellows, and What Became of Them.
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THE FLOOD WAS KNEE-DEEP WHEN JACK STAGGERED OUT WITH THE LAST BOX HE COULD FIND.

[See page 15.]

THE BLACK PEARL OF PEIHOO

A TALE OF THE MALAY SEAS

BY

STANLEY PORTAL HYATT

LONDON

THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY

4 BOUVERIE STREET, & 65 ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD, E.C.

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TO MY NEPHEW

HUMPHREY

BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THROUGH-
OUT THE YEARS TO COME HE
WILL LIVE UP TO THE STANDARD
OF THAT GREAT ENGLISH GENTLEMAN
SIR HUMPHREY GILBERT
AFTER WHOM HE WAS NAMED

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THE BLACK PEARL OF PEIHOO

CHAPTER I

THE HEAD-HUNTERS

ARIVER about fifty yards in width, a heavy, sluggish stream, with steep banks, and along those banks dense tropical vegetation, palms, huge forest trees, and a mass of tangled undergrowth, everything suggesting the Tropics—such was the river down which the two large dug-out canoes were travelling.

Many-coloured parrots screamed and wrangled in the tree-tops; monkeys chattered and jabbered, and swung themselves from bough to bough; loathsome crocodiles slid off the mud and plunged into the water at the sound of the paddles; huge snakes, coiled round overhanging branches, raised their detestable heads and hissed as the boats swept by.

In the heart of Borneo, one of the least-known parts of the world, you can see many strange sights. The flowers are glorious—nowhere else do you find such orchids; the butterflies hovering over those flowers are unequalled anywhere else; the birds seem to match the butterflies in the splendour of their colouring; the timber is wonderful—and yet there is something depressing about it all, a

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gloominess, a hint of hidden dangers in that jungle. You admire it all, you pay a tribute to the perfection of Nature's handiwork; but still, somehow, you shudder. Death seems to be lurking in the undergrowth, waiting for you, trying to catch you off your guard.

Jack Wayne felt all this as he lay in the stern of the second canoe, trying to get some ease for his tired limbs. He was wondering how it would all end.

It was three months since he had landed in Borneo, to act as assistant to George North, the famous naturalist-photographer, who had been commissioned by a great scientific society to obtain moving-pictures of the wild life of the Bornean Jungle, especially of the long-nosed monkey.

Somehow much of it seemed a kind of dream. There was such a gulf separating him from his schooldays. Colonel Wayne, V.C., his father, had died so long ago that his figure was now blurred and indistinct; his mother he could not remember at all. There had only been his uncle, a grim, sour old man, who had never said a kind word to him, and, after taking him away from school as soon as possible, had put him to work with the Zoological Kinematograph Company.

"Now you can shift for yourself, Master Jack," old Jonas Wayne had growled. "I've given you a start in life, and that's all I'm going to do. My younger brother—your father—got the Victoria Cross. Bah! A lot of good it did him, or you, or the child he married, the girl who was your mother. Give me something I can buy cheap and sell at a big profit. That's better by far than all your V.C.'s."

Jack had shrugged his shoulders, packed his bag, exchanged a handshake with his uncle, and gone down to the lodgings which had been found for him close to the kinematograph company's works. His salary was to begin at five shillings a week, and he had some ten shillings

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a week from his father's insurance. Really, he owed nothing at all to Jonas Wayne, who was only Colonel Wayne's half-brother, and so, when Mr. North had offered to take him out to Borneo, he had not troubled to consult the old City merchant.

"Good riddance," Jonas had growled to his housekeeper, who was as grim and mean as himself. "I shan't be worried with him any more. . . . Give me a boy who can buy and sell at a profit, if it's only postage stamps. . . . What's young Jack ever done, except give things away? —give them! . . . And he fought young Sebag Tolhurst, son of Alderman Tolhurst, who's worth a million of money! He's got to learn that money talks in this world."

So Jack, who was far taller and stronger than the average boy of his age, had gone to Borneo cheerfully, taking the risks as a matter of course, and remembering all the time that his father had won the Victoria Cross, and that, for that reason alone, he must do his best; whilst Jonas Wayne had thanked his stars that he was rid of the worry of his half-brother's son; and Sebag Tolhurst, now promoted to a silk hat and a tail-coat, had made various bets amongst the Stock Exchange youths of his acquaintance that Jack would never come back from the jungle.

Brown as a gipsy, with a greatly discoloured sun-helmet on his head, a flannel shirt open at the throat, and very well-worn khaki trousers, Jack Wayne tried to forget that he was horribly stiff, that his limbs were covered with sores due to leech-bites, and that his chief, George North, was terribly run down from fever. All the previous night he had sat up with North, who was now in the other canoe, and it was quite probable that he would have to sit up through the coming night. He did not complain, even to himself, about it. "All the luck of the game," he murmured; but he did wish that North would get

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well ; and then he fell to wondering how Sebag Tolhurst, or any of the other fellows he had known at home, would come out of a similar experience.

"Barney O'Brien is the only one who would score," he told himself. "Everything is an adventure to Barney, just as it used to be to me—before I had real adventures." Then he sighed, pushed back his helmet, and ran his fingers through his curly hair, a favourite trick of his while deep in thought.

Somehow, those three months in the jungle seemed to have altered most things for him. It was very difficult to identify himself with the boy who had jumped with delight on receiving George North's offer to go abroad.

"Him very sick, plenty muchee sick." A tall, lean Chinaman, who was sitting on the bottom of the canoe, just in front of Jack, jerked his thumb in the direction of the other boat.

Jack nodded. He and Ah Lung, who was cook, steward, interpreter, and general manager of the expedition, had grown to understand one another excellently. For the English boy, the Celestial seemed to put off the impassive yellow mask he usually wore, and, instead of regarding him as the Chinaman generally regards a European, from the height of his own seven thousand years of civilisation, treated him as a dearly-loved chief, a fact which was the more remarkable because, as Jack had been quick to perceive, the other was no mere coolie.

Perhaps the explanation lay partly in the fact that Jack was uniformly courteous, even to the dusky native carriers, although, at the same time, he was always the master of the latter. Anyway, he knew that Ah Lung would go through fire and water for him, and often lately, when George North had been more than usually unwell, he had been only too thankful for the Celestial's help and advice.

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North himself, tall, thin, yellow from constant fever, was a most difficult man to work for. Naturally courteous and kind-hearted, the malaria had rendered him liable to fits of unreasoning obstinacy, during which the slightest opposition, the slightest mistake, made him irritable and abusive. He was a great naturalist, as well as one of the most expert photographers in the world, and a man of dauntless courage; but, on this particular day, anyone seeing him lying on a pile of blankets in the first canoe would have taken him for a complete physical and mental wreck.

The only other important member of the expedition, Mahomed, the native headman, was a typical Malay in appearance, though, unlike most of his kind, he was capable of hard, sustained work. As a youngster he had gone to work on a British steamer, had drifted to the Bay of Bengal, worked on Indian coasters, and now, in everything except appearance, was just like a British-Indian sailor, speaking English very fairly well.

George North raised himself on his elbow, gave an anxious look at the masses of black cloud which were rolling up astern from behind the mountains, then turned to his steersman.

"We'll camp on that sandspit, Mahomed," he said. "I'm tired of being wet through.—Hurry up, Wayne," he hailed Jack. "The fever is on me again, and this storm is going to be a big one."

Jack was ashore almost as soon as his chief. He, too, had no wish to be caught in another of those terrible Bornean thunderstorms, but, none the less, he looked doubtfully at the proposed camping-ground.

"It's none too safe, Mr. North," he said bluntly. "We shall be only a few inches above the water level, and if the stream comes down in flood——"

The other cut him short. "It's in flood already. Don't

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keep on croaking. I'm very ill and I want to turn in." Then, despite the breathless tropical heat, he huddled on an overcoat over his jacket.

Jack shrugged his shoulders. There was no use in arguing, so he set his men to work, with the result that by the time the first drops of rain fell the tent was up on the sandspit, with all the loose gear stowed in it.

"Plenty muchee rain there." Ah Lung pointed up stream.

Jack, who was standing in the entrance of the tent, nodded. Never before had he seen such black clouds. Every moment they seemed to be piling up, more and more heavily.

The natives had made their own camp up on the bank, and Jack found himself envying them their security. Why had George North been so obstinate?

"I get up there, plenty quick." Ah Lung grinned cheerfully. "Cookee dinner by and by." Then he, too, scrambled up to the higher level.

Half a minute later the storm burst. There was a vivid flash of lightning, an ear-splitting crash of thunder, and then the rain came down in sheets. Although the sun was only just setting, darkness fell almost immediately, pitch darkness, something far worse than anything Jack had experienced hitherto; and yet, as he noted with a kind of uneasy wonder, the storm itself was not a bad one. In less than half an hour it stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and the sky cleared. There was just enough light left for the boy to see that the level of the water appeared still to be the same as before.

The canoes, tied to an overhanging branch, seemed quite safe; whilst, on the bank, Ah Lung had started a fire with the handful of dry sticks which he always managed to have by him, even in the worst weather.

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"Everything seems all right," Jack remarked as he re-entered the tent. "I thought it was going to be a far bigger storm."

From under the blankets North muttered an inaudible reply. He felt too ill at that moment to worry about anything.

Jack said no more, but went down on his knees in the sand, and began to search for the candles. At first he opened the wrong package, then opened another wrong one—Ah Lung had a perfect genius for getting things mixed—and fully five minutes had elapsed before he felt the candles, which were soft as putty from the heat. Then he scrambled to his feet, and, as he did so, he was suddenly aware that his knees were wet.

Instantly he understood. With one movement he pulled the blankets from off his chief.

"The river is rising suddenly. There's been a cloudburst somewhere," he cried, then put his head out of the tent and shouted for the natives.

It was merely a question of a few minutes. The flood came down almost like a wall, boiling, raging.

George North scrambled to the bank, dragging his blankets with him, and collapsed as he reached a place of safety. Jack and Ah Lung worked feverishly, grabbing at things in the darkness of the tent, with the fear of the canvas coming down on them and smothering them, passing the packages out to the natives. The water was knee-deep when Jack staggered out with the last box he could find, and, as he did so, the tent ropes carried away. A moment later the whole tent was swirling down with the flood.

Jack gave vent to a groan, but, immediately afterwards, even the tent was forgotten.

A greater disaster had befallen them. The two canoes,

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containing all the spare stores, had broken adrift and were following the tent downstream. There was no hope of recovering them, no chance of them being swept into a backwater. The river ran almost dead straight for a couple of miles, and at the end of that stretch were the formidable Kampong Rapids, in which no canoe could possibly live.

The naturalist had made straight for the fire, where he had thrown himself down, and had drawn his soaking blankets round him. He had the fever badly, and Jack knew that it would be useless to worry him with the news of their misfortunes. The stretcher beds had been abandoned in the tent; but, providentially, Ah Lung's blankets were dry, and it was in those that George North was now wrapped. Then he lay down on the ground, and went to sleep from sheer exhaustion.

Jack himself was wet through, but, as he had not a stitch of dry clothing, he had to stay as he was.

The natives had taken matters calmly. Their own possessions had been safe on shore; there was food enough for several meals, and, when that failed, the jungle would supply them with fruit. So they set to work to cook their rice and boiled fish just as though no disaster had occurred.

Ah Lung was the only person to whom Jack could turn for sympathy and advice. The Chinaman knew Borneo quite well; and now he ran over the list of things that had been saved from the flood, and summed up the position generally.

"Two rifles and plenty cartridges. Picture-make machines"—Jack's first thought had been for the cameras and films—"chop-box, tin-meat, tea, and little piecee flour, food for three-four days. Blanket all wet. Plenty silly, very muchee silly, camp there on sand. Boat all gone. White man's town ten days' walk away."

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Jack nodded without looking up. He was gazing into the fire, trying to picture what they could do now. Of course, they might find a village where they could get some more canoes, but, even then, all they could do would be to hurry back to the coast. Their stock of unexposed film now consisted of some five hundred feet, which had been kept ready for immediate use. The question of food was even more serious, for though it is possible to exist on fruits when you are strong and well, it is not possible for a man in George North's state of health. He had been bad already, and the shock and wetting would certainly make him worse. Taken all round, it was a poor prospect for the expedition.

It was well past midnight when the boy turned in. He had scarcely touched the food which Ah Lung had brought him, and he hardly noticed that his blankets had been dried by the Chinaman. There were too many other things to be considered.

For a time North had been delirious, talking wildly of the long-nosed monkeys, which, so far, had eluded all their attempts to photograph them.

"I tell you no one has ever kept one in captivity, no one has ever had a chance of studying them, Wayne," he muttered time after time. "And we must do it; we're bound to do it. Give me the camera. There they are, up there!"

At last, however, the perspiration had broken out on his face, and the sick man had gone into a heavy sleep.

The morning came fair and cloudless. When he first awoke and found himself lying on the ground without the tent over him, Jack was puzzled; then he remembered and sat up. Ah Lung was making the coffee, solemnly, just as though nothing unusual had occurred; whilst the natives were cooking their rice. A moment later

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George North raised himself on his elbow and looked round. The fever had left him, and, though he was very weak, his brain seemed quite clear.

"What a lunatic I was last night," he said. "It was all my fault, even the loss of the canocs, because there was nothing really to make them fast to. What luck we sent all those exposed films down by the runner last week! How do we stand now?"

When Jack told him he looked very grave.

"Four days' food only!" he repeated. "And it's ten days' march to the nearest white settlement. That's bad. Still, it's got to be done, and the sooner we're off the better."

The stores, cameras, and blankets made very light loads for the twelve natives, yet, when North gave the order to start, no one moved. Instead the men began to chatter vehemently amongst themselves.

"What is it, Ah Lung?" the naturalist demanded, impatiently.

"Say plenty bad road, sir," the Chinaman answered. "Too many bad men huntee heads on that road. Say we go back way we came."

The Englishman's face grew black.

"Rubbish! That would take us twenty days. Head-hunters! Nonsense! They are all the other side of the island. Come on. March!" And, as if to give point to his orders, he slipped a cartridge into the breech of his rifle.

Very reluctantly the natives took up their loads, and the long tramp to the sea began. North and Jack marched ahead, then came Ah Lung and Mahomed, the rest tailing behind in single file.

It was terribly hard going, especially for a man who had the fever about him. There was mud, nothing but mud underfoot, all the time. Now it was just enough

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to make your feet slip at every step ; next minute you were ankle-deep in it, almost wrenching your boots off as you raised them ; then you were up to the knees in slime.

Dense green jungle all around you ; a screen of dense foliage above you, shutting out the light ; air which was so hot and so still that it seemed to choke you ; salt perspiration running down into your eyes, half-blinding you—these were the conditions.

Myriads of monkeys, not one of whom ever showed himself, chattered at the travellers ; invisible birds rustled the leaves, parrots screeched, snake after snake squirmed away at their approach.

North held on bravely. He had made a great mistake the night before, but he was going to do his best to put matters right ; still, when they stopped at midday, he was thoroughly exhausted, and for a time lay very still, with his eyes closed.

Jack bent over him anxiously.

“ Is there anything I can do ? ” he asked.

The other shook his head. “ I’m all right. Count the carriers.”

The boy understood. As the natives filed in he checked them off. Eight—nine—ten—a long wait and no sign of any more. He went over them again. Yes, ten only. Two were missing.

Then he went through the loads. A bag of rice and a set of camera legs were short.

The other carriers sat silent and morose, making no attempt to eat, apparently taking no interest in anything. At the end of two hours George North got up. “ Those fellows have deserted,” he said very quietly. “ We had better get on, Wayne.”

“ Shall I act as rear guard, in case any more fall out ? ” Jack suggested.

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But the other vetoed the idea promptly, with what seemed unnecessary sternness.

"Certainly not. You keep just behind me. Ah Lung, keep up too, and you, Mahomed, as well. Tell the men not to lag, Mahomed. I'll flog anyone who comes in late."

Jack raised his eyebrows. Never before had he known his chief to act like this.

Until sundown they toiled on steadily. North, at the head of the line—they had to march in single file—stuck to his work with a grim determination. Once or twice, when they were breasting a rise, with slippery red clay underfoot, Jack noticed that he had to stop, as though from sheer exhaustion, but he pulled himself together quickly. Moreover, his rifle was always ready for use in the crook of his arm, and he had told Jack, too, to keep a cartridge in his magazine, though he had volunteered no explanation.

They camped that night on some open ground beside the river. A thunderstorm broke just as they stopped, and in a couple of minutes they were wet through—drenched.

"We must get used to it," North remarked grimly. "It's all my fault. Are the carriers in, Wayne?"

Jack counted them, counted them twice; then "One missing," he reported; "that pock-marked fellow with the small camera."

George North drew his hand across his forehead wearily, but all he said was, "Very well. It can't be helped. We're one day nearer the coast."

The camp was a very silent one. North sat smoking and staring into the fire. The carriers clustered together, as though for mutual protection, and barely exchanged

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a word. The only person who did anything was Ah Lung. He prepared the white men's dinner—it was not an elaborate meal—and after that set to work most industriously to sharpen a murderous-looking kris, which Jack had bought at a native village a month previously. When he had finished and had tried its edge on a log of wood, Ah Lung looked up and caught North's eye. As Jack was quick to note, the white man nodded significantly.

No remark was made about the matter, but before he turned in Jack overhauled his rifle carefully, and made sure that there was no verdigris on any of his cartridge cases.

The night passed quietly, and though the following morning's trek was a very trying one on account of the heat, at the midday halt all the remaining carriers put in an appearance.

George North heaved a sigh of relief—he had barely opened his mouth since the previous morning.

"Perhaps we're clear of them now," Jack heard him mutter.

The carriers, too, seemed more cheerful, eating their food greedily, and clamouring at Ah Lung for having cut down their allowance. Only the Chinaman appeared to be ill at ease, his eyes being on the surrounding jungle all the time, his big kris always just at hand.

After the usual two hours' rest, George North rose. "Time to get on, Wayne," he said. "Really, I believe the tramping has done me good. We shall pull through all right now."

As Jack remembered afterwards, his chief's manner was quite cheerful, and he began to talk of the possibility of getting some films of the wonderful long-nosed monkeys after all.

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"It's so important," he went on. "You see, no one has ever managed to keep one in captivity, even here in the island, so my photographs would be of great help to naturalists at home."

They had covered perhaps a couple of hundred yards, and the carriers, who, as usual, were slow in getting off, were beginning to catch them up, when a horrible, blood-curdling yell brought them to a standstill.

Jack glanced towards his chief.

"What was that?" he cried.

North, who had brought his rifle to the "ready," jerked out his answer.

"Head-hunters! That's why the other carriers were lost! Here they come!"

CHAPTER II

THE OTHER RIVER

IT was the first time Jack Wayne had ever come face to face with death. He never forgot the thrill which ran through him as he saw one of the carriers apparently stumble, and then perceived that there was a long spear driven in between the man's shoulder-blades.

Anger at the cruelty of it all—that was the idea uppermost in his mind. Why should poor Kilwa, the best-tempered of all their followers, have been done to death in that way?

It was such a shame, such a brutal shame—that was the thought which flashed through his brain.

Often he had wondered whether, when the test came, he himself would show any fear, whether he could face danger as his father had done. Now he thought nothing of his own case; all he wanted to do was to save the other carriers from sharing Kilwa's fate.

His first cartridge brought down the man who had thrown the spear. He jerked in another from the magazine, and then was conscious that a second savage had bitten the dust.

Afterwards he believed that, all the time, he had been shouting a kind of hoarse defiance at his enemies.

He was not afraid, not in the very least degree—he had time to realise that, with a fierce thrill of delight. He was his father's son, and he was playing a man's part.

If only Barney O'Brien were there to help!

THE OTHER RIVER

A spear whizzed by his ear, and, as he put a bullet through the arm of the man who had thrown it, it struck him that the savage was very like his old enemy, Sebag Tolhurst.

Just fancy Sebag with only a piece of native cloth round his loins! It was really funny.

How quickly one thought, sometimes! Why, all these ideas had passed through his brain whilst he was using three cartridges!

Then, suddenly, he became cool and practical again, completely master of himself. The rush had been stopped. The carriers had gone on, headlong, into the jungle beyond, and there remained now only George North, Ah Lung, and himself, though a moment later Mahomed reappeared.

Could it all be over so quickly? Had they really won the day?

"What next?" the boy asked, breathlessly.

Mahomed answered, indicating the jungle with a sweep of his hand. "Throw spear now from behind bush. Kill us all soon."

"Plenty heads to-night for black savages." Ah Lung grinned quite cheerfully. "Chinaman wantee kill one, two, first though."

North, who had been refilling his magazine, held out his hand. "I'm very sorry, old fellow. It was all my fault, but I'm paying for it too. Good-bye."

His hand had hardly left Jack's, when he threw up both his arms and fell back dead, a spear clean through his heart. Instantly Jack fired in the direction of the bush from which the weapon had come, and was rewarded by a yell, which ended in a gurgle.

Ah Lung, who had snatched up the dead man's rifle, jumped aside, just escaping two other spears, then seized the boy by the arm, dragging him out of the path into the bush.

THE OTHER RIVER

"All black savages that side," he grunted; "no good to wait. Come 'long."

As they hurried through the jungle Jack felt a sudden, mad desire to go back, to die fighting over the body of his chief. It seemed hideous to leave him there, even though he were dead. And what was really the use of trying to escape? They had lost all their equipment, all their provisions, and the head-hunters were sure to follow them up and kill them. Far better get it over.

Perhaps Ah Lung read something of what was in Jack's mind; at any rate, he gripped him by the arm when he saw him slow down.

"All right by and by," he panted. "Head-hunter catchee plenty heads there, catchee all our things, not want catchee any more bullet yet."

His words put fresh spirit into the boy. There might still be a chance of escaping. The desire to live came back to him more strongly than he had ever had it before. He would get through; he would make his way down to the coast; no one had a right to throw his life away uselessly; he would—— Suddenly he stopped, his rifle ready. Some one was coming through the jungle, only a few yards away.

The Chinaman had stopped too. "Not shoot too much hurry," he whispered. "Too much noise for head-hunter man."

A moment later he proved to be right, for Mahomed came into view, hatless, breathless, with one of the savages' spears in his hand. Jack, who had believed him to have been killed, was overjoyed, for not only did he like the native personally, but he would also be invaluable as a guide. In a few words the new arrival confirmed Ah Lung's theory. The head-hunters were not pursuing them. Some had remained with the booty, the rest had gone in search of the unarmed carriers.

THE OTHER RIVER

" Find them all very quick," he added grimly.

It had been hard enough work tramping along the native footpath, but it was many times harder pushing a way through the virgin jungle. More than once Ah Lung's kris proved invaluable for hacking through a tangle of creepers which was absolutely barring their progress.

Night had fallen before they reached the bank of a river where they determined to sleep, or try to sleep. Jack was so utterly weary and miserable that he simply threw himself down under a bush, and rested his head on his arm. He was still like that when Ah Lung touched him gently, and handed him some wild fruit.

" Eatee now," he said. " Plenty much more to-morrow."

Jack shook his head. " I can't. It would make me sick."

" You eatee," the Chinaman insisted. " Very sick to-morrow if not eatee to-day."

The boy raised himself on his elbow and took the fruit. He had not the energy left to protest; but when he had eaten, he was glad he had obeyed. Some of his strength came back to him. He remembered now to be grateful for his escape, and before he finally lay down he had given thanks to God on his knees.

Ah Lung, who had been watching him, nodded gravely to Mahomed. " Very good little foreign devil. Each man thankee his own joss. Very good way."

It was already light when Jack awoke. During the first part of the night he had barely closed his eyes, but afterwards, despite the lack of blankets, he had slept very heavily. The other two must have been up some time, for they had collected enough fruit for a good meal.

The night before it had been too dark really to see the river, but now Jack gazed at it in astonishment.

" What stream is this ? " he asked. " It's not the one

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we were on. That was the other side of the path, and this is much bigger."

Mahomed nodded. "Not know his name, sahib. I never on him, but all the same go to the sea. We follow him."

The boy hesitated. Really he had a very vague idea of where they were. George North had had some rough sketch-maps in his pocket-book, but Jack had never examined them closely. He remembered, though, hearing that the river on which they had lost their baggage joined a larger one nearer the coast, and he assumed that this must be that stream. Anyway, it was bound to go to the sea.

For three days they tramped along the bank of that river, pushing on as hard as possible all the time. It was a truly miserable experience, far worse really for Jack than for his two companions. The latter were, more or less, vegetarians—at least, meat had always been a luxury with them—but Jack had never been without it before. The fruit diet seemed horribly unsatisfying. All the time he felt hungry, and yet the quantity he managed to eat was really very small. Somehow, it did not seem worth while to take it.

He was tired, too—how tired he could never have explained. From the very first thing in the morning until he flung himself down under a bush at night, it was a toil to lift his feet, to drag them out of that horrible clinging mud. There was hardly such a thing as a stretch of dry ground, hardly a place where you could go ten yards without having to force your way through some dense undergrowth. And the heat during the daytime was appalling; it was like being in a vapour bath.

Then, too, every twelve hours or so there was a

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thunderstorm, which drenched you through, and made the going even worse than it had been before.

But the worst thing of all was the bitter cold at night—at least, it appeared bitter to Jack, lying on the wet ground, usually in wet clothes. The smallest, thinnest of blankets, even an old sack, would have seemed an almost priceless treasure then. He shivered, and shivered again; and only through sheer exhaustion did he sleep at all.

In a way it seemed as though he was reaching the lowest depths of misery—in fact, he told himself so on more than one occasion. It would have been very easy, terribly easy, to give way, to lie down altogether. Death would have come quickly enough; but he knew now that his companions would not have abandoned him, and, though he was often too weary to care for himself, he did care for them, and so he stuck to it, stumbling along with a kind of grim persistence.

Always there was the idea that he had to prove himself worthy of his race and of his father's name.

It was this which kept him going, far more than the desire to live. Really there were many times during that terrible march when he was conscious of little else.

On the fourth morning they stopped to rest a few yards back from the river bank. Jack made a brave attempt to eat some fruit, but it seemed to turn acid as it touched his lips; then, with a groan, his head fell forward, and, for the very first time, he found himself sobbing, though his eyes remained dry.

A lean yellow hand caught his shoulder and shook him. "No do that." It was Ah Lung speaking severely. "No must do that. By and by plenty——"

The sentence was never finished. A cry from Mahomed brought it to an abrupt close.

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“ A canoe, sahib ! I have found a canoe ! ”

Instantly Jack was on his feet, hurrying to the water's edge. The native was right. There, with its bow jammed between two tree stumps, was a fair-sized dug-out. Judging by the dead leaves in it, it must have been there some considerable time, but it was also evident that it was still in seaworthy condition.

A few minutes later Mahomed had got it free, and had brought it to a more convenient place. At first it looked as if, apart from a paddle, and the leaves and rain-water, it contained nothing ; but as the native baled it out, his eye lighted on some small object, which he seized eagerly. So far as Jack could see, the thing was merely a native bangle, a most trumpery affair ; then he noticed a strange look come into the finder's face, and, a moment later, the bangle had been flung away in horror.

“ What is it ? ” Jack moved as though to pick it up.

Mahomed's answer came quickly. “ Don't touch it, sahib ! An evil thing indeed ! It is one of the charms of the Palapogs, Raja Seyed's bad people. How did it come here, in this canoe ? Indeed an evil thing ! ” and he shivered slightly.

Young though he was, Jack Wayne knew the wisdom of respecting a native's prejudices, so he merely looked at the bangle as it lay on the ground, without even touching it with his foot. To him it appeared a very trumpery affair of glass and wire, though Mahomed's manner showed that to a native it must have a very great significance. He remembered having heard Raja Seyed mentioned at the coast as a scoundrel of a chief, with whom the British would have to deal sometime, but beyond that he knew nothing of him. Nor could he learn much from Mahomed.

“ Raja Seyed bad man, sahib. Palapogs are some of his people, very bad too. Better not talk of them. All

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evil spirits." Such was the gist of the answer he received to his questions.

The Chinaman, who was listening, made no remark at all.

Once more the native went on with his baling, though now he kept a keen look-out for anything else which might be in the liquid mud at the bottom of the canoe. Still, there were certainly no more bangles, and he was just scraping out the last of the mess when he made another find, this time of a little strip of bright metal.

"White man's charm," he said, as he handed Jack what proved to be an aluminium tab, with some words embossed on it.

Jack rubbed it clean, then read, "P. Van der Humm."

Later on, he often found himself wondering that he should have had no presentiment of what that name was to mean to him.

CHAPTER III

THE YELLOW DWARF

JACK put the aluminium tab into his pocket, then turned to Mahomed.

“Who is P. Van der Humm?” he asked.

The native shook his head.

“It’s a sahib’s name. The sahib knows more than I do!” Then, as though the matter were ended, “The canoe is now ready. With this stream, the one paddle will be quite enough.”

To Jack, the relief of being again in a canoe, of feeling that one was travelling easily, swiftly, back to civilisation, was inexpressible. Now no effort was asked of him. All he had to do was to make himself as comfortable as possible, whilst the others, who were adepts at the work, took turns at the paddle.

It was not long before he began to feel the reaction from the strain of the last few days. Before, he had been terribly, unutterably weary; now he was delightfully tired and drowsy. Any turn in the river might, he felt, bring them to some white man’s rubber plantation, which would mean food, and dry clothes, and safety.

He knew, at last, how greatly he had wanted to live, and he was more than ever grateful to God for having given him the strength to pull through the ordeal. Only a coward went under, he told himself, and he knew now that he himself was not a coward. He had proved it.

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Ah Lung knew it, Mahomed knew it, and in future, when he heard other fellows bragging about what they had done, or would do, he could hold his tongue and merely listen. There would be no need for him to boast.

It is a great feeling, one of the finest feelings that can possibly come to a man—the knowledge of your own personal courage, the certainty that, whatever test may come, you will not be found wanting. It makes an immense difference to your outlook on life generally. Yet it is a thing which you always want to keep secret; it concerns only yourself; and, the moment you tend to share it with anyone else, all the joy of it would disappear. You cannot talk about it. It is too sacred. You can only thank Providence humbly for having given you something which has been withheld from so many.

After a while Jack fell asleep, and, perhaps because of his cramped position, began to dream. In that dream weird, horrible, impossible things happened.

He saw the Palapogs, who proved to be a cross between the head-hunters and the long-nosed monkeys, with Sebag Tolhurst as their leader. They chased him through forests, over mountain ranges, down the river, under the water, even; screaming, all the time, that Sebag and Van der Humm had commanded them to get a moving picture of the English boy having his head cut off. When he awoke he found that the perspiration was standing on his forehead in great beads, so grotesquely real had it all seemed.

He looked round a little wildly, to find that the sun was already low, and that he was alone in the canoe with Ah Lung. Mahomed was a little way off, up the bank, gathering fruit for the evening meal.

So strong was the memory of his dream, that the first words he spoke concerned it.

“Do you know anything about the Palapogs, Ah Lung?”

THE YELLOW DWARF

The Chinaman smiled grimly and jerked his thumb in the direction of Mahomed. "Plenty fool that, no talkee to him. Tell you now."

The story did not take long. Raja Seyed, it appeared, was the ruler of a large territory on the coast. He claimed to be independent, and so far, though he was known to be an utter scoundrel, the jealousies of the white nations had prevented them from bringing him to order. The Palapogs, who were the fighting portion of his subjects, belonged to a small and extremely fierce tribe of hill-men, whose success in battle had gained them the reputation of being magicians. The rest of Raja Seyed's people were ordinary Malays, fishermen and cultivators—at least, rumour said so, though no white traveller had ever returned from the Raja's territory to report what he had seen.

"Plenty junk go there, though," Ah Lung added. "Chinese pirate junk, savee? Go fetchee bird's nest. Plenty birds' nests, good chop, in Kanderong caves."

Jack raised his eyebrows. He knew, of course, about the edible birds' nests, the Celestial's greatest luxury, and at the beginning of his journey with George North he had seen the entrance of the Gomerton caves, with hundreds of swallows flying in and out, but North had told him that there were no other similar caves on the island.

Ah Lung smiled.

"Kanderong caves two, three, five times big as Gomerton. Ask any Chinese man. Raja Seyed and Yellow Dwarf make plenty dollar, million dollar, there. Kanderong nests best of all," and, unconsciously, he licked his lips.

A sudden suspicion flashed through Jack's mind. "Who is the Yellow Dwarf?" he asked.

The Celestial shook his head. To him it was merely the native name of the man who controlled the caves, a man who was neither a native nor a Chinaman.

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"Is he white?" Jack asked.

Ah Lung shrugged his shoulders.

"No can tell. Thinkee not. Yellow Dwarf—that's all." Then Mahomed returned, and the subject was dropped.

They paddled on until about midnight, then tied up the canoe, and slept till dawn, when they started again.

So far, judging by the sun, they had been travelling north-east as a general direction; and, from what he remembered of the map, Jack believed that to be quite satisfactory. Anyway, he did not worry about it greatly, for Mahomed assured him that before long they must come to friendly villages, or white men's plantations.

Hitherto they had been passing through more or less level jungle country; but now a range of hills was visible right ahead. Obviously the river must take a big bend to one side or the other before long.

"It will turn towards the east, sahib," Mahomed said confidently. "It must do, or how could it join our old river, where we lost the canoes? Besides, if one goes west, one comes to Raja Seyed's country, where the Palapogs and the Yellow Dwarf kill all strangers."

Jack started, remembering what they had found in the canoe. Had that bangle been a warning to them?

The hills proved to be farther away than had seemed the case at the outset. Noon came, and the river was still heading straight towards the centre of the ridge. For the hundredth time Jack began making mental calculations of the distance they had come since losing their kit. It was impossible now for them to be more than a few miles from the sea, and the sea ought to mean safety, food and rest.

Then, suddenly, they came to a big bend in the river, a bend in the wrong direction, towards the north-west. Mahomed frowned and muttered something inaudible, but Ah Lung spoke out.

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"No good go that way. River he go Palapog country."

Jack nodded. "Yes, we must leave the canoe, worse luck," he sighed. "Head her for the bank, Mahomed."

But, already, it was too late. The words were hardly out of his mouth, when a very large dug-out, with a crew of some twenty men paddling and what appeared to be a European in the stern, came into view.

One glance was enough for Mahomed.

"The Yellow Dwarf!" he cried, then, without the slightest warning, he sprang overboard. Half a dozen bullets struck the water round his head as it reappeared. Instantly he sank again, and it flashed across Jack's mind that the troubles of one, at least, of them were over. He had seized his own rifle, but Ah Lung had gripped his wrist.

"No good. Too late," the Celestial muttered.

As the big canoe came alongside, the man in the stern—he was really a half-caste—swept off his huge helmet with a sarcastic politeness. "I must introduce myself. I am Piet Van der Humm, Prime Minister to Raja Seyed. And you are my prisoners."

CHAPTER IV

IN THE RAJA'S TOWN

“**Y**OU are my prisoners!” As Jack Wayne looked at the face of the speaker he realised that Ah Lung and himself were indeed in a bad case.

Probably, as his name indicated, Piet Van der Humm was half a Dutchman, the son of some planter in the neighbouring island of Java, where the Dutch have been for centuries; but it would have puzzled anyone to say what other blood he had in him. Javanese, Filipino, Dyak—it might have been any of these, or a combination of them all. It would have been difficult to imagine anyone more hideous. He was a dwarf in the sense that he was so short, but in other ways he was bigger than most men, enormously broad, with extremely long arms and a very thick neck.

Still, it was his face you noticed most—in fact, you could hardly notice anything else. There was a grim power in it which fascinated you. Ugly though it was, hideous at times, with a thin, straggling moustache, long narrow eyes, and set off by lank black hair, it was the face of a man used to command, of a man who had to be obeyed.

“Your savage seemed to know me. Perhaps he was wise.” Van der Humm pointed to the spot where Mahomed had disappeared. “Yes, perhaps he was wise;” he repeated the words slowly, emphatically; then “Get into this

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canoe," he said curtly, "you and the Chinaman. My men will look after your weapons for you."

Jack obeyed, because there was now no alternative; yet, as he did so, he was filled with a wild rage against himself. Why, oh why, had he not made an attempt to escape? To have gone through so much, and then to be captured so tamely! True, he would have had no chance. Every man on the canoe had a rifle, and, judging by the way the bullets had fallen round Mahomed, the Palapogs were good marksmen, for savages; but would it not have been better to have died fighting?

He recalled what he had heard of the Yellow Dwarf, and, as he looked at that face, he seemed to read no hint of mercy in it. Those queer, narrow eyes were fixed on him with a kind of callous mockery in them.

For a moment the boy went cold; then he threw back his head and met the other's look defiantly. Was he not the son of Wayne, V.C.?

A word from the Yellow Dwarf, and bark ropes were produced, with which the prisoners' hands were tied, tied with brutal tightness; then they were ordered to squat down in the bottom of the canoe. For a moment or two the half-caste seemed undecided as to his next move, but, after a glance at the sun, he made up his mind.

"I was going up the river to punish some disobedient subjects of His Highness, the Raja," he said to Jack. "But you seem to be more interesting, so I will take you back to Kaduk, the Raja's town. What were you doing here?" The question came suddenly, savagely.

Briefly Jack explained. He had not much hope of escaping death at the hands of his captors, but he was going to do everything possible to save his comrade and himself—everything that an English gentleman could do.

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The Yellow Dwarf listened in silence, his huge chin resting on his equally huge hand.

"Yes," he answered at last, "I quite believe you, though I hate all Englishmen"—his eyes flashed horribly—"hate them. Still, they don't lie, as a rule. But I'm not sure that the truth will save you. Anyway, you will never get back to your own people," and after that he relapsed into silence.

It was an hour later when they came in sight of Kaduk, the capital of Raja Seyed's territory. The river, which was now tidal, had grown rapidly wider, and was a full half-mile across. Two jetties, the first of timber, the second of rough stonework, ran out from the left bank, but at first sight there was no other sign of a town, beyond a few small native shacks dotted about amongst the palm trees.

The Yellow Dwarf, noticing the look of surprise in Jack's eyes, vouchsafed a few words of explanation.

"We are not quite so silly as to build where we can be shelled by one of your gunboats. The town is half a mile inland. There is a fort hidden amongst that bush, a fort with half a dozen seven-pounders. I don't mind telling you, because you will never have a chance of repeating it," he ended with a grim chuckle.

Jack did not answer. Whatever happened he was not going to let the half-caste think he was afraid.

On the bank were scores of dug-out canoes of various sizes, a regular fleet; a steam launch of rather antiquated pattern was lying alongside the stone jetty; whilst a little lower down the stream four large Chinese junks lay at anchor.

There were only a score or so of natives in sight when the canoe landed the prisoners; but before the latter were half-way through the palm grove, hundreds of the Raja's people came hurrying down, jabbering excitedly.

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A word from the Yellow Dwarf, however, sufficed to disperse them again, and they had to be content to follow at a distance.

The town itself was a surprise to Jack. Situated in the middle of a huge clearing, it consisted entirely of bamboo and palm-leaf shacks; there was not one single stone building in it; moreover, there was no defensive work of any kind, not even a palisade of stakes. Evidently the Raja felt secure and did not anticipate ever being attacked there.

Perhaps Van der Humm read the thought in his prisoner's mind. At any rate, he laughed.

"We've something a little stronger somewhere else," he remarked; "you may see it—or you may not. This is inhabited entirely by Palapogs, our fighting men." He nodded in the direction of the escort, who had already struck Jack as being savages of a peculiarly repulsive type. "The other people have their own villages. They are poor sort of creatures. Still, they can be made to work, as you yourself may learn."

Jack did not reply. Already he had gathered that he was probably going to be given a chance of life on certain terms, though something seemed to warn him that those terms would be such that he could not accept.

Five minutes later they had reached the Raja's house, which proved to be by far the largest native shack the boy had ever seen. Really it was a collection of large huts, joined together by covered ways, the whole capable of accommodating at least a hundred natives.

Scores of savages, all of them apparently Palapogs, were lounging in the courtyard; but they sprang to attention the moment they caught sight of the half-caste. Everywhere there seemed to be the same fear of him. He, on his part, took no notice at all of them, but after

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making a sign to the guards to keep the prisoners outside, went into the central hut.

So far Ah Lung had not spoken since their capture, but now he squatted down beside Jack.

"Plenty bad business," he remarked. "Him Yellow Dwarf very muchee bad. Still, no can tell. Not dead yet."

Jack nodded, but did not attempt to answer. There was little he could say. Already he was terribly thirsty, whilst the cord round his wrists seemed to be cutting into the very flesh. Never before had the sun seemed so pitiless, the heat and glare so appalling. . . . Half an hour went by, an hour, two hours. The sun was getting low now, but it was too late for the coolness of the air to give him any relief. His tongue appeared to have swelled until it filled the whole of his mouth. He could hardly have asked for water, even if there had been any good in doing so.

He knew there was no use in trying, for soon after their arrival the guards had helped themselves from a huge calabash, and had then derisively poured the remains of the liquid at the prisoners' feet, a very refinement of cruelty.

At last the Yellow Dwarf reappeared in the doorway, and gave a curt order. A couple of minutes later Jack and Ah Lung had been forced on to their knees in front of the Raja, an immensely fat, bleary-eyed old man, lying on a wickerwork couch.

Seyed stared at them foolishly—evidently he was under the influence of some drug—then muttered something to Piet Van der Humm, who was standing immediately behind him.

The half-caste gave them one of his bitter smiles.

"His Highness has considered your case," he said.

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"And he is inclined to be merciful, although you have forfeited your lives by coming into his country. Of course, he cannot let you go and carry information to his enemies; but he will grant you your lives, on condition that you become Mahomedans. Then you will be set to work with his other slaves."

Jack made an attempt to speak, but at first he could get out no articulate words; then he managed to mutter, "Tell him I'm a Christian, and will remain one whatever may happen."

Piet Van der Humm shrugged his shoulders. "You had better think it over to-night. The Palapogs have some painful ways of killing unbelievers. They are all good Mahomedans, just as I am." He gave another of his horrible grins. "Perhaps, to-morrow, when you see the way they kill men here, you will change your mind."

"Never!" Weak though he was, Jack flung the defiance at him. "I won't deny my religion."

Ah Lung nodded too.

"Chinese man's joss quite good joss. Never takee black savage's joss."

A scowl crossed the half-caste's face.

"You're fools," he growled. "I've given you a chance of life, because I want skilled men in my workshops. But if by noon to-morrow you haven't agreed to adopt the Raja's religion, I can't save you. I shan't try to, either, remember that. And don't think you will ever be allowed to escape from here and guide a British force down on us. I would kill you with my own hands first."

Then he made a sign for the guards to take them away.

Apparently there was no sort of prison attached to the Raja's house—probably prisoners were not usually kept long in suspense—and the place into which Jack and Ah Lung were thrust was really but a dilapidated

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hut at the back of the main building. The door was a crazy affair without even a latch, though, as their feet were now tied as securely as their wrists, both locks and guards seemed to be unnecessary.

For one thing they were grateful—before leaving finally, their guards gave them a drink of water. Never before had Jack enjoyed anything so much. For the moment, even their danger seemed to be of no account; then Ah Lung heaved a deep sigh.

“Plenty muchee bad. Nothing can do. Better go to sleep,” he murmured, and after that, to all appearance, he did actually doze off.

To Jack, however, sleep was an impossibility. In addition to the horror of their position, there was the aching pain of his bonds, in itself enough to have kept him awake.

Vaguely he heard what seemed to be some sort of a war dance in progress, and he found himself wondering whether they would beat drums and yell whilst he himself was being put to death on the morrow. Would he get a chance of a last handshake with Ah Lung? He would like to thank the Chinaman; he would—— Suddenly he was aware that Piet Van der Humm was standing over him. It was dark in the hut, of course, but still there was enough light by which to recognise the Yellow Dwarf's figure.

The half-caste puffed out a large cloud of cigar smoke, then—

“You had better be wise to-morrow,” he began. “I have got you the chance of life, not because I care a jot about your feelings, but because I want you and that pig of a Chinaman in my workshops, repairing guns. I'm boss here, up to a certain point; but just now old Seyed has a religious fit on him. You won't get back to your

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own people, anyway—I will see to that—but by becoming Mahomedans you will avoid an ugly death.”

Jack drew a deep breath. He knew the other was telling the truth, that the offer of life was a genuine one, and yet, and yet—

He remembered that he was an English gentleman, and had to stand by his Faith and his code of honour.

“ I shall die a Christian,” he answered quietly.

The half-caste gave a vicious snarl.

“ Die then, you young fool. I've finished with you. It won't be a quick or easy death,” and he turned on his heel and left the hut.

At last Jack dozed off, or, at any rate, became semi-conscious. How long he remained so he never knew; but it could not have been more than an hour before he was awakened by someone touching his face gently. He would have cried out, had not a hand been placed over his mouth.

“ Make no noise, sahib,” a well-known voice said, in a low tone. “ I will cut the cords.”

It was Mahomed.

CHAPTER V

THE KANDERONG CAVES

MAHOMED had a sharp knife, and it was only the work of a few seconds to free both Jack and Ah Lung ; but it was a full ten minutes before they could use their limbs at all, and even then their movements were unsteady.

Whilst they waited for the circulation to return, Mahomed whispered his story. Really, he had not been touched by any of the bullets fired at him, but had swum under water to the bank, and then had followed them up cautiously, hiding in the bush outside the village until nightfall. He had watched the dance in progress, had noted that the dancers were well supplied with native spirits, and, when the noise died down, had crept up, to find even the sentry at the entrance of the enclosure asleep.

He had run a terrible risk, of course, but luck had been on his side, for he had come almost straight to the hut in which the prisoners were confined.

Jack took a long drink from the calabash which had been left in the hut, and handed it to Ah Lung ; then, seeing the Chinaman was ready :

“ Lead the way, Mahomed,” he said.

Not a soul seemed to be stirring, not a light was showing anywhere. They crept round the big, straggling building, and were actually in the gateway before they saw anyone. Then the sentry came in view. He was asleep, with his back

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against the post, and both Jack and Mahomed passed him in safety; but he opened his eyes just in time to see Ah Lung.

And now he made a mistake. Had he shouted at once the fugitives would have bolted; but, instead, he stretched out his hand for his rifle, thinking the Chinaman had not noticed him.

A wild cat could not have sprung more swiftly and more silently than did Ah Lung. A kind of gurgle, which ended in a gasp, was all that sentry got out before those lean yellow hands throttled him.

"Plenty fine rifle and cartridge belt," the Celestial muttered as he hurried after the other two.

Dawn found them a good ten miles from Raja Seyed's capital. Fortune had certainly continued to favour them, for, an hour after their escape, a heavy rain had fallen, entirely washing away their spoor.

The British settlements lay to the east, and it was safe to assume that any pursuers would hunt for them in that direction; but, at Ah Lung's suggestion, they headed north towards the sea. As he pointed out, they could follow the coast line round with the certainty of finding what they sought, whereas, in the jungle, they might easily strike too far inland.

Hitherto, they had been forcing their way through jungle in the darkness; but, just as it became light enough to see, they found themselves on the crest of a small rise. Jack gave an exclamation of surprise. There, but a quarter of a mile away, was a high cliff, having in it what appeared to be the mouths of half a dozen caves. These entrances were of various sizes, and, at the side of the largest one, was a long, low shelter of palm leaves and bamboo. As he looked, Jack saw a bird something like a swallow come out of the big entrance. A few seconds later there were birds in scores, then in hundreds.

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Ah Lung nodded. "Kanderong Caves," he remarked. "Plenty birds' nest for soup there, plenty good chop."

But Jack was thinking of a very different aspect of the case. There would also be scores of the Yellow Dwarf's natives round the caves. They could hardly have blundered on to a worse place. Moreover, he could see now that there was only about a hundred yards of open land, old rice-fields, between the foot of the cliffs and the river. To attempt to cross that in daylight would be to ask for capture. The only thing to do seemed to be to turn back, and try to find some other way round the Kanderong Cliffs; yet, by doing so, they would very likely run right into one of Piet Van der Humm's search parties.

He was still trying to decide what to do, when a rifle cracked out some four or five hundred yards behind them. For an instant the three fugitives stared at one another in dismay. So their pursuers were on their track, after all!

Then Ah Lung gripped Jack's arm.

"Hide in cave there, little piece cave. No one come there."

Jack understood at once. The entrance to one of the smaller caves was partially hidden by bush; evidently it was not used at all by the nest-collectors; and, from where they were, they could easily reach it unobserved. The enemy would never dream of their taking refuge, so to speak, in the lion's mouth.

A quarter of an hour later saw them lying just inside the tunnel, watching for their foes through the screen of bush. They had only just been in time, for they had hardly sat down before a party of a dozen of the hideous little Palapogs swept past within a hundred yards, evidently on the look out for them. A small deer slung on the back of one of the savages explained the rifle-shot they had heard. Luckily, the ground was very stony at the

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foot of the cliffs, and it would have puzzled even an African bushman to detect their spoor.

Ah Lung gave a sigh of relief. "Now can rest," he said, and without more ado he stretched himself out and went to sleep.

Mahomed grunted, peered once more through the bush, then followed the Chinaman's example. For a few minutes Jack tried to remain on guard, gripping the rifle, which, with the exception of Mahomed's knife, was their only weapon; then his head, too, dropped and he fell fast asleep.

The sun was low in the west when Jack awoke. For a moment he could not recall where he was; then he remembered and looked around. To his dismay he found that he was alone; and, what was more, that the rifle and cartridge belt had gone. A horrible feeling of hopelessness swept over him. Naturally enough, he assumed that his companions had crept away, trying to save themselves by leaving him to his fate. In a way they were right, he told himself—they were stronger than he was, far more accustomed to the jungle, able to do with less food, and his presence could only be a drag on them.

For a full hour he sat there, staring at nothing, wondering vaguely in what form death would come to him. Then he jumped to his feet, looking round wildly for a weapon of some kind. Footsteps were approaching him from inside the cave. A short piece of dry wood lay a couple of yards away. He sprang forward and seized this; then almost unconsciously he shouted a challenge:

"Who's there? Come on, and finish it!"

There was a quiet laugh, and then Ah Lung's voice saying:

"No makee too much noise. Plenty Palapog outside, plenty slave-man in cave. Mahomed bring slave-man's chop."

A minute later Mahomed appeared, carrying some

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earthenware dishes of boiled rice and fish. Immediately Jack realised how hungry he really was, how many hours had gone by since he had tasted anything more substantial than fruit. Fortunately Mahomed had taken the precaution of bringing all he could find, and, even after the three of them had eaten their fill, there was still some left.

Ah Lung put his dish down with a sigh, rubbed his stomach contentedly, and then explained. They had gone down the cave more out of curiosity than anything else, and at first they had thought that it was quite a small one, especially as there were no nests in it, but a sudden turn had brought them to a tunnel, which led into the main cavern. Through this they had been able to steal down to the place where the nest-collectors had left their dishes of food, and appropriate some of the latter.

The Chinaman laughed softly at the recollection of their raid.

"Every slave-man say other slave-man plenty thief. We watch. By and by, Palapog came along and beat all very much hard."

Then he went on to explain how all the actual work of nest-collecting, work of the most dangerous nature, was done by ordinary natives, who were nothing more or less than slaves, the dreaded Palapogs acting as slave-drivers.

It was almost dark now, and the heavy meal they had had—heavy in comparison to what they had eaten lately—had made them all drowsy; consequently, they decided to remain where they were for the night. It was tolerably certain that no one would disturb them, and, by waiting, they would give the Yellow Dwarf's search parties time to return empty handed.

"Plenty nice soft place for sleep inside. No storm come there," Ah Lung said.

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Jack found that he was right. Once they were really inside the cave, the floor seemed to become almost spongy. They sank ankle deep in some soft matter, which felt like dry moss. It was far too dark then to see what it was, but at least it had no smell, and made a most comfortable mattress. Moreover, the cave was both dry and warm; consequently, the lack of blankets did not trouble them greatly.

The sun was streaming in through the mouth of the cave when Jack awoke. Apparently, Mahomed or the Chinaman had been out already, for, in addition to the remains of the rice and fish, there was a quantity of wild fruit. The boy felt thoroughly refreshed, ready to face anything, but the others were not so cheerful. Ah Lung, it seemed, had narrowly escaped being seen by a party of Palapogs outside. Mahomed, watching through the bushes, had seen another party, and it was evident that, for some reason or other, there were now a good many of the Raja's savage followers in the narrow strip of land between the caves and the river.

"Do you suppose they're looking for us?" Jack asked, naturally enough.

Mahomed shook his head.

"No, sahib, too many for that. I think Chinaman in junk, pirate-Chinaman, coming to try and steal birds' nests."

The boy glanced at Ah Lung, who nodded cheerfully. "Plenty fight by and by. Very bad Chinaman, very bad Yellow Dwarf. We stay here."

There was no questioning the wisdom of this advice; in fact, when Jack himself looked out, he could see at least a hundred Palapogs camped amongst the trees, not a stone's throw away. Evidently, as Mahomed said, they were expecting an attack of some sort.

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He went back to where they had slept, and sat down again. The only course was to wait. Apparently they had taken refuge in the most unfortunate place possible. More or less unconsciously—for his mind was full of the dangers outside—he began to examine that curious spongy carpet of the cave, and, to his astonishment, found that it really consisted of the dried remains of tens of millions of insects of the type of a huge grasshopper.¹

He picked up a handful of the stuff, and, as he did so, his fingers came in contact with something hard. A moment later he had unearthed a large curved sword with an ivory hilt.

Ah Lung, who had been watching, leaned forward, quivering with excitement. "Chinaman's sword," he exclaimed. "Plenty big Viceroy's sword. What him makee here?" Then he, too, began to scrape away the stuff on the cavern floor.

¹ This is actually the case in the caves.

CHAPTER VI

THE BLACK PEARL

AH LUNG'S first find was a kind of halberd. "Belong Viceroy's guard," he announced. "Plenty big mandarin die here. One Chinaman bury all his things." He glanced round, and his eye fell on what appeared to be several small heaps of the deposit, a few feet away.

It was only the work of a minute to uncover a skull, then an entire skeleton, with rags of clothing still round it. In all, they found the remains of four men, as well as a couple more swords of a plainer type, and an old pistol, bearing an English maker's mark, and having some Chinese carving on the stock.

That, however, seemed to be the limit of what they were going to discover, and Jack was just about to give up the search, when, once more, he felt something metallic. It proved to be a small bronze box, with Chinese designs embossed on it.

"What's this, Ah Lung?" he asked.

The Celestial, who was still examining the skeletons, looked up; then he almost snatched the box out of the boy's hands. It was the Viceroy's letter case, he exclaimed.

The task of opening the bronze box was no easy one; but at last the Chinaman touched some secret spring and the lid flew open, revealing a roll covered with Chinese characters.

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A minute later, "Canton Viceroy," he muttered. "Can read these writings."

Jack watched him in silence. He had always suspected that Ah Lung was greatly superior to the ordinary coolie, and was not surprised to find he could read the script of his own country; but he was surprised at the change which gradually came over that usually impassive face.

"Black Pearl of Peihoo!" Ah Lung looked up quickly. "Black Pearl, very great thing of Chinese Emperor. One Chinaman stealee long ago. All about him here." Then he went on with his reading.

At last he finished, replaced the roll with a decidedly unsteady hand, and turned to the boy.

"Black Pearl of Peihoo hide him near here, with plenty more pearl. We find him and get plenty dollar, so many dollar no know how to count." He drew his hand across his forehead, as though he was slightly dazed, then gave Jack the story, as he had read it on the roll.

The Black Pearl, he explained, had been one of the most famous, and most sacred, possessions of the Chinese Emperors. Its history went back to the very beginning of things: in fact, it was supposed once to have belonged to Confucius himself. For twenty-five centuries special sentries had guarded it day and night; consequently, when it became known that the jewel, as well as a large number of lesser pearls, had been stolen, there was the utmost consternation throughout the Flowery Land.

"Plenty chop off guards' heads," Ah Lung added. "Executioner-man very much tired."

"When was that? What year?" Jack asked.

Ah Lung counted back with the patient accuracy of his race, until he reached 1852. "That was the year," he said. Since then, nothing had been heard of the great pearl, though all Chinamen knew of the matter; hence

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his excitement over the discovery of the papers, for in these was the story of the Pearl's fate.

It was a tale sufficiently dramatic to stir anyone. The writer, Chang Ho, secretary to Wang Fu Sin, Viceroy of Canton, had set it all down carefully, in the form of a report to the Emperor. The Viceroy, it appeared, had seized a suspicious character, and, after torturing him sufficiently, had learnt that the Great Pearl was on its way, by sea, to Ceylon, where it was to be handed over to the agent of an enormously wealthy Indian prince, who had long coveted the jewel.

At once the Viceroy himself had set off in pursuit. True, the thieves had ten days' start, but they had only an ordinary junk, whilst he had a swift war-junk, and it was safe to assume that he would reach Ceylon ahead of the criminals.

However, he was destined never to complete his journey. One day a junk's boat was sighted and picked up. In it were two dead men and one who was nearly dead, the sole survivors of the crew of the vessel belonging to the robbers. The rescued man lived just long enough to tell his tale. Bad weather had driven the junk close to the shore of Borneo, where she had been attacked by pirates, the subjects of Raja Seyed's grandfather. During the fight the three men had managed to escape in the boat, the pirates being afterwards too busy looting their prize to worry about pursuing them.

Wang Fu Sin made up his mind instantly. He knew now where the Black Pearl was, in the possession of this foreign ruler, Raja Ismail, and his duty was to recover it. He had a large and well-armed crew, and, for centuries past, his nation had been accustomed to raiding all the ports of Borneo and the adjacent islands. Moreover, the captain of his junk knew the way up the river to Ismail's

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town, the place in which Jack had recently been a prisoner.

The attack, made at night, was successful. The Sacred Pearl was found, Ismail himself killed, and the junk started back down with the river, a distance of about fifteen miles. Then the luck changed. The vessel ran on a sandbank, and before she could be refloated, the Palapogs, who had now recovered from their defeat, swept down on her.

Time after time the Chinamen beat them off, but, in the end, the junk was set on fire. Five of his company escaped—the Viceroy, his secretary, and three sailors; and, with them, went the Great Pearl.

For days they hid in the jungle, then, seeing no hope of getting away, and knowing that his strength was going, the old Mandarin decided to put the Pearl where no savage could ever reach it. Into the "Hole where devils breathe out smoke" the treasure was lowered, carefully, solemnly, until the box rested on the first ledge. Then, like a great nobleman, the Viceroy went to the Kanderong Caves, to "pray to the spirits of his ancestors until death should release him."

Ah Lung told the story quietly, but none the less he was evidently moved by it, proud of it. Jack, too, was moved. He could picture the old man dying, picture the secretary, faithful to the last, writing up his report, even when it seemed impossible that anyone should ever read it, and then dying too, perhaps committing suicide because his chief was dead. Probably all but one of the party did the same. The last man must have covered the bodies with some of that strange deposit, and then have gone to seek death outside.

When Ah Lung had finished,

"What does that mean, 'The hole where devils breathe out smoke'?" Jack asked.

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The Chinaman, who was nursing the little bronze box on his knees, shook his head.

"No can tell yet. But find him by and by. Find Black Pearl, too. Then plenty dollar."

Jack could not help smiling, then, suddenly, he grew serious. After all, they themselves were in little better case than the Viceroy had been, except that they were not old and infirm. To speak of finding the Pearl seemed absurd. They would be lucky to escape with their lives.

The sound of a shot fired outside the cave brought him back to the immediate present. Apparently, however, it was merely a false alarm, for the party of Palapogs was still camped in the same place, and, judging by the fact that rough shelters of palm leaves were being put up, there seemed no chance of the savages shifting on that night.

Jack's heart fell. They had finished all their food now, and they had no water. At the end of another twenty-four hours they would indeed be in a bad way. Yet, to venture outside the cave was to ask for death. He shuddered at the very thought of falling again into the hands of the Yellow Dwarf and his gang of fiends.

The hours dragged by with deadly slowness. To kill time, they made a fresh search for further remains of the Viceroy and his followers, but found nothing more. Then they lay down, keeping as still as possible, in the hope of fighting off hunger and thirst.

It was just before sundown that Ah Lung rose.

"Go and get some more chop and some water," he said. "No make any good stay here." Then, taking the Viceroy's sword with him, he started to climb up to the hole through which the main cave was reached.

Jack watched him go with a curious mixture of hope

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and despair. Really, their plight seemed to grow steadily worse, and he felt that, if anything happened to Ah Lung, there would be no chance left for Mahomed and himself. At the same time, he longed desperately to see the Chinaman returning with some food and water, especially water.

The sun went down; the short twilight came to an end; through the mouth of the cave they could see the stars twinkling; and still there was no sign of Ah Lung. Mahomed, who had been on guard at the entrance, crawled back.

"Palapog going to have dance, sahib," he said hoarsely. "They light big fire. No chance we get out of here to-night."

The boy groaned. If, as now seemed likely, the Chinaman had come to grief, this meant that they would have once more to go through the awful agony of thirst. He lay down on his back, and tried to persuade himself that the darkness had brought relief, but the attempt was not a success; instead, he began to recall the tortures he had suffered when a prisoner at Raja Seyed's town.

Suddenly he was aware of a tiny light shining in the cave itself. He sat up quickly, gripping the rifle, then made out the figure of the Celestial emerging from the connecting passage, a tiny torch in one hand, whilst with the other hand he was gripping the waistcloth of a native youngster.

"All right. Prisoner he carry chop and water," Ah Lung announced, and Jack could see that the captive had a large calabash and a basket. The boy gave a sigh of relief. It was as though they had been granted a new lease of life.

The Chinaman stuck his torch in a crevice in the wall, where the light could not be seen from outside, then, as soon as Jack and Mahomed had had some water, told of

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his adventures. This time he had found no supplies close to the other end of the tunnel, so had crept along in the darkness, right into that part of the main cavern where the nest-gatherers were at work.

At first he had met no one. All the Palapogs were outside, taking part in the war dance, whilst those of the slaves who were not at work were sleeping. Finally, however, he had lighted on the food and water, and was just returning with his loot, when he stumbled across his prisoner.

"Me thinkee, ' Kill him or take him ? ' " he explained. " Then thinkee ' Take him.' Always can kill by and by ; but if kill first no can take."

The native squatted on the floor of the cave, staring at nothing, evidently expecting to be put to death ; then, finding that his captors were not worrying about him, he looked round, as though meditating a dash for liberty. As he did so, his eyes met those of Mahomed, who gave a cry of surprise.

" Abdulla, sahib ! " said the latter, turning to Jack. " It is indeed Abdulla from my own village. Long ago he was stolen by evil men, and made a slave."

It was some time before the two compatriots were calm enough to answer Jack's questions ; but, when they did so, Abdulla explained that Ah Lung's theory was right, that certain junks full of Chinese pirates were on their way up the river to attempt to loot the stores of birds' nests, and that the Palapogs were waiting for them. Several days might elapse before the battle, and during that time there was no chance of escape from the entrances to the caves facing the river.

Jack caught at the phrase, " the entrances facing the river."

" Are there other entrances ? " he demanded.

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Very reluctantly Abdulla answered :

" Yes, there is one, leading out at the back. You could reach it easily, without being seen by anyone."

Danger had made Jack sharp-witted, alert. At once he saw what seemed to be the weak spot in the story. Why, if there was this entrance, did not the slaves in the cavern try to escape ?

Abdulla's answer brought Ah Lung to his feet with a cry of mingled surprise and delight.

" You cannot get out there, because you have to pass the ' Hole where devils breathe out smoke,' and the devils would pull you down," the prisoner answered.

Ah Lung turned quickly to Jack.

" We go there, out from cave, and findee him Black Pearl of Peihoo."

In his excitement he reached out for the tiny torch ; but, as he gripped it, the flame flickered out. He began to mutter angrily—for a Celestial he was unusually moved—but Jack seized his arm, and pointed towards the mouth of the cave. There, silhouetted against the sky, easily recognisable by the big sun helmet, was the sinister figure of the Yellow Dwarf.

CHAPTER VII

THE SMOKE HOLE

YES, there was no question about it. The man in the entrance of the cave was undoubtedly Piet Van der Humm.

A minute after he appeared another figure climbed up beside him, evidently one of the Palapogs.

Jack's blood ran cold. Had they been traced after all? He forgot, of course, that though they could see the Yellow Dwarf clearly, he most certainly could not see them in the blackness of the cave.

Ah Lung himself was the first to recover from the shock. "Only watch Palapog-men dance," he whispered, and in the end he proved to be right, though, afterwards, that wait in the cave had an immense influence on the fortunes of all, for Mahomed spent the time in talking to Abdulla.

At last the shouts of the dancers died down; after a few final bursts of noise, the drummers seemed to have retired for the night; then the Yellow Dwarf rose, stretched himself, and disappeared as suddenly as he had come.

The moment the way was clear, Ah Lung produced a box of matches from some secret hiding-place on his person, relighted the torch, then led the way through the small tunnel into the main cavern.

At first Jack stared round in amazement. The place was huge, fully a hundred and fifty feet in height, with a vast floor area. Even in daytime, with the sunlight

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coming in through the entrance, it would have seemed strange; but at night it was absolutely uncanny.

Down below there was no lighting of any sort, not even a fire; but just beneath the roof, apparently swinging from it, were scores and scores of little torches, similar to the one which Ah Lung had captured. For a moment Jack saw only these specks of light, then he made out numbers of ropes hanging from the roof, and he understood. Each of those torches represented a nest-gatherer at the top of a rope-ladder.

"Plenty bad work that," Ah Lung whispered; "slave-man no likee. Ladder break and him fall very hard."

The cave was so large that their guide had no difficulty in taking them round a way in which there was little chance of their encountering anyone. Finally, after turning sharply to the left and climbing a short rise, they caught sight of the sky through a small opening only some twenty yards ahead.

The guide stopped dead, and began to speak rapidly to Mahomed, who, in turn, interpreted to Jack.

"He says he has done his work now, sahib, and he wants to go back. He sooner be slave than be caught by devils out there."

Jack had been expecting this and had already made up his mind. There could be no question of allowing Abdulla to return. He would be certain to tell some of his fellow slaves of what he had seen that night; they would discuss it amongst themselves; the Palapogs would overhear; and in a very few hours Piet Van der Humm would once more be on the right scent.

"He's got to come too, Mahomed," the boy said sternly. "Tell him so. I'll guard him from any evil spirits."

It was evident that Mahomed himself was afraid, but in his case there was no choice. He had to go on, or fall

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into the hands of the Palapogs; but he put in another plea for Abdulla, declaring that the latter could be trusted not to talk. Jack frowned. It was not the time for discussions of this kind.

"Bring him along, Ah Lung," he said sternly, "this is all rubbish about the devils outside. He'll be glad enough later to find himself a free man."

The Chinaman stretched out his hand, intending to seize the native by the waistcloth, but he was a little too late. With a sudden twist of his body, Abdulla eluded him and dashed back into the darkness of the cavern.

For a moment the others stared at one another in dismay—probably they had now turned the guide into an enemy; then Jack shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"We must hurry on, that's all. He may not betray us;" but he did not believe his own words.

A few minutes later they had scrambled across a stretch of broken rock, and were once more in the open. A single glance showed them that they had now got into a type of country very different from that on the other side of the caves. It was just as though some immense volcano had been blown to pieces by an internal explosion. Huge masses of jagged rock were bedded in what had been streams of molten lava. There were no trees, no grass, only an all-pervading smell of sulphur; whilst the air was full of what seemed like the sound of the boiling of a vast kettle of water.

Although it still needed some hours to dawn, after the darkness of the cavern they were able to see things outside with comparative ease.

"I don't wonder the natives avoid this place," Jack muttered. "It is about the limit for desolation, and the sulphur is nearly enough to kill you." Then he gripped Ah Lung's arm and pointed to a place on the left, whence

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a puff of smoke had suddenly issued. "Is that the devils' breathing hole?" he asked.

The Chinaman had noticed it too.

"Thinkee so. Wait and see him by and by, when sunlight come."

"No, no," Jack protested. "We must get on, Ah Lung. Never mind about that. Daylight or not, we haven't got a minute to lose."

But, for once, the Chinaman mutinied. To him the Black Pearl was something infinitely more important than even his own life, and he was not going on until he had ascertained if the place whence the smoke was issuing was really where Wang Fu Sin had hidden it. In despair, Jack glanced at Mahomed, but saw at once that there was no help to be obtained in that quarter. It was only too plain that the latter was scared out of his wits. So he had to give in, and, as it appeared, to agree to waste several precious hours in that vile atmosphere, merely to gratify the Chinaman's curiosity.

He was furious about it, so furious that had it been possible he would have pushed on alone; but such a thing was out of the question; consequently, he squatted down with his two companions behind a huge boulder, to wait for the dawn.

There must have been something in the atmosphere which made them drowsy, something which, from the very moment when they emerged from the cave, made them take strange views of everything. At any rate, the sun was high when Jack awoke, heavy-eyed, with a curious taste in his mouth, and even then he had no easy task in awakening Ah Lung and Mahomed.

However, once the Chinaman was on his feet, he remembered.

A huge puff of white smoke came out of the ground a

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hundred yards away, hung motionless in the air for a few seconds, then spread out and descended on them.

Ah Lung rubbed his eyes—they were bleared and blood-shot.

“ We lookee now,” he said. “ Plenty smoke come, then no smoke. Plenty bad place this.”

All three of them staggered as they started towards the smoke hole. It seemed to Jack as though the ground itself was rising in billows in front of him to meet his feet as he put them down. And then, after what seemed an amazingly long interval, he was standing on the edge of a huge pit, a pit without a bottom, gripping Ah Lung's arm.

A moment later he was vaguely aware that the Chinaman was speaking, that he was pointing down the pit, trying to make him see something.

Then he saw it clearly. Yes, it was there, resting on a ledge some forty feet down, a thing that looked like a box.

Another puff of smoke came up suddenly, like the smoke from a gun, and after that Jack remembered nothing until he was awakened by Mahomed pouring water over his head. His mouth was very bad, horrible, and his head was aching as though it would burst ; but he understood clearly enough when Ah Lung explained.

The Chinaman and Mahomed had carried him some distance away. Fortunately they had not been affected so much by the foul gases as he had been, otherwise all of them would probably have perished. Now they were in a comparatively safe place, hidden amongst some jungle on the other side of the volcanic ridge.

Jack drew his hand across his forehead.

“ I seem to remember seeing something on a ledge,” he muttered.

The Chinaman's eyes gleamed.

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" Box there, yes," he answered. " Plenty big Chinese box, Viceroy's box. Black Pearl of Peihoo in box. But no can get because of smoke."

The boy was terribly drowsy still. He felt that, at all costs, he must sleep—sleep for hours; yet there was something he wanted to say first.

" If you had smoke-helmets, the things they use in mine disasters, you would get down there easily enough, Ah Lung," he murmured; then his eyes closed again, and he forgot everything.

CHAPTER VIII

MAHOMED'S INDISCRETION

DAWN was just breaking when Jack awoke again. He was cold and stiff, but his brain was now perfectly clear and that horrible taste had gone out of his mouth.

"Twenty-four hours since we left the cave," he muttered as he got up and stretched himself, "and, during that time, we've only gone about a mile! We shall have to get a move on to-day." Then he roused his two companions, who were asleep a few yards away.

A couple of hours later they had crossed a small ridge and found themselves actually in sight of the sea. Jack heaved a big sigh of relief. It seemed like meeting an old friend after a long separation.

A bare mile away they could see the mouth of the river, and, as they watched, the sails of a large Chinese junk appeared behind the trees on the bank. Evidently she was drifting slowly down stream. A few minutes later she seemed to catch a slight breeze, and it was not long before the vessel was in mid-river, where they could see her clearly.

Ah Lung nodded wisely.

"Cantonese pirate-man. Very bad man indeed. But too many Palapog men belong Yellow Dwarf. Drive him pirate away."

Certainly it looked as if he were right, for there were

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unmistakable signs of the vessel having suffered badly in a fight, whilst the second junk, of which Abdulla had told them, was nowhere to be seen. It was quite possible for there to have been heavy firing on the bank without Jack and his companions hearing anything of it at the other side of the Kanderong Range.

"Well, I suppose we ought to be grateful to those pirates," Jack told himself. "If it had not been for them, Piet Van der Humm would probably have found us. They kept him busy."

That night found them a full twenty miles nearer civilisation. They had passed several villages, but had been careful to keep out of sight of the natives, as, in all probability, they were still in Raja Seyed's territory. On the other hand, Mahomed had succeeded in creeping up to an isolated hut, which proved to be empty at the moment, and securing a cooking pot and a basket of rice, whilst, just before sundown, Jack had shot a small wild pig. Consequently, they had the first really satisfying meal for many days.

Afterwards, as they sat beside the fire, Ah Lung began once more to talk of the Black Pearl. He had, of course, brought the old Viceroy's papers with him, and, as he read them through again by the flickering light of the flames, the description fitted exactly.

The box they had seen on the ledge was of hammered bronze, he declared, and though the foul gases must have affected the outside, they would not have got to the contents. The precious gem, the Pearl of all pearls, was still there, only some forty feet down the pit.

As he spoke of it, the Chinaman's voice shook with excitement. All his oriental calm seemed to leave him. Not only was there a fortune to be made by recovering the box—it appeared that the other gems were worth

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an immense sum in themselves—but there was also the glory of restoring the Black Pearl to China. Their names, and the names of their ancestors, would be glorious for ever, he declared.

Jack nodded. All day long his mind had been full of the question. He, too, had no doubt as to what was in that box, and he knew that, with a smoke helmet and a rope ladder, it would be a simple matter to bring the box to the surface. On the other hand, there was the risk of the natives. He went cold at the very idea of falling once more into the hands of the Yellow Dwarf, though, of course, it was quite possible that before many months were past some civilised nation would have wiped out the abominations of Raja Seyed's rule.

The idea of the adventure fired him, especially now that the food had given him new strength. Yes, it would be a great thing to do, and, if ever the opportunity occurred, he would do it. Still, he did not forget the claims of his companions. They must, of course, share in the adventure too, and he determined that, as soon as they reached civilisation again, he would get an agreement properly drawn up and signed.

He had no misgivings regarding Ah Lung. When a Chinaman makes a bargain, either verbally or in writing, he stands by it, absolutely, being the most honest business man in the world ; but Mahomed was different. He would probably hasten back to his village, and, as soon as he had filled himself up with native spirits, the whole story would become public property.

Jack glanced at the native. Yes, he had proved himself brave and faithful ; they owed their very lives to him ; but could he be trusted to keep a secret ?

A moment later that question was answered by Mahomed himself.

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"Yellow Dwarf know about Black Pearl hidden somewhere, sahib," he announced. "They much want to find him."

Both Jack and Ah Lung turned on him quickly.

"How do you know?" the boy demanded.

And then it came out. Whilst they were waiting in the cave, Mahomed had told Abdulla of the finding of the Viceroys papers! True, Mahomed knew no details, and Abdulla had fled before they discovered the box lying on the ledge, but a great deal of mischief had been done. Abdulla knew that Jack and Ah Lung held the secret, and it was more than likely that he would try to curry favour with Piet Van der Humm by telling him of the fact.

"Malay man plenty big fool," Ah Lung growled wrathfully. "Cannot trust one little piecee," and he went on, grumbling to himself in his own tongue.

Jack, on the other hand, shrugged his shoulders. The harm was done, and there was no use in complaining about it. After all, the Yellow Dwarf could only learn that they knew. Abdulla could not furnish him with a single detail, and the chances of anyone going into that deadly piece of country at the back of the caves were very small; smaller still was the chance of anyone peering down the "Smoke Hole" and noticing the box as it lay on the ledge.

Still, it did prove that Mahomed's discretion was not to be trusted, and now, of course, Mahomed knew as well as they did where the Black Pearl was.

CHAPTER IX

BY THE SKIN OF THEIR TEETH

AT noon the following day Jack called a halt at the foot of a small hill. They had made an excellent trek, and once more Mahomed had succeeded in obtaining some rice, so that they were all right as regarded food.

Whilst the pot was cooking, Mahomed strolled away up the hill-side, whence he would be able to get some idea of the country ahead of them. Five minutes later they heard him shouting excitedly :

“Come here, sahib, and look. There is a steamer, a steamer of the English, in the little bay.”

Jack needed no second bidding. One glance confirmed the native's report. Yes, there she was, a coaster of some five or six hundred tons, anchored not a mile away from them, apparently taking in cargo from a little fleet of dug-out canoes.

The boy heaved a big sigh of relief, and a real heartfelt prayer of gratitude went up from him. He had been protected in a marvellous manner throughout that long and perilous journey, and he was not ashamed to acknowledge the fact. In his direct, honest nature there was no room for any of that cowardly shyness of admitting his faith, which makes so many youngsters give up prayer at the very time when they need its support the most. Mahomed prayed openly at the times laid down by his

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creed ; probably Ah Lung did the same in his way ; and, if only because he was their leader and a white man, Jack's very pride would have made him keep up the outward forms of his belief. The voice of Mahomed, who had climbed a tree in order to get a better view, broke in on his thoughts.

" I can see the village now, sahib. It is amongst the palms on the beach. There are—Oh ! The snake ! " he ended in a terrible cry of horror.

Jack swung round instantly, to see him fling from him a thick greenish snake, some two feet in length..

" Has it bitten you ? " the boy gasped.

For answer, Mahomed slid to the ground, and drawing his knife began frenziedly to slash the flesh of his thigh across and across, groaning the while.

Ah Lung, who had raced up at the first alarm, shook his head sadly.

" No can do anything," he said. " No medicine."

The memory of what followed seemed to burn itself into Jack's brain. Fortunately, it lasted but a quarter of an hour ; then the rigid limbs suddenly relaxed, the foam ceased to bubble from those livid lips, and it was all over.

As they covered the body with palm leaves, the only form of burial they could give it there, the boy remembered with a sob his thoughts of the night before, his irritation with Mahomed for having gossiped to Abdulla, the uneasiness he had felt regarding the future. Now that question was settled for ever ; though he told himself with perfect sincerity, that he would have given all his chances of recovering the Black Pearl, if by so doing Mahomed might have been saved.

A cry of astonishment from the natives greeted Jack and Ah Lung as they entered the village discovered by



“HAS IT BITTEN YOU?” THE BOY GASPED.

BY THE SKIN OF THEIR TEETH

Mahomed, for not only did they seem to have sprung from nowhere, but it would also have been difficult to imagine two more ragged and unkempt-looking figures. By the time they reached the landing-place, almost the whole of the women and children appeared to be at their heels.

"Hullo! Who on earth are you?" A big burly Englishman, who had just emerged from a hut, halted and stared at them in amazement.

Jack's heart seemed to leap within him at the sound of a white man's voice, and the grip of a white man's hand. Briefly he explained what had happened during the last few weeks.

The other tilted back his big helmet, and gave vent to a long, low whistle.

"You must have had a time! And you managed to get right through that old villain, Seyed's, territory! You're the first strangers who ever did. Well, you're only just in time. I'm master of the ss. 'Zimba,' and I'm sailing right away. I was just settling up the last of my trade accounts. Harman my name is, Joseph Harman."

An hour later, Jack, who was in the spare cabin, enjoying the luxury of getting into some clean and untorn clothes, heard the engine-room telegraph clang out, then a throb ran through the little vessel as the engines began to revolve slowly. A thrill ran through him, too. He was actually in safety, leaving the shores of Borneo, bound for Singapore.

"Plenty trouble on shore. You come and see." Ah Lung put his head in the cabin door, then hurried off again.

Jack ran out on deck, barefooted, in his shirt. The Chinaman was right. Apparently there was very big trouble, women and children rushing through the palm grove to the shelter of the jungle; whilst, on the landing-

BY THE SKIN OF THEIR TEETH

place, a fierce dispute was in progress between the men of the place and a party of strangers.

Ah Lung gripped Jack's arm. "You know him? They come catchee us because of Black Pearl and Cantonese papers. Him Yellow Dwarf and plenty Palapog."

The boy nodded. Already he had made out the figure of Piet Van der Humm. There was no mistaking the hideous little half-breed.

So he had followed them, after all! He had even invaded the British territory, in the hope of recapturing them and wresting from them the secret of the Pearl of Peihoo! For a moment the boy shivered at the thought of how narrowly they had escaped.

"By the skin of our teeth," he murmured. "An hour later on our part, and he would have had us." Then his eyes flashed. "We've beaten him so far, and we'll beat him again. We'll come back to find the Pearl, and then we'll get Mr. Van der Humm hanged!"

CHAPTER X

IN PORTHKELLO

VERY few strangers ever go to Porthkello. To begin with, it is one of the least accessible villages in Cornwall; then it has no bathing beach, no accommodation for visitors, whilst its inhabitants have a well-deserved name for surliness towards new-comers.

In the old days Porthkello was one of the centres of the wrecking industry. Vessel after vessel has been lured ashore there by means of false lights, the cargo being looted as it was washed on to the beach, and not a hand being extended to save the drowning crew.

A huge cleft in the rocks, one street with little stone houses on either side, and a tiny harbour, formed by a big stone breakwater at the foot of it—that is Porthkello.

The "Logan Arms," which stands almost on the quay itself, is the principal building; and, at the period of this story, John Trevenna, the landlord of the "Logan," considered himself the biggest man in the place. Almost everyone was in his debt. He it was who bought the tobacco and rum which you got off the French fishermen in the Channel, and it was he who denounced you to the coastguard as a smuggler if you dared to object to the low prices he paid. It was no use trying to escape from his clutches. His nephew, Ralph Williams, managed, somehow, to find out if you were dealing with anyone else.

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There had been great heartburnings in Porthkello when it became known that Captain O'Brien, late R.N., had taken the cottage halfway up the gully. Not only did he belong to the Service which had done so much towards putting down wrecking, not only was he a "foreigner," in the Cornish sense of the word, but he was also bringing with him another foreigner in the form of Joseph Richardson, V.C., late gunner in His Majesty's Navy, as well as his only son, Barney O'Brien.

"Why do they come here, them foreigners?" the men of Porthkello had asked, and had received no answer.

When Sir Walter Trefusis, the local squire, had asked the same question, courteously, at dinner, Captain O'Brien had answered it:

"Because there's an excellent harbour where I can keep my yacht; because living is cheap; and because there's the finest sea-fishing on the English coast."

Sir Walter had shrugged his shoulders.

"You're down amongst a tough crowd, O'Brien. Look out for yourself, and for your boat. They stick at nothing, those fellows."

Captain O'Brien had just begun to realise the truth of the squire's words, when an old wound, gained with the Naval Brigade in Egypt—he and Gunner Richardson had held a corner of a broken square against the Dervishes—broke out afresh, and he had died, leaving Barney alone in the world, heir to the motor-yacht "Molly Hawk," the cottage, and some ten thousand pounds, the whole being at the boy's absolute disposal.

One thing also Barney inherited, though it was not mentioned in the will, and that was the devotion of Joseph Richardson.

A real south-westerly gale was booming up the Channel,

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making every one who was at sea wish he were ashore, and making many on shore murmur prayers for their loved ones at sea ; but in Porthkello all the local craft were known to be in ; and at the " Logan Arms " a dozen Porthkello men were congratulating themselves on being dry and warm, whilst so many others were in danger of their lives.

" Us could do with a good wreck to-night." It was old James Charles, a toothless rogue of ninety, who growled out the words.

Several members of the company wagged their grey heads. " Aye, aye, James Charles, that we could. If our young men were like us used to be, there'd be a lantern a wagging on the East Head to-night, bringing vessels in."

John Trevenna, the landlord, frowned, and glanced towards a figure in the corner, a short, enormously broad man with a huge black beard and a wooden leg, who was smoking quietly in the corner. Across the breast of his uniform-like jacket was a line of medal ribbons, beginning with that of the Victoria Cross.

" You may well wag your head, Trevenna." It was the wooden-legged man who spoke. " I heard 'em, and I know their ways. You ought to be ashamed of your customers, landlord. A night like this they ought to be praying for those at sea, instead of hoping they'd be wrecked. Heathen savages couldn't do worse."

A murmur of disapproval ran through the smoke-laden atmosphere of the room.

" Aye, but, Mr. Richardson," some one ventured to begin. " You don't know we Porthkello folk."

" I do know you," the gunner turned on him fiercely. " I wish I had had you all under me in the Service, that's the place to make men of the like of you. Discipline you want, discipline and hard work."

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"That's all very well, Gunner; but you work now for young Mr. Barney O'Brien, and he isn't in the navy. He's like me; he's too wise." The speaker, a weedy youth, with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, gave a fatuous laugh.

Like a flash, the one-legged man swung round in his chair.

"Say that again, Ralph Williams!" he roared. "Say that again, you useless swab! You dare mention yourself in the same breath as Master Barney, my old skipper's only son! They wouldn't have had you in His Majesty's Navy, because you had been birched for stealing an old woman's fowls; but Master Barney isn't a midshipman to-day, only because a land-lubber of a doctor spotted some scars on his neck, and wouldn't pass him through his medical examination. Those are not like the scars on your record, Williams."

"That's not fair, Gunner. You're too hard on the lad. We isn't Navy men here," a growl came from the corner of the room, in broad Cornish accents. "What do you and Master Barney want in Porthkello anyway? You're foreigners. Cornishmen for Cornwall, I says."

There was no doubt that the speaker voiced the opinions of the company.

"Aye, Cornishmen for Cornwall," the others echoed the words.

"No foreigners needed, neither Englishmen nor Irishmen."

"You're only spies, maybe, looking out to see that poor folk don't get anything out of wrecks, or through running in some tobacco or brandy. Spies—that's what you are. . . . Who put the coastguard on to John Charles last month?"

From being entirely peaceful, the atmosphere had

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suddenly become electric. It was the old quarrel of the Cornish wrecker against the Service which had put down wrecking, a quarrel as bitter as it is foolish.

Gunner Joseph Richardson, V.C., got up abruptly. He was not a very patient man, and he had always regretted that the youth of Porthkello, especially Ralph Williams, had not been under his care during his Service days. Now, he banged a fist the size of a leg of mutton on the table, until the glasses jumped and jumped again, and told the company exactly what he thought of wreckers, smugglers, and other 'longshoremen, his voice seeming to drown the howling of the gale outside.

But he was one against a dozen—Cornishmen always hold together, right or wrong—and, moreover, in spite of his enormous strength, he had only one leg.

"Put him out! Why does he come and interfere with we?" It was young Williams who spoke.

Half the men present rose at the words, and, a moment later, the ex-gunner would have been the centre of an ugly, and hopeless, fight; but, before another move could be made, the door behind him opened, and a tall, lean, yellow-faced figure appeared, its face glistening from the rain, water dripping from its pigtail.

"Plenty muchee noise." Ah Lung grinned at the company, as he took his place beside Joseph Richardson. "Too muchee noise for Chinese man." Then, with seeming unconcern, he produced a long knife from his sleeve, and began to strop it on his arm.

The hint was quite sufficient for the company. The landlord gave an uneasy laugh.

"It's only a joke. We're all friends here, Ching," he said. "That's so, isn't it, Gunner?"

The sailor squared his shoulders.

"So you say, Mr. Trevenna," he answered sternly, then

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he turned sharply on his heel and left the room, followed by Ah Lung.

As the door closed behind them, Ralph Williams seemed to find his courage again.

"Who's he to come here a-bullying honest folk?" he demanded. "It was bad enough before, that gunner and young Mr. Barney O'Brien, but now they've got that heathen Chinee and that Mr. Jack Wayne, there's no holding them. They want to rule the village, they do. But if folk only knew what I know——" and he broke off with a great air of mystery.

"What do you know, Ralph Williams?" several voices demanded.

The youth shook his head.

"That'd be talking. I've got a friend what knows all about them, and he says——"

A vice-like hand gripped his arm, the hand of a man who had just slipped in from an inner room, unobserved by the rest of the company.

"He says you're to hold your tongue," the new-comer hissed in his ear. "I want you inside."

When the door had closed behind the pair, the other men exchanged glances.

"Who was that, landlord?" James Charles quavered. "He was ugly enough to have been old Davy Jones himself."

CHAPTER XI

DURING THE STORM

IT was now a fortnight since Jack Wayne and Ah Lung had landed in England.

In Singapore Jack had told the story of George North's death, and the agents had furnished him with a passage home, besides paying both him and the Chinaman the money due to them for salary. But the boy had been careful not to attract attention by posing as a hero.

As soon as they left Borneo, on board the ss. "Zimba," he and the Chinaman had decided on their course of action. They would tell no one yet about the secret of the Black Pearl of Peihoo. As Ah Lung pointed out, in his weird English, they had nearly lost their lives over it already, and the reward ought to be theirs; consequently, nothing was said concerning their adventures after their escape from the head-hunters, and no one had really troubled to ask them any questions. Captain Harman had been able to testify as to where he had picked them up, and what their plight had been then, and with that the authorities had been satisfied.

"When we get home it will be different," Jack had said to the Celestial. "There we shall have to take someone into our confidence, because of getting money for our expedition; but we'll be very careful before we speak about the Pearl."

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In London, old Jonas Wayne, Jack's uncle and only relative, had greeted the boy sourly.

"Turned up, like a bad penny," he had growled. "I thought you were fixed for a few years. What d'you want of me now? I've no money to lend."

Jack had flushed.

"I want nothing," he had retorted. "Good-bye."

As he went downstairs—Jonas Wayne's office was in the heart of the City—he had run right into his former schoolfellow, Sebag Tolhurst. The latter had shown no surprise at the meeting.

"I heard you were back, Wayne," he had said. "I'm in my father's office now, and we're agents for a lot of Far Eastern companies. You're looking pretty fit. Come along and have some lunch with me, and tell me all about it."

Jack had declined. The oily youth with the warm, damp hands had never been a friend of his, rather the reverse, and he was now the last person to whom he would confide his story. He had made an excuse and had left, yet, greatly to his surprise, the following morning had found young Tolhurst at his lodgings.

"Got the address from your uncle," Sebag had explained. "The governor wants to see you, to ask you about Borneo. Come along. It may be a good thing for you."

This time it would have been almost impossible to refuse, but Jack had been on his guard, and old Alderman Tolhurst had learnt little from him, so little that after the visitor had left the office, the merchant had turned angrily to his son.

"He's not the fool you said he was, Sebag," he had grunted; "if he knows what our friends want to find out, he's not going to give it away."

Young Sebag had shrugged his shoulders.

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"He's only got a very little money. When that's finished, he will tell us all. I will keep in touch with him."

He had been as good as his word, greatly to Jack's annoyance. Not a day passed without Sebag putting in an appearance. He seemed utterly unable to take a snub. Meanwhile, Jack had had other worries. He knew no one to whom he could go for the capital he required for an expedition in quest of the Black Pearl, and all the time, of course, the expense of keeping himself and Ah Lung had been eating into his little stock of money.

Yet, curiously enough, in the end it had been the detested Sebag who had helped him, helped him quite unconsciously.

Talking over old schooldays, Tolhurst had said :

"You remember O'Brien, Barney O'Brien? Well, a month or two ago, when I was motoring with the governor, I came across him. He's got a cottage in Cornwall, at Porthkello; lives there with an old sailor who served under his father. Just fancy burying yourself like that! He says he's making experiments with motor-boats. His father left him a few thousand pounds. I told him if he'd let me have it to invest——" and he had grinned expressively.

That very night Jack had posted a letter to Cornwall, with the result that now he was seated in a big arm-chair beside a big fire, with Barney, small, eager, excitable, yet wonderfully wiry and tough, curled up in a similar chair opposite him.

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"Of course, I'll go into partnership with you, and help you get the Pearl," Barney declared for the twentieth time. "I've got all the money we should need—my father left it under my own control—and this'll be a fine investment."

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Jack, who had kept no single detail back, seemed to have become very cautious now that the scheme was a possibility.

"It's an extremely risky investment," he said slowly. "Remember, besides the risk of getting the Pearl out of the hole and the risk of finding it spoilt, there's the danger from the Yellow Dwarf and the Palapogs. They will see us land—at any rate, they will see our steamer waiting off the coast; and the cost of that steamer alone will be tremendous."

The other boy laughed, quietly, musically.

"But we shan't have a steamer, old man. We shall go out in the 'Molly Hawk,' my big motor-boat, go out all the way in her. Of course we must fit her with masts and sails as well."

Jack sat up suddenly.

"I hadn't thought of that. Yes, we could hide her in one of those little creeks amongst the mangroves. But how about a crew?"

Barney answered promptly.

"The gunner understands navigation, so do I—at least, I know enough for our purpose. With Ah Lung that would make four, plenty for all we need.—Oh, here are the gunner and the Chinaman."

"Bad night, sir," Joseph Richardson said, as he entered the room, "very bad night, and I've been in bad company down there at the 'Logan Arms.' I've got to thank Pigtail here for getting away with a whole skin."

His young employer looked round quickly.

"The 'Logan Arms'! I thought you never went there."

"Neither I do, sir, ordinarily," the old sailor answered.

"But I wanted to see who was in there to-night, because I heard of a hard-looking stranger being in the village, and this is a proper 'Wrecker's wind.' If they put a

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light on the East Head, as they used to do, it might bring a craft ashore, easy as anything."

Jack stared at him in amazement, but Barney, who knew Porthkello well, nodded. He had grown very grave now "Yes, you're right, Gunner. They could do it, and some of them would, if they dared. But did you see the stranger? Who is he?"

The sailor shook his head, "No, sir. But he's there, I know. He came down last night in a motor-car with that young Mr. Sebag Tolhurst. I didn't hear of him till this evening."

"What! Sebag Tolhurst!"

Both the boys started up in astonishment, whilst Barney went on:

"Why didn't he come on and see us? Where's he gone to?"

Richardson nodded. "Aye, aye, sir. I asked myself those questions. He and his motor are at St. Chads, three miles away, waiting, but his friend—an ugly foreigner, a kind of Dago, I hear—is at the 'Logan Arms' still."

Barney turned to Jack.

"There may be nothing in it, but it looks queer. I never trusted Master Sebag, any more than you did; yet wrecking seems hardly in his line. Still, it may be his friend's line. I vote we go up on the East Head, and see if there are any lights there. They used to arrange them so that they could only be seen from the sea. It's a rotten night, I know——"

"That's nothing," Jack cut him short. "I'm with you."

Five minutes later, the cottage had been locked up and the little party of four were breasting the steep rise, fighting their way against the wind up to the East Head. The gunner had strapped an old Navy cutlass on to his

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side, whilst Barney had produced a couple of revolvers from a desk, one of which he had handed to his chum.

"You never know," he remarked simply.

The climb was by no means an easy one under the conditions. A full half-hour had elapsed before they found themselves on the summit, and, even then, they had to crawl cautiously to the edge, to make sure if there were lights or no.

"There's a kind of little natural gallery, where they used to swing a lantern, making it look like a ship's riding light," Barney explained, "then other craft would come in, thinking it was safe. No, there's nothing there to-night, so we may as well get back. We might have saved ourselves a wetting and a hard tramp, after all."

The old sailor grunted.

"Duty, sir," he answered. "'Always do your duty to your God and your king,' your father used to say. It won't be forgotten in your log-book up above that you came out to-night. It'll go down. The Great Skipper, as I call Him, remembers all these things."

Neither of the boys made any reply. Barney, of course, knew his henchman of old, whilst already Jack had learnt to understand, and to respect, the veteran's simple though often strangely expressed piety.

It was a much easier job returning with the wind at their backs and they were soon within sight of the cottage again. Then, suddenly, Barney gave vent to an exclamation of surprise.

"We left no lights! But look there, someone's broken in!"

It seemed as if he were right. In the two back rooms lights were certainly showing, though a moment later these disappeared, and a beam shone through the passage window. The intruders were moving about.

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"Quick!" Barney cried, breaking into a run. Ah Lung and Jack followed him closely, though the gunner's wooden leg caused him soon to drop behind.

They had a couple of hundred yards to go, rough, broken ground, and had covered more than half of it when the lights suddenly disappeared; then Jack cried:

"Look at that red light! There's a motor-car outside the door!"

Fifty yards, forty yards, twenty-five yards—it seemed as if they were going to catch the thieves red-handed—twenty yards, fifteen—then the door banged, the engine of the car began to whirl furiously, the clutch was thrown in violently, and with a jar and a jerk the vehicle started off.

"The tyres, Barney! Fire at the back tyres!" It was Jack who shouted, as he pulled out his revolver.

It was a very dark night, and the red tail-light was a poor guide, yet, by a marvellous piece of luck, the fifth bullet went home. There was a loud report as the rubber blew to pieces; the red light seemed to swerve suddenly, as though the car were going over, then the driver regained control, and a moment later the car was round the curve of the road.

"They've got clean away," Barney exclaimed disgustedly.

Jack laughed. "Still, they've got to drive on a rim, so the police may catch them if we give notice at once."

"The police will be asleep, and there's no telephone," Barney retorted. "Did you make out the number? It began with an M, and so does Sebag Tolhurst's."

The other boy gave a whistle.

"That's exciting! Let's see what they've done inside the cottage."

Hitherto Ah Lung had said nothing, but now he took Jack by the sleeve.

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" You see him come out, see two foreign devil come out ? No ? Chinaman plenty see, no makee mistake. One foreign devil did not see well, other one him Yellow Dwarf."

Jack swung round quickly.

" What ! Piet Van der Humm ! Are you sure ? "

The Celestial nodded.

" No makee mistake," he repeated. " Know him plenty too well."

CHAPTER XII

A SUDDEN RESOLUTION

AT first the boys found the idea too amazing to be taken seriously. Jack had seen the Yellow Dwarf last on the beach in Borneo, an invader of British territory; and now—Piet Van der Humm in Porthkello! Piet Van der Humm acting as burglar of Barney O'Brien's cottage—the very suggestion seemed absurd!

Yet there was Ah Lung, cool, sane, practical as ever, the very last man to invent difficulties or dangers, and Ah Lung was quite certain on this point.

"They wouldn't be ordinary burglars, because there is so little to steal," Barney muttered, as he unlocked the front door. A few seconds later they saw that he was right. Nothing had, apparently, been stolen. Captain O'Brien's silver was still there, untouched, on the sideboard; Barney's one or two "pots" had not even been moved; but every drawer in the desk had been turned out, everything which was likely to contain papers had been ransacked. Letters, accounts, plans lay strewed over the floor. Jack's own luggage had suffered too. A leather trunk, which was locked, had been ripped open, apparently with a heavy knife, and every article in it had been turned out.

Jack went down on his hands and knees, and searched amongst the scattered garments. When he got up again,

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"I thought so," he muttered, "they've taken every single paper of mine."

His chum, who had not yet recovered from his surprise, ran his fingers through his curly hair.

"But what does it all mean?" he asked. "What were they after?"

The other boy laughed a little nervously.

"It means, old fellow, that the quest of the Black Pearl of Peihoo is not going to be a particularly safe and healthy occupation. The Yellow Dwarf is very much in earnest. He came down here to try and steal the Viceroy's letter-case, or rather to steal the document out of it, the Chinese papers containing the secret."

Barney's eyes opened very wide, and he gave vent to a long whistle. "Thunder! And has he got it? I don't see it anywhere."

"He's got the case," Jack answered, "but that's all, eh, Ah Lung?"

The Chinaman grinned, opened his shirt, and showed a little waterproof package hanging from his neck. "Plenty safe there. Can't catchee paper, unless catchee Chinese man first—savee?"

Barney gave a sigh of relief. "For a moment I thought it was all up," he said, "but what a cheek they've got!"

"A bit more than a cheek, sir;" it was the gunner who spoke; "dangerous lot of criminals they are. Look here! I picked it up in the doorway," and he handed the boy an ugly-looking Malay kris; "they were quite ready to do murder, if we had interrupted them." Then, calmly, he began to gather up the scattered papers.

A moment later he landed on another discovery, as a quick exclamation showed.

"Master Barney," he cried, "look at this cap one of them dropped. I've seen that before, many a time, seen

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it on the head of Ralph Williams. He was the other one who ran out."

The boys sat up till well after midnight discussing the affair. To Barney it seemed wholly mysterious, but Jack had had some experience of the ways of Piet Van der Humm, and knew that he was daring enough to risk anything, and as full of resource as of courage.

"But where could young Sebag come in?" Barney objected.

Jack smiled.

"That's quite simple; in fact, I can see now why he made such a fuss of me in town. Alderman Tolhurst is agent for a number of Far Eastern companies, and, probably, he's agent for the Raja as well. The Yellow Dwarf must have got a Dutch steamer, and as we were detained a fortnight in Singapore, he could easily have been in London first. He would go to old Tolhurst and would find, of course, that Sebag knew me. It's quite simple, really."

Barney nodded.

"I suppose it is, when you put it that way. I remember, too, that when Sebag was down here last year, young Williams, who's an utter waster, cleaned his car for him, and they got very chummy. But what's our next move? Tell the police?"

The other shook his head.

"No, no. That would mean making the whole story of the Pearl public. The yarn would be cabled out to China, and when we reached Borneo there would be half-a-dozen junks full of pirates waiting to steal the Pearl from us. We've got enough dangers already. Don't you agree with me, Gunner?"

The old sailor stroked his grey beard.

"I do, sir. We're going to take our lives in our hands

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as it is; but it isn't as if we were going to rob anyone, so the Great Skipper will look after us, as He looked after you up in that jungle. Depend upon it, He's going to be on our side. Well, good-night, Master Barney: good-night, sir," and he stumped off to his own room.

"That's all right," Barney laughed, as soon as the door had closed, "the gunner will help us now, through thick and thin. Once he's decided that a thing is right, he's so certain of Divine protection that he goes straight ahead, without a thought of fear. It's awfully amusing at times."

Jack looked up quickly.

"I shouldn't put it that way, old man," he answered. "I've—well, I've felt I wanted protection sometimes, and have asked for it, and got it. I daresay you'll feel much the same, before we're through with this trip. And now, I think I'll turn in too."

The following morning, whilst Ah Lung was preparing breakfast—the Celestial had constituted himself cook and general servant the moment he arrived—Joseph Richardson took a stroll through the village. He reported to Barney as soon as he returned.

"Ralph Williams has gone, Master Barney. They try and bluff it out, but I can see they're more than uneasy about him. And I learn too, from Bill Morcom, that there was an ugly-looking little half-breed at the 'Logan Arms' last night. That'll be the Yellow Dwarf, of whom you were talking. . . . They all know down in the village about the robbery here; they knew it was coming off; and now they're wondering what we're going to do. It'll be as well to keep a guard over the 'Molly Hawk,' as well as over this cottage. They'll try and get one in on us, so that we don't get that Williams caught. A bad lot, Master Barney, with their jaw about 'Cornwall for the Cornishmen.'"

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Barney's face was very grave as he made his report to Jack.

"The gunner's right," he said, "we must keep a sharp look-out now. They're the most clannish lot in the world, these Cornish fishermen."

"Why not take the 'Molly Hawk' away?" Jack suggested; "it's only thirty or forty miles to Plymouth Sound. She would be safe there; and we could fit her out far more easily."

The other boy sprang out of his chair.

"A fine idea!" he exclaimed; "we'll do it to-day. I'll wire to the house-agents at St. Chads to come and clear out my furniture and warehouse it; then we can be off to-morrow. There's nothing like doing things promptly."

Jack helped himself to some fish.

"One has to be prompt sometimes," he answered, a little grimly. "If we're going to get hold of the Black Pearl of Peihoo, we shall have to be ready to move quickly. Things may happen far more rapidly than we want them to do."

CHAPTER XIII

THE "MOLLY HAWK"

IF Captain O'Brien, Barney's father, had not been a distinguished naval officer he would probably have made his mark either as an engineer or as a naval architect. He was a splendid all-round man, and the "Molly Hawk," which was completed just before his death, was a craft which did the utmost credit to his genius. He had set out to design a motor-boat which could venture on to any seas, and could yet be handled by a very small crew, and he had certainly succeeded.

There were points about the "Molly Hawk" which no other similar craft possessed. Very strongly built, with ample freeboard and plenty of beam, she had, none the less, fine lines; and, in anything like good weather, could easily do twelve knots an hour. Her engines—twin-screw, each engine six-cylinder, with duplicate magneto ignition all through—were in the stern; amidships was a large cabin with four berths, leading into a small saloon; forward of that again was a storeroom; and, in the bow, quarters for a couple of hands. There were no deckhouses of any kind. Ordinarily, cooking would be done forward; but there was also a stove, and a duplicate set of utensils, in the saloon.

Moreover, it was possible to navigate the vessel without anyone being on deck. In addition to the ordinary steering gear, there was another wheel in the saloon, with a periscope

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arrangement similar to that on a submarine. Consequently, in heavy weather all hatches could be closed. A tiny, direct-coupled oil-engine and dynamo supplied electric light.

Every detail had been thought out most carefully. With regard to both oil- and water-tanks, the craft was unusually well provided, whilst the storeroom was a model of its kind. Moreover, she had a feature seldom possessed by a boat of her class—a Maxim gun, arranged so that, with a very little trouble, it could be mounted either in the bow or stern, though, ordinarily, it was kept out of sight altogether, in a box abaft the main skylight.

"There's no telling where we may want to go," Captain O'Brien had explained, and though he himself had not lived to use the weapon, the boys were now very grateful for his forethought.

So far, the only mast on the "Molly Hawk" was a short one for signalling purposes, though her designer had always intended to have her rigged as a fore-and-aft schooner, in the event of his undertaking a long cruise, and arrangements had been made so that the masts could easily be stepped.

Jack heaved a sigh of relief when he found himself on board the boat. The house-agents from St. Chads had sent down promptly and taken away Barney's furniture for storage, a proceeding which had been watched with surly disfavour by the village loafers, who now complained that Barney was "too mean to spend his money on the poor fisher-folk." Possibly, several of them would have done more than growl, had it not been for Ah Lung, who superintended everything with the Yellow Dwarf's kris stuck in his belt, and a grim smile on his face. The gunner had gone down early to the "Molly Hawk" to get her ready for sea, and also to keep guard over her.

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At last the vans were full, the luggage had been taken aboard the yacht, and the cottage door locked.

"Well, it's 'good-bye to Porthkello,'" Jack said, as, with the gunner at the wheel, they headed out of the little harbour.

Barney nodded.

"Yes, I'm not altogether sorry." Then he happened to look back, and gave a start of surprise. "Well, I'm jiggered! There, on the quay! That beggar Ralph Williams has come back. I suppose your friend Piet has sent him to find out where we're going to."

Joseph Richardson glanced over his shoulder.

"Aye, aye, that's him. We told them Plymouth, Master Barney. Now, if I were you, I would go on to Portsmouth instead. You'll get your masts and gear and stores cheaper and quicker there. I know a first-rate little yard, up the Worple river. We may be off before that there yellow chap can find us and try any more of his monkey tricks."

The young owner agreed readily.

"I was going to ask you anyway, Gunner," he said. "It'll give us a few days' breathing space, whilst Piet, Sebag and Co. are searching for us round Plymouth."

Jack, who was sitting on the skylight, nodded.

"Yes, but, Barney, we must never take chances with the Yellow Dwarf. Don't forget that he's much older than we are, and utterly unscrupulous. And he's got any amount of money behind him, too. . . . I vote that the first thing we do in Portsmouth is to get automatic pistols for all hands."

"Not for me, sir!"—the gunner shifted his plug of tobacco round in his mouth. "Give me the good old Navy revolver, or a cutlass. I don't know these new-fangled toys. . . . What do you say, Pigtail?"

Ah Lung, who had just thrust his head out of the

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companion way, having been busy making up the bunks, grinned expressively.

"Pistol plenty good sometimes. Likee have one, yes. But Chinaman use this when, by and by, catchee him Yellow Dwarf," and he drew his long, villainous-looking knife out of his sleeve.

Barney laughed, and turned to Jack.

"How on earth does he keep it there?"

The other boy shrugged his shoulders.

"How does a Chinaman do half the things he does? Wait till you know them better. Still, I pity Piet Van der Humm if he ever becomes Ah Lung's prisoner. He wouldn't die a merciful death."

"Yet he looks kind enough." Barney glanced at the bland, yellow face of the Celestial, who had now gone forward. "And you say he's been jolly good to you."

The gunner answered.

"That's it, Master Barney. You be good to a pigtail, and he'll die for you, and never turn a hair. Keep your word to him, and he'll keep his to you. But make an enemy of him, and then"—he shrugged his shoulders expressively—"look out! It's my belief that that there Yellow Dwarf is doomed as surely as if one of our judges had put on the black cap for him."

Jack gave a little shiver. He had not forgotten that day when he was Piet Van der Humm's prisoner.

"Unless he kills Ah Lung first," he muttered.

Joseph Richardson caught the words.

"That won't be so, sir," he retorted sturdily. "Right is on our side. We've got to wipe out those murdering Palapogs, and set free them poor slaves in the bird's nest caves."

This time Jack laughed.

"Our commission is growing, it seems, Barney," he said.

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"I think we'll find the Black Pearl almost as much as we can manage."

But the old sailor was in earnest.

"We shall manage it all, sir. Don't you make any mistake about that. I can see it coming out right in the end."

The Worples river is really nothing more than a deep muddy creek, running some miles inland, a quarter of an hour's railway journey from Portsmouth town. On one side the banks are steep and wooded, but on the opposite shore, mud flats, exposed at low tide, form splendid berths for laying up vessels, a fact of which the yacht-builders have taken full advantage.

Half a dozen fair-sized yards are kept busy all the year round, either building new yachts, or preparing old ones for the coming season. You can always see a score or more of fine craft drawn up on those mud-berths, and a number more anchored out in the stream itself.

The village of Worples straggles upwards from the shore for a mile or so to the crest of the rise, where, for all practical purposes, it ends in the two rival hotels—the "Blue Ensign" and the "Nelson's Head"—which face each other from opposite sides of the road.

Everybody in Worples talks about yachts, everybody lives, directly or indirectly, on yachts, with the result that the individual yachtsman, either owner or hand, excites far less attention than a landsman would do.

By a stroke of luck, the builder to whom the boys went was not very busy. He was able to give the "Molly Hawk" a berth at once, and to put a full gang to work on her.

"She'll sail well, Mr. O'Brien," he said, after he had examined her with keen professional eyes. "I remember your father well. He knew what he was about, did Captain

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O'Brien. . . . I suppose you're going to make a deep-sea trip this time ? "

For a moment Barney hesitated. Why tell anyone what their plans were ?

" Yes," he answered at last, with seeming carelessness. " I shouldn't be surprised if we were away some months. They say it's a good season for the West Indies."

The builder nodded.

" You ought to manage that all right, if you have good hands, and sail whenever you've a fair wind, so as to save oil. We fit out a lot of craft for long voyages here in Worple. My neighbour in the next yard has just sold that vessel"—he pointed to a large, white-painted yacht, lying out in the stream. " She's going out to the Far East, I understand. . . . Ah, there goes the new owner, that queer little man in the pinnace."

Jack, who had just strolled up, turned round to look at the motor-boat, which had just shot out from the next wharf. Then, quite involuntarily, he gripped Barney's arm.

The new owner, the " queer little man," was none other than Piet Van der Humm.

CHAPTER XIV

A CHANGE OF PLANS

THAT afternoon a council of war was held in the sitting-room of the "Blue Ensign" hotel, where the boys had taken up their quarters, the gunner and Ah Lung having found lodgings lower down the village.

"It's sheer chance, of course," Jack said. "The Raja wanted a steamer—I suppose he's going to arm her, to drive off pirate junks—and this is the most natural place for Piet Van der Humm to find one, just as it's the most natural place for us to bring the 'Molly Hawk' to refit. It's jolly unfortunate, but there's nothing mysterious about it," and he gave a quick glance at Barney, who, like so many Irishmen, was apt to be superstitious.

Perhaps Barney understood his idea; at any rate, he laughed lightly.

"That's all right, Jack. The question is not how it came about, but how it's going to affect us. Isn't that so, Gunner?" and he proceeded to get into his favourite position, coiled up in a big arm-chair, looking for all the world like a mischievous, curly-haired imp.

The old sailor was cutting a new plug of tobacco, and he waited to thrust that into his mouth before answering.

"Aye, aye, Master Barney, it does affect us, a big lot. She's a fast craft, that steamboat, and, of course, she could keep the sea when we should have to run into shelter. Then, if she ships some guns, as she's sure to do, a seven-

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pounder even, she'd make short work of us. They may not know yet that we're here, but they're bound to discover it, and I expect they'll wait for us somewhere, and try and sink us—that is, unless they try to hold us up, and have another search for that Chinese paper. Even then, they'd sink us in the end."

Jack's face had grown very gloomy. He could not disguise from himself the fact that the gunner was perfectly right; moreover, he was keenly alive to the responsibility of his own position. He himself had suggested the expedition; if anything happened to any of them, he would be, in a sense, to blame. It seemed frightfully hard to be checkmated at the very outset, when everything had appeared to be promising well; yet, at the same time, he did not attempt to shirk the issue.

He got up from his chair, crossed to the window, and for a full minute stared out over the water. He could see the Raja's vessel plainly, lying almost like a guardship in the river, and he could also see the new foremast of the "Molly Hawk" being raised with the sheer-legs.

At last he turned round. His voice was not very steady and there was something strangely like tears in his eyes; yet it was obvious that he meant what he said.

"Yes, the gunner is right," he spoke slowly. "The risks have become too great. We must throw up the whole scheme. I see no chance of success now."

"Nonsense, old man." Barney O'Brien was on his feet in an instant. "Your heart's in the thing, we know; but you've made us just as keen, and we're not going to draw back just because a half-caste rogue has bought a steam-yacht. It'll make the thing all the greater adventure—won't it, Gunner?"

Joseph Richardson nodded solemnly.

"In His Majesty's Service we never turn back, and this

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is really Service work ; because, when we've got the Black Pearl, and wiped out all the Palapogs, and set the slaves free, we'll be able to turn the country over to the British Government."

With one of his sudden changes of mood, Jack burst out laughing.

"Oh, I say, Gunner! The commission is growing too fast! In the beginning we were only going for the Pearl of Peihoo; now we're to collar the whole territory."

"Bigger things have been done with less means, sir," the old sailor retorted. "I'm old enough to remember what Raja Brooke did in that same island. Just you ship two more guns, Master Barney, two long one-pounders—she won't stand a seven-pounder—and we'll be fit to tackle everything we meet on that coast. I don't talk about it often, but I don't forget that I used to be champion gunner of the British Navy. Twelve-inch in the bar-bette, or one-pounder on a launch—it's all the same to me."

So far Ah Lung had only listened, and an onlooker might have doubted whether he understood the conversation; but now he chimed in.

"Get him Black Pearl," he remarked cheerfully. "Then go and fetch plenty Cantonese pirate men in junks, kill all Palapog . . . *Can do.*"

Really, it was that "can do" which decided Jack. There was such a calm assumption of certainty about it, that, knowing Ah Lung so well of old, he seemed to feel success must be assured. Jack wanted to go; he was desperately anxious to go; but he had felt he could not hold his comrades to their promises, unless they realised the new dangers which had arisen.

Now, everything appeared once more to be straightforward. There was no longer any question of giving up

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the venture: it was only a matter of taking the wisest possible precautions.

"She'll need a crew of twenty-five, at the very least, all told," Richardson declared, referring to the Raja's steamer. "Now, what does that mean? It means that he'll have to wait to attack us until he's out on the coast of Borneo. You may pick up a crew of twenty-five pirates here; but you can't be sure of them. He'll just ship an ordinary crew, and change it when he gets to his port."

Jack rubbed his chin a little doubtfully. This seemed to be going to the other extreme, so far as over-confidence was concerned.

"I vote we don't risk it, all the same," he said. "What I'm going to propose is a big thing. It'll make a lot of difference so far as time is concerned, but I'm sure we shall be safer—the Raja's steamer will go out through the Suez Canal, of course, and will be on the look-out for us all the way. I suggest we go out round the Cape, and so dodge her altogether."

For a moment the others seemed too greatly surprised to speak. The change in their plans would be enormous, and the difficulties of navigation would probably be largely increased. On the other hand, as Jack said, it was safe to assume that they would shake off any pursuit, and they would be able to choose their own moment for a sudden swoop down in quest of the Black Pearl. As far as the extra time they would take was concerned, that did not seem to matter; in fact, it might almost be an advantage, as their enemies would begin to assume they were not coming, after all. It was not as if the Yellow Dwarf had the least idea where the Black Pearl was hidden, and would find it for himself meanwhile.

"It seems a good idea, Master Barney." The old sailor was the first to speak.

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"I'm sure it is," Barney answered. "Wait a bit," and he dived into his bedroom, returning with a large map of the world. "Look here," he went on eagerly, "we make Madeira first, and fill up with oil there. Then down the west coast of Africa to Capetown, fill up again. At Delagoa Bay we can get more oil, and after that——?" He glanced questioningly at the others, who were bending over the map beside him.

"Through the Mozambique Channel to Mombasa, and thence to Colombo," Jack suggested.

The gunner frowned.

"Perhaps," he answered slowly. "Or else across to Mauritius, and from there to Ceylon. That's a point to settle later. Anyway, from Colombo it'll be simple enough. If we can avoid going to Singapore, and get oil and stores at some smaller port, so much the better. They'll be watching for us at Singapore, very likely."

Barney rolled up the map with a quick, decisive action.

"Then it's settled. We go round the Cape of Good Hope. That's one beauty about this job—we're our own masters. . . . Yes! Who's that? Come in," as there was a knock at the door, which opened to admit the fat figure of Sebag Tolhurst.

CHAPTER XV

SEBAG IS FRIGHTENED

IT would be difficult to exaggerate the consternation on Sebag's face when he saw who were the occupants of the sitting-room. It was evident he had expected to find some one totally different.

He was too greatly surprised to turn and flee at once, and, just as he made up his mind to do so, he found it was too late. A lean yellow hand, a hand with very long, scratching nails, was inserted in the front of his collar, half choking him; then he was sitting in the corner of a sofa, trying to recover his breath, with Ah Lung grinning at him amiably.

"Catchee this time. No can run away in noise-carriage," the Celestial grunted.

Sebag Tolhurst was anything but brave, and he had had a very bad shock; still, he tried to carry off a bluff.

"I say, you fellows, O'Brien, Wayne! This is a fine way to treat a visitor. What does that yellow heathen mean by it? He's torn my collar, and the shirt as well. He'll have to pay for new ones. It doesn't say much for you that you hob-nob with a savage like that," he panted.

Ah Lung took up a position with his back to the door, and taking his long knife out of his sleeve, began to strop it on his hand. The gunner put on his most severe expression, and tapped on the floor with his wooden leg. Barney

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curled himself up once more in his chair, and began to laugh quietly; whilst Jack leaned his elbows on the table, and answered the unwilling guest.

"So you came to see us, Tolhurst? That's kind of you. Did you have to get a new rim, as well as a new tyre, before you motored down?"

The other went deadly white. It was plain that he had not believed that they knew of his share in the robbery at Porthkello.

"I haven't the least idea what you mean," he blustered. "Have you all gone mad? If so, the sooner I leave here the better. Tell that Chinaman to stand away from the door. I've got friends waiting for me outside."

"Are they policemen?" Barney inquired innocently. "If so, I suppose we must let them have you. What d'you think, Jack?"

The latter nodded.

"They must have him some time, of course. The 'Boy Burglar' the papers will call him. But it'll be rotten for the reputation of the old School."

"I can't think why they ever had him there," Barney answered gravely. "Perhaps the warrant is out under another name, eh, Tolhurst?" and he turned to the unfortunate prisoner.

Their sarcasms seemed to have given Sebag fresh heart. He was shrewd enough to see that they did not intend to have him arrested.

"It's you who'll be prosecuted for detaining me," he retorted. "Whatever you insinuate about burglary, you've got no proof. Once more, I order you to tell that yellow brute to open the door. It's just what I should expect of you, to employ a savage like that."

For a moment there was an ugly gleam in Ah Lung's eyes. He understood English far better than he spoke it,

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and there is no greater insult, and no more foolish action, than to treat a Chinaman, with his five thousand years of civilisation behind him, as a barbarian. Then he smiled dangerously, and proceeded to pull a driving glove out of his pocket.

"Pick him up outside cottage, the night thief-men came," he said, as he handed the thing to Jack. "Plenty name written inside him."

One look sufficed for Jack. "Sebag Tolhurst" he read out. "It's your handwriting, too, Tolhurst. I remember it well at school, when you used to give us receipts for the money we paid you for stamps off approval sheets—a rotten lot they were, too. You were always keen on business, but you make a poor burglar, leaving clues like this, and keeping your tail lamp alight!"

Suddenly the prisoner covered his face with his hands. His nerve had deserted him at the sight of that proof of his guilt.

Barney glanced towards Jack. Really, he was rather sorry they had ever captured the wretched youth.

"What shall we do with him?" he asked.

The gunner answered:

"Leave him to me, sir, to me and the Pigtail. He wouldn't be the first whom I'd seen have 'twenty-five,' as we say in the Navy. It would be a week or two before he wanted to sit down and drive a motor-car."

Ah Lung grinned.

"Chinaman plenty savage sometimes," he remarked; but the miserable Sebag turned deathly white, and began to grovel.

"Oh, I say, O'Brien, Wayne, don't leave me to these fellows! I'm not like one of the boys in the Navy, or a Chinese boy. I'm—I'm awfully sensitive. I never could stand being hurt. I'll promise anything, tell you anything,

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if you'll let me go. They don't understand, these fellows don't, how sensitive chaps like myself are."

The gunner laughed, whilst Jack and Barney exchanged looks of disgust.

"Shall the Pigtail go out and get an—an implement, sir?" the old sailor asked solemnly. "One suitable for a sensitive skin?"

Barney turned sharply to the culprit.

"What have you got to tell us?" he demanded:

A crafty look flashed into Tolhurst's eyes. So he was going to escape, after all! Then he pretended to wipe away some tears.

"I came down to tell you I was sorry for the rotten part I had played," he said. "Mr. Van der Humm is an important client of ours, and we didn't realise what he wanted us to do. Now we've finished with him, though we've made him promise not to interfere with you again. My father was awfully angry about the business."

The gunner snorted. "If that's the best he can say, Master Barney, better let the Pigtail go for that——"

Barney cut him short. He was sick of the sight of Sebag's white face, with the great beads of perspiration standing on it.

"All right. Clear out," he said. "Ah Lung, open the door. But if we catch you at these games again, it'll be more than 'twenty-five' you'll get."

Sebag Tolhurst needed no second bidding. Like a flash he was gone, greatly to the disgust of the gunner, who remarked severely:

"At least, he ought to have been searched, Master Barney."

Five minutes later, in the rival hotel, Sebag himself was saying much the same thing to the Yellow Dwarf.

"I went to the wrong place," he admitted. "That was

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stupid of me ; but they were more stupid in not seeing what papers I had on me. Here are all the agreements and plans."

Piet Van der Humm took them with an ugly snarl: " It doesn't do to make mistakes, my young friend. You will find that out on this trip," he growled. " Now we'll see what your father has arranged about those guns and ammunition. Your English people won't deal with me, because they say I'm not white. But I'll teach them, I'll teach them."

Despite himself, Sebag Tolhurst shivered a little. Somehow it seemed rather like being in a cage with a hyena.

CHAPTER XVI

BARNEY MAKES A MISTAKE

“**N**OW they know we're here, we can't be too careful.” It was Jack who spoke. “There's only a sleepy old watchman down at the yard, kept there in case of fire, and they could make short work of the 'Molly Hawk.' I vote we take up our quarters aboard.”

Barney shrugged his shoulders.

“As you like. But I don't see why they should want to touch the boat now. It would be too risky, and they would gain nothing. They must know we have the important papers hidden.”

“I'm going to send them to the bank to-day,” Jack answered. “We don't want them now, except for curiosities. Ah Lung and I both know the place exactly. We've actually seen the box containing the Black Pearl; but, none the less, Piet Van der Humm is quite vicious enough to burn the 'Molly Hawk' out of sheer spite.”

The ship-builder was a little surprised when he heard of his clients' decision to live aboard. As a rule, people who could afford to own a beautiful craft like the “Molly Hawk” did not like the smell of the mud round the yards. Still, he was being paid well for his work, and it was not his concern. Had they hinted at the true reason, that they were afraid for the motor-yacht's safety, he would, in all probability, have been more surprised still, and would

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have told them that piracy and kindred crimes do not happen to-day under the eyes of the county police and the coastguard service.

They agreed to take two-hour watches, from dusk till dawn. The first three nights passed uneventfully, as did also the days. Though they kept their eyes constantly on the Sultan's steamer—they had learnt that her name was now the "Pang Yeen"—they saw no one, save the builders' men, go aboard her, and the most careful inquiries on the part of the gunner, who seemed able to make friends at once with everyone along the water-side, left them no wiser. She had been sold to foreigners, and she was being thoroughly overhauled, without any fancy decoration—that was all the old sailor managed to learn. That she was some five hundred tons register, and could do fifteen knots, they learnt from books of reference.

"I think we're giving ourselves a lot of unnecessary trouble," Barney remarked, as they sat down to supper on the fourth evening. "None of those 'Pang Yeen' people are about the village, and there's no sign of them aboard. Besides, they wouldn't risk doing anything to us here. They'd remember that Parkhurst Prison is only a few miles away. I vote we drop this sentry-go."

Jack flushed quickly. It was the first hint of a real disagreement between them, and he felt, rightly, that it was a challenge to himself. Evidently, Barney had not yet realised the character of their opponent, he did not understand that, in the case of the Yellow Dwarf, some one had always to be on the alert, that Piet Van der Humm feared nothing, and would stick at nothing.

"Very well," he answered rather stiffly. "If you don't think it worth while, Barney, I will take your watch as well as my own. For my part, I could not sleep unless I knew there was some one on the look-out."

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Now it was Barney's turn to flush. For a moment he was furious at the implied rebuke, then he held out his hand.

"Don't be cross, old man," he said. "Of course I'll do my turn. But I've never seen anything so far, during my watch, except the searchlights flashing from the Spithead Forts, and it's often a job to keep awake."

Jack laughed, and with that the matter seemed to have dropped altogether, though Ah Lung, who had just brought in some coffee, and had overheard it all, thought he detected an anxious look still lurking in his beloved master's eyes.

That night, the first two hours' watch fell to Joseph Richardson. At ten o'clock Ah Lung relieved the gunner. Then came Barney's turn.

The others had reported "All well" as they went off duty. The yard watchman could be seen from the bow, sleeping peacefully in his little box, his lantern beside him. All the lights in the village were out, and the waning moon had already set. Really, beyond the watchman's lantern, all that Barney could see were the lights of two or three craft out in the river.

He was very sleepy, and, somehow, part of his objection to doing what he called "sentry-go" seemed to have returned. It was all so foolish, he told himself, as he sat down on the skylight. Jack was an awfully good sort, and, once they got to sea, it would be impossible to be too careful; but what on earth was the use of all these precautions in a yacht-builder's yard on the Worple river? Why, the police-station was a bare hundred yards away!

He looked at the watchman's lantern, looked at the lights in the stream again, buttoned up his coat close round his throat, muttered something very impolite about Jack Wayne's fads—then fell fast asleep.

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" Hold him firm. Don't give him a chance to struggle or to shout. Hold him, hold him, you fools ! "

These words, hissed rather than whispered, were the first Barney O'Brien heard when he was awakened by a hand being placed over his mouth, whilst other hands raised him off the deck.

Three barefooted men had hold of him, but he hardly saw them, hardly thought of them as being actual men. What he had seen the moment he opened his eyes was a hideous, evil, yellow face close to his own.

He was fully awake at once, and, for the first time in his life, a shiver of fear ran through him. Jack Wayne had described the Yellow Dwarf too often for the boy not to recognise his captor.

They had everything ready—a gag, cords, even a huge horse-cloth to wrap round him further to hamper his movements ; and they carried out their work with wonderful skill. Not a sound seemed to be made over it all.

Piet Van der Humm had stepped to one side now, and Barney found himself looking at the others. They all appeared to be Malays of a peculiarly ugly type. Their faces alone were enough to make him shudder, but the feeling of their small, sinewy hands on his body, gripping him, groping, as it seemed, for certain muscles by holding which they were able temporarily to paralyse him, was literally ghastly.

Yet he could not cry out, could not do a single thing to attract the attention of his comrades.

Would those comrades also suffer through his lapse from duty ?—It is only fair to say that this was the first thought which flashed through the brave but foolish boy's mind. For the moment his own danger seemed as nothing. Then he realised that it was only himself they wanted. The " Molly Hawk " had been drawn up on to a mud-berth, and it was now low tide ; consequently, the water was

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some little distance away ; but there was a ladder against the yacht's side, and down this the prisoner was carried with that same wonderfully quiet caution which had marked the whole raid.

"Now I've got you," the Yellow Dwarf said, as they got clear of the "Molly Hawk's" stern, and were slopping through the ooze. "Now I've got you, Mr. O'Brien. I wish it had been your chum ; but you'll do. I'm sure you know the secret of the Black Pearl. And I can make you tell me. I know things which will make anyone speak in the end—things that hurt very much. You will have told me everything before the night is out," and he gave a hideous little chuckle.

Barney gave no sign that he had even heard the words. The gag closed his mouth, but that horrible yellow face was peering down into his, and he could have answered with his eyes. Still, Piet Van der Humm did not have the satisfaction of seeing fear on his face, and, perhaps for that reason, he lost his temper, and struck the boy on the side of the face with his fist.

A moment later, he himself was sent flying by a tremendous blow ; then one of the men who was carrying Barney went down heavily into the mud, allowing Barney to be half smothered in the slime.

The other men did not wait. It seemed as though they hardly looked round to see whence the attack had come. Probably, in their own country, they would have turned and fought savagely, but here, in England, even to their semi-savage instincts, the fear of the police was all-powerful. They had come on the errand unwillingly, and they were only too glad to escape, anyway.

Yet the attacking force consisted only of one man, Ah Lung. Some curious sense of danger had brought him on deck just as Barney was being taken down the ladder,

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and, without waiting to rouse the others, he had followed and made the rush from behind.

The Yellow Dwarf had staggered forwards, had caught his foot in a chain cable, and come down on hands and knees. For the moment he was absolutely at Ah Lung's mercy, and his career would certainly have ended there and then, with one thrust from the Chinaman's terrible knife, but for the fact that the assailant himself got stuck in that horrible mud. By the time he was free, Piet Van der Humm had also recovered his footing, and had drawn his knife. On hard ground there must have been a fight to the finish, but the mud prevented either from springing at the other, and, before they could get to within stabbing distance, the watchman, who had been awakened by the commotion, was hurrying down, shouting.

For once the Yellow Dwarf fled, absolutely foiled. His men were already in the boat, and in another second or two he himself would be trapped. Luck was on his side now. He happened to get on a comparatively firm ridge in the mud, whilst Ah Lung struck another very soft patch.

"What was that there?" the watchman panted as he came up. "What's all this unruly rumpus?"

The Celestial pointed towards the boat, which was now some ten yards from the shore.

"Plenty pirate-man," he answered.

The watchman snorted.

"Pirate-man!" he growled; "some mud-larks come to steal cable, I suppose you mean." Then his eyes fell on the figure of Barney, lashed up in the horse-cloth, and his expression changed. "Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered. "If this doesn't beat all!"

Ah Lung grinned amiably.

"Chinaman say 'Plenty pirate-man,'" he repeated, then, quite calmly, he proceeded to cut the boy's bonds.

CHAPTER XVII

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BARNEY was very much ashamed of himself as he climbed painfully aboard the "Molly Hawk" and faced his comrades.

"I was a slacker," he said frankly, "and, as a result, I risked ruining the whole show, in addition to getting into a frightful position myself. . . . That Yellow Dwarf!" He drew his hand across his forehead, and shuddered.

Jack laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Never mind, old fellow," he said, gently. "All's well that ends well. We've beaten Van der Humm once more, as we'll always beat him. Don't worry about it."

The other shook his head. "It's very decent of you, but I do worry. I feel none of you will trust me now."

Before Jack could reply, the gunner put his head through the skylight.

"I've got the night watchman aboard here, sir," he said. "Just now he's having some coffee; but what are we going to tell him? He's properly mazed over it all, and wants to go to the police."

Jack sprang up quickly.

"No, no. That would never do. We should have a swarm of reporters here by midday."

"But it's a fine chance to get that yellow fiend arrested," Barney protested. "I could swear to him, and so could Ah Lung."

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For a moment Jack hesitated. Certainly the argument seemed a sound one in many ways ; but before he answered the old sailor cut in.

" So far as I can see, sir, the ' Pang Yeen's ' getting under way. I noticed this evening that she had her fires going. . . . Yes, she is. So they'll take some catching."

" That settles it then." Jack gave a sigh, which was partially one of relief. " Tell that watchman, Gunner, not to mention the affair. Persuade him it was only a joke, or something of the kind."

Joseph Richardson grinned.

" Queer sort of a joke it must have looked, sir. I think a sovereign would keep his mouth shut better. Anyway, I'll find out."

In the end, the watchman went back to his little shanty, quite at peace with the world, and quite determined to mention nothing of what he had seen.

" A rummy go ! " he muttered as he fingered a gold coin. " A very rummy go ; but I could do with one of them every night for a week or two."

The following day, when the owner of the yard came down, the boys made some cautious inquiries concerning the " Pang Yeen."

" I heard she was going out of the river," the shipbuilder answered. " A proper crew of hard-looking Dagoes and lascars she had aboard. She's only got a little coal, and next to no stores, so I suppose she's going to put in somewhere else before she starts for the East. Her crowd didn't give away much information. They looked like a lot of forsaken pirates. Still, it doesn't concern us," and he fell to talking about the work on the " Molly Hawk."

Barney grinned to himself.

" Doesn't concern us ! My aunt ! If you'd been down here last night, you'd change your tone," he muttered.

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Later in the morning, as the two boys were walking up the village to the hotel where they usually lunched, Barney stopped abruptly.

"Jack, I've got an idea," he said. "No, don't laugh. It's this. One of the head men in the Naval Intelligence Department at Portsmouth was a great friend of my father's. He knows me well, and if I told him something about the 'Pang Yeen' and her crew, he'd have her watched everywhere. There's no need even to hint at the Pearl business. We'll go there this afternoon."

The doorkeeper at the Naval Intelligence Office declined to say if Captain Smith was in.

"I'll see, sir," he said, as he took Barney's name. A couple of minutes later he returned. "Will you come this way?" he asked, then showed them into a large room, with a very small naval officer seated at a desk.

"Well, what is it?" The officer looked up sharply. Barney hesitated.

"I wanted Captain Smith," he answered.

"I'm here in Captain Smith's place," the other snapped back at him. "What's your business?"

The boy flushed. For a moment he was inclined to say that the matter was a purely private one, and to leave; then changed his mind, and told, as briefly as possible, what their errand was.

At the end of the story the little officer laughed, none too pleasantly.

"I would give up reading adventure stories, if I were you, my lad. That's all sheer rubbish. If there had been anything in it, I"—and he slapped his own chest importantly—"I should have heard of it, long before you did. Good afternoon."

Barney's face was crimson as he went out.

"The idiot!" he growled to Jack. "Luckily, there're

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not many like him in the Service. It seems we'll have to depend solely on ourselves."

The other boy nodded.

"I've thought so all along," he answered quietly.

The departure of the "Pang Yeen" was a distinct relief to all hands on board the "Molly Hawk." True, they did not relax their vigilance in the very least degree—there was no question of Barney sleeping on watch again—but it was pleasant not to feel that the big steam-yacht was there, just outside the yard, like a guardship.

The rigging of the motor-yacht went on apace, and she soon began to present a totally different appearance from her former style. Many had been the councils of war held in the little saloon. The question of stores was one of vital importance, and lists had been made out and revised, and revised again, until Barney declared that he dreamt all night of tinned meat and biscuits.

"Wait until you eat them all day and every day, Master Barney," the gunner retorted. "Still, tinned meat's not like the old salt pork we used to have. This is going to be what I call luxury all the time."

Jack, remembering that terrible journey down the unknown river in Borneo, nodded; but Barney, who had never yet been out of touch with shops, made a grimace.

"I hope we get fresh meat and vegetables occasionally," he said.

A rather anxious look came into Jack's eyes. At times he felt troubled over his chum, worried as to the future. Although he and Barney were practically the same age, he felt himself to be much the older of the two. It was only natural. So far, except for the loss of his father, life had been easy for Barney. He had never come up against terrible realities, never been really tested.

There was no question as to his mere physical courage.

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Jack had seen him prove that a score of times in the past ; but there was a question of his "staying power," of his ability to go on, day after day, in the face of continued ill-luck.

To a very great extent Borneo had sobered Jack. He was still a boy, certainly, but he was a boy who had spent weeks with death stalking by his side by day, squatting beside his couch at night, and, for that reason alone, there was a vast difference between Barney and himself. He had self-confidence because he knew his own powers ; Barney was self-confident because his powers had never been put to the test. He was always laughing, always ready to assume that matters would turn out just as he wanted them to do, and—this was what filled Jack with uneasiness—ready to neglect precautions because "luck would be sure to be on their side."

The gunner, of course, was different. He believed not that luck, but that the Almighty, would help them, because of the justness of their cause, because a result of their expedition would, probably, be the downfall of Raja Seyed's tyranny ; but, being religious in the real, clean sense of the word, he did not expect God to do his work for him. His prayers were all for guidance and protection, not for miracles.

On that point he and Jack were at one, a fact each understood perfectly, though the question was never mentioned directly between them. People to whom religion is actually part of their lives very seldom talk of it. It is too sacred a thing. But Barney seemed still too excitable, too light-headed even, to take anything really seriously.

How would his chum turn out in the end ?

Often when they were seated round the little saloon table, discussing that vitally important question of stores and equipment, drawing up lists, consulting catalogues,

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working out quantities from Ah Lung's quaintly expressed figures, Jack would look up and see the owner of the "Molly Hawk" either yawning, or tracing patterns on the blotting pad. In short, he was bored with the details. He wanted to be doing something, to be in the thick of adventures.

Joseph Richardson noticed it too. Once he put it plainly.

"A war is won, not in the battles, but in preparing for the battles, Master Barney," he said bluntly. "If we've got everything we need, we shall succeed; but if we haven't got everything, we shan't even be able to make an attempt. This is the most important part of our expedition, and every one of us must use his brains now, and every one must know just what we've got and what we haven't got."

Whereupon Barney had flushed and had, during the following hour, made one or two extremely practical suggestions, showing how useful he could be when he gave his whole attention to the matter in hand.

One of the first portions of the equipment to be ordered was that necessary for the actual recovery of the Pearl from the Smoke Hole. Barney had been anxious to go to the north of England with Jack, and see the miner's life-saving helmets and suits in actual use; but Jack had vetoed the idea.

"No," he had said; "supposing Tolhurst and the Dwarf are having us watched now—probably they are—the mere fact of our buying such gear will give them the very clue they want. They will spot at once where the Pearl must be. We can't be too careful. Even when the two suits we're going to order are sent down here there must be no maker's name on the labels or the cases."

The long one-pounder guns, which were bought at

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Joseph Richardson's suggestion, were taken aboard with equal secrecy. No one in the yard had the least idea what was in those heavy cases, though, judging by the labels—which had been procured from the builders of the engines—they were assumed to be spare parts, two lengths of shaft, and some heavy castings.

The arrival of those guns showed the old sailor up in a new light. Hitherto he had been calm, almost rigid in his attention to his work, never evincing a trace of excitement; but once the guns were aboard, and stowed temporarily below, he began to grow restless.

Barney watched him with a grin.

"Sure, he won't be able to leave them alone," he said to Jack. "He'll be finding some excuse for getting them unpacked before long."

The prophecy proved to be correct. The guns had been hoisted on to the "Molly Hawk" just after midday. All that afternoon the gunner worked feverishly, arranging stores below, checking the contents of cases, arguing with Ah Lung as to stowage. He would hardly knock off for tea, but hurried back to the storeroom, although there was really no reason for haste.

"He's trying to forget they're there," Barney remarked to Jack. "He's all on fire to examine them, but he's too proud, or too shy, to suggest it yet."

Jack laughed.

"You suggest it then."

Almost at the first word from the boy, the veteran began to clamber out of the storeroom, his face literally beaming.

"Of course they ought to be examined at once, Master Barney," he exclaimed. "It's my fault for not thinking of it before. There may be all sorts of parts missing, and it doesn't do to leave these things till the last moment."

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For the rest of that day, and well on into the night, the gunner was blissfully happy. He would barely consent to sit down to supper. Every part had to be examined and re-examined with loving care, tried in its place, taken out again, then tried again. Probably, that night, Joseph Richardson, V.C., was the happiest man in the whole neighbourhood.

Was he not a gunner who had once more got back amongst the guns which he believed he would never touch again after leaving the Service?

CHAPTER XVIII

OFF AT LAST

AT last all the preparations were complete. The shipbuilder had carried out his contract in excellent style; oil- and water-tanks had been filled to their utmost capacity; the storeroom was as full as it would hold; in the main cabin a shining stand of small arms, Barney's particular delight, had been set up against the after bulkhead—in short, the "Molly Hawk" was ready for sea, ready to start on her adventurous trip half round the world.

After leaving the berth on the mud, they anchored for the night in mid-stream, almost at the same spot the "Pang Yeen" had occupied.

After supper the gunner and Ah Lung took the dinghy—the yacht carried two boats—and went for a final visit ashore, leaving the boys alone on board.

For a time they sat in silence, watching the moon rising behind the hills; then:

"I wonder what's in store for us?" Jack said suddenly. Barney looked up and laughed.

"A jolly good time, I reckon, and lots of adventures," he answered.

His chum, however, was not in a laughing mood.

"I hope we pull it off," he sighed. "It's a big job, bigger than you think. Luckily, neither you nor I have any

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relatives who are likely to feel nervous about us, if we're out of touch with everyone for a long time."

"It's a pity we did not go in for wireless," Barney answered.

The other shook his head.

"Our range would have been very small, and it would have drawn too much attention to us here. I had thought of it. As matters stand, the 'Molly Hawk' looks quite ordinary and harmless now."

He was quite right. To all outward appearances the yacht was now merely a small, and very smart, fore-and-aft schooner; certainly, no one would have suspected that she possessed a pair of motor engines capable of driving her at twelve knots an hour, nor would anyone have thought that she could go to sea with a crew of four only, all told. Had she depended entirely on her sails, had she been going to use them in all sorts of weather, she would have required several more hands.

"I don't think that, except for the Tolhurst crowd, anyone has the least idea of our plans," Jack went on; "we've managed rather well in that way. Even our stores have come aboard so gradually that the people at the wharf did not realise how much we have."

Barney nodded:

"Yes, you're right there. If I had been alone, I suppose I should have ordered everything in a lump, and given the show away." He ran his hands through his long hair rather ruefully. "That's my way, I'm afraid. But now, I think, even Sebag and his pals have got tired of watching us. Probably the 'Pang Yeen' and her precious crew of cut-throats are down by Suez by this time."

"I hope so," Jack began. "It would give us a chance of a quiet trip out, and we might be able then to swoop down on the coast of Borneo, get the Pearl, and be away

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before anyone knew of our presence. It's all a chance. . . .
Hullo, what does this chap want ? ”

A dinghy, with two men in it, had just put out from the quay, and was obviously making for the yacht.

“ Is that the ‘ Molly Hawk ’ ? ” the man in the stern hailed them. “ I’ve got some bad news for you, sir. Your man, Gunner Richardson, has been knocked down by a motor-car, and they don’t think he’ll live more than an hour or so. He’s conscious, though, and wants to see you both.”

Barney went deadly pale, and gripped the rail for support. “ Oh, I say, Jack, the poor old gunner ! ” he gasped. “ He’s been almost like a second father to me. Let’s get ashore at once.”

“ I can leave my mate aboard as watchman, sir,” the stranger spoke again. “ Then I can take both of you ashore in this dinghy. My mate’ll see to your lights, and so on.”

For a moment Jack hesitated. They had decided to run no risks of this sort, but, at the same time, he felt almost as anxious as did Barney himself to say “ Good-bye ” to the old sailor, before the latter went to make his report to his “ Great Skipper.”

He glanced down at the second man, the one who was rowing, and noticed that he was, apparently, an ordinary longshoreman, thin and narrow-chested, with a small black beard.

“ All right,” he said. “ We’ll go,” but before going down the side, he closed the companion hatch, and locked it.

The man with the beard clambered aboard without a word, then the other man took the sculls, and with Jack and Barney in the stern of the dinghy, started back for the quay.

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Barney, quivering with grief and anxiety, plied the stranger with questions, which were answered readily. It was a foreigner's car, the man said; it had come suddenly round a corner, and had gone clean over the gunner. The doctor had been on the spot a minute or two later, and they had carried the victim into the nearest house, the "Black Dog" inn. No, it had not happened in the main street, but up a side turning.

They were just alongside the quay, and their guide actually had hold of one of the rusty old shackles, when the sound of a voice above them, at the top of the steps, made Barney, who had just risen to his feet, start so violently that he sat down again.

"Where's our dinghy, Pigtail? We left it at these steps, certain." It was the gunner himself speaking.

The boys knew the voice instantly, and so, it seemed, did the stranger who had brought them ashore. With a savage oath he sprang on to the steps, dashed up them, heedless of the risk of slipping on the seaweed, flung aside Ah Lung, who happened to be in his way, and vanished into the darkness.

The gunner stared after him in amazement. "He's lost something, I should think," he remarked, then a hail from Jack changed the current of his thoughts with great suddenness.

"We've been hoaxed," the boy cried. "Hurry up! There's a stranger aboard the yacht."

As they rowed back to the "Molly Hawk," Barney straining his hardest at the sculls, Jack explained hurriedly.

"The swabs," Joseph Richardson growled. "It must have been the same gang which tried to get hold of us. They told me that, if I went up to the 'Black Dog' inn, I should meet an old shipmate of mine, Martin Foxe; but when I opened the door, and saw the sort of crowd

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inside, I said to myself ' If those are Martin's chums, I don't want to see Martin again.' They tried to get me in, but I was off. That's where their plan went wrong."

Jack nodded. " We've got one of them trapped, though. I wouldn't like to be feeling as he will be in a minute or two," he said grimly.

No one was visible on the deck of the " Molly Hawk " as the heavily-laden dinghy came up alongside, but the moment Jack sprang aboard a head appeared from the forehatch.

" He's here. Come on, Barney, Ah Lung," Jack shouted.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before there was a flash and a report. The revolver-bullet just missed Jack, then knocked a splinter off the stern rail; but the assailant did not fire twice. Barney had seized a heavy iron belaying pin, and this whizzed through the air, knocking the pistol out of the would-be murderer's hand.

Then, like a wild cat, Ah Lung was on him.

" Steady, steady, Ah Lung." It was Jack who spoke. " We don't want him quite killed. Hullo! His beard's come off . . . I say, Barney"—there was a note of delight in his voice—" d'you see who it is? It's that scamp Ralph Williams."

Jack was right. Stripped of its false beard and whiskers, the pallid, trembling figure, which sat up painfully when released by Ah Lung, was undoubtedly that of the Cornish youth. All his courage had gone now—really, it was fear which had made him shoot at Jack—and he was in a truly pitiful state.

" They made me do it, Master Barney," he began in a whining voice, but the gunner cut him short.

" Stop that noise, prisoner," he growled, emphasising the command with his foot. " You'll try him in the morning, I suppose, sir?" he turned to Barney. " Mean-

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while, I'll put him in irons. Better get his arms and legs round the foremast, and then shackle them."

When the youth had been secured in this manner—he wailed piteously during the process—Jack, who had been leaning on the rail, staring thoughtfully at the lights of the village, came across to Barney and the gunner.

"I think that, instead of sailing at dawn, we had better get away now," he said. "There must be a regular gang of those fellows ashore. We can easily run in and anchor in one of the other little harbours."

Barney agreed at once; but the prisoner, who had overheard the conversation, began to howl.

"Oh, Master Barney, do put me ashore! I didn't mean no wrong. I was told to do it. These irons 'urt me, and I can't even blow my nose."

The owner of the "Molly Hawk" grinned cheerfully. "Never mind that, Williams. As soon as we get to deep water we're going to drown you, so it's hardly worth while blowing your nose now, is it? Stop that disgusting noise. If you don't, Ah Lung will gag you." His voice suddenly became stern.

A few minutes later Jack and Ah Lung had heaved the anchor up.

"Slow ahead," the gunner, who was at the wheel, signalled down to Barney in the engine-room.

A moment later the propellers began to revolve. The "Molly Hawk's" long voyage had started.

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE

"THIS is absolutely great!" Barney, who had just come on deck, stretched himself, revelling in the sunshine. The wind, just of the right strength, was on the quarter, and the "Molly Hawk" was proving how well she could do under canvas. Hitherto, coming across the Bay of Biscay, they had used the engines entirely, but now they were able to dispense with these.

"Great, absolutely great!" Barney repeated his words. "And can't she just sail!"

Jack, who was at the wheel, nodded. Personally, just then he was thinking more about his breakfast than about anything else. He had come on at six o'clock, and it was now close on eight, when he would hand over to the gunner.

There was one delicate question which both the boys had avoided tackling until the last moment—the question of who was to be skipper. Both realised that one member of the ship's company must be supreme, but it was very difficult to decide which member that should be.

Barney, as owner, seemed to have a very good claim; moreover, he knew how to handle the "Molly Hawk." On the other hand, he had never been abroad before, never had his courage really been tested, and it was still uncertain how he would shape.

Jack, on the other hand, was experienced, and there was no question about his taking command later on, when they

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reached the coast of Borneo. At the same time, he was extremely anxious not to hurt his chum's feelings in any way, and rather shrank from what being skipper might involve.

As for the gunner, he, of course, knew far more about the sea than either of the boys, and their safety would have to depend on his skill to a very great extent. To put him in command at sea appeared to be the simplest, wisest plan, but when they suggested it to him, he shook his head.

"No, Master Barney, no, Master Jack. It's not for me to give you orders, not by a long way. I'll help all I know, and I'm sure you'll take my advice, but I won't be skipper."

Barney had laughed ruefully.

"Who should be, then?"

"Master Jack," the answer had come promptly; "he's the one who knows all about this Pearl business, and I know you'll obey him, even though you are the owner."

And Barney had turned round quickly, and had held out his hand to Jack.

"Of course I will, old man. So that's settled," and not a word more would either he or the gunner hear on the subject.

The arrangement of the watches was the natural one—Jack and Ah Lung, Barney and the gunner. Really, when they were not under sail, the wheel was the principal thing. The engines required practically no attention—they had been designed with that idea. All the lubricators were of extra large size, all the bearings very heavy, with the shafts perfectly bedded in. Moreover, the levers were so arranged that the man at the wheel had complete control of the machinery, even to the starting of it, if necessary, there being a second set of levers in the cabin, where the second wheel was.

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There was, of course, plenty of work to be done during the day. First, the deck had to be washed down, then the engine-room had to be cleaned, the cabins cleared up, and, after that, there was always work connected with the gear and equipment. Ah Lung was in complete control so far as the feeding arrangements were concerned, and both the boys were ready to acknowledge that they had never lived so well.

For the time being, the regular ship's company escaped the roughest and dirtiest work, such as cleaning the engine-room floor. That was done by Ralph Williams, who also had to scour all Ah Lung's pots, and wash all the clothes. When he had seen that the "Molly Hawk" was really going to sea, the young Cornishman had broken into such pitiful lamentations that Jack had ordered him to be shut down in the forepeak, with the anchor cable and the spare gear; but, after a few hours there, he had been allowed on deck again.

He had come up shivering with fright, thinking that at last he was going to be thrown overboard; but when he had realised that his life was to be spared, and that he was to be put ashore at the first port of call, a cunning look had flashed into his eyes. He had done his work humbly, obediently, but all the time he had been straining his ears to catch scraps of conversation from the others, who, though cautious enough at first, had gradually got used to their prisoner's presence on board, and had allowed him to overhear certain things, a piece of folly for which they were destined to pay heavily later on.

"We'll make Madeira to-morrow afternoon, with any sort of luck," Jack remarked, as he sat down to breakfast.

Barney nodded.

"Yes. It won't take long to get what we want there—oil, fresh provisions, and vegetables; then we'll just

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put that creature Williams ashore, and head for the West Coast of Africa. The gunner says we ought to have a fine weather trip until we get within a couple of days of Capetown."

Jack helped himself to some more coffee.

"Yes, that's the critical part, actually rounding the Cape. Afterwards, whether it's going to be the Mozambique Channel or Mauritius—What's that?" He broke off suddenly and made a dive into the other cabin.

"What are you doing here?"

As Barney joined his chum, he found that the latter had Ralph Williams by the collar, and was shaking him violently. "I believe the brute was eavesdropping."

The Cornishman began to blubber, "I wasn't, sir, I just came down to clean up. Why should I want to be a-listening?"

Barney grunted doubtfully.

"Why should you be aboard at all, if you weren't a scoundrel? Kick him up the companion ladder, Jack."

And he sat down again to his breakfast.

"It doesn't matter much what he knows," Jack remarked. "The 'Pang Yeen' is probably somewhere by Suez now, and it may be weeks before Williams gets home again. He won't have a cent when we put him ashore, and he won't have too happy a time until the British Consul ships him away as a D.B.S.—distressed British subject."

"Serve him right," Barney growled; "they very nearly got possession of the 'Molly Hawk' that night we sailed. . . . Oh, well, we're clear of them all now, and we ought to have no more worries until we reach the coast of Borneo."

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps not," he answered, a little doubtfully.

Funchal, the capital of Madeira, was the same as ever—

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beautiful, inviting, when seen from the sea, evil-smelling when you got ashore.

Barney revelled in it all. Never before had he seen the wonderful blue of those southern waters. The old fort, the quaint white houses with their big verandas, the marvellously green foliage, the great hill in the background, studded with picturesque villas, the anchorage with its weird variety of craft, ranging from a huge South African liner down to a quaint Portuguese schooner—all these were unlike anything else he had ever viewed before.

And when they landed, both he and Jack found it more fascinating still. Slovenly Portuguese Customs Officers had met them, and had suggested, without any apparent shame or shyness, that a small bribe would save them a great deal of trouble.

"It's the custom of the country, sir," the gunner had cut in; "you always do it with Dagos. Better give them what they ask," and so the officers had departed rejoicing.

On the quay were sentry boxes, against each of which lounged a dirty Portuguese soldier, with a soiled uniform, rusty side-arms, and a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

The sentries took no notice of anybody or anything, but a dozen touts, guides and the like, made a rush at the boys, whilst behind the touts hobbled as many beggars, dreadful-looking creatures, maim, halt, covered with ghastly sores.

Barney began to laugh at the chorus of bad English which went up, the offers to conduct them to wine shops, to the bullock-sledges, to churches, to supply them with everything from deck-chairs to oranges, the whining request for alms; but Jack, being more experienced, thrust them all on one side, none too gently.

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"The agents' office is up there, amongst the trees on that Plaza," he said. "We don't want to mess about with this scum."

One, at least, of the little crowd round them caught the word "scum," and understood its meaning. He was a half-breed, a mixture of Portuguese and English, fairly well dressed, and an ugly look came into his eyes.

"Scum!" he muttered. "So that's what you call us, Mr. Wayne. I'll teach you better manners yet."

He was the only one who had the energy to follow the boys as far as the agents' office, and, after they had done their business there, and had arranged for all their oil and stores, he was still waiting outside.

"Guide, senhores?" he said, raising his straw hat. "Now you've done business, you want to see all the sights. Plenty fine sights in Madeira."

Barney turned to his chum.

"Shall we——?" he began.

But Jack shook his head.

"Remember what the gunner told us about Funchal, Barney. . . . No"—he turned to the guide—"we don't want you. I told you so before. Clear off."

The half-breed came a step nearer him.

"Plenty fine sights, senhor," he repeated. "I, Manoel da Silva, show you all. You give me five shillings, and I take you everywhere."

Once more Jack shook his head. "No. I told you to clear off."

But Da Silva was not to be rebuffed so easily.

"Five shillings, senhor, very little money for you. . . . You don't want to see the sights? No? Well, you give me five pounds and I show you big sight, show you one Yellow Dwarf!"

A savage look flashed into his eyes at the words, then,

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without waiting for an answer, he turned into a side street and was lost to view.

The boys looked at one another in consternation.

"He said 'Yellow Dwarf,' didn't he?" Barney asked in a low voice.

Jack nodded:

"Yes. There was no mistake about it. They're on our track, and he gave it away because he was mad with us. We've got to look out for ourselves now."

CHAPTER XX

WHAT HAPPENED AT MADEIRA

LITTLE was said by either of the boys as they went aboard again. Manoel da Silva had given them plenty of food for thought.

"Do you think he told us that in a fit of temper, blurting it out, or was it deliberate?" Barney asked at last.

Jack shook his head.

"There's no telling. He wasn't so very angry, really. I think it was an attempt to make us turn back. Evidently, though, he is Piet Van der Humm's agent here, and was on the look-out for us."

"What about that scallywag, Williams, then?" Barney went on. "If we land him here, he tells Da Silva everything, doesn't he?"

The other frowned.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "But we can't take the creature on indefinitely, can we? Still, we'll carry him on to Teneriffe, or Cape Coast Castle. After all, if we had turned him over to the police at home, and given evidence against him, he would have got about three years' penal servitude; so we're letting him off lightly."

The gunner was pacing the deck of the "Molly Hawk," watching Ralph Williams cleaning the rifles.

"He's very lazy to-day, sir," Joseph Richardson said as he saluted his young skipper. "He thinks he's going ashore. Really, if I might suggest it, sir, he ought to

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have three dozen, at least. Ah Lung has made a cat-of-nine-tails specially for him, sir, a very good one."

Ralph Williams overheard the words, as he was intended to do, and the howl he set up could have been heard aboard the big Union-Castle liner, which had just come to an anchor near by.

"Stop that noise!" Jack's voice was very severe. "It will be time enough to cry when I have ordered you to have the flogging. You're a miserable coward and, for that reason, I shall be more severe on you. . . . Come down to the cabin, Gunner. I want both you and Ah Lung there." Already, Jack was quite the skipper. They had put him in command, and he realised his responsibilities.

Jack took his seat at the head of the table, with Barney on his right hand, the gunner at his left, and Ah Lung next to the gunner.

"We've been tracked so far," he said bluntly; "they're watching us, and we've got to keep a sharp look-out for their agents all the time. We must never reckon ourselves safe anywhere. Now, have any of you fellows any suggestions to make as to the next move?"

Ah Lung grinned.

"Chop off him head, him prisoner man. No good. No work, plenty eat."

The others laughed, though the Chinaman's voice showed that he was quite in earnest.

"Well, sir, we must go on as quick as we can." It was the gunner who spoke now: "I suggest we make for the West African Coast, and keep well in, out of the ordinary track, though it's not likely they would dare to touch us on the high seas."

Barney ran his fingers through his hair.

"You can't be sure. They seem a pretty desperate lot. Surely, the Pearl isn't worth all this trouble."

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"It's worth an immense sum," Jack answered, "but you're right, Barney, in a way. I don't believe the Raja knows about the Pearl. What he has told Van der Humm to do is to destroy us, in case we lead the British down into that country."

The gunner nodded.

"That's it, sir. They know it means the end of their cruelties when the Union Jack flies over their town. And we will fly it there, sir, if we have to kill every one of those Palapogs you talk of. Right is on our side, and the Great Skipper will see us through," and his fine old eyes simply glowed with enthusiasm.

"Can do." The Chinaman beamed on them all. "Plenty savee all of us; get plenty Cantonese pirate man by and by to cut off Palapogs' heads. Yes. Can do."

Their followers' enthusiasm put new heart into the boys. Neither the gunner nor the Chinaman could be described as being in any way foolhardy. Rather otherwise. Both of them had knocked about the world, both had carried their lives in their hands, and they would certainly not go into an adventure which they believed to be hopeless.

"Very well, then; we'll make for the Coast." Jack took the chart out of the rack and unrolled it. "This will be our course now."

After they had pricked it off Joseph Richardson said:

"I suggest we mount our one-pounders now, sir. We never know what we're going to meet. We could put the Maxim amidships. As soon as we're away from here we ought to begin practice."

Jack agreed readily.

"That's your department, Gunner," he said, "you are in command there, remember that. . . . Now, as to this wretched creature Williams."

The gunner gave vent to a growl.

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"Land him at one of the smaller Cape de Verde Islands, sir. Just dump him ashore, and let him go to the Consul for help. He won't dare tell the truth, so we can't get into trouble over it."

"All right." Jack bent over the chart again. "If we go—what was that?" He jumped up suddenly at the sound of oars under the porthole.

Barney was the first to reach the deck.

"He's gone," he cried out. "They've been too smart for us."

He was right. In a shore boat, manned by two powerful natives, were Manoel da Silva and Ralph Williams. At Barney's cry, the latter crouched down, as though expecting a shot; but the half-breed knew that the boys would not risk firing.

"I will give your kind regards to Senhor Van der Humm," he shouted back. "You can't very well overtake us," and he pointed to their dinghy, which Williams had evidently sent adrift.

By this time Barney was raging, but Jack merely shrugged his shoulders.

"One of the shore boats will bring her back to us. As for Williams, it's a score for him, but he doesn't know much of our plans, and I don't see how he can get into touch with the 'Pang Yeen.' Still, it's a warning to us to be more careful."

They watched Williams and his companion land, and Barney ground his teeth as the two of them stood at the end of the quay, and swept off their hats with elaborate sarcasm; then they strolled up to the Plaza, and were lost to sight amongst the trees.

Meanwhile, a local boatman, who had been hovering near, had picked up the dinghy, and was now haggling with the gunner as to the reward he ought to have.

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" I believe you're one of that same pirate gang," the old sailor declared. " If not; why were you hanging about here? We will give you five hundred reis reward."

The man screamed with indignation. " Five hundred reis. Five hundred ! I want tousand, ten tousand reis."

Barney, who had come to the gangway, gasped.

" Does he want to buy the ' Molly Hawk ' ? I should think five reis ought to be enough. How much is a rei, anyway ? "

Joseph Richardson laughed.

" They run twenty-five to a penny, Master Barney. Portuguese always like to make things sound big. I'll give him a thousand, that'll be about fair."

That night, none of the " Molly Hawk's " crew went ashore. As Jack pointed out, there was too much risk of a knife-thrust from Da Silva, or one of his friends, whilst passing up one of the narrow, badly-lighted streets.

The gunner agreed heartily.

" Dagos are Dagos," he remarked. " There's no more use in them really than in sharks—at least, not at most times. Give them a good ganger, and set them to carry coal aboard, and you can get something out of them—but it's only then. If I can catch that Da Silva——" He broke off, and handled the end of a rope longingly.

The boys laughed.

" We always seem to lose our prisoners," Barney said ; " the next one we must hand over to the gunner right away, eh, Jack ? . . . Well, Mr. Skipper, how about to-night ? We ought to keep a double watch, I think."

Jack nodded.

" Yes, I think so too ; but, still, I don't feel that they'll worry us in port."

He proved to be right. They kept the most careful

WHAT HAPPENED AT MADEIRA

guard all through—really, none of them felt like sleep—but at dawn there had been no alarm of any kind.

Shortly after sunrise their agents' launch came alongside, and piloted them to the quay, where they took their stores aboard, and filled up both their oil- and water-tanks.

"We've done well, wonderfully well," Jack said, as he studied the account for the oil. "I certainly thought we had used more than that amount. Now, according to these figures, we've got enough to carry us to Delagoa Bay, even if we never used the sails once."

Barney's face beamed.

"She's the finest motor-yacht in the world," he declared, then he hurried forward to loose the head-rope.

A couple of minutes later, when they were about six feet off the quay, a rotten orange, a very rotten one, caught him on the cheek and burst. With a yell of wrath he looked round, to see Ralph Williams and Da Silva scuttling away behind some cases.

Jack and the gunner could not help laughing at the expression on his face, as he wiped away the yellow mess; but there was something more than indignation in Barney's eyes.

"Next time, Master Williams," he growled. "Next time you won't get off so easily," then, suddenly, he stiffened up. "Look there, Jack!" he pointed out to sea. "There, beyond the Cape liner, that vessel just coming in. It's the 'Pang Yeen.'"

CHAPTER XXI

A NARROW SHAVE FOR JACK

BARNEY was right as to the "Pang Yeen." There was no possibility of mistaking her.

Instinctively the boys exchanged glances, in which there was more than a hint of dismay. The Yellow Dwarf's vessel was far larger, and, probably, a good deal faster than theirs, and they knew already, by bitter experience, how few scruples or fears its commander had.

"Don't you worry, sir," the gunner's cheery voice broke in. He had caught those glances, and he understood. "We'll dodge her, never fear. Such a bad lot as that there Van der Humm will never be allowed to succeed. Right is on our side, and we can get into shallow waters where she can't come. Then, too," he rolled his plug of tobacco reflectively, "they haven't got anyone who can lay a gun as I can. I don't care if they've got seven-pounders or even fourteen-pounders; with one of those little beauties down below, I'll always knock 'em out."

Jack laughed.

"He is thrice armed, who has his quarrel just,
But ten times he who gets his blow home fust."

he quoted. "Well," he went on, "we've seen him and he's seen us. I notice they've got wireless now, so I expect they've had a message from Da Silva. There's no harm in going a little nearer her, quite near, just to show we're not afraid."

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The gunner's face beamed.

"That's it, sir, that's the proper spirit. I'll steer within our own length of her. I want to have a look at that ugly half-breed."

The "Pang Yeen" was going dead slow as the "Molly Hawk" drew near her. She was flying the flag for the Port Doctor, which meant that she intended coming to an anchor.

"There he is, there's the Yellow Dwarf." Jack gripped Barney's arm, and pointed to a heavy, squat figure on the vessel's bridge. "But who's that beside him?"

Barney laughed:

"Don't you recognise him? Don't you know the Credit-to-the-Old-School, Sebag Tolhurst?"

"I thought it was," Jack answered, "but look at those fellows on the foredeck! What a crowd of pirates! Where can he have raised them?"

The gunner gave the wheel a turn, so as to approach a little nearer to the other vessel.

"Dagos, sir," he growled; "there's never any difficulty in finding enough Dagos for any dirty work. Still, there're some ugly-looking savages, those with the long sticks. I wonder——"

A cry from Ah Lung, who was standing by the foremast, cut Joseph Richardson's speech short.

"Plenty murder-man with poisoned darts," he shouted. "Get below, get below!"

They were now within thirty yards of the "Pang Yeen," and they were travelling at three-quarter speed, on a course which would bring them much nearer.

Barney stared at the Chinaman in amazement. He did not understand in the least; but Jack understood. The "long-sticks" of which the gunner had spoken were blow-canes, shooting poisoned darts.

A NARROW SHAVE FOR JACK

The young skipper rose to the occasion splendidly. He almost wrenched the wheel from Joseph Richardson's hands.

"Get below into the cabin, and take the other wheel," he commanded. "Get below, Barney, Ah Lung."

Perhaps Barney would have hesitated, but the gunner's ingrained sense of discipline saved them. Jack was the skipper.

"Aye, aye, sir," he said, and hurried down the companion, as rapidly as his wooden leg would allow. Barney and Ah Lung followed.

Jack gritted his teeth hard. It was a question of a few seconds, until the gunner had the other wheel in his hands; then he himself could dive for safety.

It all happened with hideous quickness.

"Full speed ahead" the "Pang Yeen's" engine-room telegraph rang. He could hear it plainly, could see the "Pang Yeen's" quartermaster whizz the wheel round, to approach the motor-yacht, could see the abominable grin on Piet Van der Humm's face, the sickly whiteness coming over Sebag's unhealthy countenance.

Something struck the deck at his feet—it was the first of the darts; then another stuck in his cap. A single scratch from one of them, and he must inevitably die.

The Yellow Dwarf was laughing. He did not know of the second wheel in the cabin.

Another dart actually hit the spoke which Jack was holding—merely a question of an inch.

A shiver ran through him. What was the gunner doing?

And then he felt a wrench at his own wheel. He could leave his post now. The gunner was steering with the aid of the periscope.

As he dived forward to the companion-ladder, four

A NARROW SHAVE FOR JACK

darts struck him in the boots or clothing, but not a single one touched his flesh.

A couple of minutes later they were well out of range, and the "Pang Yeen" was back on her course. The Yellow Dwarf had failed again, and he had no wish to attract the attention of other vessels in the port.

For a moment Jack stood very still, his hand over his eyes.

Joseph Richardson understood.

"That's right, sir," he said, "always thank the Great Skipper when He's seen you through a big danger—or a little one."

"It was a near thing," Jack muttered hoarsely.

The old sailor laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It couldn't have been nearer, sir. . . . A proper murder-trick! . . . But there's one advantage—we all know our skipper now, and he need not worry about our backing him up, right through!"

Barney had dropped into the chair at the foot of the table. He was very white, and there were big beads of perspiration on his forehead. Death had been at very close quarters with them, and he was trying to get his ideas sorted out properly.

"Somehow, it seemed rotten on our part, scooting below, and leaving you to it, Jack," he murmured.

Joseph Richardson answered him.

"We obeyed orders, Master Barney. Don't you worry about that part. . . . And now it's full speed ahead, with as few stops as possible until we reach the coast of Borneo."

CHAPTER XXII

UP THE VITO RIVER

"THERE'S the African Coast at last."

Jack pointed at what appeared to be a long low point of land some five miles away.

Barney, who had just come on deck, shaded his eyes with his hand. "It doesn't look very interesting. What part is it, exactly?"

"Cape Bantu," the other answered. "The mouth of the Vito River is a little way beyond it, the gunner says. He's hunted slavers there in the old days."

"Aye, aye, sir, many of them." The gunner had stumped aft to take the wheel. "There's a good anchorage inside the bar, and we can fill up with fresh water, as well as get chickens and fresh vegetables."

Jack raised his eyebrows.

"Water! Surely we've got ample to last us to Cape Town. Why, we only filled the tanks at Madeira!"

"Ah Lung has just reported that one tank, at least, is bad," Joseph Richardson replied. "I told him to bring some aft to you, and try the other tanks. It's the Madeira water. We haven't had to touch that before."

The news was distinctly worrying, and it was more than confirmed a few minutes later by the Chinaman, who brought samples with him. With the exception of the one tank out of which they had been drawing lately,

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all the tanks had had water put into them at the island, and all were musty.

"It's very queer," Jack said, after he had convinced himself of the truth of the Celestial's report. "The stuff is terrible, and, even after it had been boiled, I don't believe it would be fit for use. Yet that agent seemed a decent enough fellow."

Barney turned to him quickly.

"Do you think it was done on purpose, then?"

His chum hesitated. "I wouldn't go so far as that. But it is strange. Luckily for us we can replace the bad water at once."

At its mouth the Vito River proved to be a full mile across, fringed on either side with mangroves, behind which the bush rose quickly to a line of low hills. There was the usual bar across the entrance, with an ugly line of broken water for three parts of its length; but close to the southern bank the boys could make out a comparatively smooth stretch.

"Shall you risk it?" Barney asked.

Jack glanced towards the gunner, who nodded readily.

"Yes, sir. I remember it now. That's where we took in the old 'Mongoose' gunboat, and she drew more water than we do."

Despite the old sailor's assurance, it was an anxious time for the two boys. As they drew near the bar, the ground swell increased rapidly, and the breakers seemed to appear far more formidable. But for Ah Lung's report on the water, they would never have dreamed of trying to enter the river.

Joseph Richardson took the wheel, whilst Barney was in charge of the engines. Fifty yards from the bar the little "Molly Hawk" was jumping about like a cork; twenty yards from it she was taking solid lumps of water

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aboard ; then, almost before the boys realised the fact, she was across, in the placid, muddy stream.

For half a mile they held straight on, finding the river narrowing rapidly ; then, suddenly, there was a break in the mangroves on the southern bank, a stretch of sandy beach fringed with palm trees, and, scattered amongst those trees, a score of native huts.

"That means fresh water, and fresh vegetables and fowls, sir," the gunner remarked.

Jack nodded.

"Yes, we had better anchor. I wonder what sort of natives they are."

Joseph Richardson shrugged his shoulders. "Thieves, probably, but they won't attack us," and he pointed towards the one-pounders and the Maxim, which had now been mounted, ready for use.

So far as the local savages were concerned, the "Molly Hawk's" arrival seemed to have a most disturbing effect. A couple of women, who were pounding corn outside the nearest hut, were the first to espy her. At their cries, men, women and children came tumbling out of the other huts, crowded together on the beach, jabbering excitedly, then, suddenly, fled into the jungle.

Jack frowned.

"They seem scared. We must get them back somehow to help us with the water. It would take us days to do it by ourselves. I wonder what they're afraid of? There're no slavers about nowadays."

"Don't be too sure, sir," the gunner grunted. "Most bad things go on, secretly, long after they're supposed to have been put down."

When, after taking careful soundings, they came to an anchor about fifty yards from the shore, there was not a sign of life in the village, not even a dog was moving

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about. The outlook, certainly, was not a pleasant one. They had to go ashore, and there was no telling what they might find there. Natives who run away at the outset have an awkward trick of returning to attack you suddenly.

Still, there was no use in waiting, and, as soon as possible, the boat was lowered, and the two boys and Ah Lung, all armed with rifles and automatic pistols, rowed towards the beach, whilst the gunner sat down on an ammunition box, beside the Maxim, ready to support them if necessary.

The boat's bow grounded on the shingle, and Jack and Barney jumped ashore, leaving the Chinaman as guard.

"Go slowly," Jack said. "I will give them a hail." He raised his voice. "Hullo! We are friends," he shouted.

A moment later, a tall negro, clad in white, appeared from behind the nearest hut.

"You Englishmen?" he demanded.

The boys both answered promptly, and then, as if by magic, the village became alive again, men, women, and children hurrying back, laughing and chattering, evidently relieved from a great fear.

The tall native who had hailed them first came up and saluted, his face now beaming with delight.

"We think him Portuguese ship," he said, pointing towards the "Molly Hawk." "Portuguese man come here catch black men for work, growing cocoa at San Thomé and Principe Islands."

There was no doubt as to the friendliness of the savages. The very name of "Englishman" had acted like a charm. The women and children still held back, shyly, staring at the first white men they had ever seen, save as enemies; but the male portion of the population clustered round the boys, full of eagerness to know what they wanted to buy, and, more important still, to know if they would remain and protect them from the hated Portuguese "labour agents."

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It appeared that the English-speaking native in white was the local chief. He soon showed his authority. With a few curt words, he made the crowd stand back, whilst he talked to the boys.

Water? Yes. There was a perfectly clean stream, and he would put twenty men to work at once, first to pump out the "Molly Hawk's" tanks, then to take the new supply aboard in earthenware jars. They had plenty of canoes, it seemed, hidden away amongst the mangroves. As for fowls and vegetables, they could supply those in abundance.

Barney was immensely interested in the village, which was the first he had ever seen. The round huts, with their mud walls and thatched roofs, were full of fascination for him, as were, too, the chubby little piccanins, and their grinning, woolly-haired parents. He would gladly have spent the whole day there, examining things, trying to talk to the savages, but Jack insisted on keeping strictly to business, and, as soon as matters had been arranged, they went back to the boat, where they found Ah Lung placidly ignoring the comments of half a hundred negroes, none of whom had ever seen a yellow man before.

It was not long before Timbota, the chief, followed them aboard the "Molly Hawk," being brought out in a large dug-out canoe. He was immensely polite—it appeared that he had been educated in one of the British West African colonies—and extremely interested in all he saw.

With the aid of many vigorous gestures, he explained how greatly his tribe suffered at the hands of the Portuguese, who claimed sovereignty over their territory. The old slave trade, carried on by private adventurers, had been put down; but its place had been taken by the new slave trade, run by the Portuguese government, in order to supply black labour for the cocoa plantations.

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"Catch black man; take him to Island of San Thomé, Island of Principe; whip him, him die there," the chief explained. "This the time of year Portuguese come, so all people ready to run away."

Barney made a wry face. "Cheerful lot, the Portuguese seem to be."

The chief took up the words eagerly.

"Bad men, sar. You stay here, sar, and drive Portuguese away."

"I'm afraid not," Jack, who was standing beside Barney, laughed. "We're not out to act as naval police—and perhaps get hanged for our pains. No, I wish we could help you, Timbota, but I'm afraid we can't."

Timbota made a hopeless gesture:

"Englishman always the same. Very sorry for black man, but all the time do nothing. I see those," he pointed to the guns, "and think you drive away slave-catcher people." Then he shook his head several times, and went over to where some of his men, under Ah Lung's supervision, were pumping the foul Madeira water out of the tanks.

"It makes you feel sorry," Barney remarked reflectively.

Jack shrugged his shoulders:

"We've got enough trouble of our own already. Besides, our government knows all about this Portuguese cocoa slavery—I've read about it often—and if they don't interfere, we can't. The sooner we're away from here, the better."

The gunner, who had just stumped aft, put in his word. "You're right, sir. A proper fever hole this is. And if a Portuguese vessel did happen to come in here she might make it awkward for us. They're a low-down people, those Dagos, and they know it, and act up to it."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when there was a shout from one of Timbota's men. A moment

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later, every one of the natives, including the chief himself, was making a dive for the dug-out canoes.

Turning round, the boys saw a gunboat, white painted, brigantine-rigged, coming up the river, flying the despised flag of the new Portuguese Republic.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WAYS OF THE PORTUGUESE

AT the sight of the Portuguese gunboat, Gunner Joseph Richardson, V.C., made a wry face.

"We had better get up some ammunition for the one-pounders, sir," he said. "If I start at once, I can sink her before she gets too near."

Jack Wayne stared at him in amazement.

"Sink her!" he echoed. "But she's not done us any harm!"

"It doesn't mean she won't," the old sailor answered grimly. "She hasn't had time—that's all. Dagos are always bad, and the worst Dago is the Portuguese. When they're the strongest, they make their own laws. Who knows we're here, in the Vito River? The 'Molly Hawk' would be a big prize for them, the sweeps, and, after they had cut my throat, you would do well for the cocoa plantations. You wouldn't be the only Britons there."

There was such an air of conviction about the gunner's words that the boys did not hesitate over setting to work fetching up the ammunition, but Jack declined, point blank, to fire the first shot.

"We must wait and see," he declared.

They had not long to wait. The gunboat anchored a bare two hundred yards from them, and, with what was quite creditable speed for Portuguese—British sailors would have taken a tenth of the time—lowered a couple

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of boats, the larger of which, crammed with slovenly-looking men, dressed in all sorts of uniforms, and armed with rifles, made for the shore, whilst the other, in which was an officer, and half a dozen fairly tidy sailors, headed towards the "Molly Hawk."

"They've picked their cleanest specimens to call on us," Barney remarked.

The gunner grunted.

"All Dagos are equally dirty at heart, Master Barney. No use praying for *their* souls, I can tell you . . . Call those sailors, and call that a man-of-war!" He spat out his plug disgustedly. "Now, sir," to Jack, "give 'em a hail, before they get alongside," then he swung the Maxim round, so as to cover the approaching boat.

It did not need Jack's hail to make the Portuguese lay to on their oars. The gunner's action was sufficient.

"We are friends, senhor," the Portuguese officer shouted. "Tell your man to be careful. Those guns do go off sometimes."

Jack went to the rail.

"We are friends, too; but we don't take armed parties of strangers aboard. What do you want?"

"To see your papers, senhor," the officer replied. "You are in Portuguese waters; your vessel carries guns; and we naturally ask, most politely, for your explanations."

The young skipper glanced at his comrades.

"We can't very well refuse," he said, then, to the Portuguese: "All right. You yourself may come aboard, but at the first sign of hostility we shall sink your boat."

Whilst the officer was in the cabin with Jack, the rest of the ship's company stood to their arms, keeping a very sharp look-out on the boat's crew; but it seemed an unnecessary precaution, as the men merely lounged about, yawning, and smoking cigarettes.

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After a while the officer reappeared, accompanied by Jack. The Portuguese bowed profoundly when he reached the side.

"I am obliged most deeply, senhor. All is in order. I am sure my captain will gladly assist in filling your water-tanks. If those natives do not return, he will lend you some of our men."

As the boat rowed back towards the gunboat,

"Don't have their help, sir," Joseph Richardson said. "Never trust those folk. They're here for no good, believe me. . . . Hullo! What's that?"

A volley had suddenly rung out on shore. For the moment the boys had forgotten the other boatload of Portuguese; but now they could see the men, dodging about amongst the palm trees, rifles in hand. But there were white soldiers there now as well, and scores of struggling natives, and more than one black figure stretched out motionless on the ground.

After that first volley the firing became fitful, but there were shrieks and groans to show how the bullets had got home.

Joseph Richardson was the first to grasp what had happened.

"There were soldiers—Portuguese, of course—bringing down a gang of labourers, as they call them, for the sailors to take aboard. And the niggers have been trying to break free. . . . There they go again," as a score of rifles rang out together. "What's on now? Oh, it's our friend, the chief, with his crowd. They're trying to rescue the slaves."

The boys were quivering with excitement. The gunner's explanation was right. A fierce conflict was raging on shore. The local natives, armed only with spears, had made a desperate rush to save their fellow-countrymen

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from the living death of the cocoa plantations, and were now paying for their courage with their lives.

"Give me the word, sir, oh, give me the word." The gunner was squinting along his Maxim, his finger on the trigger.

But Jack shook his head. "They're all so much mixed up. We should simply slaughter both sides, and do no good."

Then, suddenly, a seven-pounder shell screamed past the "Molly Hawk" and, exploding in the far end of the village, set a hut on fire. Half a dozen other shells followed, and the whole place was in a blaze.

Meanwhile, the firing on shore died down. The attackers had been driven off, leaving scores of dead behind them, and those who were alive out of the unfortunate labourers were being dragged down to the boat. Half an hour later, the last of them had been thrust below into some slave-hold on the little warship.

The boys had watched the proceedings almost in silence. So far as they were concerned, the outlook was not a pleasant one. There seemed now no possibility of getting their tanks refilled by the natives, and they were certainly not going to accept help from those Portuguese brigands, even if that help were offered. Moreover, they knew well that they had seen too much, that the Portuguese would do their utmost to prevent such dangerous witnesses from escaping.

As the last of the labourers disappeared, Jack turned to his comrades.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked.

Barney ran his fingers through his hair.

"Wait and see," he suggested; but the gunner shook his head.

"If we wait, they'll have us. They've got some one

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there who can use their seven-pounder, and they daren't let us escape. We're in a thundering bad fix, sir, as bad as can be. Unless I'm mistaken, it won't be long before trouble begins."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a seven-pounder shell whizzed between the "Molly Hawk's" masts.

CHAPTER XXIV

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES

INSTINCTIVELY the boys ducked their heads as the Portuguese shell passed over them; but Joseph Richardson only laughed.

"Everyone does that, first time under fire," he remarked. "But that was only a kind of warning, the Dago's visiting card. Here comes their boat now, with a flag of truce."

It was the same officer who came aboard again, though now he was received in far less friendly style. All the "Molly Hawks" were fully armed, and the boat's crew was told to go back to where it could be covered by the Maxim gun. The officer seemed nervous, anxious to be away again.

"My captain thinks differently from myself, senhor," he said. "He is not satisfied with your papers, and your explanations of why you are here, in Portuguese waters, and he says you must come along with us to Angola, for the Governor to decide. You are to strike your flag at once, or he will sink you."

Jack flushed crimson.

"Strike the British Flag to a Portuguese! A Portuguese! Senhor, you have come aboard here, under a flag of truce, trusting to British honour, and you shall go in safety, but, really, I ought to hang you, both as a slave trader and for the insult to our nation."

The officer hurried over the side. He had always

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looked on the English as a hot-headed, objectionable people, and now he was certain that that view was the correct one.

"We're in for it," Jack muttered. "What do you fellows think we had better do?"

Barney answered promptly:

"Get up the anchor, run past her, and chance it all."

The gunner nodded. "That's the way, sir, if you won't fire first. She'll shoot quick enough, I fancy; but I'll be ready for her. As for the water, we must try and get that lower down the coast."

They had just begun to heave up the anchor as the gunboat's officer made his report to his own skipper. The motor-engines were revolving slowly, the gunner being at the wheel. A moment later, one of the Portuguese vessel's seven-pounders—she had two, one on either side of the upper deck—roared out, the shell just missing the cabin skylight.

Joseph Richardson did not wait any longer. With a growl of wrath, he sprang to his beloved one-pounder, trained it in what seemed an incredibly short space of time, then pulled the trigger.

He had been the finest gunner in the British Navy, and his hand had not lost its skill. He had intended to put that Portuguese gun out of action, and he had done so. He had shorn it of its sights, jammed the breech action, and killed the man behind it. For the moment, the gunboat was powerless to harm the "Molly Hawk."

There had been a rush to cover on the part of the Portuguese, only her captain and one of her officers remaining on deck, but as the "Molly Hawk" got under weigh, some of the men were shamed into returning, and the rifle bullets began to patter about the motor-boat.

"Go below, sir. Steer her from below." Joseph

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Richardson, the tough old fighter, the seasoned Navy man, suddenly took control. "Below, all of you—Master Jack, Master Barney, Ah Lung. I'll follow."

But he did not follow.

A rifle bullet grazed his shoulder, another knocked off his cap, just scraping the skin, so that blood trickled down his face. And then, as those below got the engines to full speed, the gunner began to "see red."

One of Cromwell's "Ironsides" could not have been more fierce, more certain of the righteousness of his cause.

Afterwards, Barney declared that he had heard the old man chanting one of the fighting Psalms of the Covenanters. That is doubtful; Barney may have been wrong. What is certain is that, after using up the belt of the Maxim gun, and sending the Portuguese below in double quick time, Joseph Richardson started in again with his forward one-pounder.

He seemed to take an artist's interest in his work. First, he put her other gun out of action; then he dismounted the Gatling on her bridge, and, after that, pulverised her searchlight.

It was as though he could not miss.

The gunboat was out of action, helpless really. The "Molly Hawk" could have run past her, unharmed.

But the gunner was "seeing red." She should never engage in the slave trade again.

The way in which he planted his next ten shells—Ah Lung had come to help him—was little short of marvellous. Each report meant a deadly hole, through which the water poured; whilst a huge cloud of steam showed that he had disabled her antiquated boiler.

Very soon—Jack had already put the engines to "Dead Slow," and come back on deck—the gunboat began to settle by the head. Then her captain rushed on deck,

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hauled down the flag of the Republic, and waved his hands frenziedly in surrender.

But it was too late. His boat began to settle. Realising his danger, the captain ordered his crew into the boats. Hardly had they started for the opposite shore when the frenzied captives rushed up on deck, plunged overboard and swam to their side of the river, where they were received with great demonstrations of joy.

Then—a sudden lurch to starboard ; as sudden a recovery. An even more sudden lurch to port—and no recovery.

Over, over, over—and the Portuguese gunboat had turned turtle and gone down.

"It was 'kill or be killed,' sir," the gunner said, as he wiped the perspiration off his face. "They would have given us no quarter. . . . And now I expect our niggers will come back and give us all the water we want, if we go to our old anchorage."

The prophecy proved to be correct. The natives must have been watching from the palm grove, for, long before the "Molly Hawk" had brought up again, dug-out canoes had been dragged from all sorts of unexpected hiding-places, and a yelling crowd, half mad with delight, was surrounding the motor-boat.

For many months to come, the villages up the Vito River would have peace, for the Portuguese had no other gunboat in those waters suitable for the abominable traffic in human flesh and blood.

Forty-eight hours later, when the "Molly Hawk" once more crossed the bar of the river, her tanks were full of sweet, fresh water, whilst forward Ah Lung had coop after coop of chickens, and far more vegetables than they could possibly eat.

"It's been an ugly experience," Jack sighed, as they reached the open sea again and started southwards, under

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sail. "I hope there'll be no further trouble. We've strained things pretty far."

Barney nodded.

"What a story for the newspapers. They would make heroes of us—but the law might insist on hanging us."

"Those men will tell no tales, sir," the gunner, who was at the wheel, cut in; "that gunboat is 'lost.' And no nigger on the coast will ever split on us. If he did, his life would not be worth an hour's purchase. The chief told me so. . . . It may have seemed horrible, sir, sending some of those people to face the Great Skipper suddenly, and hand in their log-books just as they stood; but we did right: they were engaged in an unlawful act, and, besides, had wantonly attacked us first. The only thing is that, when we reach Cape Town, we must not breathe a word about it, for we do not want to be detained and our whereabouts made public: We shall have worry enough without that tacked on."

CHAPTER XXV

ROUND THE COAST

“**W**HAT a gloomy hole ! That horrible, flat-topped mountain seems to overhang us all the time. And the people ! Half-castes, Malays, Boers—a hateful crowd. I shall be glad to be away.”

The boys were walking up Adderley Street, Cape Town, and Barney was making the comment which rises to the lips of most Britons who pass through that port.

Table Mountain, huge, threatening, unbeautiful, seems to oppress the whole scene by its vastness. The town at its foot, squalid, undignified, un-English, except as regards a few hundred yards of Adderley Street, is always a disappointment to the newcomer. He expects a fine city as the capital of a British colony, and he finds, instead, an overgrown Boer “dorp,” with a number of unwholesome Asiatics, in addition to the inevitable African natives.

The “Molly Hawk” had made a very good passage from the Vito River, doing the greater part of the distance under sail ; only during the last three days had she struck bad weather, which had kept all hands hard at work most of the time. Still, she had proved herself so fine a sea-boat that there had never been any danger which her crew could not meet. Now she was lying beside one of the quays, having her oil-tanks filled up afresh.

This time the boys had been more careful. They had had the contents of the tanks tested most carefully, and

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had then placed the job of refilling in the hands of a great English firm, which was absolutely above suspicion. Now their object was to discover if the "Pang Yeen" had put in at the port.

At the office the clerk shook his head. "No vessel of that name entered, or been reported," he said as he closed the register.

"That's all right," Jack remarked as they strolled back to the docks. "She's probably ever so far ahead now, and we shall have no more trouble till we're actually on the coast of Borneo."

The "Molly Hawk" was lying alongside a stone quay. Half a dozen men were at work on her, doing various minor repairs to the rigging and in the engine-room. The gunner had gone ashore to look up some old acquaintances, whilst Ah Lung was sitting on the foredeck, preparing some vegetables for dinner.

Barney gave a nod of satisfaction as they came in sight of the little vessel.

"We shall soon be out of this hole again," he said. "I shan't be sorry. Hullo, what's that fellow after, that one in yellow?"

A lean, brown Malay, clad in the gaudy colours beloved of his race, had slipped round the corner of a small building, and was making his way cautiously to the quay side. In his hand he held what appeared to be a long stick. It was obvious that he had the "Molly Hawk" as his objective, obvious, too, that he had not seen the boys approaching.

As he reached the edge of the quay, but a few yards from Ah Lung, he raised his stick. At the same moment Jack gave a yell and rushed forward.

The Malay turned round quickly, seemed to hesitate, then fled, disappearing almost immediately amongst the sheds. "It was one of their rotten blow-canes again,"

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Jack panted. "He was going to murder Ah Lung. If only I could have got my hands on the brute!"

Barney had gone rather white from excitement, not from fear. "I wonder if he was put up to it by the Yellow Dwarf?" he said.

A moment later, that question seemed to be answered by Ah Lung, who had taken his own narrow escape from death very coolly.

"Plenty Palapog man that," he remarked. "Me see the Palapog charm on his arm."

The following morning saw the "Molly Hawk" once more at sea. The night had been an anxious one. It seemed a matter of absolute necessity to keep a constant watch, yet, all the time, there was the dread of one of those horrible little poisoned darts coming out of the darkness. Still, in the end, there was no alarm of any sort.

Originally the boys had intended to put in next at Durban or Delagoa Bay; but now they changed their minds. It was more than likely that the Yellow Dwarf had agents at those places on the look out for them, and they had no desire to run unnecessary risks, so they decided, instead, to go right on to Beira.

"I know that port, sir," the gunner said, "it's the only one in the Mozambique Territory. Of course, it's Portuguese, but the British really rule it. The railway to Mashonaland starts there."

At the mention of the Portuguese, Barney made a wry face.

"If they've heard any rumours from the Vito River——" he began.

The gunner shook his head.

"They won't; and, if the story did come out, we should be held up just the same in a British port. We shall only

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be in Beira a few hours, just for water and oil and provisions. It's not a healthy spot. I was out there in the early days of the railway building."

And then he went on to tell them the terrible story of the construction of the Beira Railway, the line which, they say, cost a human life for every sleeper laid. The fever was appalling, and as so often happens in such circumstances, men began to lose their nerve, and took to drink to restore their courage; with the result that, in the end, liquor and fear claimed more victims than all the natural diseases put together.

They died, the gunner said, like "rotten sheep." Very often they never even drew their first month's pay. Of the original staff, only about three lived to see the line through to the high veld.

In addition to the fever, there were terrible floods which, in an hour, destroyed the work of months. There were lions always round the camps, ready to pick up stragglers, hyenas ready to dig up the dead. There was the constant fear of a native rebellion. There was a pitiless sun which rendered exertion of any sort a veritable misery.

Yet all the time the work went on. Slowly, very slowly, the line—it was only two-foot gauge, a mere toy railway at first—crept along through that dense jungle, rising steadily all the time, until at Macquece it reached the foot of the Great Central Plateau; and there, after twenty miles of zig-zagging amongst the mountains, it was on the high veld, the Promised Land.

"Only our own countrymen could have done it," the gunner said proudly. "It's a big story, a very big one; but it's one of those that never gets into the papers, worse luck. It's more healthy reading than a yarn about some low-down murder or a divorce case."

And the boys, being healthy-minded, agreed heartily.

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The weather round the coast was unusually fine, though there was, of course, the eternal heavy swell, beating in against that iron-bound shore.

They passed within a mile of Port Elizabeth, and wondered why that open roadstead, one of the most dangerous in the world, should be called a "port." Everything had to be discharged into lighters, no easy task when the vessel is rolling heavily. The town itself, built along the shore, looked singularly unattractive.

East London is little better, for though there is a river there, only the smallest vessels can cross its abominable bar.

"The bar at Durban used to be a terror, too," the gunner remarked. "I've known it silt up till there was only nine feet of water at high tide; but now they manage to keep it down with dredgers. Still, the only really good port is Delagoa Bay. We could have bought that for a few thousands twenty-five years ago, but, as we usually do, we lost our chance, and let the Dagos keep it. . . . To-day it's the Gate of South Africa, as we found out during the Boer War."

As they went up the Zululand coast, the gunner pointed out a break in the line.

"That's a treasure-hunting place, sir," he said. "It's St. Lucia Bay, where old President Kruger's millions are supposed to be. During the war, they shipped the gold down to Delagoa, and it was supposed to be put on board a vessel called the 'Dorothea.' Well, a few days later, news came that the 'Dorothea' had gone down mysteriously in St. Lucia Bay. Since then, ever so many expeditions have tried to get at the wreck, and have come to grief. Dozens of lives have been lost over it."

"Why?" Jack asked. "What's the difficulty? Can't they locate her?"

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The gunner gave his plug a twist.

"The ground swell's the difficulty. The wreck's there, in shallow water, but the moment they get the diving boat over it, she's swamped. If they had wanted to pick out a safe grave for the 'Dorothea' they couldn't have done better. She'll keep her own secret."

Barney raised his eyebrows.

"Is there a secret?" he asked.

"Well, some say there is," the old sailor answered. "A lot of men hold that there never was any gold aboard her, only boxes of lead, that the gold had all been stolen by some Germans in Delagoa Bay. It's a queer story, anyway. I know this much—I'd sooner be on our own treasure hunt, after the Black Pearl, than trying after old Paul Kruger's lost treasure. There's no luck for anyone about that."

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

EVERYONE who knows Beira will tell you it is the hottest, most detestable little port in the Indian Ocean.

The bay, really the mouth of the Pungwe River, is large and well-sheltered, the shores being covered with horrible mangroves. The town itself stands on a sandy beach, but a few feet above sea level, and appears, at first sight, to consist of little more than a few score of sweltering, galvanised-iron shanties. When you land at the little stone quay, and pass the uncleanly sentinels with their rusty rifles and eternal cigarettes, you find that the roads are all heavy sand, that ordinary wheeled traffic is quite impossible, all transport work being carried out by means of little trollies running on tiny tram-lines. You, yourself, have to charter a trolley with a chair on it, and be pushed along by two white-clad natives.

You will notice, too, that there is the finest collection of samples of rascaldom from all parts of the world lounging about the little cafés near the quay, the very scum of both east and west. Every second building is a liquor shop. Every white man looks yellow from fever, and utterly weary.

"This is worse than Cape Town," Barney remarked as they were being trundled up to their agent's store. "Doesn't this wretched tram jolt? And the heat! I

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don't wonder men die quickly here. So far, the only people we've seen doing anything have been drinking."

The agent, who proved to be a fat German, was sitting under a punkah, perspiring. He was very cordial, and expressed himself as being ready to do anything for them, but a minute later he dashed their hopes to the ground.

"Heavy oil for your motor-engines? *Ach, mein*. There is none in Beira, none at all. That I know well, as I am the only person who sells it here, and my stock is run out of late."

Jack drummed on the table with his fingers. They had used a good deal of oil since Cape Town, and it was an important matter to get the tanks refilled.

"When will you have some more?" he asked.

"I have plenty at Zanzibar," the German answered. "There is a steamer leaving there to-morrow, and I can cable her to bring some down."

Jack shook his head. "That means a week's delay here. No, thanks. We have enough left to carry us on to Zanzibar, so we could get it ourselves."

The German beamed. "That is good, very good. I am glad, my young friends. I will cable my manager to be sure and reserve some."

"That settles the question of whether we go up the coast, or via Mauritius," Jack remarked, as they left the store. "Hullo, there's the Post Office. Let's go and get some stamps."

They made their purchases from the dirty Goanese postal clerk, and were just about to leave, when a native came in with a telegram, which he handed to the official. The latter scanned it, frowned, then called to the boys.

"Senhors! I little English spik. I cannot this word read. Would you assist?" and he held out the slip of paper.

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Jack took it. "Casual beggars," he remarked, "not much secrecy here," then his expression changed suddenly, for the "English" word was "Pang Yeen"!

Still, he kept control over himself, not saying a word to Barney, who had already strolled to the door, and was looking out. Not until they were both in the street did he let himself go; then:

"Barney," he said, very quietly, "we've had a narrow escape. That telegram was to the Yellow Dwarf, aboard the 'Pang Yeen' at Zanzibar, telling him we're coming up."

The other gave vent to a low whistle.

"Thunder! We should have gone straight into his jaws, and been chewed up. He's organised his spy service pretty thoroughly. What's the move now?"

"Mauritius," Jack answered promptly. "Let the German think we're going to Zanzibar. That'll keep the 'Pang Yeen' hanging about on the coast, and give us a fair start."

The German seemed most anxious to assist them to get off speedily. So well did he bestir himself that by the evening they had everything they required aboard, ready to leave at dawn. He literally beamed on them as he said good-bye—he had taken the trouble to come down himself.

"Now I have instructed my agent, who will meet you on arrival," he added. "Good-bye, and good luck to yourselves, and this your most wonderful yacht."

"Hypocrite," Barney growled, as he watched the stout, white-clad figure clambering on to the quay. "I hope we'll have the chance of getting square with you yet."

The gunner shook his head.

"Leave him to the Great Skipper, Master Barney. He'll get his reward later on."

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Had the German been outside the harbour the following morning just after sunrise, he would probably have used some very bad language on seeing the course which the "Molly Hawk" was steering. At first he might not have understood it at all, because it is doubtful whether either he, or the Yellow Dwarf, had ever thought of the possibility of the boys taking Mauritius on their route. The previous night they had calculated out matters carefully. Given decent weather their oil ought just to suffice to carry them to the island. But, in order to be on the safe side, they had decided to use their sails whenever there was a fair wind.

The gunner had warned them that they might expect some dirty weather on the passage, but their luck seemed still to hold good. A good breeze, which hardly varied a point the whole time, took them more than half-way, and when they finally caught sight of the weird, needle-like pinnacles of the hills above Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius, they still had a fair amount of oil in hand.

Mauritius ranks as one of the curiosities of the world. It is only some seven hundred square miles in extent, yet, so enormous is the amount of sugar produced in it, that it supports a population of over a hundred and seventy thousand people, almost all of whom are coloured.

Indians, French half-castes, Chinamen, negroes—every race of Africa, Asia, and Europe is represented there. Yet, when the island was discovered, its sole inhabitants were the dodos and the giant tortoises! The dodo has gone, but some of the tortoises remain. There is one whose history goes back with certainty for two hundred and fifty years, and he was not young then.

Everything in Mauritius looks wonderfully green, save the hills, which rise like gigantic black obelisks out of the plain. Port Louis lies at the foot of a semicircle of these hills. The harbour is long, narrow, and well-sheltered,

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Outwardly, at least, the place is safe and delightful, a very haven of refuge; but it has its drawbacks, as the boys were soon to learn.

The port doctor, a stout Frenchman, allowed them to enter after a great deal of unnecessary fuss and delay.

"I should think they must be a jolly clean lot on shore to need all these precautions," Barney growled, after the vessel had been fumigated, and all their dirty linen dipped in disinfectants.

"Clean!" Joseph Richardson snorted. "It's the dirtiest town in the Empire, out and away. One great big smell—that's what it is!"

The first thing that struck the boys on entering was that every vessel was moored bow and stern. The pilot took them to their moorings, which were well to the side of the harbour, and they proceeded to make the "Molly Hawk" fast. They had just finished their task, and were about to clean themselves, when a sudden commotion broke out on the quay, men shouting, rushing about hither and thither, hurrying away the horses and carts which had been carrying sugar to the lighters, frenziedly trying to get everything under cover.

Half a dozen shore boats put out from the landing-stage, and began to row in frantic haste towards the larger steamers.

"What ever can it mean?" Jack asked in astonishment.

The gunner answered:

"A cyclone's coming, sir, I'm afraid. They've just got the warning from the observatory. . . . Aye, look there," as the steamer nearest them began to belch smoke out of her funnel. "Those who can get to sea are going to do so. It's safer for them than being in this trap."

"Ought we to go?" Barney asked.

The old sailor shook his head.

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"No. We're better as we are. The 'Molly Hawk' wasn't intended to weather Indian Ocean cyclones. It would be different if we had more hands. But we can double our mooring ropes."

For the next hour they were too busy to pay attention to anything but their work. After seeing to the moorings, they struck both the topmasts and made all loose gear as secure as it was possible to do. Then they looked round. Half the steamers had managed to get outside the harbour; of the rest, some had not enough steam up, whilst the others were too light to face a heavy sea.

On shore, it was like a city of the dead. Not a soul was to be seen. Every window was closed with thick, heavily-barred shutters.

When they entered the port, there had been a light, pleasant breeze. Now, there was a horrible, uncanny stillness in the air, a curious greyness in the sky.

"It's eerie," Jack said with a little shiver. "Listen! What's that?"

A faint humming noise was all the others could hear at first; but, within a few seconds, it was more like a distant roar. Joseph Richardson recognised it.

"Down below, all of you," he said. "The cyclone is on us. May the Great Skipper see us safely through!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CYCLONE

IT seemed to the little party in the saloon—they had battened down the forehatch and were all together—that it was only a few seconds before the cyclone was on them. From that time onwards for the next half-hour they could see nothing, owing to the spray on the port lights, nor could they hear each other speak.

The "Molly Hawk" seemed to shiver all through at the first blast, but within an incredibly short space of time the sea had got up, and she was tossing about violently, in a way which made them tremble for their moorings, extra strong though these were.

Several times a sharp jar told them that something had been driven against the yacht, one of the shore boats probably, and once a heavy object actually landed on the deck.

At last the noise began to abate, then, almost before they realised that they could once more make one another hear, it had died down altogether.

"It's over," Barney said as he proceeded to open the door of the companion way.

The gunner shook his head.

"Over for the moment. It may come back. Most of them do so."

There was blank astonishment on the faces of the boys as they gazed round the harbour. Theirs seemed to be

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the only craft which had not suffered seriously. Every one of the steamers and sailing ships had broken adrift, and gone ashore; whilst the local coasting craft, which had been moored alongside the quays, seemed, in almost every case, to have ground themselves to pieces against the stonework.

Several lighters had been washed clean up on to the land, whilst two tugs, having failed to break loose, had sunk at their moorings. The shore boats had all gone. It must have been some of those which had struck the "Molly Hawk."

The trees, which had looked so green before, were now black, stripped, not only of their leaves, but of all their small branches as well. Of some, only the trunks remained. A vast pile of debris by the Customs House represented the roofs of several neighbouring buildings; whilst, farther back from the water, a couple of black columns of smoke showed where fires had already broken out in wrecked houses.

Yet still, except on the stranded vessels, there was no one in sight.

"Look at that barque! She's lost all her sticks," Barney exclaimed, "and that big tramp steamer that was so light is nearly high and dry. I knew it must be bad, but I never thought it was as bad as this. Somehow, it didn't seem so."

The gunner laughed. "I know, Master Barney; but, you see, we're low in the water, and very tightly built; that's why we escaped. As for those——" he broke off suddenly, and listened. "Look out! It's coming back again, from the other way. Down below all."

He was quite right. They were hardly back in the saloon before the cyclone was on them again, sweeping round the semicircle of hills in the opposite direction

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to its former course. This time, perhaps because they realised the terrific force of the wind, the boys were far more uneasy, and the lips of both moved in prayer.

About the same space of time as in the first instance elapsed before it was over—it had only been a little more than an hour from start to finish—but now there was no fear of a return. It was just a question of reckoning up the damage—and counting the dead.

At first glance, when they opened the hatch and stepped on to the deck, it seemed to the boys that in its second passage the storm had done little, perhaps because it had already accomplished all that was possible. Yet a second look showed them that it had really completed the wreck of the shipping, of which, with the sole exception of the "Molly Hawk," there was not a single vessel which was not either a wreck, or totally disabled. Even the "Molly Hawk" had not escaped entirely, for in addition to some damage to her paintwork, caused by shore boats being dashed against her, a heavy shutter, ripped off a house on shore, had been flung on to her deck, smashing in the fore-companion-hatch.

But they quickly had something more serious than that to think of, a danger which made them move as, perhaps, they had never moved before. A large tramp steamer, which had been lying in mid-harbour, had been driven ashore at the first onslaught of the cyclone, her bows being stove in; but on its return, the storm had, somehow, refloated her, and now she was drifting helplessly, well down at the head, drifting right on to them, to foul them, perhaps to drag them down with her.

"Axes!" Jack cried. "Cut our moorings, Barney, Ah Lung! Take the wheel, Gunner, whilst I start the engines."

If any one of them had failed, disaster would have been inevitable, if one had even stumbled and so lost a second

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or two. But as Jack got the engines going, so the others hacked through the mooring ropes.

The great steamer was actually on them, her black hull towering over them, but a foot or two away, when the "Molly Hawk" began to move. Half a minute later, with a lurch, the steamer settled down, until only her bridge and part of her upper deck were visible above the water.

During the next three days and nights the boys hardly closed their eyes. The loss of life in the town had been very great, over a thousand, and, in its blind terror, the coloured population seemed to get out of hand. As a result, the Governor proclaimed martial law, which gave him power to commandeer anything.

He would have commandeered the "Molly Hawk," as being the only effective craft in the port, but, before he could do so, the boys had voluntarily placed her at his disposal. He found them plenty of work to do, but, in return, he did them a favour—he allowed no private messages mentioning the motor-yacht to go out, and at the same time, as if by mistake, he permitted her to be included in the list of total wrecks. They had told him something of their venture, and, as by a lucky chance he knew Borneo well, he was ready to help in hoodwinking the Yellow Dwarf.

"Van der Humm, or one of his agents, is certain to get the 'news,'" Jack exclaimed. "Now, he will worry about us no more. For us, at least, the cyclone has been a good thing."

Barney nodded, then pointed to the stricken town. "Not for those poor wretches there, though. I hear, too, that the sugar plantations are utterly ruined. It means wholesale starvation, the Governor says."

Fortunately for the boys, the store containing the oil

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they needed had escaped damage, and the Governor readily gave them permission to have their tanks refilled. Thus it was that, on the fifth day after their arrival, they found themselves running out of the harbour of Port Louis, bound for Colombo, the last stage but one of their long and adventurous voyage.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A BID FOR THE PEARL

THE trip to Colombo proved to be entirely uneventful. They had plenty of oil, and the certainty of obtaining a new supply in Ceylon, so they hardly used their sails at all.

Jack, of course, had been at the famous seaport before, but it was all new to Barney.

"You don't realise these things," Barney said, as he watched the marvellous scene, the extraordinary amount of shipping, the never-ending activity. "To us, at home, Colombo is just a port in Ceylon—nothing more."

His chum nodded.

"Yes, worse luck, that's the general view. Until people come out here, they don't understand what these places—Colombo, Singapore, Hong Kong—mean, that they give us the command of the world's great highway. You'll see it all now."

Colombo is like a kaleidoscope—all the nations of the earth pass in review before you there, the rich people of the nations, not, as in Mauritius and Borneo, the mere scum. And in Colombo, too, you learn how rich and magnificent the East can be. On the Galle Face, the famous drive of the town, you can see horses and carriages which would astonish even Hyde Park. In the harbour are ships from every part of the world, ships of all nations, trading there because it is a British port, which means there is security

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and justice and sane regulations. A great town, a magnificent town, Colombo is one of the finest jewels in our Imperial Crown. Holding Colombo, we hold half the control of the Indian Ocean.

The boys made their arrangements for a supply of oil and water, then, at Jack's suggestion, they turned into the Grand Asiatic Hotel for tea.

Everyone in the East knows the Grand Asiatic. It is one of the most famous meeting-places in the world. On its broad veranda, overlooking the harbour, half of the most famous people of to-day have sat, at some time or other, and taken tea, or iced drinks, and got angry with the swarm of native dealers in curios or precious stones, who are allowed to pester the life out of every new-comer.

Barney, never having been in Asia before, would have been as wax in the hands of these touts and cadgers, but Jack had learnt things on his former trip, and a word or two from him was enough to send most of them waddling off. But there was one of them, apparently an ordinary Hindu seller of jewels, who would not be sent off. He hovered round, waiting until all the rest had gone, then came close to the boys, a strange gleam in his eyes.

"Sahib," he said to Jack, in a low tone, "I do not want to sell you jewels. I want to buy jewels from you. By and by, I want to buy the Black Pearl of Peihoo."

The words came out so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that both the boys started violently. The native, having fired his shot, stood very still, regarding them with an inscrutable look on his face; then he smiled gently, as he saw that they would not, could not, deny all knowledge of the matter.

It spoke well for the boys' common sense that they did not attempt to lie or to bluster. Both courses would have been equally useless. This Hindu knew of their

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quest, and, apparently, he was not an enemy. He was prepared to buy the Black Pearl—when they had obtained possession of it.

"We have not got the Pearl yet," Jack answered, quietly. "When we have it—if we find out where it is—there will be time enough to talk of selling it. What have you to do with the matter?"

The native had squatted down, and arranged his tray of cheap jewels in front of him, so that any onlooker might have imagined he was trying to do an ordinary deal.

"My name is Gobind Chand," he said. "I am the son of the son of that other Gobind Chand, to whom the Pearl of Peihoo was consigned. . . . Ever since it failed to arrive have we been looking for it, waiting, first my grandfather, then my father, then your servant here. Now, at last, we shall succeed."

Both the boys were conscious of an eerie feeling. This suave, humble native seemed to be so horribly certain, to know so much.

"How did you find out that we held the secret?" Jack asked.

Gobind Chand smiled.

"There are drugs which make men talk. Some of those drugs I gave to the young sahib who has gone to Borneo with that Yellow Dwarf, the thrice-accursed. The sahib's name is 'Tolhus.' To me he told many things, so that I know all about the matter. . . . And now, when the sahibs have the Black Pearl, they will sell it to me."

Jack and Barney exchanged glances. It was rather like counting your chickens before they were hatched; moreover, it did not seem possible that this humble-looking Hindu, in his thin, cheap muslin, with his tray of cheap jewels, could raise the money to purchase the most valuable Pearl the world had ever known.

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Still, as he knew so much, it was evidently not good policy to quarrel with him.

"When we have the Pearl, we can talk about that," Jack said; "meanwhile, it's going to take us all our time to get it."

Another hawker passed, and, for a moment, Gobind Chand appeared to be busy with his tray; then:

"I can help the sahibs much," he murmured, "there are things I know, and I am honest in great matters, even though I hawk jewels in Colombo. The sahibs should take me with them."

But Jack shook his head. He was going to have no unknown natives on the venture.

"We can do it by ourselves," he answered. "Later, if we succeed, we shall be back here, in Colombo, then you can make us an offer for the Pearl."

A flush of annoyance crossed the Hindu's face, then he salaamed.

"Very well. The sahib will keep his word. And I shall be here, to buy."

As they walked away from the hotel—

"I don't like it a bit," Barney said. "How does that fellow know about our quest? My own idea, too, is that he is far more likely to try and steal the Pearl from us than to buy it from us."

"It can't be helped," Jack answered. "I did my best to keep him friendly. If he had been an enemy, I don't think he would have tackled us at all. Still, it is strange how this story of the Pearl seems to have got round amongst the natives. I shall be glad now when the quest is all over."

There was nothing particular to do on board the yacht—they had arranged for the tanks to be filled the following morning—so, at Barney's suggestion, they strolled up into

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the native portion of the town. They soon found plenty to interest them—effeminate Cingalese men, their long hair done up with tortoiseshell combs; Buddhist priests with shaven heads; humble Tamil coolies from Southern India; huge, fierce-looking Afghans and Pathans from the Far North; temples, bazaars, beggars—and, as a result, went on farther than they had intended to do at first.

“We seem to have got to a kind of Chinese quarter,” Jack remarked. “Ah Lung is ashore somewhere. I wonder if we shall come across him.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when three Chinamen stumbled out of the doorway of a filthy hovel, just ahead of them. They were arm in arm, or rather, the two outer ones were supporting the man in the centre, who appeared to be hopelessly drunk. The boys drew to one side, intending to let them pass; then, suddenly, both sprang forward; for the drunken man was none other than Ah Lung.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CANTONESE

"TWO of the most evil-looking brutes I ever saw"—that was the description of the two Chinamen which Barney gave the gunner afterwards. Certainly, they acted up to their appearance. They must have realised at once who the boys were, for, letting go of Ah Lung, who staggered and then fell to the ground, they turned savagely on Jack and Barney.

The boys were totally unarmed—one does not carry weapons in daylight in a British city of the type of Colombo—but the Celestials had knives, which they whipped out hastily. Still, though they threatened, they did not attempt to do anything at once.

"What you wantee with our brother?" one of them growled, coming very close to Jack, whilst the other did the same to Barney.

The boys glanced round quickly. The street appeared to be deserted, save for a couple more Chinamen lounging in a doorway some twenty yards off, and a Cingalee, who had turned tail at the first hint of trouble. Ah Lung was lying just as he had fallen, the boys' assailants now having their backs to him.

To have attempted resistance would have been madness, asking for certain death.

"We don't want to interfere," Jack answered slowly, trying to gain time, in the hope of help appearing. "We

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thought it was our cook you had there, and we wanted to get him back to our yacht. If you'll bring him along we'll pay well."

The Celestials snarled.

"This no your cook. You go way now, plenty quick. Savee?" and the big knives flashed ominously.

Barney glanced at Jack. There seemed to be no course open to them save retreat, mortifying though that would be. Perhaps they would be able to rescue Ah Lung when they returned later with the police.

"All right. We're going," Barney began; "keep that beastly knife away from my ribs, can't you! Ah!"

There was good reason for the exclamation, for, without the slightest apparent cause, the two Chinamen were jerked violently backwards, landing on their heads.

Ah Lung had recovered his senses, and had seized each of them by an ankle so unexpectedly that they had not had a chance to save themselves.

It was the work of a moment for the boys to jump on them, and wrest the knives from their hands, whilst Ah Lung staggered to his feet, ready to help if need be. But his fellow-countrymen knew the game was up. Their own knives were pressed against their throats, and the look in the boys' faces told them that they would not get much mercy.

"Kill them. Plenty pirate-man," Ah Lung growled. "Let me kill if you no wantee do it."

The boys were in a fix. Of course, it was out of the question to follow Ah Lung's advice, yet, at the same time, it was dangerous to release their prisoners. However, the matter was settled for them by the appearance of a couple of native police at the end of the road.

"Let them go now," Jack said quickly. "We don't want to be in a police court case."

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As soon as they were released, the two Celestials skulked off hurriedly, and were lost to view down a narrow alley. A couple of rupees served to allay the constables' curiosity, and make them volunteer to conduct the sahibs out of what was obviously a dangerous area.

As they went, Ah Lung explained. He had been to find a cousin of his, and had, quite by chance, fallen in with this pair of scoundrels who, under the pretext of showing him where his cousin now lived, had taken him to an opium den, intending apparently to drug him.

Realising that he was in a dangerous position, he had pretended to be thoroughly drunk, hoping for a chance to escape, a thing which he probably would not have accomplished had it not been for the boys' unexpected appearance, just as he was being taken from the opium den to his captors' own abode.

"But what was their motive? Robbery?" Barney asked.

The Celestial shook his head emphatically. No, it was not robbery. He knew far better than to go down to that part with anything worth stealing on him; but these men were no ordinary thieves, being, in fact, his pet aversions, Cantonese pirate-men. They, too, like Gobind Chand, had learnt of the discovery of the Black Pearl of Peihoo and, for months past, they had been waiting to kidnap Ah Lung, in order to extract the secret from him.

He was visibly shaken, unusually shaken, over the narrowness of his own escape.

"Plenty bad men those," he exclaimed. "Kill me, if not tell them about Black Pearl; then send junks to take 'Molly Hawk,' and kill all. Savee?"

Certainly, the boys did "savee," only too well. They were more than thankful for Ah Lung's escape, but, at the same time, the news he had given them was most disturbing,

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especially as their follower declared, emphatically, that the Cantonese had nothing to do with Piet Van der Humm, that they were, in fact, his most deadly foes.

"So we've got two sets of enemies to dodge," Jack said. "Three, if you count Gobind Chand, who may, or may not, prove to be friendly. It's just a question now which of these parties is going to turn out to be the most dangerous."

Barney laughed.

"We shall be our own worst enemies, if we let things trouble us beforehand. We've just got to take reasonable precautions, and then go straight ahead."

His chum gave him a quick look. The owner of the "Molly Hawk" had changed wonderfully since leaving England. He was still happy, still ready to laugh, but he had lost his irresponsibility. When difficulties or dangers arose, he took them seriously, faced them squarely. The adventure in Madeira had altered his outlook on life considerably; but the tragedy in the Vito River had had an even greater effect. Perhaps because he saw how easy it is to take human life, realised how impossible it is to bring back the dead, he was far less ready to talk of fighting, even whilst those adventures had made him a far better man in a fight. There was now no question of his sleeping on watch.

Nothing could have exceeded the calmness with which the gunner received their news.

"The more the merrier," he exclaimed, glancing towards the carefully shrouded gun-mountings—the guns themselves had been sent below temporarily. "We'll beat them all, or, better still, set them on to fight each other. It'll be a proper case of 'dog eating dog.' Still, the sooner we're away from here, and heading for the coast of Borneo, the better. Because you know you're going to win, it doesn't mean you ought to risk losing points in the game."

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That night it fell to Jack to take the twelve till four anchor watch. He saw the lights on shore go out, at first in great batches, as the hotels closed, then singly as the last revellers went to bed. A patrol launch passed the "Molly Hawk," and he gave it "All's well." Two ancient brigs, decrepit enough by day, but looking stately and dignified in the moonlight, slipped past on the tide, followed closely by a Maldivian craft with weird matting sails, and a jabbering crowd on her stern. Then all seemed to become suddenly still.

Jack went to the stern rail, and stared towards the open sea. Never before had the desperate nature of their mission come home to him so strongly, and never before had he prayed so passionately for help and guidance.

Suddenly he swung round, as a hand was laid on his arm, a lean, nervous, yellow hand with long finger-nails.

"Can do." It was Ah Lung's voice, confident, almost affectionate, a rare thing in a Celestial. "Can do no wrong, savee? You lookee—there goes Cantonese pirate-man," and he pointed to a junk which was just leaving some inner wharf, towed by a fussy little steam launch. "Chinese trader here, plenty good. Big Chinese merchant, Chinese banker, believe him all right; but very much pirate out there in Borneo."

The young skipper of the "Molly Hawk" stared gloomily at the junk. Certainly, she did not look a formidable enemy, but it was unsafe to prophesy, knowing, as he did, how keen and resourceful were their foes.

Perhaps Ah Lung understood what was in his mind. At any rate, he tried to cheer him up.

"Can do," he repeated, "can get Black Pearl of Peihoo. Me tell you that."

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAST STAGE

THE "Molly Hawk" slipped out of Colombo very quietly, after dark. Once more the Pearl seekers had been obliged to change their plans. Instead of putting in at Singapore, they were going to run straight on, to touch nowhere else until they reached the coast of Borneo.

As soon as they were well out at sea, the guns, which had been sent below some time previously, were fetched up, and re-mounted. There was plenty of ammunition for them, and every day the gunner insisted on giving the boys target-practice at a screen towing astern. "I may get disabled," he said. "And anyway, if we get a real fight, we shall want to use both our one-pounders."

The Maxim, too, was tested and put into perfect order, and all the small arms were overhauled most carefully. Then there were the smoke helmets to be tried. After a great deal of discussion, it had been arranged that Ah Lung should make the actual descent into the smoke hole to fetch out the Viceroy's box, whilst Barney was to be reserve-man for the task; consequently, both of these practised wearing the unwieldy gear in the fierce glare of the sun, so that, when the crucial moment came, they should not find the dress and helmets strange.

The days seemed to slip by with lightning rapidity.

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It was a fair weather passage all through, and they made very good running. They had got out a course which would keep them well out of the track of most vessels, and though, once they got down amongst the islands, navigation became a nervous task, they never actually got their little vessel into danger.

As they drew near to their destination, a curious restlessness seemed to take hold of them all. Little was said now about their venture, but everyone was keenly on the qui vive. It became difficult to sleep during the watch below, difficult to refrain from continually consulting the patent log, and then looking at the chart. At last there came a day when Jack was able to announce, at noon, that they were actually within fifty miles of the mouth of Raja Seyed's river. A dim haze showed them where the coast of Borneo was, and before long they could make out clearly a line of mountains far inland.

Ah Lung pointed to a certain great peak. They had passed within a few miles of that on their memorable canoe journey, after their escape from the head-hunters, he declared.

Jack nodded in silence. He, too, had recognised the mountain; but the memories it brought back were almost too much for him; then, as he thought of what the next few days might bring, when he thought of the possibility of once more falling into the hands of Raja Seyed and the Yellow Dwarf, a sudden chill ran through his veins. If any of his comrades came to grief their blood would be on his head, he told himself.

The plans for the landing had been worked out carefully. The "Molly Hawk" was to be run into a small creek which formed the nearest point of the sea to the Smoke Hole. On account of his wooden leg, the gunner was to be left on board, in charge of the yacht; whilst the

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other three were to make as straight a course as possible for the Smoke Hole, and return quickly with the treasure.

The smoke helmets and gear were all ready for carrying; each of the three was to take a rifle—a 400 bore weapon using cordite and a nickel-covered expanding bullet, not a footling little Service rifle—an automatic pistol, and a package of provisions. A couple of strong rope ladders completed the equipment.

Barney, who had never yet trekked in the Tropics, tried the weight of his load, and nodded sagely.

"You were saying it would be hard work, Jack," he remarked. "Why, it's not much, really."

Jack, remembering treks he had made in that same country when, with only a rifle, he had panted and stumbled along, his eyes full of perspiration, made no reply; but Ah Lung grunted:

"Plenty heavy for little foreign devil; plenty mud, plenty hills. To-morrow you savee it all."

Barney laughed.

"Oh, well, once we've got the Black Pearl we can afford to leave all this stuff behind and come back light, can't we, Jack?"

His chum nodded absently. For the thousandth time he was trying to weigh up their chances of success, trying to devise new schemes for securing their own safety. A sudden descent on the coast, a sudden dash to the Smoke Hole—it could not really be more than ten miles in a straight line—a dash back with their treasure—they might do it that way; and, afterwards, if the "Pang Yeen" did get on their track, Joseph Richardson's wonderful shooting might carry them through.

"Might! Might! It's all might," he muttered to himself.

The gunner's quick ears overheard the words.

THE LAST STAGE

"Trust the Great Skipper, sir," he said simply. "Trust in His real Might. Didn't He see you through before? Can't He do it again? These Palapogs, and Sultans, and Rajas, and Yellow Dwarfs are all clean against Him and His teaching. Say your prayers, and see that there's no grit in the action of your rifle, and you've nothing to fear."

The boy smiled, a little sadly. The responsibility of having brought the others on this quest seemed terrible at times.

"And you, Gunner?" he asked; "we're going to leave you alone, perhaps to face hundreds."

"No, sir, not alone," Joseph Richardson answered stoutly. "There's the Great Skipper, and there're those little pets of mine, too." He pointed meaningly to the Maxim and his beloved one-pounders. "Toys they call 'em, toys!" he snorted contemptuously. "Perhaps they're toys for a marine, but not for me. That Dago craft in the Vito River learnt that lesson."

They had slowed the "Molly Hawk" down to less than half speed, as they did not want to be seen off the Raja's coast in daylight.

"We'll get opposite that creek by dawn," Jack said. "Then make a quick dash in. Perhaps we shall not be sighted. At any rate, we ought to have a few hours' grace before the Yellow Dwarf can hear."

"There's a steamer on the horizon." It was Barney, who had gone up aloft to get a better view, who hailed the deck. "She looks to me very much like the 'Pang Yeen,' and she's coming this way."

CHAPTER XXXI

ASHORE AT LAST

IT did not take Jack long to join his chum up aloft. The sun had just set, but there was still plenty of light, and it was easy to make out a small steamer with two masts and one funnel.

"Yes, I think it is the 'Pang Yeen,' worse luck," Jack said, after he had had a good look. "It's hard to say for certain, but the chances are that it is the Raja's craft. The question is—will she sight us?"

Barney glanced at the glow in the west. "We are against the sun to her, so we've got a chance. If we don't see her change her course before dark, we may assume she's missed us."

They were two very anxious boys who watched the distant steamer in the dying light. Once, Barney declared that he could see by her masts that she had changed her course; then he decided he had been mistaken; and, after that, he returned to his former attitude.

Jack would give no opinion; the result being that, when they descended to the deck once more, they were wholly uncertain as to whether they had been sighted or no, whether they might not, in an hour or so, have a search-light suddenly turned on to them.

Still, there was nothing they could do, save work slowly up towards their destination and wait for what might happen.

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None of the ship's company really turned in that night. From time to time, one or other of the boys dozed on the saloon skylight, whilst Ah Lung had a blanket spread just forward of the foremast, but it was not like real sleep. They had been working up so long to this crisis that now they were all overstrung. Really, they were in the nervy case of men who would shoot at the very first alarm.

When you are searching, in the darkness, for the mouth of a creek which is not marked on your chart, the chances are that you miss the place, and make a mess of things generally; but luck was on the side of the crew of the "Molly Hawk." Dawn found them a bare mile from shore—they had not intended to get so close in—but it also found them exactly opposite the entrance for which they were making.

Both Jack and Ah Lung recognised the locality at once.

"The mouth of Raja Seyed's river, where we saw the junks which had been trying to loot the birds' nests, is there, about three miles away," Jack said, "and I suppose the Raja's town is fifteen miles up the stream, which is tidal so far. . . . I wish you would go aloft, Barney, and see if there is any sign of the 'Pang Yeen.'"

Five minutes later, after a most careful scrutiny of the horizon, Barney reported that there was not a sail in sight; nor could he see any sign of life on shore, not a single whisp of smoke was rising in the still air.

Jack heaved a sigh of relief.

"Very well," he said to the gunner, who was at the wheel, "run straight into the creek. It is high tide, and there will be plenty of water for the 'Molly Hawk.' We'll anchor in mid-stream, and land in the dinghy, hiding her in the bushes."

A strange silence fell on them all as they entered the creek. At last they were actually in Borneo, actually

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in Raja Seyed's territory, ready to come to death grips with the Palapogs if necessary.

The creek, a hundred yards in width at its mouth, narrowed quickly down to a bare fifty yards. On either bank, dense vegetation, of a type known only too well to Jack, overhung the water. They went down, dead slow, until they reached a bend, which sheltered them from observation from the open sea, then they anchored promptly. It was only the work of a few minutes to get the dinghy into the water. Everything was ready—gear, stores, weapons. A hearty handshake with the gunner—a silent farewell, for they could hardly trust themselves to speak—then they were rowing to the bank, to begin the last, and by far the most dangerous, portion of their adventure.

A huge tree, hanging a good twenty feet over the water, seemed to offer an ideal hiding-place for the dinghy. Very cautiously they made their way under its boughs, turning to give one last wave of the hand to Joseph Richardson. Ah Lung, who had been rowing, drew in his sculls, and Barney, in the bow, began to pull the little craft along by the branches.

"Be careful," Jack exclaimed, "you never know——"

The sentence was not finished. He had been going to warn Barney against snakes, and, at that very moment, his chum put his hand on a ten-foot-long reptile, which was lying coiled up in a crook of a bough. The loathsome head was reared up instantly, and, though Barney drew back suddenly, as far as he could, he must inevitably have been struck in the face, had not Ah Lung, with an almost superhuman effort, seized a lower branch, and thrust the dinghy to one side, out of reach of the snake.

For a moment Barney was visibly shaken, then he tried to laugh.

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"Our luck is evidently going to hold good," he said.

The Chinaman nodded.

"Him killee you plenty quick that snake," he answered.

They found an easy landing-place, just at the foot of the tree trunk, made their dinghy fast, then got their stuff out on to the bank. Not a moment was wasted. Jack had arranged everything perfectly, the loads were all ready, and each knew exactly what he had to do.

There was, of course, nothing in the nature of a path, and, at first, it was no easy task to force one's way through the dense bush along the side of the creek; but, on the other hand, as Jack was glad to note, there was no human spoor to be seen anywhere. Evidently the natives had no villages in the immediate neighbourhood.

Once they were away from the creek, however, the undergrowth became less troublesome, and it was possible both to follow a fairly straight course, and to travel fairly quickly. Already Jack could make out familiar landmarks. The range of hills at the back of the Kanderong Caves had, of course, been visible since dawn; but now, as they breasted the first rise, he was able to point out to Barney the gap through which they would have to pass.

"The Smoke Hole is only a mile beyond that," he said. "Only a mile! Think of that, old man! Then we shall have the Black Pearl."

Barney nodded, but he did not answer. Already he was breathless. During the voyage he had got distinctly out of training, whilst, of course, this was his very first experience of the Tropics. The heat, the toil of pushing aside the leaves and branches, and, of course, the unaccustomed load, were telling on him sorely, even at the start. He was determined not to give in, determined, if possible, not to let his companions see how distressed

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he was, yet when he looked forward, and saw the distance which had to be covered, his spirits fell to zero.

How was he going to do it ?

For the next couple of miles, however, he managed to struggle on manfully, fighting hard to keep up with the others. Somehow, the dangers of the venture seemed to be as nothing now compared with his own sufferings. How he envied Jack and Ah Lung ! During the next mile he went as if in a dream ; afterwards, he could recall little or nothing of it ; then, suddenly, he collapsed, going down like a log. At the sound of his load falling against a stone, Jack looked round. A moment later, his own kit was on the ground, and he was hastening to the assistance of his chum.

" I'll be all right soon, quite all right," Barney gasped ; but both the Chinaman and Jack knew better. Barney would not be fit to carry anything heavier than a rifle that day.

What was to be done ? It did not take Jack long to make up his mind. One of those life-saving suits and smoke-helmets must be left behind. After all, the chances were greatly against the spare one being needed. By leaving it, it would be possible to reduce Barney's load down to the rifle and his own provisions.

A quarter of an hour's rest sufficed to allow Barney to recover. At first he protested strongly against the proposed abandonment of the gear, but Jack would listen to no argument, and at last Barney gave in, with an inward sense of thankfulness. After all, he knew he could not face that march with the full load.

The sun was now high in the heavens, and the heat had become intense, but still they started off again at a good pace. Things seemed to be in their favour, after all. They had seen no sign of natives, had not even crossed a native footpath.

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Then, suddenly, Ah Lung brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired. A brown figure sprang into the air from behind a bush, then collapsed inertly.

"Palapog," the Celestial grunted; "no do any more killee now," and he gave a little grin of satisfaction.

But Jack, who had dashed behind the bush, and had been trying vainly to get a sight of something, came back with a very gloomy look on his face.

"There was another of the beggars," he said, "he's got clean away with the news."

CHAPTER XXXII

DOWN THE SMOKE HOLE

JACK'S news was about as grave as any could possibly be. It was certain now that, within a very short time, Piet Van der Humm and the Raja would know of their presence in the country, which would mean, too, that they would know of the presence of the "Molly Hawk" and, even though the boys and Ah Lung might slip through their fingers, and reach safety, as Jack and the Celestial had done before, the motor-boat would inevitably be found.

The gunner would put up a good fight—of that they were sure. He would be able to use the Maxim, and so long as the attack was all on one side, he could beat off hundreds of opponents; but once let them open fire from both banks, and the gun-screen would no longer protect him.

He had been given orders to put to sea at once, if he was hard pressed, to assume that the shore party had been killed or captured—it meant the same thing—and to secure his own safety. But would he do it? Jack and Barney were absolutely certain that he would not. The old hero would fight to the very end, sooner than retreat. Able and cool though he was on all ordinary occasions, and a wise counsellor, when it came to a question of retreating he had a stubbornness which verged on stupidity. Literally, he would stand to his guns to the very last.

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As for the shore party, their one chance was to hurry on still more. They had shed one of their life-saving suits and smoke-helmets, now Jack decided still further to lighten the loads by shedding all the provisions, except one small package, which mentally he reserved for Barney.

Ah Lung nodded wisely at the order.

"Have lived on fruit before, long time. Can do again."

In addition to that, they shed every rag of clothing they could, stripping themselves down to vests, trousers, and boots. What did shirts matter when not only the Black Pearl of Peihoo, but their own lives as well were at stake?

The lightening of the loads, combined with the sense of immediate, pressing danger, led to a great increase of speed. Ah Lung, who had a splendid sense of locality, strode in front, heading always for the gap in the range through which the Smoke Hole was reached. Never once, even in the thickest jungle, did he seem to get out of the straight course. Close on his heels came Barney, whilst Jack now acted as rear-guard.

On and on, toiling up the hills, struggling through the mud in the dips, panting horribly most of the time, the perspiration always smarting in their eyes, the three treasure-seekers hurried towards their goal.

On and on! They had the start over any pursuers, and they were determined to make the most of that fact. On and on! It was a terrible trek, a veritable nightmare of a trek, by reason of the heat, the mud, the sheer physical exertion, even apart from the mental strain, but still, once they were tuned up to it, none of them faltered in the very least degree. They were out to win—or to die.

At last they were in the gap, within a mile of the Smoke Hole, the "Hole where the devils breathe smoke," within a mile of that Black Pearl of Peihoo, which had already cost so many lives.

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In the gap, Jack stopped abruptly, drew a deep breath, then looked back in the direction whence they had come.

Below them, the hills and dips almost lost amongst the immensity of the forest trees, was the jungle through which they had just forced their way—a vast sea of green.

Beyond that jungle was the sea, blue, serene, and on that sea, almost opposite the mouth of the creek in which the "Molly Hawk" was hidden, was a steamer.

"The 'Pang Yeen,'" Barney exclaimed. "She's got the gunner shut in. They'll have him," and he gave a queer little sob.

But Jack shook his head.

"It's not the 'Pang Yeen.' This craft has not got a fiddle-bow. She may be an ordinary trader."

Ah Lung plucked him by the sleeve, and pointed towards the east. "Cantonese pirate junks," he remarked quietly. "Plenty trouble by and by."

Following the direction of the Celestial's finger, the boys could see three large junks coming round a headland, some five miles from the mouth of the creek. They must have seen the steamer some time before, yet apparently her presence did not disturb them in the least degree.

Jack turned away impatiently.

"We can't help things now; we can't alter things, so far as the sea is concerned. Our business is to secure the Pearl, and to chance the rest."

It was not long before Jack clutched Barney's arm and pointed to a cloud of smoke floating slowly upwards, a puff of smoke, such as might have been blown out by some monstrous smoker.

"That comes from the place," he said, "from the Smoke Hole itself. It is intermittent, not like a typical volcano."

And then, almost before they knew what had happened, they were standing on the very edge of that awful pit,

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and Jack, in the most quiet, matter-of-fact tones—strangely matter-of-fact—was pointing out to his chum the Viceroy's box on the ledge forty feet below them.

"The Black Pearl of Peihoo is in that, in that," he repeated the words more or less mechanically. "It is still there. No one else has found it."

Then another of those terrible puffs of smoke came up, and they had to dash away from the edge, choking and half-blinded.

One glance had sufficed for Ah Lung. As soon as he was certain that the treasure had not been taken already, he began, in the most matter-of-fact way, to untie the various packages of gear, the smoke-helmet, the rope-ladders. He was not going to lose a minute; every second was precious.

His example set the boys on, too. There was no tree anywhere near the edge of that horrible pit, but there were plenty of huge boulders, and they had some spare rope; consequently, it was not a difficult matter to get a sound fixing for their rope-ladder.

Ah Lung was to be the one to descend. Both the boys were deadly keen to have the honour, but common-sense prevailed. The Celestial was far tougher than either of them, far less likely to turn giddy, or to lose his nerve. Moreover, if he went, there could be no rivalry between them.

Whilst they were fixing the rope-ladder, their companion was arranging his smoke-helmet—or trying to arrange it.

"No can do!" The boys turned sharply at the words. "No can do. No use at all!"

The Chinaman was regarding the helmet with the most intense disfavour. Then they understood. By some horrible oversight, when they abandoned the other suit, they had also abandoned part of this one. It was quite

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impossible to make a smoke-tight joint at the neck! The whole thing was useless. In fact, it was worse than useless, for the smoke could get in, that deadly sulphur-laden mixture of gases, and kill the wearer even more quickly than would have been the case had he not had the helmet on his head.

It was a tragedy, nothing less. To have come all that way, to have been through so many perils, and then to fail like this, to fail because of a moment's carelessness. It seemed too hard.

Barney gave a queer little sob. "It's my fault, Jack. If I had not given in as I did, we should have had the second helmet, and the rest of this one as well. I've ruined it all, because it's too late to go back now for the things we abandoned. The Palapogs will have been there already, or will be there soon."

His chum shook his head.

"It's the luck of the game," he said hoarsely. "Yet to think the Pearl is there so close!"

But the Chinaman made no more complaints. He set his face hard, having come there to get the Black Pearl of Peihoo, or to perish in the attempt.

"After all, can do," he grunted, casting the smoke-helmet aside. "Can do this way."

He had only a loose kind of blouse on his skinny yellow body, but now he took that off, tore it into strips, tied those strips together, then turned to Jack, and explained. That bandage was to be put round his mouth, and he was going down into that terrible pit without any other protection.

"No, no!" Jack drew back in horror, for this faithful yellow-skinned man was very dear to him. "No, no, Ah Lung, your life is worth more than a dozen Black Pearls."

The Chinaman grinned.

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"Can do," he repeated. "Better make haste, or Palapog men come."

Very reluctantly Jack gave way. The bandage was put on carefully, so as to allow as much chance as possible for breathing, but, even then, it was a case of semi-suffocation.

The rope-ladder was lowered down immediately after one of the huge puffs of smoke had ascended. It reached the ledge easily, and, had it not been for those ghastly fumes, the recovery of the bronze box would have been a very simple matter. But no man could say what was the nature of the atmosphere forty feet down, whether it would be possible to breathe at all. For all they knew, Ah Lung might be suffocated before he had descended ten feet.

Yet, none the less, he did descend, and, so far as the boys could see, he was absolutely calm and untroubled, absolutely without any sense of fear. Outwardly, at least, they were far more nervous than he was.

The ladder swung to and fro as he went down, but his grip on it was sure, and there seemed no likelihood of his slipping. Once, he glanced up at the boys and smiled, as though telling them that all was right.

Then, just as his foot was above the ledge, just as he was within a few feet of the Black Pearl itself, one of those terrible puffs of smoke suddenly burst upwards. The boys, who had been leaning over the brink, jumped back, and attempted to keep off the fumes by covering their faces with their hands; but Ah Lung was down below, right in the horror of it.

The moment the smoke was clear the boys were back, dreading to find the ladder hanging loose, to find that the faithful Chinaman had fallen headlong into that inferno. Yet there he was, clinging desperately to the ladder, his

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head lolling on one side, like that of a hopelessly drunken man ; but still he was struggling upwards, rung by rung, and in the bag which he had taken with him, slung over his back, was the bronze box containing the Black Pearl of Peihoo.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE STEAMER OUTSIDE

WOULD Ah Lung do it? Would his strength hold out until he reached the surface?

The boys held their breath as they watched him struggling to keep his self-control, struggling to prevent the last of his strength from slipping away, fighting to be out of that terrible pit before the next puff of smoke should be on him.

Would he do it? It is only fair to say that, during those few agonising seconds, the boys' thoughts were all of the man, and not of the treasure which that man was carrying. Together they knelt on the very edge, at the top of the ladder, waiting for a chance to seize the man the moment he came within reach. The fumes rose into their nostrils and eyes, choking them, half-blinding them; but they were barely conscious of this. What could their sufferings be compared with those of the man below them?

Six feet from the top, Ah Lung stopped. The boys groaned. Was he done? Was he going to fail when so close to safety? A few seconds more, and one of those terrible puffs of smoke would be due. Yet there was nothing they could do, nothing at all.

The Chinaman's head had fallen forward now, and he seemed to have lost all sense of where he was. Hitherto the boys had not said a word; but now Jack hailed suddenly.

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" Ah Lung ! Hurry up ! Come on ! " he cried sharply, as though giving a command on board ship.

To their intense relief, they saw that the yellow man had heard the words. He looked up, with awful, blood-shot eyes, then very slowly, with an obvious effort, began to climb again.

One rung—two—three—four—at last ! Strong young arms seized him, dragged him up, regardless of the rocks which cut right into his bare flesh, and flung him into safety, just as the next of the smoke puffs whirled out of the pit. A second or two more, and both the *Celestial* and the *Black Pearl* would have been lost for ever.

The first thing to do was to remove the bandage from Ah Lung's mouth, the next to give him some brandy and water. For a few seconds he could do little else than gasp and blink—it seemed as though he could neither speak nor see—then he staggered to his feet, looked round wildly, felt for the bag hanging on his back, and seemed to remember.

" Plenty big Viceroy's *Black Pearl* of Peihoo here," he said hoarsely, with an attempt at a grin. " We get back to ship muchee quick, before Palapog man come and catchee."

His words recalled the boys to the danger of their position. Probably the Palapog they had seen had long since raised the alarm, and already parties would be out searching for them. There had been plenty of rain lately and, once their spoor was picked up, the natives would have little difficulty in following it.

Really, there was not a moment to lose, not a moment even for examining the box which had cost so much to secure, and might easily cost so much more—in human lives.

It was only the work of a few seconds to toss the now

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useless rope-ladder and smoke-helmet into the pit, then, with hardly a word having been spoken, they were ready to start on their way back.

"You takee this." The Celestial had taken the little bag off his back, and held it out to Jack.

But the latter shook his head.

"No," he answered, knowing how the trust would please his faithful follower. "You keep it, Ah Lung. It's safer with you. Let's get out through the gap as quickly as we can—that's where we may be trapped—then we will make a bit of a sweep to the right, to keep away from our former track."

Beyond the Pearl, and the one small package of food, their only loads now consisted of their weapons; moreover, though there were many dips and rises, they were really descending all the time; consequently, their pace was better than it had been coming up.

It must be admitted that all three were very nervous as they reached the gap. If any party of Palapogs had got on their trail quickly after the alarm, it was at the gap that they would probably wait for their victims.

Jack went first, his rifle ready, the others following close at his heels. They peered round cautiously, expecting every moment to hear a rifle-shot, or, worse still, to have one of those deadly little darts in their flesh. But nothing happened. There was not a sign of life.

As they entered the jungle on the other side of the gap, the boys breathed prayers of gratitude. One great peril, one more great peril, was safely past.

"Now for the dash to the creek," Jack began, but the words were hardly out of his mouth, when, from a bare twenty yards away, came the sounds of voices.

Instantly the three treasure-hunters sank down into the undergrowth. The speakers were hidden from them by

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a screen of bush ; but it was obvious that they consisted of a large body of natives ; there came a voice, the sound of which made Jack grip Barney's arm fiercely.

" We've got them," it said in English. " They've gone on there, amongst the rocks, and there's no other way out, except that through the Kanderong Caves, where I've got men on watch."

" The Yellow Dwarf," Jack whispered. " He never suspects we have been so quick. It will give us a chance."

Another English voice answered Piet Van der Humm. " I'm glad we're going to get the Pearl, but," there was a distinct shudder in the tone, " that seems a horrible place, amongst all those rocks ; and if they see us first and shoot——"

" It's Sebag Tolhurst ! " This time the whisper came from Barney. " Doesn't he sound scared ? I would be too, if I were in the Dwarf's hands, and had such a rotten record as that skunk has."

A curt order from the Dwarf to his men, and then it was evident that the party was moving on again, through the gap.

" I don't like it. Can't I wait here ? " they heard Sebag protesting, heard a short, savage negative from the half-caste, and then the voices died away in the distance.

" Now for the creek," Jack said as he stood up and stretched himself. " I am glad we heaved all that gear down the Smoke Hole. We left no spoor on those rocks by which they could track us. They'll perhaps spend hours searching, thinking we're still somewhere there."

The tramp down to the creek seemed strangely uneventful. Not a sign of any natives did they see, whilst, having no loads, the going appeared very easy. Then, too, there was the knowledge that they had the Black Pearl of Peihoo, that they had succeeded in their amazing venture.

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Yet it is doubtful whether any of them realised fully what they had done. Their minds had been on the subject so long that it was difficult for them to grasp the fact that that portion of their adventure was over, that, so far as they were concerned, the Smoke Hole no longer existed, that all they had to do now was to get away with their booty.

At the head of the creek Jack halted.

"We must go carefully," he said. "The chances are that some one is watching the 'Molly Hawk,' and we may blunder right into them."

It was a sound policy, yet, on that day of astonishing luck, the precautions appeared to have been unnecessary. Through a break in the jungle, they saw the motor-yacht at anchor, the gunner sitting on the cabin skylight, smoking reflectively; and when they reached the place where they had left the dinghy, the little craft was still there.

As they emerged from under the great, overhanging tree, the gunner caught sight of them, and gave a hail of delight, which was redoubled when he learnt of their success, that they actually had the Pearl with them. He insisted on shaking hands with them again and again, the tears of joy in his eyes showing how great his anxiety must have been during their absence; then he came down to the necessities of their position.

"I've had no alarms, sir," he said, "no sign of any of those murdering heathen; but I think that the sooner we're away the better. That 'Pang Yeen' may turn up. We know she's somewhere in these waters, or that Yellow Dwarf and young Tolhurst wouldn't be here."

Jack nodded. The advice was very sensible. They were all anxious, more than anxious, to examine the bronze box and see that it really did contain the Black Pearl, see what other jewels it might contain as well; but it

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would be a work of no little difficulty to open the casket, and there was certainly no time to spare for the task. When they were at sea, matters would be different.

Consequently, the bronze box was placed in the cupboard of the saloon and all hands set to work to get the "Molly Hawk" under way.

It is safe to say that every member of the ship's company heaved a sigh of relief as the little vessel's propellers began to revolve. At last it seemed as if their long series of dangers was at an end.

And then, as they rounded the bend, and came in sight of the open sea, their hopes were rudely shattered, for there, apparently waiting for them, was a rakish, dirty-looking steamer about the size of the "Pang Yeen."

Ah Lung stared at her for a moment, then turned to Jack.

"Wantee plenty ammunition now. That steamer belong Wong Yat Sen, big chief Cantonese pirate-men. Come look for Black Pearl of Peihoo."

CHAPTER XXXIV

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

IT never occurred to the boys, or to the gunner, to doubt the correctness of Ah Lung's information. The Chinaman had been the hero of the day; he had vindicated the honour of his great nation so splendidly—its grim, unswerving courage and determination—that he was now fully on an equality with his companions.

The appearance of the strange vessel would alone have sufficed to make anyone suspicious. She lacked paint, polish, everything that made for smartness, but, on the other hand, she had a searchlight on the bridge, and an unmistakable seven-pounder in the bow and another in the stern. Moreover, she seemed simply to be swarming with Chinamen.

"What are we going to do?" Barney turned anxiously to Jack. "Those fellows are out after the Pearl, and they'll stick at nothing to get it. Our lives will be no safer with them than with the Yellow Dwarf."

Jack nodded. He was trying to calculate out distances and speeds.

"There are only two courses," he answered, at last. "We must fight her, our one-pounders against her seven-pounders, four of us against the hundred or more on board her; or we must all land, abandon the 'Molly Hawk,' and try and reach British territory on foot, as Ah Lung and I did before."

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All Barney's pugnacious instincts were on fire at once.

"Fight, Jack! We must fight! Just fancy the shame of running away from Chinese pirates! As for landing again——"

"I think that is out of the question, sir," the gunner cut him short. "Look there, on the bank of the creek."

Jack, who was at the wheel, merely glanced over his shoulder, but Barney stared in amazement. The whole of Raja Seyed's army seemed to be crowding down, hundreds of the horrible Palapogs, and amongst them were three figures in European attire. The distance was so short that the boys recognised the three at once; they were the Yellow Dwarf, Sebag Tolhurst, and Ralph Williams.

"There's no landing now," Barney muttered. "Those beggars must have been close on our heels at the end. It's a fighting chance, Jack."

The young skipper smiled grimly. He had seen what was on shore, and now he was trying to decide how best to deal with the enemy at sea. There was, of course, a great difference between their position and that of the Cantonese pirates. The one object of the latter was to obtain possession of the Pearl, which meant that on no account must they sink the "Molly Hawk." But the crew of the latter merely wanted to escape, and, therefore, were free to sink their enemy.

"We'll cross their bow," Jack said. "I doubt if they use their seven-pounders. They'll try to shoot us down with rifles. But we can steer from below, and if we have to use the guns, they have shields, luckily."

Meanwhile, Piet Van der Humm and his party of savages had suddenly disappeared into the jungle, thereby showing their sense, for, without waiting for orders, the gunner had swung his Maxim round, so that it bore on them; but, a few seconds later, they proved that they had no

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intention of allowing their prey to escape, for, from amongst the bush, a ragged volley squibbed out.

Most of the bullets flew high, well over the motor-yacht's deck ; but one knocked the heel off Jack's boot, whilst another smashed the binnacle lamp.

"Time to get below," Jack cried. "Go down, you fellows."

Barney and Ah Lung obeyed, and, as soon as his chum had hold of the wheel in the cabin, Jack followed, only too glad to get away from the bullets, which were now coming thick and fast ; but the gunner remained on deck, behind the shield of the Maxim gun.

A yell of delight went up from the Palapogs the moment they saw the yacht apparently left to steer herself, but the delight changed to consternation as the Maxim suddenly belched out a veritable hail of bullets on them.

Backwards and forwards, the gunner seemed to have an almost uncanny sense of where they were hiding. It was impossible even to guess how many he hit, but, judging by the groans and shrieks, the number must have been large. A few futile shots came back, but, though the shield of the Maxim was dented, and a few splinters ripped off the deck, no real damage was done.

As they got out of the creek, into the open sea, Jack returned on deck, followed by Barney and Ah Lung. For the time being, they were practically clear of their foes on shore, and they now had to tackle the foe outside.

The Chinese pirate steamer was about a mile off the shore, waiting, like a hawk, ready to pounce on the little "Molly Hawk," waiting to see what course the crew of the latter would adopt. Jack set his face hard. "I'm going to keep as close in as I dare," he said. "Will you others see to the guns? The moment she shows a sign of hostility, let her have it."

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The gunner put a fresh plug of tobacco into his cheek. "Aye, aye, sir," he said. "We shan't have long to wait."

His words proved to be correct. A quarter of a minute later, the pirate, which had been almost stationary hitherto, began to gather speed, then there was a flash from one of her guns, and a seven-pounder shell flew past the "Molly Hawk's" bow.

"That's a signal to stop. Run up our colours, Barney. Let 'em have it, Gunner."

There was just enough breeze to blow out the ensign, the mere sight of which seemed to put fresh heart into the boys. At the bow gun, old Joseph Richardson was leaning with his shoulder against the rest, squinting along the barrel. Then he pulled the trigger. He had intended to try and dismount the seven-pounder, to do as he had done in the case of the Portuguese gunboat, but he just missed it, and his little shell ripped through the deckhouse behind the gun.

The reply came immediately, in the shape of a shell from the pirates, which cut half through the foremast, though, fortunately, it failed to explode.

Joseph Richardson's face had grown very stern. He knew that everything depended on his skill, for the pirate vessel had now gathered speed, and it was obvious that, in spite of her shabby appearance, she was unusually fast. Unless she were disabled, she would certainly overhaul the "Molly Hawk." But first of all, before he tried to do anything else, he must silence her gun.

This time he aimed long and steadily. Another shell passed by a couple of feet over his head, without disturbing him in the least degree. From the stern, the boys watched him in fascinated silence, whilst Ah Lung stood like a statue beside him, ready to help him reload.

At last he pulled the trigger. A yell of delight broke

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from both the boys. He had hit the other gun fairly, unshipping it.

The gunner gave a little grunt of satisfaction.

"That's the Navy way, the British Navy way," he muttered.

All this time the two vessels had been approaching one another, and there was now but some eight hundred yards of water between them, a space which was being lessened every moment. The pirates' answer to the gunner's successful shot came quickly. From behind her bulwarks fifty Chinamen sprang up, and, lining her side, poured down a hail of rifle bullets, their shooting being far more accurate than that of the Palapogs had been. Jack's left shoulder was grazed. Barney's hat carried away, whilst Ah Lung went down in a heap, his leg broken.

"This won't do, sir. Get below again. I've got the gun shield to protect me," the old sailor shouted. "I'll fix her yet."

Barney had already sprung forward to help the Chinaman, but Ah Lung waved him back, almost fiercely. Already he was dragging himself to shelter down the fore-companion, and he was not going to allow one of his young masters to run extra risks on his behalf.

It was not the first time they had reason to be grateful for the arrangement of the second wheel and the periscope. It had been useful before, very useful, but on this occasion it undoubtedly saved the lives of all of them. So accurate was the shooting of those Chinese riflemen, that no one could have lived a minute at the ordinary wheel. The steersman must have been shot down and the motor-yacht captured.

Still, the main danger remained. The pirate vessel was coming down on them rapidly. It seemed to be only a question of minutes before she was alongside them,

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before her crew of cut-throats was pouring on to the "Molly Hawk's" deck.

Why did not the gunner fire again? What was the matter with him? Barney put his head out of the companion cautiously, and, as he did so, the old sailor pulled the trigger of his one-pounder.

Not often did Joseph Richardson show traces of excitement, but after this shot he waved his cap gleefully.

"Got her!" he cried. "I've smashed her wheel to smithereens, sir. Now, she can't do much whilst I'm finishing smashing her up. I'll riddle her like a sieve."

He had already reloaded, and was just aiming, to plant a shell in her engine-room, when there was a sudden rending of timber, and the damaged foremast of the "Molly Hawk," which all of them had forgotten, fell with a crash over the side.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE LAST

IN ordinary circumstances, the fall of the foremast in such fine weather would not have involved any serious danger. There were axes handy, and it could easily have been cut adrift. But now, exposed as they were to the fire of the Chinese riflemen, the task of clearing the wreckage would be one of supreme danger.

Jack, who was at the wheel, could not leave it to help; Ah Lung was absolutely helpless, in the fore-cabin; so there remained only the gunner and Barney. The latter made up his mind quickly.

"Get aft to the Maxim, Gunner," he shouted. "The shield will protect you, and you'll be able to stop most of their fire whilst I'm cutting the mast adrift."

The gunner plugged one shell clean into the pirate's engine-room, apparently hitting the main steampipe, if one could judge by the dense clouds of steam which began to pour out through the skylight, then he made a dash for the Maxim, reaching it unharmed, though a score of bullets whizzed close past him. A moment later he had the gun at work, driving every Chinese rifleman to shelter.

"Hurrah! That's the way!" Barney sprang on deck with an axe, and began cutting furiously at the rigging. In a few seconds, however, the rifle fire started again, this time from the pirate's portholes, but, perhaps because of the fear of the Maxim, which was turned on to wherever a rifle-barrel appeared, the shooting was not so accurate

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as before, and Barney was not touched. Still, his task was a dangerous one, and he was more than glad when he came to the last of the stays. He cut through this, dropped his axe, and made a dive for the companion.

"All gone," he cried to Jack. "Now we're safe."

And then, as if in mockery, there was a sudden jar which ran all through the little vessel, and the engines stopped.

One of the trailing ropes had fouled the propellers. The "Molly Hawk" was as helpless as her enemy.

The boys looked at each other with white faces. Really, their position could not have been much worse. On shore, waiting for them if they landed, were the Palapogs and the Yellow Dwarf; but a few hundred yards away on the water were the Chinese pirates; whilst, in all probability, the "Pang Yeen" was somewhere in the vicinity, and would soon be on the scene. This time, there seemed to be no possibility of escape for them.

"Could we get at the propellers, anyhow?" Barney asked.

His chum shook his head.

"No chance at all. Think of the water she draws. And then, too, there're the sharks, as well as those pirates' bullets. How is the tide running?"

Barney made a wry face. "Inshore. We shall be on the beach in a few minutes, and so will the pirate steamer. Then it will just be a question of who gobbles us up, the Palapogs or the Chinamen," he added grimly.

The gunner was still behind his shield, waiting for a rifleman to show himself when the boys came up on deck. He took the news very calmly.

"If it's the Great Skipper's will, we must not complain," he said simply. "Anyway, we shan't go to Him afraid. We can put up one more good fight even when we are ashore; though it can't last long, because they'll attack

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us from both sides ; and if I try the Maxim on the Palapogs, the Chows will shoot us down at once."

Jack turned towards the companion again.

" Let's fetch up our mattresses, Barney. They'll be a little protection ; and all the rifles and belts. We'll fight to the end."

The " Molly Hawk " was drifting fairly rapidly, and, so far as they could see, she would go ashore on a point about a mile away. There was no time to lose, and the boys set about their task—perhaps it would be the last they would ever have to do—as quickly as possible. Out of the mattresses they made a kind of screen, which would probably save them a little, then arranged rifles and ammunition so that they should be readily available when the crisis came.

Hardly had they finished when a rifle bullet from the shore buried itself in the skylight. Already the Palapogs had got round the end of the creek, and were following them up, ready to attack the moment the motor-boat grounded. The Chinamen, on the other hand, had ceased firing for the time being. Their vessel would go ashore quite close to the " Molly Hawk," and doubtless they thought that their chance would come then. Though not so numerous as the Palapogs, they were better armed and better shots. Certainly, there seemed every likelihood of a horrible slaughter before the strange, three-sided fight for the possession of the Black Pearl of Peihoo was decided.

Ah Lung, who had managed to bind up his wounded leg, crawled on deck again, and joined the others. Though he could not stand, he could still shoot lying down, and he was determined to die game. No one, looking at his face, would have imagined the pain he was suffering. Like all his race, he had marvellous powers of endurance in that respect, and the only expression of his features was one

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which told of a grim determination to kill as many of his enemies as possible.

The bullets from the shore began to come quicker and quicker, though the enemy, warned by past experience, kept, as far as possible, out of sight. Once, however, the boys got a glimpse of the Dwarf and his two white companions, though there was no chance to shoot at them.

"Two or three minutes more, sir, before we ground. We had better shake hands, and say 'good-bye.'" The gunner glanced towards the shore, gauging the distance.

The handshakes were exchanged in silence. There seemed so much still to say, and so very little time, that it was not worth while beginning; then the old sailor bared his head, and in a few broken, halting phrases, commended their souls to the Almighty God.

The boys echoed his "Amen," whilst Ah Lung nodded gravely.

"Very good Joss, your Joss," he muttered.

No one was firing now. It seemed as though both parties of enemies were reserving themselves for the final struggle. The crew of the "Molly Hawk" was doomed, and, so far as anyone could see, the real fight would be after they were dead, between the rival gangs of scoundrels.

To the boys, the waiting was awful, nerve-shattering. They longed for something to break the silence which had fallen so suddenly; they wanted to get it all over, to have the agony ended.

The motor-yacht was very close in now, only some twenty yards from the shore, but owing to a cross-current she was moving almost parallel to the beach. For five minutes this continued, though it was obvious that she must soon strike, as there was a long spit of sand only a little way ahead of her.

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Suddenly, Barney, who had glanced round at the disabled pirate steamer, gave a cry of surprise.

"Look there! Do you see those masts showing above the point? It must be the 'Pang Yeen' coming in."

Jack nodded grimly. "Then the Pearl will go to the Yellow Dwarf, after all."

"Unless we have the luck to shoot him," Barney growled viciously.

A moment later, a volley burst out from amongst the trees. The last fight had begun in earnest.

If the boys had had to write an account of what occurred during the next few minutes, they would have found the task almost impossible. It was just a blurr of noise, and the acrid smell of the cordite, the ripping of bullets, the whirr of the Maxim, of blood flowing from wounds, of yelling savages on shore, of yelling Chinamen on the water, a veritable nightmare.

They lost all sense of fear. All they thought of was to kill, to beat off their enemies until the last possible moment.

Already Jack was disabled, a bullet through his right hand, whilst Barney's face was streaming with blood. It could not last much longer. Really, the wonder was that it had lasted so long.

Suddenly the Maxim stopped.

"It's jammed," the gunner cried, as he seized a rifle.

The end was very close now. . . .

A flash of flame, a terrible explosion on shore, right amongst the Palapogs—what could it mean?

Joseph Richardson was the first to understand. He knew a twelve-pounder shell, and looked round to see whence it could have come.

"A cruiser, lads, a British cruiser to our rescue," he shouted.

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He was right. The masts they had seen had not been those of the "Pang Yeen" but of a trim man-of-war, with the White Ensign at her stern.

Another shell, equally well placed, was followed by a chorus of shrieks; but no more rifle-shots came. The Palapogs were fleeing wildly.

"Look at the pirates!" Barney had wiped the blood out of his eyes, and was pointing at the disabled steamer, which had just grounded. Her crew of ruffians were not going to wait for the cruiser's boats to arrive. They preferred to take their chance on shore amongst the Palapogs and head-hunters to the certainty of being hanged by the British.

Ah Lung watched them with glittering eyes, his rifle ready. "Huh! Him there. Better have stayed in Colombo!" he exclaimed, then fired, bringing down his man. A few seconds later, a second man met the same fate. Their slayer grunted with satisfaction and explained briefly. They were his two enemies from Colombo. Their steamer must have been waiting at sea for them when they left the port in their junk, he declared—a theory which afterwards proved to be true.

"I congratulate you on a fine defence, gentlemen," the captain of the cruiser said when he came aboard the stranded motor-boat. "I wished to be the first to say it."

The boys flushed at the compliment—he might easily have sent a lieutenant to bring the message, and to fetch them off to the warship.

"A very narrow shave," the officer went on. "You could not have held out many minutes longer if we had not turned up. And now, whilst the surgeon, whom I have brought with me, attends to your wounds, we will have a look round on shore. I have a strong landing party with me. Afterwards, you can tell me all about

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it." He was just turning to go, when he caught sight of the old sailor. A look of surprise and delight came into his eyes. "Gunner Richardson!" he exclaimed. "Now I know why that pirate steamer is disabled," and, to the other's intense joy, a captain in the Royal Navy shook him heartily by the hand, not once, but many times.

The cruiser's surgeon dressed the wounds of the "Molly Hawk's" crew, then insisted on taking them all off to the man-of-war. "You can't be of any use on board this yacht," he said. "And I can attend to you properly if you come. The captain will put a fresh crew on the 'Molly Hawk' for you."

As they entered the cruiser's launch, Jack was carrying a bronze box. At last the Black Pearl was in safety, under the British Flag. . . .

"We've found a lot of dead savages," the captain told them when he came aboard again. "And two white youths, Englishmen, came crawling along to surrender; their names are Tolhurst and Williams. They say they were dragged into the affair by that scoundrel Van der Humm."

Jack smiled.

"He would say they were his partners."

The captain shook his head.

"He will say nothing more now," he answered gravely. "Our first shell blew half his head off. . . . Well, gentlemen, I am going to put a crew on your yacht for you, and, of course, patch up that pirate steamer, and take her into port too. There will be some prize money there. You may be glad of your share, unless," and his kindly grey eyes twinkled, "unless you've got such a big prize you don't need it."

The boys looked at him in astonishment. How could he know of the Black Pearl?

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He saw their expressions and smiled.

"I'll explain later. May I see the famous jewel?"

"We haven't seen it ourselves yet," Jack answered. "There's been no chance to open the box; but we'll do so now. May we go into the sick bay, and do it in front of Ah Lung?"

It was no easy task to open the box, even when Ah Lung had explained the way to do it. The fumes of that deadly Smoke Hole had affected the bronze considerably, and, in the end, it was necessary to use a hammer and chisel.

Then—"Oh, what a pearl!"

The expression broke from them all simultaneously. Never before had any of them seen, or even imagined, anything to approach it.

Ah Lung gave it one look, then sank back on his cot.

"That is Black Pearl of Peihoo indeed," he muttered. "All right now. Plenty rich now."

The captain nodded.

"He's right. It is to other pearls what the Koh-i-noor is to other diamonds. You will all be rich. Gobind Chand didn't exaggerate in his cable to me."

"Gobind Chand?" Barney exclaimed.

"Yes," the officer smiled. "You owe your rescue to him. He knows me of old—he's an enormously rich banker—and, when he found that the Chinese pirates were after you—he heard that somehow—he cabled asking me to try and save you. That's how I know of the Pearl."

Barney turned to his chum.

"He shall have the first chance to buy it then," he exclaimed. Jack agreed readily, and, in the end, the Hindu purchased, not only the Black Pearl itself, but also the other jewels which were in the box, the sum he gave being sufficient to render all four of the "Molly Hawk's" crew rich for the rest of their lives.

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“ And now about those wretched prisoners ? ” the captain said, when the precious bronze box had been locked up in the safe. “ I don't see what we can charge them with, except attempted murder, and that might not be possible as they were fighting for the Raja. Yet they ought to be punished.”

The gunner, who was present, saluted.

“ I think, sir, if you would let me have two men, and something in the way of a cat-o'-nine-tails, I would take them ashore for half an hour, and talk to them. They would be sorry afterwards.”

“ All right,” the captain laughed. “ Don't tell me any more about it, Gunner. You had better do it at once.”

When Sebag Tolhurst and Ralph Williams returned to the cruiser an hour later, they seemed to find some difficulty in mounting the ladder ; whilst the boat's crew appeared considerably amused over what had happened on shore. Not even to his father, at home, did Sebag ever volunteer any account of the proceedings. He had learnt his lesson.

And so, after having been lost for over half a century, the Black Pearl of Peihoo once more saw the light. Moreover, solid good came of it all, for, as a result of the attack on the “ Molly Hawk,” the British Government decided to put an end to Raja Seyed's independence.

“ All's well that ends well,” Jack remarked, as, a few months later he read the news in an English newspaper.

“ It jolly nearly ended badly,” Barney retorted. “ If we hadn't had luck we could never have got through.”

“ Luck ! No, lads, it was the Great Skipper's help,” the gunner put in quietly.

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