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Author: Lewis R. Freeman

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HELL'S HATCHES

BY

LEWIS R. FREEMAN

Author of "In the Tracks of the Trades," etc.



LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

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HELL'S HATCHES

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CHAPTER I

A REPUTATION QUESTIONED

"SLANT" ALLEN and I, between us, had been monopolizing a good share of the feature space in the Queensland and New South Wales papers for a week or more—he as "the Hero-Ticket-of-Leave-Man" and I as "the gifted Franco-American painter whose brilliant South Sea marines have taken the Australian art world by storm"—and now that it was definitely reported that he had left Brisbane on his way to connect with the reception the boyhood home from which he had been shipped in disgrace five years before had prepared for him, I knew it was but a matter of hours before he would be doing me the honour of a call.

He simply *had* to see me, I figured; that was all there was to it: for with Bell and the girl dead (that much seemed certain, both from the newspaper accounts of the affair and from what I had been able to pick up in the few minutes I had been ashore during the stop of my southbound packet at Townsville) I was the only living person who knew *he* was not the hero of the astonishing *Cora Andrews* affair, the audacious daring and almost sublime courage characterizing which had touched the imagination of the whole world; that, far from having *volunteered* to navigate a shipload of plague-stricken blacks through some hundreds of miles of the worst reef-beset—and likewise the most ill-charted—waters of the Seven Seas on the off chance of saving the lives of perhaps one in ten of them, he had been brought off and forced to mount the gangway of that ill-fated schooner at the point of a knife in the hands of a slender slip of a Kanaka girl.

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To be sure, two or three of the blacks who were hanging over the rail at the end of that accursed afternoon may have been among the survivors (for it could have been only the strongest of them that had been able to fight their way up to the air when Bell chopped open the hatches they had been battened under ever since the *Cora's* officers had succumbed who knows how many hours before); but, even so, their rolling, bloodshot eyes could have fixed on nothing to have led them to believe that the greasy shawl of Chinese embroidery the girl appeared to have thrown affectionately over the shoulder of the belated passenger in the leaking outrigger concealed the diminutive Malay *kris* whose point she was pressing into the fleshy part of his neck above the jugular.

No, there could be no doubt that I was all that stood between "Slant" Allen, "Ticket-of-Leavester," beachcomber, black-birder, pearl-pirate and (more or less incidentally to all of the foregoing) murderer, and the Hon. Hartley Allen, second son of the late James Allen, Bart., racing man, polo player and once the greatest gentleman jockey on the Australian turf. Pardon for the comparative peccadilloes—a "pulled" horse or two, a money fraud in connection with a "sweep," and the rather rough treatment of a chorus girl, who had foolishly asked for "time to consider" his proposal that she come to him *at once* from the Queensland stockman who was only just finishing refurnishing her George Street flat—which, cumulatively, had been responsible for his being packed off to "The Islands," was already assured, and it looked as though more was to come—that his "spectacular and self-sacrificing heroism" was going to wipe out the unpleasant memories that had barred him from sporting and social circles even before the law stepped in. A sporting writer in that morning's *Herald* had speculated as to whether or not he would be seen again riding "Number 1" for the unbeaten "Boomerang" Four, with whom he had qualified for his handicap of "8," still standing as the highest ever given an Australian polo player; and the racing column of the latest *Bulletin* had devoted a good part of its restricted space to a discussion of the possibility that the weight he had put on in his years of "easy life in 'The Islands'" might force him to confine his

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riding to steeplechases. Of the record which had made the name of "Slant" Allen a byword for all that was desperate and devilish from Port Moresby to Papeete, from Yap to Suva, little seemed to be known and nothing at all was said. But then, that old beach-combers' maxim to the effect that "What a man does in 'The Islands' don't figure in St. Peter's 'dope sheet,'" was one from which even I myself had been wont to extract no little solace.

With nothing but my fever-wracked and absinthe-soaked (I may as well confess at the outset that I was "in the grip of the green" at this time) anatomy standing between, on the one hand, and Allen more despicable than even I, who was fairly familiar with the lurid swath he had cut across Polynesia, had ever dreamed he could be, and, on the other hand, an Allen who might easily become more the idol of sporting (which is, of course, the real) Australia than he had ever been at the zenith of his meteoric career as a turfman and athlete, it was plain enough that he would not—nay, could not—ignore for long my presence in a city that was standing on tiptoe to acclaim him as a native son whose deed had done it honour in the eyes of the world. It was something like that the *Telegraph* had it, I believe.

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Where a word from me (and Allen would know that my friendship for Bell, to say nothing of the girl, would impel me to speak it in my own good time) would dash him from the heights to depths which even he had not yet sounded—there were degrees of treachery which "The Islands" themselves would not stand for—it was only to be expected that a man of his stamp would make some well-thought-out move calculated to impose both immediate and eventual silence upon me. If we were still "north of twenty-two" I would have had no doubt what form that "move" would take, and even here in the heart of the Antipodean metropolis—well, that I was leaving no unnecessary loop-holes of attack open was attested by the fact that I was awaiting his coming wearing a roomy old shooting jacket, in the wide pockets of which a man's fingers could work both freely and unobtrusively. I had shot away a good half-dozen patch pockets from that old jacket in practising "unostentatious self-defence," and when a man gets to a point where he can spatter a sea-slug at five paces from his hip he really hasn't a great deal to fear from the frontal attack of anyone—or anything—that hunts by daylight.

Yes, though I hardly expected to have to shoot Allen, at least on this first showdown, I was quite prepared to do so if he gave me any excuse at all for it; indeed, I may as well admit that I was going to be disappointed if he did not furnish me such an excuse. There need be nothing on my conscience, that was sure, for, if the fellow had had his deserts according to civilized law, he would have been put out of the way something like twenty times already. I had heard him make that boast himself one night in Kai, just before he went under Jackson's table as a consequence of trying to toss off three-fingers of "Three Star" for every man he claimed to have killed. Moreover, I had a sort of a feeling that old Bell would have liked to have seen his score evened up that way, for he, more than almost anyone I could recall, had marvelled at what he called the tricks I had tucked away in my "starboard trigger pocket." But—I may as well own it—my principal reason for hoping for a decisive showdown straightaway was that I felt sure I could see my way through an affair of that kind, even with so cool and resourceful a hand as I knew Allen to be. As an absinthe drinker, what I dreaded was to have the crisis postponed, knowing all the while that during only about from four to six hours of the twenty-four would I be fit in mind or body to oppose a child, let alone a man who, for five years and among as desperate a lot of cut-throats as the South Pacific had ever known, had lived up to his boast that he drew the line at no act under heaven to gain his end.

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It had struck me as just a bit providential that Allen almost certainly would be coming to see me in the early afternoon—the very time at which, physically and mentally, I would be best prepared for him. It varies somewhat with different addicts of the drug, but with me the "hour of strength"—the interval of the swinging back of the pendulum, when all the faculties are as much above normal as they have been below it during the preceding interval of depression—was mid-afternoon. From about ten in the morning I was just about my natural self—just about at the turn of the tide between weakness and strength—for three or four hours; but from about three to five, when the renewed cravings began to stir and it had long been my custom to pour my first thin trickle of green into the cracked ice, I was preternaturally alive in hand and brain. The rigorous restriction of my painting to these brief hours of physical and spiritual exaltation must share with my colours the credit for the fact that I had already done work that was to win me a niche distinctively my own as a painter of tropical marines. How much absinthe—or the reaction from absinthe—had to do with my earlier successes was conclusively proven by the way my work at first fell off when those colourful years I was later to spend with the incomparable Huntley Rivers in the Samoas and Marquesas began to bring me back manhood of mind and body and to rid me—I trust for good and all—of the curse saddled upon me in my student days in Paris. But that is neither here nor there as regards the present story.

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I had ascertained that Allen's train was to arrive from Brisbane at ten in the morning, and that he was to be taken directly from the station to the Town Hall to receive the "Freedom of the City." Then, out of consideration for the fact "that the hero" (as the *Herald* had it) was "still far from recovered from the terrible hardships he had endured as a consequence of his unparalleled self-sacrifice," the remainder of the day was to be left at his disposal to rest in. The further program—in which His Excellency the Governor-General himself was to take part—would be arranged only after the personal desires of the "modest hero" had been consulted.

A 'phone to the gallery where my Exhibition was on—or an inquiry of almost anyone connected

with the show at the Town Hall, for that matter—would apprise Allen that I was staying at the *Australia*, and there I knew he would come direct the moment he could shake himself free from his entertainers. Someone was to take him off to lunch, to be sure, but—especially as it was reported that he was already dieting to get back to riding weight—I felt sure this would not detain him long. "It will be about three," I told myself, and left word at the office that any man asking for me around that hour should be brought straight to my rooms without further question. I also 'phoned Lady X — and begged off from showing her and a party of friends from Government House my pictures at four, as I had promised a couple of days previously. Being borne off to the inevitable and interminable Australian afternoon teas—or to anything else I could not easily shake myself free from very shortly after five—was one of the worst ordeals incident to the spell of lionizing that had set in for me from the day of my arrival in Sydney. What did I care for Sydney, anyhow? Paris was my goal—gay, cynical, heartless Paris, who took or rejected what her lovers laid at her feet only as it stirred, or failed to stir, her jaded pulses, asking not how it was made or what it had cost. Paris! To bring that languid beauty fawning to my own feet for a day—even for an hour, my hour—*that* would be something worth living—or dying—for. For many years I had been telling myself that (between three and five in the afternoon, of course) and now—quite aside from my nocturnal flights there on the wings of the "Green Lady"—it seemed that the end so long striven for was almost in sight.

I lunched lightly—a planked red snapper and a couple of alligator pears—in my room, and toward two o'clock (to be well on the safe side) slipped into the old hunting jacket I have mentioned, and was ready; just that—ready. My nerves were absolutely steady. The hand holding the palette knife with which (to kill the passing minutes) I began daubing pigments upon a rough rectangle of blotched canvas on an easel in the embrasure of the windows, might have adjusted the hair-spring of my wrist-watch, and the beat of my heart was slow and strong and steady like the throb of the engines of a liner in mid-ocean. If either hand or nerve inclined more one way than the other, it was toward relaxation rather than tenseness. Tenseness—with a man who has himself in hand—is for the moment of action, not for the interval of waiting which precedes it. My whole feeling was that of complete *adequacy*; but then, the sensation was no new one to me—at that time of day.

Exhausting the gobs of variegated colour on my palette, I went to a table in the bathroom and started chipping the delicately tinted linings from the contents of a packing case of assorted sea shells, confining my attentions for the moment to a species of bivalve whose refulgent inner surface had caught and held the lambent liquid gold of sunshine that had filtered through five fathoms of limpid sea-water to reach the coral caverns where it had grown. Powdering the coruscant scalings in a mortar, I screened them from time to time, carefully noting the gradations of colour—ranging from soft fawn to scintillant saffron—as the more indurated particles stood out the longer against the friction of the pestle. At this time, I might explain, I was in the tentative stage of my experimentation to evolve and perfect a greater variety of media than had hitherto been available with which to express in colour the interminable moods of sea and sky and sunshine. The value of my contribution to art—not yet complete after five years—will have to be judged when I pass it on to my contemporaries and posterity. Of the part these colours played in my later and more permanent success (to differentiate it from the spectacular but transient spell of fame upon the threshold of which I stood at the moment of which I write), I can only say that had I been confined to the pigments with which my predecessors had been forced to express themselves, I should never have risen above the rating of a second or third class dauber of sea-scapes.

CHAPTER II

HARD-BIT DERELICTS

WITH Allen and his coming in the back of my brain, it was only natural that my thoughts, as I ground and sifted and sorted the golden powders, should turn to Kai and the train of events leading up to the ghastly tragedy of the *Cora Andrews*, so distorted a version of which had gone abroad as a consequence of the fact that Allen was alive and Bell was dead, and that I, so far, had not told what I knew of the circumstances under which the one and the other had been induced to board the stricken "black-birder."

It must have been, I reflected, its comparative remoteness from all of even the least-sailed of the South Pacific trade routes that was responsible for making Kai Atoll, a barely perceptible smudge on the chart of the Louisiades, the unofficial rendezvous for the most picturesque lot of cut-throats, blackguards and beachcombers that "The Islands" had known since the days of "Bully" Hayes and his care-free contemporaries. Like had attracted like after the original nucleus gathered, safety had come with numbers, and at the time of my arrival no man whose misdeeds had not made him important enough to send a gunboat after needed to depart from that secure haven except of his own free will.

Among a score of hard-bit derelicts whose grinning or scowling phizzes flashed up in memory at the thought of that sun-baked loop of coral, with its rag-tag of wind-whipped coco palms and its crescent of zinc and thatch-roofed shacks, only three—or four including myself—occupied my mind for the moment. Allen—reckless daredevil that he was—had come to Kai from somewhere in the Solomons for the very good and sufficient reason that it was the only island south of the Line at the time where his welcome would not have been either too hot or too cold to suit his fastidious taste. Bell had come, in a stove-in whaleboat, because Kai was the nearest settlement to the point where he put the *Flying Scud*—the trading schooner that was his last command, if we except the *Cora Andrews*—aground on Tuka-tuva Reef. The girl, who arrived with Bell in the whaleboat, came because he brought her. The tide-rips of Kai passage and the Devil's own toboggan were all the same to Rona—at this stage of the game, at least—so long as the big, quiet, masterful Yankee was bumping-the-bumps with her. And even afterwards—but let that transpire.

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I, Roger Whitney, artist, formerly of New York and Paris, and, latterly, man-about-the French-colonies, with no fixed abode, had been landed at Kai by a French gunboat from the Noumea station. I packed myself off from that accursed hole because the suicide of a couple of officers in whose company I had been drinking absinthe at the *Cercle Militaire* for some weeks had reminded me altogether too poignantly of what I might, in the ordinary course of things, expect to be doing myself before long. A change of scene and, if possible, a modification of habits was the only hope. I would never have had the initiative to tackle even the first had not the feeling persisted that I was on the verge of doing something worth while with my painting. I went to Kai because the archipelago thereabouts was reputed to have the most gorgeous sky and water colouring in Polynesia.

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Neither the promised beauties nor the reputed badness of Kai stirred me greatly in anticipation. With a bitter smile I told myself that every night I was seeing sights more lovely than anything my eyes were likely to rest on short of Paradise, while the Chamber of Horrors in which I awoke every morning was a veritable annex to the Inferno itself. No, it was out of the question that Kai could unfold in realities, whether to delight or shock, things to outdo those that were already mine in dreams that had themselves become more real than realities. Well, it turned out that I was only half right, or wrong, whichever way you want to put it. While, on the one hand, I found the bluff, open badness of Kai rather more refreshing than shocking; on the other hand, it was hardly more than a week before I was ready to swear that not the most ethereal houri that ever laid her cool green hand upon my fevered brow was of a class to run one-two-three with a flame-quivering slip of a nymph whom I had surprised at her bath in a beryline pool inside the windward reef. I began to pull myself together from that hour. Rona, the very sight of whom threw most men out of hand, had quite the opposite effect upon me. I knew she was not for me, and the thought that the world actually held such loveliness in the form of flesh and blood had a sort of reassurance about it, like the knowledge that one has an ample income from government bonds.

Because I had landed from the *Zelee*, and also, perhaps on account of my rig-out (especially the brimless Algerian sun-helmet), the "beach" of Kai put me down at once as a "We-we," and, therefore, a creature quite apart. The only Frenchmen on the island were a couple of escapes from the convict settlement of New Caledonia, and because neither of them could ride or shoot or fight with their fists, they had no standing with the predominant Australian "push," most of whom were more or less handy at all three. It was, indeed, the fact that, in spite of all my years in Paris and the French colonies had done to make a physical wreck of me, I still retained something of the quickness of eye and hand and foot which had conspired to make my Harvard record as an all-round-athlete one that only two or three men have equalled even down to the present day, that gave me such easy sledding in making my way with the "best people" of Kai.

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It took just three minutes—the length of the first round of the "friendly bout" I fought with "Heifer" Halligan, ex-welter-weight champion of Victoria, at Jackson's pub one afternoon—to change Kai's openly expressed contempt for me to something very near respect. I thoroughly appreciated the attitude of that breezy lot of sport-loving rascals toward a Frenchified Yankee artist, especially one that did not appear to be a fugitive from justice, and so took the first opportunity to win a standing with them which would at least incline them to let me go my own way when I wanted to. Notwithstanding my wretched condition, I outpointed my chunky opponent a good three to one in that opening round; indeed, the "Heifer's" excuse for the foul which put me to sleep in the Second was that both his "bloomin' peepers" were so nearly swelled shut he couldn't see "stryght." But it was my swelling groin and battered hands, rather than "Heifer's" bruised optics, that came in for first attention from deft-fingered Doc Wyndham—once of Guy's, on his own admission. The next day I was waited upon by a delegation sent from "Jackson's Sporting Club" to urge me to put myself in training for a go-to-the-finish with "Shark-mouth" Kelly of Suva, the Fiji open champ. My speed would dazzle a cow-footed dolt like "Shark-mouth" was, they said, and he would be easy picking for me. They further urged that we could clean up all the loose money west of the "Hundred and Eightieth"—what odds would Fiji not give in backing a fourteen-stone stoker against an artist that only weighed ten stone and looked half dished with the "green" besides? Moreover, I could keep the whole purse for myself; all they wanted out of it was the sport. God bless the scalawags, it was more than half true, that last.

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The funny thing about it was that the project actually tempted me at the time, principally, I think, because there seemed a chance that the hard exercise of training—the very thing, indeed, that helped work the miracle a few years later—might effect me at least a temporary separation, if

not a permanent divorce, from the "Green Lady." I was still temporizing with "delegations" when the *Cora Andrews* dropped her hook in Kai Lagoon and gave us something else to think about.

If the little cunning I had left with my fists won me the respect of the "beach," it remained for my proficiency with the revolver—something which I had never allowed myself to grow rusty in—to give me real prestige. My father had been only less famous as a pistol shot than as a builder of steel bridges, and from my birth it had been his dream that I should carry on the tradition in both lines. If it had broken the old boy's heart when I turned my back on engineering for art—insisting on going from Harvard to Beaux Arts instead of to Boston "Tec" as he had planned—he at least had nothing to complain of on the score of my aptitude for the revolver. He admitted that I had bred true in hand and eye, even on the day that he called my "art tomfoolery" a throwback from my French grandmother. I have always thought that the one circumstance which prevented the Governor from cutting me off in his will when he finally had definite proofs of the depths to which I had sunk in Paris, was the fact that, on my last visit to the old home on the Hudson, I had beaten him, shot for shot, with his own pistols, and at his favourite distance.

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They were rather free with their gun play during my first fortnight at Kai, each little affair having been followed by one or two more or less ceremonious burials in the coral-walled cemetery on the south lip of the windward passage. It was merely as a precautionary measure—on the off chance that they should be tempted to draw me into something of the kind at a time when I might not be quite on edge for it—that I took early opportunity to uncover a trifle of what I had crooked in my trigger-finger. A casually winged gull or two, and a few plugged pennies (not a miss at the latter, luckily, even when they tried to spin them edge on to my line of fire) effected all that was necessary. After that, though they were continually sending for me to come down to Jackson's and shoot the wire off champagne corks (fizz, loot of some kind, was the freest flowing drink on the island at the time), or perform some other equally useful and spectacular gun stunt, not the roughest of the gang but took the most meticulous care not to press his invitation the instant it sank home to him that my mood of the moment wasn't of a kind calculated to blend smoothly with the free and easy spirit of a beach-combers' carousal.

It was hardly to be expected that they would ever quite understand why a man who could "blot out a cove's blinker as easy wiv his fist as wiv his gun" (as I was told that "Reefer" Ogiston, penal absentee and pearler, put it one day) and who "'peared mo' than comfitabl' heeled fo' coin," should be "light an' looney enuf tu go roun' smearin' smashed barnculs on sail cloth"; and yet it was on that very score—or at least to their quick comprehension of what I was driving at in my pictures—that the "beach" of Kai rendered me a priceless service. Almost from the outset they began to "twig" my marines, to feel the living atmosphere I was striving to paint into them. They were all men who had lived by the sea, on the sea; yes, and not a few of them had worked under the sea. Well, when I began to see those deep-set, wrinkle-clutched eyes squint to a focus of concentration, and, presently, the quick heave of a hairy chest as the message of the canvas flashed home, I knew that I was on the right track. Nothing less than that would have given me the courage to go on working, as I had set myself to do, on a steadily decreasing allowance of absinthe, a certain supply of which, of course, I had brought with me from Noumea.

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So much for me and my relations to Kai at the time of which I am writing. Now as to Bell....

"Who is that tall, square-jawed chap who looks as though he was not quite sober?" I had asked a day or two after I landed.

"Yank—calls himself Bell," Jackson replied laconically; adding that he was "not quite sober" when he tried to take a cross-cut over Tuka-tuva Reef with the *Flying Scud*, that he was "not quite sober" when he hit the beach in a busted whaleboat, that he had been "not quite sober" all the time since, and that there was no doubt that he would still be "not quite sober" when the time came for him to leave the island, whether he went out with the tide in an outrigger canoe or shuffled off up the Golden Stairs. "Allus been pickled and allus goin' to be pickled," Jackson continued; then, qualifyingly: "Course I don't know he was pickled when he kum int' the world, but I'm willin' to lay any odds that he'll be pickled when he shuffles out of it."

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Just about all of which was, or proved to be, "stryght dope."

After quoting this terse summing of Jackson's, it may sound a little strange when I say that Bell was a gentleman—not *had been*, understand (that could have been said with some truth about a dozen or more of us at Kai), but *was* a gentleman. Though undeniably never "quite sober," the fact remained that no one on the island had ever seen him "quite drunk." And no matter how much liquor he had stowed "under hatches," no one could say that it interfered either with his trim or his navigation. His even rolling gait was always the same, whether it was the glow of his eye-opening plunge at dawn that lighted his face, or the flush of twelve hours of steady tipping that darkened it at twilight. Nor was he ever known to omit that gravely courteous, almost "old-fashioned," bow which, with the flicker of smile that was more of his eyes than his mouth, was the invariable greeting he bestowed upon friend and stranger alike. The mellow drawl of his "It's suah goin' to be a fine mawnin'," had made it easier for me to weather dawns that—in my inflamed imagination—menaced monstrously in jagged lines like a cubist's nightmare. If drink had any effect on his speech, it was to incline him to reserve rather than garrulity. His temper appeared to be under quite as perfect control as his legs. Even when he broke "Red" Logan's jaw with a swift short-arm

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jolt the time that sanguine Lochinvar tried to nip Rona off his arm as they passed on the beach in the twilight, they said that Bell hardly raised his voice as he "guessed that'd hold the varmit fo' a while." And when, a few days later, Doc Wyndham told him with a grin that "Red" wouldn't be screwing a diving helmet on his block for some weeks to come, it was said there was real regret in the Yankee's voice as he hoped that the injury wouldn't be "pumanant."

Yes, before I had been a week at Kai I felt that there was a little addition I could safely make to Jackson's comprehensive estimate. I knew that Bell had been born a gentleman, and—whatever lapses there may have been, or might be—I knew he was going to die a gentleman. And that also (had I put it on record) would have proved pretty nearly "stryght dope."

What stumped me at first was trying to reconcile the remarkable control Bell maintained over all his faculties in spite of his hard drinking with the fact (apparently fully authenticated) that he had run aground—through drunkenness—every ship he had ever commanded, beginning with a U. S. gunboat. He cleared up that matter for me himself one afternoon, however, by casually observing—at the moment he chanced to be watching me trying to transfer to canvas the riot of opalescence between the *lapis lazuli* of the barely submerged reef and the deep indigo where a hundred fathoms of brine threw back the reflection of the sinister core of cumulo-nimbus in the heart of a menacing squall—that the sea had always acted as a tremendous stimulant to him, especially when he trod a deck.

"If I could just have managed to cut out the whisky at sea, all would have been smooth sailin'," he said in his deep rich Southern drawl. "On land—heah ... anywheah—kawn jooce is lak food to me; mah body convuts it into ene'gy just lak an engine does coal. But with a schoonah kickin' undah me—we'll, I guess theah's just one kick too many, something lak mixin' drinks p'raps. It suah elevates me good an' plenty ... and when I come down theah's natchaly some crash. My ship an' I gen'aly strike bottom at about the same time. But, s'elp me Gawd" (a tensing *timbre* in his voice) "on mah next command—"

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It was the one sure sign that Bell was beginning to feel the kick of his "kawn jooce" when he spoke of his "next command." Unless that kick was beginning to carry a pretty weighty jolt behind it he knew just as well as everyone else on the beach did that he would never get his Master's Certificate back again, and that even if he did there was no house from Honolulu to Hobart that would trust a ship to a man who had already beached a half-dozen.

Kai was glib to the last detail—rig, tonnage, cargo, insurance, owner and the like—respecting the several merchant craft Bell had piled up in the course of his downward career; but the extent of local "dope" in the matter of the gunboat episode was to the effect that it happened "up Manila-way," and that "that was the bally smash that started him goin'."

Personally, I took little stock in the naval part of the yarn—that is, at first. Then, one morning—it was the day after the tail of a typhoon had sucked up the end of Ah Yung's laundry shack and left everyone on the beach short of clothes—Bell came out in a suit of immaculate *starched* whites. It was the cut of the jacket and the way he wore it that drew and held my puzzled gaze; that its shoulders were "drilled" for epaulettes and that its thin pearl buttons barely held in buttonholes that had been worked for something thicker and wider I did not notice till later. Steady-eyed, lean-jawed, square-shouldered, ready-poised—not even a flapping Payta *sombrero* could quite disguise, nor five years of heavy tipping quite obliterate, the marks of type. Then I understood why it was that Bell, all but down and out though he might be, was, and would remain to the last, a gentleman. There are things the Navy puts into a man that not even a court-martial can take away.

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The only allusion Bell ever made to his remoter past was drawn from him a few days later, when—he was watching me paint again—I chanced to mention that I had spent a fortnight in the Philippines on my way south from Saigon to Australia. Glancing up at the sound of his sharp intake of breath, I saw his jaw set over the questions that leapt to the tip of his tongue, to relax gradually as a faraway look came into his wide-set grey eyes and a wistful smile of reminiscence parted his lips.

"Did you heah the band play on the Luneta in the evenin'?" he asked eagerly, "while the *spiggoties* in their *calesas* wuh racin' round the circle, an' the kiddies an' theyah nusses wuh rompin' on the grass, an' the big red sun was goin' down behind Mariveles beyond the bay? An' did you know the Ahmy an' Navy Club—not the new one ... the ol' one ovah cross the moat inside the wall?"

"Put up there all my time in Manila," I replied. "A very comfy old hangout, especially considering what the hotels were."

"An'—did you—" (he gulped once or twice as though the question came hard) "did you evah heah them speak at the Club of a chap called Blake ... Lootenant-Commandah Blake? He was a son of Captain Blake, who helped Sampson polish off Cervera, an' a gran'son of Adm'al Blake. Ol' naval fam'ly."

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"You mean the man who pulled off that coup when Wood was cleaning up the crater of Bud

Dajo? Some kind of a bluff on his own with one of the little old gunboats Dewey captured after the Battle of Manila Bay, wasn't it? Scared some Jolo Dato into giving up a bunch of our men he already had lined up against a wall to *bolo*, didn't he? Of course, I remember perfectly now. General X—" (mentioning the Military Governor of Mindanao by name) "told me the yarn himself the night I dined with him in Zamboanga. He said no one but an old poker shark would ever have thought of the stunt, much less had the nerve to bluff it out. Incidentally he mentioned that the chap was the best poker player in the Navy, as he was also the speediest baseball pitcher ever graduated from Annapolis; that he had been missed almost as much for the one as the other since he dropped out of sight several years before. Some difficulty about—"

"Tryin' to push Corregidor out of the entrance to Manila Bay with the nose of his gunboat," Bell cut in harshly, the hell in his soul glowing through his eyes as the glare of the coal-bed welters beyond a stoker's lifted furnace flap. That, and a single sob sucked through his contracted throat as the vacuum in his chest called for air, were the only outward signs of the intensest spasm of throttled emotion I ever saw assail a human being. Then the square jaw tightened, the cords of the muscular neck drew taut, and what would have been another body and soul racking sob was noiselessly absorbed in the buffer of a flexed diaphragm. The fires of agony behind the eyes paled and died down like an expiring coal. The corrugations of the brow smoothed out as a smile—half amused, half wistful—relaxed the set lips. The old controlled Bell (I shall continue to call him so) was in the saddle again.

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"So they still remembah mah ball-playin'," he drawled musingly, his left hand digits gently massaging the bulbous swelling remaining after some red-hot drive had telescoped the middle finger of his right. "Ye'es, of co'se they'd miss mah wing in the Ahmy-Navy game at Ca'nival time. But mah pokah—we'll I reckon a few of 'em did find mah pokah hand about as bafflin' as mah baseball ahm. But it was straight deliv'ry, tho'—both of 'em. An' they wouldn't be callin' me a fo'-flushah, etha. No, you didn't heah any of 'em say that, I'm right suah."

A smile more whimsical than bitter twitched his lips twice or thrice in the minute or two he stood alone with his thoughts. "So I've sort o' dropped out o' sight to 'em?" he said finally. "We'll, I guess that was about the best thing to happen for all consuned. But, just the same, if you evah go back Manila-way I won't be mindin' it if you tell 'em that, tho' the ol' wing's tuhn'd to glass from long lack o' limberin', an' tho' I don't play pokah down heah fo' feah o' bein' knifed fo' mah luck, I'm still hittin' true to fohm in mah own lil' game of alterin' the sea map with the noses of ships. I reckon they'll know the reason why."

There was another interval of silence, but, unlike the other, not charged, electric. Bell's blow-off through the safety-valve of frank speech had taken the peak off the pent-up pressure within, and when he spoke again it was merely to quote what the Governor of North Carolina had said about its having been a long time between drinks. "Great thust aggravateh, the Sou'east Trade." Would I mind—ahem—hiking home with him and lubricating my tonsils with a drop of "J. Walkah"? That was simply his delicate way of pretending to ignore my slavery to absinthe, a habit which not even the most whisky-saturated sot of an Anglo-Saxon can ever quite forgive one of his race for falling a victim to. I wouldn't? "We'll, *hasta manyanah*."

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With a crunch of coral clinkers under his feet and a stave of "Carry Me Back to Ol' Virginny" on his lips, Bell, disdaining the smooth path by the beach, swung off through the pandanus scrub on what he called a "bee-line for home"! He had a weakness for taking "short-cuts" on land as well as at sea. Never again—not even in the moment of his great decision—did he lift for me or any other man the "furnace flap" of iron reserve that masked the fires of his innermost soul.

Their saving "sense of sport," which was the golden vein in the rough iron of the "beach push" of Kai, made it inevitable that they should have a substantial sense of respect for a man of Bell's stamp, and this might easily have ripened to an active popularity had not the American's quiet but inflexible reserve prevented their knowing him better. They suspected that he was no novice in handling the big Colt's that was flopping on his hip when he landed, they knew that there was a weighty punch behind his long arm, and they were frankly outspoken in their admiration of the manner in which he stowed and carried his booze. But what had impressed them more than anything else was the way in which he had taken the devil out of a vicious imp of a Solomon Island pony on the beach one morning. "Hellish hard-handed," "Slant" Allen had said, as his steel-blue eyes narrowed down to slits in the intensity of his interest and admiration; "but a seat like he was screwed to the brute's backbone. Old cross-country rider—hundred to one on it. Man in a million in a steeplechase on a horse strong enough to carry the weight. Gawd, what a seat!"

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All in all, indeed, there was only one thing the "beach" held against Bell, and that was Rona, or rather his possession of her. There was nothing personal in this, of course. They merely regarded the big American in the same light they had always regarded a man with a chest of pearls or anything else of value that their simple, direct natures made them yearn for the possession of. There was this difference, however. Where the "push" of Kai would have combined to a man to get away with a box of pearls or a cargo of shell, the annexing of a woman was essentially a lone-hand game, and—well, Bell was hardly the kind of a "one-man job" any of them cared to tackle. I feel practically certain that, but for the disturbance of the even tenor of Kai's way incident to the *Cora Andrews* affair, his "rights" in Rona would never have been challenged.

CHAPTER III

THE GIRL HERSELF

As for the girl herself, words fail me in trying to picture her, just as my brush and pencil (save perhaps for that one rough memory sketch, done at white heat while still gripped in the exaltation that first glimpse of her splashing inside the reef had thrown me into) have always failed. This is, I fancy, because, unbelievably beautiful though she was, there was still so much of her appeal that was of the spirit rather than the flesh—something intangible which had to be sensed rather than seen. She was compact of contradictions, physical as well as mental. So slender as almost to suggest fragility at a first glance, there was still not a straight line, nor an angle, nor a hint of boniness, from the arch of her instep to the tips of her ears. Again, pixie-like as she was in the dainty perfection of her modelling, there was yet a fairly feral suggestion of suppleness and strength underrunning the soft fluency of contour. The strength was there, too, held in reserve in the flexible frame like the power of a coiled spring. I saw her unleash it one morning when, impatient of the slowness of a clumsy Fijian who was launching a very sizable dugout for her, she yanked him aside by the hair of his fuzzy head and did the job herself. I can still see the run of muscles under the olive-silk skin of arm and ankle, and the bent-bow arch of her slender back, as she gave a last push to the cranky outrigger. Indeed, my mind is full of pictures like that—paddling, swimming, leaning hard against the buffets of a passing squall, with a lock of wet hair streaking across her glowing face and her drenched garments clinging to her lithe limbs; and yet, as I have said, the buoyant, flaming spirit of her always escaped my brush and pencil as it now eludes portrayal by my pen.

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But the most baffling, as it was also the most fascinating, of Rona's contradictions was the combination she presented of inward intensity and outward calm. The fire of her was, perhaps, the first thing one was conscious of. Even I, with my blood thinned and cooled with the ice of absinthe, could never watch her movements without a quickening of my jaded pulses; to the sanguine combers of Kai the sight of her (whether the rippling undulations of arms and shoulders as she drove a canoe through the water, or the hawk-like immobility of her as she poised on a pinnacle of reef waiting for a chance to cast her little Dyak purse-net) was palpably maddening.

So much for the flaming appeal of the girl in action, or suspended action, which was, of course, about the only way in which she was ever revealed to the "beach." Now picture the same creature (as Bell—and occasionally myself, his only intimate friend on the island—so often saw her) seated cross-legged on a mat, her sloe-eyes, set slightly slant, fixed dreamily on nothingness, like a sort of reincarnated girl-Buddha. The sight of her thus never failed to awaken in my nostrils the smell of smouldering *yakka* sticks, and to set my ears ringing with the throb of temple bells.

To my hyper-sophisticated (I will not say degenerate) senses this Oriental side of the girl made a subtle appeal that was like an enchantment. The passion to paint her—always burning within me when I saw her in action—never assailed me when she fell into one of those contemplative calms. Rather the peace of her soothed me like an opiate and made me content to sit and dream myself. It was the one thing (until I got the habit by the throat years afterward) that ever held my nerves steady when the "absinthe hour" drew near at the end of the afternoon. As long as Rona would continue to "sit Buddha" I had myself completely in hand, even till well on after sunset. But if she moved, or spoke, or even showed by her eyes that she was following Bell's words (it was he—less sensitive to this phase of her than I—who did most of the talking at these times), the spell was broken. The haste of my bolt for home was almost indecent. I have sometimes thought that a few months alone with Rona at this time might have effected very near to a complete cure in me—by a sort of involuntary mental therapeutic treatment on her part, I mean. But perhaps the other side of her—the "unreposeful" one—might have complicated the case.

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Both the fire and the repose of Rona—the passion and the peace of her—were reflected in the olive oval of her face, the one by the full, sensuous lips and the sensitive nostrils, and the other by the smooth, low brow. The low-lidded blue-black eyes were "debatable territory," now in the hands of one, now the other. So, too, that infallible "gauge of temperament," whose dial is the pucker between the eyebrows. With Rona, this "passion-pressure index" was a corrugated knot of intensity or an olive blank according as to whether her inner fires were flaming or banked.

Bell knew little of the girl's origin and said less. "Rona's *trousseau* consisted of huh peacock sca'f an' this heah baby *bolo*," he said in his slow drawl one afternoon when he had borrowed the exquisite little dagger to show me how the Jolo *juramentado* executed his favourite belly-ripping stroke; "an' I reckon they'll comprise 'bout the sum total of huh mo'nin' at mah fun'ral." That, and "I guess Rona knows no mo' 'bout mah past reco'd than I do 'bout huhs," was all I recollect his ever having said on the subject. He was content to let it rest at that.

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It was old Jackson who told me that he had seen the girl at Ponape, where she had been brought by an "owl-eyed" (referring to horn-spectacles rather than to the almond orbs themselves, I took it) "chink" when he came back to the Carolines after buying bird-of-paradise skins down

New Guinea-way. She was dressed "Java-style" at the time, and was said to have been picked up at Ternate or Ambon in the Moluccas. Although the wily old Celestial kept the girl practically under lock and key from the first, customers of his shop occasionally glimpsed her, and she them, it would seem. Among these was the Yankee skipper of the trading schooner, *Flying Scud*. The coming together of those two must have been like the touching off of a *ku-kui*-nut torch, Jackson opined, adding that he supposed I "twigged that thar was no snuffin' uv *ku-kui*, onst aflar."

Just how the sequel eventuated no one in Ponape save the old Chinaman knew, and he never told. With only half her copra discharged, the *Scud* was heard getting under way at midnight, shortly after which the silhouette of her, close-reefed, was observed to blot out the moon three or four times as she beat out of that "hell's craw" of a passage in the teeth of a rising sou'wester. The girl was never seen in the Carolines again. Neither was Bell nor the *Scud*, for that matter, as it was but a few days later that he attempted his disastrous short-cut across Tuka-tuva Reef.

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The next morning the Chinaman waited on his customers with his neck heavily, obscuringly swathed in bandages. He kept these on for a fortnight or more, and when they were finally dispensed with replaced his loose shirt with a close-buttoned jacket having an unusually high-cut neck. Even the latter, however, could not entirely conceal a number of parallel red cicatrices which, beginning on his fat jowls, ran down, slightly converging, onto his puffy yellow throat. Jackson felt sure that the point where those red furrows came to a focus must have been "fairish messed up."

On the beach of Ponape opinion was fairly divided as to whether the big, close-mouthed Yank had "strong-armed" the Chinaman and carried off the girl bodily, perhaps against her will, or whether she had made the get-away unaided, going off to the *Scud* on her own. In Jackson's mind there were no doubts.

"I see them welts wi' my own peepers," he said, "an' they wan't the marks uv a man. They wuz *scratches*. That lanky Yank don't scratch ... 'e *wallops*. But that gal—s'y, did y'u ever tyke a squint at 'er taloons? Them's the ans'er. She kum to 'im; an' she's stickin' lika oktypus."

Again I must credit old "Jack" with handing me pretty near to the "stryght dope."

Yes, I had indeed noticed Rona's wonderful fingernails; likewise the astonishing amount of care she lavished on them. One could not have helped noticing them. A quarter to half an inch long, meticulously manicured, and stained a maroon-brown (rather darker than the rich *sang du bœuf* of *henna*), she was always polishing them—those of one hand on the palm of the other—even when "sitting Buddha" with dreaming half-closed eyes. I inferred the habit of letting them grow was acquired in the course of her association with the Chinese. She cut them just short of where they would begin to curl and be a nuisance. A fraction of an inch longer, and they would have been as useless as the tusks of an old boar that had curved back more than a half circle. As they were....

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One man's guess was as good as another's in the matter of Rona's racial origin. Kai, though agreeing that she came from "somewhere Java-side," always spoke of her as a Kanaka, just as they did of all the rest of the "beach" women who were not palpably Jap, Chinese or white. I doubt very much, however, that she had a drop of real Polynesian blood in her veins. Flaring with temperament though she was, there was still nothing about her of the happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care sensuousness of the Caroline or Samoan, the only women of the Islands to whom she bore even the faintest resemblance in face or figure. If she had come from Marquesas-way—but no, not even an admixture of old Spanish pirate blood would have accounted for either the spirit or the body of Rona.

The girl's practice of wearing her *sulu* (Kai used the Fijian name for the inevitable South Sea waist-cloth which the Samoans call *lava-lava* and the Tahitians *pareo*) Malay-fashion—looped over the breasts and secured by a hitch under the left arm—indicated that her outdoor life at least had been spent somewhere in the Insulinde Archipelago. Her very considerable English vocabulary, however, and especially her fluency in "pidgin," could hardly have been acquired save through some years of residence in the Straits Settlements or the Federated Malay States. I was inclined to favour Singapore, especially as she had once let slip something about a fling at *fan-tan* at Johore. But even had she been born in that amazing island melting pot, her unmistakably Hindu cast of features and mould of figure were hardly accounted for. The Madrassi Tamils of the Straits were coolies, and Rona radiated *caste* from her slender pink-tipped toes to her crown of indigo-black hair coils.

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In my own mind I harboured the theory that the girl was a "by-product" of the harem of one of the innumerable petty Sultanates of Malaysia, among which I knew were to be found girls of all the tribes and races of the Moslem world. In no other way could I account for the flaming spirit and the physical perfection of her. Not even descent from that strange Hindu remnant of the lovely island of Lombok, just east of Java (a theory which I had also turned over in my mind), quite satisfied on both these scores. As to what sort of a centrifugal impulse might have operated to spin her forth to the clutches of the currents of the outside world, I had not speculated very deeply. But—well, I knew something of the strange currencies in which Malaysian potentates paid their debts to Singapore rug and jewel merchants!

In spite of the increasing warmth of Bell's friendship for me, my way to Rona's confidence proved far from easy sledding. This was partly because I had got in bad at the outset by starting to sketch that capricious lady at her reef-side bath in the face of her very outspoken disapproval of anything so unseemly, and partly because she was slow in making up her mind that I did not necessarily classify with the predatory males against whom her whole life had unquestionably been an unrelieved defence. Obsessed by the desire to paint her, I had not improved my standing with the girl by asking Bell (after she had refused me pointblank) to intercede to get her to sit for me. Indeed, that *faux pas* on my part seemed to have put an end for good to any chance I might have had of getting her to pose. Rona was openly indignant that I should have presumed to regard her own decision as other than final in the matter, while Bell, though perfectly good-natured about it, was no less decided in his disapproval.

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"No, sah, I'm not fo' it in the least, ol' man," he drawled decisively. "Lil' Rona's 'bout the neapest thing to a true, lovin' an' lawful wife I evah had, awh evah will have, fo' that mattah. So you must see that it doan quite jibe with mah sense o' what is right an' propah unda the ci'cumstances fo' me to aid an' abet a proceduah that might culminate in huh appeahin' on the wall o' somun's bathroom as a spo'tin nymph awh a wallowin' mumaid. Nothin' doin', ol' man; not with mah blessin'."

That ended it, of course. From then on I had to content myself with the hopeless "sketches from memory," in not the best of which was I able to catch more than a suggestion of what I sought. I could not have failed more utterly had I set myself to do a "character portrait" of the "Green Lady" herself.

But on the personal side it was not long before I began to make an appreciable gain of ground with Rona. First she ceased avoiding me when I dropped in for a mid-afternoon yarn with Bell; then she began to assume a sort of "benevolent tolerance" by coming and sitting on the mat as we talked; finally she started taking an active interest in the conversation, coming out of her Buddha-like trances every now and then to cut in with some trenchant comment in fluent *bêche-de-mer* jargon, or perhaps a shrewd question phrased in carefully chosen and enunciated English.

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At last, one memorable afternoon, she came (quite on her own initiative, he assured me) with Bell to call at the little thatch-roofed, woven-walled hut I was calling home at the time, wearing in honour of the occasion her most treasured possession, the "peacock" shawl. It was this astonishingly fine piece of Cantonese embroidery which Bell had mentioned as having made up, with the little Malay *kris*, the sum total of the dower Rona had brought him. It was the first time I had had a chance to examine it at close quarters and I saw at a glance that, however it had come into her possession, it had once been a priceless thing, a real work of art, a treasure fit for the *trousseau* of a princess.

The body of the shawl was amber-coloured silk of so close a weave that it would have shed water as it stopped light. A rubber blanket would not have thrown a blacker shadow when held against the sun. Yet so sheer and fine was the fabric that a twist of it streamed from one hand to the other as brandy pours out of a flask. The peacock itself, done in a thousand tints and shades of delicate floss, was all of life-size in body and something more than that in tail. Stitching and matching, stitching and matching—you could almost see the artist growing old before your eyes as you thought of the years he must have bent above his glacially-growing masterpiece.

With this rainbow-bright rectangle of shimmering silks worn folded over the shoulders in the ordinary way the peacock must have been considerably telescoped and distorted. It was doubtless for this reason that Rona always wore it Malay-fashion, as the Javanese women wear their *sarongs*. This displayed the jewel-gay bird in all his pride, the bright breast swelling over Rona's own and the coruscant cascade of tail (you could almost hear the rustle of it) falling about her limbs like the feather mantle of an early Hawaiian queen.

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I have said that this shawl *had been* a priceless thing. As a matter of fact it still was such. So lovingly had it been cared for, not only by Rona but by the many owners it may well have had before her (for Canton had done no such work as this for half a century at least), that not a corner was frayed, not a one of its countless thousands of stitches started. In texture it was scarcely less perfect than the day it was finished. The only thing wrong with it was that the colours were a good deal dulled, not by age (for the old Cantonese dyes are as deathless of hue as ancient Phoenician glass), but by grease. This had happened, I suspected, largely during Rona's stewardship, for the *tiare*-scented coco oil she used so freely as a hair-perfume often found its way to her arms and shoulders—and so to the shawl. All the latter needed to restore it to its pristine freshness and refulgency was a good "dry-cleaning."

"Even Rona does not dream of the brilliance of colour under that grease," I said to myself. "Oh, for a can of naphtha!" Then the fact that my benzine would do the same trick flashed into my mind. I was all but out of it, I reflected, with replenishment uncertain; but I could at least contrive to spare enough to make a start with. Pouring a teacupful of the pungent solvent out of the scant pint I found still on hand, I saturated a clean rag with it and, without a word of explanation to the girl, walked up to her and started washing the bird's face and hackle. For an instant she stiffened angrily, evidently under the impression that my solicitude for the embroidery was only a thinly veiled excuse for chucking her under the chin. (Indeed, she confessed to me later that "gentlemen"

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could always be counted on to employ such indirect methods of approach, and that she found them rather more difficult to combat than the straight cave-man stuff of the less sophisticated beach-comber). But as the first glad flash of brightening colour caught the corner of a suspiciously-lowered eye, the innocence—even the laudability—of my purpose shot home to her quick mind. With a twirl of thumbs and a twist of shoulders, she came out of the shawl as a golden moth spurns its cocoon, and, leaving it in my hand, darted over to a peg and purloined an old smoking-jacket to take its place.

"Bath heem good, Whitnee," she chirruped, giving her slipping *sulu* a hitch with one hand as she thrust the other into an arm of the jacket. "Makee heem first-chop clean. He too much dirtee long time."

That she lapsed thus into "pidgin" was a sure sign of the girl's ecstatic excitement. Usually her English—especially when she had time to ponder and polish it in advance, as when she put questions—was much better than that.

Sopping gently to avoid pulling the delicate stitches, I managed to "bath heem good" from his saucy crest, down over the royal purple hackle, and well out upon his comparatively sober-coloured breast before my benzine came to an end. A slightly more vigorous dabbing beyond the embroidery line "alchemized" a patch of clouded amber to a halo of lucent gold, against which the bird's haughtily-held head stood out like the profile of a martyred saint on an old stained-glass window. Thus far would the precious contents of that teacup go, and no farther.

Rona was in raptures. What though there was a blotchy high- (or rather low-) water mark where the dabbing had ceased near the base of the erupting splash of tail-feathers, what though the magic liquid had come off second best in its bout with an indurated gob of egg-yolk drooling across one wing, what though the worst of our Augean labours—the cleansing of the mighty green tail—had yet to be tackled—just look at the glory already wrought!

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Crooning with pleasure, the girl stroked and petted the renovated iridescence of the lordly neck—until I called her attention to the fact that the still unevaporated benzine was dissolving her finger-nail stain. It was an ill-advised remark on my part, for it turned her attention to the still unreclaimed tail and set her begging for "just nuff fo' one-piecee featha, Whitnee; he need it vehry ba-ad."

She had her way, of course, and would have finished my benzine then and there had not Bell come to my rescue. Laughing and muttering something about "thustiness" (not drinking whisky myself, I had none in stock), he took Rona by the arm and started off on the homeward path. Strutting and preening she went, the very reincarnation of the royal bird upon her bosom, the very living, breathing spirit of "peacock-iness."

She might just as well have finished the job—or rather the benzine—at once, though, for she got it all in the end. Every day or two—sometimes with Bell, sometimes alone—she began paying calls. Always she was in gala dress and always, after more or less "finessive" preliminaries, she made the same plea.

"Just one mo' featha, Whitnee," she would coo ingratiatingly, putting a long-nailed finger-tip on the "eye" of the particular quill next in line for renovation. "Ple-ese, Whitnee.... 'Peakie' has been one veh-ry good fella bird too-dayee. Pu-retty ple'ese, Whitnee."

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Of course that always got me, and incidentally the benzine—as long as it lasted. I had remarked to Bell once or twice how his soft Southern drawl was beginning to creep into Rona's English, and how fetching a combination it made with her "pidgin-*bêche-de-mer*" blend. Getting wind of this, the sly minx played the card to the limit. That "one mo' fetha, Whitnee," had me fated, and she knew it. I was completely out of benzine for three weeks, and at a time when I was in especial need of it in connection with my experiments in colour-mixing; but Rona's friendship was cheap at the price. When I finally got hold of a five-gallon can of naphtha from Suva (sent up to Bougainville by Burns, Phillip packet, where one of Jackson's cutters picked it up), the dry-cleaning the two of us gave old "Peakie" was the best fun I'd had since I used to scrub my Newfoundland pup as a kid.

CHAPTER IV

"SLANT" ALLEN RETIRES AGAIN

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ALTHOUGH "Slant" Allen had "retired" to Kai on three or four occasions previous to my arrival, his latest sojourn—the one which ended with his enforced departure on the *Cora Andrews*—began

about a month after I took up my residence there. Two questions which Jackson asked of the man who told him "Slant" had landed on the beach the night before have always struck me as especially illuminative. One was: "Did 'e fetch a 'awse?" and the other—even more laconic—was: "Gin, Kanak, Jap or Chinee this croose?"

And equally illuminative was his comment when told that Allen had come across in a catamaran, bringing neither girl nor horse. "Then 'e musta sloped in a 'ell uv a rush," said the old trader with finality.

Kai was frankly disappointed that "Slant" had come without his "stable," for the "beach race meets" which had made his name a byword throughout the Islands were always productive (it was universally agreed) of no end of sport and excitement. Allen, it was claimed, had transported ponies about the South Seas by every known craft that plied their waters, from a steam packet to a Papuan head-hunting canoe. Once, in Fiji, he had even swum a horse across the flooded Rewa in order to get it to Suva in time to run for the "Roku's Cup." Of course he won out. "Slant" always did that—by hook or by crook—whether with a horse or a woman. Thus Kai, in discussing Allen's advent.

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It was characteristic of that hard-hit bunch of "gentlemen and sportsmen" (a phrase often on the lips of the post-prandial speakers at their "race-banquets") that they should hasten to tell me that Allen had once owned a Melbourne Cup winner—"came jolly near riding the gelding himself, too"—while the fact that he had killed more of his fellow-creatures than any man of twice his age in the South Seas was only a matter of casual mention. You had to credit the frank minded and mouthed rascals for running true to form in that touch of naïveté, though. To them the Melbourne Cup was the greatest thing in the world beyond any possible comparison: a human life was just about the least. But they were quite as careless about their own lives as of those of others, and that alone always raised them in my eyes far above the pettiness of lesser if more conventionally moral men.

Although there was not a horse on the island at the time of Allen's arrival, within a week he had wangled it somehow to have a bunch of Solomon ponies brought over from Malaite, and at the end of a fortnight had pulled off the first Kai "Grand National." "Slant" called it that, he said, because, like the great Liverpool classic from which he borrowed the name, it was to be a steeplechase. The half-wild little beasts were brought over on the deck of a trading schooner, travelling in such restricted quarters in the waist that they had to be thrown and held down to let the foreboom go over every time she was put about.

A bit stiff in the knees but uncurbed of spirit, the vicious quartette clambered out on the beach, shook off the water soaked up during their swim from the schooner, laid back their ears and stood ready to fight all-comers with tooth and hoof. As a consequence, naturally, the preliminaries of the "Grand National" were more in the character of broncho-busting contests than speed trials, and it was in one of these that the mighty Bell had won the plaudits and the respect of the "beach" by breaking the spirit of a wild-eyed lump of a cayuse which had just managed to give the momentarily overconfident "Slant" a nasty spill.

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The "Grand National" was run round the curve of the beach, with two "water-jumps," the "stonewall" of the quay, and three hurdles in the form of old dugout canoes to be negotiated. Bell declined to accept a mount, and, in any event, his weight would have told prohibitively against him in competition with any one of at least a dozen lighter men, all of whom had had more or less actual racing experience.

Allen was the only one to go the full route at the first running of the "National," all three of his rivals falling out at the water-jumps. When one of the defeated riders limped in and started to attribute "Slant's" win to the fact that he had picked the best-broken if not the speediest mount, that imperturbable sportsman cheerfully agreed to ride the race over mounted on any one of the ponies the judges cared to designate. Again he had a walkaway. It was all a matter of sheer horse-mastership; the speed of the beast had little to do with it.

Finally, just to prove that the running was all on the square, "Slant" rode the race on each of the two remaining ponies, one of which had strained a tendon and rasped most of the hide off one side of him in trying to jump *through* the coral blocks of the quay instead of over them. We gave the laughing centaur a great ovation when he brought even the cripple—dripping blood and sweat it was, but still responsive to the magic of the hand that imposed its will at the pressure of a bridle rein—under the wire a half-breach-length winner.

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And still more wildly we cheered him when "Quill" Partington—a broken-down and broken-out (from jail, I mean) newspaper writer, late of Melbourne and formerly of Calcutta and London—chivvied up an ancient tortoise that Jackson used to keep around his shop as a pet, and, mounting "Slant" on the ridge of its shell, offered to back the pair at catch-weights against anything on the island. "Quill," a most engaging character, was the poet and minstrel of Kai. He did not, however, figure in the *Cora Andrews* affair, save that he later wrote some rather spirited verses in celebration of it, or rather of what little he knew of it.

If the feeling in Kai had been one of disappointment when it was first reported Allen had landed without a horse, that awakened by the still more astonishing intelligence that he did not have a girl with him was somewhat different—rather more akin to apprehension, it seemed to me. "Slant" was no more of a laggard on the love-path than the race-track, and the gay gossip of his amazing *amours* was sipped with the tea of effete Apia and Papeete with scarcely less gusto than when it sauced the salt-horse of the pearling fleets of Port Darwin and Thursday Island. The lightning of his love was likely to strike anywhere, you were told, sometimes in the most unexpected places. There was that vixen of a *gin*—a straight Australian aboriginal black—whom he had risked his life for in cutting across a corner of the "Never-Never" when he ran away with her, only to have her turn and knife him later in Deli out of jealousy of a half-caste Portugee Timorese who had caught his fickle fancy. And—to take the other extreme—there was that little golden-haired doll of a niece of the Governor of Fiji, who fell heels over head in love with "Slant" after seeing him play polo in Suva, and who, when they packed her off for home to break up the disgraceful affair, made what was described as a really sincere attempt to go over the rail of the Auckland-bound Union packet. Then there was "Slant's" affair with that notorious pearl-pirate "Squid" Saunders' girl—the one the missionaries adopted and tried to reclaim, and who promised for a while to be such a credit to their teaching—with its ghastly sequel. And so it went.

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It was said that "Slant" boasted of having a son (he never kept track of girls, he said) and a saddle in every group west of the "hundred and eightieth." I daresay this was true, though those who put it *island* instead of group doubtless exaggerated. I had landed at several islands myself where I had been unable to borrow a saddle.

Most of the little unpleasantnesses that disturbed the *dolce far niente* atmosphere of Kai had their roots in the fact that the male population of the island was always a good jump ahead of the female, that there were not, in short, enough girls to go round. Under these conditions the advent of so notorious a "feminist" as Allen could not but be provocative of a certain anxiety, especially on the part of those who were (to use Jackson's terse if inelegant expression) "'arborin' 'igh-class 'ens."

"Don't you coves make no mistake," Jackson was quoted as saying; "'Slant' 'll be tykin' a myte stryght aw'y. Only question is 'oo's myte 'e's goin' to tyke. If it was any bloke but that squar'-jawed Yank w'at 'ad 'is grappin' 'ooks slung into the plumage uv that perky peacock pullet, I'd 'ave no doubt w'at bird 'Slant' ud be baggin' an' draggin' 'ome to broil. But—layin' low as 'e is fer a bit—I'm thinkin' it ain't *that* presarve 'e'll be gunnin' in just yet aw'ile."

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"Stryght dope" again from old "Jack." Allen had his own reasons for not wishing his presence in Kai to be called too forcibly to the attention of the authorities in the British Solomons, where his latest escapade (something to do with the forcible recruiting of blacks) came pretty near the line where they were likely to ask for a gunboat from the Sydney station to aid in bringing him to book. Allen was by no means inept of his fellow men, and he must have known that a showdown with a man of Bell's stamp—even though he had the best of it and copped the most desirable thing he ever set eyes on for his very own—could hardly fail to prove a clash that men would like to talk about, the inspiration of a tale that would shudder itself from Yap to Tasmania in delirious beach-comber jargon, setting tongues wagging about him at a time when publicity was quite the last thing that he wanted.

Pipped as he was by the pullet's pulchritude (his own expression—he admitted as much to Jackson offhand) the cool-headed if hot-blooded Allen evidently decided to ride a waiting race for at least the first half or three-quarters, and so have something to draw on for the straightaway. "Easy starter but a hell of a finisher," was the popular appraisal of "Slant's" way of winning with a horse, and it was but natural that he should pin his faith to similar tactics where a woman was in the running. There's a lot in common between the two, and it is rarely indeed that a man who has a way with the one comes a cropper with the other.

It has occurred to me, too, that a very wholesome respect for Bell as a man may have had a good deal to do with Allen's failure to force the running at the start in the matter of Rona. The steel of his own hard purposefulness could not have but struck sparks on the flint beneath the American's mask of suave reserve at their first meeting, and the Australian was far too intelligent not to sense that in Bell's Jovian spirit there was a force more compelling than anything in his own. Moreover, at riding, fighting and shooting—all that carried much weight when they judged a man in the Islands—Allen must have known that if the balance inclined either way, it was in the American's favour.

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It may well have been the sheer rugged, manly forcefulness of Bell that gave Allen pause, at least in those early weeks before the Australian's infatuation for the girl became an obsession in which his reason had no part. For years he had been taking life and property out of downright contempt for his victims. "I'm the better man, and therefore the more deserving," was sufficient excuse in his own mind for his most high-handed outrages. But in Bell—for almost the first time perhaps—he had met a man who had an "edge" on him—even his soaring ego could not prevent his recognizing that. This must have been plain to him even when he measured the Yankee with the yardstick of his own primitive code. Yes, I really think that Allen, in his innermost mind, rated Bell as a man who, like himself, had a "right" to the best of everything. I am even convinced that, for a while at least, he even tried to respect Bell's right to Rona.

But do not let me leave the impression that there was one iota of physical fear of Bell in this attitude of Allen's. From what I had seen, and was to see, of the cool-eyed Antipodean that was unthinkable, even though he knew that the powerful ex-athlete could come pretty near to staving in his ribs with a single punch, and though he may have suspected that the Yankee was the deadlier man on the draw. I honestly believe that "Slant" Allen had no fear in his heart of anyone or anything under heaven. At that time, I mean; what came to him later is another matter.

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"Slant" ran true to Jackson's "dope sheet" in the matter of "tykin' a myte," though, but it was done quite decently and in order—that is, as such things go in the Islands. He put up with "Quill" Partington (an old pal) for a fortnight, and then, when "Quill's" lyric spirit led him to run over to Malaite in search of a queer native banjo that someone had told him the bush niggers of the interior of that island made, strings and all, from the wild boar, "Slant" simply stayed on to "look after the pigs and chickens" (as he told them at Jackson's) and, incidentally, Mary Regan. Mary came from Norfolk Island, and claimed lineal descent from the mutineers of the "Bounty." Certainly she looked the part—of a descendant of mutineers, I mean. She had specialized in unhappy love affairs, and showed it. She had a thin, bony, angular frame, a voice like the wail of a cracked fog-horn, and a temper "calid enough for cooking purposes," as "Quill" described it. "Quill," who had developed a taste for curries and hot seasonings while living in India, claimed that the reason he had put up with Mary for so long was because of the saving she enabled him to effect in *paprika*.

How "Slant"—straight meat-eating and unpampered of palate as he was—hit it off with the mercurial Mary no one seemed to know. At any rate, I feel sure that he found her "condimental" disposition useful as a counter-irritant against the rising fever of his passion for Rona, something which, though he kept it under astonishingly good outward control, had been burning with increasing heat from the very first time he saw her. He confessed that to me later. Curbed passion, like wounded pride, if it cannot find outward expression, bites inward. With all his despicable record well in mind, I still cannot help thinking with a certain admiration of the game bluff the rascal put up during those six or eight weeks that the enchantment of Rona worked within him, of the gay, devil-may-care smile that so successfully masked the writhings of his racked spirit. First and last, there was something about the fellow—I think it must have been his flaming courage—that attracted me strongly in spite of all that I knew, and all that I came to hold, against him.

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Since Kai held no regular intercourse with any of the surrounding islands, the news that the plague—a pernicious form of bubonic—had broken out and was making terrible ravages among both the bush and saltwater niggers of the Solomons was received with no especial interest on the beach, save perhaps by those who were wont now and then to take a flyer in "black ivory." The labour-recruiting trade—itself almost the only medium through which the pest had been spread—was hard hit of course; indeed, had there been anything like adequate control of the pernicious traffic at this time, it would have been suspended entirely until all of the islands from which blacks were being taken, or to which they were being returned, were able to present something approximating clean bills of health.

Since this was not done, however, the only check on the movement of blacks—infected or otherwise—was the possible reluctance of the masters of ships engaged in the trade to take the risk of carrying them. And since the average black-birding skipper lived as a matter of course with a gun in one hand, his life in the other, and the devil's tow-line between his teeth, it was hardly to be expected that a little thing like the spectre of the "Black Death" looming up on the windward horizon was going to make him reef much canvas. The "Black Death" in another form would ambush him sooner or later anyhow. With niggers waiting to settle accounts with him in every bay it was only a matter of time at the best. Why worry about a few cases of a disease that might not kill him even if he did get it? Heave in and get under way! That was about the way the black-birder looked at it, and he went right on scattering infected niggers around the South Seas like a cook stirring raisins into a pudding.

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But in the secluded and peaceful haven of Kai lagoon they reckoned that they had little to fear from the epidemic whatever happened elsewhere. Let the plague and the heathen rage for all they cared. They were their own quarantine officers, and, until the "Black Death" ceased to stalk in the neighbouring islands, "No Visitors" was the order of the day. All very simple and efficient—in theory. Covered every possible contingency—just about.

I had spent several colourful days once—getting about from island to island in the New Hebrides—with red-haired old Mike Grogan on the *Cora Andrews*, and had heard from that hard-fisted giant's own lips something of the grim balances checked against his life in practically every black-birding island of Melanesia. A black's home bay holds a labour-recruiting skipper responsible for the man's safe return at the end of his contract time, and if he does not come back they figure that the only fair way to even up the score is by killing the captain of the ship which took him away. Grogan calculated that he would have to be killed something like one hundred and forty times to make a clean sheet of all the accounts thus reckoned against him. He took a sort of grim pleasure in running over the items of the various tallies, but always ended with: "B'gorra, the devils'll be gittin' me yit!" He was convinced that it would be a "cutting-out" party that would do for him in the end, and I have no doubt that he fought over in his mind that final bloody showdown every night he stood the "graveyard" watch alone. A sudden volley from the bush, his whaleboat caught in a swarming rush of blacks, his crew disabled or deserting, and himself alone battling it

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out single-handed with the niggers at the last.... It was something like that he expected for a grand finale, and all the "fighting Irish" in him yearned for it as a sunflower turns to the setting sun.

"An' it ain't as if I won't be givin' the spalpeens a run for their money, me bhoy," he had cried one afternoon, clapping me on the shoulder where I swayed with him to the plungings of the *Cora* in a nasty cross-swell. "An', b'gorra, it's a way to die after a man's own heart—shootin' an' clubbin' into a mob o' niggers out under God's own sky!"

Full as my mind was of other things on that accursed day of which I am about to write, I could not help but think of these words when they told me at Jackson's that old Mike's fighting spirit had passed on a windless midnight, and while Mike himself was jack-knifed over the *Cora's* wheel, spitting blood and curses, and imploring the devil to quit tying knots in his tortured guts with a red-hot pitchfork.

What little we heard of how things came to go wrong with the *Cora* in the first place fell from the blackening lips of her "Agent" (as the recruiter is called), who managed to reach the beach of Kai in a whaleboat, and who did not go into a delirium until a half-hour before he died that evening. She was packed to the hatches with "return" boys from Samoa. Although the plague had been claiming a very heavy toll among the Melanesian blacks of the coco plantations of Upolou, Grogan decided to take a chance at making the Solomons with a load which, on account of the risk, was offered him at double rates. They would have made it all right, the Agent thought, had not the southerly gale which blew them a long way out of their course been followed by many days of calms and alternating winds. Grogan's softness in trying to doctor the first case of plague—instead of following the customary practice, cruel but effective, of shooting the infected black (doomed anyhow) and throwing the body to the sharks—was probably responsible for the ghastly sequel. The blacks fell sick by dozens, until at last the Skipper—doubtless already in the first throes of the disease himself—ordered every living man except the surviving members of the crew driven below and battened under hatch. Grogan died that night and the mate the following morning.

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The only white man remaining was the Agent, and he, obsessed with a life-long horror of being buried at sea, steered the best course he could for the nearest island. The *Cora*, luckily heading into the treacherous reef-beset passage at the turn of the tide, dropped her hook in Kai lagoon in the first flush of the dawning of the next day.

CHAPTER V

A SHIP OF DEATH

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WITH a good many days of my life to which I cannot look back without a blush of shame, I write deliberately when I say that the one ushered in by the raucous grind of the *Cora Andrews'* chain running through its hawse-pipe as she let go anchor a couple of cables' lengths off Kai beach, stands alone in the horror and the painfulness of its memories. It is characteristic of all but the most degraded of beach-combers—doubtless their general contempt of life has much to do with it—that "once in a while" they "can finish in style"; that, on a showdown, they are usually there with the goods. I had always felt sure that, in a pinch, I could force myself to come through in the same way—the thought had gilded many a slough of despond for me. Well, this day, I had my chance and funk'd it—funk'd it clean, as a yellow dog slinks from a fight with its tail between its legs, as an underbred hunter refuses a jump. Oh yes, I had an excuse. "Seeing green" is next thing to "seeing yellow." Almost anyone knows that. But I had thought that there was enough red blood left in me to make it possible for me to take the bit in my teeth and finish like a thoroughbred at the last. But there was not. That was the thought which had made the ghastly tragedy even more tragical to me, which made a mockery of the triumph which I might otherwise have felt when, first Australia and then Europe, acclaimed me as the greatest marine painter of the decade.

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For several days previous to the coming of the *Cora Andrews* I had been slipping up pretty badly on my "absinthe reform" program. It was largely the fault, I think, of a positively infernal spell of weather. The ozone-laden trade winds, falling light after a spell of low barometer, had finally failed altogether. Kai was lapped in sluggish moisture-saturated airs that clung like a wet blanket. The Gargantuan popcorn-like piles of the trade clouds were replaced by strata of miasmatic mists which awakened all the latent fevers in a man's body and mind. The sea, slatily slick of surface, heaved in oily, indolent smoothness, sliding over the reef without sound or foam. The brooding, ominous sullenness was all-pervading, oppressive with sinister suggestion.

Everyone on the island was drinking heavily, and mostly alone. No tipsy choruses boomed out from under the sounding-board of Jackson's sheet-iron roof. Even "Slant" Allen failed to appear for his wild end-of-the-afternoon dashes up and down the beach. Rona dropped in languidly one afternoon to say that Bell was tilting the bottle more frequently than she had ever known him to do before, and that for three days he had missed his early morning plunge from the reef.

"Too much walkee with Jo'nnee Walkah, Whitnee," she punned in a feeble flicker of pleasantry. "I veh-ry much worree along Bel-la."

She needn't have worried, though. *He*, at least, had the stuff in him for a proper finish.

It was only to be expected that I should seek solace in a time like this by snuggling closer than ever into the enfolding arms of the "Green Lady." That fickle jade was at her best—and her worst. Never had she winged me to loftier pinnacles of sensuous delight; never had she dropped me to profounder depths of horror and despond. The night before the *Cora* came marked a new "high"; also a new "low." I dropped like a plummet straight from a pea-green grotto full of lilies of the valley, maiden's hair ferns and ambrosia-breathed houri to the fire-scorched cliffs ringing the mouth of the Bottomless Pit. I knew that Pit of old. Most of the early hours of my mornings for the last five years had been spent in trying to keep from being pushed into it.

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But this time, though, it looked as if they were going to get away with it. Failing to break my grip (I always managed to hang on somehow), they had tried new tactics. They were pushing in the side of the Pit itself so as to carry me with it. I felt the relentless creeping of the ledge on which I struggled to maintain precarious footing. If I could only push back into the rock ... through it ... out to the air! Nothing could stand against the mighty heave I gave with my shoulders. The cliff parted with a great rip-roar of rending, and I reeled back, back, straight through—the pandanus siding of my hut. An instant before a nigger had knocked off the shackle of the *Cora's* anchor chain. The unchecked run of forty-odd fathoms of rusty iron links through a hawse-pipe is very like in sound to the rending of a rocky cliff—that is, to a man in an absinthe nightmare.

That violent awakening did not bring me straight back to normal by any means. You never come out of the "green horrors" that way, unless, of course, you fall into water, or set fire to the house, or do something else that calls for instant action. You usually come out by gradual stages, each successive one marked by a shade more of the earth-earthy than the last.

In this instance my fall only changed the spirit of my nightmare. I was by no means out of the woods, either. I had backed away from the Mouth of the Pit all right, but what brought that Ship of Death—black and sinister she was against the bloody redness of the infernal sunrise—unless it was to take me there again? I *knew* that it was a real ship. I *knew* those black things festooned along its rails were real dead men. I *knew* that the horrible reek which presently came pouring in over the oily water to penetrate my contracted nostrils was the real smell of rotting flesh. I *knew* that I was looking out at Kai lagoon, and from the door of my own hut. I *knew* these things, just as I *knew* it was real blood I saw and tasted when I bit my finger to prove that I knew them.

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But it was still as in a dream that I became aware of an erratically rowed whaleboat pulling away from the Death Ship and making for the beach. It was with an agreeable sense of relief that I noted that it was apparently heading for the quay rather than in my direction. Drawing near, it sheered away from the weed-slippery landing and went full-tilt for the beach. A man—a big man, bare of legs and of chest, wearing only a red *sulu*—ran down to meet it. It seemed no more than a perfectly natural development of the ghastly pantomime that the big man should raise a revolver and shoot one of the black rowers when the latter jumped over the gunwale of the whaleboat and started to bolt up the beach. I saw the flash from the revolver, saw the fugitive crumple and fall, and the sharp report, impacting on the side of my sheet-iron rain-water tank, slammed against my ear-drums with a shattering "whang."

That close-at-hand shot had the effect of shocking me back a notch or two more nearer normal; but, nerve-shattered as I always was at the end of a night, it was something very akin to the abject terror that gripped me as I backed away from the Brink of the Pit which now impelled me to "back away" from the new menace. Seizing my painting things from sheer force of habit, I slunk off through the long early morning shadows of the coco palm boles, not to stop until I came out upon the broken coral of the steep-shelving leeward beach of the island. It was as far as I could go without swimming.

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Here Laku, my Tonga boy, found me toward noon. The coffee from the flask he brought was the first thing to pass my lips since I had poured my last drink the night before. It steadied me somewhat, but my nerves still refused to react. The shock of the morning had been too much for them. I realized that Kai had a mighty knotty problem on its hands with that shipload of dead and dying niggers in the lagoon (Laku had told me it was the *Cora*, and something of what the trouble was), and it took a lot of screwing before I got my courage up to a point where I could force my reluctant feet to carry me back to shoulder my share of the responsibilities.

I was still streaking and dabbing at my canvas at three o'clock, and it must have been nearly an hour later before I packed up and started back toward the village. I burned that bizarre rectangle of colour-slashed canvas on the very first occasion (which was not until a day or two later) that I had a chance to stand off and look at it objectively. There was revealed in it too much of the utter unmanliness which marked my conduct on this most shameful day of my life to make it a pleasant thing to have around. For me to have kept it would have been like a man's framing and hanging the excoriation of the judge who had sentenced him for some despicable crime.

What had transpired in the village up to the moment of my return at the end of the afternoon I must set down as I learned of it later. Everything considered, it seems to me that Kai—with one or two notable exceptions—behaved very creditably in an extremely trying emergency. Awakened when the *Cora's* anchor was let go, a number of men had run out to the beach, from where their glasses quickly gave them a pretty good idea of the state of affairs aboard the luckless black-birder. Then they got together at Jackson's—the lot of them in their pajamas or *sulus*, just as they had tumbled out of their sleeping mats—to decide what was to be done. The majority at first seemed inclined to stand by their predetermined plan of shooting the first, and every man from a plague-infested ship that tried to land on the beach. But at this juncture Doc Wyndham, calling their attention to the fact that a whaleboat had already put away from the *Cora*, suggested that they wait and learn just how things stood before starting off gunning.

"I'm with you as far as shooting any nigger that tries to break quarantine goes," he said, "but I'm dam'd if I'll stand by and see anyone take a pot shot at Mike Grogan, or any other sick white man, for that matter. Old Mike nursed me through a spell of 'black-water' once at Port Darwin, and if he is in that boat I dope it it's up to me to tote him home to my shack and do what I can for him. If he can't clamber out I'm going to wade in and carry him back to the beach, so you'll have to shoot the two of us if you shoot at all. But I don't think you will. I'm not asking any of you chaps to have anything to do with the stunt. You needn't touch him. I'll take him home and swear not to budge from there till the thing's over one way or the other. After that I'll put myself in a ten-day quarantine. Moreover, I won't be expecting attention from any white man or nigger on the island in case the luck goes against me and I catch the pest myself. It's my own little game and I won't stand for any interfering in it."

That was the gist of Doc Wyndham's remarks as Jackson outlined them to me the next day. They met with hearty assent from all of the dozen or more present, except on the score of letting the Doc have the job all to himself. He turned down every one of the volunteer nurses, however, saying it was his own kettle of fish and that he'd have to stew it in his own way. He even insisted on meeting the boat alone, urging that there was no use in multiplying the points of possible "plague contact."

So it must have been the distinguished surgeon from Guy's that I saw shoot the bolting black that morning. Had I continued to watch, instead of bolting myself at that juncture, I would have seen him wade out, lift a man tenderly from the stern-sheets of the whaleboat, and start carrying the limp body up the beach to where a spreading bread-fruit tree shaded the door of the sheet-iron shack which he was wont humorously to refer to as his "professional, social and domestic headquarters for Melanesia." Following that, I would have seen a bunch of motley-clad figures prance down and start menacing the irresolute boat-pullers with flourished revolvers, forcing the frightened blacks to back off and begin splashing their wobbly way out to the *Cora*.

Wyndham's conduct all through struck me as rather fine, especially for a man who was a convict of three continents and two hemispheres. Disappointed in finding his friend Grogan in the whaleboat, on learning that the latter and his mate were already dead, Doc just as cheerfully set about paying to the Agent the debt he felt he owed to old Mike. Before entering his house, he called to his girl—a saucy little Samoan named Melita, who had gone right on sleeping through all the racket—ordering her to make a hurried departure by the back door and not to return until he sent for her. The Doc was never a man to let sentiment interfere with business, Jackson opined.

Making the doomed man as comfortable as possible in his own canvas folding bed, Wyndham deferred giving an opiate until he had gained such information as he could of how things were on the *Cora*. Then, after communicating (from a safe distance) what he had learned to a delegation from executive headquarters at Jackson's, he nailed a red *sulu* to his front door as a danger signal and disappeared behind the bars of his self-imposed quarantine.

I may as well state here that Wyndham—thanks, doubtless, to the precautions which he, as a medical man, would have known how to take—side-stepped the plague completely, quite as completely, indeed, as he sidestepped the Thursday Island customs authorities a year or so later, when a half season's shipment of pearls from Makua Reef, Limited, disappeared as into thin air.

Of the information Wyndham gleaned from the Agent before giving the latter a shot of morphine to relieve his agony and mercifully hasten the inevitable end, the most important as affecting Kai's action was that something over a hundred blacks had been battened down in the schooner's forecabin and 'midships hold for seventy-two hours, with nothing but a couple of stubby wind-sails feeding them air. The dead had all been cleared out before this was done, but there were a lot of bad cases among the living who were driven or thrown down the hatches. By the stench, the Agent knew that some of these had already died; but that many still had life in their bodies he judged by the unabated vigour of the howling.

The most reassuring news passed on by the dying man was that Ranga-Ro, Grogan's gigantic Malay Bo'sun, had remained in charge of the *Cora*, and that he appeared to have the black crew (only three or four of them, luckily, had succumbed to the plague so far) well in hand. That brightened the outlook a good deal, for what Kai had feared above all else was a general breakout and stampede, which might inundate the island with plague-infected niggers, crazy beyond all possibility of control.

Ranga, who claimed to have had at one time or another every tropical disease on record, was—or believed himself to be—a plague immune. He was not in the least worried over the responsibilities that had fallen on him, and could be counted upon, the Agent thought, to see the game through. The only trouble was that he couldn't navigate, so that if the *Cora* was going to be taken to a port where any real relief could be obtained, she would have to have at least one competent white officer. Would Kai furnish that officer? was the question up before the meeting called at Jackson's to decide what should be done with the ill-fated black-birder.

This was rather a larger assemblage than the one which had gathered at dawn, called up by the rattle of the *Cora's* anchor-chain. The latter was mostly made up of the "inside push," "Jackson's Own," as they were sometimes alluded to, and that they were a dead game bunch of sports was attested by the way in which they had volunteered in a body to nurse for Doc Wyndham. The later and more representative meeting was hardly up to the earlier one on the score of quality. There were a few out-and-out rotters on the island, and about the worst of these was a typical Woolloofooloo larrikin from Sydney, whose name I have forgotten. As foul of tongue as of face, he was as sneaking and cowardly as a wild Malaite pup reared in a black-birder's galley. He it was who, with a smirk on his tattoo-defiled face, got up and suggested that the simplest way out of the difficulty was to "blow up an' burn the bloomin' 'ooker w'ere she lies. Cook the bloody niggers to a frizzle, pleg an' all." Give him a few sticks of dynamite and he'd pull off the bally job himself.

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The leering wretch, in his eagerness, pushed right out in front of gaunt-framed old Jackson, who was "presiding." "Wi'out battin' a blinker," as he told me later, that old Kalgoorlie outlaw took the proper and necessary action. His straight-from-the-hip kick doubled the miscreant up, breathless, speechless, upon the floor—the only floor of sawed boards in all Kai. He rather favoured that method when he had to throw a man out, Jackson explained, on account of the convenient parcel it made of him when lifted by the back of his belt.

When Jackson called the meeting to order again and explained what word Wyndham had sent as to the lay of things on the *Cora*, "Froggy" Frontein, one of the escapes from Noumea, his Gallic soul aflame, popped up and volunteered to sail her to any non-French port in the Pacific. That brought a cheer for "Froggy," but the enthusiasm died down a bit when it transpired that the only ships the gallant ex-counterfeiter had ever boarded in his life were the steamer which deported him from Marseilles and the cutter in which he—buried under copra in its hold—had escaped from New Caledonia.

More competent volunteers were not lacking, however, and several of these were trying to urge their respective claims at once when "Slant" Allen's magnetic glance drew the eye of the chairman and he was given the floor.

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Calling several of the more insistent of the volunteers by name, "Slant" asked if it had occurred to them that the nearest port which had quarantine facilities equal to handling more than a dozen cases of infectious disease was in Australia—probably Townsville, but possibly Brisbane. They admitted that they hadn't thought that far ahead.

"In that case," Allen cut in with, "it may be in order for me to point out that there's not a one of the whole mob of you young hopefuls that wouldn't be pinched and clapped in the brig just as soon as they saw your face and recollected what it was you sloped for in the first place."

That shot made some impression, though "Crimp" Hanley seemed to think he had countered not uneffectively when he asked: "Who in hell thinks he's going to last long enough to get her there?"

What "Slant" had got up to say, he went on without deigning to engage the logical "Crimp" in argument, was that there was one first-class sailor in Kai against whom nothing was booked in Australia, a man, moreover, who had been known to be looking for a command for a number of months. He referred to Captain Bell, who, he regretted to say, had not been summoned to their meeting. If it was agreeable to those present, he would be glad to wait upon Captain Bell and acquaint him with the facts in connection with the emergency which confronted them all. In the event that Captain Bell should see fit to assert his claim to this place of honour, as he had no doubt would be the case, he—"Slant"—was in favour of giving that claim precedence over all others, both because of Captain Bell's well-known ability as a navigator (his late slip, they would all admit, was due to circumstances quite beyond his control), and because he was the only competent man available who would not have to step out of the frying pan into the fire on making port in Australia. What was more, in case Captain Bell felt that he needed a mate for a voyage which could not but be beset with much danger and many difficulties, he—"Slant"—wished to take the occasion to put in his claim for that berth. He had been in bad in Sydney, he had to admit, but it was nothing very serious, and he felt assured that, in a pinch, there were certain influences which could be counted upon to get him clear. No fear that he would not be seen in the Islands again in due course.

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Considering what "Slant" was really driving at, you'll have to admit that this was put with consummate adroitness. The meeting voted by acclamation to allow him to carry out his suggestion, adjourning in the meantime to await developments. It was significant, in the light of what transpired later, that Allen flatly refused the offer of Jackson and two or three others to go

along to Bell's with him and "make a delegation of it."

No suspicion was aroused by the fact that Allen, on the way to Bell's shack, stopped in at his own for five or ten minutes. Indeed, nothing that he did at any time awakened anybody's suspicions—among the beach push, I mean.

When "Slant" came out of Bell's at the end of half an hour, he was accompanied by the American, the latter apparently leaning heavily on the Australian's shoulder. This occasioned little surprise, as Bell, who had hardly been seen for the last three days, was believed to have been drinking heavily. Instead of returning round the curve of the beach to report at Jackson's, as it had been assumed he would, "Slant" led the way to a little dugout canoe lying in the shade of the coco palms in front of Bell's and started pulling it down to the water's edge. When it was seen that the slender Australian was doing most of the tugging, while the big American seemed to be blundering about to small purpose, it was remarked at Jackson's that Bell, for the first time since he hit the beach of Kai, appeared to have stowed enough booze to submerge his "Plimsol" and affect his trim. At the same time it was admitted that the Yankee was a wonderful "weight-carrier"—nothing like him ever seen in the Islands. It was thus that they mixed nautical and racing idiom at Jackson's Sporting Club.

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When the little canoe was finally launched, Bell, helped by Allen, stumbled forward and slithered down in the bow. The Australian plied his paddle from the stern. It was remarked that the dugout's progress was very slow, but "Slant's" leisurely paddling was attributed to the care he had to take on account of the trim Bell's lopsided sprawl gave the cranky craft.

By the time the canoe slid in alongside the *Cora*, Bell appeared to have collapsed completely. Lifting carefully by the shoulders, Allen was seen to raise the inert body in the bow enough for a hulking yellow giant—easily recognizable as the lusty Ranga-Ro—to throw a mighty arm around its waist. Then, with his other arm looped round a stanchion, he swung his burden high above the rail and into the arms of two of the black crew. Thereafter nothing was seen of the *Cora's* new skipper for an hour or more.

"Doosed smart loadin'," was Jackson's laconic comment on the teamwork Allen and Ranga had displayed in hoisting Bell's husky frame out of a wobbling canoe and up over the *Cora's* four feet of freeboard topped by five strands of "nigger wire."

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Allen did not go aboard, but continued to lie alongside for ten or fifteen minutes, evidently giving extended orders to the Malay bos'n. Immediately the canoe pushed off, great activity was observable among the crew, who were evidently rushing preparations for getting under way before the ebb began to race through the passage.

The rate at which Allen paddled back to the beach was in marked contrast to his leisurely progress on the way out. Grounding the canoe on the beach near where it had been launched, he made directly for the door of Bell's house and bolted inside. Reappearing almost immediately, he came on along the beach at a more deliberate gait.

At Jackson's he told them that Bell had jumped at the chance of taking the *Cora* to Townsville.... Said it might be the means of getting his master's certificate back in case he pulled it off all right. But he—"Slant"—couldn't allow a white man to tackle a job like that alone. He had only landed to pick up his kit and a few things Bell wanted. He was going to get back aboard the *Cora* before they began to shorten in. It was going to be a ticklish job, fetching the passage from where she lay in those fluky airs.

Leaving Jackson's, Allen went to his own (or rather "Quill" Partington's) house, where, according to what I heard from Mary Regan a couple of days later, he took several drinks but did not do anything toward throwing his things together. A half-hour later he was seen hurrying along the beach to Bell's again, and when he came out from there it was in the company of a girl—plainly the "Peacock." Paddled by a third party, who came upon the scene at this juncture, these two went off to the schooner, boarding her just as she filled away on the first tack of the almost dead beat to the entrance of the narrow seaward passage. For all they knew on the beach, Allen was carrying out his program (with the little incidental of Rona—doubtless taken along at the last moment by way of a surprise for Bell—thrown in), just as he had outlined it to them. They were not hurt by his failure to say good-bye. They were not strong for the gentler amenities in the Islands, anyhow.

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CHAPTER VI

COMPULSORY VOLUNTEERING

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As a matter of fact, however, there had been a very considerable slip-up in "Slant's" carefully doped slate. That was plain from a number of little things which sunk into even my absinthe-addled brain in the few minutes I spent in his and Rona's company while paddling them off to the *Cora*. How staggering a slip-up it must have been for him I was not able to figure until I got my nerves under control the following day.

I was still far from pulled together when I came back to the village after my day of hiding (for that's what it amounted to) on the other side of the island. With my head twanging like an overstrung banjo, I was feverishly anxious to get home and seek relief in the only thing I knew would relax the tension of my breaking nerves. I had told Laku to "putem littl' fella pickaninny in rock-a-bye belonga him" just as soon as he got back to the shack. This was a long-standing joke between us, and I knew that he would interpret aright this *bêche-de-mer* order to "put the baby in its cradle" as a strict injunction to lay a certain long green bottle in a little basket of porous coco husk, which, dampened and hung in a draught, answered the purpose of a crude refrigerator. The vision of the slender green trickle I should shortly pour from the dewy fresh lip of that bottle was drawing me on as the thought of the oasis with its fountain draws the thirsting desert traveller.

Between horrors fancied and real—from my struggle at the mouth of the Bottomless Pit to the coming of the Ship of Death—my nerves had suffered a number of trying shocks since the dawning of that accursed day; but the one that came nearest to bowling me over I had still to receive. I had *known* there was a Bottomless Pit; I had *known* there was a Death Ship; I had *known* they were shooting niggers on the beach. As each of these horrors was projected upon my vision in turn I had accepted their reality as a matter of course. Didn't I see them with my own eyes? Didn't I continue to see them after I had bitten my finger? But *Rona, with her arm and her peacock shawl thrown over "Slant" Allen's shoulder, coming out of Bell's house....* No, that wouldn't do.... That was one thing they couldn't put over on me. My eyes must be playing tricks on my brain. I must be in even worse shape than I thought. Never before had my fancy conjured up a thing so utterly, impossibly absurd. Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, I pulled up and started kicking the shin of one foot with the toe of the other. That was another little trick I had of proving whether or not I saw what I "saw."

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At the clink of the broken coral under my shuffling feet the girl turned her head in my direction, but, far from releasing "Slant's" neck from her embrace, she only drew the lanky Australian closer with her right arm, while with her left she beckoned me imperiously.

"Whitnee, come alonga this side, washy-washy!" Her thin clear voice cut the air like the swish of a rapier.

It was, strangely enough, the fact that she lapsed into the vulgarest of *bêche-de-mer*, rather than the eagerness of her gesture, that drove home to my wandering wits the fact that Rona was confronted with difficulties, that she needed help. Verging on nervous and physical collapse as I was (and as I knew I would continue to be until I had gulped my first steadying draught from the cool green bottle), the realization that something concrete was demanded brought me instantly out of the half-trance in which I had walked since dawn. Still a sorry enough specimen, I was at least sufficiently in hand not to need any more finger-bitings or shin-kickings to know the difference between what seemed real and what was really real. Letting my easel go one way and my paint box the other, I hastened forward in answer to Rona's summons.

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"Katchem washy-washy one piecee boat," Rona began as I came up, her heaving breast, flushed face and flashing eyes revealing the emotion that held her in its grip.

"Man-man; my word, what name this fella thing you do?" I interrupted between breaths, blurting mixed *pidgin* and *bêche-de-mer* English of a brand to match the vile blend the girl had discharged at me.

"I too much cross this fella 'Slan','" she started to explain. "Him too much—"

"You'd think she was cross with me, Whitney, if you could see the way she's sticking me in the neck with her hat pin," Allen cut in, the half-sheepish, half-amused grin he had worn from the first broadening as he spoke.

That was the first "straight" English to be spoken, and the words had the effect of reminding Rona that she had been speaking nothing but low jargon from the outset. For weeks she had been taking the greatest pains to avoid both of the weird volapuks in all her chats with me. Pulling herself together with an effort, she strove again to be a purist.

"Scuse me, Whit-nee," she chirruped, paying "Slant" for his sally with a prod that made him duck like a prize-fighter avoiding a straight-arm punch; "'scuse me, but I'm veh-ry mad. This bloody boundah he put *kor-klee* in Bel-la's drink. He take Bel-la to schoonah. Now we all go off to schoonah. If Bel-la he dead, then I keel this boundah, 'Slan'.' You will do us the paddl'?—ple-ese, Whit-nee."

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There was a deal more that I would fain have been enlightened about, but my brain was clear

enough now to understand the urgent necessity of getting off to the *Cora* without delay. A drugged man (or a poisoned one—it was not until later that I learned how that strange essence of the wild Papuan fig might be expected to act) on a plague-infested black-birder looked like just about the last word in hopelessness; but (I told myself) if there was anything I could do for my friend, it was up to me to try to do it. Rona seemed to have some sort of plan in her head, though just what she was taking Allen along for I didn't quite twig at the moment.

The funny part of it was that the Australian didn't seem particularly averse from going off to the schooner. Indeed, it was he who cut in to call Rona's attention to the fact that they were rushing preparations on the *Cora* for getting under way, adding: "If you don't want to be left at the post I might suggest you whip up a bit." Even as he spoke the throbbing wail of a chantey came to our ears across the water, and I could just make out the blur of motion on the forecastle where a knot of niggers was circling round the capstan.

"Washy-washy! Quick! quick! Whit-nee," implored Rona, leading the way, with Allen's head still in the crook of her arm, to the canoe; "we must make the great hur-ee."

Luckily, the dugout, although Allen had left it pulled well up on the beach when he landed, was half awash through the rising of the tide, now just about to ebb. I launched it without difficulty. Still with her knife at "Slant's" neck, Rona made him enter ahead of her and crouch in the bottom of the canoe, well forward, while she seated herself on the sinnet-wrapped thwart immediately behind his hunched shoulders. When the unabashed rascal coolly leaned back and started to make himself comfortable with an arm thrown over her knee, the girl stiffened with a start of repulsion. It was more than a prick she gave him this time, for I saw the sudden swell of his jaw muscles wipe out the lines of his grin as his teeth set over a repressed oath.

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Pushing off, I slid gingerly along the port weatherboard until the canoe heeled just enough to bring a gaping hole in the starboard bow clear of the water that started to pour through it, and began to paddle cautiously inside the outrigger, the only place I could get at from where I sat. Our progress was, of course, slow as to speed and wobbly as to direction. Even at that, a good deal of water kept slopping in, and I couldn't blame Allen, who was sitting in it, for asking Rona if she minded if he baled a bit with his sun-helmet.

Her only reply was another prod with the needlepointed *kris*. (I knew it was the little Jolo dagger, for I had seen it as she adjusted her shawl on sitting down). "Hur-ee, Whit-nee," she urged, quiveringly tense, and continued to keep her flaming gaze riveted on the schooner, where the latter, foot by foot, was moving up on her shortening chain.

About halfway out Rona gave a start and a glad little cry. "I see Bel-la," she laughed. "He stand up by wheel. By jingo, he look—he look like he lick his weight in wile cats!"

That had been the big Southerner's favourite expression when, glowing with the reaction from his deep, eye-opening dive from the reef, he would come prancing back to his door of a morning. The sight of his bare muscular torso, white as marble against the dingy folds of the half-hoisted mainsail, must have called up in the girl's mind the picture of Bell breezing in from his bath, and brought the tersely quaint phrase to her lips. As a matter of fact, there was no saying at that distance *how* Bell looked; but it was good to see him on his feet, at any rate. Probably Rona had been mistaken about the poisoning.

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"I told you he was all right," Allen remarked drily, shifting a few inches to get clear of the water that was beginning to swish about his knees. "He was drunk—dead drunk; that's all. He began to buck up an hour ago. Looked through my glass and saw them dousing him with water. First thing he did was to take a drink (plenty of it aboard)—saw him tilt the bottle. Then he must have made them open up the hatches. There's more than the crew lining the rail there for'ard; besides—you don't think the slop-chute from the galley spills out the bait that's drawing those black fins, do you? I won't need to tell you they don't belong to chambered nautili out for an afternoon sail. There's a man-eating shark under every one of them. Can I lend you my binoculars?"

He started to slip the strap of the powerful racing glasses over his neck, but desisted when Rona refused to clear the way by lifting the point of her dagger. Save for maintaining that one important little point of contact, she ignored him completely, and "Slant" seemed rather to resent the latter more than the former.

"Well, if you don't want to use it, I suppose you won't mind if I have a bit of a look-see," he went on in half-assumed petulance. Rona replied with the usual prod, but interposed no further objection when he raised and began focussing the glasses.

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"Clubbing niggers on the fo'c's'l," he commented presently, as signs of commotion were visible forward. "Skipper don't want 'em too thick on deck while he's getting under way, most likely."

Then, a minute later: "Looks like you'll need an ice-breaker to clear a passage through those

sharks, Whitney; or perhaps we can walk across their backs from the edge of the jam. Seem to be thick enough to give good solid footing."

And again, shortly: "Chain almost straight-up-and-down, Whitney. Mudhook going to break out in a couple of minutes. Can't accelerate that 'long, long pull' of yours, can you? Looks as if they weren't planning to wait for us."

It was a gruesome passage, that last hundred yards. The sharks were hardly as thick as Allen's picturesque hyperbole might have led one to believe, but there were undoubtedly more than a score of triangular dorsals slashing about in swift circles. But the sharks, for the most part, gave us a good berth. It was the things that *didn't* get out of the way that came near to flooring me at the last—black, bloated bodies, floating face down, like logs awash, till the canoe struck them, then to roll shudderingly over and sweep you with the sightless gaze of their wide, staring eyes as you fended with the paddle. Rona, her flashing glances running back and forth over the schooner (following Bell, who appeared to be lending a hand now and then on sheet or halyard), seemed not to see the floating horrors around us. Allen's steely eyes met the corpses stare for stare, and looked them down. But upon me the horrors which passed the others by descended with full force. How I kept going is more than I can guess. But I did it. At last the loom of the *Cora's* blistered starboard quarter cut off the seaward view, and I steadied the dugout in close to the upper line of her weed-foul copper sheathing.

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Apparently no notice whatever had been taken of us up to this time. Short-handed as he was, Bell was doubtless too busy to keep a lookout, while to the few niggers watching us through the wire the sight of a dugout carrying "two fella white marsters and one fella Mary" was of indifferent interest. All they cared about was getting away from the Death Ship, and they didn't need to be told that this "pickaninny boat" hadn't come to help forward their desires in that direction. Besides, the guard walking up and down behind them with a Lee-Enfield over his black shoulder had undoubtedly given them to understand that the first one to start over the side would be shot.

It must have been the guard who reported us finally. Burning with impatience, Rona was just prodding up Allen and ordering him to clamber aboard and tell "Mistah Bell" she wanted to speak to him, when I heard the shout of "'Vast heavin'!" ring out, and presently a familiar tousled head was poked over the top of the barbed wire. (I should explain, perhaps, that three or four strands of "nigger wire" are run all the way round the rail of every labour-recruiting ship. This is done with a double purpose—to make it difficult for the blacks aboard to bolt, should the spirit move them, and to serve as a partial protection while at anchor against the always imminent attacks of the treacherous shore natives.)

There was a look in Bell's face I had never seen there before. The old familiar furrows of dissipation showed deep around the mouth, but if he had been drinking heavily, there was nothing to indicate it. What struck me at once was his air of determination—I might almost say exaltation. His head was held high, his shoulders were thrown back, and he might have been treading the deck of a battle-ship as he swung up to the rail. Everything about him betokened the man who has taken a great resolve, and means to see it through if it kills him.

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Although I had heard no word of it up to that moment, I understood at once that Bell had taken command of the schooner, that he was going to try to sail her to some port where the plague-stricken blacks could be given medical attention and kept under control. It was like Bell to take on a job like that, I said to myself; but he would do it as a matter of course. It would never occur to him that there was any alternative, just as with an order in the Navy. There must be something more to account for that air of high resolve.... I couldn't help thinking that, and I was right. He let out what it was shortly.

"It's right nice of you to come off to say good-bye, honey—and of you, too, Whitney," Bell called down genially; "but, as we'ah not quite what you'd call fixed fo' cawlahs, you'd bettah do it from wheah you a'. You, Mistah Allen, if you have fin'ly made up youah mind in the mattah of signin' up for the voyage, I reckon we can find accommodation fo' you. But fust, let me say that if you've got any mo' of that dope you put in my whisky stowed about youah pusion, you'd best scuppah it befo' you climb abo'd. I doan quite twig what you did it fo', unless it was to dodge out of goin' yo'self, afta you had promised to help me see the job through. But now, seein' you've come off of youah own free will, I reckon I can fo'get that lil' slip, providin' it ain't repeated."

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Although Rona could hardly have known the exact meaning of "free will," she caught the drift of Bell's remarks readily enough. "This rotten boundah" (bounder was the worst name she knew to call a man in "pure" English) "not come himself," the girl cut in shrilly, speaking for the first time. "I fetch him. See!" and she threw back the folds of the peacock shawl to reveal the bright wavy blade of her little *kris* boring into the hollow between Allen's right shoulder-blade and the corded column of his sinewy neck.

"From the reef I see you an' this fella 'Slan'" (Allen's shoulder quivered under her designative prod) "go off to schoonah in boat," Rona went on, avoiding as well as she could in her excitement the jargons she knew Bell disliked so much. "Bime-by I see 'Slan' come back—you stop schoonah. When I go home I smell'em *kor-klée*. You no sabe *kor-klée*, Bel-la. I sabe him too much long time. I

smell *kor-klee* in one glass—not in othah. Pu-retty soon this boundah 'Slan" come house. He say: 'Bel-la go off in schoonah. Now I stop with you all time!' Then I sabe what for *kor-klee* veh-ry queeck. So I katch'em this fella by neck an' fetch'm off schoonah. I say myself: 'If Bel-la dead, I keel this boundah; if Bel-la not dead, *he* keel him.' Heah he is, Bel-la—you fix him pu-lenty. Then we go home-side."

"So that's what upset the appl'-ca't?" There was nothing of the wrath of the jealous male in Bell's deep, chesty laugh. "Well, I'm not blamin' Mistah Allen fo' fallin' in love with you, honey. No propah man could quite help doin' that, as I see it. Just the same, I can't quite approve of his way of goin' about it, no' the occasion he took fo' it, eethah. So you brought him off fo' me to execute, honey. That's right rich. Youah a brick, you shuah a'. But I won't be killin' him, honey—no, hahdly that. I'm just goin' to sign him on as Fust Mate of the *Cora Andrews*, just as he 'lowed he do at the beginnin'. Of co'se I won't be goin' home with you, honey. Doan you see I'm in command of this heah ship?"

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A sudden shiver shook Rona's tense frame at those last words. Half rising, she started to speak, but Bell cut her short with lifted hand and went on himself.

"Mistah Allen," he said, addressing himself now to the huddled figure in the bottom of the canoe; "I said I was goin' to sign you on an' take you with me. Let me qualify those wuds just a trifle. I'll pumit you to go if you'll agree in advance to my tums. I might explain that theah's two dif'rent views in the mattah of the best way of avoidin' catchin' the pleg. One is, that you must keep strictly soba—straight teetotal; the otha—diametrically opposed to the fust—is that you must keep dead drunk—pif'ucated. Now I reckon that it's goin' to take at least one white man to sail this hookah all the way to Australyuh; that is to say, at least one white man must steah cleah of the pleg fo' the entahprise to be crowned with success. But as theah ain't no suah data as to which is the safe an' sutin way to 'complish this, I figa theah's nothin' else to do but sta't with two white men, and let one of 'em try the fust purscripshun an' the otha the second.

"Now (tho' I must admit it's a bit high-handed on my pa't) I've already picked the one I'm goin' to take; so, if you elect to sign on, Mistah Allen, you'll have to take the otha. Theah's a dozen cases of whisky abo'd—not Jawny Wakah, to be suah, but still fayah to middlin' cawn jooce—an' I had to toss off a tumbrah o' two of it as an antidote fo' that dream-provokin' dope you wished onto me. But"—Bell's head was up and his shoulders back again—"that's the last." His square jaw snapped shut on the words like a sprung wolf-trap. Now I understood. *That* was his Great Resolve.

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Bell paused, and in the waiting silence I became aware for the first time of the low rumble of groaning from the bowels of the ship.

"So you'll see, Mistah Allen"—the corners of his mouth relaxed into a smile as Bell resumed—"that since the Skippah's plumped to try the 'soba man' preventative, theah's nothin' left for the Mate to do but to fight off the pleg by the 'drunk man' method. Theah'll only be two of us, you see, an' it's theahfo' up to us to hedge ouah bets an' play safe. But you won't be havin' to go if you ain't hankerin' after it. I'm not (in spite of what the way you've been 'shanghaied' by—by Miss Rona might lead you to think) runnin' a press-gang. It's entiahly up to you as to whethah o' not you want to sail as the drunken Mate of the soba Skippah of a black-birdah full of pleg-rotten niggahs. You see, Mistah Allen"—the whimsical grin broadened—"you see I'm not tryin' to luah you on by paintin' the picture any brightah than it is. 'Drunk Mate of a soba Skippah'—do you get that?"

Allen made no reply, that is, not directly. Raising his hand to fend the expected prod from Rona, he wriggled halfway round and started to speak to me, where, in the stern, I still paddled the canoe gently against the turning tide and held it close alongside the schooner. For an instant I was puzzled with the look on the side-face he presented, but almost at once saw the reason for it. For the first time in my recollection the thin upper lip was uncurled by its mocking smile. By that, I thought I could gauge something of the extent of his slip-up. Yet—if I could have read the man's mind—I would have known that it was something even deeper than the wreck of personal hopes that had sobered "Slant" Allen. What it was I learned later.

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"Whitney," he began, the words coming huskily from the dryness of his throat; "I don't dope a man's chances for finishing inside the distance flag in this little Handicap of Captain Bell's as better than a hundred to one. That's long odds to be on the short end of when a man's life is his stake. I don't give a damn about my life. Anyone will tell you that. I've thrown it into the pool on worse than a hundred-to-one shot a good many times before this. But—well, I'd rather appreciate it if—if you could see fit to make a point of not telling my friends on the beach that—that I had any help in—in volunteering—volunteering to lend Captain Bell a hand in getting this hooker on her way."

Rona, sensing that her responsibilities, so far as Allen was concerned, were at an end, raised the *kris* from his neck and thrust it into the knot of her *sulu*. The Australian lifted himself lightly to his feet and looked Bell straight between the eyes. "Lead me to your whisky," he said in a steadied voice.... "By Gawd, I need it!"

Poising an instant on the middle of a forward thwart of the canoe, he sprang to the rail,

clambered smartly to the top strand of the barbed wire, and swung lightly down to the deck on the main backstay.

It was at this juncture that I went through the feeble motions of trying to act the part of a man myself. I pointed out to Bell that I had knocked about on yachts a good deal, and, while I couldn't claim to be much of a hand with niggers, was probably as good a navigator as Allen was. I also said something about three men standing a better chance than two of pulling off the job, and even added, half jocularly, that I was about ready to go to Australia anyway, as I had had word that an exhibition of my pictures was due to open in Sydney in a fortnight. I only hope my words didn't sound as hollow to Bell as they did to me—for they were the last ones I was ever to speak to him.

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Bell's gentlemanliness—nay, rather, his gentleness—came home to me more in what he refrained from saying in his reply than in what he said. He did *not* say that he had no absinthe aboard, and that, as a consequence, I would be only more useless and undependable than if he had. He did *not* say that his hands would be full enough looking after crazy niggers without having a crazy white man to keep an eye on. He even refrained from recalling to my mind a story I had told him of a French official in New Caledonia whose absinthe supply had run out while he was at an isolated post, and who, unable to stand the deprivation to the end of the three-days' run in to Noumea in a trading cutter, had taken a header over the side almost in sight of port—and relief.

All he *did* say was: "Nonsense, ol' man.... Quite out of the question.... Nothin' doin'." Then, as though to soften the curttness of his refusal: "'Twouldn't be propa, Whitney, to set a man that can slap colour on canvas like you can to herdin' sick niggas. Besides, I'm countin' on you to stick 'roun' Kai an' be a sort o' fatha an' motha' to Rona while I'm gone. Youah the only man on the island I'd ca'ah to trust with that job."

There was nothing more to be said after that, I told myself; nothing more to be done. I gave up limply and relapsed into wondering how long it would take me to paddle Rona ashore and traverse the quarter of a mile of coral clinkers between the place where she would land and the long green bottle cooling in its breeze-swept swing beneath my coco leaf jalousies.

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CHAPTER VII

RONA COMES ABOARD

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WELL, I still think I was right on the score of the futility of further words. Nothing more that I could have *said* would have changed the situation; but was there nothing more that I could have *done*? Rona answered that question, so far as she herself was concerned, then and there, though hardly in a way that I had the wit or the will to profit by.

Bell's answer to the girl's anxious appeal that she be allowed to join him had been no less brusque and decided than that he had made to mine. "Sorry, honey. No 'commodations fo' ladies this voyage. You wun't intended to nu'se niggas, anyhow. Can't be done, honey." Then, to me: "Time to be shovin' off now, Whitney. Tide's already on the tu'n. Right sorry to have to hurry you—all this way." Not a word of farewell.... Navy training would not down.

"Bel-la, leesten to me!" There was more threat than entreaty in Rona's voice now. Beyond doubt, he had never crossed her before. That she was hurt and angry showed in every line of her tense figure, as she balanced precariously with her left foot on the outrigger and her right on the port weatherboard. "Bel-la, by crackee, I say I go with you! If you let me come on schoona, all good. If you say no, by crackee, I—I sweem! I sweem afta you. You know I good sweema, Bel-la."

Swim! I knew the girl well enough to know it was not a bluff, and Bell must have known even better. I had heard him speak many a time of her absolute lack of fear. Also, although at that moment his imagination was not quickened (as mine was) by the drunken roll a black cadaver under the counter gave as a questring nose pushed into it from below, he must have known what shrift a swimmer would have in those shark-infested waters.

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Bell's mouth twitched at her words (I could just see his head and shoulders where he coned ship with a foot on the starboard rail and a hand in the shrouds of the mainmast), but he made no reply. Doubtless he counted on my doing what I could to fish her out before anything happened. Sweeping his eye fore and aft, he noted how the turning tide had swung the schooner so that she headed directly away from the passage, with the fluky puffs of the freshening trade wind coming over her port quarter. Then, cautioning the men standing by at the fore and main sheets to "take in sma't" as she gathered way, he bellowed the order to "Heave away!"

The ululant surge of the *bêche-de-mer* anchor chantey floated aft as the blacks resumed their

rhythmic tramp around the capstan.

"What name you b'longa?
What name you b'longa?
You Mary come catch'm ride.
What name you b'longa?
Come hear my songa—
I take you to Sydney-side."

I have often wondered if the frank invitation in the swinging lines might not have been the inspiration of Rona's astonishing action.

The obligato of the incoming chain grinding through the hawse-pipe had accompanied the chantey for only a stave or two, when Allen's clear, ringing voice (he had not needed to be told where a mate belonged when a ship was getting under way) announced from the forecandle: "Anchor broken out, sir!"

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"Walk lively! Get catted 'fore she hits the passage!" Bell roared back, anxious lest the great length of chain still out would make trouble where the lagoon shoaled at its seaward entrance. A moment later he came aft and relieved the man at the wheel, ordering the latter to stand by to keep the mainsheet from fouling the nigger wire. It was the gigantic Malay, Ranga-Ro, bulking mightily against the purpling eastern twilight sky, who responded with a deep-rumbling "Ay, ay, su!" and sprang to the starboard rail to clear the sagging lines running back from the unstable-minded main boom. Then the amazing thing befell.

As the schooner gathered way and began gliding ahead under the impulse of the half-filled mainsail, Rona had crouched as though for a spring at the towing whaleboat. The painter of the latter, however, made fast on the port side of the taffrail, brought the yawning double-ender too far away for anything but a creature with wings to bridge the gap. Seeing it was impossible to jump to the whaleboat, she straightened up again, swaying undulantly as the dugout bobbed about in the gently heaving wake of the schooner.

"Bel-la, I come!" There was more of anger than despair in that steel-clear cry; more indignation than resignation in the hair-trigger poise of the reed-slender figure. The instant that she hesitated on the chance that this final threat might soften Bell's resolve was all that prevented what at best could not have been other than a nasty mess for the both of us. There was no possible chance for me to intercept her before she jumped, and, once in the water, I knew she was quite equal to upsetting the canoe rather than be dragged back into it. As for help from the schooner—Bell had determined upon his course, and his eyes, like his mind, were directed ahead, not astern.

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It was Ranga-Ro (deftly fending the slack of the mainsheet from the nigger wire), not Bell, who turned at the sound of Rona's cry. Whether or not he had glimpsed her during the previous ten minutes, I am not sure; but for the girl (whose eyes had been on Bell from first to last), I was certain that the big Malay had not impinged upon her vision before. Recognition of his racial characteristics must have been instantaneous. They were written for even an ethnic novice to read in the giant's straight black hair, high cheek bones, wide mouth, with its betel nut-stained teeth, and the light golden yellow skin clothing the monstrously muscled limbs. The peculiar twist of the loosely-looped *sarong* and a wisp of rolled leaf behind an ear would have located him even more definitely; but to Rona the fact that there was an indubitable Malay staring into her eyes from the nearest rail of the receding schooner, made the incidental of his being a Moluccan—a Spice Island man—of little moment. She was used to handling big golden-yellow men.... They had proved a deal more manageable than a certain white man she could mention.

I heard, without understanding, the swift run of her trippingly-tongued Malay, and only the sibilant hiss of "*Lekas! Lekas!*" at the end told me that what she had ordered done was to be done "quickly! quickly!" Her next order—to me—was no less insistent. "Paddl' catch'n schoona, Whit-nee! Paddl' lak hell!"

The girl's imperious mood brooked no delay. My work was cut out clear for me, and, everything considered, I am not at all sure that the yellow man—on the score of zeal, at least—outdid the white man in carrying out the orders he had received. Slipping back to the stern to even up the down-by-the-head trim Rona's presence in the bow gave the cranky dugout, I plied the stubby paddle with all the strength and skill at my command. The crazy craft rode higher now with Allen out of it, but even so the speed with which I drove it threw a wave inches above the hole in the crumbling bow. The up-curling water poured through in a steady stream. My race, I saw, was against that rising flood in the bottom of the canoe quite as much as against the schooner.

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There were only eight or ten yards to make up on the still slowly moving *Cora*, and, barring swamping or a collision with a shark or a floating nigger, I felt that I could do it easily. But what to do when we had caught her up? Ah, there was where the yellow man was to come in. Ranga was just as busily carrying out his orders as was I. "Clear away the nigger wire and stand by to pick me up," had plainly been the drift of that swift stream of Malay Rona had directed at him. Superbly disdainful of the sharp barbs that were slashing his bare palms to ribbons, he forced the whole

savage entanglement down to the deck with no more apparent effort than a child would have used in collapsing a string-strung "cat's-cradle." Rove through steel stanchions set at close intervals along the rail, the wire could not be torn entirely clear. So the direct and simple-minded Ranga did the next best thing—gave a mighty heave and brought three or four of the nearest stanchions down to the deck in the tangle of wire they had supported.

An order from Bell at this juncture would probably have stopped this wholesale destruction of his protective entanglement; or perhaps I should say *possibly* rather than probably. One cannot be sure just how strong a force Rona had lashed into action. It has since occurred to me that the man must have been gripped with something very closely akin to the madness of *amok* to handle that wire with his naked hands as he did. It may be that the only one from whom he would have brooked interference was the one who had fired that savage train of energy—Rona. These points were not to be put to the test, however. From first to last Bell—although, from the wrecking of the wire almost under his very eyes, he must have known what was going on—never looked back.

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What with the settling of the half-swamped canoe and the accelerating speed of the schooner, it was touch-and-go at the end. I had gained by feet at first; then by inches; and finally, with but a couple of yards more needed to bring the bow up even with the schooner's counter, I realized that I was no better than holding my own. It was the last ounce of reserve in my aching frame that I called upon for that final spurt. Rona must have sensed that I was going my limit, for she said no word ... only crouched, tense as a waiting wild-cat, for the moment of her spring.

For the first few seconds the gap closed quickly as the canoe gathered increased headway from the impulse of my wildly driven paddle; then more slowly and more slowly, until, again, I was no better than holding even. Another foot, and the jump would be safe. Bending low to make the most of my expiring strength, my eyes wandered from the goal for an instant. It was a shuddering gasp of consternation from the bow that brought them back again. The swooning mainsail, filled by the freshening puffs, was beginning to make its pull felt in earnest. The gap had widened. Instead of gaining a foot I had lost two. That dished me completely. "No good, Rona—I'm—all in," I groaned, and slid limply down into the bottom of the canoe, where the water now lapped level with the thwarts.

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Half fainting though I was, the picture of that super-simian spring of Rona's is indelibly etched upon my memory. Save for that one quick gasp, she made no sound. The jump was an impossible one ... sheerly impossible. And yet— Only a swift gathering of muscles—very like the final quivering hunch of an ape that leaps from tree to tree—heralded action. Then, with a back-kick that forced the already half-submerged bow right under, she flashed up to her full height and launched her body into the air.

It was a good jump,—a wonderful one, indeed, considering the unstable take-off—but of course she missed the rail—and by feet. That didn't surprise me.... I had seen it was inevitable. But what I had *not* reckoned upon was the astonishing length of Ranga's mighty left arm. Standing by with a bight of the mainsheet gripped in his right hand to keep from overbalancing, he had sprung to the top of the rail as Rona jumped, leaning out at all of an angle of forty-five degrees, probably more. It was into the solidly pliant muscles of his great corded left wrist, extended to the full reach of the arm, that Rona clawed with the last half inch of her out-stretched fingers—clawed and *held*. I say *clawed into*, not clutched or seized. The girl's hold on Ranga's wrist was not that of an acrobat grabbing over the bar for which he has jumped (her leap was short by an inch at least of giving her a chance to do that), but rather that of a flung cat clawing into the limb or the trunk of a tree. With less strength of fingers or length of nails her hands would merely have brushed the outstretched arm and missed a hold.

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Under the impact of that flying hundred and twenty pounds (in spite of her slenderness, Rona must have weighed quite that) of bone and muscle, striking, as it did, just where the greatest leverage would be exerted, Ranga was all but swung round and thrown from his footing. The hastily-seized mainsheet was hardly a scientifically-run guy for the leaning tower of his stressed frame, nor did the wreck of the barbed wire entanglement writhing over the rail offer the solidest of foundations. Back and forth he swayed, like the half unstepped mast of a grounded sloop; then steadied, quiveringly, up to his original tense slant.

The acrobatic miracle wrought by Ranga in swinging Rona's precariously hanging form inboard was the most perfect feat of strength and balance I ever saw, or ever expect to see. It looked as sheerly impossible as the jump had looked—and was accomplished scarcely less quickly. The drawing up of the extended left arm (what a marvellous rippling and bunching of golden muscles that was!) brought the girl's pendant form close in against the corrugated bulge of the giant's chest, reducing the terrific leverage by a good half. A similar doubling up of the right, with a sudden tug on the mainsheet at the end of it, did the rest. For an instant the great rangy rack of corded muscles balanced erect in the midst of the wire-tangle festooned over the rail; then jumped lightly down beyond and deposited its burden on the deck.

Hardly ten seconds could have elapsed from the instant of Rona's jump to the one in which Ranga plumped her down beside Bell at the wheel. The gap between the canoe and the schooner had widened to hardly twenty yards. I could see both the Malay and the girl quite distinctly as, with the latter still looped in the crook of his fingernail-torn left arm, he poised for a moment on

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the rail. Neither appeared to have turned a hair. Neither seemed in the least flustered ... might have been in the habit of doing that sort of thing every day for all the excitement they showed about it.

The first thing Ranga did, as the dropped mainsheet gave him a free hand, was to reach to the knot of his *sarong* and satisfy himself that the little bamboo flute tucked in there had ridden out the storm. And Rona—her first move was to gather up and stow an amber-streaming corner of the peacock shawl, which was threatening to catch in an uprearing strand of the nigger wire. Those two funny little incidentals complete my recollections of that breathless quarter-minute. Whether Rona, or Bell, or anyone else on the schooner waved good-bye in my direction I do not recall. Ranga was taking in the slack of the mainsheet when I looked again, and Bell, peering up at the flapping headsails, was grinding away at the wheel. Two or three shots rang out following a commotion forward—probably fired to check a fresh up-surge of the blacks from below.

As Bell brought her round in a wide circle, the *Cora's* sails were flattened in and she began to beat up toward the entrance of the passage in a series of short tacks. As she headed in past the quay, I heard a burst of cheers roll up from a knot of humanity blurring the beach in front of Jackson's. It was just a big, full-throated general whoop, that first one, but it was quickly followed by a number of other volleys of "huroars" that seemed to carry suggestions of control and leadership. The last of these was a hearty "three-times-three," topped off with a "tiger." "Cheering the parting heroes by name," I muttered to myself, and wondered who that last rousing "tiger" was meant to speed. I was still speculating when the sharp whish of a heeling dorsal, as a sheering shark avoided the submerged outrigger by a hair, awakened me to a rude realization of the fact that the swift tropic night had all but fallen and that I was drifting out with the tide in a holed and barely floating dugout.

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Of all the ebbings of the tide of courage that my sorrowfully spent life had known, and had still to know, those next few minutes—with the *Cora* dissolving into the swimming dusk as she beat out through the passage, the weirdly green wakes of the sharks lacing the oily-black water with welts of phosphorescence as they assembled for their ghastly banquet, and my swamped canoe teetering in balance between positive and negative buoyancy—registered low-water mark. I have never heard of a despairing absinthe slave trying to break his bonds at the end of the day. It is invariably at the end of the night that he makes his break for liberty—at the beginning of the day he has not the courage to face. But it was the shame of the yellow in me, rather than the green, that held empire now. Rona had brooked no refusal of her demand to be taken on the *Cora*. Why had I? She had been ready to swim for it. Why should not I? Surely the sea, better than anything else, would wash that yellow stain from my honour and leave it white at the last. I didn't even have to screw my nerve up to the point of jumping over. Listing heavily to starboard as the half-capsized dugout was, one little inch edged to the right, and not even the leverage of the outrigger could keep it from overturning. Just the inclination of my shoulders would do the trick.... I would not even have to take the initiative to the extent of edging along. Surely—

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With a quick gasp, I slid sharply to one side—but it was to the left—the outrigger side. The great starshaped welter of green luminescence, where a half-dozen wallowing man-eaters nuzzled into a bobbing witch-fire-streaked shape of unreflecting opacity, proved too much for my last unbroken filament of nerve—all that I needed to make my honour white. I had always dreaded sharks, and it was my horror of them now that checked the worthiest impulse that had stirred me that day. The momentarily eclipsed image of the cooling green bottle took shape again before my eyes, and, after that, there was nothing to do but make the best fight I could to reach it.

Proceeding with infinite caution to avoid the upset which I now feared above everything in the world, I crawled forward along the outrigger side and stopped the hole in the bow with my folded drill jacket, as a necessary preliminary to beginning to bail out with my waterproof sun-helmet. But before I turned to on what could have hardly proved other than a hopeless task, the sound of oars and voices reached my ears, and presently the bow of a hard-pulled whaleboat came pushing up out of the darkness. It was old Jackson whose strong arm reached out and dragged me in over the gunwale. When they got back their breaths lost in cheering the departing schooner, he explained, after depositing my limp form in the stern sheets, Doc Wyndham bawled over to them from "Quarantine" that some cove had been left behind in a foundered canoe. Jackson himself reckoned that the Doc was beginning to go off his nut and see things; but as several of the others seemed to have hazy recollections of something of the same kind, it was thought best to put off and investigate.

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"Ow'd you 'appen to miss c'nections?" Jackson asked sympathetically. "I spotted you paddlin' the canoe off, an' we was so sure the Skipper 'ad signed you on that we give a speshul w'oop in your 'onour. 'W'at's the matter wiv W'itney?' I bellered ('member the night you learned us that one?—time the looted fizz from the *Levuka* was on tap); an' the boys cum back wiv: 'E's all right!—you bet!—Ev'ry time!'"

"That wasn't the big 'three-times-three' at the end, was it, Jack?" I asked, my face burning with shame at the thought.

"Well, no; 'ardly that un," was the half-apologetic reply. "That ripsnorter was in 'onour uv 'Slant' Allen. Long time pal uv all uv us, 'e is. Slash-bangin' finisher, li'l ol' 'Slant.'... Trust 'im allus

to be on 'and w'en they're liftin' 'ell's 'atches."

I knew then that I wasn't going to be tumbling over myself to tell "Slant's" friends on the beach that his volunteering to go with the *Cora* had been just a shade less voluntary than they reckoned. *He* had not pulled up dead at his first hurdle as I had, anyhow. No, until I knew more of what had transpired earlier in the day, I was not going to give the man away; and not to his old friends in any case. I would do at least that much homage to his nerve.

Seeing how dead beat I was, Jackson waved back the crowd at the quay and headed me straight for home. He knew what I needed, and I was as grateful for the bluff old outlaw's unspoken sympathy as I was for the help of his sustaining arm. With rare delicacy, he avoided being a witness to my assault on the green bottle by leaving me at the door. Like all the rest of those rough, red-blooded roysterers of Kai, Jackson felt that habitual absinthe drinking was degenerate, almost immoral.... All right for a "Froggy," of course, but not for a proper white man.... A thing that a real self-respecting beach-comber would never allow himself to be guilty of. The fact (which could not be concealed for long) that I was known to be addicted to the habit had taken even more living down than my painting, especially when they learned I was straight Yankee and not a "*We-we*."

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I drank hungrily at first—gulping glass after glass of the cool green liquid,—but stopped just as soon as I found my nerves were steadied and before the first stage of "elevation" was entered upon. (A seasoned drinker takes some time to reach the latter.) Unspeakably tired physically, I dropped off to sleep almost as soon as the absinthe relaxed the tension on my nerves. My rest was dreamless and untroubled—or comparatively so.

CHAPTER VIII

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I LEAVE THE ISLAND

ROLLING out of bed at the end of twelve straight hours of sleep, I found the Trades blowing fresh and strong again, and the air—after the soddiness of the past week—almost bracing. A plunge from the reef and a piping hot breakfast of fried clams and duck eggs—my first solid food in over thirty-six hours—bucked me up astonishingly. For almost the first time since I came to the island, I was out before ten o'clock—and well in hand, too. I had to be.... There was much that it was up to me to learn—and perhaps to act upon.

That which I most desired to get some line upon was what Allen had been driving at in drugging Bell, or even, possibly, trying to poison him. What was *kor-klee*? (of which Rona appeared to be so terrified), and how did it act? were questions which I wanted especially to find the answers to. Was it a drug with a delayed action, following a preliminary stupefaction of comparative mildness? If so—no, there was nothing that could be done for Bell in that case; but, as a friend of his, I might do what I could to square the account later on. There was no lack of confidence *that* morning. The reaction (which had eluded me completely the day before) was strong upon me, and I felt quite equal to any situation that might arise. I still blushed with shame at the thought of the contemptible figure I had cut from dawn to darkness of the day previous, but I was ready to make such atonement as was humanly possible. It was merely one of my "high" moods coming three or four hours ahead of time. I could have slung my colours with telling effect that morning, if there had been a chance for me to get at canvas.

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From one and another at Jackson's I gathered a fairly connected account of what had happened during the hours I was away on the leeward side of the island. The salient incidents of this I have already set down. None of them knew much of anything about *kor-klee*, but all agreed that Doc Wyndham would be sure to be an authority upon it. I dropped the subject for the moment, as I did not care to be pressed for an explanation of why I sought the information. The next day I slipped quietly over and had a long-distance interview with the learned Wyndham.

The Doc had buried the *Cora's* recruiting agent the night the schooner sailed, doing everything except the digging of the grave with his own hands. He had then returned home and shut himself in for his ten days of solitary quarantine. Solitary is hardly the word, though. Wyndham was far from being alone. Unlike Bell, he was a "spree drinker" rather than a speedy tippler. It was his habit (as he put it himself) to accumulate aridity during five or six months of the most rigorous teetotalism, and then blow up the dam and make the desert blossom like the rose under the stimulus of a generous flood. The breaking up of the Monsoon and the culmination of Doc Wyndham's biennialsprees were bracketed together in the Islands' list of seasonal disturbances.

The desert was hardly due for its wetting at this time, but Wyndham, shaken by his unsuccessful fight to save the Agent's life, was loath to face the ordeal of the confinement ahead of

him without company. So (as he explained after he had halted me a dozen paces from his door with a revolver flourished from the window) he called in the only dead sure plague-immune he knew—his old friend John Barleycorn—and raised the floodgates. The last thing he had impressed upon his brain before putting Barleycorn in charge was that he must rigidly confine his desert reclamation project to his own wastes. On no account was he to leave his own house, and, on no account, was anyone to be allowed to enter it. "Strict quarantine's the word," he had repeated to himself many times before he started drinking, and "Strict quarantine's the word" was the greeting—and the warning—I heard when I stepped into the shadow of the big breadfruit tree in front of his door.

Solemn as an owl, Wyndham had been catching purple shrimps (or something of the kind) with a butterfly net and putting them under his microscope for examination. The big brass instrument was set upon a table pulled up to the window, while the shrimps were being harvested from the bosky depths of a patch of elephant-eared taro just outside. It was his favourite hunting and fishing preserve, that taro patch, the Doc had confided to me once, and the rarity and variety of the specimens captured there were rather remarkable. I don't remember many of them, but a sea-cow and a sabre-tooth tiger were among the commonest he had made slides of. Everything went under the microscope, of course. His captures were small in size during the first few days, starting with mere animalculae, but bulked steadily bigger as the desert blossomed to a jungle. It required a microscope with a great latitude of adjustment to handle such a wide range of subjects—but his was a most excellent instrument ... most excellent. Thus the Doc.

Pretending to ignore my approach completely, Wyndham continued squinting through the eyepiece of his microscope until I crunched over the dead-line he had established. Then he flourished the revolver, barked out his quarantine formula, and asked what I wanted. "When I replied that I had come to inquire respecting the effects of a drug called *kor-klee*, his manner changed instantly. By some queer psychological process quite beyond me to fathom, he started at once speaking French, or rather what he thought was French. It was a weird jargon he had picked up in the Marquesas, where he had spent a year in research work when he first came to the Islands, and where (it was said) only his passion for collecting pearls—other people's—had prevented his winning to international fame for his all-but-successful efforts to isolate the bacteria responsible for the dread *fe-fe* or *elephantiasis*.

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"*Kor-klee—mais oui, mon ami. Je comprend him fella kor-klee too much. Parfaitement. C'est la liqueur essential de la ficus—ficus—nom d'un chien—ficus what-dyucalum. C'est la aphrodisique le plus exquisite, le plus fort, en tout le monde. Prenez vous comme ca—whouf!*"—and he made a great pretence of inhaling the contents of his shrimp net to show how the drug was administered for that particular purpose.

"*Encore—quand—quand eat'm like kai-kai!*" he floundered on learnedly; "*quand eat'm kor-klee il fait—mak'm mort—dead—tres vite.*"

Here he interrupted himself to ask for which purpose it was I intended to use the stuff.

"Neither," I denied stoutly. "I was merely asking out of curiosity."

"*Parle that talkee a la marines,*" he scoffed. "*Le meme chose talkee parle 'Slant' Allen. Je voudrais connoce ou—ou in hell you fella catch'm kor-klee. I'd like to get my fist on some of the blooming elixir myself,*" he trailed off into English.

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Save for that one lapse, Wyndham, in spite of my reiterated appeals that he speak straight English, rattled on in his impossible Franco-*bêche-de-mer* from first to last. That which I have tried to render does it scant justice. Most of it was quite unintelligible. At the end of a rather trying half-hour (though it would have been amusing enough had I been less anxious for information that might throw light on the mystery I had set myself to unravel), about all that I had been able to gather was that *kor-klee* was the name given in the Dutch Indies to several preparations made from the latex of the wild fig of New Guinea. A crude infusion of it was employed by the Papuans in stupefying fish in their rivers. More elaborated extracts were distilled for their narcotic and other properties. One of these, vapourized and inhaled, was much prized by the Rajahs of Malaysia as a quickener of the languid pulse, a restorer of youth. Another—the most powerful extract of all—was a deadly poison—very neat and incisive in its action.

I also understood Wyndham to say that the use of the drug in any form acted as a great exciter of the cravings for alcohol and narcotics on the part of those addicted to these habits. "If that's the case," I said to myself as I turned home, "God pity poor old Bell's teetotal resolutions! It would have been hard enough without anything further in the way of a 'thust aggravata.' I'm afraid he'll be having to exchange rôles with 'Slant' after all—to let the latter be the 'soba Mate of a drunken Skippa.'" Now that I had a chance to think about it, I didn't have any great faith in Bell's ability to refrain from drink for any length of time—certainly for not more than a day or two at the outside. He'd probably see the thing through, I admitted, but not as a "soba Skippa."

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Turning over all I had picked up at the end of a couple of days, I felt that I could come pretty near to reconstructing in my mind those scenes of the drama of which there had been no witnesses

save the actors themselves. Allen's infatuation for the girl had undoubtedly got the better of him the instant the turn of events suggested a plan which promised to give him undisputed possession of her. To this end he had plotted to get Bell off on a voyage from which there was no more than a negligible chance of his ever returning, while he himself remained behind to enjoy the spoils.

Considering that Allen's plan was evolved upon little more than a moment's notice, there could be no question that it was laid with consummate cleverness and carried out without a hitch—save, of course, for that final fatal slip-up which undid all the rest. To make sure of Bell and disarm his suspicions, Allen had assured the American that he himself would also go on the *Cora*. That he had tried to poison Bell, I had my doubts. I had not learned enough of how the drug acted to make my speculations on that point of much use. At any rate, with Bell unconscious on the schooner, it had clearly been the Australian's plan to return to the beach and remain there until she sailed, at the turn of the tide. That the *Cora* should get under way at that time had already been arranged between the unsuspecting Ranga and himself. The pretence that he had missed the schooner while engaged in getting his own and Bell's kits together would save his face with his friends on the beach. This latter consideration, it appears, was something the rascal never lost sight of. In the improbable event that Bell ever returned—but that bridge need not be crossed until it was in sight.

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Allen's cropper at the last jump was directly due to his cool assumption (natural enough, considering his success with South Sea ladies generally) that the girl, once Bell was out of the way, would fall into his lap like a ripe mango. That, and his long-curbed passion for her, led him to rush in search of Rona the moment he landed from his first visit to the schooner, and, missing her then, to return before the *Cora* had got her anchor up. The consequences of his finding her in on this latter occasion I had seen something of myself. How that slip of a girl got the drop on the most notorious bad man in the Islands I could only conjecture. Probably, with Allen, it was the old story—prudence going out of one door as passion entered at the other. I didn't reckon that Rona had ever read the story of Delilah; yet I felt pretty confident that the point of that little Joloano *kris* had found its way to the pulse of "Slant's" jugular some time after the girl's arm had gone round his neck in what he thought—for a second or two at least—was a warm embrace. Rona's uncanny faculty for getting away with everything she went after—from having her peacock shawl dry-cleaned to boarding a schooner which was all of "two jumps" beyond her reach—had greatly impressed me. And well it might have....

Even allowing that Allen had not tried to poison Bell outright, the fact remained that he had played the worst kind of a low-down trick on the American in treacherously attempting to railroad the latter out of the way and deprive the girl of his protection. That much was plain, and it was dead against the shifty Australian. In "Slant's" favour was the game manner in which he had stood the gaff at the last, when Bell left the way wide open for him to return ashore without even going over the side of the plague-infested schooner. He had not hesitated an instant in staking his life in what he had very fairly characterized as the short end of a hundred-to-one shot. There must be redeeming qualities in a man who could do that, no matter how shot through with infamy his past record had been. It occurred to me as just possible that Bell's magnanimity had struck a responsive chord in Allen's sense of sportsmanship—that the latter was going to play whatever remained of that grim game on the square. If the *Cora* was lost, or if Allen and Bell and the girl all died of the plague (one or both of which contingencies seemed practically inevitable), the whole slate would be wiped clean anyhow. If not—if the *Cora* won through with any of those three surviving—some hint of what had transpired on the voyage would certainly be obtainable at Townsville, or whatever port the schooner succeeded in making. In any event, I told myself, it was up to me to get on to Australia at the earliest possible moment.

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The fact that my Exhibition would be sure to have opened in Sydney by the time I reached Australia, really had nothing to do with my decision. In spite of the bluff I had tried to put over on Bell, I had had no intention of leaving Kai for a number of months to come. Nor, even after I began getting ready to go, did I attempt to ignore the fact that there might be duties for me to carry out in Townsville, the performance of which would be more likely than not to interfere seriously with my freedom of action for a good deal longer than the art world of Sydney would be inclined to pay homage to my marines.

No, my coming show had nothing to do with my resolve to hurry south, although, naturally, I fully intended to take it in if things shaped so as to make it possible. Since my daubs had been making good with the connoisseurs of Kai—men who knew at first hand the things I was trying to paint,—I had little fear that the more sophisticated critics of civilization would not fall for them. I hadn't any worry on that score. I knew I had been doing good work. But—well, an artist who isn't interested in the way his work will react on his fellow-beings is lacking in a very important stimulus to success.

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Kai manifested its usual sympathetic interest in my preparations for departure, but, with characteristic delicacy, asked no questions. Well off the steamer routes, and with only the most infrequent comings and goings of pearling and trading craft, the problem of reaching Australia with any dispatch seemed, at first, a hopeless one. For a while it looked like the best I could do would be to accept "Slim" Patton's kindly offer to run me over in his pearling sloop to Thursday Island, where I could count on getting a south-bound China-Australia liner inside of a fortnight. As Patton was known to be in bad for several little things at Thursday Island, his offer did more credit to his heart than to his head, and I was a good deal relieved when Jackson figured out a plan that

promised to make it possible for me to reach my goal by another route. After thumbing a greasy sheet of Burns, Phillip sailings for the best part of an afternoon, the old outlaw suddenly announced he had found reason to believe that, with luck, a cutter getting away from Kai that night could intercept the Solomon-Australia packet at Samarai, off the easternmost tip of New Guinea. To be sure that the thing was done properly, he would take one of his own cutters and sail her himself. As my impedimenta consisted of little beyond a few changes of drills and ducks, my painting kit, and a case of absinthe, and as Jackson used neither paint nor absinthe and wore a flowered *sulu* in place of ducks and drills, we had little difficulty in getting away on schedule.

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Jackson's carefully tabulated calculations—you can do that kind of thing in those latitudes when the southeast Trades are blowing steady and you know your boat—were only wrong by an hour. That is to say, we would have missed the *Utupua* by something like that had we pushed right in to Samarai. Old "Jack," however, sighting a bituminous smear trailing off above the tufted tops of the coco palms that line the inner passage, promptly shook out all his reefs, hauled up four or five points, and headed away on a course calculated to converge with that of the outgoing steamer a couple of miles to seaward. It was only after an abrupt greening of the tourmaline depths of the passage we had been threading suggested a sudden shoaling that it occurred to him to unroll and study his chart.

"Five 'undred fathom—three 'undred fifty fathom," he read laboriously as his tarry forefinger cruised along the tiny rows of dots and figures indicating soundings. "Three 'undred fathom—two 'undred fifty fathom—*one* bloody fathom! By Gawd, W'itney, we're 'igh an' dry already! This bally chart says they's only one fathom uv water on this kerblasted coral patch, an' the cutter draws two feet mor'n that."

But he never luffed her, never altered her course a fraction of a point. "More she 'eels the less she draws," he muttered philosophically, sitting down on the weather rail of the cockpit and starting to whittle at the end of a stick of tobacco with his clasp-knife. "Save a lot of wig-waggin' if we do pile up," he continued presently, rolling the shaved-off blackjack between his palms. "Ol' 'Choppy' Tancred never giv' the go-by to even a nigger dugout he could len' a han' to." Then he lighted his pipe, whoofed two or three whirling jets of blue smoke to leeward as he brought it to a proper draw, and settled comfortably back in puffing contentment. Ten minutes later he unrolled the chart again, produced a greasy stub of pencil from the band of his *kouli*-leaf hat, and wrote with great care the letters "P.D." across the dotted expanse where curving lines of figure "1s," like the graphic representation of telegraph lines on a bird's-eye map, indicated six feet of water where the eight-feet-draught cutter had just crossed without a bump.

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"As I figger it," Jackson observed drily, rolling up the chart and tossing it down the companionway as a thing whose usefulness was ended,—“as I figger it, a bloke's only manifestin' proper conserv'tism w'en 'e marks as 'Position Doubtful' a reef that ain't tangibl' enuf to stop 'im w'en 'e 'its it." Then, presently, between puffs, as he stretched himself and sidled along to take the wheel as the cutter began to close the slowing steamer: "Wonder 'oo the bally cove'll be 'oo bumps a mis-charted reef w'en 'e thinks 'e's got four 'undred fathom uv brine 'tween his keel an' the bottom uv the Pacific." The notorious inaccuracy of the South Sea charts is a continual source of amusement or wrath—according to whether a misplaced shoal or passage has spelt comedy or tragedy to him—for the man who sails their reef-beset waters.

It was Captain Tancred himself who came tumbling down from the *Utupua's* bridge to greet me as I clambered up the Jacob's ladder thrown over from the forecastle head. Hearing of him often before, this was the first time I ever set eyes on one of the best-loved characters in the South Pacific. He was a red-faced, blue-eyed, sandy-haired Scot, with a heart as big as his fist, and as soft as his voice was rough. Square himself as his own broad shoulders, and strictly law-abiding personally, he was credited with an amiable weakness for befriending every man who had run afoul of the statutes. I had heard them yarn by the hour at Kai of the way he had smuggled this one out of Australia, and that one into New Guinea; of how he had all but bumped South Head while standing-off-and-on in a "Southerly Buster" one night, on the off chance of picking up a jail-breaker, whose only claim upon Tancred had been that the latter had once before performed a similar service for the reprobate when he had forced his way out of the jug in Suva. Several of the push at Jackson's claimed actually to owe their lives to the bluff old Scot; many of them their liberty. "Choppy" Tancred—so called from his sun-washed red-brown mutton-chop side whiskers—was the nearest thing to a patron saint Kai ever had—that is, until the Rev. Horatio Loveworth hove up on their skyline some years later and converted the lot of them (just about) with the knuckles of his brawny fists.

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The last thing Jackson had said, as he steadied the ladder for me to swarm up the *Utupua's* side, was to the effect that I ought to consider myself dead lucky to be stacking up with "Choppy" Tancred; "or, leastways," he qualified, "you would be if you was in any kind uv a mess 'e could fish you out uv."

"Don't give up hope, Jack," I chaffed back, clawing round a projecting ventilator; "I may land in a mess yet."

"Then don't be forgettin' ther'll allus be a refooge for the errin' on the banks an' brays uv Kai Lagoon," he sang back, taking in the mainsheet as the cutter came up to the wind; "an' that

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'Choppy' Tancred'll be the cove to give you a first leg-up on the way back there."

Except for his very evident disappointment over the fact that I disclaimed any need of his help in getting ashore in Australia, Captain Tancred seemed not in the least put out over being stopped and boarded so high-handedly. He had carried many queer birds in his time, so that a man eccentric enough to take a case of drinkables with him on the *return* trip from the Islands didn't worry him as much as it might have some others. He was also kindly charitable about my "exclusiveness" of evenings (when all normal beings expand and grow sociable at sea), and even good-naturedly tolerant of my weakness for having breakfast in my cabin. I made it up to him to the best of my ability in my "quickenened" hours of the afternoon, and we became good friends.... Really good friends. I felt that I could count upon him in a pinch.

The grounding of the company's Port Moresby steamer somewhere along the Barrier Reef was responsible for the fact that the *Utupua*, this voyage, had been ordered to pick up freight at both Cooktown and Cairns, instead of proceeding direct to Townsville on her regular schedule. This set her back two days, and brought us into the offing at Townsville twenty-four hours after—instead of twenty-four hours before—a sun-blistered, foul-smelling labour-recruiting schooner, with a dead Captain and a score or more of dying niggers, was brought to anchor off the Quarantine Station by the Mate, who, immediately the hook was let go, collapsed on the deck and went to sleep. The empty hulk of the *Cora Andrews*, swinging lazily to the turning tide, was one of the first things to catch my eye as the *Utupua* steamed in and tied up to her buoy.

CHAPTER IX

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A GRIM TALE OF THE SEA

I HAVE often tried to figure just what effect on the succeeding train of events my earlier arrival in Townsville might have had. I have never come to any very definite conclusions in that connection. There were two or three things that were pretty well bound to happen, and if they hadn't come about one way, there is little doubt that they would have done so in another. Had I been there when the *Cora* arrived, it is probable that I would have learned definitely at once (instead of somewhat tardily) that Bell had *not* died of the plague. Certainly, on learning that fact, my impulse would have been to try to force Allen to an immediate showdown—to insist on his proving that the dope he had put in the American's whisky at Kai had not been the direct cause of the latter's death. Such a showdown would have been impossible to bring about at the time, however: for one reason, because Allen had been put into quarantine immediately, and, for another, because, completely played out by thirty-six hours at the wheel without relief, he had sunk into a sleep from which he had not rallied for over two days. Similar considerations would have prevented my seeing Rona. Besides being in quarantine she was in a state of raving delirium, which would have made it impossible for her to convey coherent information. Even Ranga, unaffected in mind and body though he was, I would hardly have been permitted to talk with when he landed, any more than I was two days later. No, everything considered, I fail to see where my earlier arrival would have made much difference in what happened. It must have been slated anyhow, I think—just bound to come off however the incidentals shaped.

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Still askance at what he rated as my temerity in making an open landing in Townsville, Captain Tancred had somewhat reluctantly granted my request for a boat to take me ashore as soon as the quarantine officials were through with the ship. I couldn't, of course, go off in the quarantine launch, but one of the doctors lingered a few minutes to tell me what he knew of the *Cora*. Although her captain had died twenty-four hours before the schooner anchored, his remains had not been buried at sea. This, it appeared, had been largely due to the protests of some sort of a Kanaka girl the Skipper had had with him. According to the Bo'sun's statement (fine upstanding fellow that looked like some kind of a Java man), she had gone plumb off her chump. Tried to knife the Mate first, and then plumped down by the Skipper's remains and threatened to stick the first man to touch it. The Mate, endeavouring to humour her, had not insisted on the burial—a reprehensible weakness on his part.... Common prudence demanded that the dead on a plague ship should be scuppered as soon as the breath was out of their bodies. That is, with a white man; with a nigger it did no harm to anticipate that event by an hour or so—as long as you were sure the fellow was going to whiff out anyway.

The funny part of it was, though (the Doctor went on), that the Skipper had not died of the plague at all. They had not, it was true, made any post-mortem in the rush of things; but it was certain, nevertheless, that his body had not displayed even the preliminary evidences of infection—no swelling of the glands of the groin or under the arms. Magnificent physical specimen the chap was, but plainly a man who had punished an ocean of booze in his day. And yet—confound it all!—there was no evidence that the fellow had drunk himself to death, either. Now if it had been the Mate—*he* was exuding alcohol from every pore—absolutely reeking with it. Almost made a man drunk to breathe the air down to leeward of him. Seemed to have been on one glorious spree all

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the way from—somewhere up Solomon-way, he thought it was. Harried the niggers like a fiend, according to the Bo'sun. Clubbed three or four of them to death for not stepping lively enough to his orders. Lucky thing the Skipper had scuppered all but one of the guns the first day out. But not all the booze he had soaked up had effected the nerve of the Mate. Kept his head and his legs to the last, finishing up with a straight twenty-four-hour trick at the wheel. Said none of the crew knew the Barrier Reef as well as he did. Had one nigger holding a parasol over him, another playing a concertina, another waiting handy with a bottle of whisky, and a fourth standing by to block any rushes from the Kanaka girl with her knife. Funny thing it never occurred to him to have her disarmed and tied up, or shut up. Grabbed the bottle of whisky and started to brain the Bo'sun with it every time the latter tried to push in and relieve him at the wheel.

A chap of terrible determination and iron nerves, that Mate was, observed the Doctor. But no wonder.... Think who he was! Allen! The Honourable Hartley Allen! The great Allen! Son of old Sir Jim Allen! Melbourne Cup winner! Best horseman in all Australia! Crooked as they make 'em—but how he could ride! Sent off to the Islands four or five years back for raising some sort of hell. His old Ticket-of-Leave had given him away when they came to strip him for a bath. No possible mistake about it. One of the doctors at the Quarantine Station had set a broken collar-bone for him once after he had fallen in a steeplechase at Coolgardie. Found the marks of the old compound fracture still humping up on the clavicle—the left one....

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It was not without difficulty that I brought the excited young medico round to speaking of Bell again. The astounding fact that he himself, with his own hands, had actually helped to put the great and only Hartley Allen to bed, was proving almost too much for him. It was certainly not less than three separate times that he assured me that it was his own silk pajamas that were encasing the limbs of the resurrected hero. He switched subjects reluctantly, rising to go to his waiting launch.

"Nothing in the world the matter with the big fellow—not even too much drink," he said as he began shuffling his health sheets together. "He must have passed away from the sheer mental strain of the stunt he had tackled. Intense nervous strain—that was the one thing written all over the man. Face was starting to bloat a bit from the heat by the time I saw it first; but, even so, it still showed the lines of the most terrible mental suffering. Seemed to have gone out fighting hard to pull himself together—shoulders hunched up, finger-nails clenched deep into palms, lower lip bitten clean through."

"May not those—those things you mention have been caused by physical rather than mental agony?" I asked, speaking very slowly to hide the agitation aroused by this significant intelligence. "Isn't that about the way a man would repress his feelings if he was racked with—with stomach cramps—if he had eaten something that disagreed with him?"

"Possibly so," admitted the Doctor, with the air of a man weighing an idea that had not occurred to him before; "but somehow that wasn't the suggestion they carried to me—nor to any of us. Fact is, though, we didn't give the matter very much attention. That chap was dead—finished,—while the other white man and the girl—to say nothing of forty or fifty niggers—were alive. Then, with the excitement of finding we had the great Hartley Allen on our hands—and, on top of that, having the girl run *amuck* and give us the slip complete,—there was enough else to think about. The only—"

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"The girl gave you the slip?" I interrupted. "How was that? You didn't mention it before."

"Bolted and drowned herself in the creek," he replied; "or at least there's every reason to believe she drowned herself, though they haven't found her body yet. She wasn't going to leave the Skipper, even when we started to take his body away for burial.... And of course we couldn't allow her to leave the Station until her period of quarantine was over. Had to take her away from the body by main force. She fought the whole lot of us with tooth and nail and a wicked little curly-bladed dagger. Stood us all off, too, and looked like getting ready to use the knife on herself when the big Malay (who chanced to be there, but had taken no part in the shindy up to that moment) stepped in, caught her wrist and took the nasty little toy away from her.

"The big yellow man seemed to have rather a quieting effect on the girl. Blind mad as she was, she didn't try to stick him. It seemed to steady her a good deal when he talked to her in her own lingo. She was panting like a cat coming out of a fit when we left her, but was quite over her raving—wasn't even sobbing aloud. She was coming out of her hysteria—getting rational again. Her eyes, though still wild and almost throwing off sparks of anger, were quite free of the crazy look. It looked like our trouble with her was about over, but, to be on the safe side, we locked her up in one of the 'mad' rooms. That was the last anyone has seen of her alive—or any other way, for that matter.

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"You wouldn't have believed the thing possible!" he ejaculated feelingly, turning back from the door and slapping the table resoundingly with his portfolio. "That room was made to confine dangerous lunatics in, and it had fulfilled its purpose, too—up to night before last. To make it perfectly secure, it had been constructed without windows—nothing but a two-by-two hole up against the twelve-foot-high ceiling admitted light and air. There were no beds or chairs to be

broken up when the occupant had tantrums.... Just sleeping mats, a sheet, a blanket and a mosquito net. No more. Even the wash basin was brought in and taken out by the attendant.

"In locking the girl in, no precautions were omitted except that of strapping her in a strait-jacket, and we had never resorted to that save in violent cases. The window—or rather air-hole—was so high and so small that it had never been considered worth while to put bars on it. But as it was the only conceivable way she could have got out (the attendant is absolutely trustworthy, and the key was not in his hands more than a minute or two anyway), we would have been forced to conclude that the girl had reached it with wings—had not we found the lower four or five feet of wall marked with the prints of the toes and balls of the bare feet which had apparently been violently projected against it. That led us to get a ladder and light and examine about the window more closely. For a foot or more below it the wall was splashed with blood and slightly scratched, where lacerated fingers had clawed at the narrow ledge.

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"It did not take us long to figure that, taking the whole length of the room to get going in, the girl had flung herself up the wall something in the way that a terrier will run six or eight feet up the side of a house for a ball or handkerchief fastened there. That's the only way we could account for the toe-prints on the wall, though it is quite possible that, after failing to pull off the trick in that fashion—it's a stunt that looks dead hopeless for anything but a monkey,—she managed it with a straight spring, high enough to get her fingers over the ledge. Even from there, not one woman in a million could pull herself up. But we had already remarked on the extreme wiriness of the girl (a regular human ape she was for agility), and so found it a bit easier to accept the evidence of our eyes. In some way or another she had managed it.

"The air-hole opened out under the eaves of the sheet-iron roof," the Doctor went on, forgetting his waiting launch in the interest of the story, and seating himself again at the table. "It must have taken some jolly snaky wriggling to crawl through the hole, out over the eaves and on top of the roof; but she did it, else she could never have jumped across the big banyan, where we found some twigs broken at the point she hit, and some wisps of silk floss. The other side of that banyan—a hundred feet from the wall of the hospital—spreads until it comes to about fifteen feet from the station wall. The wall is ten feet high, has broken glass on the top of it, with three or four strands of barbed wire above that.

"Swinging to the ground by a pendent air-root on the side she had landed in, the girl crossed under the tree—the marks of her bare feet showing plainly in the soft earth—and used a similar ladder with which to mount on the other side. To be sure of clearing the barbed wire, she had climbed to a firm perch fully twenty-five feet from the ground, and made her final jump from there. Luckily for her, the cane field on the other side of the wall had been flooded but a day or two before—though I don't doubt she would have jumped just the same if it had been to a cobblestone pavement.

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"We found the deep prints of her feet, knees and hands where she had sprawled on striking. Her tracks down to the edge of a sprouting row of seed-cane, and the marks where she had crawled up out of a deep irrigating ditch to the road, were all we had to indicate the direction she had taken. As she had seemed plumb daft about the dead Skipper, we figured that she had probably broken out with the idea of going to his grave, and perhaps making an end of herself there. If that was it, she failed. There were no signs whatever of her having been near the fresh mound we had tucked the big fellow away under. It was some distance away from the Station, and, in the night, it isn't likely she would have met anyone to ask the way of. The only grave she found was her own, and not a very restful one at that, I'm afraid.

"We had noticed that she seemed to set great store by a big yellow shawl she wore—rather a fine old piece of Oriental work it looked, with a dragon or some other kind of wild animal embroidered on it. Well, when we found that lying on the bank of Ross Creek, just a bit inland of the town, we felt so sure that it marked the jumping-off place for her in more ways than one. For that reason, what search has been pressed since has been in the form of shooting alligators, and seeing if one of them appears to have enjoyed anything extra-special in the way of tucker lately."

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An impatient toot from his launch carried the Doctor to the door again, where he paused long enough to assure me for the third or fourth time that it would be most unlikely that permission would be granted me to see the Mate or the Boatswain of the *Cora* until their spell of quarantine was over. If I was really anxious about it, he would gladly put in a word for me with the Chief. I would have to show good reason for my request, of course. Perhaps, if it chanced that I was able to shed any light on how the schooner came to get into such a mess—I cut him short by saying that I might call at the Quarantine Station when I came ashore a little later. What I knew about the sailing of the *Cora* from Kai happened to be the one thing I didn't care to confide to anyone—just yet. Asking the Mate to order my boat to stand by for me a few minutes longer, I went to my cabin to be alone while I turned the fresh developments over in my mind.

I had been prepared to await the coming of the *Cora* indefinitely. In fact, what I expected above anything else was that the final news would be a report that she had been found piled up on any one of a thousand reefs that spread their coral claws all the way from the Louisiades to the Great Barrier. And in case she did get through, I was quite prepared to learn that both of the white men and the girl had succumbed to the plague. But to be told that, after the schooner had avoided

disaster, and all three of them the plague, that the two upon whom my interest and affection had centred were gone—dead,—was just a bit staggering. It was now up to me to determine upon a definite course of action, and, since it was now out of the question attempting to follow my first impulse of going to Allen at once and forcing a showdown, I wanted time to think.

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What the Doctor had told me of the way Bell appeared to have died had instantly reawakened my suspicions of Allen. Had the *kor-klee*, working with a recurrent effect, finally proved fatal? Or had Allen, perhaps, administered a second and stronger dose? He would have had a hundred opportunities to do that had he desired to. Rona's attacks on the Mate, indicating the deadliest hatred, seemed to prove that her first suspicions of him had not weakened during the voyage—more likely, indeed, had hardened to a certainty. The belief I had been entertaining that Allen had made up his mind to play the game out on the square was not very deeply grounded.

My sense of personal loss in the passing of Bell and Rona was not a thing I cared to let myself dwell upon for the moment. There was no question that the news of Rona's death had shocked me even more than that of Bell's. Not that there was anything more between us than I have already told. I had never let myself think of her in terms of physical possession, though the sheer animal attraction of the girl was beyond anything I had ever experienced in a woman. But her appeal to the artistic side of me had been stronger even than that. Just as the thrill I felt at the first sight of her bathing in the pink-lipped bowl of the reef had made the very world itself seem more wonderful and beautiful, so now the depression that filled me on realizing that I was never again to have sight of her made the world seem emptier and drearier.

Another thing: there was no denying that Bell, splendid fellow that he was, had shot his bolt. A real come-back with him was too much to expect. The most that could have been hoped for was that he would "finish in style," and that I was assured he had done, no matter in what agony of soul and body his brave spirit had taken flight. But Rona's bolt was still unsped. The girl had hardly begun to finger Life's bowstring. It was almost as hard to think of the flaming, soaring spirit of her as quenched, as it was to believe that the matchless perfection, the supple gracefulness of her body—*shooting alligators to see if any of them had been enjoying anything extra-special in tucker lately!* I could not pursue that line of thought any further. I agreed with the Doctor that the fact that the girl had parted with her beloved shawl indicated that she had reached a jumping-off place—a point where she had no further use for it. I could not picture her—living—without its amber-bright flame streaming about her limbs. The wonder was that she had not kept it for a shroud. As I came out upon the deck to go to my boat, the intermittent crack of rifle shots along the shore told me that the "search" had not been abandoned.

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Beyond deciding to go ashore and see if anything further could be learned, I had made no plans. It seemed that about the best I could do would be to wait in Townsville until Allen and Ranga were out of quarantine, and then let things shape as they would; but always assuming that, in case the former could not satisfy me he was innocent of Bell's death, I should do what I could to settle the reckoning with him. That would be my atonement—to Bell and to myself—for my sorry failure to "measure up" the day the *Cora Andrews* came to Kai Lagoon.

Captain Tancred, who had never quite settled it in his own mind how a man who openly admitted he had been living in the Kai colony for months would not have to be smuggled ashore on the quiet if he expected to avoid arrest in Australia, met me at the gangway.

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"Best to leave the luggage aboard, lad," he began genially; "then that'll be ain less thing ye'll hae to bother wi' if ye're haen' to cut an' run for it. If ye're not back ag'in by the time I'm gettin' awa', than I'll be sendin' it in for ye on the Company's launch. But ye'd best be hangin' on wi' me a bittie, an' tak' me to see them pictur's ye've been tellin' me about in Sydney toon."

My pictures! The Exhibition had slipped my mind completely, driven out by the news of the *Cora* and the anxieties that had followed in its train. I had told Captain Tancred something of my coming show, but had hardly convinced him. He was far too considerate to say outright that he didn't believe me, but my Kai origin could not be ignored. If I was to have an exhibition of paintings in Sydney, then why was I stopping off in Townsville? On that point—since I didn't want to go into the *Cora* affair with anyone until I knew how things were going to shape—I had hardly been able to reassure the old sceptic. I might be an artist all right enough—I don't think he had any serious doubts on that score,—but I must also be some kind of a crook. He was plainly convinced in his own mind that I was trying to slip into Australia on the quiet, and was rather hurt because I would not take him into my confidence and let him help me.

But why not take in the Exhibition? In nine days, with any luck in connections, I could go to Sydney and back, with a day or two to spare. Even if the trip ran over that time, it was not likely that the man I wanted to see would be getting away immediately.... And, in any event, I would know how to find him, whether in Australia or the Islands. Further, it could not but have a salutary effect on my nerves to get quite beyond the attraction I felt that Quarantine Station would have for me if I lingered within physical reach of it. Nothing but absinthe, and more absinthe, and then more absinthe, could be depended upon to relieve my nerves once they were fully wrought up, as I knew they must be if I remained in Townsville in enforced inaction, fretting my heart out with impatience. And too much absinthe would mean only one thing—that I would begin the day on which I was to meet "Slant" Allen for a final showdown in a condition of mind and body precisely

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similar to that in which I had entered upon another day of accursed memory—and, doubtless, with equally shameful consequences to myself.

These thoughts flashed through my mind in a fraction of the time I have taken to set them down. My reply to Captain Tancred followed close upon his suggestion that I leave my luggage aboard.

"I think I'll be going through to Sydney with you, Captain—or at least as far as Brisbane," I said, motioning to the steward to bring up the bags he had already stowed in the waiting boat. "I know no one whose opinion on my daubs I'd rather have than yours. But I'll pay my little visit ashore here just the same, counting on you to get my kit landed in the unlikely event of my not being aboard again when you get under way this afternoon."

I was not long in coming to the conclusion that there was nothing new to be learned ashore, that is, with respect to what had happened on the *Cora* in the course of her voyage from Kai. This was not because the story was not on everyone's lips.... Quite to the contrary, indeed, the town was agog with the dramatic suddenness of the arrival of the plague ship and its astonishing sequel. But as no one had been allowed to see any of the survivors, such accounts as were current were only those which had been passed out by the quarantine people, and about all the latter knew I felt that I had already gathered that morning from the Doctor on the *Utupua*. Bell's name was not mentioned, and not a man I talked with knew that the dead white man had been the Skipper.

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For Townsville—for all of Australia—the overwhelming appeal of the event was in the fact that a black-birding schooner had been brought into port by an ex-Ticket-of-Leavester, who had *volunteered* to risk his life in an attempt to save those of half a hundred plague-stricken niggers. That one circumstance in itself was wonderful enough, but when, on top of it, the announcement was made that the hero was none other than the former idol of sporting Australia, the Hon. Hartley Allen, popular imagination was stirred as rarely ever before. What man in all the Antipodes had not envied Allen, the supremely successful owner, rider and sportsman? What woman had not been intrigued by the romantic dash of him? What boy had not dreamed of growing up in his image?

Townsville, delirious with the dramatic appeal of this splendid act on the part of a man who had tasted the wine of adulation as he had drunk the dregs of infamy, was but a microcosm of Sydney and Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide, to all of which the news had been flashed by wire. Every town and hamlet, from Cairns to Hobart, from Perth to Woolongong, were dispatching telegrams of congratulation to a man who was still muttering in his drunken sleep behind the walls of the Townsville Quarantine Station. Sydney was competing with Brisbane for the honour of being the first to bestow the "Freedom of the City" upon the man both of them had had some share in transporting. A special from Sydney to the local sheet, hinted darkly of what might happen to the misguided official who attempted to revive any of the old charges against the man "whose sublime courage had emblazoned his name upon the tablets of undying fame.... A hand that is raised today against the Hon. Hartley Allen is a hand that is raised against the noblest traditions of Australia."

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I had to elbow through half of a densely packed block to read that last on the bulletin in front of the *Trumpet's* office. The mob cheered wildly as the message was chalked up on the blackboard—cheered the stirring sentiment and growled ominously at the suggestion that any hand would dare to be raised against the Hon. Hartley Allen and the noblest traditions of Australia. As I elbowed my way out again, I wondered just what the Charters Towers miner, who had manifested his exuberant approval by slapping me on the back, would have thought—nay, what he would have done—had he known that the hand fingering the guard of the revolver in the right side-pocket of my shooting jacket (I had brought the useful little weapon on the off chance that it might be needed) was rather more likely than not to be raised against at least one of those cherished institutions he was so anxious to uphold.

I began to perceive that the line between dealing out retributive justice to a blackguard of a murderer and assassinating a national hero in cold blood might easily become too hairlike in its tenuousness for a red-eyed Australian jury to admit the existence of it. For it was nothing less than a national hero that "Slant" Allen was becoming, even before he roused from the heavy sleep which had held him ever since he collapsed over the wheel as the *Cora* came to anchor. That circumstance, I told myself, complicated my task beyond measure, though I couldn't, of course, allow it to make any difference in my program in the event Allen wasn't able to satisfy me that he was guiltless of the murder of my friend. But if things should transpire which might make Allen anxious to put *me* out of the way—if he, not I were the attacking party—that would simplify things greatly. I began to ponder that felicitous possibility.

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Would not the fact that I was the only living man (Ranga, whatever he had seen or heard, would hardly need to be reckoned with as a witness) who knew the actual facts about the way he had "volunteered" to join the *Cora* at Kai awaken a desire in Allen's lawless breast to seal my mouth for good and all, now that he had so much to lose by the truth's coming out? The feeling that such would be the case—that the dizzily mounting fortunes of the ex-beach-comber would ultimately impel him to seek me out for an understanding—grew on me more and more as I turned the situation over in my mind, until at last it became a certainty, against which I felt justified in preparing as a boxer trains for a definitely scheduled prize fight.

I did not reckon it worth while to call at the Quarantine Station, which was some distance from the town and not easy to reach. I did, however, just before I put off to the ship, meet the young doctor with whom I had talked in the morning. The only thing which he was able to add to what he had already told me was in connection with the question I had raised respecting the cause of Bell's death. To be certain that he had been correct in stating that the latter had not died of plague, he had made a special inquiry. In response to this he had been shown a slide made from a smear they had taken of the late Skipper's blood. The bacteriologist had seen to that immediately the body was landed. It showed no traces whatever of plague bacilli. I could be quite assured on that point. The Chief was unwilling to hazard an opinion as to what the real cause of the man's death might have been. He seemed rather to regret that he had failed to order a post-mortem. Allen was still sleeping heavily, but would be right as a trivet beyond a doubt as soon as he woke up and gave them a chance to sweat some of the alcohol out of his hide. Pulse steady as a church.... Temperature a shade sub-normal. Marvellous constitution.... Wonderful fellow altogether. Any word of the girl? No, nothing. Ten pounds reward had been offered for the recovery of her body, or any recognizable part of it. Search was still going on, and he pointed across to the opposite foreshore, where a couple of spindling Hindu coolies—evidently sugar plantation contract hands—were earnestly engaged in performing "*hari-kiri*" upon a plethoric 'gator they had just bagged and towed to the beach.

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The Doctor was already beginning to look ahead. Did I fancy Allen would be able to wangle it so as to get an entry in for the Melbourne Cup in the short time that remained before that classic was run? Entries closed some time ago, of course. He'd have to square it with the stewards some way. They might make a special exception, seeing who Allen was, and what he had just done. Any horse with his colours would carry a barrel of money, just out of sentiment if nothing else. Did I think he would wangle an entry?

"No," I replied, stepping down into my boat. "No, I'm afraid the chances are all against it." My mind had been torn with doubt over a number of things that day.... It was a relief to be asked to express an opinion on a matter respecting which I had no doubt.... Not a shred of it.

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Captain Tancred welcomed me back to the *Utupua* with a significant grin. "So ye didna find the outlook ashore to yer likin' lad?" he boomed boisterously, thumping me on the back. "Weel, dinna ye mind, since ye wasna nabbed. I'll be findin' a wa' to slip ye aff in Sydney sae they wan't be puttin' nose to yer trail till ye're clean awa'." The look on the old boy's face was a study when, a few days later, after the tugs had nosed his ship into her berth at the Circular Quay, I stalked brazenly off down the gangway, with no more regard for the two Bobbies guarding the dock gate than they had for me. He had exacted two promises from me before he let me go: one, that I was to take him to see my pictures, and the other, that I would not fail to let him know if there ever came a time when he could be of Service to me.... "Real sarvice, lad; you'll be twiggin' wha' I mean." I gave both promises freely, just as I kept them later—yes, both of them.

As I had trunks, with all the common accessories of civilization, stored at the *Australia*, my transformation from a beach-comber to a fairly correct imitation of a comfortably heeled artist was the matter of but a few hours. My appearance at the Exhibition could not have been better timed. The affair had been extremely well handled from the first. I had been sending pictures to Sydney from all parts of the South Seas for the last eighteen months, packing them up as completed and getting them off whenever opportunity offered. Two or three had been lost, but, on the whole, I reckoned the plan safer than trying to take them round with me in one lot, at the risk of losing the bunch.

CHAPTER X

ART AND SUSPENSE

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NOTHING had been further from my mind than an Australian exhibition. I cared little for the provincial approbation of the Antipodes, and I was hardly ready for Paris—not quite yet. It was only at the reiterated requests of friends (two of them were young Australian artists I had known in my student days in Paris), to whom I was under real obligations for their kindness in receiving and storing my pictures as they dribbled into Sydney, that I finally gave consent to a public showing. In doing this, I had stipulated particularly that they were to take all the troubles and responsibilities of the affair, and that under no circumstances was I to be expected to appear in person—unless, of course, it suited my convenience and inclination at the time.

As I have said, the affair had been most intelligently handled from the first. There had not been enough of my canvases comfortably to fill the wing of the big New South Wales Government Museum and Art Gallery which was available for exhibitions, but my friends, rather than pull the show off at a less pretentious and worse lighted gallery, had added enough of their own pictures to relieve the coldness of otherwise blank walls. These were also South Sea marines—it was a

straight seascape show throughout,—but more or less conventional in inspiration and execution. Benchley might have been painting marine backgrounds for an aquarium, so faithfully did he labour to reproduce every detail of jutting coral branches and floating seaweed. Crafts, on the other hand, had fallen early under the influence of Turner, and persisted in bulling the yellow ochre market by drenching his Great Barrier Reef seascapes with such a flood of golden light as was never seen save at the head of the Adriatic and now and then on the coasts of Tripoli and Algeria.

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I would hardly characterize my own work as a compromise between these two extremes.... It was *not* that, though I *was* less of a slave to form than Benchley, and by no means so emancipated from it as Crafts. Rather, I should say, I was striving, independent of either classic or contemporary influence, to paint such depth, warmth and atmosphere into my tropical seascapes as would make them convey an *intenser* suggestion of reality. I did not expect water spaniels to pay me the subtle compliment of trying to gambol in my breakers, nor children to try to launch their toy sailboats in my lagoons.... Benchley's "colour photograph" effects were more likely to attain to those distinctions than my comparatively impressionistic sketches. What I was striving for was an effect that would compel some such comment as old Jackson had made the first time he stood off and conned my "Swells and Shells"—"Gawd bly'me, that's *it!* That water's wetter 'n a swept deck, an', s'elp me Mike, but I c'n bloomin' near sniff them bloody clams!"

Very naturally, then, since the sea was what I was painting, the impressions of anyone who didn't know the sea as intimately as did my beach-combing cronies of Kai wasn't going to worry me much. The opinions of men who knew less about the subject of my pictures, and more about how pictures in general were painted, didn't strike me as anything that counted very seriously. Nevertheless when, at Brisbane on the voyage south, I got the Sydney papers with the account of the opening of the show, it was a good deal of a satisfaction to find that my work appeared to have got over with the art critics. These had, of course (since they were denied Jackson's facility of expression), to confine themselves to the jargon of their kind. It was plain, however, that they had been favourably impressed, and were doing the best they could with their comparatively restricted vocabularies. Mere city dwellers, too, most of them, one had to allow for their limited capacity of appreciation for something—the sea—which they knew only from other pictures. But even allowing for that, it was reassuring to find that they were coming across so whole-heartedly. Such capsules of praise as they had in stock were scattered with lavish hands for whoso would to swallow. "The soul of the sea palpitates through every canvas," said the *Herald*; "you leave the gallery with the tang of blown brine fresh in your nostrils," said the *Telegraph*; "Australia is honoured with having the first chance to see this brilliantly distinctive work," said the illustrated *Australasian*, and promised four full pages of reproductions of the "gems of the collection" in its next issue. The young lady (I judged she was young) who was on the job for the Melbourne *Age* gushed breathlessly for a column and a half. This was a sample: "In 'Mother-of-Pearl' he has woven with a warp of sunbeams and a woof of rainbow—a shimmering brocade of exultantly sentient brightness!" Capsules of praise, every one of these; but they were from the top shelf beyond a doubt, and the fact that they had been reached for indicated that at least something of my message had dribbled over the frames.

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The *Bulletin* had done rather better than the others in commissioning for the occasion an "art critic" who (as transpired in the course of his half-page article) had sailed his own sixty-footer to Auckland and back. He, at least, had met the sea on more intimate terms than was possible through Sunday mixed-bathing at Coogee and Manley (with occasional ferryboat passages, about the limit the others had gone, I reckoned). Said he, in speaking of "The Seventh Son of a Seventh Son": "The beat of the eternal sea was behind every slash of the brush with which this Franco-American wizard of light and colour painted that rolling mountain of water. I felt my fingers involuntarily clutching at the spokes of the wheel to bring her up to meet the menace of that curling crest. I forgot where I was ... I almost felt the heave of a deck beneath my feet...."

I rather liked that, I must confess; though perhaps it didn't give me quite the double-barrelled thrill of "Heifer" Halligan's comment when I sent for him to pass judgment on that same picture before the paint of my finishing touches upon it was dry. A month before, as I have already mentioned, I had given the "Heifer" a pretty severe pummelling with the four-ounce gloves, and, like the good sport he was, to show that there was no hard feeling on the score of his battered optics, he had volunteered to sail me in his sloop to Tuka-tuva (the reef on which Bell lost the *Flying Scud*, it may be recalled) so that I could make some close-range studies of hard-running waves at the point of breaking. And, just to show that there was no hard feeling on *my* part over the wallop below my belt with which the "Heifer" had finally brought the bout to a close, I accepted. The studies had been made—just a few slashes on oil-cloth with a rather useful waterproof paint I had mixed specially for "sloppy" stunts like that—with my shivering anatomy lashed to the *Wet-Eyed Susy's* bowsprit, while the "Heifer" tacked back and forth just beyond the line where the pull of the shoaling reef, dragging at their bases, let the green-black tops of the combers tumble over in a thunderous roar. As he was really taking a good deal of a chance of losing his handy little pearler, if nothing else, it was only right that the "Heifer's" request for a first look-see at the completed picture should have the call.

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He studied it in silence for a minute or two, legs wide apart and his bullet head cocked judicially to one side. Then his fine teeth were bared in a broad grin and he vented a throaty chuckle of amused admiration. Said he: "Mister Whitney, that hulkin' ol' lalalooser there looks

like he has all the kick behind him of that bally wallop on the solar plexus you floored me with the other day." Not even the Sydney *Bulletin's* dilettante yachtsman could do quite as well as that—from my standpoint, at least. But of course I had a weakness for the Kai viewpoint.

The Exhibition had been opened early in the week—the usual affair of the kind, "Under the Patronage and in the Presence of His Excellency, the Governor General and Lady X—," and a long list of specially invited guests. Amiable old Lord X— had made one of the happy little speeches for which he was famous. Then they had all had tea and a look at the pictures. This inevitable formal session out of the way, the show was opened to the general public. Under the stimulus of the astonishingly enthusiastic press, the public had come through beyond all expectations. For the next three days the crush at the gallery was, as the *Bulletin* had it, like a "bargain day rush at *Morden's*." On Friday, it was advertised, Sir Joseph Preston, R.A., a very distinguished English artist visiting in Australia, had consented to speak at the Exhibition on "The Painter with the New Method and the New Message." This was the day of my arrival in Sydney. It did not occur to me at first just who the subject of the discourse was to be. When it finally came home to me, I began speeding up my transformation process at once. By dint of rushed valeting and dressing, I just managed to reach the gallery as Sir Joseph was getting under way.

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I won't endeavour to set down his speech, not even in outline. It was highly complimentary from first to last—and not even condescending, which was as surprising as pleasing when one considered how lofty an eminence Sir Joseph occupied in the art world. One thing I was just a bit disappointed about, though, was that the speaker seemed to assume that the pictures on exhibition represented my ultimate expression, the best I could do, or could be expected to do; whereas I knew that I had hardly got my foot well planted on the first rung of the ladder. I regretted without resenting this. I hadn't painted my hopes and ambitions into the pictures, so how was Sir Joseph Preston, more than anybody else, to see what I was driving at? I rather wanted to tell him about it, though. I hadn't talked with an artist of the old boy's calibre since I was in Paris, and not often there.

I was just screwing up my nerve to push in and introduce myself, when Benchley pounced upon me with a joyous whoop and did the thing as a matter of course. Totally oblivious of the widening circle of wondering cackle that arose as the news of my unexpected, and not undramatic, appearance spread outward through the jam, I held forth to the beaming Royal Academician on the things that had been passing through my mind. The great man fired as though he had been of tow and my words—my ideas—were a torch laid to the inflammable mass of him.

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"Magnificent! Perfectly ripping!" he exclaimed with enthusiasm; "but what a shame I didn't know that ten minutes ago so that I could have told them! By Jove, I'll tell them now! Better yet—jolly good idea; *you* tell them. Just the things you've been telling me."

Benchley, Crafts and my other sponsors descended upon me like a pack of hounds at those words, and the first thing I knew I had been hustled up onto their little dais, and Sir Joseph was introducing me as "a gentleman who can make a few pertinent additions to my late remarks."

I hadn't been called upon for a speech since I won the middle-weight boxing championship of Harvard in my Junior year, and speaking was by no means my long suit even in those days. I bucked up and went through it now though, just as I did on that first occasion. It's no very difficult thing to get away with when you know what you want to say—and have the crowd with you. I spoke briefly, but very earnestly—very much to the point, too, I think. When the crowd had quieted down a bit, tea was served. The next morning, when I read the papers in bed, it was to discover that I had become a fully fledged—or perhaps maned is the proper word—lion.

In one of those same papers there was an interesting item of news about another lion. The special representative the *Herald* had rushed to Townsville immediately the news of the *Cora Andrews* affair had been received, wired that the Hon. Hartley Allen, replying from the Quarantine Station to a note the correspondent had addressed him there, announced definitely that it was his intention to pay a visit to his old home town of Sydney. He would leave by the first steamer sailing after the doctors had certified him free of the danger of plague infection.

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That was good news. The best I could have hoped for. It confirmed my growing belief that I was not going to have to do much, if any, seeking in order to meet my man. And it was a hundred to one that the doctor with whom I had talked on the *Utupua* had told Allen of the conversation as soon as the latter came out of his long sleep, I was even inclined to the opinion that his decision to go south as soon as he could had been influenced by a desire to find out once and for all what attitude I was going to take toward him. This was all to the good. There was no need of my hurrying back to Townsville now. I could stay in Sydney and enjoy my triumph while watching that of the Hon. Hartley Allen develop. With a lighter heart than I had known since the rumble of the *Cora's* anchor chain awakened me on that day of hateful memory in Kai, I tumbled out of bed, took a cold bath, and went down to the dining-room for breakfast—the greatest burst of early matutinal energy I had shown in years.

The avidity of the interest of the public in the Hon. Hartley Allen increased day by day as the time approached for the hero to come south. All of the important papers had special men on the

job in Townsville, and every scrap of news bearing the least relation to the man of the hour was instantly put on the wires and rushed into print. Save for that one announcement that he intended visiting Sydney, Allen himself gave out nothing. The correspondents had to confine themselves to reports of his continued improvement in health, as passed out to them by the doctors, and to speculation—columns of it—as to what effect Allen's return might be expected to have upon racing. His elder brother—Sir James, who was now in England—had allowed Hartley's stable to run down a good deal after the latter had been shipped off to the Islands. There were a few good horses left after the best of the string had been sold to pay off debts, and these would form a nucleus which could not fail to develop quickly into a factor to be reckoned with in the meets of next season. There was no limit to the discussion of this phase of the affair, Melbourne and Sydney racing experts devoting even more space to it than the special men in Townsville.

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Of the story of the *Cora Andrews* there was nothing new whatever being brought out. If Allen was telling the doctors at the Quarantine Station anything, it must have been in confidence, for these professed to have learned nothing further every time the correspondents pressed them for details. The schooner herself, it was reported, had broken from her mooring during a gale and been driven upon the beach of Cleveland Bay, some miles from the town. A hole had been stove in her bow and it would be impossible to get her off before considerable repairs were carried out. As she had not been disinfected since the removal of the plague victims, there would probably be some delay about the repairs, especially as the question of her ownership was in doubt. She had belonged to the man who sailed her in the labour-recruiting trade, and he was dead. So was the Skipper who had taken her over in the *Louisiades*. It looked like the Hon. Hartley Allen had the most valid claim to her, but that was a matter to be adjusted by the courts in any event. In the meantime, the schooner, as she was lying in fairly quiet water, was probably safe until the next gale. Thus the papers.

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When Allen finally came out of quarantine it transpired that he would have a wait of three days on his hands before there was a steamer departing for the south. The delay was unavoidable, although an enthusiastic Sydney paper had suggested that the Admiral commanding the Australian Naval Station should detach a gunboat to bring the hero home. Allen, it appeared, had actually tried to avoid meeting the newspaper men, and consented to do so finally only on the condition that he would not be expected to give out anything in the way of an interview in respect to his past, present or future. As they had no alternative in the matter, the correspondents accepted the ultimatum, but only—as most of them confessed—in the hope of getting it modified when action was joined. They were doomed to disappointment.

Allen received them on the veranda of a house that had been put at his disposal by a prominent local shipping man—a detached bungalow in the grounds of the latter's home on the outskirts of the town. They reported him looking rather soft—a good two stone heavier than his former riding weight. He was heavily browned from the tropical sun, showed a tinge of yellow—doubtless from malaria and *dengue*,—and his face was deeply lined about the eyes and mouth. He looked to have aged rather more than the five years of his absence: but life in the Islands was hardly the rest cure most Australians fancied it. No, not by a long shot.

Except for his refusal to tell anything whatever of the story of how he had brought the plague ship through the Great Barrier Reef, Allen had been very courteous and agreeable to the pressmen. They all agreed that he was in good fettle—quite full of beans. Indeed, it was Allen who did all of the interviewing. Persistently refusing to answer any questions about himself, he was avid of interest concerning all that had happened in the racing world during his absence. What were the real facts behind the breakdown of the Colchester filly after she had won the Victoria National so handily? Who was that colt *Ballarat Boy* out of?—the one that had upset all the dope in the spring meet at Adelaide. Were Tod Sloan and Skeets Martin still piling up wins in England? What was the secret of their success? Was there any chance of these or any other of the Yank jockeys coming to Australia?

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Answering such questions as these for an hour was the way that bunch of high-salaried feature writers interviewed the Hon. Hartley Allen. And when, as one of them put it in somewhat mixed simile, they were "pumped dry as a last year's dope sheet," the hero announced that the interview was over.

Disappointed in their endeavours to pry any pearls from the oyster into which Allen (for reasons best known to himself) had metamorphosed himself, the correspondents made the best of a bad job by playing up the modesty of the man they had been sent a thousand miles or so to interview. Modest was an adjective that—in the light of what most of them knew of Allen's past—it hadn't occurred to any of them to use before. Now, however, they made up for lost time. The modest hero did this, or the modest hero said that.... There was modesty in the way he stroked his chin, in the shrug of his shoulders, in the way he crossed and uncrossed his legs when sitting. His habit of looking sideways when speaking was rated as a sign of modesty; so was the trick of stroking his cheroot between thumb and forefinger as he smoked. *Modest—hero*—those words became permanently wedded in my mind during the week that I was reading leaders written with them for an inspiration, the report of sermons preached with them as a text. I cannot hear the one of them to this day without thinking of the other. *Modest hero!* In the estimation of the public "Slant" Allen, whom I had always thought of as the most egotistic man I had ever known, remained that to the—until public estimation ceased to interest him.

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There was one little item of news telegraphed from Townsville which I read with a good deal of grim amusement. The day before his departure Allen was given some kind of a send-off in the Town Hall. As he was riding down the main street on his way to this affair, a man ducked under the rope holding the crowd back at the curb, rushed at the open carriage and aimed a blow at the breast of the hero with a knife. No whit perturbed, the latter had coolly deflected the thrust by striking up the assailant's elbow with his left hand. Then, seizing the ruffian's wrist with his right hand, he had brought it sharply down on the edge of the carriage door, shattering the bones and causing the knife to fall from the relaxed fingers to the pavement. Infuriated by the dastardly attack, the crowd had set upon the would-be assassin, who was only saved from being mauled to death through the interference of none other than Allen himself.

The correspondents were much impressed, not only by the behaviour of the generous-hearted hero in intervening to save the life of the man who had just tried to take his own, but also—and especially—by a curious little circumstance in connection therewith. It was observed, in short, that, while Allen had defended his own body most effectually with his bare hands, as soon as he saw that the man who had attacked him was on the verge of being killed by a bloody-minded mob, quite beyond police control, he whipped out a revolver and used the menace of it to clear a space around the trampled body of his late assailant. The correspondents all thought that was rather fine; indeed, I was inclined to think so myself.

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Allen had flatly refused to lodge a complaint against the man who had tried so desperately to knife him, and even declined to help the police in their attempt to identify the fellow. "Just an old Island affair, the big-hearted hero had explained with a careless laugh, as he turned on his way to receive the Golden Key symbolizing the Freedom of the Queen City of Northern Queensland." That was the way the *Herald* man had it.

At the Police Station the prisoner was recognized at once as a man named Saunders, who had been convicted of a series of bullion robberies in the Kalgoorlie gold fields of Western Australia some years previously. Because of his diabolical practice of throwing red pepper and vitriol to blind his victims, he had gained the sobriquet of "The Squid." He had escaped after serving but eighteen months of his twenty-five-year sentence and made his way across the "Never-Never" to Port Darwin, where all trace of him was lost for the time. He was supposed to have slipped away to the Islands. This was confirmed a few months later, when a boatload of out-bound placer miners were held up and robbed of the fruits of their season's work in the Fly gold fields of New Guinea. Even if one of them, who had once been in Western Australia, had not identified Saunders, the fact that a jar of sulphuric acid had been thrown into the midst of the miners would have connected "The Squid" with the crime beyond a doubt. Australia had but fragmentary record of his later crimes, but he was known to have been mixed up in a number of pearl robberies in and about Thursday Island. He had continued to practise his vitriol-throwing trick (varying it occasionally with a fiendishly original stunt with some native concoction), and was still known as "The Squid." How long he had been lying low in Australia, or why he ventured there, he refused to tell; neither would he offer any explanation of his savage attack upon the hero of the hour. All he had said in the latter connection was: "'Slant' 'll twig why I took a flyer at returning the pig-sticker to him—it was his onct."

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I understood at once that the root of "The Squid's" grudge against Allen struck back to that affair of the old pearl pirate's missionary-reared daughter—a copper-haired, ivory-browed Amazon of a girl who had become one of the most consummate sirens in the pearleries after a three-months trip with "Slant" to Singapore had broken her in. Amazing story the whole thing, from its beginning with the girl's mother—a teacher in the Gospel Propaganda Society's school at Thursday Island who had fallen afoul of one of "The Squid's" tentacles long before his conviction—to its ghastly finish, when the girl herself settled her accumulated account against all mankind with the body and soul of one—a hot-headed lump of a young missionary just out from London.

According to the version current in Kai, Allen had not been greatly to blame in the affair with the temperamental rack of bones and red braids that the girl was when she burst upon the Islands from the Auckland convent; but "The Squid" evidently felt that the man who had set the snowball (not a very apt metaphor, for I never heard the girl compared to anything so frigid) rolling was the one to settle with. I had heard of three or four rather ingeniously thought-out attempts he had made to square the account, all of which, however, had failed as a consequence of Allen's quickness of wit and hand in sudden emergency. The knife figuring in the Townsville attack, it occurred to me, was probably the one the resourceful "Slant" had put through "The Squid's" shoulder at twenty paces a fraction of a second before the latter had delivered a flask of red pepper from his upraised hand.

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I also thought I understood why Allen had bluntly refused to make any explanation of the attack. A veritable Turk in his relations with women, that Island Lothario had also the Turk's dislike for discussing his women in public. When sober, Allen rarely if ever boasted about anything. When very drunk, he would occasionally toot a horn anent his racing wins; and once, when he was all but swamped—awash to the rails with "Three Star"—I had heard him give a maudlin monologue on men he had put away. But I—and no one else, so far as I knew—had ever heard him talk of the girls he had bagged, though the Lord knows there had been enough of them. (The nearest he ever came to it was in that little joke of his I have mentioned—the one about having "a son and a saddle in every island group in the South Pacific,"—and that was only a sort of delicate implication.) His

close-mouthedness about women was one of a number of little things I couldn't help but liking in the rascal.

Since Allen and Saunders would not talk, and since the knife that figured in the affair—a heavy dirk, with a shark's hide handle and the mark of a Lisbon cutlerer on the blade—could not talk, the ever-baffled Townsville correspondents had been able to gather practically nothing about what their journalistic noses told them was a red-hot human interest story. Blocked on that trail, they devoted a lot of space to a discussion of the interesting revelation of the hero's Island nickname. More or less ingenious theories as to "Why 'Slant'?" filled the columns of the papers for a number of days. None of them was within a mile of the mark. One of the correspondents fancied the name had been given Allen because of his "aquilinity, his wiry slenderness, so that he clove the air like a slant of sunbeams as he rode." Another writer was sure the name was suggested by the hero's peculiar crouching seat—the slant of his back as he urged on his mount. They were quite incapable of going beyond Allen's physical characteristics, or of visualizing him save on horseback.

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That added another little item to the list of things I could have enlightened the press and the public on about "Slant" Allen, and, in this particular instance, I wouldn't have minded passing on the facts at once. Indeed, I made rather a hit at a Government House luncheon one day by telling how the nearing hero (he was expected to be landing at Brisbane on the morrow) had qualified for his queer nickname. Jackson, who was responsible for the title, had confided to me how he came to bestow it. There was no story behind it, as some of the papers had hinted. Old "Jack," after having known Allen pretty intimately for a couple of years, came to the conclusion one day that the lanky Sydney-sider was the first man he ever met who persistently and consistently kept him guessing. Given a situation, and the foxy old highwayman had discovered that he could usually tell in advance how any given man would be likely to meet it. It was after he had guessed wrong about Allen some dozens of times, without once guessing right, that Jackson made up his mind that there was no forecasting the "slant of his course from the slant of the breeze." And because something in the mellifluous sound of the word struck pleasantly on the trader's ear, he began applying the name to the man who had inspired it. "No re'l reason for it," he explained; "but it sure do seem to fit 'im like a new copper bottom does a schooner."

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The Governor General's Aide-de-camp, who was something of a follower of the ponies, confirmed Jackson's opinion and the fitness of the sobriquet. Said the gaily uniformed "Gallopers": "The great secret of Allen's astonishing success as a point-to-point rider was his amazing faculty for bringing off the unexpected. Once, at Launceston, I saw him win on a hundred-to-one shot (how he happened to be riding the skate I don't know) by deliberately bolting the course and putting his mount full tilt through a thorn thicket. He was in tenth place, with a mile to go when he did it, and he won the race by a dozen lengths—his own and the waler's hide in tatters.

"Another unexpected win of Allen's," he continued with the wry grin of a man who speaks of dearly bought experience, "was that 'Totalisator' coup of his at Adelaide. His pals got in on the 'Tote' somehow, and—" A warning cough from Lord X— checked the loquacious "Gallopers" tongue in mid-flight, and, with reddening gill, he faded away with: "Sorry, sir, but I forgot it isn't quite—quite the thing to remember that little chapter of Hartley Allen's past. Quite right, really. My mistake. Dead sorry, sir...."

There was no doubt that Allen was going to have a clean-scored slate to begin writing anew on. I was thinking of that, and "Why 'Slant'?", as I walked back to the hotel an hour later. "No forecasting the slant of his course from the slant of the breeze!"... "Faculty for bringing off the unexpected." I hoped that he wasn't going to disappoint me in the matter of bringing things to a showdown on his arrival in Sydney. But no.... My every instinct told me that he would not side-step that. So I made all preparations properly to receive "Slant" Allen, and, on the day of his triumphant home-coming, was waiting for him in my room at the *Australia*, as I have already told.

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CHAPTER XI

A HERO'S HOMECOMING

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It was two o'clock when I began powdering and screening the yellow-hued inner lining of my sea shells. Subconsciously, I must have set three in my mind as the time my caller would come, for it was not until that hour that I ceased my absorbingly interesting labours and looked at my watch. So far as I can recall, I felt no concern one way or the other. I simply noted that the hour had gone by without bringing my expected visitor, and went back to my work.

As a matter of fact, having just made a most gratifying discovery, I was rather glad that the interruption had not come. I had isolated a new and wonderful colour—a dark coppery gold that I had yearned for every time I saw sunlight filtering through brine onto the gently undulating leaves of reef-rooted kelp. Now I had it; and it was not an accident—I could do it again. By standing on

edge a fragment of one of the big bivalves I was experimenting with, I discovered that a sharp blow with the side of my pestle caused the thinnest of chips to fly from its enamel-like lining. These, glassily translucent as they fell, when reduced in the mortar gave a warm, almost glowing powder of exactly the hue I sought. Now if I could only devise a way of mixing it effectively....

So well were my innermost faculties set to respond to that expected knock, that, when it came, not even the mazes of exultant speculation in which my discovery had set my brain—my outward wits—to wandering, prevented instant ganglionic reaction. I didn't have to think. That had all been done an hour before, and the necessary orders given. At the alarm, these had only to be carried out as prearranged. My legs and arms simply obeyed the directions that had been registered for them in some convenient little nerve-knots strung along my spinal column. That carried me, stepping softly, out of the bathroom, through the bedroom, and past the middle of the sitting-room, well beyond the direct line of vision of anyone opening the door from the hall. It was a position from which I must see anyone coming in before he was able to locate me. The rest of the order—carried out simultaneously—had to do with laying the pestle lightly on the bathroom table and thrusting the hand that had been wielding it deep into the right-hand pocket of my old shooting jacket.

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In the second or two that it had taken me to reach the middle of the sitting-room from the bathroom, my wits had relinquished their rainbow dreams and were back on their workaday job. They it was which, now the limit of ganglionic action had been reached, stepped in and took command. It was not from nervousness that I swallowed once and flashed my tongue across my lips before speaking. I only wanted to be sure my voice was as firm as I knew the resolution directing it to be. Speaking sharply, but in a tone not above the ordinary, I said: "Come in, Allen!"

Among the several little surprises in store for me in the course of the next few minutes, not the least came when the man on the other side of the door coughed and cleared his throat as his hand began to turn the knob. I was just telling myself that such palpable symptoms of nervousness were very unlike "Slant" Allen to display, when the door swung inwards and "Slant" Allen stepped into the room. Allen, but not the Allen I had known. Absolutely nerved to readiness as I was, the contrast of this flushed, slightly embarrassed, almost diffident young chap and the ruthless, cold-blooded badman I had made every preparation—physical and mental—to meet came nigh to taking me aback. It was like clambering up out of a companionway, all set for a hurricane sweeping the deck—and finding it calm. For an instant my jaw must have come near to sagging in the amazement that swept over me. I pulled myself together quickly, though, and if Allen noticed my momentary lapse, he gave no sign of it.

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He was the first to speak. "So you were expecting me?" he said, but not as though greatly surprised.

"Ra-ther," I replied with emphasis. "Look at this!" and I pulled out the revolver from my right-hand pocket, released the hair-trigger adjustment, slid the safety-catch, and laid it on the table by the window. I would not have been guilty of such an obvious act of bravado had not my preternaturally acute senses told me that, so far as Allen was concerned at least, there was not going to be any occasion to use the weapon. That feeling persisted even when, as Allen turned slightly in the act of closing the door, I noticed a very perceptible bulge where the flimsy corner of his pongee coat swept his lean right flank. The instant he entered the room I knew that, whatever motives had brought him there, the intention of trying to kill me was not among them. Scarcely less strong were my doubts that I would be able to establish any valid grounds for killing him. My old sneaking liking for certain things about the debonair rascal was not dead.

He grinned appreciatively at the sight of the gun, and then, with a perfunctory "You don't mind, do you?" stepped over and picked it up. I watched him without misgivings, my mind still busy adjusting itself to the new aspect.

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"Was that the toy you used the day you put a bullet hole through the crown of my new hundred-dollar Payta hat?" he asked, fingering the exquisitely turned barrel admiringly. "My own fault, of course. I egged you on by expressing some doubts of your ability to do it from your jacket pocket. This looks like ..."

"Same gun—same jacket—new pocket," I cut in laconically; adding: "I was prepared to repeat the operation just now—with about half a finger less elevation on the muzzle."

It was the real old Allen grin that opened out as the significance of those concluding words sunk home. Not the mocking smirk which had curled his lips so much of the time, but a good, broad, healthy grin that betokened genuine inward enjoyment. The fellow—I had remarked it before—had a really keen and inclusive sense of humour—even inclusive enough to permit his hearty participation in a laugh that was on himself. But that irritating sneer (which had died on his lips as a full realization of Bell's bigness in giving him his choice of going on the *Cora* or remaining at Kai came to him)—that sneer, with the amused contempt for all the world it connoted, did not reappear. Indeed, I am not sure that I ever saw it again. Had there been some inward change in the man to dry up the fount of contempt from which that ironic smirk rose to his lips? I wasn't clear on that point yet: but certainly he had been profoundly shaken—deeply stirred.

Save for that expansive grin of real amusement, Allen made no comment on my implication that I had been waiting to send a bullet—a few inches below the crown of his hat. "Sweetest balanced little piece of light artillery I ever trained," he remarked inconsequentially, holding the revolver at arm's length and squinting along the sights to where his reversed image menaced back from the depths of a full-length mirror. He really admired the little gun—I could see that by the way his fist closed on the checked vulcanite grip, by the caressing touch of his forefinger on the locked trigger.

"Made to order by the S. and W. people for my father," I explained, trying to fall in with his mood as far as I could. If he had come to talk about revolvers—well, who in Australia knew more about them than I did? I continued:

"There's two or three of the Governor's own little gadgets on it, and one or two I had added myself. The one that I like best is that safety-catch.... Stranger can't release it till he's been shown how. You never can tell who may be picking up a gun that's left lying around, you know. You'll have to admit it would be doubly painful for a man to be plunked with his own revolver."

I couldn't for the life of me have refrained from that last little sally, and Allen seemed to enjoy it as much as I did. His broadened grin showed an extra tooth or two at each end as he relaxed his extended arm. "I haven't the least intention of trying to impose that indignity on you," he laughed. "Besides, you needn't fear that the significance of that sag in your left-hand pocket has been lost on me. Had me covered from there all the time, didn't you?"

"As a matter of fact, I had," I replied, beginning to grin myself; "but this confounded sawed-off *Mauser* automatic has an upkick that makes anything like delicate work quite out of the question. I could wing you with it from there, no doubt; but the job wouldn't be a pretty one—nothing that I could take any pride in."

I laid the stubby automatic on the table where the other weapon had been, saying that I always did hate the drag of a gun in my pocket. Then, letting my glance wander to the bulge on Allen's right hip, I added pointedly: "... especially when I can't see any immediate use ahead for it."

Either missing the point of that gentle hint, or else ignoring it completely, Allen went on playing with the little S. & W. Breaking it gently with practised hand, he studied with bent head the smooth, easy action of the automatic ejector. Just a bit more of a bend, and the six cartridges slid noiselessly forth and fell into his hand. He commenced shoving them back, one by one. It was the last, or the next to the last, of the greasy cylinders that slipped from his fingers, struck the floor and rolled under the table. I remarked with admiration the magnificent swell of the flexed saddle muscles as the thin *pongee* tightened over the bent thighs; the narrow hips, the lean, powerful back, the—

"Good God!"

The voice, hoarse with awe and surprise, was mine; but my own mother would hardly have recognized it. For an instant my quaking knees almost let me collapse to the floor; then my faltering inward control stiffened and clapped the brakes on my skidding nerves. By the time Allen, startled by my sudden exclamation, straightened up from his scramble after the still unretrieved cartridge, I had myself fully in hand again. I could not be sure whether his flush and quick breathing were from surprise or the stooping posture in which he had been.

"Did you speak, Whitney?" he asked, after running his eyes over the room and assuring himself that no one had entered. I held his eyes with my own till I was sure my voice was steadied. When I spoke, it was deliberately and evenly. "So Rona came back," I said.

The train of lightning mental processes by which I had arrived at that astonishing conclusion had not much of an edge on Allen's quick comprehension of what had started that train going. For only the briefest instant his eyes were blank with surprise. Then, with a look of complete understanding, he clapped a hand to the side of his neck and began smoothing straight the limp collar of his soft silk shirt. The ghost of what would have been a sheepish grin flickered up and died away, and to his face came something of that half-embarrassed, half-eager look that had sat upon it when he entered the room, as he said: "Yes, Rona has come back. That was one of the things I came to see you about. She—we—the both of us have a bit of a favour to ask of you."

Quite the master of myself now (and of the situation, too, I thought), I came back banteringly with: "If it's that red, white and blue neck of yours you want tied up, I have one of B. and W.'s little First Aid cases in my bag...."

It was the shockingly torn and bruised neck that had been revealed when Allen's collar had slipped back as he stooped to recover the rolling cartridge that set my swift train of thought going. This must have been something of the order of it, but electrically rapid of action: Lacerated neck—old Chinaman at Ponape whose neck was scratched when Rona ran away from him—Rona a specialist in neck-scratching—probably scratched Allen's neck (Question—Was it done in the

course of one of the attacks she was known to have made upon him on the *Cora*?)—Could not have been done on the *Cora*, as they had left her over two weeks ago and these half-healed scratches were not over five or six days old.—Hence, Rona had scratched Allen's neck inside of the last week, and, therefore, could not have drowned herself in Ross Creek a fortnight ago. Conclusion—Rona has come back.

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It had taken not over a second or two for my quickened mind to run that devious course, and Allen's must have covered a good part of it in even less time. The wits of the both of us were keenly on edge. There could not but have been a fine display of sparks had he been in his wonted aggressive mood. But he had not come for fighting, physical or mental, it seemed. He had come to ask a favour—"for the both of us."

"*For the both of us!*" The significance lurking in those words had eluded me for a moment in the sudden adjustment my mind was called upon to make in coming to a realization of the fact that Rona—the lissome lovely Rona—was not dead—that the bright flame of her was unquenched after all. But: "*a favour for the both of us!*" A sudden chill checked and throttled the thrill that had started to flood my being. "*A favour for both of us!*" "So—Bell dead—'Slant' Allen takes the girl in the end!" I said to myself. Then, the echo of Kai's estimate of Allen's track strategy: "An easy starter but a hell of a finisher, 'Slant'. Don't worry about what he's doing when the starting flag drops; watch him head into the stretch." "... *head into the stretch,*" I repeated to myself. "Then what about the finish? Is he already under the wire?"

These thoughts, like the train preceding them, must have flashed through my mind very quickly, for it was Allen's voice replying to my badinage about First Aid for his lacerated neck that brought me out of them.

"The neck's doing very well, thank you," he was saying, "considering that its windpipe was closed for all of sixty seconds, and that most of the hide was clawed off from it all the way round."

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That was really very interesting intelligence, but my mind, deep in another channel, was quite incapable of compassing the significance of it for the moment.

"So you've landed the girl after all," I said woodenly, cursing myself inwardly for the gallery play that had left both guns beyond my reach. For of course he had deliberately put Bell out of the running—shouldered him in the stretch.... Reviving suspicions brought also a realization of what it was up to me to do, now that there was no longer doubt....

"That depends very largely upon you." Allen's quick reply cut short further conjecture.

"Depends upon me?" I interrupted incredulously. "What do you mean by that? Oh, I see. Now that you've put Bell out of the way, perhaps you think that I, as his closest friend, ought to—to distribute his estate, so to speak. If that is the way you figure it, let me tell you that all the distributing you can count on me for will take the form of spraying lead over your worthless hide. You won't mind handing me one of those guns, will you? I don't mind which."

It would have been sheer madness—straight suicide,—that outburst, had Allen been moved by the least desire to get me out of his way. I have never been quite able to make up my mind as to whether it was my instinctive feeling that he had no such desire that prompted me to take more leeway than prudence—nay, the commonest motive of self-preservation—would have dictated; or whether I simply lost my head—let my feelings get away with me. It may well have been the latter, for shocks had been crowding pretty thick, and it was hardly to be expected that the gears of my self-control wouldn't slip a cog now and then under the strain.

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Allen's brows drew together in a black scowl for a brief space, and his eyes contracted and grew hard as steel. Then, slowly, the scowl smoothed out, leaving only a deep flush behind it. It was not replaced by his former look of anxious embarrassment, however. Rather his expression was one of a serious, controlled determination.

"That matter of my putting Captain Bell out of the way, as you choose to phrase it," he said sharply, "is one of the things I called to talk with you about. Since you've stated so plainly what you intend to do about it—assuming it's a fact,—perhaps it would be in order to take it up before—before the other matter. As for these pistols.... Since they're yours, help yourself to both of them." Stepping back from the table, well out of reach of the guns, he added: "But I'd rather appreciate it if you could see your way to refraining from using them until I'm through with what I've got to say; after that ..." (he gave his shoulders an indifferent shrug) "it's up to you. Do what you think best with them. I don't want them—neither one of them."

"Of course not," I sneered. "Quite naturally, you'd prefer to use your own. Quite right, too. Get it out of your hip-pocket while you've got a chance. That's a new chum's way of carrying a gun, anyhow. I'm just a bit surprised to see a practised killer like Mister 'Slant' Allen resorting to it. No chance in the world to make an even break of it with a man with a gun in his side-pocket. Tail of your coat's always getting mixed up with your fingers just when you want to use them."

Allen had braced himself after my first taunt came so near to getting him going, and this second one—galling as it must have been—hardly moved him. Only the faintest flutter of a corrugation between the brows told that another scowl had been repressed. The half-surprised tap he gave to the bulge on his hip—a gesture that would most certainly have drawn a shot from me had I had a gun in hand—suggested that he really had forgotten that there was anything there. I am positive that I could have grabbed a revolver from the table and beaten him to it on the draw. A move so naïve on the part of an old gunman convinced me, even before he had spoken a word, that I had let my feelings send me off at half-cock.

"I haven't a pistol in my hip-pocket," he said evenly. "Never did carry one there, and wouldn't be likely to begin it if I was going gunning for a specialist like you. You'll have to take my word for that. Yes, and since I'm going to ask you to take my word—my unsupported word—for a number of other things, it may be in order to try to make you believe that my word, when I give it to you straight, isn't quite—that it isn't on just the same plane with the rest of my doings."

I was just a bit surprised that he didn't take out whatever it was that created that bulge in his hip-pocket, but hardly reckoned it worth while mentioning. I was fully assured that, far from seeking trouble, it was the one thing he had steadfastly resolved to avoid. That was enough for the moment. He was also about to speak of the one thing I was interested in above all others—the doping of Bell. There was every reason why I should encourage him to speak of that. The matter of Rona would come up in due course. He evidently had something to say about her also.

"Sit down," I said, and extended my cigarette case.

He declined my fat gold-tipped Egyptians, heavily salted with *kief* (another accursed habit I had picked up in Paris), and lighted a slender Sumatra cheroot from his own case. It was not as a move of precaution (I was through with all pretence of that now) that I set the big lounging chair I shoved up for him so that he would sit facing the light. I merely wanted to watch his face. Yet even that was not necessary to satisfy me of his sincerity, at least for the moment. His every tone and gesture was sufficient proof of that.

"In the matter of the value of my word...." Allen was losing no time in getting to the point. "In the time you have spent mooching about the Islands, Whitney, you have doubtless heard me referred to by a good many hard names, such as pirate, murderer, thief, blackguard, jail-bird, crook, and so on without end. You've heard all of these, haven't you?"

"All, and many others," I assented readily. His frankness rather appealed to me just then.

"Quite right. Yet I dare say you didn't happen to hear the name of liar included among the number. If you did, it was used by some cove who had a grudge against me, and didn't care whether he stuck to facts or not. I don't mean that I haven't put over a lot of crooked deals in my time, nor that I haven't come out with a gratuitous falsehood now and then when it suited my purpose. I don't claim to be a George Washington. But I do mean just this: that when I have deliberately assured a man that a thing was, or was not so, I was giving him the dead straight of it to the best of my knowledge. And that's the way I'm speaking when I tell you that I haven't a revolver on me, and that that dope I slipped into Bell's whisky at Kai had nothing to do with his playing out on the voyage. As for the reason of that ..."

Allen frowned slightly and ceased speaking for a few seconds. When he resumed it was not to take up the thread where he had dropped it.

"I don't know whether you'll have difficulty in believing it or not, Whitney," he went on after a half-dozen puffs at his slow-burning cheroot; "but this is the first time since I was packed out of Australia five years ago that I've tried to explain to anyone anything I've said or done—tried to make out a case for myself. That was simply because I didn't give a damn whether anyone approved of it or not. The reason I am doing it now—well, there are two reasons."

He puffed quietly for a few moments again, as though gathering his thoughts. Then he continued: "The first reason is that I owe it to you for the consideration you showed in the matter of not telling them at Kai what an ass I'd made of myself. That was dead white, Whitney. I've got to give it you for that. No one but a thoroughbred could have held his tongue for five minutes about a thing like that, especially seeing you were under no obligations of any kind whatever to me. And, for all I can learn, you've held your tongue for a month. How do I know? Well, I know about Kai (the only ones I care much about anyway) through a letter Jackson got off to me from Samarai—after he'd delivered you over to old 'Choppy' Tancred to bring south. Got it the night before I left Townsville. It wasn't much of a literary effort, but he managed to say a few things that—things that I knew he wouldn't have said if you had given them the facts—all the facts about my departure in the *Cora*. As for Australia.... If you had been dishing up any inside dope in this nest of old women and busybodies, no fear that it wouldn't have come to me before this. I know them. Their tongues will waft gossip from Melbourne to Port Darwin quicker'n the telegraph. My word, don't I know them!"

Quickened puffs registered the bitterness of unpleasant memories as Allen fell silent for a brief

interval. "I'm not fool enough to believe that you kept quiet here out of any regard for me," he went on presently. "That wouldn't be it, for you haven't any. I don't blame you. As a matter of fact, I don't seriously care what Australia thinks anyway. I'm through with them here for good and all. But the Islands are different. The rest of my life, such as it is, is going to be lived there, and the only men I have ever had any great respect for are living there now. So, whatever reason there was behind it, Whitney, I'm deeply grateful to you for not showing me up in Kai. It was dead white of you.—I say it again. I've thought of it a good many times since I got Jack's scrawl, and it was the first thing I intended to speak to you about today. Only, my slate got a bit upset. That little gun of yours deflected my thoughts, and then—but you saw how I got forced off on another tack.

"The other reason" (Allen hurried on as though anxious to avoid hearing any observations I might feel impelled to make on what he had just said) "why I am going to the trouble of trying to clear up your suspicions in the matter of Bell's death is because, if I don't, there will be no hope of your granting the request I have come to make of you—and I can't run any chances of failure with that.

"I didn't want to kill Bell, but—well, it seems that I was equal to playing a damn dirty trick to get him out of the way. I won't need to tell you why. I hate to drag the girl into it, but it can't be helped. She must have bewitched me, I'm afraid. Not intentionally. Quite to the contrary, she never gave me a look. I admired Bell—in spite of his rather standoffish way with me—as much as any man I ever met. That was the only reason I held myself in about the girl as long as I did. I don't know just what would have happened if the schooner hadn't come. Chances are, since I was getting pretty near the limit of my self-control, I would have blown off some other way.

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"The opportunity which I saw to get rid of Bell in the schooner was too great a temptation to be resisted. So far as getting him clean away with the *Cora* was concerned, I have only my own hot-headedness to blame for failing. I was simply asking for trouble when I went prancing down to take over the girl before the schooner even had her hook broken out; and I found it. No more than I deserved, though."

Allen paused while the old humorous grin spread over his face for a moment. Then: "I trust you won't mind if I don't go into details about how I came to put my head into the noose," he said, still grinning. "It wasn't very edifying, you know—from my standpoint, I mean.

"But it would have made no difference even if Bell had got away, while the girl and I remained behind on the island. She wouldn't have had anything to do with me anyway—at any rate, not while she had any reason to hope that Bell was still alive,—and probably she would have knifed me at the first chance for the part I had in getting him away. She would have found the chance, too, let me tell you. That girl creates her own opportunities—there's no holding her once she takes the bit in her teeth. What she wants to do, that thing she does. And what she wants a man to do for her, that thing *he* does. She'll put through what she's after if she has to go through hell for it—and no minding whom she takes with her."

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The queer unnerved look on Allen's face drew my first interruption. "So it's come to that?" was all I said.

"Yes, it's come to that," he assented, the seriousness of his eyes belying the whimsical smile on his lips. "But I'll be returning to that presently.

"About that dope I gave Bell," he went on—"it was absolutely harmless. I bought the stuff in Macassar a few months ago, more out of curiosity than anything else. The old Sultan at Ternate had told me about it, and I was just a bit interested in its effects. It was pretty concentrated, though not a hundredth of the strength of the essence from the same plant that Rona took it for—the deadly poison, which has the same pungent smell. It was a considerable overdose of the stuff I took one night that put me on to the fact that, after a short spell of rather pleasant mental stimulation, it would drug a man to sleep for an hour or two. Hardly any after-effects at all, except a deuce of a thirst for liquor for a few days. I had talked about it with Doc Wyndham two or three times, and am perfectly certain of what I tell you.

"It was the only stuff I could lay hands on that promised to do the trick. You see, I was afraid that if Bell wasn't drugged, he would become suspicious when I failed to return to the schooner, and come to look for me—perhaps even chuck up the stunt entirely. If he hadn't been pretty drunk (much the furthest along I ever saw him—probably on account of the beastly heat—you remember it?) he must have sniffed the half-dozen drops I put in his half-emptied glass of whisky while he was conning that old chart he had on the wall. It was a light dose (I've taken twice that much myself), and though he went under jolly fast—due to his being so far gone with whisky, probably—he was up and taking command of the schooner inside of an hour. And you'll remember how he was going right on ahead getting under way to catch the tide, even though I hadn't returned. The best nerves I ever saw in a man, bar none, that chap had. Will of iron and eyes for nothing but the thing he set out to do. There was a lot in common between him and the girl on that score. No wonder they were so strong for each other."

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Allen fell silent again, stroking his cheroot between thumb and forefinger—the habit the

correspondents had characterized as a sign of modesty. "I hope you won't insist on my telling any more about the voyage than I have to in connection with Bell's death," he said at last. "I hate to speak of it at all. The thing is almost as much of a nightmare in memory as it was in fact. You saw how things were on the schooner when we got away. Well, just picture them getting worse and worse day by day for—how long was it?—something over a week, I believe, but it seemed a lifetime. The whisky I kept bracing up with made it a lot easier for me to stand—kept me from going crazy and jumping overboard, as so many of the niggers did. But Bell—he didn't have the whisky—wouldn't have it. Yes, he kept up that mad joke of his about being a 'soba skippa' to the end. That was what killed him—just that, and nothing else. It was beyond a being of flesh and blood to do what he set himself out to do—and live. He tried to (my God, how he tried!)—and died.

"I never felt such pity for any living thing, unless it was old Recoil, my first steeplechaser, when he lived for twenty-four hours after staving in his chest against a stone wall. I was hardly more than a kid then. I lay in the straw of his box all that time with his battered, bleeding frame, and swore I'd kill the first man that tried to shoot him. Then I pulled myself together and did the humane job myself. But I couldn't shoot Bell, and he wouldn't shoot himself. That would have been the easy way out (since he had steeled his will against taking another drink), but he wouldn't follow that short-cut either. Said he was—how did he put it?—'goin' to ride the wata wagon all the way to po't, an' then fall off good and plenty.' Some Yankee expression about keeping strict teetotal, wasn't it?

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"It got to me worse than the crazy niggers—watching the agony of his mind and body contorting the muscles of his face, as he tried to hide what he was going through. The girl was a good deal of help to him for the first day or two, and he admitted that he was glad she had decided to join his 'li'l pa'ty at the last minnit.' But even she failed to create a diversion as his cravings for whisky became more and more intense, and he seemed to try to avoid her as much as he could toward the last—probably because he couldn't hide his suffering from her. I saw that it was killing him—that he would never last out the voyage on the course he was heading,—and tried hard to make him see that it was only reasonable to allow himself at least enough whisky to ease off the tension on his breaking nerves. But he wouldn't listen to it.

"'I gave it out official,' he said, 'that I was goin' to keep soba on my next ship, if I eva got one. An' soba's the wo'd.' To put an end to the matter, he turned his back on me and went for'ard among the niggers.

"After that I tried to explain to Rona (I had managed to get on speaking terms with her as soon as she became satisfied that Bell had not been poisoned) how things stood, in the hope that she would fall in with a plan I had for giving him small doses of whisky with the coffee he had taken to drinking with increasing frequency as the craving for liquor grew on him. She flew into a temper at once, however. Said that, far from helping me to give him whisky on the quiet, she would taste every cup of coffee after it was poured for him in the galley, and then take it to him herself. She ended by saying that if I tried that trick she would knife me with her own hands: in fact, rather regretted that she hadn't done it when she had a chance at Kai. I couldn't for the life of me see why the girl should take that attitude, when it was so plain that whisky was the only thing that would pull Bell through; but take it she did, and that was the end of it, at least as far as co-operation from her was concerned, I mean. That simply left it up to me to watch my chances and do the best I could on my own.

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"Bell had insisted on standing watch-and-watch with me from the first, usually, in his own watch, taking the wheel himself, probably because it gave him something to occupy his mind—and his hands. (He was beginning to tear the skin of the palms of his hands from clenching and unclenching his fingers.) What broke him finally was discovering that he was no longer fit for a trick at the wheel. His eyes went bad rapidly under the strain, and it was not long before he could not distinguish the readings on the compass card. He told me about it at once, but was confident he could manage to hold a course by the stars. This went on all right as long as it was clear. But one night, when it was squally and overcast, he lost the 'Cross' (which had been giving him a shifting but fairly approximate bearing), and fell back on trying to keep her a couple of points off the wind. This would have done all right if the Trade had held from the southeast. But it hauled up to east in a squall, and Bell, following it around by the 'feel' of it on his face, had the schooner all but onto the Baluka Reef and shoal at daybreak. I let him extricate himself to save his feelings; but he knew that both the Bo'sun and I had twigged what had happened, and why, and it must have been the realization of the fact that he had become quite useless in navigating the ship that hastened the final collapse.

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"He came on the following night for his watch—the 'graveyard,' from midnight to four in the morning,—but made no objection when I stuck on at the helm. We were closing the tangle of the Barrier Reef by then, you see, and it wouldn't have done to trust the wheel to a nigger. In fact, when I went on at eight the previous evening, it was practically the beginning of the thirty-six-hour trick at the wheel that ended when we anchored off Townsville.

"When Bell let me stay on at the wheel at midnight, he showed the first voluntary signs of giving in, not in the matter of closing his lips to whisky—nothing could affect his decision on that score,—but to the other alternative. I mean that he gave up hope of holding on till he had brought his ship to port—gave up hope of living to the end of the voyage. Up to that time he had always

tried to pass the whole thing off as a sort of a joke, running on with patter like that about the 'wata wagon.' But he dropped all that from the moment I refused to give way to him at the wheel.

"'Youah quite right, Allen,' he said in a weary sort of voice, and went over and sat down on the rail of the cockpit. His voice was hollower still when he spoke again, maybe ten minutes later. 'Allen,' he croaked, 'I've got a hunch I'm not up to pullin' my weight in this heah schoona any longa. I'm all in—no mo'n so much ballast. Just a dead drag.'

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"I didn't reply to that. I was too much awed—yes, awed—even to urge him again to take the drink I knew would be the saving of his mind—perhaps his life. He didn't speak again till after I roused him to prevent the main boom giving him a crack on the head as I put her about. (We were working through a nasty patch of broken coral—the outskirts of the Barrier—but scant seaway and fluky airs.) As he settled back on the weather rail of the cockpit he said, speaking very slow as though hard put to control his voice: 'Allen, I make it about two hundred miles to Townsville by youah noon position. Say thirty-six to forty hours' sailin', with the wind holdin' up. Do you reckon you an' Ranga—good man, Ranga—do you reckon you an' he ah up to pullin' it off alone? I'm—damn it all, I'm seem' hell-west-an'-crooked just as we hit the dirty navigatin' Allen, take my wud fo' it, this soba skippa stunt ain't all it's cracked up to be—not by a long shot. I'd rather ha' had the plague by a damn sight, Allen.'

"He wouldn't mention the other alternative—whisky—even then, and I simply didn't have the nerve to take advantage of the opening and suggest it to him outright. But I did what I thought was the best thing under the circumstances—waited for a stretch of open sailing, gave the wheel to a nigger, fished up a convenient bottle of whisky, and set it down just behind him against the cockpit rail. I didn't speak even then—just pressed his shoulder, tilted the neck of the bottle against his hand where it clutched the rail, and went back to the wheel.

"I had the feeling (and I still have) that I was doing the decent and humane thing, just as I did when I put old Recoil out of his misery; though the cases aren't quite parallel of course. But I knew it would force a crisis one way or the other, and that was what, in all sincerity, I thought was the kindest thing to do. If Bell drank (though it well might be that he would go on drinking until he fell in a stupor), it would surely save his life. What if he did get dead drunk? He wouldn't be any more useless in navigating the schooner than he was already. On the other hand, if he still refused to drink, the heightened temptation of the handy bottle would increase the tension and hasten the collapse of mind and body, which was now but a matter of a few hours at the outside. I think you'll agree with me, Whitney, that I did the kindest thing possible under the circumstances."

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"I wouldn't venture an opinion on that offhand," I temporized; "but, in any event, it's the thing I would undoubtedly have done myself had I been in your place. There's no question in my mind on that point at least."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he said warmly; "especially as there was one person—a rather important person to me—who didn't approve of my action.

"Bell's only acknowledgment of what I had done," Allen went on, "was a sort of disjointed muttering. 'Many thanks, ol' man. Nothin' doin'. Good intentions. Soba skippa to the fareyewell!' (I think that was the word). He shoved the bottle along out of easy reach, but didn't even make a bluff at throwing it over the side. I have an idea that the reason for his restraint on that score was due to the fact that he remembered I had told him that the supply was running low (I had been putting an awful crimp in it), and didn't want to deprive me of it. He was quite considerate enough to think of that sort of a thing, even with his senses toppling, as they must have been from the beginning of the watch.

"It was a moonless night, and heavily overcast, so that I could just make out the blur of Bell's head and shoulders against the deckhouse where he sat hunched up on the port rail of the cockpit. But there was a crack opening up in the beastly binnacle, and through it an inch-wide welt of light slashed diagonally across his tortured face. One eye, the side of his nose and half of his mouth were sharply lighted up. The rest was a shadowy blank. The vivid gash of light, like a magnet, kept drawing my gaze away from the compass. That one eye, wide and staring, never blinked in the bright beam. The nostril, distending and contracting jerkily, was red, like that of a horse that has been galloped to the point of death. The teeth looked to be clenched through the lower lip, and blood was trickling over the lighted streak of clean-shaven chin. Not all his sufferings had made him miss his morning shave. Almost like a rite with him, that was."

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"Holdover from his Naval life," I suggested hastily, fearful less he should be tempted to digress upon irrelevant details.

"I don't know just when it was that the end came," Allen resumed. "I was expecting every moment that he would jump up and begin his restless paces, as he had done on previous nights. But at six bells his position was still unchanged, and to blot out that beastly slash of light across his drawn face I threw a piece of canvas over the top and back of the binnacle, so that the beam from the crack was cut off. Just as the morning watch was called a nasty bit of a squall was threatening to bore in and give us a raking, though it finally passed astern of us and spun off down to leeward.

My hands were full for some minutes preparing against the imminent onslaught, and it was not until the menace was past and I had taken over the wheel from Ranga (who had relieved me when I went for'ard to have a squint ahead for myself), that it struck me that Bell had been paying no attention whatever to all that had been going on—didn't appear to have shifted at all, in fact.

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"I was just going to call to him to suggest that he go below and turn in for a spell, when the nigger on the lookout in the bows sung out 'breaka—dead ahead!' It was a near thing, but I managed to sheer off and avoid grounding on a patch of barely submerged coral, just becoming visible in the shimmer of the false dawn. As I knew that the main wall of the Great Barrier must be close at hand to lee, I was chary of letting her fall off very far in that direction. I had just ordered a man to stand-by to heave the lead at the first sign of shoaling water on the starboard bow, when the tail of my eye caught a glimpse of Rona stepping out on deck from the cabin companion way. (We had sulphured out the Agent's cabin and made it fairly comfortable for her use. It was out of the question her sleeping on deck, on account of the incessant squalls.) She headed straight for Bell, who was still hunched up on the weather rail of the cockpit, the outlines of his face just beginning to show in the ashy light of early morning.

"As her hand touched his shoulder she let out a shrill squeal and plumped down on her knees beside him. In doing this she must have bumped the whisky bottle, which had been rolling back and forth on the deck with the lurches of the schooner. It was with more of a hiss than a scream that she grabbed it up and flung it straight for my head. Oh, I should hardly say *straight*," Allen corrected himself, "for Rona evidently can't throw any better than the run of her white sisters. The bottle smashed against the wheel, deluged the cockpit with broken glass and one of my last half-dozen quarts of whisky. If I had not been pretty sure that Bell was already dead, the fact that the smell of the old familiar juice welling up from the deck didn't bring a twitch to his nostrils would have been enough to drive it home to me.

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"Without waiting to observe the effects of her throw, Rona launched herself right on after the bottle—only a shade better aimed. Unluckily, the cross-cut she took to my throat carried her right over the wheel—and at the very instant that the appearance of a second line of foam down to leeward confirmed my fears about our desperately scant working room. The instinctive lifting of my right arm to block the girl's grab at my face came near to bringing disaster. I fended the clutch from my throat all right, but the weight of her body falling across the wheel tore the spoke from my left hand and threw the schooner up into the wind.

"Ranga's quick presence of mind was all that saved the situation. Jumping into the cockpit regardless of the broken glass cutting his bare feet, he grabbed the girl about the waist, disentangled her flying arms and legs from the wheel, and smothered her struggles against his side. I threw the wheel back an instant before she jibed, and then, for two or three seconds, things hung in the balance. Finally, very slowly, she filled away on the port tack again, and the immediate danger was over. Had the schooner gone about, nothing could have saved her from running onto the reef. There was not enough room left in which to wear her round.

"Bell must have given up the fight along toward the end of the 'graveyard' watch. I heard him muttering off and on for a while, but the last coherent words that came to my ears were, not unfitly: 'Nothin' doin'. Soba skipka to a fareyewell.'

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"That rub with the reef was the nearest squeak we had—though I can't say that I remember much about the navigation that took us through the Barrier and on to Townsville. Drunken man's luck doubtless. I was sure drunk, and no mistake, though both my legs and my head were grinding right along to the finish—only ceased functioning when there was nothing more to do.

"The girl—when Ranga let her go again—went back and settled down by Bell's body. Wouldn't let anyone come near it. Only left it on the two or three further occasions that she took to fly at my throat when she thought I wasn't looking. I didn't want to lock her up (it was inviting the plague to force her to stay 'tween decks for too long), but managed to get around the difficulty finally by having one of the crew stand-by to push in and absorb the impact whenever she made a break in my direction. She gave up trying after that. Seemed to loathe the touch of a nigger. But with Ranga it was different. She grew quiet as soon as he picked her up—something like a kid with its nurse.

"The big fellow was wonderful, by the way. Always doing the right thing without waiting for an order, always cool and quiet, always good-natured. Spent his spare time sitting on the taffrail and peeping to the sea-gulls on a queer little Malay flute he always carried in his belt—some kind of hollow stem, full of little wooden balls that gave a weird sort of ripple to the notes. First and last, Ranga was the man to whom the bulk of the credit was due for taking the schooner through. I still feel a bit guilty that I didn't divide the whisky with him. But perhaps it was best to stow it where I did.... You never know how a yellow man or a black man will react to the stuff. It's hard enough guessing with a white man sometimes."

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Allen smiled whimsically as he lighted a fresh cheroot. He was through with the worst of the story and seemed a good deal relieved. It was plain enough that he spoke the truth when he said that the memory of it was still a nightmare, and that he hated to have to speak of it. He said a few words more in explanation of why he had not buried Bell at sea, which appeared to have been

mainly because he was afraid the girl would have followed the body over the side. He had no misgivings about keeping it aboard, he said, as he was quite certain that it carried no plague infection. He mentioned incidentally, that they had found a lot of stick brimstone among the stores, and that the thorough smudging they gave the after quarters with this was probably responsible for the fact that the plague had not reappeared there. It had been impossible to devise a way to disinfect the big 'midships hold where the labour recruits were housed, on account of the more or less crazy condition of all of the niggers.

Allen looked at his watch, but went on with his story as though in no particular hurry. "You're doubtless impatient to hear about the girl's turning up again," he said. "You've already heard of the rather remarkable escape she made from the Quarantine Station—Butler, one of the doctors, mentioned that he told you about it on your steamer. At the Station it was the theory that the girl had broken out so that she could kill herself on Bell's grave—that she was more or less off her head anyhow. That was a mistake, though a natural one. She had just one thing in view when she clambered out of the mad cell and over the wall: that was to lie low until I came out and then, watching her chance, try to make a better job of polishing me off than she had done on the schooner. She realized that they were on their guard against her at the Station, and that she might be kept under restraint indefinitely, or at least until I was out and gone beyond her reach.

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"Her mind was working well enough to make her reckon that that Chinese shawl (which everyone would have noted) was the one garment she had that could not fail to be recognized. So—it must have been something of a wrench for her—she left it on the bank of Ross Creek and went to seek a hiding place.

"Luck was with her in the search. Locating the native quarter after wandering for a while, she circulated around until she came upon the signs—in Hindustani, I fancy—in front of the shack of an old East Indian drug seller and money changer. How she got around him I don't know; but at any rate she persuaded him to keep her there until I was out of quarantine. She even contrived to get the old rascal to spy out the refuge I had flown to—a bungalow just out of town, where I figured I would be a bit quieter than at the hotel. Then she took a hand in the game herself.

"It was on the second night after I came out, and I had turned in early. I had taken no precautions of any kind against attack. Never have bothered much with that kind of thing. The doors and windows were wide open. I had a servant—a Chino,—but he was sleeping in his own hut in the rear of the grounds.

"It was the window she came in by, though she could just as well have used the door. I was more than half awake (hadn't been sleeping very well any of the time since my two-day snooze after landing from the schooner), lying on my back under the mosquito net, with no covers over me. It was probably her intention to slip up quietly and get her hands under the net before disturbing me. She had no knife, by the way. They had taken that little Malay dagger away after she had tried to stick me at the Quarantine Station. As she would have had no difficulty in raising another through old Ratu Lal had she wanted it, I take it that she felt confident enough of doing the job with her hands. No idle dream that, either; you know something of the strength of them.

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"I sat up in bed in a dazed sort of way as her shadow darkened the window. (There was a bit of a moon, shining on that side of the house.) It must have been my movement under the netting that made her change her plan. Very naturally, she counted on my shooting first and asking questions afterwards. It was the rational and proper thing to do, and it is probably what I would have done had my pistol been handy. But, not dreaming of an attack (this was the day before old 'Squid' Saunders turned up and took a jab at me), my gun was in my coat pocket. I have always carried it there—when I had a coat on—ever since I saw your little exhibition of pocket gunnery at Kai," he added with a humorous smile.

"As I was saying, the stir I made under the mosquito net forced the girl to speed up her schedule a bit. You saw the jump she made the time she caught up the schooner at Kai. Well, it must have been about that same kind of a spring over again. She never touched the floor between the low window ledge and my bed. Landed right on my chest, bringing down the net under her weight, and went to my throat with an instinct as sure as that of a fighting bulldog. She was choking me right through the net before I really knew what had happened.

"Of course, taking it for granted that she was dead, I didn't have the ghost of an idea it was Rona who was sprawling on my chest and shutting off my wind with steel fingers that seemed closing in to meet at the base of my brain. I didn't even know that it was a woman. In fact, the deadly pressure of that grip argued all the other way—that I was being throttled by a man, and a deucedly powerful one at that. If I did any speculating at all, I probably figured it as some kind of a thieving stunt. But a man fighting for his life—and that is precisely what I was doing—doesn't waste much time in conjecture. My immediate problem was a simple one. If that grip wasn't broken inside of a minute, it might stay there forever as far as my shaking it off was concerned. I had been choked before, and also done a bit of choking on my own account; so I knew to within a few seconds how long it is before the head of a man whose wind is shut off begins to reel.

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"Still quite the master of myself, I tried on, very deliberately, the best thing I knew for

breaking a strangle grip—that simple little *jujutsu* trick of thrusting your arms between those of the man choking you, and then throwing back your shoulders and expanding your chest. Stiffening the chest muscles, I mean—of course you can't expand it with air while your windpipe is closed. That never fails if you are both on your feet, and will sometimes work even when you are on your back. Here the tangle of the net blocked the up-thrust of my arms, and I failed to get enough leverage to break the hold on my neck.

"Then I tried my next best bet—that of turning over and over and sort of unwinding the grip on your throat. I was a shade less confident now. Time was getting short. I did some jolly active wriggling in trying to work along far enough to roll over the side of the bed, but again it was the net that defeated my effort. I was getting a good deal peeved with that bally canopy; and yet, in the end, it was the very thing that got me clear.

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"Nine times out of ten a man being held down and choked by another man—that is, if the choker knows his job—has no chance of doubling up in a ball and kicking his assailant off by straightening out his legs. If the man choking you flattens his body closely enough against yours, you simply haven't the room to start doubling your knees. My assailant knew his business right enough, but the folds of the net (some of the corners of which were still clinging to its frame), prevented his flattening in close to my legs. The sag of the woven bamboo bed springs also gave me a few inches of leeway.

"There was nothing deliberate or confident in the jerk with which I began drawing my knees up against my chest. I had already failed twice with what I rated as decidedly better bets than that one, and the time limit was nearly up. My head was already beginning to swim. It was neck or nothing this heat. The sheer desperation of my effort won out for it. The push of my knees against the chest of the incubus did not lift it quite enough to break its hold, but it did enable me to squirm my right foot up and get it firmly planted in the pit of the creature's stomach. Then, with all the strength left in me, I straightened out in a terrific kicking push.

"In reverse, the flight of the muscular body that had been holding me down must have been fully equal to that opening jump from the window. Indeed, I am almost sure that it hit the further wall before it did the floor. The hold on my neck was the only point of contact that did not break readily, and there the result was—as you saw a moment ago. As those steel-claw fingers would not give an inch, they simply ripped out through the flesh. I can consider myself dead lucky that they didn't hook onto my windpipe or jugular. Both of them would have come right along with all the flesh and hide those unrelaxing talons took with them.

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"It didn't occur to me for a few moments that I might have knocked out my assailant, and I was a good deal surprised when he neither returned to the attack nor made any break to escape. The laboured gasping in the darkness on the other side of the room quickly told me the reason, however. I had knocked the wind out of him with my mighty kick. I knew that spasmodic gasping for air meant that I wasn't going to be greatly troubled for a minute or two at least, so took my time about fumbling for my automatic and lighting the lamp.

"A bit dazzled by the light for a moment, I took the lanky yellow figure huddled up against the wall to be a Hindu coolie. The thin legs and arms were like those of the East Indian indentured labourers of the sugar plantations, and the two or three yards of white cloth trailing off along the floor suggested a Madrassi waist and shoulder rag. Presently—for that one rumpled wrapping was all she had worn—I saw that it was a woman; and then—but as a matter of fact I think that the girl spoke before I recognized her face.

"'Slant,'" she piped out in that bird-like chirrup of hers; "'Slant," I guess I make a meestake. 'Scuse me, ple-ese, "Slant."'

"Could you beat that for cheek? Trying to tear a man's throat out one minute, and asking him to 'ple-ese 'scuse' her for it the next. And what do you think of a man who would tumble for it, especially after the way she had made me jump through and roll over at Kai? But that's Rona; yes, and that's me. I tumbled, and—I may as well admit it—I am still tumbling.

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"Having the girl turn up like that—after I had been thinking of her as dead for a week or two—didn't give me quite the shock it would have if that voice had come out of the darkness without my seeing her first. It was a deuce of a surprise even as it was; but, when all is said and done, a pleasant one, in spite of the rather startling way she chose to—to re-materialize. I was glad to find that she was alive, whether it meant anything more to me than that or not.

"We didn't talk much that night—there wasn't much talk left in either of us as a matter of fact. Rona continued to croak and hiccup, while my own swollen vocal chords smothered every other word I tried to get past them. I managed to assure Rona that I quite understood her feelings against me (though I didn't entirely, and don't yet), and begged her to give me a chance to explain the way Bell had come to his finish. She admitted that she had begun to believe that she might have been hasty in her decision and action, and said she would be glad to hear what I had to say. She told me where she was in hiding and asked me to come there in the morning; also to do what I could to square her with the quarantine authorities for breaking out of the Station ahead of time,

and on no account to let anything happen to old Ratu Lal for giving her refuge. She seemed to take it as a matter of course that I would do these things. You'd have thought I was some sort of a *mayordomo* taking orders.

"It was not very late and, luckily, the bungalow (which Ralston had occupied himself at times) had a telephone. I ordered a closed carriage sent out, and also got the Quarantine Station and arranged for one of the doctors—Butler, the chap you talked with on the steamer—to come to the landing and wait for me to pick him up. They had been very decent to me at the Station, and I wanted to avoid having to explain things to a strange doctor.

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"Rona tied my neck up for me—very handily, too—and when the carriage came I bundled her in and gave the driver the direction which carried him along the edge of the 'foreign quarter.' I dropped her at a corner not far from Ratu Lal's joint, promising to look in on her early the next morning. Butler was waiting for me at the landing when I got there, and I told him about Rona's coming to life, and its sequel, as we drove back to the bungalow. After he had dressed my neck I told him what I wanted him to try to do for me and sent him back to the landing, where his boat had hung on for him.

"Rona was looking a bit white about the gills when I called the next morning, and complained that her stomach 'got mad' every time she sent food down to it. I told her that she still had the best of me, as I didn't expect to be able to get any food down to my stomach for a couple of days yet. That seemed rather to buck her up, and she had a good laugh over it. Then we got down to business, and had an hour's yarn in the drug-scented quiet of old Ratu Lal's back room.

"As my Malay is fairly good, we talked without difficulty. I told her more or less what I have just told you about Bell and why I had given him the whisky. She said, rather grudgingly, that she thought she could understand why I had done as I did. Then I said a few things about—well, about my personal feelings toward her. Finally, I asked her point-blank if she would go back to the Islands with me. Told her she could live anywhere she wanted, and in any way that she wanted. I didn't say that I was willing to marry her, because (since, if she has any religion at all, it's Hindu or Mohammedan) I felt that would make no difference to her one way or the other.

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"Am I really willing to marry her?" (It was the lift of my eyebrows that suggested the query to Allen, for I did not speak.) "Well, yes, I think I am, if she made that a condition. But I don't think the question is one likely to arise.

"The girl took in the whole thing without giving away by word or look how it impressed her. When I had finished, she coolly suggested that I run along and square matters up with the quarantine people about her and Ratu Lal. She added that she would be obliged if I'd look up her Chinese shawl for her. She also started to speak about her dagger, but changed her mind and said to let that go for the present. As for what I'd been telling her.... Well, perhaps if I could see my way to dropping in again toward evening she might have an answer for me. High and haughty as a Sultana, she was, sitting cross-legged on a mat and pulling away at one of Ratu Lal's big 'hubble-bubbles.'

"I went to the Quarantine Station straightaway, and, in spite of the red tape tangling up a thing of that kind, managed to get them to agree to discharging the girl without anything more than a perfunctory call from a doctor to certify her free of plague. That done, the rest was easy. I told the story—omitting, of course, the girl's attack upon me—at the Police Station, and they agreed not to arrest Ratu Lal as long as the quarantine authorities were satisfied and lodged no complaint against him. They said they were only too glad of a chance to do me a favour. Then I got them to let me have the shawl, and begged them to keep the news of the girl's turning up quiet as long as they could.

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"'Squid' Saunders's little diversion that afternoon gave the pressmen something else to take up their minds, and the matter of the missing girl was forgotten, at least for the remainder of my time in Townsville. The fact that she did not drown herself must have leaked out since, but they probably haven't been enough interested in it—now that the hunt has followed me here—to wire it south.

"When I broke away from the official reception committee and dropped in on Rona at the end of the afternoon—impatient enough, I can tell you—she gave no sign that the matter I had come for an answer about was in her mind at all. She grabbed the Chinese shawl out of my hand with a yelp of delight, but almost dissolved in tears when she saw how the embroidery had been smudged and ruffled in her scrambles over trees and walls and ditches the night she escaped from the Quarantine Station. You may remember that it was a big peacock that was embroidered on the shawl—pretty nearly life-size—rather a fine piece of work, it always struck me. Well, ignoring me entirely, she spread that old peacock out over her breast—something in the way she used to display it when she wore the shawl in Kai—and began chirping and crooning and muttering to it like a dove to its nestlings. She would nuzzle into the plumage, smoothing the ruffled feathers with her lips, just like she was the old peacock preening himself. Every little bit of torn floss she would try to put back where it came from.

"Stiff with funk, I sat quiet until she had gone all over the moulting old bird, but when she started in working down from his crest again, I thought it was time to remind her of my presence. I had never sat around waiting on anybody like that before, Whitney; even my old nurse couldn't make me do it. So I cut in and told her that I had arranged things at the Quarantine Station—that she wouldn't need to go there again; also that old Ratu Lal need not worry any longer about a visit from the Police. Incidentally, I mentioned that I was making him a present of ten pounds to show my appreciation of his consideration in not claiming the reward offered for her.

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"She took no notice of anything I said. Just went on crooning and preening and stroking down the ruffled feathers, giving a little sob every now and then as she came to a place where they were badly mussed up. Then I went off on another tack, saying that I knew of a shop in the town that carried Chinese embroideries, and suggesting it was possible a skilled needle-worker might be found there competent to undertake the restoration of the bird's damaged plumage. She deigned to cock up an ear to listen to that, but her only reply was a disconsolate shake of the head, as though anything like proper restoration was a matter beyond all hope.

"That quieted me for a while, but after twirling my thumbs through ten or fifteen minutes more nuzzling and crooning, my patience gave out. I jumped up to the accompaniment of a good lively string of oaths, and asked her point-blank if she had made up her mind about the matter we had been speaking of in the morning. She broke into a ripple of smiles at that, and cooed sweetly: 'Ye-es, I think 'bout that plenty, "Slant.'" Then she slipped into voluble Malay and laid down a perfectly simple and direct proposal, on the fulfilment of the conditions of which she was willing to return to the Islands with me. It was not what I had expected,—not what anyone would have dreamed of expecting under the circumstances; yet ridiculously easy of fulfilment in the event a certain third party fell in with the idea. That third party is you, Whitney. That's the main thing I have come to see you about. Everything is up to you now. Perhaps that will make it easier for you to understand why I rattled on for an hour or more in the hope of putting myself right with you about Bell. I've never tried to justify myself with any living man before, and probably will never do it again. But it had to be done this time, Whitney, and I hope I've been successful."

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My nod might have meant almost anything, but I was not unwilling that Allen should interpret it in his favour. As a matter of fact, he had convinced me wholly that—after the abortive attempt at drugging in Kai—he had played straight with Bell. As for Rona—well, if he was also ready to play straight with her (and he had just about convinced me on that point, too), what was it to me? If she could forget Bell so easily, it was her own affair. If Allen were trying to carry her off against her will—that would be a different matter of course. But he was not. Plainly it was the girl herself who held the whip hand. The whole thing was a bit obscure yet, but what Allen had still to say might do something to clear it up. Without committing myself by more than that one nod, I waited for him to go on.

CHAPTER XII

A BAD MAN'S PLEA

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THE expression of nervous anxiety I had noticed several times since he came was on Allen's face again as he started to speak. "It's a queer enough proposition," he began. "You see, it's like ..." He hesitated, stopped, got up and walked to the window, where he stood for a few moments, frowning and biting the end of his cheroot. Suddenly he turned to me with: "Whitney, what do you say to a bit of a turn in the fresh air? I've been talking more than I'm used to, and this stuffy room of yours is getting on my nerves. We might walk out through the gardens to the Domain. I can tell you all that I have to tell out there."

I did not need to look at my watch to know that it was getting on toward five o'clock. Only the absorbing interest of Allen's narrative had prevented my becoming conscious of that fact before. My own nerves were less under control now, and the inevitable end-of-the-afternoon restlessness was surging strong upon me. But I was anxious to hear Allen out, and no reason occurred to me why it should not be in the open air. If there was any decision to be arrived at, that could be made on the morrow, or whenever I felt up to it.

"Right-o, Allen," I cried; "I'll be glad to get out myself. I shall want to be back in about half an hour though."

I was grateful for his restraint in not greeting that last with an indulgent smile, for I knew that he fully understood what it was that focussed my interest upon five o'clock. It was very evident that the man had retained all the finer instincts of a gentleman, little opportunity that he had had to exercise them in the last five years.

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I got my hat and stick, and, feeling sure I would have no use for them, put both the revolver and the automatic pistol into the drawer of the table upon which they had been lying. I was rather glad of the chance to show Allen that I had confidence in him to that extent anyhow.

Anxious to avoid recognition, Allen pulled on a pair of dark spectacles and drew the brim of his Panama low down over his forehead. Turning out of crowded Pitt Street, he removed the spectacles, and as we passed the entrance of the Botanical Gardens took off his hat and fanned his brow with it as he walked. He had not spoken so far, but with the deep breath he inhaled as he felt the springy turf underfoot his restraint passed from him.

"It's a great relief to get clear of those damn walls and pavements," he said fervently, opening his coat to let the cool breath from the Bay strike his chest. "I can't get used to them again. I've been free of them too long now. But I'm finished with them for good, I hope." Then, as we came out upon a broad path: "Bear away to the left, if you don't mind. I want to take a squint at that bunch of palms as we pass."

As we came abreast of a big bed packed with a riot of dense tropical growths, he pulled up and appeared to be searching for something. "Ah, there she is!" he ejaculated presently, and pushed in close to a queer little dwarf palm, which straggled drunkenly on a half-dozen spindling legs set something like those of a camera tripod. Pulling up the stamped metal marker, he gave it a quick glance and then handed it to me with a grin. "The fruits of my first and only dip into botanical research," he remarked. "What do you think of it?"

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"*Pandanus Bensoni Allensis*," I read in large letters, and below: "Habitat: Portuguese Timor. Very rare. The only other catalogued specimen is in the Royal Dutch Gardens at Buitenzorg, Java."

"So that *Allensis* stands for you, does it?" I said, not a little impressed, as I handed him back the metal disc. Then added: "And racing and polo cups weren't the only objects you collected."

"The merest accident," he replied. "I had always liked plants and flowers, ever since my nurse used to wheel me down this very walk in my pram. I suppose that gave me an interest in the tropical growths of the Islands, after they packed me off there. I thought this little fellow looked a bit on the unusual when I chanced upon it one morning in a low valley back of Deli; so I dug it up and shipped it to Sydney direct on the China Line steamer, which touches in there. It turned out to be a real find. Benson of Kew Gardens, the great authority on tropical palms, described it, and tacked my name on as the discoverer. The old cove's letter contained the only kind words addressed to me from the outside world in the last five years. And now look at them ..."

I had come to expect that note of bitterness in Allen's voice every time he spoke of the past, and especially of his "transportation" to the Islands. He evidently thought that he had been badly treated; too badly for even the present wave of frantic adulation to make atonement. He was through with it for good. Several little things he had let drop indicated that.

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The incident of the palm was interesting in throwing an illuminative crosslight on the gentler human side of a man who had generally been rated as without either gentleness or humanity. So, also, was the very evident appeal to Allen's sense of natural beauty made by the matchless panorama of the Bay as it unfolded to us from the far end of the point.

We had skirted the Naval anchorage of Farm Cove, picked our way along the path below the ledges where benighted "sundowners" were wont to boil their "billys" and spread their "blueys" in the shallow wave-worn caves, and climbed up through the gums to the rocky lookout on the outermost tip of the sharply-jutting point. The clocks in the town behind us began chiming the quarters heralding the hour of five, and presently, on the first of the heavier strokes, the flotilla of trans-bay ferry-boats slid from their slips at the inner curve of the horseshoe of the Circular Quay and "fanned" out on their divergent courses to points on the opposite side of Port Jackson.

"That sight has never failed to quicken my pulses from the time I used to wait and watch for it as a kid down to today," Allen said with almost a thrill in his voice. "It is the one picture that has remained clearest in my mind all these years I've been—shut out from it. Did you ever read Henry Lawson's lines to 'Sydney-Side,' written from somewhere in the West, I believe? Something like this they go:

"Oh, there never dawned a morning in the long and lonely days,
But I thought I saw the ferries streaming out across the bays—
And as fresh and fair in fancy did the picture rise again
As the sunrise flushed the city from Woollahra to Balmain:

"And the sunny water frothing round the liners black and red,
And the coastal schooners working by the loom of Bradley's Head;
And the whistles and the sirens that re-echo far and wide
All the light and life and beauty that belong to Sydney-Side."

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"A sentimentalist, too," I muttered to myself, the surprise of that revelation checking for a few moments the rising tide of my absinthe-hunger.

Allen led the way back to where a flat ledge of rock made a rough natural seat. "Lady Macquarie's Chair," he explained, motioning me to sit down. "Named from the wife of a former Governor who was supposed to slip away out here and enjoy the view. The Domain runs right back behind the Government House, you know. I always used to mooch along out here for a look-see every time I got a chance, partly for the fine prospect of the Bay and partly for the comprehensive visualization it permitted of what I might call 'The Rise and Fall of the House of Allen.'

"Haven't you an expression in the States to the effect that it's 'three generations from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves'? Well, here in Australia we put the same natural law of evolution in the form of a conundrum and answer. It goes: 'How long does it take for an arrow to become a boomerang?' The answer varies, but for the 'House of Allen' it is: 'Four generations.'

"The arrow, you understand, is the 'Broad Arrow' that marked the transported convicts, while the boomerang merely suggests something that rises, circles and returns to the point of departure. Well, from this place where we sit I can trace the full circle of the 'arrow-cum boomerang-cum arrow' of the Allen quiver. Look! I'll show you. Follow me closely.

"Over there," he said, pointing seaward and easterly, "are the Heads, in through which sailed the brig bearing Jim (alias 'Crab') Allen, convict, with a few hundred more of the scum of London, to the shores of Australia. That is, I've always liked to fancy my distinguished progenitor sailed in through the Heads, though it's quite possible that the brig beat around into Botany Bay direct. Now" (he pointed westerly to where the Paramatta wound out of sight between green hills) "at the end of that deep cove over there is the slaughter house where the convict's son, James Allen, dealt in hides and hoofs and horns and laid the foundation of the family fortune, the fortune that wasn't seriously dented when the convict's grandson gave a hundred thousand pounds to a drought-relief fund and drew down a Baronetcy. That big red-brick pile among the trees on Darling Point" (Allen was pointing east again) "is the mansion of the late Sir James Allen, Bart., and now owned by his eldest son, the New South Wales Agent in London. Old Sir James' second son, Hartley, was born in the south wing of that unsightly heap of red bricks.

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"And here" (this time he turned and pointed south where a sharp dagger-blade of inlet plunged deep into the heart of Sydney's lowest slums) "is Woolloomooloo, where young Hartley Allen, descending from the soft refinements of Darling Point, found his level, organized his own 'push' of rock-throwing, head-smashing larrikins and completed the social circle. The cycle of metamorphosis had begun its round. I was the throwback, Whitney. Old 'Crab' Allen, the transported convict of Houndsditch, lived again in young Hartley Allen, whom most people thought of as a racing man and polo player, but who had all the natural qualifications of an out-and-out crook.

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"I can trace all of my little moral obliquities, Whitney, back to old 'Crab,' and, everything considered, I think he would rate me as rather a credit to his name, whatever contempt he might have had for my comparatively law-abiding father and grandfather, to say nothing of my pillar-of-the-state elder brother. 'Crab' was transported as a consequence of his persistent disregard of his fellow townsmen's rights to their lives, wives and silver plate. I—well, I never did care much for silver plate."

All this would have been intensely interesting to me an hour earlier, but now the fervour of my longing for my "*solitude à trois*" (as I was wont to call my séance with the long green bottle and the glass of cracked ice) was getting beyond control. The flowing lines of the reaches of cove and inlet glowing in the slanting light of the declining sun were becoming jerky and jagged and intershot with dazzling little spurts of light like one thinks he sees after receiving a crack on the head. The evening breeze lapped clammily about my chest and I fumbled clumsily with the buttons of my coat, trying to shut out the chill.

"I ought to have been back at the hotel before this," I mumbled, getting to my feet. "You had something more to tell me, hadn't you? You can do it as we walk back. I've got to be going now."

By this time I wasn't in a state to observe things very carefully. Undoubtedly (as I've thought it over since) Allen had been stalling to gain time and screw his nerve up to advancing the plan he had in mind. This being so, it must have jarred him a bit to have me call the turn so suddenly. I don't remember whether his face showed consternation or not. The one thing I recall was the quick movement of his hand to that hump on his right hip.

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I did not recoil an inch. I am sure of that, for I felt no apprehension. I was beyond apprehension—save over delay. But Allen's hand came back empty. "I'll tell you at once," he said brokenly. "But please sit down. Don't go just yet. We'll have to come to a decision straightaway." Then, seeing I was turning to go: "It's just this: Rona wants you to paint her picture—on the schooner—the *Cora*. Wants a picture done of the whole layout—ship, Bell, her, me, Ranga, niggers, everything. Says she'll pose for it on the schooner. Says I must pose too. Seems to be bitten with the idea of perpetuating the event for posterity, or something of the kind. Crazy scheme, but she's

set her heart on it. Says when it's done, if she likes it, she may go back to the Islands with me. Nothing certain for me, but it's a chance and I've got to make the most of it. Will you do it, Whitney? She says you've always wanted to paint her picture, and now she's all for it. You won't turn it down, Whitney?"

The incongruity of "Slant" Allen in the rôle of a plaintive pleader struck me with scarcely less astonishment than his strange and unexpected request. I was, however, totally unfit to cogitate upon either just then.

"I'll think it over and let you know tomorrow," I said dully. "Got to go now."

"It has to be decided here and now, once and for all," Allen answered firmly. "Here!—" This time there was no hesitation in the movement of his hand to the hip-pocket hump. When it came back it was holding a fat stubby flask—one of the thermos type, just coming into general use at that time.

"I know what's calling you away, Whitney," he said steadily, unscrewing the top of the flask and pouring into it a bright green liquid with a familiar smell and sparkle. "On the off chance that we might be detained beyond the hour when you're used to depending upon it, I had this cooled at the Marble Bar—old hangout of mine—and brought it along with me. Don't use the stuff myself, but I know the hooks it throws into a man who does use it. Drink hearty!"

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He handed me both the brimming screw-top and the flask itself. The contents of the former might have been drugged heavily enough to kill a horse for all I cared. It was absinthe beyond a doubt, and cold enough to frost the outside of the little nickled cup that held it. I gulped it down hungrily; replenished and repeated. The third cup I drank less greedily, letting my eyes rove slowly where the jerkily jagged zigzags of hill and headland and foreshore were smoothing into a softer fluency of contour. Sipping the fourth cup, I unbuttoned my coat to give more intimacy to the caress of the milk-warm evening breeze.

"Not bad stuff, Allen," I breathed at last. "Very good of you to think of it. What was it you wanted me to do just now?" Five minutes later I had promised to meet "Slant" Allen at the railway station in time to catch the nine-thirty train for Brisbane, en route Townsville.

It appeared that Rona's ultimatum had stipulated that Allen was to be back in Townsville with me, ready to begin arranging for the picture, inside of ten days. The only northbound boat, the *Waga Tiri*, which would arrive within the limit, had already left Sydney but could be overtaken at Brisbane by entraining at once. Allen had booked sleepers for the express and wired for cabins on the steamer before he called on me at the *Australia*. There was nothing left to do but throw together what things I wanted and get to the station.

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It was rather a wrench, checking myself after getting all poised for flight with the "Green Lady," but not so hard as it would have been had I really "got off the ground." The contents of Allen's flask were hardly more than a strong bracer. Once I got back to the hotel and into my packing, it was easy going, especially as my enthusiasm was mounting for the work ahead. To have Rona for a model at last! And for such a picture!

The dramatic appeal of the thing grew on me with every passing minute. It was not, to be sure, quite the kind of a work I was best prepared to do. With my ambition to become a marine painter, I had gone in more for colour than for anatomy and drawing; but I was still confident that I could make good with anything that gripped my imagination strongly. And "The Saving of the Black-birder" (I had already given it a tentative name) fairly took me by the throat. I would not fail with it. Nay, more, I would triumph. Perhaps—why not?—Paris! Yes, "The Black-birder" should open a short-cut to my goal. The rails beneath the wheels of the speeding Brisbane Express were clicking *black-bir-der—black-bir-der* when I dropped off to sleep that night somewhere along toward the Queensland boundary.

That the morrow should bring some reaction from this fine frenzy was inevitable, but it was a comparatively slight one. That Allen had deliberately planned to draw me away and take advantage of my weakness for absinthe to gain my intervention in his favour was evident enough. Indeed, the consummate manner in which he turned the trick argued an almost pathological intimacy with the reaction of the insidiously subtle essence of wormwood upon the human brain. But I did not hold this heavily against him. It was plain that he had only done it to play safe in a matter respecting which he did not dare to take any unnecessary chances of failure. I could not but admit to myself that I would probably have fallen in with the plan ultimately in any event. There was no disloyalty to my friend in making him (as I intended to do) the central figure in a picture that I hoped would become famous in two hemispheres. On the contrary, what greater tribute was there I could pay to his memory? If Rona cared to flaunt that memory by going off to the Islands with Allen, it was her own kettle of fish. Besides, she had not gone yet; didn't even appear to have committed herself definitely in the matter.

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To minimize explanations and the possibility of complications, Allen and I had agreed to defer wiring our Sydney friends of our departure until after we were aboard the *Waga Tiri* in Moreton

Bay. His message to the Chairman of the Reception Committee, and mine to Benchley at my Exposition, went ashore on the tender that brought us off, and the steamer was under way before they could have been put upon the wires. It was not until the next northbound boat brought the Sydney papers to Townsville that we learned what a wave of surprise and speculation had been started by our joint hegira.

In the course of the voyage Allen told me some few further details of developments in Townsville. Before his departure he had managed to induce Rona, for her own comfort, to move her headquarters from Ratu Lal's joint to the Medical Mission of the London Bible Society. The head surgeon of the Mission he characterized as "a good old sport" he had knocked up against in the Straits and the Dutch Indies. He was just like an ordinary missionary to look at, but redeemed in "Slant's" eyes by a real love of horses, and even—very much on the quiet—a shrewd interest in racing. "It's in his blood. He can't help it," Allen explained laconically but comprehensively.

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Explicit instructions had been left at the Mission that Rona was not to be worried about her spiritual future. She was to be just a "straight boarder" until Allen's return. She was well provided with money, as he had seen to having everything Bell had with him at the time of his death deposited to her account at a local bank. This had included eighty gold sovereigns, found in a money-belt around Bell's waist, and some hundreds of Chilean silver *pesos* he had brought off to the *Cora* in a canvas sack.

Ranga had been put up at the Sailors' Home. There had been a flat refusal to receive him at first, on account of his colour, but this was promptly withdrawn when it was found the request came from Allen, whom the town was going pretty strong on delighting to honour just at that juncture. Allen, who seemed very fond of the big fellow, also saw that the latter was comfortably provided with money.

Allen did not speak again of the proposed picture until the steamer was nosing up to her buoy in Cleveland Bay. Then, after inquiring if I had everything I needed to go ahead with, he intimated that he would probably find Rona fretting to get things under way. "She seemed to have some wild sort of an idea," he said, "that the whole thing would be done on the schooner—that we all might move out there, bag and baggage, and make it our head-quarters until the picture was completed. She even wanted me to go out to that plague-rotten wreck with her and look the ground over before I left. I had no time for it, of course, and am jolly glad I didn't. Can't see what the good of it would have been anyhow. I was hoping I had seen the last of the damned hulk, though I suppose I can stick it for an hour or two in a pinch. I fail to see what she's driving at, but whatever it is you may as well make up your mind that she will have her way about it."

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I assured him that the picture would probably be mostly studio work as far as he was concerned, though I myself might want to sketch a few details on the schooner. It might save time, however, I suggested, if the whole lot of us went aboard before I began work so I could figure out a tentative grouping and get a general idea of the composition. Then I could make notes and sketches of whatever parts of the schooner would be included, and be ready to work on the individual figures as soon as I rigged up a studio.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SCENE OF THE FINAL DRAMA

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WE spent the night at the hotel and went together to call on Rona at the Mission the following morning. The change in the girl was startling, far too great to be accounted for by the baggy Mother Hubbard that had replaced the close-clinging *sarongs* and *sulus* in which I had grown accustomed to seeing her at Kai. Her face was thinner and the former peach-like bloom of her cheeks had given way to a dusky sallowness. The curve of her lips had flattened—and hardened; hard, too, was the fixed stare of her great sloe eyes. To a stranger the pucker of concentration between her eyebrows might almost have suggested sullenness. The lines about her eyes and mouth, which spoke to me of suffering, might have seemed to another as stamped there by hate. She was still beautiful, but in a new way. It was a wild, fluttered sort of loveliness that haunted rather than allured. The woman before me could never "sit Buddha," I told myself; those dreamy spells of repose had not punctuated her present life with intervals of Oriental peacefulness.

Decidedly reserved in her manner toward Allen, Rona tried to be warm in her greeting to me, but quickly showed signs of restraint and embarrassment. She became even more ill at ease when "Slant," after genial old Dr. Oakes invited him out to see a new saddle horse that had just arrived from Singapore, excused himself and left us alone. She sheered off so sharply from my first mention of the name of Bell, and became so palpably nervous at a couple of attempts I made to lead round to him by degrees, that I gave up trying to induce her to speak of him out of sheer pity. Even my inquiry after the health of "Peeky" of the embroidered shawl drew only a weary little

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smile and a sad shake of her riotous tumble of blue-black hair.

She was ready enough to talk about the picture, though even in that connection I was at once conscious of a lack of real enthusiasm on her part. She seemed anxious to get it started, however, and said she supposed we would be going to live on the schooner in a day or two. She even confessed to having worried a good deal for fear the *Cora* would be broken up by a storm before the picture was made. When I told her that we would not need to live on the schooner, and perhaps would not have to make more than one or two short visits to it, she appeared a good deal put out for a few moments. She scowled angrily and started to speak; then thought better of it, bit her lip and held her tongue. She appeared a bit mollified when I said we would make our first visit, to plan the picture, just as soon as the quarantine people would disinfect the schooner for us. (That this had not been done yet I had already learned through 'phoning to the Station the night before.) She observed impatiently that she thought disinfection was a needless precaution, and I had to explain that it was not a matter of precaution at all on our part; that it was against the law for anyone to board a ship that had carried plague until it was disinfected, and that if we tried it on the *Cora* the whole lot of us would probably be clapped in jail and quarantined afterwards.

She softened a little as I got up to go, and her "Next time I show you 'Peekie,' Whit-nee —'Peekie' is a ver-ee sick bird," sounded almost like old times. The hand she gave me was hot and dry but unshaking, and the almost cutting grip of it tense with nervous force. I noticed that her finger nails, though trimmed closer than of old and no longer stained, were still of unusual length.

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I found Allen, his face flushed with enthusiasm, putting the doctor's new colt up and down the sward before the Mission chapel in sharp bursts of terrific speed. The animal, Oakes explained to me, had been given to him by a petty Rajah of the Federated Malay States as a token of his appreciation of the doctor's success in removing a troublesome appendix from a favourite dancing girl some months previously. It was a chunky bay gelding, only his small head, full neck and a certain trimness of hock bearing out Oakes' claim that he was out of a Mameluke imported direct from Bassorah by the Sultan of Johore. For the rest he favoured his Timor dam, and looked built for endurance and handiness rather than speed. The instant Allen was on his back, however, his sure instinct told him that the powerful little beast had swiftness as well as staying powers, and he was already itching to put his judgment to the test. A week later, having quietly entered him in the race of the day—the Planters' Handicap—at the Townsville midsummer meet, he rode the gelding himself and gave the local betting public the worst jolt in North Queensland track annals by winning at two-hundred-to-one. Every pound that the wily Allen cleaned up on the race went to build the good Doctor Oakes, shortly transferred to Fiji, the largest and best equipped Medical Mission in all of Polynesia. The full story of what the winning of that race meant to the game old missionary with the sporting blood has yet to be written.

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My plan of visiting the *Cora* to make a preliminary study of the "Black-birder" met with an unexpected check. The quarantine people had readily consented to give the schooner a rough disinfection, one that would make it quite safe for us to board her as long as we kept clear of the holds, which would require more drastic treatment. Before the formaldehyde squad got away, however, several cases of smallpox were reported in the native quarter, and all the available disinfecting apparatus was called upon for use there. It would be at least a week or ten days, we were told, before an outfit would be free for the *Cora*.

Personally, I didn't mind the delay in the least; for one reason, because Rona's strange mood had quenched my initial surge of ardour for the picture, and, for another, because I had still to find a suitable place in which to work. Allen seemed to be worrying very little over the forced wait. "I've laid my bets to win or lose, and I'll be there to cash in after the finish," he said philosophically. He spent most of the time in the saddle, getting out mornings at daybreak to give the "Missionary Colt" (as he called the Oakes gelding) workouts on the quiet. As far as I could observe, he saw very little of Rona.

It was the girl who really chafed under the inaction of waiting. Two or three times she sent for me to urge that we disregard the quarantine regulations and go off to the schooner. Allen mentioned that she had also begged him to take her out for a look-see at the *Cora* on the quiet. How she spent her time I did not know. Oakes told me that she went out for long walks every day, sometimes going toward the hills and sometimes along the shore. I found freshly picked tiger-lilies on Bell's grave the day I visited it, and it occurred to me that the gathering of these might have furnished the motive for the solitary walks. But if she was still devoted to Bell's memory, why wouldn't she speak of him?—and why the plan to go off to the Islands with Allen? The girl's conduct was quite beyond my understanding. That was one thing I was sure of, at least.

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Meanwhile I went ahead looking for a place I could turn into a studio. It had been Allen's idea that the suburban bungalow he occupied after coming out of quarantine would be suitable, but I was compelled to veto it on account of the poor light—a consequence of the dense tropical growth surrounding it. The same difficulty—light—ruled out a number of other attractive places that were offered me, and I was about to close with a rather squalid little shack near the beach as a last resort, when Allen got wind of a temporarily vacant house on a big sugar estate, some miles from town.

This little gem of a hillside bungalow had been built by the sugar people for a sub-overseer of

the plantation, who had gone to Melbourne to meet and marry a girl from home. As the lucky chap had been given a three-months holiday for a honeymoon in New Zealand, the local manager of the sugar company decided that there could be no objection to my occupying the nest in the interim; in fact, he was sure his directors would be highly honoured to have their property used by so distinguished an artist, and for so laudable a purpose. He hoped I would not hesitate to call upon him for help at any time. He would see to it that the servants already hired against the return of Borton and his bride reported at once, and that Borton's trap and saddle horses were placed at my immediate disposal.

I was greatly pleased with my find for a number of reasons besides the fact that it had a large and well-lighted living-room that could be made all I could ask to work in. Not the least of these was its location. Several hundred feet above the sea, its wide verandas caught cool currents of the Trade wind that the sultry lower levels never knew. Infinitely refreshing, too—both in fact and in suggestion,—I found the splendid stream which circled close under the rear wall, forming, where a mossy ledge reared a natural dam, a deep, clear pool to which I could jump from my bedroom window. The revitalizing effect of an early morning plunge, I had found by long experience, was beyond comparison the best antidote against the insidious absinthe poisoning paralyzing body and brain at the end of the night.

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A couple of hundred yards further down the stream took a swift run through a verdant tunnel of fern fronds and overhanging palm leaves, before it leaped in a fine compact spout of green and white over the verge of a creeper-clad cliff, to a lucent hyacinth-lined basin thirty feet below. From there, quieter of mood and mind after its hillside gambols, it meandered by pleasant reaches across a broad belt of shimmering sugar cane, beyond which it disappeared in tangled growth of primeval bush. By dark ways and devious, broadening and deepening in the lower levels, it finally lost itself in the mangrove swamp that fringed the sea fifteen miles to the northward.

I mention this stream particularly because of the part it was destined to play in the final act of the drama of the *Cora Andrews*. For a similar reason it may be in order to say a few words about the great flume, which took off from the stream at the pool below the waterfall and led down to the big central sugar mill on the shore of the first deeply indented bay north of Townsville. It was built, following the successful Hawaiian practice, for the purpose of floating the cut cane from the fields to the mill, a method which, wherever the natural conditions were suited to it, had proved both cheaper and more expeditious than the old system of transporting the succulent stalks by tramway and bullock carts.

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The flume itself was built of imported Oregon pine planks, and was carried on a trestle of rough-hewn blue-gum and *jarra* trunks. In section, the box of the flume was about four feet wide by three feet deep. The water it carried—about a quarter of the normal flow of the stream that fed it—varied in depth according to its velocity. The latter, of course, depended upon the grade of the flume, this varying from two or three per cent. in the broad upper valley to all of fifteen per cent. in a couple of short steep pitches near the coast.

I was interested in this flume from the first time I saw it. In the course of a visit to Hawaii some years previously, I had found no end of sport in what was called "sugar-fluming"—riding from the mountainside plantations down to the mills seated on a water-propelled bundle of sugar-cane. On my inquiring of the local manager if the highly diverting stunt was practicable here, he had answered with a most emphatic negative. "You could go down the flume all right," he said, "but the volume of water is so great that you could not stop yourself by holding to the sides even where the grades are the slightest. On the sharp inclines, where the flume runs down to the mill, a team of bullocks couldn't hold you back. Only one man ever tried the feat deliberately, and we were picking fragments of him out of the *bagasse* for a month. Also spoiled a lot of sugar—everything from the juice in the vats to the unfinished article in the centrifugals had to be thrown away. Same thing has had to be done on the several occasions coolies have fallen into the flume while at work. Jolly costly accidents for the company. I hope that you're not contemplating...."

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I hastened to assure him that, after what he had told me, I most certainly had ceased any contemplations I might have allowed myself to indulge in up to then. Still I couldn't help picturing in my mind what sport could be got out of the thing if only some sort of buffer were rigged up at the lower end. That prompted me, a day or two after I was settled in the bungalow and while time was still hanging on my hands, to put my horse down the bridle-path along the flume when I went out for a ride in the cool of the afternoon. After that I lost all interest in "sugar-fluming" as a sport. It was just conceivable that a man of great strength and agility might stop himself by gripping the sides of the flume at several points in the first five or six miles, but from where the sharp descent to the coast began I was inclined to agree with the manager's statement, that the drag of a man's body in the pull of the racing stream would take a team of bullocks off their feet.

I dismounted and leaned over the edge of the flume where it ran through a narrow cut in the rock at the brow of the great basaltic cliff that followed the curve of the beach of the bay. This was the upper end of the first of the two sharp drops and the water, which was running within a foot of the top of the flume a hundred yards above, and here flattened down to a scant six inches in the bottom, grey-green and solid like a great endless belt of flying steel. The butt of my riding-whip was all but jerked from my hand as I touched it lightly to the speeding water, and a curving fan of spray was projected up into my face and over the sides. The evidence of such a solidity of kick in

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running water seemed almost beyond belief, until I recalled having heard how a jet escaping from the pressure pipe of a hydro-electric plant somewhere in the American West had penetrated a man's body, cleanly, like an arrow.

My desire to ride the flume died then and there, though even yet I couldn't help regretting that there wasn't a level stretch above the jump-off, where a man could check his headway and crawl out. It would have been rattling good sport down to there, but beyond—sheer suicide. There was, it is true, a couple of hundred yards of perhaps five per cent. grade between the first steep pitch over the edge of the cliff, and a second one, even steeper, that seemed to run almost directly upon the roaring, churning mass of cane-crushing machinery that began at the upper end of the big mill. Even there the water was lightning-swift, however, so that a man, once over the edge of the first pitch, looked to be less than a thousand-to-one shot in bringing up before going on into the second. And that would have been—how was it the manager put it?—more "spoiled sugar"—another "jolly costly accident for the company."

The bridle-path I had been following continued on along the flume to the mill, but, desiring to strike the main highway to Townsville as quickly as possible, I put my sure-footed little Timor mare down what appeared to be an abandoned road graded into the face of the cliff. When I finally came out in the rear of what was plainly the remains of an ancient water-driven cane-crushing mill, I realized that the old grade by which I had descended must have been the bullock-cart road from the plantation. The mill was a picturesque old ruin, with its mossy water-wheel, crumbling roof and sprawling pier, and I made mental note of the lovely little cove as a place well worth returning to with paintbox and easel when opportunity offered.

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Returning through the town, I had the good luck to be hailed from the sidewalk by my bluff old friend, Captain "Choppy" Tancred. He was southbound with the *Utupua* again, he said, but she was going to go to drydock immediately on arrival in Sydney and he was going to command the *Mambare*—a new steamer just turned out on the Clyde for the company—and start north the following day. It was hard luck missing his week at home with the wife and nippers at Manley, but his promotion to a ship on the Singapore run was some consolation. He would be back in Townsville again in a little over a week, and, as he had a lot of sugar to load for the Straits, hoped to have the time for a good yarn with me. It must have been more from habit than anything else (for the old boy should have read enough about me in the papers by this time to be convinced that I was not a fugitive from justice), that he repeated his injunction that I must not fail to let him know if there was ever anything he could do for me—"ye'll ken wha' I mean, lad." And, equally from habit, I assured him that I "kenned wha'," and would not fail to call upon him in my extremity.

As I had nothing but what I had brought with me on the steamer to move, and as the house was practically ready for occupancy, I was comfortably settled in my hillside bungalow at the end of the third day after our arrival from the south. A Chinese cook and house-boy, a Hindu groom, a couple of New Hebridean blacks as roustabouts, and Ranga as general factotum, gave me a very tidy and self-contained establishment. Ranga I had taken to at once. He was quick-minded and quick-handed, extremely good-natured, and ready to do anything at any time of the day or night. I resolved to keep him with me indefinitely as a personal servant—that is, if it fell in with his own inclinations after he had given me a fair trial.

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I made a number of rather successful studies of Ranga by way of getting my hand in again, and that suggested that it might be profitable to put in the days of waiting by trying what could be done along the same lines with the others who were to figure in the picture. Allen, although busy with his secret training of the Oakes colt (all unknown even to the good missionary, by the way, who thought that "Slant" was merely borrowing the gelding for his morning ride), found time to come up and give me several sittings. It was easy to see that he hated the whole thing, and was only going through with it as a part of the bargain with Rona. The latter, after promising me faithfully to come, was reported missing on all of the three occasions I sent the trap for her. As her whim was at the bottom of the whole mad plan, I was not a little mystified at the girl's action. Also, as it was she whom I was most anxious to do full justice to in the picture, I was a good deal annoyed. Allen had no explanation or excuse to offer for her, saying the girl had him pocketed at every turn anyhow, but volunteered to try and round her up for me himself as soon as the Planters' Handicap was out of the way, and he had a bit more time on his hands. For all of his light way of speaking, I knew that he was as hard hit as ever, and had thrown himself into the training of the "Missionary Colt" only to give him something else to think about.

Two unostentatious acts of kindness on the part of Allen in the course of the week which followed added fresh refulgency to his halo of popularity. Townsville had gone madder than ever about him following his sudden and unexpected return from the south, and the same appeared to be true of the rest of the country. In all sincerity, he had tried to do both of the things I have referred to strictly on the quiet, and that they became public was only a consequence of the zeal of the fresh army of "war correspondents" that had been rushed north again to camp upon the hero's trail.

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One of Allen's little kindnesses was an appeal, in his own name, to the Governor of Western Australia to have dismissed the proceedings that had been instituted to bring "Squid" Saunders back to be locked up for the twenty-three and a half years which still remained to be served of his original twenty-five-year sentence. This appeal was accompanied by a promise to send the ex-

convict, immediately he was released, back to the Islands at Allen's expense.

Doubtless the momentary magic of Allen's name had something to do with the Westralian Governor's complaisance. In any event, "Squid" Saunders was out of jail and off as a first-class passenger on one of the Solomon Island boats inside of a week. Allen, the correspondents were not long in learning, had bought the ticket, footed all of the very sizable telegraph bills, and given the purser of the steamer a hundred pounds in gold to be handed to "Squid" when he was disembarked at Bougainville. The correspondents, long baulked of any real "Allen stuff," went to that story like hungry hounds.

But scarcely was the "Squid" Saunders story onto the wires before it was followed by the news of Allen's astonishing win of the Planters' Handicap with the rank outsider, Yusuf, at two-hundred-to-one. That win was spectacular enough in itself, but when, on the heels of it, was flashed the word that not only the thousand-guinea purse hung up for the race, but approximately twenty-five hundred pounds paid to Allen by the "tote" as well, had been donated to the owner of Yusuf to forward the realization of his long-cherished dream—the erection of a modern medical mission in Fiji—the climax was capped. Australia echoed anew with acclaim of the "philanthropist hero" (it was now), and press and pulpit moralized and maundered afresh on the Hon. Hartley Allen's goodness of heart and greatness of soul. The clamour of the people of the country to see their idol in the flesh fused the Townsville wires from every direction. It was all very well that the incomparable heroism of the saving of the *Cora Andrews* should be perpetuated upon canvas, but why should the pushful American artist drag the hero off before his own people had a chance to do him homage? Let the artist rise to the occasion with a display of that famous "Yankee hustle" they had heard so much about and get the job over "right quick." It was the man himself they wanted; let the picture wait if it couldn't be finished straightaway!

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CHAPTER XIV

HELL'S HATCHES OFF

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THAT may give some hint of the state of mind of Australians when, waiting on the tip-toe of expectancy for word of the next dashing act of their hero, they received a message of quite another tenor. It was the Sydney *Herald* man who sent the message that swept the country like the blast of a hurricane. He wired just the bare facts and no more. His imagination, even his reasoning faculties, as he confessed in a later dispatch, were numbed for the moment, temporarily paralyzed by the staggering shock of the horror he had looked upon.

"The Hon. Hartley Allen was found at an early hour this morning" (ran the telegram) "bound, gagged and lashed to the wheel of the schooner *Cora Andrews*, which has been aground for some time at a lonely spot on the beach of Cleveland Bay, several miles north of Townsville. Allen, who was taken to the General Hospital as soon as he was brought back to town, is a raving maniac and not expected to live out the day. From information in the hands of the police, there is no doubt that the worse-than-assassin was the ex-convict, 'Squid' Saunders, recently released from jail and deported to the Solomons through Allen's generous efforts on his behalf. He is known to have escaped from his northbound steamer at Cairns, stolen a fishing sloop, and is believed to have headed back to Townsville to carry out the dastardly act his disordered brain has evidently nursed for years. As the police seem likely to yield to the popular pressure to employ bloodhounds in running down the fugitive, his capture is probably the matter of but a few hours."

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It was a fairly sane, reasonable-reading dispatch, that. None but a man who had felt his blood turn to ice-water at the sight the *Herald* man had looked upon that morning could appreciate how much credit he deserved for stating the facts so coherently. For myself, at the moment the launch brought us back from the *Cora* and put us ashore at the landing, I would have been incapable of writing my own name correctly. There was only one thing I could do—nay, would have had to try to do if the world had been disintegrating beneath my feet—and I did it. That is why so much of the next thirty-six hours is a blank in my mind.

It was on a Saturday that Allen had made his spectacular killing in winning the Planters' Handicap, and on Sunday afternoon, to escape the importunities of Townsville generally and the correspondents in particular, he had ridden up to pay me a visit at my hillside bungalow. I had missed the race (through another appointment for a sitting with Rona, which, like the others, she had failed to keep), and so took the occasion to get some account of it at first-hand from Allen. He

was in high spirits over his success, but rather inclined to be put out with the impulsive Oakes for breaking down in church that morning and proclaiming to all and sundry the real source of the thirty-five hundred and odd pounds that had fallen at his feet like manna from the skies. What had come nearest to flooring Melanesia's leading bad man, I think, was that the missionary had publicly announced his intention of naming the new medical mission at Suva after the donor!

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Allen also, somewhat to my surprise, was not averse to speaking of the "Squid" Saunders episode. "The only redeeming thing about the old ruffian," he observed, "is his affection for that girl of his—the red-haired one, I mean—the black-and-tans don't signify. Rather a remarkable girl, that one, Whitney. She was one of the kind that must either soar to the high places or wallow in the low ones, and I've been sorrier than I can tell that I was slated to—well, not to start her winging for the heights exactly. I really wasn't a lot to blame in the matter, but—that isn't either here or there. Old 'Squid' *thinks* I was, and will go on thinking so till his dying day—or mine. I tried to get the old reprobate to call it quits when I shipped him off the other day. Do you think he would? No fear. Not the 'Squid.' Indeed, considering the bother I had wangling him out of serving that Kalgoorlie sentence of his, he was rather nasty. He asked me if I was trying to buy him off for fear he'd get me in the end. There wasn't much I could say to that under the circumstances, so I just let him go. Now the purser of the *Nawarika* wires me from Cooktown to say that the 'Squid' slipped ashore at Cairns and failed to show up again before sailing time. Purser says he still has the hundred quid I gave him to slip Saunders when they put him off in the Solomons. I have turned the wire over to the police, but have asked them to sit tight unless Saunders shows up in this section again. I hate to drag the old fire-eater into a new mess, especially after all the trouble I had getting him out of the old one. So I hope he won't be fool enough to come mooching south again. Don't suppose he will, but—I'll be keeping an eye lifting just the same against the loom of a vitriol bomb on the weather skyline."

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Allen tapped his coat significantly at those last words, and that reminded him that there were two or three little things about "pocket-gunnery" he wanted me to coach him up on. Nailing a foot-square of discarded canvas to the swelling bole of a bottle tree down by the stream, we put in a half-hour of "by-and-large" practice at it. Allen, thanks to his natural gift for judging distance and angle, proved a very apt pupil.

By way of return for his gunnery lesson, "Slant" volunteered to show me a few tricks of knife-throwing, in which he was reputed to have no equal in the Islands. "I'm about as much of a walking arsenal as you were the time you waited for me at the *Australia*, Whitney," he said with a grin, as he produced a broad-bladed dagger from a sheath slung unobtrusively on his right hip. "This knife, by the way," he went on, tilting it lightly across his forefinger, "is balanced especially for throwing. They are made in Lisbon, mostly for export to Brazil I understand, where they seem to go in for that kind of stunt a good bit. I bought it from the skipper of a Portuguese gunboat at Deli, who also taught me the principles of chucking it. First and last, I've had a lot of sport out of practising with it, and have an idea I would have an even break with the *Capitano* himself when my hand's in. I was very grateful to old 'Squid' for handing it back to me the other day. I only hope he won't be forcing me to pass it on to him again."

Allen's skill with the wicked-bladed *facon* was decidedly impressive. If anything, he was a shade more accurate in planting the point of it than I was with a bullet from my pocket. Little luck as I had in throwing it, I was quite as fascinated with the appearance and "feel" of the formidable weapon as Allen had been with my target revolver in Sydney. "I trust you won't have to part with it again, to Saunders or anyone else," I said as I handed it back to him.

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Before he mounted for his ride back to town, I mentioned to Allen that Rona had left me in the lurch again the day before, and intimated that, unless she began to show more interest in the picture, I would have to consider packing up and going back to Sydney. As a matter of fact, the girl's perversity had already been responsible for effectually dampening down my first flush of enthusiasm, and I began seriously to doubt my ability to make a success of the picture when the way was clear to work at it. Allen begged me not to be discouraged, and assured me again that he would look up Rona himself on the morrow and see if he couldn't get some line on what she was sulking about. He also said he would see if the quarantine people couldn't be prodded along to get at the job of disinfecting the *Cora*.

Rona still failed to show up on the following day, and in the evening I was unable to get 'phone connection with Allen's bungalow in an endeavour to learn if he had seen her. Dr. Butler, whom I got on the wire at the Quarantine Station, said that Allen had rung them up that morning, urging them to get a move on with the *Cora*. They had told him that they were planning to send a squad off before the end of the week. As word had just come to them, however, that men were seen climbing over the schooner that afternoon, they had decided to clean up the job in the morning. As long as the ship remained in her present condition, he said, she would continue a possible spreader of disease. She should have been attended to before. If I cared to go off with them, he added, he would pick me up at the landing at eight o'clock. I thanked him and told him I would be glad of the chance to look things over before going to work.

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I drove down early in the morning, taking Ranga with me on the chance that Allen and Rona might care to go off and plan a tentative grouping. A black boy cutting weeds with a sickle in front of Allen's bungalow told me that "white marster stop townside" for the night and had not yet

returned. At the Mission I found Oakes a good deal perturbed. The day before, he said, Allen had called just after lunch, talked with Rona a few minutes, and then borrowed Yusuf and gone off for a ride. He had not returned at dusk, but during the night the horse, dangling a broken bridle rein, had come galloping back to his stable. The missionary was fearful the rider had been thrown and stunned, and had been lying all night on the road. He had sent out boys to search soon after daylight. He was not sanguine of an early report from them, as Allen on his rides always avoided the metalled main highways to save his horse's feet. No, Yusuf's knees showed no signs of his having stumbled. He was as sure-footed as a goat and as gentle as a kitten. Not in the least given to shying or bolting. Besides, the colt wasn't foaled that could unseat Hartley Allen. Of course, he must have struck his head against a low-hanging limb in galloping some bush path, but that was unlikely. Hartley had his wits too much on the alert to be caught like that. He was beginning to be just a bit suspicious of foul play. Had I heard that "Squid" Saunders had left his steamer at Cairns and was believed to have sailed south in a stolen fishing-boat? He was just about to call up the Police Station and tell them of Allen's disappearance when I came.

Rona had been off on one of her long walks the previous afternoon, Oakes said in answer to my inquiry, and was not yet up. He had spoken with her through her window, just after Yusuf came back, in the hope that she might be able to give him some hint of the road Allen had taken. The latter had not mentioned where he was going, she said. She herself had been "away inland"—Oakes had encountered her on his weekly round through the plantation villages. She was a tireless walker, and very restless—altogether a strange character. I did not disturb the girl, as I reckoned there was no use in taking her off to the schooner until Allen was along to talk our plans over.

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It would have seemed that this word of Allen's disappearance, taken in conjunction with the fact that men had been seen on the wreck of the *Cora* the previous day, might have given me just a shade of preparation for what I saw as I followed Butler and the *Herald* man over the schooner's side an hour later. But it was not so, probably because my mental faculties were at their dullest at so (for me) unwontedly early an hour. If the news had come to me in the afternoon, possibly I would have traced some connection between the two events, and so have been at least slightly braced and stiffened for the coming shock. As it was, I bumped into it all unset, and the staggering impact of it came near to bowling me over.

It had been Dr. Butler's theory, propounded as the launch put away from the landing, that the figures descried on the *Cora* the afternoon before were those of blacks or coolies, attracted to the hulk by the hope of loot. As a matter of fact, he said, they would doubtless have made quite a haul, as nothing but the ship's papers had been taken ashore on the day of her arrival. Considerable "trade" and all of the personal effects of her former officers had been left for removal after disinfection.

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As we came out into the bay the coast to the northward began to open up, and presently the wreck of the *Cora*, heeled sharply to port with the foremast over the bows, became visible against the deep green of the mangroves a couple of miles distant. Butler studied the hulk closely through his glasses as we closed it.

"Looks as though I had another guess coming," he remarked finally, lowering the binoculars with a puzzled air. "Someone aboard her now. Seems to be jiggering the wheel. Can't be a pirate stunt, can it? Wouldn't be possible to drop a petrol engine into her, block up the hole and get off to the Islands on the quiet? But of course not. That's a drydock job—'count of the propeller and shaft."

At a quarter of a mile he raised his glasses again. "Chap at the wheel's the only man in sight," he reported. "He don't seem to have spotted us yet. Must be deaf, not to hear the explosions of our exhaust. Ah, perhaps that accounts for it! He's an old cove—big shock of white hair. 'Bout time he was getting his helmet on, though, with this sun beginning to bore into the back of his neck. Ahoy, there!..."

But there was no reply. The lone white-haired figure was still jiggering at the wheel when the launch, nosing in cautiously in the up-boil of reversed propellers, slid past the *Cora's* stern and the loom of her counter cut it off from our view.

A moss-shiny Jacob's Ladder hung over the starboard side amidships, where a section of the "nigger-wire" had been cut away, doubtless when the labour-recruits were disembarked. Butler climbed up first, then the *Herald* man (who had come off on the Doctor's invitation to see the ship made famous by the great exploit of the Hon. Hartley Allen), and then myself. Butler lingered at the ladder for a few moments, giving orders to his men about bringing the disinfecting paraphernalia aboard; so it was given to the newspaper man to be the first to go aft and discover that the moving, gibbering white-haired wretch lashed to the wheel of the schooner represented the sum total of the mental and physical remnants of the man whose doings he had been detailed to chronicle.

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The horrified reporter uttered no sound—simply froze and stood rooted to the deck in amazed consternation. It was as though the basilisk stare of the maniac's eyes had turned the flesh and blood of his rangy frame to stone. When he stirred finally, it was to tip-toe softly back two or three

paces to where I, in turn, had frozen in my tracks. It was his hand on my shoulder and his white face thrust close to mine that broke my own trance. Then the both of us must have retreated another step or two, until we bumped into Butler, similarly petrified with horror.

I am almost certain that not one of the three of us made any outcry, or even uttered a word, so paralyzing was the effect of the apparition at the wheel. The first sound I definitely recall as breaking in upon those muffled mowings from the cockpit was a booming gasp as Ranga's mighty chest sucked in a lungful of air, and then the big Malay's quiet "'Scuse me, Tuan," as he started to shove past between me and the deckhouse.

The yellow giant had seen too many men, white and black, lose their minds and their lives on that reeking old schooner to let the snapping of one more brain, or the parting of one more life-line, ruffle unduly his solid Oriental composure. He had been fond of Allen, however, and I could see that he was shaken, though not, like the rest of us, unnerved. There was a rumble of concern and anxiety even in that respectful "'Scuse me, Tuan," as he started to push past the blockade the cowering forms of three lesser men had made in the narrow passage.

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Ranga's steadiness was good for the rest of us. Butler checked the Malay with upraised hand and, muttering something about his duty as a doctor, started aft, the *Herald* man and I pushing in his wake. If it had been possible for the fear-distorted features of the wreck of "Slant" Allen to express extremest terror, that heightened degree was registered when Butler extended his opened clasp-knife to begin severing the lashings. I have no wish to attempt to describe that hell-haunted face. Indeed, there will be scant need of my doing so, for there can be few readers of this record who are not already familiar with its tortured lineaments. It seared itself into my brain with a white heat of intensity that left no room for any other image. At the moment it seemed as though it must be blazoned there as long as my body was quick with the spark of life, or at least until my reason recoiled at the horror of it and tottered from its throne. A little later, when the dread face itself had been hidden from my sight, a light seemed suddenly to flash out in the distance, and in groping toward it I found relief.

The ghastly shadow of the Hon. Hartley Allen was standing wedged in between the wheel and the binnacle-stand, his wrists lashed to the spokes of the former and a maze of tangled line binding his knees to the latter. The lashing was a length cut from the taffrail-log-line, another piece of which had been used to secure a gag of wadded oakum. The only wound visible (save for the wrists chafed through to the white cords of their tendons in his desperate tuggings to tear free) was a half-inch-wide incision on the right inner side of the neck, evidently made by the point of a knife pressed in close to the swell of the jugular vein. As this cut was hardly more than a deep prick, it seemed probable that the knife had been used, not to inflict injury, but rather to compel the victim to remain quiet while he was being secured.

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As the wrist lashings fell away, Allen lurched savagely forward with a throaty "g-rrr" and did his best to claw Butler's throat with his fingers. His strength was spent by his night-long struggles, however, and Ranga easily smothered the attack in the crook of his interposed arm. The removal of the gag did not, as might have been expected from the way the chest had been labouring, release a frantic scream. The passages of the throat, although the neck revealed no evidences of having been choked—recently, that is,—appeared to be swollen almost shut. The windpipe would carry air to the lungs, but every effort to expel it violently seemed to clap a sort of automatic muffler on the vocal chords.

Allen collapsed limply into Ranga's arms when his leg lashings had been cut, but he would not swoon. The dread of the damned continued to stream from his staring and unbelievably dilated eyes; those hoarse heavings of throat-throttled shrieks continued to issue from his gaping mouth; every time a hand or foot was freed, he continued to strike or kick with it to the limit of his pitifully drained strength.

Butler said that the only hope of saving the man's mind, and probably his life as well, was to rush him to the hospital and put him under an opiate as quickly as possible. Ranga picked up the tortured body carefully, as he might have handled a struggling kitten, and passed it down to the launch. Butler had the forethought to have us all sprayed with the disinfectant before we went over the side, so as to minimize the chances of our carrying off any plague germs.

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Just as the launch was about to shove off, Ranga begged the coxswain to hold on for a moment, and went clambering back up the latter. He ran aft, picked up something from the deck, and came back tucking his little Malay flute into the waistband of his dungarees. He had dropped it in the cockpit, he explained.

About all I can recall of the run back to the landing was the interminable number of times the *Herald* man insisted on telling us that he had been talking to Hartley Allen all the while the latter had been shifting into his jockey togs for the Planters' Handicap, and of how Butler, each time, replied: "And he slept in my pajamas all the time he was in quarantine." Possibly I said equally trivial things; but I don't recall them. I was conscious of a great pity for the plight of the man for whom I had come to have a genuine liking, and a dull sort of wonder as to how the tragedy might have happened and who was responsible for it. But the haunting horror of that fear-stricken face

hung like a curtain in front of my mind, dimming or blanking everything behind it.

At Butler's suggestion, he—with Ranga to help—took a carriage at the landing and drove direct to the hospital with Allen, while the *Herald* man and I went in my trap to the Police Station to report to the Chief. The latter had recently come to his present job from Charters Towers, where he had made something of a name for himself by breaking up a gang of outlaws who had long been doing pretty much as they pleased in that rough and ready bonanza town. He was a chap of great determination, energy and courage, but of little subtlety—rather the type of a Western American sheriff than a city police chief. I had met him at the Club two or three times, and liked him for his steady eye and open straightforwardness.

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The Chief was a little impatient at the *Herald* man's repetitions of the togs-shifting episode, and possibly also of my own wooden silence; but he got to the salient facts readily, and was no less forward with his deductions therefrom.

"'Squid' Saunders beyond a doubt," he pronounced decisively. "His sloop was sighted twice between here and Cairns, the last time only fifty miles to the north'ard. He could have landed night before last easy. Any of the lagoons running back into the Caradarra Swamp would hide his sloop. That would have given him all day yesterday to scout for Allen. Why the schooner I don't quite twig. But the 'Squid' was always adding devilish little embroideries to his jobs, and leaving a man to rot on a plague ship has all of his ear-marks. Never mind, I've had two launches patrolling the north coast for him since yesterday morning. He must have landed before they got there. But they'll nab him if he pulls out with the sloop again, and if he doesn't, I'll nab him. I hate to do it with a white man, but I'm going to put Rawdon's 'nigger-chasers' on his trail. I've got 'Squid's' old suit of clothes—the one he threw away when Allen bought him a new outfit—stowed away here, and I fancy a sniff of it will be enough to put them on the scent with. If I don't miss my guess, Mr. 'Squid' Saunders will be enjoying our bed and board again before another twenty-four hours has gone by."

The Chief dropped his professional manner for a few moments as we arose to go. "Allen was a good friend of yours, Mr. Whitney," he said, laying a kindly grip on my shoulder. "I don't wonder that you're a bit dazed by the thing. Rather puts a damper on the picture, I'm afraid. Going up the hill now, are you? Good—a bit of a rest will steady you no end. Ring up this evening and we'll give you the news. It won't be long before we have our man."

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The *Herald* man, with the Chief's approval, rushed off to the telegraph office to dispatch his wire. I drove round to the hospital to pick up Ranga and inquire for news of Allen. Butler came down to see me in the reception-room and reported that it had taken an astonishing quantity of morphine to have any effect upon the patient, but that he was at last beginning to grow quieter. His heart action was very irregular and there was no saying yet what turn things might take. He asked me to let Ranga remain at the hospital for a day or two. They were short of orderlies as a consequence of the smallpox epidemic, and the big Malay was a very useful attendant on account of his strength, quietness and good sense. As they were trying to avoid the necessity of putting Allen in a strait-jacket, they wanted someone in the room able to handle him if he became violent again on coming out from his opiate. I told him to keep Ranga as long as he was needed.

CHAPTER XV

THE FACE

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THE Chief of Police's allusion to the picture had started a nebulous idea in my head, but it took it several hours to crystallize. Driving alone up the hill, my mind gravitated dully to the matter of the identity of the perpetrator of the unspeakable outrage. I found myself speculating as to whether or not the Chief of Police, had he known of Rona's previous attacks upon Allen, would have been as ready as he was to attribute the guilt to "Squid" Saunders. And would he—had he known of them—been able to trace any connection between Rona's repeated attempts to induce Allen to go off to the schooner with her and the fact that the crime had been committed there? And didn't it look just a little as though Rona's whole strange plan for having a picture painted was only a subterfuge to open the way for a carefully plotted revenge? And yet, if she had done all this, she surely must have had—or thought she had—a good reason for doing it. But had not Oakes established a clear alibi for the girl when he met her "away inland" the same afternoon men had been reported to have been seen on the schooner? Probably, but not certainly. Oakes himself had said that she was "a great walker" and "very restless."

It was conceivable that the girl might have doubled back and waylaid Allen on the road. Or perhaps she had met him by appointment. He had admitted that he was becoming increasingly subject to her will. But how could she have induced him to go off to the schooner, and how had they gone? No boat had been sighted along the beach (we had looked for one through Butler's

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glasses on our return to the landing), and none was reported missing from the harbour. The Chief had inquired on that latter point while we were with him at the Station.

And how had Rona, or anyone else for that matter, been able to get the better of such a man as Allen, fully armed and on the alert as I knew him to have been, and noted for his resourcefulness in emergency? That train of thought reminded me that we had found no arms on Allen when we released him. His right coat-pocket was empty, and so was the knife-sheath on his right hip. But his pocketbook, containing a considerable amount in notes, had not been taken.... It was all too much for my tired brain, which, ready enough to suggest questions, was quite incapable of grappling with them. When I drove into the home clearing I was wondering whether the broken glass I had noticed in the bottom of the cockpit was that from the whisky bottle Allen had told me Rona had thrown at him the morning Bell gave up the fight.

I was horribly tired, both in mind and body, and hoped that, with a glass or two of absinthe to relax my nerves, I might be able to sleep at least through the heat of the noonday. Shifting into my pajamas,—after telling Suey, my China boy, that I would not want lunch and not to disturb me until I sent for him,—I crawled under the mosquito-net and tried to drop off. But it was no use. No sooner would I begin to doze than the expiring images of my thoughts would shuffle up and sharpen with a steel-clicking suddenness into the dread likeness of The Face, with its dilated eyes boring me to the spine.

At the end of a couple of hours of fevered tossing, I gave it up, threw off my pajamas, stepped to the low back-window ledge and took a header into the cool green pool below. The Face dissolved as the thrill of the refreshing embrace of the water ran through my blood, but only to return when, after donning a fresh suit of drills, I began a restless pacing of the floor of the big living-room—my studio. Always it flashed a pace or two ahead of me, floating backward as I advanced upon it and swinging with me at the end of the room. I could not wheel swiftly enough to lose it, and it made no difference whether my eyes were opened or closed. I tried it both ways.

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It was in the course of an experimental lap I was trying with my hands over my eyes that I bumped into the big rectangle of canvas I had prepared in advance against the day I should be ready to start work on "The Saving of the Black-birder." Ten seconds later I was pawing over my colours with feverish haste. The idea swimming in my head had crystallized. It was, in effect: *Put The Face on canvas and it will cease to haunt and harrow your mind.* That sounded reasonable. Certainly The Face couldn't be in two places at once, and if I once got it anchored to the canvas I could cover it up when I wanted to get away from it. It would all depend upon how faithfully I did my work, something told me. If the face on the canvas was a replica of the other to a hair, to a line, to the fear in the hell-haunted eyes, then the phantom face would enter into it and become subject to my control. If not—then I would never know sleep nor peace while I continued to live.

No artist can ever have approached a task under empire of the flaming intensity I threw into this one. I was painting to save my reason, perhaps my life. That is not a figure of speech. I mean it quite literally, for I am convinced to this day that I stumbled upon the only path that would have led me clear of complete mental and physical collapse.

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There was a rather remarkable coincidence in connection with the way I started to work. Nothing told me that those first nervous slashes of my brush signaled the beginning of a picture the fame of which was destined to reach the outposts of the civilized world before the year was out. All thought of "The Black-birder" was erased from my mind. I had no idea of a picture in my head. I was not even beginning to work upon a figure. I was only conscious that I was going to put all I had into the task of reproducing—recreating, if that were possible—with coloured pigments a phantom of my brain—a face—The Face.

I had no thought, I say, of beginning a picture. I sketched nothing in, not even the outline of the haunting shadow I was going to try to capture. A very few minutes after I began squeezing out colours onto my palette I was smearing them upon a patch of the big six-foot-by-ten expanse of woven cotton in front of me. The coincidence I have mentioned became apparent some weeks later, when I discovered that, of all the sixty square feet of canvas before me, the something less than one square foot upon which I concentrated my paint and energies for the next thirty hours chanced to be in exactly the place it *had* to be for the result of my effort to assume its proper place in a somewhat intricate composition. I will tell of that in due course.

Save for the strain of the terrible tension under which I worked, the task to which I had set myself proved absolutely the simplest I ever attempted. It seemed that I could not go wrong. It was not like painting a face from memory, nor yet like painting one from a model. It was more like colouring a photograph, for the image, terrible as life, was right there on the canvas at the end of my arm. At first, as I tried to visualize it at shorter range than the five or six feet at which it had been floating, it was a bit hazy; but presently my intense concentration of mind had its reward. The dreadful phantom drew nearer, increased in detail, and finally sharpened into clear focus at the tip of my brush. After that I became just a meticulously faithful retoucher, working in a trance.

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It was toward the middle of the afternoon when Suey came in to ask if I was going to be home for dinner. He was becoming used to my queer ways, and, when I failed to take any notice of his

reiterated query, came over and touched me on the shoulder. I "came out" with a start, but gathered my wits quickly. I told Suey that I should probably be working steadily for the next day or two and would want nothing to eat until I was finished. If he would bring me a bowl of cracked ice every hour and see that no one was allowed in to bother me, it would be all I should want of him. He replied with a laconic "Can do," and backed out toward the kitchen as though I had asked for curry-and-rice for dinner, or ordered something else equally rational and matter-of-fact.

I settled back into my spell of tranced concentration with scarcely an effort, working swiftly and surely, with never a pause. The "drawing" was all done for me, and even in the matter of colours there was no hesitation. Exactly the proper shade or tint drew my brush like a magnet; and always it was applied with telling effect.

The sunset shadows of the western hills were driving their black wedges across the satiny sheen of the light-flickering levels of the waving sugar-cane when I became aware that a sound I had been conscious of for some time had suddenly changed and intensified. If my mind had tried to catalogue the clear notes that had been floating in through the north window, it was probably to credit them to a certain bell-bird friend of mine who was in the habit of ringing his vesper chimes from a leafy chapel in the big bottle tree toward the end of the afternoon. But there was nothing bird-like in the quick staccato of eager yelps that had been responsible for bringing me, with ears and interest a-cock, out of my trance. "Dogs closing in for a kill," I muttered to myself, realizing that it had been the distant baying of hounds on a hot scent that I had confused with the more imminent chiming of my Austral bell-ringing neighbour. The sounds came from a long way off—probably from somewhere in the dense bush beyond the farther borders of the cane fields. It was a northerly hauling of the wind that brought them down to me so clearly. The air had been charged and electric all day, and the breaking up of the trade wind indicated that a hurricane was mustering its forces somewhere up among the Islands. I had not looked at the barometer on the veranda, but knew that it must be registering a considerable fall.

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The crack of a single shot drifted down the wind as the yelping reached its climax. Then all was quiet in the distance, with only an occasional cackling guffaw of a "laughing jackass" ripping across the silence that brooded nearer at hand. I didn't know what there was to hunt in that particular neck of Queensland, but thought it might be kangaroos or dingoes. It wasn't of enough interest to waste time in speculating upon it, just then in any event.

Daylight had given way to twilight, and twilight to moonlight, before I stopped work again, this time to respond to an insistent ringing of the telephone bell. Oakes' deep voice came excitedly over the wire. "I thought you would be interested to know that Rawdon's dogs tracked down 'Squid' Saunders this afternoon," it said. "He has just been brought in. Bullet through his shoulder, but not a serious wound. The report went around that he had confessed to the attack on Hartley Allen, and the town went wild. Only the Chief's nerve prevented a lynching, and there may be trouble yet. Never saw the people so excited." In response to my inquiry about Allen, Oakes said that he had been drugged to sleep early in the afternoon, and that there was no use trying to forecast what turn things would take until he came out.

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"That clears Rona, at any rate," was my thought as I drained a glass of iced absinthe and picked up my brush again. I found it just a shade harder materializing The Face than it had been at first, but managed it at the end of a minute or two of close concentration. Save for an occasional pause for a sip of absinthe, I worked steadily on through the night.

To make clear what transpired the following day, it will be well to set down at this point a few things which I only learned in a conversation with the Chief of Police after the last act of the drama was played to a finish and the curtain rung down. Contrary to the understanding of Dr. Oakes, and all the rest of the people of Townsville with the exception of the Chief of Police and a couple of his assistants, "Squid" Saunders had *not* confessed. From what he *had* said in the presence of all his captors, however, it was easy to see how the story had originated. He admitted quite freely to Rawdon, after the latter had called off his dogs and was lending a hand to plug up the puncture in "Squid's" shoulder, that his one purpose in returning had been to settle his account with "Slant" Allen. He also said that he would rather be strung up straightaway than to be sent back to West Australia and begin, at sixty, serving out a twenty-odd-year sentence.

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That was about all Saunders said at the time of his capture, but later, after expressing himself to the Chief of Police to similar effect, he went a little further. He averred frankly that curiosity had always been one of his most pronounced characteristics, and, while he entertained only the kindest feelings for whoever it was that had been responsible for tying up "Slant" Allen and leaving him alone to meditate upon his past, he couldn't help wondering about the identity of a man able to pull off such a cleverly thought-out and executed piece of business. Might he not suggest to the Chief that the latter try to find some trifle that this bright-minded and quick-handed cove had left behind on the schooner, and see if those sharp-nosed—yes, and sharp-teethed—dogs

of his couldn't be put on the owner's trail. They appeared a very likely lot of hounds, especially that big black-and-tan brute with a chewed ear, who had broken away from the ruck and fastened his teeth in the "Squid's" calf.

This all struck the straightforward, open-minded Chief as entirely reasonable. It was only fair to Saunders, too, and since saving him from the mob that afternoon the Chief had come to take a sort of proprietary interest in his prisoner. Going off to the schooner in the morning he found a small fragment of red rag in the cockpit, which, though it was greasy and dirty, did not show signs of exposure to the weather, and must, therefore, have been left comparatively recently. It was a six-by-eight-inch piece of flowered red calico, of the kind used by the natives of all parts of the South Seas for waist-cloths. Even if he wasn't able to locate the particular *sulu* from which it was torn, the Chief reckoned that it would give the dogs something to go by.

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Rawdon's "nigger-chasers" were of a foxhound-bloodhound cross that the old ex-bushranger had bred especially for the purpose of chivvying down runaway blacks from the sugar plantations. The swart sextette displayed a very encouraging interest in the greasy rag the Chief brought them to sniff; so much so, indeed, that they were far from drained of enthusiasm at the end of a bootless day's nosing up and down the coast for tracks that gave back the same ingratiating aroma. It looked quite good enough to warrant going on with the game the following morning, Rawdon pronounced, as he started back on foot for his kennels on the southwest outskirts of town. (The old chap had some kind of a theory about its being destructive to a hound's keenness to tote him around on wheels: also, he had stumbled upon many trails where he least expected them, even in the town.)

Rawdon was striding a couple of blocks ahead of his two helpers when, crossing the town end of the main westerly highway to the hills, the dog he was holding in leash—the big black-and-tan with the chewed ear, by far his keenest-nosed hound—broke away and set off up the side of the road in full cry. As there was no hope of trying to overtake him on foot, Rawdon waited for the other dogs to come up and catch the scent, cautioning his men to hold them well in leash and not to hurry until he rejoined them. Then he ran back a quarter of a mile to the Police Station to summon the Chief and get a horse.

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This was about seven o'clock in the evening of Wednesday, the day after we had found Hartley Allen bound to the wheel of the *Cora Andrews*.

At the moment the big black-and-tan hound tore his leash out of Rawdon's hand and started to burn up the footpath beside the westerly hill road, I had been streaking a small patch of canvas with coloured pigments for something like thirty hours in a desperate endeavour to drive a phantom out of my brain. I was near to the end of my labours and—I could sense it already—close to victory. I had made a hard fight for it and I deserved to win. Using absinthe sparingly—as a fuel and a food rather than as a stimulant—and drawing upon my nerves for everything the drug would not provide, I had kept going steadily and was finishing strong.

There had been but one interruption since the night before. Early in the forenoon Captain "Choppy" Tancred had called up to say that he had brought his new command to anchor in the harbour the previous evening, and that, as he had a good twenty-four hours' loading to do, he hoped that we could find time to foregather for a bit of a yarn in the course of the day. Would I come down and have lunch with him at the hotel, or would he drive up to me? He would rather prefer the former, as the barometer was down and he ought to remain where he could get off to his ship in a hurry if it came on to blow. I made the best excuse my wandering wits could frame, and hung up. The old boy's voluble protests were still clicking in the receiver as I returned it to its hook.

I had a hard time materializing my "model" again after that break, and it was fifteen or twenty minutes before I was sure enough of it to resume work. For a while, in the back of my brain, there was a flutter of apprehension that old "Choppy" would take it into his head to come up anyhow, and I was desperately afraid that I might not be able to "connect" again after another interruption—that I would fail to focus The Face at the one moment of all when I most needed it. There would have been comfort in that thought twenty-four hours earlier, but by now a desire to finish the portrait for its own sake seemed to have entered into me.

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But my fears were groundless. "Choppy" was properly rebuffed, and had no intention of poking in where he "wasna weelcom'." (He told me so himself later.) There was no further interruption, save the negligible one of Suey and the cracked ice, sharp on every hour. As the sunset faded and the twilight flooded the valley with luminous purple mist, I was finished—or nearly finished. The Face was all but complete on the canvas now, and all but erased from my brain. It had taken an intense effort of concentration to hold it while I put the last touch on that writhen lip, as it curled back in a snarl from the bared teeth. But I did it. And now—just a stroke in that whorl of iris to

accentuate the abnormal dilation, to fix the horror in that ghastly stare! Slowly the image sharpened in my brain. Again the fear-haunted eyes held my own. Now! I was just darting my delicately poised brush forward when the sound of voices from the veranda arrested the colour-daubed tip a hair short of the blurring eye its touch would have made a hopeless smudge. "Maskey—no can do!" came in Suey's brusque *pidgin*; and then, following a sudden scuffle and the sharp click of the latch, a familiar chirrup floated to my ears. "Let me in, Whit-nee! Hur-ree, ple-ese, Whit-nee!" was what it said.

CHAPTER XVI

A SUDDEN VISITOR

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As a rider reins in his stumbling horse, so did I rein in my stumbling nerves. It was now or never, I told myself. If those final touches were not given before I stirred from my tracks, they would never be given. I closed my eyes and my ears—not with my hands but by a sheer effort of will—and then, inch by inch, as though I were dragging it by the throat, brought the phantom prototype back and forced it to merge with the face on the canvas. The tip of my brush flashed twice, thrice. Then I relaxed the tentacles of my will, and as the phantom face, receding, blurred to blankness, it left behind, where a wisp of green-smeared camel's hair had touched the canvas, an expression of hell-haunted terror streaming from the unnaturally dilated eyes of the *completed* picture-face.

I was breathing heavily, like a coolie who throws down his back-breaking burden at the end of a hard climb, when I tossed aside my brush and palette, but no wretch of a human pack-mule ever knew the depth of relief that was mine. A carrier could only experience the physical satisfaction of feeling his back was freed of a load: mine was the spiritual ecstasy of knocking off the shackles that had threatened to bind my soul. And now I was free to rush to the arms of the "Green Lady"! No more need of rationing my absinthe. I spilled the remaining contents of the bottle at my elbow in the bowl of half-melted cracked ice, and wolfed it greedily over the tilted brim.

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"Ple-ese, Whit-nee, I have the great hur-ree." Again came the click-clack of the imprisoned latch and the thud of a knee or shoulder against the door.

"One moment, Rona!" Steadied and alert, I set down the emptied bowl, threw a hastily-snatched couch-cover over the canvas so that the space upon which I had worked was hidden, and stepped to the door. Already I felt the exaltation and relief of having banished the dread phantom. And the picture face on the canvas—how easy it was to blot out! The hanging corner of an old steamer-rug....

Rona pushed in eagerly as I swung back the door, Suey relaxing his restraining grip and backing away noiselessly at my reassuring nod. All the old verve showed in the girl's high-flung head and flashing eye. Sullenness, depression, sadness alike were gone, replaced by an air of eagerness, of suppressed excitement. She was still wearing the baggy *holakau* the lady missionaries had wished upon her, but with it—looped over her breasts and under her shoulders *sarong*-fashion—was the peacock shawl, outlining softly the lithe curves of shoulder and hip and flowing clingingly in folds of amber and scintillant opalescence below her knees.

"Whit-nee, I come to make the good-bye," she gushed cooingly, catching her breath. "Tonight I take boat go Seengapo. Whit-nee, I come here to tell you I ver-ree sor-ree I make you troubl' 'bout the pick-yur. I tella you lie, Whit-nee. I cannot—make—the pick-yur. Bel-la, he say—"

At that instant a strange thing happened. Two or three times since she entered the room, Rona's eyes, as though drawn there irresistibly, had wandered from mine to what could have appeared to her no more than a corner of plaid rug hanging over a broad blank of tightly stretched canvas. She had done this again as she started to speak, and it was a slight widening of her eyes that caused me to turn and follow her glance. The hastily-flung rug was slowly slipping back off the easel. The fringed corner hanging down in front was rising. Possibly a draught from the open door had started the movement, or perhaps the swishing blows a wind-lashed tree was dealing the side of the house. Whatever was the cause, the effect was that of an invisible hand slowly drawing up a curtain.

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Rona's tongue framed the sentence that was in her mind, but the words came brokenly as her puzzled wonderment increased. As her double-syllabled rendition of Bell's name fell from her lips the accelerating slide of the curtain quickened to a run, and, with a flirt of green fringe, the masking corner disappeared over the top of the frame. The Face—"Slant" Allen's hell-haunted face, tortured and terrible—glared out at her from the broad white field of the canvas.

There was sheer amazement in the down-drop of the girl's lean jaw and a suggestion of terror in the gasp with which she filled her deflated lungs. But the piercing "*ey-yu*" with which that air was forced out again was a battle-cry. Fortunately, I was standing a couple of paces nearer the canvas than was she; but even with that handicap in my favour it was a near squeak. I caught the gleam of a flashing blade and a quick grab sunk my crooked fingers deep into the flesh of a thrusting arm. Hurling the arrested figure back toward the door, I stooped and picked up a knife—that beautifully balanced Portuguese throwing-knife that Allen and I had been flinging at the swelling bole of the big bottle-tree the previous Sunday. To this day I do not know whether Rona thought she was attacking a reincarnation or a ghost, or was only bent on destroying an uncannily life-like portrait that awakened savage memories.

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I swished the fallen rug from under the easel and rehung it—evenly this time—before turning to confront Rona, where she was readjusting—with raised elbows and twinkling thumbs—the hitch of the peacock shawl in the opposite corner of the room. She had scrambled to her feet again, but gave no sign of returning to the attack. Her eyes were snapping with anger and excitement, but I did not have the feeling that she entertained any especial personal resentment against me for the rough handling I had given her.

"So it was you after all," I said slowly, fingering the tapering blade of the tell-tale knife.

Her lips moved as though in reply, but if she said anything coherent it was drowned in the roar of a sudden gust of wind that buffeted the bungalow at that moment. I turned to the girl again after closing the north windows. Her eyes were fixed on vacancy now, and her head, with the clean-cut chin slightly elevated, was turned sideways in an attitude of listening. As the banging of the trees died down my own duller tympana registered a new vibration—and yet not quite new—something that I had heard very recently. Ah, now I had it! The baying of a hound, very near and very eager. A red-hot scent beyond doubt, I told myself. But why were Rawdon's "nigger-chasers" running at that hour, and into the teeth of a rising hurricane? There was questioning in both our glances as the girl's eyes met mine, but in hers certainly no hint of fear.

Before either of us spoke a firm, quick step sounded from the back of the house, and a moment later, following a light tap on the door, Ranga entered from my bedroom. If he was surprised at Rona's presence, or at her somewhat dishevelled appearance, he gave no sign of it. Nor was there about me—now that I was holding the knife behind my back—anything to suggest to the Malay that he had stumbled upon a situation in the least out of the normal.

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Tuan "Slant" was sleeping heavily, he said, and so he had snatched the opportunity to come up for some of his own Borneo tobacco and a change of clothes. They had nothing in the hospital large enough for him. Tuan "Slant" was growing stronger in body, but—he finished by tapping his temple and shaking his head dubiously.

A heavier broadside of the gathering storm shook the house again, this time sending a shudder through its stout frame and wringing a vibrant *ping* from the tautened "hurricane cables" that guyed its windward corners. Out of the heart of that blast came the bell-mouthed baying of the nearing hound. He was still sounding his clear bugle notes as he swung in through the gate from the road, but down the driveway, with the incense of the burning trail conjuring visions of an imminent quarry in his brain, he began tearing his throat with harsh, savage yelps of eagerness. I was looking for his charge to come against the closed front door, but a sudden shower of claw-spurred gravel rat-a-tat-ing against the glass of the French windows told that he had wheeled in his tracks and was circling to the rear of the house. A yell and a clatter of saucepans from the kitchen, a scramble of slipping claws upon the hardwood floor of the back hallway, and in from the open door of my bedroom—drooling-fanged, bloody-eyed and bloody-minded—came dashing that black bolt of canine fury, closing on his cornered quarry for the death-grapple.

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Ranga, on entering, had moved a step or two aside from the door, a survival doubtless of his training at sea, where an idle man blocking a companionway or a ladder is liable to be taught manners by a rap on the head. Rona was still in the corner to which I had hurled her. I was at the opposite corner, near the big canvas and twenty feet or more from the girl. The flying hound tried to check himself at the doorway, but the polished floor gave him no grip for his claws. Down on his haunches, with forefeet poked rigidly ahead, he slid the full width of the room, tobogganing on a smooth-running Samoan mat for the last half of the distance.

With the certainty of Rona's guilt fixed in my mind by her possession of Allen's knife, I had no doubt, from the moment the hound's baying indicated it had turned into the clearing, that it was hot on her trail. But even so, the brute's entry by the bedroom door had been so unexpected and so swift that I had not stirred from my tracks to the girl's defence when the snarling animal, shooting across the room, brought up against the wall close beside her. Even Ranga, leaping forward instantly as he had, was scarcely past the middle of the floor when the beast regained its balance and bearings almost at the girl's feet. Drawing back into the angle of the walls and crouching low like a cornered cat, Rona awaited the attack, while Ranga, barehanded, and I with the throwing-knife rushed in to her aid. Without an instant's hesitation, the savage beast spun to a full right-about and, brushing the girl's advanced knee as though it was no more than the piano stool, launched itself full at the throat of the yellow man.

Ranga's counter was swift, sure and terrible. He might have been fighting bloodhounds barehanded from childhood, for all the surprise and dismay he showed at the sudden attack. Where my own instinct (if I had not tried to side-step the charge completely) would have been to grapple for the brute's throat from beneath, he simply struck—or rather grabbed—down from above. The impact crushed the snarling beast to the floor, but when Ranga raised his arm again he was gripping his struggling canine adversary by the scruff of the neck. Or rather, I thought it was the scruff. In reality his grip was a bit more inclusive.

Holding the floundering black form at arm's length with no more effort than if it had been a terrier, Ranga suddenly tightened his hold. I saw the hound's red-lidded eyes grow slant and elongated like a Chinaman's as the skin of its scalp was drawn backward in the relentless vise closing from behind; then a grinding snick cut short an unearthly scream of pain, and the hound was dangling limp and lifeless with a crumpled spine at the end of a gibbet of knotted yellow muscle. Ranga tossed lightly aside what a moment before had been a flying bolt of wrath, and where the great head doubled under against a flowered chintz window-curtain I saw the sprawling outline of a tooth-torn ear, doubtless the scar of a fight with a luckier ending.

In its strangely terrible tenseness, the electrically charged silence that succeeded has no parallel in my experience. Not a word was spoken. The only sound was the banging of the wind-wrenched trees against the house and the nearing mutter of the thunder in the north. The significance of the fact that it was Ranga the dog had been trailing was lost upon neither Rona nor me, nor yet upon the big Malay himself. The latter met my questioning glance steadily for a moment, but it was the girl's piercing stare of fierce concentration that drew and held his troubled black eyes. While one might have counted fifty those two stood and (as I have since understood) communed with eye and mind. It was a sudden thunder-clap that broke the connection and checked the interflow of thought. Ranga had not winced at the blinding flash and close-following crash, but Rona's higher strung nerves fluttered for an instant, and the wire was down. But Ranga's words indicated that the message was about complete.

"Yes, I did it, Tuan," he said quietly, turning toward me as though answering my unspoken question. "It had to be, Tuan, and—yes, I did it."

It was not until afterwards I recalled that it was to Rona I addressed my protest. "But 'Slant' swore to me that he did not kill Bell; that he was in no way responsible for his death, first or last."

A spasm of passion twisted the girl's face to the seeming of an ape's as she caught the drift of my words, and her reply was almost a scream. "Not ke-el Bel-la? 'Slan' do worse than ke-el. He—"

The chorus of the leashed pack that checked her words came from so close at hand that it made itself heard above the now unbroken roar of the storm. There was the clang of shod hoofs on a metalled road, too, and I thought I could distinguish the shouts of men. The hunt was closing in for the kill.

"I think I go now, Tuan. I like the better to fight outside." Ranga's voice was as quiet and controlled as when he had told me the news from the hospital a few minutes before; but there was the lust of battle in his flashing eyes, eagerness for action in the quick heave of his chest.

There was no time to debate and decide the question as to who had committed the outrage upon Hartley Allen, or of what justification there might have been for it. One thing only was clear to me, and that was that I was not going to throw either Rona or Ranga to the dogs—no, nor to the law either—if there was any way of avoiding it. My mind—as was always the case when I had fasted long and drunk absinthe sparingly—worked with lightning swiftness.

"Don't fight unless you have to," I said, stepping closer to Ranga as the wind and thunder threatened to drown my voice. "Follow down the stream over the falls. Jump won't hurt you—plenty of water at the bottom. That'll throw off the dogs. Then follow the path by the flume down to the sea. The rain'll kill your trail for the dogs. It ought to be starting any minute now. Wait for me on the pier by the old sugar mill. I'll come for you in a boat as soon as I can."

Baring his teeth in a quick grin of comprehension, the big fellow wheeled and started for the front door. I caught his arm and checked him just in time. "This way!" I shouted. "Through my bedroom window. Beat it! *Lekas!*"

Again that intelligent tooth-flash of understanding. Ranga's foreshortened bulk was making a blurred blot against the blue-green lightning flash playing across the rear bedroom window as I turned to answer a heavy banging at the front door. Everything considered, I have always felt that I got away fairly well with the situation with which I now found myself confronted. It was Harpool, the Chief of Police, who staggered into the room, bracing back against the push of the still rising wind. The flutter of the lightning revealed two or three horses in the driveway, and three or four men following a bunch of howling dogs around the corner of the house.

I was on the point of opening up at the Chief with a facetious sally about the way he was

sending his hounds around to frighten my lady visitors, when I chanced to glance to the corner where Rona had been, and lo—I had no lady visitor! The girl was gone, but whether under the couch or out of one of the windows I could not guess. So I only gaped rather stupidly and said nothing, leaving the Chief to open the attack. I was glad the face on the canvas was covered, and only wished there had been time to throw something over the crumpled remnants of the big black-and-tan.

"I am quite satisfied it isn't you we want, Mr. Whitney," Harpool began, with a shade of embarrassment, I thought. "But the fact remains that Rawdon's hounds have followed a live scent straight to this house, and I have every reason to believe they are on the trail of the man who tied up Hartley Allen. Perhaps you can explain—"

"I think I can," I cut in, anxious to gain time for the fugitive, but realizing that no end would be served by trying to conceal his identity. "You're right that it was a hot scent. Just a few degrees too hot for your canine deputy there in the corner. It's the end of *his* trail, I'm afraid."

The Chief strode over to the limp corpse and turned it with his foot. "Who killed this hound?" he demanded angrily, regarding me suspiciously for the first time.

"Not I, Chief," I replied jauntily; "but can't you guess? You can see for yourself that he hasn't been shot—or clubbed—or poisoned. Well, then—look at that neck. Do you know of more than one man in these parts capable of snapping a bloodhound's spine between his thumb and forefinger?" (I added that little thumb-and-forefinger touch with malice aforethought, for I wanted to impress upon Harpool—for whatever it might be worth—that it was no old broken-down of a "Squid" Saunders that he was going to try to run to earth out there in the darkness.)

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The Chief's honest eyes opened with amazement as the answer dawned upon him. "You don't mean the big Malay?" he ejaculated incredulously. "Why, he has been tending Allen like a sister for two days. Everyone in the hospital has been speaking about his devotion."

"No other," I answered. "Ranga came up from the hospital less than half an hour ago to get a shift of togs. Five minutes later that hound came tearing in through the back entrance and flew at his throat—right here in my studio. You see the result. That fellow can drop a horse with his fist—a dog is no more than a flea to him."

"I can hardly believe it," said the Chief, shaking his head; "but the fact remains that if the hound went for him, he's our man. I hope we won't have to shoot him.... But Rawdon will never stand by and see his dogs pinched out like that. This fellow was his best hound by a mile. Drive him crazy when he finds it's been dished. Gawd, that neck might have been run over by a steam tram! What in hell—"

A bedlam of howls and yells and savage oaths rising from the rear of the house at this juncture broke in upon the Chief and caused him to bolt on the double through the door of the corridor leading to the kitchen. The unearthly racket, with the rattle of pistol shots spattering through it, made me certain that Ranga had run afoul of the hunt at his first jump. Shuddering at the thought of the terrible fight that must ensue, I pushed on after Harpool, reaching the further end of the corridor just in time to catch his reeling form as he staggered back from a bullet that had burned his scalp the instant he opened the kitchen door. Astride the sill of a kicked-in window sat old Rawdon, his bearded face distorted with fury and pain, coughing, sneezing, cursing, and firing impartially at all parts of the long, low room. Under the sink, almost at Rawdon's feet but quite out of pistol range, crouched Suey, blinking blandly and rubbing his almond eyes. He it was who was the author of an unpremeditated diversion which was the only thing in the world that prevented Ranga being nabbed at the outset.

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The late black-and-tan, in following Ranga's trail, had entered the kitchen by snapping his way through the light screen door. To prevent his lines being thus penetrated a second time, the foxy Celestial, when he heard the main pack rallying to the attack, closed and bolted the heavy outside door of his domain and, with a little surprise packet in his hand, took station beside the little swinging window above the sink. Waiting with true Oriental restraint till the clamouring enemy was compactly bunched upon the porch outside, Suey gently raised the screen and emptied the contents of a can of red pepper into their midst. The paprika appeared to have been pretty fairly divided between three of the most oncoming of the dogs and their equally forward master. The hounds quit for the night, then and there, but the old bushranger's fighting spirit urged him on to make the best stand he could with his automatic. Considering the way he was being racked with coughs and sneezes, and that he only blazed away at the creak of an opening door his streaming eyes could not locate, his shot that welcomed the Chief was by no means uncreditable. It cut a neat furrow through Harpool's stubby pompadour and even drew a drop or two of blood.

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The Chief's fervent swearing stayed Rawdon's murderous hand just as he had finished fumbling a fresh clip of cartridges into his emptied "thirty-eight" and was about to start fusillading anew. Roaring mad as he was, his first thought was for the dogs. "Get a wet rag round the muzzles o' Dingo an' Jackaroo 'fore you let 'em inter this 'ell 'ole," he growled between sneezes. "Our bloke's somew'ere in this 'ere 'ouse," he went on, laving his smarting eyes at the water-tap of the

sink above Suey's jack-knifed form. "Don't let 'im slope by the front door, Chief, now we've got 'im in 'is 'ole."

"Sloped already," snapped Harpool laconically, adding that most of the sloping had been done while Rawdon was setting his dogs on a "bally Chink cook." In a few terse sentences the Chief explained the way things stood, giving it as his opinion that their man would be trying to follow the stream right across the plantation and down through the belt of bush to the mangrove swamps. The loss of the big black-and-tan was so great a calamity for the old bushranger that it had the effect of sobering rather than further exciting him. His red rage burned white and flamed inwardly rather than outwardly. "I'll know 'ow to even up for 'im killin' Starlight w'en I gets that bloody wombat in a patch o' dry bush. Nice bit o' a torch that greasy 'ulk o' 'im'll make. Come along! We'll 'ave a better chance o' makin' a quick bag if we get 'im in sight 'fore the rain starts."

There were still left two dogs with undamaged "noses." Fearful that these, if they took the bridle-path down the right side of the creek, might pick up Ranga's trail where he would have left the stream at the pool, I made bold to suggest a plan calculated to carry them wide of that danger point. "Why don't you ford here," I said, "and push straight across the plantation to the end of the big loop the stream makes round the nigger village? Your man will be all of an hour making that point if he wades by the stream. You can make it through the cane in twenty minutes and be waiting there to bag him."

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The Chief was inclined to favour the plan—until Rawdon cut in sarcastically with: "An' wot's to pervert the bloody bloke's givin' us the slip a 'undred times 'tween 'ere an' there? One hound down each side o' the stream—that's the only way to be sure o' clappin' our 'ooks inter 'im."

That was sound reasoning of course—from Rawdon's standpoint,—and I didn't dare urge my plan any further. Ten minutes later, when a sudden eager baying came down the wind from the direction of the waterfall, I felt sure my worst fears were realized. It was, therefore, with only the faintest hopes of success, that I pulled myself together to take the first step in making good my promise to pick up Ranga at the pier of the old sugar mill.

The priceless Suey had crawled out from under the sink as the sounds of the hunt grew faint, and turned to tidying the kitchen as though cleaning up after a pack of bloodhounds was just a pleasant little incidental of the day's work. When I ordered him to get me out a fresh bottle of absinthe he did not even forget the cracked ice. I told him I should probably be away for most of the night, and that if Rona showed up in the interim to see that she was made comfortable till my return. "All lightee girl-ee. Otha fell-ee too much peppa can have," he said decisively. I told him to do what he liked to Rawdon, but to give the Chief a shake-down if he asked for it.

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Quaffing a couple of glasses of raw absinthe, I filled a flask, pulled on a pair of riding-boots and a raincoat, and pushed out onto the veranda. The wind had not increased greatly in force, but the lightning and thunder were flashing and crashing almost simultaneously overhead, and the first big drops of rain were beginning to spatter. The moon was hidden behind a dense pall of black cloud, so that it was by the incessant flicker of the lightning that I sized up the three saddle-horses tied at the side of the driveway and picked the rangy waler of the Chief as the likeliest rough-weather beast. I had no compunction to taking him, as the bunch would be breaking away anyhow as soon as the sagging bottom of the cloud overhead dropped its contents on them. I preferred not to have my own saddle-horse left standing in the town if it could be avoided. There would be enough tell-tale posts on the course I was going to try to negotiate without deliberately planting another one.

The cane fields in the valley were glistening with the opening volleys of the rain as I spurred across the clearing, stabbing the night with silver gleams in the lightning flashes as the bayonets of massed troops throw off the rays of the sun. The wind was behind me as far as the main road; then side-on, but broken by the wall of the thick-growing trees. I put the waler at top speed, anxious to cover all the distance possible while the footing was good. I was halfway to town before the storm let go in real earnest, and from then on it was about as much of a swim as a ride, especially after the hillsides began to spill off on the lower levels. My mount was a sensible beast, evidently no stranger to tropical cloudbursts. He took the initiative readily when I ceased to urge him, and kept plugging right on through the storm at a good steady business-like jog. Nothing but my good fortune in getting a jump on the rain prevented my going out in this first lap of my race, as all of the four bridges I had to cross must have washed away within a very few minutes from the time I put them behind me. Indeed, one of the two horses I had left in the driveway, after both had broken away as I had anticipated, was drowned in trying to flounder through an open crossing.

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The worst of the terrific downpour was over as I rode into the town, but the wind—as was to be expected—was blowing with increased force. Everyone had been driven indoors by the rain, so that it was in an empty street I dismounted and left my horse, knowing that he would be pawing at his own stable door within a very few minutes. The rest of the way to the landing I covered on foot. As I had feared, the creek was empty of launches. I would have to see what could be done at the Burns, Phillip offices, which, busy with manifests and other odds and ends of business incident to an imminent steamer sailing, were still lighted up. It was an alternative I was very reluctant to resort to, as I had been hoping that my visit to Captain Tancred might be managed on the quiet. Just as I turned to go a red light, bobbing past the outer end of the jetty, caught the tail of my eye,

and, on the off chance that it might be a craft I could hire, I held on at the steps. Smartly handled in the nasty cross-lop, a small but powerful steam launch bumped in alongside the landing stage.

"Can I get you to take me off to the *Mambare*?" I demanded of the uniformed youth who came bounding up the steps.

"Glad to do it, sir. This is her launch," was the cheery reply. "Just in for clearance papers. Be back in a jiffy. Climb aboard and make yourself comfy in the cabin." Then, as an apparent afterthought: "You're sailing with us, aren't you? Can't take off visitors at this hour. No way to get back. Getting under way at midnight." He had so little doubt that I was a belated passenger, perhaps delayed by the rain, that my nod was quite sufficient to reassure him. Five minutes later we were shoving off for the run back to the line of lights where the *Mambare* tugged at her moorings.

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The sea was white with foam outside the jetties, but with waves and wind almost dead astern the sturdy little launch made very comfortable weather of it. It was by no means as bad as it had been coming in, said the young officer, who turned out to be a freight clerk. As the gangway was already raised and the launch had to come in anyway, we remained aboard her and were hoisted right up and swung in to the chocks on the *Mambare's* boat-deck. My companion hurried at once to his office to go over his pouch of papers, while I, locating it without asking anyone for directions, went forward to the Captain's cabin under the bridge.

The faint shadow of constraint on Captain Tancred's face as I entered disappeared the instant his ready mind divined I had come to him for help. "So they're after ye at last, lad," he said, sympathy and satisfaction queerly blended in his deep voice. "Weel, noo, tell me a' about it. I ken we'll be findin' a way oot for ye."

I told him all that he needed to know as quickly as possible, making a point, however, of omitting to state that the man I wanted him to smuggle away to the Islands had confessed to committing the outrage upon Hartley Allen. "Slant" was an old friend of "Choppy's," and I felt sure that the latter, far from being a witting party to helping the man who had attacked him escape from justice, would undoubtedly lend every aid to placing him where he would receive his just deserts. Luckily, the quixotic old Scot was not a man to ask searching questions. He was plainly disappointed that it was not I who was fleeing the law, but there was ready consolation in the fact that a friend of mine, in very sore straits, might be saved from being torn to pieces by a pack of bloodhounds if he was picked up at a certain point on the north coast before morning.

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We located the cove of the old sugar mill on the chart without difficulty, and in his bulky volume of "Sailing Directions" found the comforting assurance that it afforded especially good shelter in a northerly blow. There was no surf, it was stated, and the shore was almost steep-to. This was all in our favour. He was sailing at midnight, the Captain said. The hurricane was central over the New Hebrides, so it was only the tail of it flirting across the Great Barrier—nothing he would dream of sticking in harbour for. Doubtless he would be able to find an excuse to heave-to off the cove, while I piloted the launch in to get our man. Then, if I didn't care to return and take a pleasure voyage with him to Insulinde and the Straits, I could drop off and make the best of my way home.

The Captain had just finished telling me how he had made a point of bringing his old launch crew with him from the *Utupua*—"the lads I use for speshul wark, ye ken"—when the freight clerk who had brought me off entered the cabin with a number of papers and letters. On the top of the pile was a red envelope marked "Rush." "Choppy" tore the letter open at once. The up-flop of his grizzled side-burns at the sudden flexing of the jaw muscles at their roots gave me warning of the coming jolt.

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"We'll nae be gettin' under wa' the nicht, Ryerson," he said quietly to the freight clerk. "Will ye be sae guid as to bid the Chief an' the Mate to step this wa'. Mair carga the morrow," he added by way of explanation. To the Chief Engineer, when he came, the Captain merely countermanded an order for steam on the capstan at seven bells, and warned him to keep the pressure in the boilers high for fear the steamer might part a mooring cable if the wind increased. The Mate he ordered to be ready to handle a consignment of silver bullion and ingot copper that would come in a tug from the *Moresby* as soon as she arrived from the south in the morning. He also told him to have the crew of the steam launch called away at once, so as to put "yon gentleman" ashore as quickly as possible. If the Mate was lively about it, "Choppy" suggested, he might find that the fires of the launch had not yet been drawn from her trip to the landing. If so, that would save time in getting up steam.

Not until all of this was ordered did he turn to me with: "The de'il's ain luck, lad. Nae gettin' awa' afore eight bells, noon, the morrow. Shipment frae Broken Hill catchin' up wi' us in the *Moresby*."

"That means that the game's up and you're sending me back because there's no hope of doing anything?" I asked in dismay.

"Nae, nae, lad," he soothed. "No' so fast. Just a wee bit o' a shift o' program, that's a'. True I'm sendin' ye ashore in the launch, but when she comes back I'm hopin' tae find oor mon in yer place. Do ye ken noo wha' I'm drivin' at?"

"Do you mean to send the launch all the way round from here?" I demanded in astonishment; "and then to keep him aboard here in the harbour for ten or twelve hours before you sail? Isn't that asking for trouble both ways? Even if the launch stands up against the gale outside, aren't you done for if they come off from town and make a search of the steamer?"

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Old "Choppy's" blue eyes twinkled merrily at the latter suggestion. The police never did seem to have any luck in searching his ships, he laughed. As for the launch—it was new, its engine was unusually powerful, and it would have "Pisco" at the wheel. "Pisco," he explained, was a Chilean who had been with him for years, and had never been known to fail at a pinch. He thought that combination ought to win out. I didn't mind a bit of slap-banging off the point, did I? That settled it. If he was willing to risk his own launch and his own career to save *my* friend, it was not for me to hang back. Fifteen minutes later we had been lowered over the side and were rounding under the *Mambare's* fine clipper bows into the teeth of the gusty norther. It had been agreed that I should pilot "Pisco" to the rendezvous and deliver my man into his care. "Choppy" undertook to do the rest.

What the hard-bit old sea-dog had characterized as a "bit o' slap-banging" off the point proved to be a frontal attack upon as ruffianly a bunch of headseas as it was ever my lot to face in anything smaller than a ninety-ton schooner. Stoutly built and over-engined as she was, the launch was quite equal to the task of driving her nose through the waves, but—not being built for submarine service—proved a dismal failure at getting rid of the solid green water that deluged her as a consequence. Knot by knot, cursing fluently in picturesque *roto* Spanish the while, "Pisco" rang down the engine, until finally the pugnacious little craft ceased tunnelling the bases of the seas and contented herself with boring neat round holes in their curling crests. By this method she shipped no more water than her scuppers could put back where it came from. The only fear now was that enough spray might splash down her squat funnel to quench the fires, and to minimize the chances of this, the resourceful "Pisco" made the lookout stand so that his broad chest would receive and deflect the heaviest rushes of the threatening flood. Fortunately, the distance to be run head-on to the seas was comparatively short. Once round the point the alteration of course brought the wind and the waves on the starboard beam, and though she now just about rolled her sidelights under, it was fairly quiet going compared to the buffeting outside.

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I gave "Pisco" his course for the first leg in by the lights of the big sugar central, and then, as we opened up the inner bay, gave him a bearing on the notch—barely guessable against the overcast west—where the old cartroad grade pierced the brow of the cliff. The clouds were racing overhead and the baffling cross-gusts on the surface would have made it bad business for a sailing craft. But for a launch the task was a comparatively simple one. The loom of the old mill was discernible against the darker opacity of the cliff at a couple of hundred yards, and the right-angling lines of the pier at half that distance. As the latter was sure to have been built of the eternally-lasting *jarra*, I knew that it would be as solid and serviceable as the day it was abandoned.

I had not thought it best to risk dampening Captain Tancred's enthusiasm by confessing that I thought it was a good ten-to-one against my man's turning up at the rendezvous. Indeed, I could see no grounds whatever for hoping that Ranga had shaken the pursuit—already at his heels—and won through to the appointed place. Nothing short of a miracle could have compassed it, I told myself. It was on the off chance that the miracle had been wrought that I was keeping my promise.

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"'Bout half a point to sta'boa'd, Tuan. Way nuf now! Steady!" That deep rumbling voice from the darkness was a welcome surprise. "Pisco," heeding the quiet directions, brought his launch alongside the broad solid flight of steps as neatly as he would have laid her up to the *Mambare's* gangway in broad daylight.

Ranga was coming down the steps—with a slowness which I attributed to the fact that they were probably very slippery—when I heard a thud on the deck behind me, such a sound as a heavy, soft bundle thrown down from above might have made in striking. A second or two later there was an ejaculation of astonishment somewhere aft, probably from "Pisco," I thought, as the words were Spanish. I did not try to puzzle out the purport of them at the moment, as my attention was occupied with Ranga, who seemed to be hesitating at the last moment about coming aboard. Twice or thrice he drew back his foot from the rail, as though uncertain of his balance. And when the great bulk of him finally did surge forward, it was with a lurch that took all my strength to check it and prevent his reeling on across the narrow bow and over the other side. He steadied himself slowly, with a great intake of breath. "Sorry—make trouble,—Tuan. Now—I go aft."

"I am leaving you here, Ranga," I said quickly, for I was getting nervous about a movement of lights I had observed along the flume in the rear of the big sugar mill. "Captain Tancred will look after you on the steamer, and put you off wherever you want to go. He also has some money for you. Good luck!"

The big fellow took a long shuddering breath, and when he spoke it was as though he had rallied himself from a spell of faintness by sheer force of will. "Some day, Tuan—I pay you back—for all you do. So long." He turned with painful deliberation and started to edge along aft. I was a bit surprised that he had not grasped my extended hand, but could not be sure that he had been aware of it in the dark. It did not occur to me until afterwards that he had not used his own hands on the rail of the stairway in descending, and that he had seemed to shoulder his way back to the cockpit rather than to grope. I waited until his swaying shoulders ceased to blot the blinking of the phosphorescent seas astern, and then swung off to the stairs.

"All clear!" I called softly to "Pisco," as I felt the solid step underfoot. "Shove off when you're ready. *Buena fortuna!*"

It was doubtless "Pisco's" ejaculation in Spanish a few moments before, lurking in the back of my mind, that prompted me to speed the spirited coxswain in his own tongue. On the heels of that "*Buena fortuna!*" the words he had spoken flashed up in my memory. "*Cristo! Porqué la muchacha?*" It could hardly have been a sarcastic dig at Ranga's hesitancy in stepping aboard, I reflected as I mounted the slippery—astonishingly slippery—steps. He would not have expressed it quite that way in that case. A sudden slip in a slimy patch at the head of the steps put an end to conjecture for the moment, and when I regained my feet the answer was written across the cabin doorway of the turning launch. The lamp inside had—purposely—been turned very low, and the blurred silhouette of the figure that came groping out to where Ranga had collapsed on a cockpit transom might easily have been that of any one of old "Choppy's" true and tried launch crew. But wet amber silk reflects a deal of light, and there was only one peacock shawl in the world—or in that neck of the world at least.

CHAPTER XVII

DOWN THE FLUME

THE lights had disappeared from the flume as I turned to go, and, rather than take the chance of another fall, I decided to use my small electric torch in finding a solid footing. The lacquered crimson reflection of the fluttering disc of light instantly revealed the cause of the slipperiness I had encountered. The whole end of the pier was criss-crossed with thick trails of blood, with great spreading pools here and there where, whoever shed it, had stood or sat. The blood on my hands and raincoat, where they had come in contact with Ranga's reeling frame, proved beyond a doubt that he was badly hurt. That explained his unsteadiness on his feet, and also the fact that he had avoided shaking hands with me. Very likely, indeed, his hands were unfit to use. Tired to the verge of exhaustion though I was, my blood leaped at the thought of the battle royal the splendid fellow must have fought—and won. I was expecting to come upon traces of the fight at any moment as I picked my way in past the ruined mill to the foot of the old grade leading to the top of the cliff.

As I left the planking of the pier behind two sets of footprints appeared in the wet, firm earth of the path at the side of the road. Both were made by bare feet, but the larger ones—plainly Ranga's—were broken and irregular, and saturated with blood. There could be no doubt that his feet, like his hands, were frightfully torn. The small prints pressed very close to the side of the large, indicating that Rona was either supporting the wounded giant or being supported by him. From the fact that the smaller impressions were deeply indented, I figured that the former was the case—that she was helping him. The girl, evidently, was not badly hurt—perhaps not at all.

Where the path I was following joined the bridle-road at the brink of the cliff, the trail of blood turned off down the foot of the flume toward the big sugar mill. The battle royal must have been fought somewhere in the depths of the dense tropical growth that filled the rocky fissure in the cliff followed by the flume. What grim secret the black hole held would have to wait for the coming day to reveal. My way home led in the opposite direction, and there was some question in my mind as to whether or not I had the strength for the full course.

Fortunately for me the flume had been built along ridges and high ground, so that the trail following it had not been exposed to heavy flooding in the torrential rains of the early evening. I found it hard and firm underfoot for the most part, and by no means hard to follow without resorting to my electric torch. It would have been very easy going had I not been so nearly all in, but even as it was, by using my absinthe sparingly as I had done while painting, I managed to keep plugging steadily on toward home.

At one time something very near a panic seized me for a while, when the thought flashed through my mind that the great quantity of Ranga's blood soaked up by my boots and my clothes would undoubtedly leave a trail that Rawdon's hounds, should they chance to nose into it, would be quite justified in mistaking for that of the Malay himself. Even if I succeeded in holding the beasts off with my revolver, my presence there, and in such a state, would call for a lot of explaining. If

the Chief once became suspicious, I told myself, it would undoubtedly upset my plans to get Ranga away, to say nothing of involving both myself and Captain Tancred in a serious scrape. I was in a miserable state of funk until the cheering thought entered my head that Ranga had probably killed not only the dogs, but probably Rawdon and the Chief as well. That reflection reassured me immensely, and, buoyed in mind and body, I trudged on confidently to the foot of the waterfall.

I had noticed from time to time along the way that the flume, in its less inclined stretches, was overflowing its sides. The reason for this became evident when I reached the intake, at the side of the pool under the falls, where I discovered that the gate, usually only partly raised, was wide open. A flow of more than double the normal was rushing out of the rain-swollen stream and into the flume.

I was too tired to speculate upon how this might have happened. It was touch-and-go with my tottering knees all the way up the steep, slippery path to the top of the cliff; but, with three or four breathing spells and the last of my absinthe, I managed it, and came out at last upon the greensward rimming the bathing-pool under my bedroom window. It was comparatively quiet here, now that the roar of the falls was deadened by distance, which was doubtless the reason that I heard for the first time a racket from the other side of the plantation that must have been going on right along. It was rather a lucky thing that I *did* hear that noise before I turned in. Had I not done so, it is hardly likely that it would have occurred to me that it might be a wise precaution to remove my boots before entering the house, and then to strip off and burn carefully in the kitchen range everything that I had been wearing. It was all I could do to keep awake until the irksome job was over, but, since it was evident from the ki-yi-ing and cursing that was floating down the wind that Ranga had not made a clean sweep of Rawdon and his pack, I reckoned that it well might be the means of preventing unpleasant complications.

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My arduous climb up from the old sugar mill had served a useful purpose in one respect. The hard physical exercise had sweated the poison of the absinthe out of my system and relaxed the near-to-breaking tension my nerves had been under for thirty-six hours. I fell into a good normal hard-workingman's sleep the moment the mosquito-net closed behind me. And the best of it was that, when a pandemonium outside awakened me a little after sun-up, I tumbled out upon my feet in full possession of all my faculties. This was a mighty fortunate circumstance, for the rather delicate situation with which I was confronted called for something better on my shoulders than the usual "absinthe-holdover" head.

Harpool and Rawdon, it appeared, had experienced a beastly night. Losing a hot scent that had been picked up at the foot of the waterfall immediately after leaving the bungalow, they had been forced to take refuge in one of the labour villages during the deluge. Dragged out by the bloodthirsty Rawdon before the rain had ceased to fall, they had spent the night "working" the fringes of the bush in the hope of stumbling upon the trail of the elusive fugitive. The net result of this was the drowning of two more hounds and the driving of the baffled bushranger to the verge of distraction. Returning, dead beat, in the early dawn, they had encountered, at the intake of the flume, a scent so strong that even the paprika-dosed noses of Suey's victims followed it readily. Swarming up the cliff in full cry, the hunt came on to whirl in a mad war dance round the bungalow and put a period to my morning slumbers.

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The maniacal Rawdon was the worst difficulty, and I honestly believe that only the Chief's restraining presence saved me from the necessity of winging him with a revolver bullet to prevent his setting fire to the bungalow. That "bloody wombat" had dodged him once from that shack and he wasn't going to take chances on its happening again. The Chief and I finally induced him to leave his "ring of death" intact round the bungalow and come in and search for himself. That gave me a chance for a quiet word with Harpool, whom I did not want to have push on to town for fear he would start a search that might extend to the *Mambare*. Indeed, he admitted he was afraid that his man might have doubled back to Townsville and got off to the Singapore boat, which had doubtless sailed at midnight. He had lost a badly-wanted counterfeiter a fortnight ago that way. The skippers never seemed very keen to co-operate in a search of their ships. Too many little smuggling games of their own probably.

I suggested to Harpool that he have a bath, a change of clothes—my togs were about his size—and a snack of early breakfast. Afterwards—since his horse was gone—I would drive him down in my trap. In the meantime he could ring up the Police Station and give any orders he thought desirable by 'phone. (This latter suggestion I made in full knowledge of the fact that the line must be down for over a mile. I had seen myself where uprooted trees were responsible for wide hiatuses.) If it was in any way possible without arousing his suspicions, it was my intention to detain Harpool until I was sure the *Mambare* had sailed.

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The Chief fell in with my suggestion readily, and felt so much bucked up after a bath and a couple of whiskies-and-soda that he did not appear seriously upset when the telephone turned an irresponsive ear to him. Like the straightforward gentleman he was, he accepted at once my assurance that Ranga had not entered the house again, and took no hand in Rawdon's wild scimmages, which carried him from cellar to garret with no other result than the brushing of a bit more of the bloom off "Honeymoon Bungalow" with the soles of his hobnailed boots. Madder than ever after his vain search, he surlily refused my invitation to remain for a cup of the coffee that his Chink friend of the night before was already preparing in the kitchen, and slogged off down the

road, followed by three dragged hounds and two cursing helpers. I was a good deal cheered by the thought that it was unlikely that any of them would be getting through to town, without swimming, for another twelve hours at least.

Before he left Rawdon turned over to the Chief the little piece of red rag he had been using to put the dogs on the scent with. It was at this time that Harpool told me of "Squid" Saunders' suggestion, and of the visit to the schooner in search of a clue. I did not tell him that I recognized the rag as one which Ranga had used to wrap his little Malay flute in, and that it had undoubtedly been left there the morning the big fellow helped carry Hartley Allen to the quarantine launch. It was interesting, however, to know that Ranga was absolutely guiltless of the outrage to which he had confessed. I thought I could just conceive how a well-guarded passion for the girl might have prompted that chivalrous attempt to shield her from suspicion; but why had Rona herself committed the ghastly crime?—and how? It was many months before I was to have an answer to those questions, and they came from the lips of the last person from whom I could have expected them.

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Direct and straightforward as ever, Harpool was visibly impressed by my suggestion that Ranga had probably remained hidden near the fall until the pursuit had passed, and after returning to the bungalow and finding it dark, had retraced his steps and adopted the desperate expedient of trying to escape the dogs by riding down the flume. That reminded him that they had found the gate of the intake closed when they first reached it, and that it had occurred to him at the time that the fugitive might have done this so that he could walk down the bottom of the flume without risk of being carried away by the water. This would account for the patch of scent the hounds found at that point. The Chief said that he was for pushing along the path by the flume, but that Rawdon scouted his theory, insisting that their man had jumped back into the water and gone on wading downstream. The hound-master had carried his point, but, to be on the safe side, they had ratcheted up the gate to its full aperture and turned a stream down the flume heavy enough, he was afraid, almost to carry the sugar mill into the sea. And that reminded me (though, obviously, I could not speak of it) that I had not heard the roar of the mill's machinery when I paused at the brow of the cliff. There was no doubt it was hung up for some reason. Was it possible that Ranga had made his escape after coasting right down into the crushing gear? But of course not. He would never have been able to get away unpursued, even if he had survived.

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I welcomed for two reasons Harpool's suggestion that we ride down the flume and investigate as soon as breakfast was over. It would keep him away from town until the *Mambare* had sailed for one thing, and, for another, it would give me a chance to fathom the mystery that lay at the end of that trail of blood leading down into the rift in the cliff. It seemed probable to me that both Rona and Ranga, after the former had overtaken him—probably at the foot of the fall—had started down the flume on foot. Whether there would be any indications of what had befallen when the water overtook them remained to be seen.

The gate was still wide open when we rode along beside the intake, but halfway down to the coast we met a man from the mill who said that he was going up to shut the flow off so that a break near the lower end could be repaired. The wires were down from the storm, he said, making it impossible to 'phone directions to the plantation office. The break was a bit of a mystery, he added. Flume opened right out. There were indications that some large animal—perhaps a bullock—had been carried down—probably washed in at the upper end while the stream was at flood. Funny part of it was, though, that there was no trace to be found of the bullock below the break. Must have been washed right on into the sea.

Harpool pushed on eagerly after hearing that significant piece of news, and we reached the head of the first steep pitch at the top of the cliff some minutes before the water had ceased to flow. As I did not care to have the Chief discover the trail of blood leading down to the sea for a while yet, I proposed that we tie our horses here and walk down the top of the flume on a narrow board that evidently had been placed there for the use of workmen when repairs were necessary. It proved ticklish going—both on account of the incline and the elevation,—but nothing to trouble seriously a man with a sure foot and a steady head. Harpool, who was up first, led the way, I following closely.

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If the power of the flying bolt of water in the bottom of the flume had been impressive on the occasion of my first visit, it was a vast deal more so now, both on account of the greatly increased volume of flow and because of my certain knowledge that a human being—perhaps two of them—had gone down that chute, where I had been assured that a team of bullocks could not hold a man—and survived.

The foot-wide board on which we were walking was nailed to the left side of the flume. The top of the right side was a rough line of unplanned two-inch pine planks. Harpool had only taken a step or two when he brought up short with an exclamation of surprise and horror. "Look at that top board on the other side!" he shouted; "raw, red meat all the way from here right out of sight round the bend at the bottom!"

I looked, shuddered, shuffled my feet uncertainly, and brought my staring eyes back to the precarious footing. "Push on!" I implored quaveringly; "my head's beginning to swim as it is."

The roar of violently falling water came to my ears as we rounded the bend at the lower end of the steep incline, and just ahead was the break. The whole right or seaward side of the flume had opened out and the flood was pouring to the rocks below in a spreading forty-foot-high cataract. The ghastly smear along the top ran on unbroken, right out to the end of a loose plank, which was kicking spasmodically under the impulse of the released stream of water shooting under it. The Chief, pointing to a ragged fragment of bloody cuticle, wedged in a joint of the line of boards on which we were standing, delivered himself of what I believe was his only approximately correct diagnosis of any feature of the whole affair.

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"The fact that piece of skin and toe-nail were torn off on this side of the flume directly opposite the bulge," he said, "would seem to indicate that the brake our man made of his right arm flung over the top plank of the other side must have finally brought him to a stop here. Then he must have doubled up crosswise of the flume, with his feet against the place where that skin is torn off and his back against the end of that plank that is sprung loose. When he straightened out that great rack of bone and muscle of his something had to give way, and it seems to have been the flume. Probably the force of the water, where his body deflected it against the side, was of some help; but it must have come jolly near to staving in his ribs where it drove into him at right angles."

"Perhaps it did," I said. "We can't tell till we find him." I was not anxious to hurry up the search by any means; but I felt that it would be better to move on to a place where I could grow dizzy without the risk of plunging forty feet onto a pile of broken rocks. The Chief, with ready consideration, hastened forward, and my faintness passed quickly when I felt the solid floor of the crushing level of the mill beneath my feet.

It appeared that they had knocked off early the previous evening for want of cane. At the time, the superintendent said, he thought the flume had been carried away by flood water. He had only evolved the bullock theory when he went out at daylight and found the blood and meat smeared along the planks. The bullock must have got wedged in finally, he thought, and the water had piled up behind it and sprung out the side. They had not found the carcass yet, but, as there was a very sharp slope down to an in-reaching neck of the cove, it was not impossible that the rush of water had rolled it right on into the sea. Neither Harpool nor myself thought it worth while to ask him if he had found any bullock's hair among the "meat."

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Going down through the silent mill to reach a lower level before doubling back to the foot of the flume, a weird sort of sputtery peeping caught my ear while we were traversing the boiling-room. Something vaguely familiar in the sound caused me to trace it to its source behind one of the big vats. The *virtuoso* proved to be a lanky Australian sugar-boiler, whiling away the idle hour blowing across the holes in a queer little bamboo flute. One of the blacks had found it in the last run of the *bagasse*—the crushed cane—a while ago, he explained. Someone must have dropped it in the flume. Funny thing that it had been so slightly crushed in coming through the rollers. He gave it to me readily when I told him that I was a collector of primitive musical instruments. Said he had a much better one—made in Germany and all bound with brass—in his home in Maryborough. I took it on the off chance that I might some day be able to give it back to Ranga. I knew how greatly he was attached to it, and, since flutes like that were only made in one little pile-built village on the coast of Ambon, how hard a time he would have to replace it.

I played up the superintendent's "washed-into-the-sea" theory for the Chief's benefit as long as I could, but finally he circled round and hit the double trail of footprints that led down to the end of the old pier. The idea that Ranga had ridden the flume alone was so firmly rooted in his mind however, that he agreed at once with my suggestion that the smaller prints must have been made by an idle boy from the hung-up mill, who had perhaps trailed the blood on his own account, in the hope of getting the bullock meat. As I myself had made a point of keeping on the grass to the side of the path, my trail of the night was not discovered.

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"The poor devil must have thrown himself over here and been finished by the sharks and 'gators," Harpool shouted up to me from where, at the foot of the steps of the old pier, he stood beside the black-filmed pool that had drained from Ranga's wounds as he steadied himself for a few moments before lurching over to the bow of the launch. The Chief also said something more about coming back with a boat next day and searching the beach for anything that might remain. I didn't follow him very closely, for, just at that moment, a trim clipper bow slid out past the end of the southern point. Knowing a certain old brass-cylindrical spy-glass would be training landward from the bridge that followed, I opened and closed my arms swiftly in a surreptitious wave of farewell. Good old "Choppy" must have been standing very close to the whistle-cord, for his reply came instantly. The wind carried the toots that must have sprung from the heart of two woolly steam-puffs in the opposite direction, but I caught the message just the same. "All's well!" was what old "Choppy" signalled in answer to my wave. His "puff-puff" talk was a deal easier to understand than his English.

I was no longer in Australia when the *Mambare* returned from her maiden voyage to Singapore, so her skipper's report came to me in Paris by letter. He had put both of my friends ashore in Macassar, he said, safe, sound and comfortably heeled for "siller." He had become much attached to both of them in the course of the voyage, and couldn't thank me enough for putting him in the way of giving them a bit of a lift. He trusted I wouldn't fail to command him whenever another opportunity of the kind presented itself.

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The night that I sent Rona and Ranga off from the pier of the old sugar mill in the *Mambare's* launch marked the beginning of one of the strangest and most picturesque friendships the Islands ever knew; picturesque in the striking background the strongest and most terribly-scarred man in the South Pacific made for the hauntingly appealing beauty of the most interesting woman, and strange—more than passing strange—in that there was none who could say that their relations were ever other than those of mistress and servant.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MASTERPIECE

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THE third day after the *Mambare* sailed found me southbound for Sydney, with Paris as my ultimate objective. The thought that a striking—possibly a great—picture might be painted about the face I had already done came to me the first time I threw back the veiling rug and encountered poor Allen's terror-haunted eyes staring back into my own. In deciding to finish the work in Paris I missed whatever chance I might have had of doing something really worth while. That I did finally complete a picture that was striking, arresting—something to set the tongues of the art world wagging for many a day—was due to the effort I had already made—The Face.

With small chance of being able to do anything for Hartley Allen—at that time believed to be permanently insane,—there was no reason for my remaining longer in Townsville. As nothing that the good Chief of Police had learned—or ever did learn, so far as I know—was calculated to connect me with his failure to run Ranga to earth, he, naturally made no objection to my leaving. The whole affair was a complete mystery to him. The disappearance of Rona was rated only as a minor mystery. The amusing part of it was that it never occurred to the dear man to connect the two. The last thing that I fixed my glass upon as my southbound boat steamed out of the harbour was a confused mass of wreckage, blurring darkly against the mangroves a few miles north of the town. It was all that the late storm had left of the grounded labour schooner, *Cora Andrews*.

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Missing the P. & O. boat by twenty-four hours at Melbourne—too late to overtake it by train to Adelaide,—I found the next sailing was a *Messageries Maritime* steamer. Rather than wait a week for the next Orient liner, I booked for the French boat. This was all against my better judgment, especially in the light of the fact that I had work ahead. The one most effective influence I had known in keeping my use of absinthe at a point where it was not entirely beyond my control was the scathing if unspoken contempt of men of my own race for another of that race addicted to the insidious Latin habit. The nearest thing to a clean break-away I had ever made up to this time came after a stony-faced Cockney steward on a transatlantic Cunarder, who had put my whisky-drunken cabin-mate to bed one night as a matter of course, slammed the door with a snort when he surprised me pouring absinthe into cracked ice the following afternoon. In France, in French colonies, on French steamers—wherever the tri-colour flapped, in short—that restraining contempt was non-existent. There one found palliation, indulgence, even encouragement. That was the reason I had always become so abject a slave of the "Green Lady" during my sojourns in Paris, in Algiers, in Saigon, in Noumea. With no one to remind me of my shame, I forgot it, sinking ever lower and lower the while. This time, it had been my plan so to occupy myself with work on my picture in Paris that I should be able to keep my absinthe appetite just about where I had managed to hold it during the last six months in Kai and Australia. It is quite possible I might have kept to this program had I caught the P. & O. from Melbourne, or had the sense to wait for another British boat. As it was, five weeks of *dolce far niente* were too much for me. By the time we reached Suez, I was seeing so green that the desert banks of the Canal looked like verdant lawns to me, and at Marseilles they took me straight from the ship to the hospital, pretty well all in mentally and physically. As my case presented some interesting complications of malaria and tropical anaemia, the doctors took a good deal of interest in it. Under the circumstances, I was dead lucky to get out of their hands at the end of a month.

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Thoroughly disgusted with the world in general and myself in particular on the day I was discharged from the hospital, it was a toss-up for a few hours as to whether I should jump out for the Islands by the first boat, or push on to Paris. That I finally plumped for the latter was due more to the fact that there was no east-bound sailing for a couple of days, than to any faith that remained in my ability to get on with the picture. Considering all this, it seems to me that the effort I finally did pull myself together for was fairly creditable in its results.

It was The Face itself—after I had unpacked and set up the canvas in a studio that a former friend kindly placed at my disposal—that was responsible for finally jolting me into action. Even at the end of ten weeks, Hartley Allen's tortured features seemed as real to me as on the night I had finished transferring them from my burning brain to the canvas. It struck me then—as it seemed to strike the public later—as the nearest thing to flesh and blood ever flicked off the tip of an artist's brush; and I felt that I had only to daub in some kind of an *ensemble* around it to have a work that would at least give Parisian art circles something to talk about for a while.

It seemed to me that the most effective thing to do would be to make Allen, lashed to the schooner's wheel, the central and dominating figure on the canvas, and to have the other figures the creatures of his imagination—the phantoms conjured up by his reeling brain. These would include Bell, Rona, Ranga and a background of plague-stricken niggers. It was not to be—as we had planned the "Black-birder"—an attempt to portray some incident of the voyage. The "phantoms" were to be done in greys and blues, filmy and indistinct, to differentiate them from the solid flesh of the maniac tied to the wheel. It was not an uneffective conception, had I been up to carrying it out—which I wasn't.

By a remarkable coincidence, as I have already mentioned, The Face was in exactly the right place to fit into the *ensemble* I had planned. This was a good omen and I derived no little encouragement from it. Fearful of the effect that terror-stricken gaze might have upon my models, I stuck an opaque square of paper over the distorted features, with the intention of leaving it there until the rest of the picture was finished. This was a wise precaution, as the sequel proved.

The model whom I chanced to secure to pose for Allen's figure was an especially fortunate choice. He had recently finished spending six or eight hours a day lashed to a hollow canvas cross in connection with a mural decoration at some cathedral—Sacré Cœur, I believe it was,—so he stood up rather well under the strain being tried to the property steering-gear I had contrived to borrow from the *Folies-Bergère*, where the "marine" *revue* in which it had figured was just over. Considering the fact that I had never done anything but seascapes and was notably weak in anatomy, my work on this figure was far from being as bad as might have been expected. It was not seriously out of drawing, and, even with The Face covered up, one was conscious of an unmistakable suggestion of agony in the tensely-strained limbs and back-drawn torso. From the artistic side, I would undoubtedly have done better to have trimmed down my canvas and limited the picture to this single figure. This, however, never occurred to me until a long time afterwards. At the moment, my mind was quite incapable of running away from the track on which I had started it.

Although I knew that one of the things that must have been in Hartley Allen's mind was Bell's face, as he had described it to me—pain-twisted, with the lower lip bitten clean through, and a bar of light from the cracked binnacle slashing across it,—I could not bring myself to attempt to dramatize the sufferings of my friend. (Indeed, even at that time I had a guilty feeling that I was not doing the decent thing in using that of Allen in a picture to be exhibited to the public.) All that I did in Bell's case, therefore, was a back view of a huddled figure, sitting on the rail of the cockpit, with a half-empty whisky bottle rolling on the deck behind. It was not destined to draw much attention or comment one way or the other, for which I was duly thankful.

Ranga, as a consequence of being unable to find a model that would do him justice, I finally omitted. Rona came near to elimination for a similar reason, but in her case fortune, in the end, was more kind. It may be remembered that there was a so-called Hindu dancer leading the Oriental ballets at the *Comique* about this time. She was really an Eurasian half-caste—the daughter of a British "Tommy" and a Mahratta girl, born in Poona. With little of Rona's beauty of face and winsomeness of manner, she was still possessed of the same flaming temperament and a figure that might have been poured from the same mould. It was the lithe, sinewy, serpentine shape of her that caught my eye when I chanced to drop in at the *Comique* for a *matinée* of *Marouf*, and (as she was still a few strokes short of the crest of the wave of popularity on which she rode for the next season or two), I had little difficulty in persuading her to give me a few sittings. She insisted she was doing it for art's sake, but it was really vanity that brought her into line. Also, as transpired shortly, she had a very sharp weather eye for the main chance. In any event, the picture proved both her immediate making and her ultimate undoing. The advertising she got out of the fact that her living, breathing likeness had been painted into the most talked-about picture at the spring *Salon* of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* doubled and trebled her salary several times in the course of the next year. But it was also a reproduction of that same picture in a Vienna art journal that was directly responsible for luring to Paris the young Serbian ex-prince who chopped the girl to pieces with a curved Arabian scimitar—a part of her dancing toggery—as she was dressing to go on at a gala night of *Aida*.

It had been my original intention to paint Rona issuing from the companionway, just as Allen had seen her rush out on the morning Bell died. This, however, was far from meeting with the approval of Keeora (that was what she called herself at the time; it was only in her hey-day that she was known as Kismet), who insisted upon breaking in full length or not at all. I was so sodden with absinthe by this time, so sick of the whole job, so anxious to get quit of it for good, that I raised no objections. The flighty thing proposed a sort of near-aerial posture on the deck-house that was something like a cross between the wing-footed Mercury and one of Puck's getaways in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Rather than lose the girl outright, I let her have her own way. Steadied by two or three convenient guy-wires and puffing contentedly at one of my hemp-doped cigarettes, she held her painful pose with a fortitude truly Oriental. I can see yet the queer little heart-shaped pucker that dented the muscle-knotted calf of her leg when she swung up to the tips of her toes.

I fancy it must have been a certain appeal the audacious minx made to my physical senses that prodded on my flagging energies. Everything that was left in me I devoted to making her absurd conception effective on its own account. To make it so as an integral part of the picture was, of course, out of the question. It is still a matter of a good deal of wonder to me that I succeeded as

well as I did. The pirouetting figure on the *Cora's* deck-house might just as well have symbolized *Peter Pan*, or *The Spirit of Spring*, as *Rona Rampant*; but the fact remained that it was exceedingly pleasing to the eye. In this connection I thought an American tourist—from somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon Line by his accent—expressed himself rather well. I overheard the remark on my first and only visit to the *Salon*. "If that little filly doan leave off kickin' up so neah them buck niggahs," he drawled, "things ah suah fixin' fo' a lynchin' pa'ty. By cracky, if she doan look good enuf to eat!"

It was "them big buck niggahs" that were responsible for bringing my labours to a sudden end. I had managed to round up a half-dozen hulking Senegambians from the docks at Havre to pose for my plague-stricken Solomon Islanders, and for the first two or three days things went very well. I was striving for a sort of Doré-esque effect, by painting a tangled bunch of blacks writhing in the half-light of the shadowed waist of the schooner. The lazy brutes found lolling round on the studio floor a deal more congenial work than humping cotton bales, and I was getting on very encouragingly considering my wretched condition, when one of the prying rascals, taking advantage of a moment when my back was turned, turned down a corner of the patch that hid the face of the man lashed to the wheel. What damage was wrought was inflicted on such flimsy furniture as chanced to be in a direct line of flight from the "models' throne" to the door. Fortunately, the canvas was well to one side. The Senegalese, it seems, have a raw, red terror of the "Evil Eye."

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That little episode brought to an end my work with models. I simply blocked in my plague-stricken blacks in a rough sort of way and let it go at that. The effect was hardly as crude as one would think. The remark of the Southern gentleman I have quoted proved that a man not unfamiliar with niggers could at least distinguish of what the tangle in the waist was intended to be made up.

I have definite recollection of only one further occasion on which I tried to work. The interval in which I had anything approximating command of my normal faculties had dwindled to a half-hour or so in the afternoon, and I quickly found that I was utterly unable to concentrate my mind sufficiently for connected effort even then. On the occasion I have mentioned, I knocked off dead after discovering that I was trying to decorate Keeora's brow with the wreath of maiden's hair fern that had crowned the aviating "Green Lady" in her flight of the night before. I chucked in my hand complete after that, and had the whole monkey-show packed off to the Selection Committee. As might have been expected, the picture nearly caused a riot in that temperamental bunch of "pickers," but, in the end, The Face won the day with them, just as it did with the public.

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Of the furore created by "*Hell's Hatches*" in the *Salon* it will hardly be necessary for me to write. Most of the excitement it stirred up was traceable to the haunting horror of the face of the wretch tied to the wheel; the rest was due to its name, which only suggested itself to me at the last moment. Perhaps the fact that everyone was baffled from the outset in trying to discover the *motif* of the bizarre thing also contributed to the impulse of the whirlpool of morbid curiosity with which it was engulfed. And who could blame them for failing to discover any connection between a tied-up maniac, a hunched-up drunkard, a kicking-up dancer and a bunch of tangled-up niggers? The avalanche of surmises would have been highly diverting had not my sense of humour already fallen a victim to the apathy that was rapidly settling upon my mind and body.

My outstanding recollection of the whole affair is of a highly effective by-play staged by that keen little publicist, Keeora, who had become a bit piqued over the slowness of the Press to broadcast the identity of the lady dancing on the deck-house. Utterly indifferent, I had avoided the *Grand Palais* not only on the opening day of the *Salon*, but also during the week that followed, when it was reported that the *Avenue Alexander III* was at times blocked with the throngs striving to get within sight of the most intriguing picture shown in years. My telephone was disconnected; telegrams and letters by the stacks lay unopened; a pile of newspapers were unread. Growing more sullen and sodden day by day, I had eyes for nothing but the green bottle at my elbow and the constantly replenished glass of cracked ice by its side. All the rest of the world was one soft, verdant tunnel—nothing else. I had been drinking steadily for days, afraid to face the reaction that must inevitably follow the first break in the continuity of the flow of the life-saving trickle of green.

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In a way, I suppose, it is Keeora I have to thank for the fact that, when I finally left my room in the *Continental*, it was to be headed for the *Grand Palais* instead of to *La Morgue*. I am quite convinced that nothing short of the violent eruption of hysteria that soulful lady brought off outside my door would have induced me to open it, and probably no one else in Paris could have been equal to just that kind of an outburst. In passionate French-Cockney, Keeora told how, after failing for days to reach me by 'phone and telegraph, she had at last come in person to bear me to the *Salon* to share with her our common triumph. That didn't move me greatly, but when she swore that she was going to stay until she "jolly well croaked, G'bly'me," unless I let her in, something inside of my head snapped and I gave way. (I always was like that with hysterical women.) When I opened the door I discovered that she was dressed in some Mogul princess sort of a rigout, and accompanied by an Italian *Marchesa* and two or three lesser satellites. Between them and my valet they got me dressed and down to a waiting carriage.

To get away from the mob at the main entrance, they took me around to the *Avenue d'Antin* side of the *Grand Palais*, where Keeora pointed out with glee that the *Salon* of the *Société des*

Artistes Français, which had opened a week or two previous to that of the *Beaux-Arts* outfit, was almost deserted. "Et tout, mon cher Monseer Witney, por raison de—de la grand success de 'Aykootillys don fur."

"And what might they be?" I asked dully, rather fancying some new sort of epidemic had broken out.

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"Madame means to say '*Ecoutilles d'Enfer*,'" began the *Marchesa* politely; "eet—eet ees—"

"Eat your bloomin' 'at!" cut in the lady impatiently, indignant that anyone could be so stupid as to have her Parisian interpreted to him. "Don't you twig me, old cock? That's wot them French Jo'nny calls 'El's 'Atches."

The picture was extremely well hung, both for position and light; though whether this had come about as a consequence of a reshuffle after it had turned out to be the main drawing card, I did not learn. There was a roped-off area in front of it, and through this a number of perspiring attendants were feeding the crowd, working hard with tongue and hand to keep the chattering line in motion. Keeora called my attention to a woman who had fainted and was being carried out on a stretcher. "Bowls 'em over just like that right along," she giggled. "Six of 'em squealed and keeled back just w'ile I was 'angin' on 'ere yustidy. But it ain't *me* wot gets 'em," she hastened to explain; "it's that crazy bloke at the w'eel, wiv 'is bloomin' eyes borin' right through your chest an' raspin' up an' down your spine. Don't see wot you wanted to put '*im* in for any'ow."

At a word from Keeora's sedulous satellites, the attendants opened up a line through the mob and cleared a space in front of the picture. Then, assuring herself with a critically comprehensive glance that the setting was all correct, she rushed in, threw her arms around my neck, kissed me smackingly on both cheeks, French-fashion, and began declaiming in her best Parisio-Whitechapel how I had earned her undying gratitude and affection (*mon amours eternel*) in making her the central figure in the greatest work of art of modern times. It was all extremely well done—from Keeora's standpoint, that is. She had a solid phalanx of reporters massed in the background, as a consequence of which, after the next morning, there was no chance for anyone to remain longer in ignorance of the fact that the nymph hot-footing around the coamings of "Hell's Hatches" was Keeora of the *Comique*. The following Saturday the management came round voluntarily to her hotel with a new contract worth several thousand francs a week to their rising *danseuse orientale*.

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For myself, groggy in head and knees as I was, the experience was rather trying. Breaking away from her stranglehold at the first opportunity, I told Keeora to keep her "eternel amours" for those who wanted them, and bolted. There was some pretence at pursuit, but, with the real magnet drawing in the other direction, I finally managed to elbow clear. Hailing a cab in the *Champs-Élysées*, I returned to my hotel.

But the interruption, as I have said, was a fortunate one. It checked my downward slide dangerously near the point where a crash was due. I was far from being out of the woods yet, but the interval of comparative lucidity had given me enough courage to try to pull up. Unloading all the firearms I had about my suite and giving them to my man, I told him to go away for the night and not to return until noon of the following day. Then, as restrainedly as I could, I drank during the first three or four hours of the evening, before allowing myself to go to sleep. The crisis—the dread reaction I had feared to face—I knew would come on awakening in the morning. It arrived on schedule—two hours of teetering on the edge of hell and cursing myself for putting the guns beyond my reach. Even with the *absintheteur's* notorious dread of cold steel, I fingered Hartley Allen's Portuguese throwing-knife a long time before mustering up the courage to drop it out of the street window. That gave me a new idea, and I held lengthy debate with myself about following the knife to the pavement. If I had been on the fourth floor instead of the second, I might have tried it. As it was, fifteen feet to a glass marquee didn't look good enough. But at last I won through—just. It was a sorry looking figure that shivered back at me from the mirror after I had got up my nerve to ring for a pot of black coffee at seven; but I was off the toboggan, at any rate, with my face set unflinchingly toward the one place in the world where I felt there was at least a fighting chance for me to pull up again. I had arrived at the end of the day of which I had dreamed so long—"My Day," I had called it. Paris had come fawning to my feet—and brought me Dead Sea Fruit. I was going back to work out my own salvation in the Islands.

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I had a rather trying time of it, getting packed up and away on such short notice; but I simply did what I could and let the rest go. Putting Paris behind me was the thing. It took all that was in me to do it, but I caught the Brindisi Express from the P.L.M. station that night.

My last act before leaving the hotel was to sign a paper brought there by a well-known art dealer, with whom I had talked by 'phone earlier in the day. It authorized him to sell to the highest bidder a painting in oil known by the name of "Hell's Hatches," delivery to be made immediately after the closing of the spring *Salon* of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*. It also provided that he should receive a liberal commission for his services. It must have been something like a month later that he collected ten per cent. on three hundred thousand *francs* less about five hundred paid some second-rate artist for executing a slight alteration in one of the figures. It was a petty Sultan from Morocco (high card with Keeora at the moment) to whom the picture was knocked down after

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a spirited run of bidding with an Irish distiller and a Chicago soap-maker. The buyer's only condition was that the man lashed to the wheel should be changed to a *burnoused* Arab. That would tend to give the picture an atmosphere more in keeping with his desert palace, he said; also, he wanted the *efrangi's* face covered up. The eyes made him jumpy.

CHAPTER XIX

AFTER ALL

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I HAD not planned by what route I should go to the South Seas, and it was only because an Orient-Pacific liner chanced to be the most convenient connection at Brindisi that I went by Australia instead of by India and Singapore. I was rather glad, on the whole, that I was going to have an opportunity to learn something at first-hand of Hartley Allen—or, Sir Hartley, as he had become since I left Australia. That much I had been able to gather from an item I had read in *The Times* shortly after my arrival in Paris. This stated that Sir James Allen, Bart., Agent in London for New South Wales, had just died of pneumonia. Being without male issue, it was understood that the title would pass to his younger brother, formerly a well-known racing man, and more recently in the public eye through his heroic action in navigating a labour schooner full of plague-stricken blacks through the Great Barrier Reef to Queensland.

Nothing was said in the local item of the outrage aboard the *Cora Andrews*, but the day following a dispatch from Sydney stated that Sir Hartley Allen was recovering his health and strength at a sanitarium in the interior, from which, however, it was not expected that he would be in a condition to be discharged for several months. The shock to his nervous system from the mysterious attack upon him in Townsville three months previously had been so great that only time could obliterate the traces of it. He had not yet been allowed to see any of his old friends, but the correspondent affirmed on good authority that Sir Hartley's reason, so long despaired of, had been fully regained.

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From the fact that the attack was still spoken of as "mysterious," I took it that Allen, for some reason of his own, had refrained from revealing the identity of the person who had left him to die lashed to the wheel of the *Cora*. What that reason might be, was one of the things I hoped to learn when I should see him in Australia.

Hartley Allen was still in a sanitarium in the Blue Mountains, I learned on my arrival in Sydney, but of late there had been little news of him. He was believed to be getting stronger, slowly but surely, though no hope was held out that he would appear in the saddle again for at least another season. It was unlikely that I would be permitted to see him, but there would be no harm in trying. I should, of course, communicate with his physicians, not with Allen himself.

By a lucky chance, in wiring the head of the institution where Allen was under treatment, I stated that I was a former friend of his from the Islands. A reply arrived the same day, telling me to come on at my earliest convenience. The eminent nerve specialist in charge of the case drove down to meet me at the train. It was very fortunate indeed, he said, that I had mentioned in my telegram that I had known Sir Hartley during his residence in Melanesia. He had failed, very stupidly, to recognize my name as that of the famous artist who was about to paint Sir Hartley's picture when the attack upon him occurred. As a consequence, he was about to wire a refusal to my application, when he recalled that news from the Islands was the one thing in which his patient had shown any great interest. Accordingly, he had asked Sir Hartley himself if he cared to see a certain Roger Whitney, lately arrived in Sydney. The eager interest manifested by his patient was the most encouraging symptom the latter had shown since his mind had cleared. If I would carefully refrain from introducing any subject calculated to excite Sir Hartley nervously, he was confident that my visit would be productive of nothing but good. It was even possible, should it prove convenient to me, that he would want me to remain for several days. Sir Hartley was quite sound in brain and body. What he needed was increased vigour of both, and to this end he would have to develop a greater interest in living than he had yet shown. It was just possible there was something on his mind....

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After leaving my coat and bag in the reception-room, the doctor led me out across a bright solarium. We would find Sir Hartley out of doors, he said, probably playing polo. He seemed to hate the very thought of having a roof over him, even to sleep under. It was a strange sight that met my eyes as we came round the corner of the veranda. In the shade of a grove of blue-gums and stringy-barks a wooden horse had been erected, saddled with a light pigskin, and provided with snaffle and curb reins running back from the angling bit of board that served as "head." Astride the saddle, in the famous short-stirruped "Slant" Allen seat, booted, spurred, and in immaculate whites, slashing smartly at grass-stained and dented bamboo-root balls that were alternately tossed in and chivied by a pair of bare-footed youngsters, was a familiar figure. Save for the white hair (which I had already seen) and the absence of the former coat of tan, he did not, from a

distance, appear greatly changed. It was not until his eyes met mine at close range that I was conscious of the weary listlessness which, like a bed of ashes, smothered the coals of his old fire.

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Allen had just poked away the first of two successively thrown balls in a sweet-running dribble, and sliced off the other in a sharp-angling "belly cross," when he raised his eyes and caught sight of the doctor and me coming down the steps. Swinging a bit uncertainly out of the saddle, he came toddling in a swaying childlike trot across the grass. His grip was firmer than I had expected, and the thought flashed through my mind that this was the very first time I had ever shaken hands with him.

"I've been wondering when you were going to turn up, Whitney," he exclaimed eagerly. "There's something I've been waiting to talk to you about." He spoke in generalities while the doctor lingered, saying that he had given up his old idea of returning to the Islands, and that, instead, he was hoping to get away before long to a back-blocks station he owned and ride the boundaries for a year or two. But when the specialist, evidently assured that his experiment was getting under way properly, quietly excused himself, Allen led me over to the wooden horse and launched at once into a subject which had doubtless occupied his mind for many days. From ancient habit he leaned, as he spoke, now on the hollow pigskin of his "pony," now on the flexible Malacca handle of his polo mallet.

"You're the only man in the world I can talk to about this now, Whitney," he said with a queer new quaver of weakness in his voice. "I suppose that's because you're the only person I ever talked to about it—before. I take it, Whitney, that you had no great difficulty in making up your mind as to who was responsible for—for my night of contemplation on the *Cora*?"

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"Well," I began evasively, "I had such grave doubts about Ranga's guilt that I went to some little trouble to get him away. Mostly old 'Choppy' Tancred's work, though."

"Good old 'Choppy'!" said Allen with an appreciative grin; "on hand at the right time as usual." Then, with serious interest: "But the girl—how did she manage to get clear?"

"Just turned up and helped herself to a place in the launch I was sending Ranga off in," I replied, a bit worried at my failure to lead the conversation away from subjects "calculated to excite Sir Hartley nervously."

"And you were also convinced of *her* innocence, I suppose," he said, eyeing me with a strange smile across the leather-bound handle of his mallet.

"On the contrary," I answered; "I knew that she was guilty. I had taken your throwing-knife away from her the same night. I knew that Ranga was quite innocent, even though the police, through a silly ball-up, tracked him down with their dogs."

"Then why did you let the girl go?" he pressed.

"Because I thought I knew Rona well enough," I replied evenly, "to feel sure that she wouldn't have done—what she did, unless she was convinced in her own mind that she had a good reason for it." It was a stiff jolt for a sick man, that; yet, for the life of me, I couldn't have made an evasive answer.

But there was a smile of untold relief on Allen's face as he leaned over and laid his hand on my arm. "You were right, Whitney," he said in a voice that trembled with the depth of its fervour. "You were right. She *did* have good reason. I ought to have seen it all along."

"I don't quite understand," I said, greatly puzzled. "Do you mean that all you told me about your—your having nothing to do with Bell's death was not true?"

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"Not at all," he replied, with unexpected vigour. "Everything that I told you that afternoon at the *Australia* was true—according to my understanding of the moment, I mean. But later my understanding broadened a bit, you must know. A chap doesn't spend a night tied up alone with the spirits of three or four white men, and Gawd knows how many blacks, without coming to comprehend some things that have eluded him before. I didn't go all the way off my chump till well along toward morning, you see; and I was broadening my understanding all the time."

"I was never able to make out," I remarked somewhat irrelevantly, "how the girl managed to get the best of you the way she did."

"Oh, that," he said lightly, in a voice that indicated he rated it as a negligible incidental to the "broader understanding" that had come to him as a consequence. "Well, I suppose you have a right to know if you are interested in that phase of the affair. I simply got tired of holding out against the girl, that was all. Her relentlessness wore me down. It was not long after our return to Townsville that I realized that her picture stunt was only a blind. She counted on it to get me away to the schooner, where she could finish me off on the scene of—of my offence. I won't need to tell you

that hit me jolly hard. Training out Yusuf and making a clean-up for Doc Oakes' mission with him helped while it lasted; but I gave up as soon as that was over and there was nothing to do but wait and brood. Since I knew she'd have her way in the end, I told myself that the sooner it was over the better. That was the reason I finally consented to go off to the schooner with her when she waylaid me on the north road, the day after I paid you my last visit.

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"She must have planned the whole thing in advance for the place at which she intercepted me was at the point where the road ran nearest to the wreck of the *Cora*. As it was low tide, we were able to walk on the sand to within fifty yards of the heeling hulk. Careless of consequences as I was, I readily enough consented to her suggestion that I wade the remainder of the way, carrying her in my arms. For the rest, it was more or less of repetition of her little coup at Kai. She pinched the knife from my belt while I was wading out with her, keeping it carefully out of sight while we were walking round the deck of the schooner. I missed it presently, but thought it had fallen from its sheath while I was clambering over the side. Leaning over to look for the knife in the water, I felt the point of it on my neck. Same old place—just over the jugular. Trick she learned from the Malays.

"I told her to hurry up and get the job over. She coolly replied that this wasn't the place she had had in mind for it, and would I mind coming aft to the cockpit? Confident that she knew how to do the thing with decency and dispatch, and heartily glad to get life's fitful dream over anyhow, I went. Just like a lamb to the slaughter, Whitney. It sounds foolish, but I assure you that's just the way it happened. The idea was so fixed in my mind that a plain every-day throat-cutting was all she was figuring on, that I let her get three or four hitches of the log-line around my shoulders before it occurred to me that she might have a few refinements in pickle. I started to put up a fight at that, trying to force her to use the knife straightaway. Do you think she would do it? No fear. She wouldn't deviate from her set program by a hair. Rather than risk having the joint jolted into my jugular so that I would bleed to death quickly and painlessly, she dropped the knife and used both hands on the log-line. We had a hell of a tussle, Whitney, but she wore me down. Those three or four well-thrown hitches she had to start with were too much of a handicap.

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"When she finally had me bound fast, she sat down on the rail of the cockpit to recover her breath. I tried to argue with her, pointing out the certainty that I would be seen and rescued in the morning if she left me as I was; whereas, if she would cut my throat then and there, it would finish things for good and all. I also reminded her that dead men tell no tales; that she would be much less likely to get into trouble herself if there was no one to bear witness against her. (Fancy a man having to rack his brain for arguments like that, just to get his throat cut, Whitney.) The girl admitted the soundness of my contentions, but declared she was willing to run all the extra risk for the sake of cleaning up the job 'good an' propa.' (One of Bell's expressions, that, wasn't it?)

"Then—I must have begun losing my nerve a bit, I think—I told her I had never yet been able to twig why she had a grudge against me at all; said I'd only done for Bell what I'd be jolly glad to have another man do for me under similar circumstances, and probably a lot more twaddle along the same line. She listened for a while, as though she rather enjoyed hearing me rattle on in that vein. Then she got up and disappeared down the half-open companionway. When she came back on deck she had an empty whisky bottle in her hand, probably one of a stack left in my cabin. This, with some effort on her part and much to my further discomfort, she wriggled under the lashings about my chest until she seemed satisfied it was held securely. Then, binding a filthy gag of oakum in my mouth, she stood off and looked me over critically. 'I the-enk you will twe-ig ver-ee much purretty soon, Mista "Slan",' she finally chirruped with a knowing nod of her head. Without once looking back, she stepped to the side, jumped over, and waded ashore. I never saw her again—in the flesh, I mean. It took a deal of squirming to shake that bottle out. The satisfaction of hearing it break when it hit the deck was the only comforting thing that happened in the whole night."

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"And you say that you understand why she did it?—that you believe she was justified?" I exclaimed incredulously, shuddering at the horror of a cold-blooded cruelty that even Allen's deliberately matter-of-fact recital could not obscure.

"Most assuredly," he replied with an enigmatic smile. "I'm just a bit surprised that you don't see it yourself, Whitney. It seems to me that a chap like you ought not to miss a point like that. But then, you haven't had a night alone on the *Cora Andrews* to broaden your understanding like I have."

"What was it?" I asked bluntly, completely mystified and not a little awed.

"Just this," he answered, growing suddenly serious. "That bottle I shoved along to Bell the night he died had been partly emptied—by me, of course. Well, the first thought that entered the girl's head, when she came across it on the deck near his body, was that he had been drinking from it. In spite of all my assurances to the contrary, it seems that she was never able to rid her mind of that idea. That was—"

"But couldn't she see *why* you offered him the whisky?" I interrupted. "What if he did drink some of it? She must have known it was the one thing that would have saved his life."

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"Ah, that is just where you miss the point, Whitney," he cried. "And that was just where I always missed it until—she showed me the way to a broader understanding. Don't you see that Rona realized that keeping away from whisky, as he had sworn he would, had come to mean more to Bell than even a new lease on life? Well, she did. But, even so, one would hardly have expected her to fall in with the idea. And yet, don't her actions prove that she even did that? Whitney, I've never come across anything comparable to the straight physical passion of those two for each other. And, if anything, hers was the hotter flame of the two. There must have been something of the impetuosity of her rages in her loving,—for.... Well, the most maddening of all the thoughts I tried so long to stifle in Kai was the one that those frequent welts and abrasions appearing on Bell's neck and cheeks and arms were not from the bites of no-nos or mosquitoes. And yet, loving his body like that, she loved his soul enough more to be willing to give up the body that the soul might pass in peace. It was because she thought I had intervened to destroy that peace of soul, Whitney, that she—well, the effect of it was to pave the way to my broader understanding."

THE END

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Transcriber Notes:

Throughout the dialogues, there were words used to mimic accents of the speakers. Those words were retained as-is.

Errors in punctuation and inconsistent hyphenation were not corrected unless otherwise noted.

On page 34, "dispayed" was replaced with "displayed".

On page 67, "skin-kicking" was replaced with "shin-kicking".

On page 74, an apostrophe was added in 'Slan'.

On page 102, "Ulupua" was replaced with "Utupua".

On page 159, a period was added after "he was going through".

On page 176, "its" was replaced with "it's".

On page 188, a quotation mark was added before "On the off chance".

On page 203, "at the botton" was replaced with "at the bottom".

On page 205, "twentyfive" was replaced with "twenty-five".

On page 233, "back of the easel" was replaced with "back off the easel".

On page 238, "in no may" was replaced with "in no way".

On page 241, "ejaculted" was replaced with "ejaculated".

On page 246, "Marbare" was replaced with "Mambare".

On page 282, "firsthand" was replaced with "first-hand".

On page 285, "listnessness" was replaced with "listlessness".

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HELL'S HATCHES ***

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