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MYSTERY GOLD

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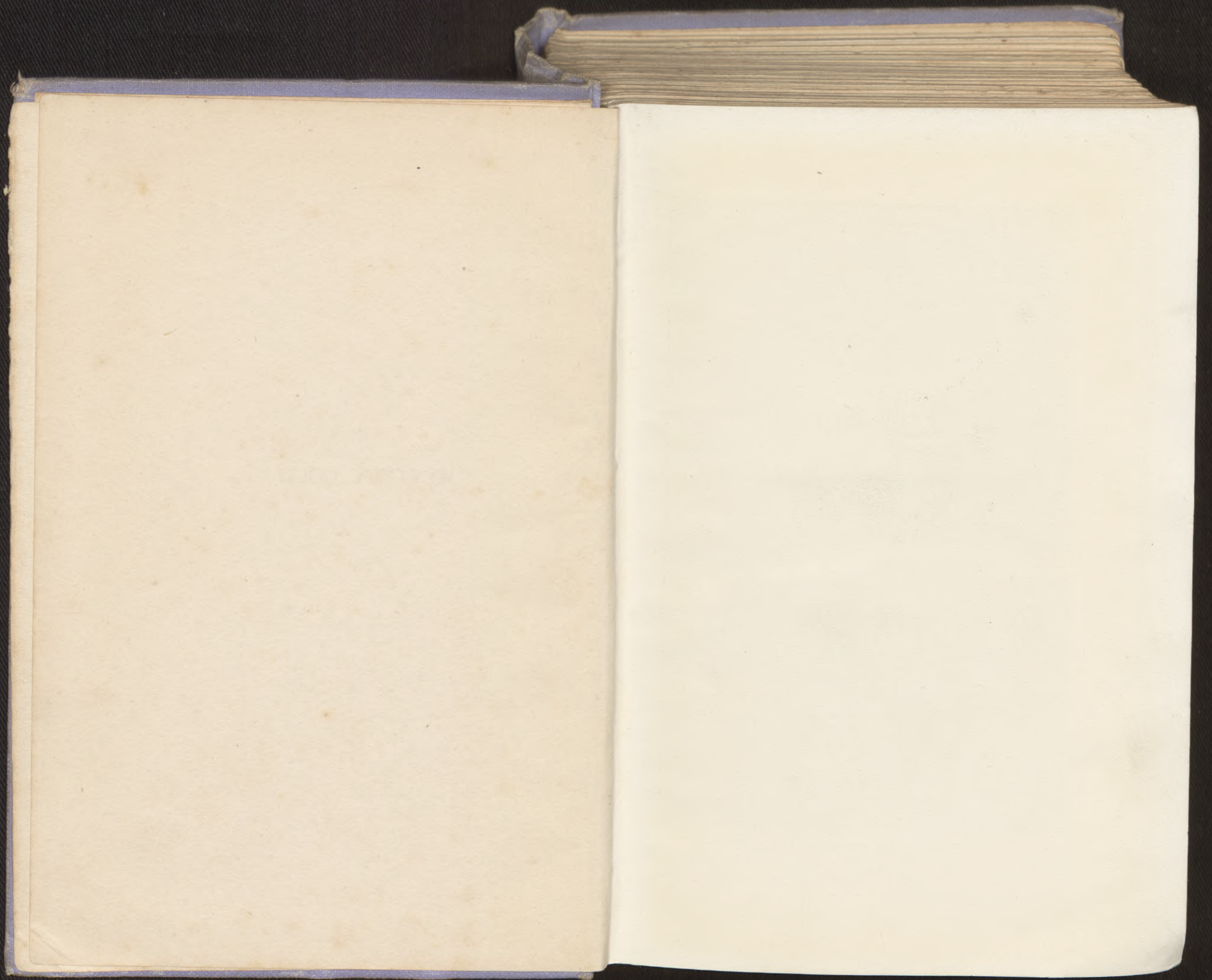
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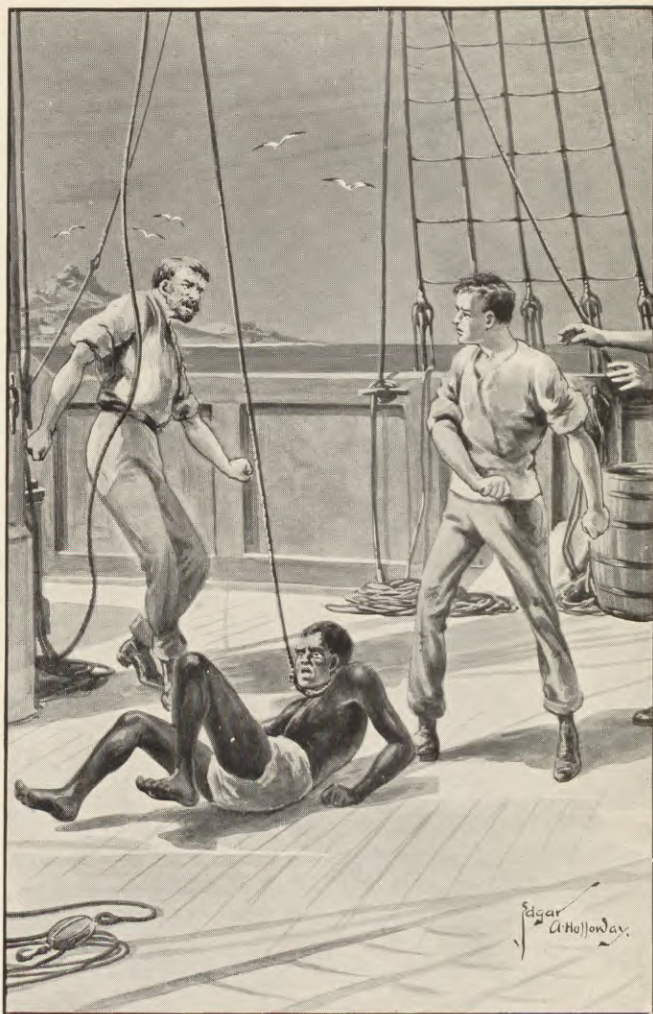
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JOHN FAY & SON  
\* BOOKSELLERS \*  
LISMORE





A blow that sent him reeling.  
(See page 7)

# MYSTERY GOLD

BY  
BARTLETT ADAMSON

*With illustrations by Edgar A. Holloway*

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PART I  
THE LAGOON



## CHAPTER I

### THE RUNNING NOOSE OF THE *RIPALONG*

WHEN I signed on as cabin-boy of the *Ripalong* I had no notion as to her true business, nor did I guess what manner of man her skipper chanced to be. Much less did I dream of the strange events which were to befall me ere I should reach home again.

I was but a lad of sixteen at the time. My mother had died a few weeks before. I had never known my father. Alone in the world, and compelled by circumstances to start earning my living immediately, I had welcomed the opportunity of obtaining a berth in the *Ripalong*. I was entirely ignorant of the wild deeds that were done on the lonely waters and among the lonelier islands of the Pacific in those days, or perhaps I would have waited a trifle longer and sought employment elsewhere.

But it is difficult to say: the *Ripalong* was a beautiful little tops'le schooner and looked like a ship of brave adventure as she rode the calm waters of Sydney Harbour. Even had I known of the dangers I was about to face, it is probable that I would have made light of them in my youthful eagerness to sail in such a delightful vessel.

Old Booky Ben was sitting on a coil of rope, reading as usual. He looked up for a moment and said "Storm's broke, Billy! Better look out f'your neck. Old man's run out of dope. It's always the same. I know." Then he resumed his reading. He deserved his nickname if ever a man did.

That afternoon I found out what Booky had meant.

Evans, storming along the deck, bellowed out an order to Kalele, one of the boys. It was shouted so incoherently that no one could have understood it; but because the native hesitated, the skipper, with a look in his eyes such as I have never seen in any other man's, roared, "I'll teach you, you blundering idiot of a nigger!" and he called to the carpenter.

I had not known that Noosey was more than a carpenter on that ship, and when I saw what he was about I was more curious, and more fearful than ever, to know what such an evil man could mean by his references to birds. There was something dreadfully sinister in the way he had always used that mysterious word.

He now went forward and loosened a rope which ran through a pulley attached to the yard-arm. Then he strode towards the unfortunate Kalele and knocked him down, dragged him along the deck, and standing him under the rope, slipped the running noose at the end of it round the fellow's neck. It was easy now to see why he was known as Noosey.

Then he announced to the Captain, who stood glowering near by "Ay, ay, sir! All ready."

The Captain nodded his head. The carpenter hauled on the rope until the native was lifted several feet above the deck, and hung there slowly strangling.

When I recovered from the first sickening shock of that sight I became so enraged that I dashed at the carpenter and landed him a blow on the jaw. It was unexpected and sent him reeling. He let go the rope, and Kalele fell to the deck, where he lay half-conscious. At the same time a strong hand seized me by the back of the jacket collar and nearly choked me. It was the skipper.

I think I would have been a match for the carpenter. Although young I was fairly tall. I must have stood over five foot nine in my stockings, and he was no taller. But Evans stood well above six feet and was immensely powerful.

As he held me he heaped curses over me, and ended "You young chicken-livered namby-pamby of a poltroon! What do you mean by interferin' with the ship's discipline? Think I don't know how much hangin' a nigger can stand! Haven't I strung up dozens of 'em, and don't I know to a tick when to let 'em down without quite killin' 'em? I'll teach you to interfere!"

Kalele by this time had freed himself from the rope and slunk away. Evans now grabbed the noose as it swung loose, and still holding me with one hand, slid it over my head. I was so much afire with anger that I hardly cared what happened, and when he told the carpenter to tauten up I felt as though it would almost be

good to die. Then that monster might be brought to justice.

As I stood there, with the rope chafing against my neck, Evans roared "Will you promise not to interfere any more?"

Even then my temper got the better of my common sense. I was quite helpless, but I scarcely realized this as I glared back and dared "No, I *won't* promise."

This seemed to take him by surprise; and my defiance, foolish though it was, had an unexpected effect. Instead of making him angrier, it steadied him. For a second or so he seemed undecided, then somewhat more calmly he said:

"The dickens you won't! Well, take my warnin' and next time anythin' like this occurs, up you go, good and high, and you won't come down before the last gasp the way the niggers do, either."

With that he strode below. Noosey released me. "Narrow shave that time, young idiot! Your silly sort shouldn't be aboard a blackbirder, anyway."

There was that reference to birds again, but this time it was "blackbirder." Towards evening I got a chance once more to ask old Ben what it meant. This time he explained. It was really slave-trading. Natives were seized from the more remote islands and taken to work on the Queensland and Fiji sugar plantations whether they wished to do so or not. They were called Kanakas, and it was supposed to be all quite legal, but nevertheless was a bad business.

Ben also told me it was a habit of Captain Evans nearly to strangle the boys of his crew at the least cause. I felt sick and dizzy. I decided I could stand such a life no longer.

Some of the crew had visited Chasm Island that morning. The small rowing-boat they had used was still tied astern. I decided to climb down the rope, cast off, and make for the island as soon as darkness came. I would have to hurry to reach shore before the moon rose. That evening I found it was easy enough to get down into the boat, but I got a great fright when from the stern of it I saw two big eyes gleaming whitely at me.

It was Kalele, who had made up his mind to take the same course that I had chosen. When he found out it was only the cabin-boy Bili Karatane, which was the nearest he could get to Billy Gordon, he lost his fear and made every show of gratitude.

We let go the mooring rope and started away, rowing hard. The island showed darkly about two miles off, but the moon came up by the time we had gone half way. Then we heard a shout from the schooner. Soon afterwards we could see a dark speck on the silvery water behind us. It was a boat in pursuit. We rowed with frenzied energy.

It was a thrilling race in that warm moonlit air and we looked like winning; but I had forgotten the difficulty of landing. An experienced hand was needed to drive a boat through those big rollers booming down on the beach, and we were soon in trouble. A huge breaker caught

us and tossed our boat into a smother of foam as though it had been a leaf.

Luckily I could swim. Seeing Kalele apparently helpless near by, I made a few strokes, reached him and, nearly winded and utterly exhausted, managed to get him to the beach. Then I saw that he was covered with blood. The gunwale of the overturning boat had split his head in a terrible manner. I called to him. He did not answer. I felt dreadfully lonely all of a sudden. Then I felt his heart, and knew that he was dead.

At that moment a shout brought me to my wits. The other boat was charging in towards me on the crest of a breaker. There was no time to waste. I ran up the hill as fast as my weariness would let me.

My pursuers were close behind me by the time I neared the top of the island. Glancing back now and then, I could see them scurrying up through the patches of bright moonlight. When I reached the crest of the ridge they were but a few yards away, and a terrible weariness was in my legs. I could hardly breathe.

Hopelessly I looked back, and at that moment found myself falling. I clutched at some bushes. They held me for a moment, but gradually gave way and sent me dropping dizzily through space.

I seemed to fall for ever. The air rushed up past my ears and a sickly sensation caught me. Then something sprang upward, so it seemed, and hit me. I was almost in a dream when high above I heard the voice of Evans say "That

finishes him, the young idiot! Serves him right. Fell clean into the sea. Saw him splash."

I knew I wasn't in the sea, but that was all I did know. Unconsciousness came over me, and when I awoke it was dark. The moon had set and it was near dawn. I felt bruised all over, and one of my ankles was badly sprained.

When daylight came I found out where I was. I also learned why the island was known as Chasm Island. From where the *Ripalong* lay becalmed nothing out of the ordinary could be seen, but the island was really two islands. It was split down the middle by a chasm which extended clean from side to side. The walls of this great cleft fell straight and smooth to the sea, which flowed through the passage into the lagoon on the inner side of the island.

Half-way down the chasm a large flat boulder was lodged, bridging it from side to side. On this I had fallen. It was about ten feet wide and twenty feet from wall to wall, and as the walls rose about fifty feet above me, and fell about the same distance sheer below, I was completely trapped.

A breeze came up; and after a while the schooner drifted into view. I knew that anyone aboard it could now look clear through the gap in the island, and that a telescope would almost certainly be searching the passage; so I dared not move, but lay flat out beneath the blazing sun. It must have been two hours before the scarcely perceptible drift of the schooner carried her out of sight and allowed me to move again.

My ankle was very painful; but I crawled

from side to side of my perch peering down for some possible way of escape. After a while I decided several points.

The breakers charging through the passage below broke and flowed on into the lagoon. But between each breaker a strong current could be seen running out towards the sea. Evidently the bottom of the chasm sloped steeply seaward.

My only chance was to leap that fifty feet into the water, and, not being a high diver, I did not feel joyous about it. Not only that, but I would have to take off from the lagoon side of the rock and time my fall so that I would be carried in on a breaker. To miss would mean being carried out to sea in that strong current; and even if I caught the exact moment, the force of the breaker would barely carry me far enough.

I felt glad that I had so often bathed among the breakers in the bogie-hole at Ben Buckler, and knew a bit about them.

I waited while six rollers boomed through below. Then I judged my time and slipped from the ledge. It was a dizzy fall, but I was lucky. I just caught the drive of the breaker, and it bore me nearly through into the lagoon. By swimming furiously I was able to reach the calmer water before the back-flow caught me. It was hard work, and I knew how the lagoons teemed with sharks, but I had to chance them.

A quarter of a mile away the island sloped to a white beach. With some difficulty I arrived there at last. Some natives found me later the same day. They canoed me across to the larger island at the far side of the lagoon. There they

gave me into the care of the local trader, a decrepit ex-sailor.

Dan Rockley was the name of my new-found friend. He was a thorough scoundrel to all appearance. Dirty he was, and much battered, and his left ear was missing. But he proved a valuable ally for he knew and hated the captain of the *Ripalong*. He was only too glad to help me when I had told him my story.

"Evans!" he growled, "Worst cut-throat in the South Seas, and that's sayin' a lot!"

He assured me that I might live with him and his native wife, Tamata, as long as I liked.

Dan was the only white man in the group. His store was at Malusa Village on the main island of Malusa, and there I stayed as a sort of assistant for close on twelve months. Dan was drunk half the time and he got into the habit of leaving me in charge of the store. He also made a general confidant of me. In fact there was only one secret, so far as I knew, that he kept from me. That was how he had come to lose his left ear. Once I was foolish enough to ask about it. He answered with a scowl and an instinctive glance over his shoulder.

For the rest it was a drowsy life, wakened only by the occasional visits of island schooners and the dealings with natives who strolled in to buy gaudy cotton prints, beads, salt, and tinned things, and to sell parcels of copra.

To fill in time I started to learn the Malusan language, a dialect of Polynesian, taking lessons from a little native girl named Rara who could speak English fairly well. She was a friendly,

merry-hearted little thing and took a childish delight in my mistakes. What with this pastime and roaming about the island, or bathing in the lagoon between whiles of attending to the store, the year passed quickly enough.

The store was a dirty, broken-down shanty with a wide veranda. On this I used to sleep, having told Dan that I preferred sleeping in the open air. In truth, the only room available within was a hole too vile to inhabit.

From the store veranda the view was wonderful. I used to wake when the rays of the rising sun came streaming across the wide ocean, across a corner of the lagoon waters, through the fringe of coco-palms, and through the tall trees of the surrounding bush to the slight rise on which the store stood.

But one morning, as I glanced down to the lagoon, I was surprised to see a spanking little tops'le schooner anchored there. She must have arrived in the early dawn, since she certainly had not been there the previous evening. As I looked at her familiar lines I felt myself go pale.

It was the *Ripalong!*

## CHAPTER II

### THE SECRET LEDGE

WONDERING if Evans had learned of my presence at Malusa, I hurriedly dressed and went in to tell Dan. He looked deadly serious, and mumbled some words to Tamata who was already busy getting breakfast.

She left her preparations immediately. Beckoning me to follow she led the way up a hill at the back of the store. We passed along an overgrown track which in places was so thick with bush as to be hardly a track at all. At length we reached the face of a cliff.

This seemed to be the end, but Tamata, whispering "Come long this way!" crawled under a clump of jungly creeper. I followed snake-fashion, and found the entrance to a sort of cave. It proved to be merely a passage through a wall of rock.

When we came out at the other side we were in a very secluded place indeed. The cliffs rose sheer round three sides of a mountain shelf several acres in extent. The front of the shelf was open to the sea, and on this side the shelf was bounded by a precipice.

From a small hole in the cliff at the back there spouted a goodly stream of clear water. It

sparkled down a cascade, wound its way through a luxuriance of bush and plunged finally over the sheer drop in front. It was a wonderful retreat, for it could only be reached by the tunnel-way through which we had come.

After Tamata had gone, having first told me to stay there till I got word from Dan, I explored the ledge thoroughly.

Near the cascade was a cave, a shallow one certainly, but quite deep enough to make a dry sleeping-place, however much it might rain. I found fruit in plenty, bananas, mangoes, oranges and citrons. There was no danger of starvation. From the front of the ledge I could look down upon Malusa Village and the lagoon, and watch for the departure of the beautiful, evil little schooner, which from that height looked like a white toy on the blue water.

The day was long, and it was very lonely up there when evening came. I longed for even old Dan to be near by. There was something eerie about the place. But I was most thankful that that ledge existed, eerie or not, for it certainly was a safe spot to hide in should Evans be searching for me.

During the day I had made a very cosy bed of leaves in the cave; but after I lay down many an hour passed before sleep came to me.

Next morning I had just finished bathing in a pool of the creek when footsteps sounded through the bush and old Dan appeared. He told me that Evans somehow had found out that I was not drowned, and that I was staying at the store. Dan had denied it—it did not

trouble him in the least whether he told the truth or otherwise. Tamata, whom Evans had questioned, denied ever having heard of me.

But Noosey, the carpenter of the *Ripalong*, had got hold of one of the natives down in the village and forced him to tell what he knew about me.

Old Dan looked like murder when he told me this. "That carpenter's a bad 'un, Billy—a bad 'un! If he treats another of our natives the way he treated that one to-day, I'll shoot him."

He did not tell me any more, but he had told me enough. Something dreadful must have been done, for Dan Rockley was not the sort to worry over trifles where natives were concerned.

He had brought some bread and tinned stuff up with him and told me not to leave the ledge till the *Ripalong* sailed. Tamata, he promised, would come up at least once a day to me. Then he left. He did not want that scoundrel Evans to suspect that he had been away from the store.

So through long days and lonely nights I waited.

Often I was tempted to leave my hiding-place and spy out the land about the village. But I remembered that old Dan was sheltering a deserter, and might get into trouble were I found.

Day after day, with faithful regularity, Tamata used to come to me, bringing food as my supply ran down. I could not but admire her loyalty. And there was a motherly kindness about her

that made me realize how, under her coloured skin and her plain features—for she was distinctly plain—she was true of heart. Maybe when old Dan had first taken up with her, nearly ten years before, she had been good-looking enough, but now any trace of beauty was utterly vanished. Indeed, when I first saw her I had wondered at even Dan the toper choosing her. But while hiding on that ledge I learned to value Dan's judgment more fully.

On the eighth day Tamata did not visit me. Neither did Dan. The ninth also passed with no sign of them. This worried me. Tamata knew that my supply of food, except native fruits, was low, and for that reason when she had last left me she had promised faithfully to come the next day. As evening approached I decided to wait no longer. Something was wrong, I felt convinced, and I would find out what it was.

Stooping low I crawled out through the passage-way, and under the jungly mass which hid the exit.

Everything seemed safe, so, taking good note of my bearings, I set out for the village. I went cautiously all the way, and came at last within sight of the back of the store. By this time darkness had fallen over the island like a black velvet cloak.

There seemed to be no one about, but I could see a dancing glare reflected over the shanty, as though a camp-fire were burning at the front of it. I crept across the small clearing and peeped in through the open door.

By the light of a candle that burned low between three nails driven into the table I saw old Dan lying huddled in a corner. A bottle lay beside him, the usual rum bottle, and his breathing was heavy. I knew the symptoms. Time after time had I seen him thus. It was easy to understand why he had not been to see me.

But Tamata!—why should she have failed in her promise?

Just then I heard a voice from the front of the house. It made me start. I knew it, and I knew the exact tone of it. No one but Evans, and Evans in one of his worst moods, could have spoken like that.

"Now!" he shouted. "Now will you speak?"

I threw discretion to the winds and leapt through the back room, into the store, over the counter, and so to the front door. What I saw there made my blood run cold, and set it boiling the moment after.

In the clearing before the veranda a fire had been lit, evidently to give light. At the edge of the cleared space, under the old iron-tree whose feathery foliage gave such a sweet shade when the tropic sun was high, there stood three people. Evidently they had not heard me dash through the store.

One was Captain Evans, his immense height towering above the others. The second was Noosey, and, as usual, the dirty brute was unshaven. He stood holding one end of a rope, as when I had last seen him. The other end was noosed and hung over the limb of a tree.



That was what horrified me. Unable to discover me by fair means, these two villains had made Dan utterly drunk, and were now going to force poor old Tamata to speak—and the noose of the rope was already round her neck.

I seized the weapon nearest to hand. It was the handle of a broken paddle, which Dan used occasionally as a bar for the front door. When not in use it stood against the wall just inside the shop.

With this as a lance I raced down the slope. I must have looked as mad as Don Quixote charging at the windmill, but I was not thinking about appearances at that moment. I was in deadly earnest, and there was good reason to be.

By the light of the fire I could see that Noosey had taken a hitch of the slack round his elbow, just as he had done aboard the schooner, and I knew that the next move would be a wicked little tug which would tauten the rope and draw the noose tight around Tamata's throat.

The slope was thickly carpeted with grass, so that I charged down almost silently. Also, the fire blazing between me and those two scoundrels prevented them from noticing me. Instinctively guessing that this would be so, I made straight for the fire so that there would be more chance of taking them by surprise.

I had nearly reached it, intending to circle sharply round it, when a new idea came to me. Keeping straight on, I leapt clean over the flames. Tamata told me afterwards that it seemed as though I had sprung straight out of

the fire itself, and for a moment she thought me some sort of debbil-debbil.

Evans had not much time to think what I looked like or where I had come from, for I went full tilt at him with that crazy lance set somewhat like a bayonet at the charge. Before he realized what was happening I caught him fairly amidships. His towering form doubled up, and he slithered backwards under a bush, completely winded.

I stumbled a step or two myself from the force of the impact, then, recovering balance, I swung the weapon round, intending to dispose of Noosey, but it was an unwieldy thing to use as a club, and Noosey was not taken by surprise like the skipper. He ducked and dodged the blow.

He had let go of the rope, but instead of closing with me as I had expected, he scuttled off into the night as quickly as his clumsy gait would allow. He was always an ungainly creature, and his awkwardness was at its worst when he tried to run, so that he vanished into the heavy gloom of the moonless night for all the world like one of the huge crabs found in coral latitudes.

Evans lay motionless where he had fallen.

I sprang across to where Tamata still stood beneath the tree. As her hands were tied behind her, she was unable to help herself. I freed her from that horrible noose, and then, taking out my knife, cut the strings which bound her wrists. Next I pulled the rope from over the limb of the tree, for I had some thought of

trussing the skipper with it, but it was too late. He was already on his feet.

That frightened me. I knew I was no match for him; also the look I had once seen in his queer rusty-coloured eyes was still vivid in my memory.

Dropping the rope, and picking up the paddle-stem, I started for the store, with Tamata a few yards ahead. Behind me I could hear the bushes breaking beneath the weight of Evans.

"Quick, quick, Tamata! He's coming!"

Poor old thing! She stumbled into the store, with me close on her heels. As I slammed the door and barred it with the old paddle I heard the skipper's footsteps on the veranda.

It was almost a farce trying to barricade that shanty. If a heavy man had leaned against it I believe the thing would have simply tumbled down. However, I dashed through to the back door, and shut and bolted it also.

Returning to the front, I heard Evans hammering on the panels and threatening me with all sorts of dreadful punishments. His voice was husky with rage, and it was so evident he meant all he said that my blood ran cold. He must still have been suffering from the blow I had dealt him, and therefore lacking in energy to turn threats into action. Every now and then the torrent of vile language would be interrupted by a groan or a sharp cry of pain, and he seemed to be leaning against the door as he hammered it, as though to support himself.

"I'll get you yet, young 'un!" he shouted, "I let you off once, did I? But I'll catch you if

I have to lose the flaming ship! And when I do get you it won't be the noose. Nothing so gentle. It'll be the thousand cuts—with some improvements of me own. The thousand cuts, d'you hear? And that won't be all. That'll just be the wind-up!"

So he went on. Every second syllable was an obscene oath. I feared every moment that he would break in.

My first impulse was to escape by the back and make for the mountain ledge with Tamata. We would have been quite safe there; but that would have meant leaving old Dan to the fate Tamata had just escaped, and, even had I been coward enough to let another man suffer for me, Tamata would never have left him.

Looking back on that night, and remembering the fear I had of the skipper and the threats he made, I am very proud that never for a second did I dream of leaving old Dan in the lurch.

As it was, I went through to where he still lay in drunken sleep, but, though I shook him and called to him, he gave no sign of waking. I then got a new candle, and set it up in place of the old one, which was fluttering to an end. After that I returned to the store-room, where those curses were still fumbling their way through the cracks of the door, and where Tamata was crouching in a corner behind the counter.

By the white gleam of her large eyes in the darkness I knew what fear was in her heart, and, knowing that, I felt like going down on my

knees before her. For even with that great fear upon her, the old soul had refused to betray me—had gone to what looked like certain death rather than reveal my hiding-place.

Outside, the black-bearded, black-hearted Captain still raved; but there was now a sound of weariness in his voice. In a little while I heard him step unsteadily across the veranda and sit down. By peeping through the corner of the window, I could see his huge form seated against the veranda post. The fire was still blazing in the clearing. He held a flask to his mouth for a long while. I think there could hardly have been a smell left in it by the time he had finished. Next, he took a revolver from his hip-pocket, and fumbled it in the unsteady light, feeling, rather than seeing, that it was loaded.

A mad impulse came over me. I prised a strip of deal from one of the cases, and then took off my boots. Silently I unbarred the back door and sneaked out. There was no trouble about this. I could have sneaked away quite easily, and I have never made out why Evans did not trouble about such a contingency. Probably he was still feeling too ill to worry much, and knowing old Dan would not be able to escape, he just left it at that. I felt mighty savage with Dan for being such a dead weight at that moment.

Going round to the end of the house, towards which Evans had his back turned, I stole noiselessly along the grass against the edge of the veranda, and so got close behind him.

He must have felt my presence, for he turned—but not quickly enough! With a swift upward cut of the piece of wood I caught the revolver or his hand (I'm not sure which), and sent the weapon spinning through the air. It landed on the grass some yards away, as I had hoped. At a bound I seized it. Fortunately the fire gave a fairly good light. Pointing the revolver at Evans, I shouted:

"Move, and you're a dead man!"

I felt quite heroic for the moment. It had been a bold move. I had counted on the skipper being still rather shaken by my previous attack and on my being the more agile in any case—and I had counted rightly. I felt a bit nervous all the same, and it was not such plain sailing as I had hoped. Instead of showing consternation or even annoyance, Captain Evans, for the first time during my experience of him, laughed heartily.

His laughter was not pleasant to hear. There was not only derision in it, but malevolence. A moment before I had felt like a victor; now I felt helpless and afraid.

"Very smart, young 'un! Very smart! That's another score agin' you, though. All these little hanky-pankies won't do you any good. You're on this island, and you can't get off it, except by the *Ripalong*, and you're going by her, let me tell you. At least, you're going part of the way. I sort o' feel that you won't last the full voyage, but we'll see that you get a decent burial—with a Bible and all. And maybe you'll last out long enough to learn that Captain Evans means to

have discipline aboard his hooker. There's no one on this island to help you. I know 's well as you that that old cove inside there is the only other white man in the group. Lot o' good he is to you, too!"

Then he suddenly leapt into a rage, and went on "I'd stay here a year rather than let you give me the slip. D'you think I'm going to let it be said that a youngster like you bested me? Before I've done with you, you'll be a cringing idiot praying for mercy. I'll show you! Yes, you! standing there with a gun in your hand looking like a hero in a penny-dreadful!"

If I looked like a hero I didn't feel like one by now. There was such a sense of self-confidence, such certainty, in the man's vindictive words. A strange foreboding came upon me, a feeling that he would yet have me in his power.

Maybe the heavy, hot stillness of the night had something to do with it, in the same way that one often feels some disaster brooding in the air when a thunder-storm is about to burst. Or, maybe it was simply a premonition. I saw a queer craftiness glint from the skipper's eyes as he sat motionless on the edge of the veranda.

"P'raps you'd better have a look at that gun and see if it's loaded;" he said, "Didn't occur to you, did it, that the thing's empty?"

A sickly sensation came over me. I felt like a mere baby in the man's hands. After all I was pretty young compared with him. I could have wept for vexation. Instead I broke the revolver, to see if his words really were true, though they were so confident that it seemed useless

even to look at the weapon. But when I glanced down I was astonished to find that it was loaded in every chamber.

He had tried a bluff, and had failed.

A sense of relief flashed through me, but at the same instant my arms were jerked behind me and twisted into an attitude that caused intense pain if I made the least move. The revolver dropped from my hand, and Evans, with an ape-like leap, got it.

He was now holding it against my temple.

I had been wrong. He had tried a bluff, and had succeeded.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE SHAN FANG COMES TO MALUSA

"Got the young fly-be-night this time all right, sir!"

It was not difficult to guess what had happened. Returning to ascertain what had become of his chief, Noosey had been in time to see me seize the revolver and had crept up behind me. Evans had been able to watch him sneaking nearer and nearer; and the triumphant tone of his jeers and threats and the clatter of his talk were designed to mask that stealthy approach across the grass.

"Shut up," growled the Captain, "nobody's speakin' to you, and, anyway, you've got to explain where you've been, and why you didn't get this blasted youngster noosed up long ago."

Then, turning to me, "I'm thinking you don't look so tidy as you used to, Billy! Ain't got no jacket with a collar to it, f'r instance. Miss the loving care we gave you aboard. Never mind, Billy! I'll take you in hand, we'll soon have you dressed up collar and all in a rope."

He had spoken quietly, and but for a curious little twist of the voice, it would have seemed kindly, until the last three words. These he

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loaded with all the compressed rage his other sentences had been holding back.

I remember wondering what sort of a drug opium could be that the thirst for it should drive a man to such malevolent fury as gleamed in those rust-coloured eyes. I had knocked him down, certainly, and had once again interrupted his dreadful practice, but the look in his eyes was a madness quite apart from any ordinary glare of rage, as though the lack of that vicious drug drove him to a frenzy in which he wanted to gloat on someone else's misery.

This thought leapt through my mind as the Captain strode towards the fire. He gave the wood a kick, and the flames fluttered and danced in the night with new energy. Then he returned, carrying the rope which had lain there since Tamata had escaped its dread terror. He slipped the noose round my neck and commanded: "Down with him!"

Noosey, with a twist that nearly dislocated my shoulder, threw me face downwards on the ground and, still holding my hands behind me, he knelt on my back. I was quite helpless; and the least attempt to move was agony.

By the light of that leaping fire they tied my wrists securely, with the running noose of the rope still about my neck; after which Noosey, holding the slack end, gave me a kick and said:

"Up you get."

I struggled to my feet; I don't know how, for the rope was so arranged that the least movement of my arms tightened the noose and nearly

choked me. It was a terribly efficient way to fasten a prisoner, and left no chance for me to wriggle my hands and loosen the knots.

With the carpenter still holding that slack rope, I was driven, like a slave in the old Arab days, down to the beach, where a rowing-boat waited with Booky Ben drowsing in the stern-sheets.

It was a year since I had seen him, and I was surprised to find him still one of the *Ripalong's* crew. He had a lantern burning, and by its light I noticed his crooked nose.

It is curious what thoughts come to one at all sorts of inappropriate moments. I was nearly choked by that rope, and was feeling too near dead even to nod to him, but I started wondering how his nose had been so damaged.

The Captain pushed me into the boat; and then I must have fainted. At any rate, I thought no more about broken noses or anything else, and the next I knew I was lying on the deck of the schooner, my hands still fast, but my neck free.

Old Booky Ben was leaning over me, and when I opened my eyes he growled "Come along now, none o' your pretending. Worthless young dog! Deserting ship! Jump up or I'll kick some life into you."

I scrambled to my feet, with pains in my head and throat, and a dull sort of astonishment that Booky should be so rough; he had always been rather kind to me before.

There were three cabins in a deck-house aft, and he took me along to one of them. As he

went he snapped out fresh curses at me every now and then. But when we came to the door of the cabin he whispered:

"Kidstake, lad! I'll help you if I can." Whereupon he cursed again more heartily than ever, and vowed that nothing was too bad for a runaway.

Inside the small cabin he unfastened my hands and after whispering "No use trying to get out," he stepped outside and closed the door. A key grated in the lock, and footsteps moved away.

In spite of what Booky Ben had said, I felt about me in the darkness and softly tried the door. Of course it was useless. I fumbled my way to the port-hole and found it barred. Evidently this cabin had been specially fixed up as a prison. I had not known of it before and had never been inside it, but I well understood that such a man as Evans might have use for a lock-up aboard his ship. For the rest the place seemed quite bare, so I lay down in a corner and went to sleep.

When I awoke, nearly suffocated by the heat of that cramped space, I found that it was morning. Fearing that we might have sailed at the first light of dawn, I peered through the port-hole, and was relieved to see that we were still in the lagoon.

Then I examined the cabin. It was, as it had seemed in the darkness, quite bare. The bars across the port-hole were strongly bolted. The door was still locked, and appeared to be unusually strong. Booky Ben had known what he

was saying when he had whispered that an attempt at escape would be useless.

I next went through my pockets, but there was little enough in them; I found a couple of bits of string, a box of matches, a handkerchief, a pocket-knife, and a book called *Travels in the East*. The latter had been brought me by Tamata to beguile away the wearisome waiting, day after day, on that lonely mountain ledge. There were three old novels in the store but I had already been through them again and again. I had appealed to Tamata for fresh reading; and she had done her best for me. At her last visit she had brought this travel-book, explaining that she had found it at the bottom of Dan's old sea-chest, the key of which she had taken from him when he was tipsy. At the time I wondered what he would have said had he known, for the one thing about which he was particular was that neither Tamata nor myself should touch his precious old box. However, the book had proved a great boon. I was half-way through it.

Taking my knife, I went to the port-hole. I might just as well have taken a needle to harpoon an alligator for all the impression a knife could make on those bars. Next I tugged at them. They were as stout as the ship itself, but as I tugged I caught sight of something that made me start—there was another ship in the lagoon: she must have just arrived, for I could see them letting go anchor and furling sail.

The vessel was schooner-rigged, but had a

funnel, so I surmised that she used auxiliary steam-power. This was unusual, and I thought maybe she was a sort of war-vessel doing police duty about the Islands. However, I could see no sign of guns or naval uniforms.

It was about an hour later that I heard footsteps outside my prison door. They stopped, and a voice said:

"What d'you make of it?"

Another voice, which I recognized as old Booky's, replied "Dunno! It's called the *Shan Fang*. Seems to be a Chinky rig-out. Chinky captain, Chinky crew, Chinky name, Chinky everything. Darned queer! No trepang in these parts. And steam, too!"

A lot of good a Chinese vessel would be to me in my present plight, I thought. Then an idea came to me: for some minutes or so I pondered on it, and decided it was worth a trial.

Just about this time a curious noise reached my ears. At first I did not really notice it, but slowly its persistence won through to my attention. So far as I could judge it came from a cabin next to mine, used, I had always understood, for any occasional passenger that the *Ripalong* might pick up.

Placing my ear close to the wall I listened. The sound was as of some one sobbing.

That gave me a queer feeling—a very queer feeling. I could think of no explanation other than that some poor fellow, one of the crew doubtless, had been so ill-used by Evans that he

now lay, a sobbing wretch, imprisoned in the next cabin. I tapped on the wall; and the sound ceased. I tapped again; but only silence answered me. And although I listened closely for a long while I heard nothing more.

All this time my heart was heavy with dread. I could still hear those mysterious words of the skipper, those threats of the thousand cuts. I wondered what was meant. I thought of the cuts of whips, and of knives, and I felt sick.

On the top of this I began to have an agony of thirst. Hunger did not worry me, for I was too oppressed to wish for food; but in that sweltering box of a prison I would have given anything for a pannikin of water. Taking the book from my pocket, I tried reading to distract my thoughts, but found it useless. After wandering over two pages I had no idea what they contained. The book was not in the least interesting; at any rate, not just then. I remembered that up on my airy and secure mountain ledge, with the cascade chattering in a friendly tone beside me, it had seemed a splendid book. The mere thought of that stream of clear sweet water made me feel more parched than ever. Perhaps part of the promised torture was that I should be left to the agonies of thirst for days.

I don't mind saying that I nearly started to cry. I was utterly miserable; and ever in my ears I kept hearing those horrible words:

"A thousand cuts! A thousand cuts!"

But I pulled myself together and opened the book once more. I tried reading it upside down. That was at least something new, something to keep my thoughts busy. When the novelty of this faded, I decided to read backwards, and opened it at the end.

That is how I came to make a third surprising discovery that morning. The first had been to see another ship in Malusa Lagoon. The second was to hear some one sobbing. That was horrible, and I scarcely dared think of it. The third was that the fly-leaf at the back of the book had been gummed all round its edges and was stuck to the back cover. This of itself was nothing; but I could feel a small sheet of thick paper inside the sealed pocket thus formed. I made an opening with my knife, and took the piece of paper out. It was thick, and very tough. Long afterwards I learned that it was vellum; but now I was chiefly interested in the fact that it was covered with queer hieroglyphics.

I did not study them at the moment, because there was scarcely time for a glance before I heard a key being put in the lock. Sliding the paper into its recess at the back of the cover, I slipped the book back into my pocket.

The key turned, and the door opened. The steward, a Solomon Island boy, stepped inside. He placed a pannikin of water and a couple of ship's biscuits beside me where I squatted on the floor in one corner. Then he slipped out again with never a word. I seized the mug and drank. Water had never tasted so sweet before. So



thirsty was I, and so eagerly did I drink, that I did not notice that some one had entered the cabin.

Maybe this was because the drinking vessel, being a wide one, had pretty well covered my face as I drained it.

Be that as it may, when I lowered the pannikin I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a short piece of knotted rope swinging slowly beside me, and glancing hastily up to the hand that held it, and up to the face above, I found the giant figure of Evans towering over me.

#### CHAPTER IV

##### MYRA ESCAPES FROM THE SCHOONER

My first impulse was to cower. Probably I did shrink toward the corner slightly. The skipper's eyes widened and lit with that gleam of cruelty I had noticed in them whenever any of the native boys cringed before him.

Instantly I pulled myself together and stood upright. It was not easy. In my heart I was afraid, but I knew I had to forestall the frenzy which at any moment was likely to convert Evans into a wild beast insensible to any appeal.

As I rose to my feet he stepped back a pace and drew his hand backward as though to hit me; but before he could do so I said, as stoutly and calmly as my nervousness would allow:

"Good morning, skipper!"

He had expected nothing so commonplace, and the look on his face changed, though almost imperceptibly. Looking him steadily in the eyes I followed up with "I wanted to see you, sir. I've a suggestion that might interest you."

"Yes," he growled, "and I've a darned sight more than a suggestion for you, young fellow! Your medicine starts this mornin', and maybe it won't be nice to take. I'm one of these here

doctors what believes in kill or cure. And there'll be more kill than cure about it, too. But it'll be slow, it'll be slow, I promise you!"

I began to fear he would not even listen to what I wanted to say, so I cut in quickly; "Just as you please, but about my idea first. You see that ship out yonder?"

"I don't care if the whole British Navy was in the lagoon: I'm master aboard this tub, and I'll keep discipline, in my own way, too. So you needn't think that hooker's going to save you. More likely to give me a few extra hints about the thousand cuts. Dunno what that is? I'm getting the knives ready. Perhaps I'll get a few more from their skipper. Didn't know that she's a Chinky boat, did you?"

He finished with a dreadfully evil look in his eyes. It took me all my time to keep my wits about me, especially as I did not know whether he had already thought of what I had in mind. However, it was a chance. So far as I could see, it was my only chance, so I picked up his last remark and repeated what I had heard old Booky Ben say outside the cabin:

"That's just it. Chinky boat! Chinky skipper! Chinky crew! Chinky everything! But this is the main point, Captain! A Chinky boat is just the one to have opium aboard."

I had some notion of the hold opium has on a victim, and I hoped this might turn him aside for the moment, but I had not dreamed how astonishing the effect could be. His eyes lost their madness of cruelty and a sort of dreamy look came into them. His hand went slack; he

dropped the piece of rope, and trembled like an invalid just out of bed. Tears came into his eyes, and he put a hand on my shoulder in quite a friendly way, saying in an unsteady voice:

"Of course, lad! Of course! If you're right, I'll forgive you everything, I will. You're a good lad after all, blowed if you're not."

It was tragic to see that huge man suddenly become maudlin at the sound of one word. Even if he were thoroughly bad, I could not but feel sorry to see him almost snivelling like a silly girl.

He repeated: "A good lad!" Then, swiftly changing his tone, continued "But, by heavens! if you're wrong about it. . . . if you're wrong . . . ." And his eyes blazed more madly than ever as he dashed from the cabin in such a tempest of hurry that he left the door wide open and the key in the lock.

That was so much gained. I stepped out, locked the door behind me, put the key in my pocket, and quietly tried the door of the next cabin, the one in which I had heard the sound of sobbing. It opened. I had decided that as soon as I should hear the boat lowered and Evans on his way to the Chinese vessel, to chance sharks, jump overboard, and swim for the shore.

But when I entered the other cabin I got a shock.

Instead of a native seaman cowering in a bare corner, as I had expected, I found an ordinary ship's berth. Seated on a small tin trunk against the wall, was a girl, a white girl.

Her chin rested in her hands, and her elbows were on her knees. Her eyes, very lovely eyes, large and dark, had a hopeless look.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "What on earth are you doing here?"

She just shook her head in a despairing way. I knelt beside her and shook her.

"Quick! quick!" I said. "What's the matter? Tell me about it—I might be able to help you. Quick! I must leave soon!"

She looked me straight in the eyes for a moment; then she brightened and said eagerly "Take me. Take me too! Don't go without me!"

"All right. Can you swim?"

"A good bit," she replied.

"Righto!" I went on. "You haven't got many clothes on, have you? Listen a second. . ."

I could hear the davits creaking. They were lowering the boat. Just then I heard the skipper's heavy tread along the deck outside. It was easy to recognize, and it stopped at the door of my late prison. I heard him try the door, give a grunt of satisfaction, and stride away. In his excitement he believed that he had shut and locked the door himself.

Peering out of the port-hole, I found it would be possible to see when the boat left. Then it would be a matter of sneaking on deck, keeping clear of Noosey—he was the only one I feared would try to stop us—and dropping overside into the water.

While we waited I asked my companion how

she came to be there. The story did not take long to tell.

Her name was Myra Douglas, and her father had had a trading station on one of the low Line islands, a very remote one. During a holiday in Sydney he had met her mother, and they had got married there, returning a few weeks afterwards to the island trading station, where Myra had been born.

"About two years ago," she said, "my mother took ill, and died."

Up till the time of her death the mother had taught Myra as well as possible, but now her father had decided to take her to Sydney, either to leave her with some of his relatives or put her in a boarding-school.

They left as passengers in the *Ripalong*, which had chanced to call at their island; and had intended catching a steamer at Fiji for Australia.

But on the way down to Malusa something had happened. From what I could make out, they were going out on deck one day to look at a small mountainous island which they were passing. Myra was walking behind her father, when he suddenly exclaimed: "Good God!—hanging!" and ordered her back into her cabin, while he hurried forward along the deck.

That was the last she had seen of him. When she asked Captain Evans, later on, where her father was he answered:

"Interferin' idiot fell overboard. Serves him right!"

I guessed what had occurred. Her father had seen one of the crew being punished in that

terrible running noose, and had interfered; and doubtless Evans, in mad rage, had struck him over the head with a belaying pin or something—probably killing him—and had thrown him overboard as the easiest means of disposal.

"That's about six weeks ago," Myra went on. "I'm terribly afraid of the Captain. I think he means to get rid of me somehow for fear I tell about Dad. I'm sure he killed him. I was going to jump overboard when we got to a bigger island where there were some white people to help me. Old Booky Ben tells me to keep my weather-eye open, and that's all he says. I don't know what he means."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen," she replied.

By this time she was standing up, and I could see she was well-grown for her age, and she was very pretty. I liked her especially because she did not cry at all when she was telling me about herself. I could see she wanted to, but she bravely kept from doing so.

All this while I kept my eye on the port-hole, and we now saw the boat pulling away towards the Chinese vessel, the oars flashing silver against the blue water of the lagoon. I also noticed that Noosey was one of the boat's crew. That was good.

Myra had made a small parcel of a few things she wanted very much, and I tied it on my back. Then we went on deck, there being no need to fear the few native boys left aboard. Going aft I found a rope, made it fast and tossed it over the side. No one was about.

I climbed over, and went down the rope to steady it while Myra climbed down. I was not much afraid of sharks. I had done a good lot of swimming in lagoon waters, and had met none, but just as I was lowering myself into the water Myra sang out:

"Look out! Shark! Quick, quick!"

She had small need to tell me to be quick. I scuttled up the rope and looked down. There was no mistake! An ugly fifteen-footer was cruising leisurely round, as though expecting us.

I climbed aboard, and wondered what on earth to do. It was impossible to lower a boat. I thought of jumping on top of the monster to scare him, but I could not be sure that he would be frightened of me, and I knew that I was frightened of him.

However, we had to do something, and quickly. Evans might be back any time and if he came without any of his drug it would be better to chance the shark. I went across to the other side of the deck, and looked down. I could see crimson and blue fishes dawling about deep down; but there was something that interested me more at the moment. Another huge shark was cruising close by.

That gave me an uncanny feeling. I could not help remembering the old superstition that sharks follow a vessel when anyone aboard is about to die.

I crossed back to where Myra stood. She was gazing intently at the shore. I looked in the

same direction. Turning to me she asked:

"A canoe?"

I nodded. It was a canoe all right, with two natives aboard. Evidently they were going out to the reef to fish. The little craft travelled very lazily; it seemed that it would never get any nearer, but steadily nearer it came, none the less, though its course lay some distance astern of the *Ripalong*. I glanced and found that where we stood we would not be visible from the *Shan Fang*. So, when the canoe was as close as it was likely to come, I coo-eed, not too loudly, and waved. It paused. I could see the two natives looking towards us and shading their eyes with their hands. Again I waved and beckoned, frantically this time, and they started paddling across to us. I ran to the other side of the ship and looked over. . . . The row-boat had not yet left the Chinese vessel to return to the *Ripalong*. Next, I dashed into the cabin; then carrying Myra's little trunk I ran back to her.

The canoe was close by, and I recognized the two native boys in it. One was Kuru. I remember his name vividly because of the strange terror he displayed when a few weeks later he next caught sight of me. Telling them to come to where the rope hung, I once more ran across to see what was happening at the other vessel. What I saw did not cheer me: the skipper's boat had already left, and the swift, steady flash of the oars told that she was being driven at top speed. For some reason Captain Evans wanted to get back to his own ship very speedily. I

wondered if he had remembered, after all, that it was not he who had locked my prison door. But there were no half-seconds to spare on questions.

I raced back to Myra just as the natives paddled up below us, and slipped over the side by means of the rope, carrying the trunk with me. It was a clumsy box and I could never so have carried it had it been at all heavy. Having passed it aft, I grasped the rope while Myra climbed down. In a moment or two she had her arms round my neck, as she steadied herself into the canoe. The boys pushed off. Captain Evans would be clambering aboard at the other side within a few minutes, so I bade them paddle for all they were worth.

But their crazy little shell had not been built for speed.

## CHAPTER V

### THE TERRIBLE SCAR

UNDER other circumstances that journey across the lagoon would have been a sheer delight. The tropic sun was high—not a brazen sun in a brazen sky, as described by those writers who seem afraid of good sunlight, but a warm presence that cast a dreamy spell over the blue waters round us and over the rugged, bronze-green island peaks towering beyond the fringing palms of the beach.

Even the canoe seemed to be caught in that dreamy spell. It loitered along as though scarcely moving; and the ripple made by the darting paddles circled lazily in the sun. Quite a time had passed, or in my impatience I thought it had, and the little white schooner still loomed over us. It gave me a feeling that this evil ship held the canoe by some invisible cord and that, row as they might, the natives would never be able to get us away from its power. The feeling was increased by the sight of the dorsal fin of a shark cutting the water ahead. It crossed our path, and I wondered if this were the same shark we had seen from the deck. Once more I recalled that superstition of death. I tried to

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shake off the silly idea, the foolish sailor fancy, but it was not easy. Every moment I expected to see the *Ripalong's* boat shoot out and round the stern of the schooner. I dared not think of what then would happen.

I glanced at Myra. The look of alarm on her face told of her fear and from that instant a curiously different feeling came upon me. I no longer cared for my own safety. In fact, it seemed quite unimportant to me whether I were safe or not, whether I should be recaptured or not, so long as she escaped.

Maybe she sensed my thoughts, because she turned her eyes from the schooner, and fear died out of them. Looking at me, she smiled as though there was no further need to worry.

I grinned back; and we laughed as though we were merely playing the truant instead of fleeing for our lives.

It is wonderful what a difference companionship makes when you are in trouble. Till now I had seemed all alone. Old Dan Rockley had been a dead weight when he was most needed. Dear old Tamata, noble-hearted though she was, gave no sense of consolation, but Myra! Well, when I looked at her large dark eyes I knew that between us we would get the better of Captain Evans. I felt certain of it.

"Myra! you're a splendid little pal."

She just laughed clean into the drowsy sunshine. The two natives, although they could not be very clear about what I meant, grinned and showed their fine white teeth, and set their paddles going even faster than before.

Gradually we drew away from the schooner, and now could see both vessels sleeping on the smooth waters, their spars silhouetted against the sky. As there was still no sign of pursuit, I concluded that my guess had been right and Evans had been able to get some of his drug. If so, there seemed little to fear. He would probably be sailing away and bothering no more about us, immediately the opium had once more dulled his senses.

By this time we were nearing the beach, and while I was warning the native boys not to say anything about bringing us ashore, the canoe ran on to the sand.

I was still barefooted, of course. I lifted Myra, and stepping into the water, carried her to dry land. The feel of her arms about my neck was wonderful. When I thought of that monster keeping this bonnie girl a prisoner on his evil ship, I felt I could fight him single-handed were he to appear at that moment.

There was still no sign of any boat coming after us, so I took the tin trunk from one of the boys, and the canoe set out once more for the reef.

Myra and I made for the shore. I had no watch, but it must have been about eleven in the morning—and I was feeling hungry. We hurried on through the belt of coco-palms, the fringe of high bush, and up the slight slope to the store veranda. Thence we both looked back to the lagoon. The schooners still lazed in the heat, and the canoe was a speck that scarcely moved on the smooth water. That was all.

Tamata must have heard our steps, for she came hustling out. When she saw it was Bili Karatane back once again, her face widened to a smile of delight. She took my hand in both of hers.

"You safe! You safe! Tamata glad—so glad!"

Then she paused to look at Myra, and her eyes were full of astonishment. I explained "Tamata, this is Myra, my little pal, my friend—you understand, ma flennie? She going stay here."

Tamata shook hands in a kind, old-motherly way.

I wondered where we were going to put Myra. The store and the rooms at the back were so vile that I had always slept on the veranda.

However, it would be time enough to worry about a room when the *Ripalong* had gone. In the meantime both of us would have to hide on the mountain ledge.

We set Tamata to watch the lagoon for any boat leaving the *Ripalong* and went inside to see if Dan had yet wakened from his drunken sleep. He came into the shop just at that moment, looking more sober and more serious than I had seen him for a long time. When he caught sight of me his eyes, deep sunk in his dirty, unshaven face, blinked half a dozen times. Then he sprang forward and gripped my hand so that I squealed.

"Billy," he said, "I'm sorry I got you into such a fix. Tamata told me all about it, and Billy, I won't forget how you risked gettin' caught sooner 'n leave Tamata or me for that

scoundrel to man-handle. I've sworn off, Billy. I won't drink another drop—leastways, not worth speakin' of—until that there tub sails out of this here lagoon. It ain't fair, Billy—leavin' you to fight that hulkin' great coward by yourself. I'll stand by you in future, dinkum I will, lad."

He meant it, and somehow I hardly knew what to say. So I stammered out that it was really all my fault for having run away from the ship in the first place, and it was not fair that he should be dragged into the quarrel. I then told him about Myra, adding that we would have to look after her till she could get safely to Sydney.

"So we will, Billy. My oath, we will!"

After shaking hands with her and looking at her for a second, he added "Bonnie little lady y' are, too. I'll tell Tamata to look after you well."

"Thanks very much, Mr. Rockley," she said.

It was funny to hear old Dan called "Mister." He looked queer about it and said "Better call me Dan—old Dan, I ain't used to bein' called Mister—drink too much to be given flash titles. Never mind! Cuttin' out the drink from now on, Billy, blessed if I don't—leastways, most of it."

He was interrupted by Tamata trotting in to say that a boat had left the other ship—not the *Ripalong*—and was rowing towards the village.

"Queer rig-out, that," said Dan. "Can't make out what sort of a ship she is. Got steam as well as sails. Wonder what she is?"

"I heard," I said, repeating Booky's words, "that it is the *Shan Fang*, a Chinky vessel, Chinky name, Chinky captain, Chinky crew, and all."

"Wonder why she comes here?" he said anxiously. "No trepang or sandalwood about here, anyway."

The row-boat slid from sight under the screen of palms. Dan told Tamata to stay out on the veranda watching the *Ripalong*. To Myra and myself he said:

"We'd best go inside. Some one might be comin' up here. I'll quiz through the window. Best be careful. Chinky turn-out! Don't like it!"

The last phrase or two, muttered more to himself than to us, made me curious. We went inside, and Dan brushed the dust from a pane of the window, enough at least to give him a clear space to peep through. I craned over his shoulder.

After a while a figure emerged from the bush into the clearing and walked leisurely, head down, towards the store. Whoever it was, he was dressed in ducks, European fashion. When half-way up the slope he straightened himself and looked at the veranda, giving us the first sight of his face. It made me start and shudder, and old Dan nearly jumped out of his dilapidated pyjama suit. His sudden movement knocked me over.

By the time I picked myself up, Dan had reached the door leading into the back room.

"Pretend to be servin' in the shop, Billy," he gasped. "Don't say I'm about. Say I'm away."



Don't let him come through here Billy, not on no account, and don't admit that I've only got one ear."

He was in a blue funk. His face was pale, and there was a hunted look in his eyes.

But the most alarming thing was the face of the man who was coming, and who was now stepping leisurely across the veranda. I only got a glimpse, but it was enough to show me that he was a Chinaman, that his face was rather fat and round, and that it seemed to be framed in a dark red circular line—a sort of hoop, which gave him a most horrible appearance.

As Dan closed the door into the back room I slipped behind the counter, and waited.

The Chinaman was tall, nearly six feet, I should say. His pace was stately as he took the four or five steps which brought him to the counter. There he stood, staring down at me through that hoop thing. It was ghastly. Myra had shrunk into a corner at first sight of the man. I wanted to do the same. Instead, I took a good look at him, and found out what that hoop was.

As I have said, he had a round and rather fat face, and what looked like a ring framing it was a heavy, circular cicatrix, dark red, which continued without a break across the forehead, down round the cheeks, and round the point of the chin. The grotesque effect so fascinated me that I could not help staring. It was a fascination of horror. The features otherwise were normal, a thin mouth, fairly well-shaped nose, and brown eyes that gave no hint of the thought behind

them. He was not one of the coolie type which I had seen about the Chinese quarter of Sydney. There was a dignity in his bearing, and he was dressed neatly.

"Good morning," he said, in excellent English. "Will you be so kind as to tell your chief that I wish to see him?"

Somehow, his politeness was far from pleasant.

"Sorry, sir," I answered, "but he's away at present."

"Mr. Rockley," he went on, "do you mean to tell me he is away at present?"

"I do."

"I do not wish," he continued, leaning forward a little, "I do not wish to imply that you are misleading me, but I think I will step through to the back room, and I might find him somewhere."

He moved towards the leaf of the old rickety counter, and was about to raise it, but I slammed my weight down on it and said "Can't be done, sir! Customers not allowed on this side of the counter. Sell you anything, sir? tinned meat? matches? jam?"

I was going to run through the whole stock for his benefit, but he interrupted me.

"If I want to buy anything I am quite capable of saying so. I wish to see Mr. Rockley—known sometimes as old Dan. He has only one ear, has he not?"

I didn't quite know what to say to this. Dan was my friend, and evidently had a serious reason for trying to hide himself, and the fact of

his missing ear, from this repulsive visitor. I am no hand at telling lies, but there was no help for it.

"One right and one left, sir," I replied.

I thought to myself that one was certainly left, but I had no idea why or where it had been left. This Chinaman evidently knew more about it than I did; and I wondered more than ever why Dan, when I had asked him about it, had merely scowled and glanced furtively behind.

"I shall call again. You will please tell Mr. Rockley that I shall call again, and again."

By stressing the repeated words slightly he gave a meaning to them that was ominous. Then he turned and quietly walked out of the shop and down the slope. As he disappeared into the belt of thick bush two other Chinamen stepped from the sides of the path and walked respectfully behind him.

I went to see where Dan was and found him in the back room, cowering in a corner, with a look of great fear in his eyes—and the rum bottle to his lips.

PART II  
THE MOUNTAIN

## CHAPTER VI

### OUR SECRET REFUGE

I SNATCHED the bottle; and the fear in his face changed to anger. For a second he looked like killing me; but only for a second.

"Dan," I said, "you and Captain Evans make a fine pair, him for opium and you for rum."

"Sorry, Billy!" he replied. "Wasn't going to get drunk; straight, I wasn't—only I've a mortal fear o' that there Chinky. He's followed me half-way round the world. Thought I'd given him the slip, but there don't seem to be any way of doing it. Billy, that there Chinky means to kill me; but he wants to find out something first, and that's worse than killin'. I'm afraid of him, Billy, straight, I am. I was just takin' a sip to pull meself together."

"We're all in a fix." I said, "Why not take provisions and things and hide on the high ledge for a while? Shut up the store and scoot. They'll never find us up there. You've got a revolver, haven't you, Dan?"

"Three of them, lad," he said. "I'll dig 'em out."

"Righto!" I responded. "I'll get to work. We must hurry."

I hustled out to the veranda. "Any news?" I asked Tamata, who was still on the watch.

She pointed to the lagoon. A rowing-boat was moving away out across it towards the *Shan Fang*.

Evidently that hideously-scarred Chinaman was so confident of having Dan in his power, cooped up on the island, that he saw no reason for instant action. I told Tamata to report the least movement from the ships; then, dashing inside, Myra and I set to work. We got some of the store blankets, provisions, candles, matches—we made sure to have plenty of those—an axe, some string, sheath-knives, and other things. Of these we made four swags. My boots were still lying outside the back door, where I had left them the previous night, so I slipped them on.

By this time Dan had found the revolvers, a little rusty, and a supply of ammunition. The revolvers were antiquated affairs that required cocking before every shot. Dan gave me one and kept two.

"Have to teach the lassie to handle one of these," he remarked.

He also took from the chest an old bag with a strap to it, and swung it over his shoulder. We were ready to leave at a moment's notice.

Just then I saw a coil of stout rope hanging in the back room, and it gave me an idea.

"This goes too!" I exclaimed, and told Dan my scheme. The climb to the high ledge was so steep and roundabout that it meant nearly an hour's stiff going, but to the bottom of the

waterfall, at the base of the cliffs, was only about twenty minutes' walk. I suggested we should leave Tamata on the watch—she could pick up her swag and come instantly to warn us if anyone left either of the vessels—while we went with our swags to the high ledge. Myra could then stay there in safety while Dan and I returned to the store for further supplies, which we could hide at the bottom of the waterfall, and haul them up the face of the cliff by the rope whenever there was a chance, thus saving an hour's stiff climb at every load.

"We might have to stay in hiding for quite a while," I argued, "and the more we can stock up our camp the better."

"Billy, you're not such a fool, after all," said Dan—and his manner of saying it made me feel more pleased than if he had taken great pains to pay me compliments.

Telling Tamata of our plan, the three of us set out. The climb proved quite hard work with the swags we had. At the last minute I had picked up Myra's little tin box, thinking she would like to have it, but by the time I got half-way I was almost sorry for having done so. It became very heavy chiefly because of its awkward shape. Myra, however, seemed so glad to have it that I hung on and pretended it was quite light.

It was a rare scramble wriggling through the tangle of bush and on through the low tunnel-way with our loads, but we did it all right without making any noticeable pathway through the jungly mass that screened the entrance.

Once inside, Myra glanced up at the protecting cliff walls around us and said:

"Isn't it wonderful? I feel as safe as safe in here."

Then she skipped around a bit, the way girls do, gave old Dan and myself each a merry hug, and scampered along the pathway towards the cave. There we left our swags, with the tin box and the rope, and set out again for the store. Myra came as far as the exit with us.

"You won't be very long, will you, Billy?" she said. "I'm afraid it'll be a bit lonely up here by myself, and something might happen to you and Dan."

"No fear!" I replied, and Dan chipped in with: "We'll come back all right, lassie. Don't you be afraid o' that. Better have a bit o' feed while you're waitin'. There's some biscuits an' cheese, an' you'll find plenty fruit growin' round the ledge."

When we got down the hill a bit we passed some heavily-laden banana-trees and, being by that time thoroughly hungry, we picked some of the rich golden fruit and ate our fill as we walked along.

Back at the store Tamata was still on watch. She reported all safe, and we set to work carrying loads to the bottom of the waterfall. The track was mostly through tall bush, with twisted lianas tangled and massed from tree to tree, so that we were walking for the most part through a long tunnel of green shadiness.

When we arrived at our destination with the

first load, Dan looked at the wall of rock towering above us.

"Don't think much of our chance, sonny. Rope's not long enough to reach all that way down. 'Fraid your little notion's gone all to pot this time, Billy."

"My idea," I told him, "was to lower myself down to that smaller shelf of rock over there and haul the stuff up on to it first."

I pointed up the cliff-face, to the corner nearest which the waterfall descended. There, half-way up, a small ledge jutted from the otherwise smooth surface. It was in a corner formed by the face of the cliff and a side wall that extended at right-angles to the face. This right-angle wall, which was the same at each side, was the continuation of the side cliffs which so perfectly walled in the high ledge. Owing to the small shelf of rock being perched in the corner, it was for the most part hidden from the lagoon, and any climbing we did up or down the precipice at that spot would not be visible from the schooner.

I had examined the shelf from above during my weary days of waiting on the high ledge; it seemed small, but there were several trees growing on it and a deal of undergrowth.

"It's small," I said, as though in apology.

Dan looked quizzical. "I guess that there crow's nest is a sight bigger'n you think. What size d'ye think it is?"

I said I thought it about the size of a tennis court.

"Tennis-court, be blowed!" he snorted. "You

could put half a dozen tennis-courts pretty comfortably up there if you happen to have them about you. You're a rotten judge o' size, Billy! What d'you think's the area, so to speak, o' the high ledge?"

"About a couple of acres," I replied.

"Couple o' acres, me foot!"

He started off on the return journey to the store, and I followed. "More like a quarter-hundred," he mumbled, in a sort of grumpy good-naturedness. "'T any rate, it contains a good few acres. Y'll learn in time, Billy. Anyway, it's not a bad idea o' yours, that there shelf half-way, but we'll try to find some more rope, just to make sure."

When we got back to the store he did discover another piece under some old copra bags that had lain in a heap for long enough. It looked even longer than the coil we already possessed. We didn't take this all the way with us, but planted it in the bush near where the track leading to the high ledge branched off from that to the waterfall.

Awhile then we worked hard carrying load after load (and heavy loads they were) of flour, oatmeal, sugar, salt, tinned provisions, candles, matches, blankets, and all sorts of other things that might be useful. These we hid in a rocky nook by the base of the fall.

We had enough to stand quite a siege, and were wondering whether to take anything more when Tamata came in with news that caused us to make up our minds quickly—a row-boat was coming ashore from the Chinese schooner.

We shouldered one last load each, barred up the front door with the old paddle-handle, locked the back door, and set out for the high ledge. We picked up our second coil of rope on the way.

When we reached the place where the track petered out—the rest of the way being through wild bush—I turned to Dan.

"I'll plant my swag here for a bit," I said, "and sneak down to see what's happening."

"Better not, Billy," he spluttered, somewhat out of breath, "you don't know that Chow the way I do. If you did, you'd be a darned sight more afraid of him. I'll tell you about him when we get settled safe on the ledge."

Tamata, finding us loitering, chipped in with "Think best we hurry. Tamata 'fraid."

"I'll be very careful, Dan," I persisted. "I'd like to know what they do when they see us gone, and the place locked up. It might be well for us to know, and I could scuttle away much quicker than them; because they would not know which way I'd gone."

"All right, lad," Dan agreed, "but be mighty careful. I'm pretty tired, or I might come too. Anyway, I'll wait for you at the top of the climb. Keep your revolver handy, Billy. Don't use it if you can help it, but use it sooner'n let that Chow get hold o' you."

I said "Righto!" hid my swag, and swung off downhill until I could see the top of the store through the trees below me.

Altering my stride to a cautious creep, I went still farther down, my heart beating a little

faster. Soon I could see the back door, but there was no sign of anyone near it; so, crawling under a thick, ferny mass of scrub, I lay still, quite hidden, and able to watch the rear part of the store perfectly. There I waited for about ten minutes.

It was strangely exciting, and I felt my heart thumping more loudly than when I had been a prisoner in the hands of Captain Evans, more loudly than when he had made his horrible threat of the "thousand cuts." This was partly due to the suspense and partly to the thought of that implacable Chinese face peering through its encircling scar, peering even at that moment, maybe, into the dusty little window in the store front.

Just then something moved on the grass at the side of the shanty. It gave me quite a fright. It was a head moving, and only a head.

When I looked more steadily I began to breathe again. It was merely a shadow of someone in front of the building.

It disappeared for a while. Then two figures dashed round to the back of the store, coming from opposite directions and meeting at the back door, against which they stood silently, one on either side. They were Chinamen, but neither had a scar. In the hand of one of them a long knife gleamed. I felt inclined to run; but they were only fifty yards from me, and must have seen me had I moved. Presently, round the right-hand corner came the stately figure and hideous face of the one I most feared. He was still spick-and-span in white ducks and sun-

helmet; and he walked as leisurely as a man smoking a cigar on his veranda after dinner. Behind him came two other Chinese, clad, like the two guardians of the door, in loose-fitting jackets and wide pants like dirty-white pyjamas.

Scar-face said something in his native tongue. His voice came clearly and calmly through the drowsy afternoon air. One of his men fiddled with the door for a moment, and swung it open. (Lot of good Dan's lock was!) Two of the men went inside, followed by the chief, while the other two stood immobile on either side of the doorway.

Once more I felt a strong impulse to run for it. I wanted badly to get well away before that hideous face reappeared. I felt that I could hardly stand any further sight of it gleaming sallowly through that dark red frame. If I sprang up I would have a start of at least fifty yards, and I knew which way I wanted to go, whereas they would be continually losing sight of me among the trees. The trouble was that the track was well defined until it reached the top of the first rise, and the bush on either side too thick to dodge through without making a clatter of branches, so I decided to stay where I was a while longer.

It was a lucky decision, for just at that moment a low gabble of gibberish came from somewhere behind me. At least two Chinamen were on the track, between me and safety. They had evidently made a wide detour to encircle the place. That imperturbable Chinaman had arranged details carefully, and was very keen to

capture the inmates of the store. Had I jumped up when I first thought of doing so, I would have leapt right into the arms of those two at the back of me.

As it was, the gibberish seemed to be coming slowly nearer. I did not know whether they would be able to see me or not, my chief care having been to hide myself from the direction of the house; and I dared not look round to learn what they were about, because, if they had not already spotted me, the least move on my part would certainly have put me away.

A moment later and their voices sounded almost directly above me. From out the corner of my eye I could see the slack cloth of a wide trouser leg but a couple of yards away, and there they stood. Evidently my fern screen was more effective than I had thought.

For a long while I scarcely dared breathe, but at last, from the direction of the store, there came a shrill call, a strangely penetrating sound like the high wail of an Oriental fiddle.

It was a signal, a command. The two Chinese near me hurried to its call. I took a long breath.

He of the hideous scar then strolled round the end of the building, followed by the others. Several more came scurrying from different points round the edge of the bush and converged on the shanty. Their chief disappeared round the corner, but must have paused at the end of the building, because I could still see three or four of his men standing there, as though clustered round some one just out of sight. These

had their faces turned partly away from my direction, so I decided to wait no longer.

Taking the revolver from my pocket, I raised myself a little and took a good look behind. I did not want to run into any outer cordon of those stealthy watchers.

The way seemed clear.

Sliding from my covert, I wriggled snake-like along the ground, keeping as flat as possible, and with a sharp eye on the council of war or whatever it was. For twenty or thirty yards I would be full in view, should they look my way. I hoped they would be too intent on the words of their leader.

It was slow going, but I had got nearly across that exposed space—only a couple of yards remained to be traversed—when one of the crowd turned excitedly, and pointed at me. There was something uncanny about the way he had spotted me from the slant edge of his eye.

A hubbub ensued. I did not wait to see anything, but leapt to my feet and ran as I had not run since that mad night chase on Chasm Island.

Fortune favoured me in that I had a good start; and I was round a thick bush and out of sight the instant after I sprang upright, but I was cramped from having lain motionless so long, and weary after the afternoon's hard work, and from lack of food. I felt myself lagging.

I could hear the quick pad-pad of feet coming nearer.

At the top of the first rise several tracks branched off in various directions. They were connected by short cuts from one to the other,



forming quite a small maze. I took a track at right-angles to the way I wished to go, and slackened my pace a little.

When the pursuit was near enough, I made such a clatter of branches that they could not fail to hear. Then, silently as possible, I scurried through a short-cut and listened a second or two. They were yabbering and searching about where I had made the noise.

On I went and through still another short cut. It was risky, because some of the pursuers might have continued up the track towards which I was veering. The narrow pathway I followed came to a wider track. I glanced up and down this, dashed across it, and round a clump of bamboos. I had no sooner done so than a Chinaman ambled past along the wider way.

That frightened me. I scuttled up hill as fast as possible, and gained the track leading towards the ledge. Below me was a rustling of bushes and a jumble of voices, but ahead all was silent. On I went, somewhat wearily.

Within a quarter of a mile of the end of the track I heard a noise ahead, and just had time to slip behind a large iron-tree when a Chinese went padding at the double down the hill. While I had been dodging in that maze he must have gone straight on, and having reached the end, had turned about. I gave him time to get well out of hearing.

The rest of the distance to the end of the track I covered without trouble. It was fairly certain I had shaken off the chase. Once in

the wild bush, I felt safe. Pursuit was most unlikely, though the going was noisier because of the necessity of scrambling through scrub and jungle.

I came to the spot where I had left my load. It was no longer there. Dan must have returned for it. By now the sun was getting low; already twilight was creeping darkly through the deep bush. I did not want night to trap me in that solitude, so I hurried onward, scrambling, climbing, and breaking a way through.

Not far from the ledge entrance some one stepped from hiding as I passed, and once more I nearly jumped out of my boots.

It was Myra.

## CHAPTER VII

### DAN ROCKLEY TELLS OF HIDDEN TREASURE

"THANK goodness, Billy! you're safe," she exclaimed, unconsciously taking my hand in both of hers as though to make sure I was real. "I sneaked away while Dan was fixing things up, and went down for the load he said you had hidden."

"But that was too heavy for you, Myra," I replied, rather breathlessly.

"It was pretty heavy," she went on, "but I got it up all right. Only, just as I reached the passage-way, I heard noises away down towards the beach, so I left the load and came down the hill a bit. The noise was like a lot of men talking. It came very clear up here. I was just going back to ask Dan if we hadn't better try to find you when I heard you scrambling through the bush. I just hid till I was sure it was you."

I altered my mind about Myra. When I had last seen her I thought her rather a booby for feeling afraid of being left alone, but if she was ready to go scouting round by herself like that,

and so near dark too, well, that was good enough for me. I told her she was a brave girl.

We came to where the bush thickened into the jungly mass hiding the tunnel. Together we wriggled our way through, dragging my load with us, and so came once more to the safety of the high ledge.

Dan and Tamata were getting tea ready, with a fire burning merrily. They looked relieved to see us. We asked if it wasn't dangerous lighting fires and maybe giving signals as to our hiding-place, but Dan assured us that the spot he had chosen was hidden by the shoulder of cliff from any part of the island or lagoon. Our fire would be visible only right out at sea; and ships to espy it were all too scarce about that locality.

The place where Dan had camped was some distance from my sleeping-cave and right in the corner of the ledge. It was overhung by the back wall of mountain, and looked very cosy, much cosier, I thought, than ever his living-quarters at the store had been.

"Of course," he explained, "we must be darned careful about fires in the daytime. The smoke 'd put us away, but at night it'll be all right in this nook."

Very soon we sat down for tea. During the meal Dan told Myra that she had been very foolhardy to leave the ledge without letting him know.

"Takin' too much risk, lassie!" he declared. "O' course, it wuz plucky, but don't do anything like that on your own. We're dealin' with

desperate characters so to speak, and it's not healthy, as I might say, to take chances with 'em. I s'posed you wuz gallivantin' round the ledge and thinkin' it a good copy o' the Garden o' Eden an' all. Did you find out anything much, Billy?"

I told him what had happened.

"Good job we took your advice, lad!" he replied. "They're keen after us. Only it's me they're after, and something I got. Tell you after tea. Not a nice story, either, but you'd better know it. You too, lassie; then you mightn't go takin' chances, careless like."

"I was worried about Billy," Myra explained. "I thought he might want help, but I won't do it again without telling you."

"Righto, girlie!" Dan replied. "You're the right sort, anyway."

After tea, Dan told us the story. In parts it made my blood run cold. I won't tell it as he did, because Dan can be a bit long-winded when he's explaining things. This was the yarn:

Years before, when Dan was still a sailor, his ship called at Hong-Kong, and one night, in an unfrequented quarter of the town, he saw three Chinese set on to a white man. Charging down on them, he let out right and left, foot and flipper, as he expressed it, and the Chinese assailants scuttled away. Dan caught a bit of a stab in the side during the rumpus, but it was only a surface wound.

The white man was lying on the roadway, and proved to be one of Dan's shipmates, named Alick North, a quiet sort, as Dan explained:

"Never had much to say, and always seemed to be thinkin' about something or other. Used to mutter in his sleep, too, queer things about lights burnin' for ever, an' gold an' things."

Dan found that Alick had been stabbed in the back and chest and was altogether in a bad way.

"Done for!" said the sailorman, "Ling Loo got me. No good now! Pocket, mate! left-hand pocket! Secret key. . . temple. . . lots o' gold. No good to—me—now. You try for it. Beat Ling Loo! I found it. . . Malusa. . . Key easy. . . letters mean. . ."

Without another word the poor fellow died. Dan didn't know what to make of his broken utterances, but something about them convinced him that Alick really had learned a great secret. The fact of his having been murdered confirmed this. So Dan felt in the left-hand pocket and found what certainly seemed to be a key to something.

"Queer sort of thing it was. Light was bad, but I could see it was queer. Didn't know what to make of it. So I puts it in me pocket. 'Might as well keep it a bit,' says I to meself. so to speak. But I'll let yous have a look at it f' yourselves. Might make something out o' it. Got me beat. An' I used to be good on keys one time—skeleton keys. I don't tell that to everybody. Anyway, that was before I went to sea. Sea's a good place, Billy, to clean the mean city tricks out o' you, though I ain't no sample saint at present, am I?"

We were all agape with excitement, but he

wouldn't go straight ahead. I think he spun the story out to tease us.

At this stage of the yarn Dan reached over for the shoulder bag I had seen him so carefully dig from the contents of his old sea-chest that afternoon.

"I'll just show you this 'ere key," he remarked, as he unstrapped the bag. Holding the flap back, he canted the bag towards the flames so that he could see into it. We leaned forward eagerly, except Tamata, who took much less interest in the narrative than we did. All at once Dan looked aghast, tumbled a strange collection of knick-knacks from the bag, jumped up, and stamped round and swore like a madman. Myra gazed up, her eyes round with wonderment, as he pranced and his huge shadow pirouetted on the rock wall behind.

"It's gone! The key's gone!" gasped Dan.

"What was it like?" I asked. Before Dan could reply, Myra, with a whimsical little smile in her eyes, remarked:

"You do know a lot of swears, don't you, Dan?"

"I do, don't I, lassie? S'pose I ought to beg pardon. 'Tain't hardly polite to chuck words like them about when there's a lassie on deck. Tamata don't matter."

"But I say, Dan," I chipped in, "tell us about this key. What's it like?"

"'Tain't like nothing much," responded Dan. "Just a bit o' paper with queer things on it. Had it hid in a book, and the book's gone. Must 'a'

left it behind somehow, and that there Chow'll get it for sure."

Then I remembered.

So much had happened during the day that I had quite forgotten the slip of paper I had found that morning pasted behind the back leaf of the book that I had taken from my pocket as I lay imprisoned in the *Ripalong* cabin.

I pulled the book out and handed it to Dan. He grabbed it, and fumbled it open with his thick drink-shaken fingers.

"That's it, Billy. That's the book. Pasted in the back. Cripes! someone cut it open. . . Hooray! here it is. 'Tain't gone. Someone cut it open, though."

I was going to explain how I found it, but Dan was too excited to listen. He slid the paper back into the pocket formed by the pasted-down leaf of the book, placed the book and other trifles back in the bag, and went on.

"Won't worry about lookin' at it just now. It's all right. Show it to you after. Finish the yarn first."

He went on to tell how, when he had taken the mysterious bit of paper from the pocket of his dead shipmate, he started off through the narrow dark streets to find a policeman. He kept his senses alert, but not alert enough (I suspect him to have been a bit tipsy) for he was taken unawares by three men, who suddenly, as from nowhere, leapt upon him. He was seized round the neck and nearly garotted. His arms were wrenched behind him.

He struggled furiously, but it was of no avail.

A door in an evil-looking, blank-fronted building opened right alongside of the tangled quartette. Still firmly held by long fingers that felt more like claws than flesh and bone, he was pushed through into pitchy blackness.

In spite of his desperate battling, he was tied to a post. Only then did those fingers relax, and for a few seconds he heard deep breathings about him. It pleased him to think that those three men were as much exhausted as he was.

A light was brought, a primitive sort of lamp. Dan found that he was in a large but nearly bare room and was tied to one of the uprights supporting the ceiling. He judged that there were two or perhaps three of these uprights and he noticed that they tapered slightly towards the top. There was a table in one corner. On this the lamp was placed. In another corner were some empty packing-cases. A large fireplace yawned blackly in the wall opposite the door.

The men who had attacked Dan were all Chinese. Two were of the coolie type, and these stood deferentially behind the third, who was dressed in white ducks, European fashion. He was about six feet high, with a large, round face, smooth as only a Chinese face can be, and his bearing suggested that he was of the wealthier, possibly even of the mandarin, class. Dan instantly recognized the three as those who had killed Alick North, and he surmised that the tall one must be Ling Loo.

"Beat Ling Loo!" had been Alick's dying exhortation.

But it did not look as if Dan had much chance of beating the confident Oriental, especially at that moment.

Ling Loo said something to one of his attendants. The latter stepped up to Dan and, rummaging in his pockets, found Alick's mysterious key which he handed to his chief. Ling Loo scarcely glanced at it, but put it in his pocket, and spoke to Dan in precise English.

"That will do very nicely. I have endeavoured to obtain that for some time, but there is one other trifle for which I will trouble you. What did your sea-faring friend say to you before he died? His words—you will kindly give me his exact words."

"I knew at once," said Dan, "that he must 'a' bin edjicated at some sort o' collige, p'raps in Sydney, p'raps in the Old Dart. Anyway, I didn't tell him what Alick said. I just told him the poor blighter died without sayin' nothin'. 'And, what's more, you murdered him,' I said, 'and you'll swing for it—or my name ain't Dan Rockley.'"

"Ah!" said Ling Loo. "Rockley! Thanks! Thanks very much, Mr. Rockley; but I must insist on having the exact words of your dead friend. I am sorry he is dead, but he opposed me, you see. It is not a wise thing to do."

To this Dan gave no answer. He was both wild, and, as he said, afraid. He could see no use in replying, especially as his reply would have consisted only of curses; and although the

other man was "only a blasted Chow," as Dan expressed it, he was not a comfortable Chow to curse.

After a slight pause Ling Loo continued "I must have those words, Mr. Rockley. I have means of obtaining them; but I give you one more opportunity to deliver them without—shall we say—unnecessary pain."

Still Dan remained silent—sulkily silent.

Ling Loo turned to one of his attendants, said a word, and was instantly given a long, curved knife, produced seemingly by magic.

"My request, Mr. Rockley," Ling Loo went on, his voice very quiet and calm, "seems to go in at one ear and out at the other, to use one of your country's idioms. This would be impossible if you only had one ear—would it not, Mr. Rockley?"

"And with that," said Dan, "before I knew what was happ'nin' almost, he gave a flick o' his knife an' whipped off me left ear. It fell on the floor, an' I could feel somethin' warm tricklin' down the side o' me neck."

I felt sick and pale, and Myra, who was sitting beside me, gripped my arm and drew close in to me. I looked down and found that she, too, was deadly white.

"It was horrible," continued Dan. "No wonder you two young 'uns look a bit white about the gills. Made me feel pretty queer at the time. But buck up! It really didn't hurt much."

Maybe not, but the thought of that cold-blooded Chinaman doing such a ghastly thing with calm politeness made my blood run cold.

"That's Ling Loo, isn't it, Dan?" I asked, "who has the scar about his face?"

"That's him," replied Dan. "That's why I'm tellin' you. Better know what he can be when he likes. Only he didn't have no scar then. After he'd sliced off me ear, he hands the knife back to the other Chow, who wipes it careful and hides it back in his clothes. Then Ling Loo smiles at me slightly, as though he's sort o' done me a good turn."

Dan went on to tell how he tugged at the ropes, but they were quite secure.

"I think," Ling Loo next said, "that this trifling operation may assist us. Maybe you will now tell me the exact words of your dead friend."

Dan thought it hardly worth while refusing, so he repeated what Alick North had said to him, adding that there was one word he had forgotten. That word was "Malusa," but, try as he would, Dan could not at the time recall it.

"Unless you remember that word, Mr. Rockley," Ling Loo had then announced suavely as ever, "I must take steps to help your memory, and you have not told me how to read this cryptic piece of paper. Your friend told you what the letters mean. Please let me know at once."

Dan assured the unbelieving Chinaman that Alick had been on the point of saying what they meant, but had died before he could do so. Ling Loo refused to believe this.

"You understand, Mr. Rockley, that you are withholding two most important points: that

name, which is the name of an island, I have reason to think, and the solution of this written key. I must have these two informations."

"Blast your informations!" shouted Dan. "Don't I tell you I don't know? You can do what you like and you'll never learn no more, 'cos I don't know no more!"

Turning to the other Chinks, Ling Loo gabbled a few words. One scuttled across to the front door and out into the dark street, his shadow running slantwise up the wall and across the ceiling as he did so. The other started smashing up the packing-cases in the corner, and in a few moments had a roaring blaze filling the fire-place and putting the light of the lamp to shade.

Very shortly the one who had gone into the night came shuffling back—carrying a pair of tongs with a curved beak, and a round iron ring about five or six inches cross.

At a word from Ling Loo he placed the ring in the fire, and after waiting a while started taking it out every now and then to look at it. When it was red hot, Ling Loo gave some further command.

His flunkey dropped the ring once more into the fire and passed the tongs to Ling Loo. Then both the attendants slid quickly across the room and out through the front door. Then, with that same smile which Dan had seen once before, Ling Loo spoke.

"Your fidelity, Mr. Rockley, is so admirable that you should have some recognition—a crown, for instance. Crowns are chilly adorn-

ments usually, but yours shall be specially prepared. You understand, however, that you shall wear it only while you keep your secret. The instant you tell me what I wish to know, you forfeit the right to wear the ornament. Are you ready for your coronation? The crown is, I think, quite ready."

He drove the tongs into the flames and drew forth the red-hot ring.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BRANDING OF LING LOO

OUR fire was low, but we were so eager for Dan's story that no one troubled about it. The night was one wide calmness. Even the long, steady flow of the trade-wind seemed to be stilled, as though it too waited the rest of the story before drifting onward to other islands.

Our shadows on the rocky wall were still. The fire had so died down that they could no longer dance even faintly to its fluttering.

"I was just off me rocker," continued Dan, "when I saw what he was going to do. I knew he'd do it, too! Cold-blooded brutes, some of these Chows can be. I struggled and tugged at me ropes, but he knew they wouldn't give way. They'd tied up too many other coves, p'raps. Wouldn't 'a' sent t' other two Chows away if he'd thought I might get loose. I'd tugged plenty already and hadn't made them ropes budge a bit, but I was too terrified to stay still. Fact was, lad, I darn nearly went mad. That's what saved me. I tugged so frantically, so to speak, that something I hadn't thought of happened. Ling Loo hadn't thought of it, either."

Rambling along, with "so to speak" thrown

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in at all sorts of unnecessary places, Dan told us how just as Ling Loo had got the red-hot ring gripped in the tongs, and while he was still stooping over the fire, a noise overhead followed one of Dan's frantic tugs at his ropes. The upright, not intended for such usage, had "slipped its moorings at the top."

Ling Loo, just straightening himself, heard it, turned quickly, still holding the ring in the tongs, and saw what had occurred, but he was not quick enough. The post gave way so suddenly and fell with such great force that, before Ling Loo could move, it caught him on the side of the head and bowled him over like a blow from a nullah.

That was all Dan knew for the moment. Being tied fast to the post, he had to fall with it; and he came down heavily. His head hit the floor so violently that he was stunned for a while.

I glanced at Dan's head and decided that he must have landed very heavily indeed.

It was probably only a few seconds before Dan recovered. When he came to his senses he could hear a curious noise; also he was aware of a sickly smell that pervaded the room.

He struggled with his ropes and found that it was a simple matter to slide them over the thin end of the tapering post. He had then no difficulty in freeing himself altogether. Then he leapt to his feet, and found Ling Loo lying on the floor face downwards. That curious noise and awful smell came from beneath him.

Dan rolled him over and staggered against



the table, sickened by what he had seen. Ling Loo in falling had let go the tongs; the red-hot ring had dropped on the floor, and the stunned Chinaman had landed with his face fairly in the centre of it.

"And that's 'ow he got that scar round his ugly dial," said Dan.

A sudden weight pressed against me. Myra, who was still holding my arm, as if she felt safer that way, had fainted.

Dan produced a bottle of rum from the lining of his coat. I was sorry to see he had it, because I was afraid he might get drunk again. A touch of it on Myra's lips soon opened her eyes, and she said she was sorry for having been so silly.

Myra was soon all right again, and Dan went on with the yarn.

When he reeled against the table, he knocked the lamp over and it went out. The fire still showed plenty of light, but the falling lamp made a noisy clatter, and Dan at that moment heard a fumbling at the lock of the door.

He sprang across to Ling Loo, dived his hand into the pocket containing that mysterious piece of paper, took it out, jammed it into his own pocket, and seized the tongs.

He was just in time.

The two coolies returning, had heard the clatter of the falling lamp and guessed that there was something wrong. They flung the door wide open and leapt into the room, each armed with a long, curved knife similar to the one with which Ling Loo had "ear-marked" Dan.

Dan was not afraid of the Chinese now he was free. Unarmed, he had already fought all three of them when they had attacked Alick North. With the tongs as a weapon and only two to deal with, he felt confident.

They leapt towards him. A swing of the tongs laid one of them out, but the other dived beneath Dan's arm before he could recover, and plunged the knife at his stomach. Luckily Dan was wearing a belt with a few sovereigns in it, and the point of the knife struck these. That saved his life.

Two other Chinese passing in the street noticed the affray. They sent a shrill call into the night, then rushed into the room. They leapt upon Dan after he had dealt a staggering left to the second of his assailants. The newcomers were unarmed and easily shaken off; but more appeared at the doorway. Moreover, the second assailant recovered and again attacked with the knife.

Dan leapt backward and seized the table. Using it as a shield, he charged the whole crowd. The Chink with the knife made a thrust at him and buried the blade so deeply in the wood that he could not withdraw it.

A mad struggle followed, a mixture of table, coolies, thrusting arms, struggling legs, excited voices, and whirling tongs. Through it all Dan worked his way nearer and nearer to the doorway. At last he got into the street.

One of his adversaries was hanging on to his foot, others were crowding after him through the door. He delivered a blow which stunned

one and momentarily blocked the others from getting out. A second blow and a vigorous kick freed his foot, and he went racing down the narrow street. A swift clatter of feet and gibbering calls came close behind him in the darkness.

It was a wild chase, through a maze of danger, and every now and then he had to turn swiftly and lay out a pursuer who was getting too close. Once, also, a knife whizzed so close past the left side of his head that it would have pierced his ear had he still possessed it. Dan sprinted the faster for its hint.

At last he reached the European part of the town. The pursuit melted away beneath the bright lights, and he got back to his ship without further assault.

Next day his ship sailed for Shanghai, and he noticed a strange Chinese steward aboard. This man was most obtrusive. A Chinaman can be extremely so when he wishes, but Dan felt that the fellow was watching him.

After a few weeks, the ship returned down the China coast and called once more at Hong-Kong. There Dan one day saw the strange steward in a secluded corner of the jetty talking to a fellow Chow whom Dan felt certain was one of those who had killed Alick North, and attacked himself.

A few weeks later Dan transferred to another ship at Singapore, and sailed for Manila. On the way, a typhoon severely damaged the vessel, forcing it to remain in Manila some while for

repairs. While there, Dan glimpsed that Chinese steward once more.

A day or two later, a tall and gentlemanly Chinese was seen by one of Dan's shipmates, who mentioned the fact solely because the face of this tall Chinaman was framed by such a dreadful circle of newly-healed scar.

Thereafter followed a continual chase, with Dan a fugitive from every port about those waters. This went on for nearly a year.

At times he thought he was safe at last, but sooner or later something would occur to show him his mistake. Many attempts were made to capture him. Ling Loo did not wish to kill him. He wanted to capture him and extort a secret, a secret which the fugitive did not possess. Dan came down to Java, hoping to shake off the pursuit, but it caught up with him again at Macassar in the Celebes.

He deserted his ship there, took passage to Singapore, and travelled thence to Fremantle and on to Adelaide. But once more he not only heard of that scarred face—he saw it. Ling Loo had followed him to Australia.

From Adelaide, Dan went overland, reached Brisbane, and shipped on a South Sea trader. There it seemed he had really shaken off the chase. He drifted about the islands, sailing, beachcombing, and trading.

In the course of these wanderings he heard of the island of Malusa, with its chief village of the same name.

At first he was puzzled. The word seemed familiar, but he could not tell why. Then one

day, in Samoa, he suddenly remembered. "Malusa!" that was the name—the name Alick North had spoken with his dying breath, the name that Ling Loo was so keen to know!

"Malusa!" that was where he would learn this mysterious secret for which at least one man had been killed and another hunted from port to port for months.

After a long wait Dan got a passage to remote Malusa on the blackbirder *Ripalong*. It was thus that he had come to know and hate Captain Evans.

But when he reached the island of mystery he was disappointed. He explored it as well as he could, he puzzled over the strange hieroglyphics on that mysterious piece of paper, which he had carefully guarded all the while, and he questioned the natives.

Nowhere could he find trace of any temple or treasure hoard. Yet Alick North had distinctly spoken of both.

After a while he gave up the quest, re-started the old trading station that had been abandoned years before, chose Tamata to be his wife, and settled down to the drowsy existence of the South Sea Islands. There he had lived undisturbed until the Chinese auxiliary schooner *Shan Fang* had arrived in Malusa Lagoon some twelve hours previously.

It was about ten years, Dan said, since he had given Ling Loo the slip, but during that time the search must have been going on without pause.

I thought to myself that if Ling Loo were

willing to keep up the chase for all that time he would not lightly give it up now that he had Dan trapped on the island, and I said so to Dan.

"My oath, Billy, he's a die-hard! There must be something big hangin' to this 'ere secret, but what worries me is that if he gets hold o' me, and even the piece of paper as well, he'll still want to know somethin' I can't tell him, and he'll never b'lieve that. That's the rotten part of it."

"Never mind, Dan," Myra chipped in, "I don't think he'll get you, somehow."

"Hope not, lassie," replied Dan. "Anyway, we'll brighten up this fire, and then you two youngsters can have a peep at the key. P'raps you'll guess what it means. Used to be all right at puzzles meself when I was young."

While he was attending the fire I decided to stroll across to the rim of the ledge to see if there were any unusual signs of life down in the village or lagoon. Dan said it was a good idea, and Myra decided to go with me.

It was dark in that luxuriant bush, but I knew the ledge perfectly, or thought I did, and we came to the cliff edge without trouble. Away down through the purple darkness we could see the riding-lights of the two schooners and here and there the lights of the village fires. Otherwise the night seemed all quiet and drowsy.

But suddenly, sharp and clear through the stillness, came a shrill call—like the high wail of a Chinky fiddle—and, peering down into the bush near the base of the waterfall, we saw

torches moving. The sing-song jabber of voices floated plainly up to our retreat.

I wondered whether they had found our hidden reserve of provisions, and by what uncanny means they had already got so near to our tracks of the afternoon.

The lights moved away through the deep bush and towards the beach, while we wandered back to our camp. Those torches gave me an unpleasant feeling, as though Ling Loo would surely get us in the end.

The fire was now bright and cheerful. As we sat down beside it old Dan opened the precious book and clumsily took from the pocket of it that mysterious piece of paper.

## CHAPTER IX

### A SECRET CIPHER

DAN passed the paper to me, and as I gazed at it Myra leaned over, resting her head against my shoulder.

I remember well the strange contentment I always knew when she was close to me. For a moment this feeling even took my thoughts from the puzzle before me. It was really Myra's voice that woke my attention.

"I can read the bottom word all right," she remarked rather quaintly.

So could I. It was "Down," but this was the only intelligible part of the cipher. The thing on top was like a pair of stirrups with the irons having a close look at each other—or was it meant for a double-headed snake that had swallowed a rabbit and was looking at itself to see how it felt? Then came two little Chinese words apparently, "HO" and "MO," and beneath them a queer sketch like a long building with a dome at one end, and a sharp roof at the other, and an enormous bottle perched in the middle.

The two Chinky words, taken together, made "Homo," which I seemed to recollect was the Latin for "man," but that did not help us at all. And those small circles roosting on the cross-bar of the "H," in the dip of the "M," and in the centre of each "O" doubtless meant something. There was also the additional small circle underneath the sharp roof and a cross under the dome.

We pored over the puzzle for a long while, and tried it sideways, upside-down, and with the fire reflecting the signs through the paper, but could make nothing of it. Alick North, according to Dan, had mentioned the word "temple," and I wondered if the dome-and-bottle thing could be intended to represent a temple.

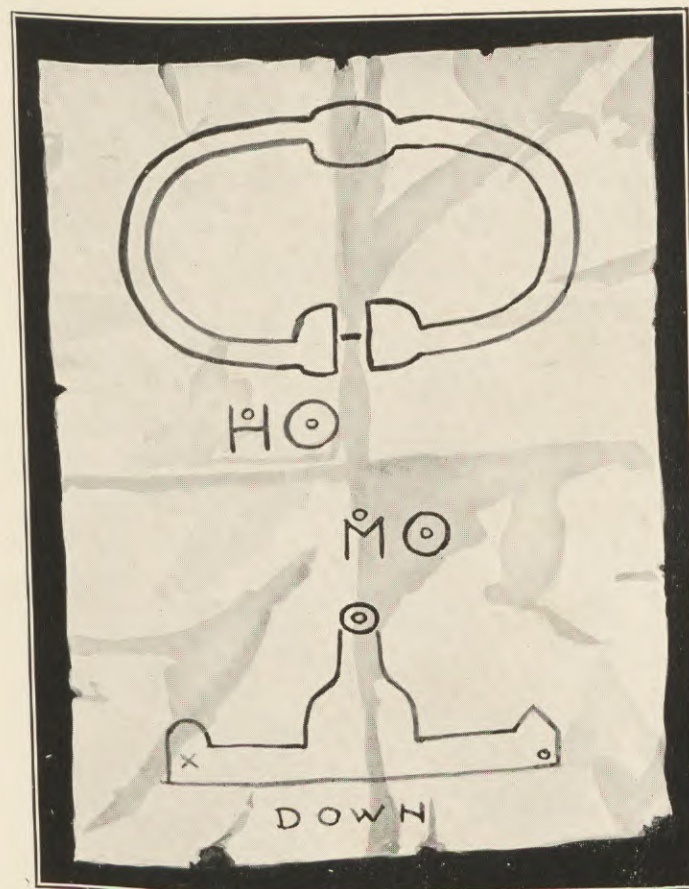
"You've got some learnin', Billy," Dan remarked, "been to school in Sydney, an' all, so to speak. Y'ought to be able to make out what it means."

"'Fraid I can't, Dan," I replied, "not yet awhile, anyhow."

"Lot o' good schoolin' is!" Dan growled. "I alwuz did 'ave a poor opinion of it. Never yet found it any good for practical purposes, as I might say. Why, lad, there must be no end o' money hangin' to that there puzzle!"

"There must be something," I half agreed, "when Ling Loo is so eager to get hold of it. Where did Alick North get it?"

"Not the ghost o' an idea," Dan replied. "Must 'a' got it by accident. Don't think he drew it 'imself . . . couldn't write 'is own name."



The Secret Cipher.

I handed the paper back to Dan, and he replaced it in the back of the book, and we spent the rest of the evening arranging details of the camp and cleaning the rust from the revolvers, after which we all lay down to sleep, just as we were.

For a long while I remained awake listening to the boom of the surf on the reef below, and watching the stars perched in the branches of the trees. The trade-wind was once more flowing gently over the island, and the drowsy rustle of the palm-fronds made a slow lullaby, but it was a futile one. There was a clear picture in my mind of that hieroglyphic puzzle, and for a long time I could not help pondering over it, and when at last I did fall asleep I was no nearer a solution than before.

Dan woke me before dawn. He thought it wise to get on with the work of hauling our extra provisions from the bottom of the cliff. A late moon gave enough light to work by; and, as Dan remarked, it would be as well to get everything up, at least to the first ledge, before the day was too wide awake.

We took a rope each and went to the brink of the ledge. Myra and Tamata came with us. We tied the longer of the ropes round a stout tree, and ran the end of it over the cliff. It just reached to the small ledge, down to which we tossed the short rope.

Tamata looked on anxiously. When Dan took hold of the line to climb down, she seized him, imploring him, in a mixture of English and Polynesian, not to go down.

"No! No! No!" she gasped. "Not safe! Debbil-debbil! No go on that rock! Tapu."

"Wot rot!" Dan growled. "Never see such people as these natives. Everything tapu! I told you, didn't I, Billy, that Tamata's mother was the only one wot knew the way on to this 'ere high ledge? She told Tamata about it just before she kicked the bucket. Somethin' queer! None o' th' other natives 'd come near it even if they knew how. I thought Tamata didn't go in for that rot. But that there shelf down there gets even her beat. Tapu, is it? Righto, Tamata, old gal! we'll soon fix the tapus."

Pushing her aside, rather roughly, I thought, Dan swung over the edge and went shinning down. Myra knelt on the edge, peering through the weak light of the moon. Tamata crouched motionless at the foot of a palm, where she had fallen. Her eyes were wide with fear.

When Dan had reached the lower shelf, I followed. It was a stiff climb down, and would, I thought, be an even more difficult climb up again. It was well that both of us had done some sailing.

After a quick glance round the lower ledge, which, as Dan had foretold, was more roomy than it looked from above, we fastened the other rope to a tree near the brink and so made a line to the base of the waterfall. The distance was less than to the ledge above.

Although he knew what might happen to him if he fell into the power of Ling Loo, Dan insisted that the job of going down the rest of the way must be his.

"Too risky for you, lad! If these Chows come along, the chap who's at the bottom of the cliff is goin' to be in a tight corner."

"That's just the reason," I argued, "why I should go. There mightn't be time to climb up again, and whoever's down there might have to run for it. I can run faster than you."

"No use argifyin', Billy," Dan insisted. "You're goin' to stay in this 'ere crow's nest. It's me that blasted Chow is after, an' it's up to me to take the chances. You didn't leave me to risk it with Evans when he wuz after you, did you, lad? So just make up yer mind to stay where y'are."

He paused in the work of fastening the rope round the tree as he made these remarks. When he turned to complete the job I pointed out that the one on the ledge had to do the hauling and that Dan was the stronger for such work. He agreed, but said it could not be helped, and went on to explain what signals we should use in case of need.

I was eager to go down the rope. Goodness knows why! The past two days should have satisfied my craving for excitement, but apparently they had not. So, going to the tree, I examined the fastening of the rope and pretended to find a fault in it. Dan knew there could be none, but he came across to tell me I didn't know what I was talking about.

"Very well," I said, "you just watch that knot when I pull on the rope."

Somewhat puzzled, he did watch. Before he could guess my purpose I seized the rope and,

running it through my hands, got to the brink of the cliff and let myself over. Half-sliding down the rope and half-climbing down the corner formed by the two walls of rock at right-angles, I reached the base of the waterfall. Kneeling on the brink above, Dan leaned over and shook a fist at me. There was nothing for him to do but stay where he was.

I had feared that those torches we had seen during the evening might have meant that our plant—hidden in its rocky nook—had been found. In that case there would be a watch kept over it. So, with my revolver cocked, I scouted round for traces of ambush. There were none.

Next I examined the approaches to the nook. There were no signs of it having been approached closer than twenty or thirty feet, so far as one could judge by the light of the moon.

After these precautions, I set to work loading the things into a couple of copra bags and fastened the rope to them. Dan did the hauling. It was slow work, and the more dawn widened into day, the more anxious I became to be through with it. I kept my ears alert, but was handicapped by the fact that I had to make more noise myself than would anyone approaching.

I began to wonder all sorts of things. Would those Chinese resume their search at dawn? Had they returned aboard ship, or were they camped at the store? Why had we not arranged for Myra, on the high ledge, to watch the two schooners? What was Captain Evans doing by

this time? Was he drugged with opium? Had he given up trying to recapture me?

I thought, too, how suddenly the situation had changed. It was no longer merely a vengeful sea-captain wishing to punish a runaway cabin-boy. Instead, it was a mysterious Chinaman seeking the mysterious key to a mysterious temple or something, wherein might be found fabulous store of treasure. Evans for the moment had faded from the picture.

These thoughts danced through my mind while I was working at top speed either in the rocky nook loading the sacks or carrying those sacks the dozen or so yards to the cliff and attaching them to the rope.

It was stiff work hauling them up, and Dan was evidently tiring. Each load made the journey up that wall of rock more slowly than the previous one. Continual soakings of rum must have had a far more weakening effect than I had thought. Owing to his lack of pace, it was well towards breakfast-time, judging by the feel of my appetite, before the last load went its unsteady way aloft.

Then all I had to do was to wait for that rope to descend once more, and up I should go to safety.

Dan seemed slower than ever, not only in hauling that last load up, but in unfastening it. At last, however, the rope's-end slowly descended. I waited anxiously, but it was not more than half-way down when I heard voices through the bush. If they were coming towards the waterfall, as they seemed to be, it would be



quite impossible for me to stay for that rope and climb it before they would arrive. I decided not to chance it. It would be wiser to wait until the intruders, whoever they might be, had passed on, as I hoped they intended to do.

Making a pre-arranged signal with my arms to Dan, who was peering over the brink of the shelf, I scuttled across to the nook where our things had been hidden. As I did so, a glance upward showed me the rope hurrying back up the cliff. Dan had got my signal.

The rocky nook was the safest place I knew of about there. It had only one approach; this my revolver covered. The voices came quickly nearer, and told me that Captain Evans had by no means faded from the picture. One of those voices was his. The other belonged to Ling Loo.

I was not surprised to find them together, but I wondered greatly why they should be about so early—and at that particular spot.

The path along which they were coming was a little below my hiding-place, and as they approached I began to pick out a word or two here and there, chiefly spoken by Ling Loo. Although he spoke very quietly, as usual, his voice carried much better than the skipper's, which mingled as indistinct rumblings with the sound of the waterfall. They paused opposite my nook, and only a few yards from it, and I could hear their talk much more distinctly.

"Torture!" came Ling Loo's voice, "I don't think I used such a crude word, did I, Captain?"

"Course you didn't!" replied Evans. "Never

use any straight-out word. But that's what you mean, ain't it?"

"I will say what I said before, Captain," Ling Loo drawled, "that if we can only get hold of one of them, I have certain means, certain persuasions shall we say, whereby we can learn where the others are. That young lad, for instance, or the young lady, would be an excellent subject. I find youth very interesting in some circumstances, Captain; it is so bold, so courageous—and so easily brought to tears."

## CHAPTER X

### THE MYSTERY OF THE LOWER LEDGE

IN my rocky hiding-place I shuddered.

"Well, have it your own way," Evans rejoined; but I never mind saying what I mean in plain English." He made some further remarks that I could not quite catch, but I did hear the words:

"Girl knows enough . . . . hang me . . . .  
Must get her, dead or alive."

I could not see either of the speakers. Maybe it was just as well. I felt as though I would have fired had they been visible. My finger trembled on the trigger, and in my heart was a dreadful fear for the safety of Myra. Afterwards I was glad I had not been able to yield to that mad mood. There was always a chance that we would escape, somehow or other, without the terrible necessity of killing anyone to save our own lives.

Ling Loo made no response to the skipper's mumblings. Instead, he remarked: "A beautiful waterfall, Captain! Not of great volume, I admit, but the surrounding luxuriance makes it most picturesque. By the way, where does it come from? There seems to be a curious gorge at the top of it, does there not?"

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I was glad to hear him describe our retreat as a gorge. From the bottom of the fall the high ledge, with its side walls of cliff, did resemble a gorge, or a chasm through the mountain, rather than the enclosed aerie it really was. That might possibly help to mislead them.

"My men report," Ling Loo went on, "that they found the marks of booted feet in this direction. Where could they lead to, do you think?"

"No idea," replied Evans. "Might be a cave or something in this cliff."

"Maybe, maybe," said Ling Loo, "I understand that the track does not extend past this fall. As soon as my men return from the *Shan Fang* I will have them make a close search of this locality."

That announcement warned me that I would have to get out of my nook and away before those men should arrive.

The mention of the *Shan Fang* woke a thought in the mind of Captain Evans. "You're quite sure they won't forget to bring that packet of dope?"

"They will not forget," replied Ling Loo; "but you must remember that it will not be delivered to you until we get aboard the *Ripalong*—and then only when you have placed that ship and her crew completely under my command."

"I don't forget, and ain't likely to, either," growled Evans. "Pretty stiff bargain for a bit of opium, my oath!"

"Well," responded the Chinaman, "I don't compel you to buy opium, and you understand

that I need every man—or, rather, *we* need every man, since you are as interested in this search as I am. It will take some time to beat this island systematically, and it has to be done.”

The voices began to recede. I heard the deep rumble of Evans say something about “confounded early-morning walk,” and the calm voice of Ling Loo:

“But it has been pleasant, has it not, Captain Evans? I always like an early stroll when I am ashore. It clears the brain, Captain, and I am sure that waterfall was beautiful enough to justify the . . .”

I could make out no more. They had evidently gone round the bend of the track, so I crept forth and followed their voices till they were a safe distance away from the fall. Then I scurried back and signalled to Dan by extending my arms horizontally three times. There was a movement in the tuft of bush that slightly overhung the edge of the rocky shelf, and immediately afterwards the rope was being lowered

I had no idea how long it would be until Ling Loo’s men arrived to make the proposed search, but I had to take the chance.

The climb was not so stiff as I had expected. For a good part of the way the rope hung just clear, owing to the slight underlay of the cliff-face. Higher up, the corner formed by the side cliff gave several small footholds. This corner was especially useful when it came to clambering over the top on to the shelf.

“Close shave, lad!” Dan greeted me.

“Rather!” I replied, as he hauled the rope up.

We then returned to the back of the ledge and signalled to Myra, who had evidently withdrawn the top rope when I had made signs to Dan of Ling Loo’s approach. She now lowered it; and Dan climbed up after having arranged to haul some of the things to the high ledge. Tamata was to keep a look out. There was one spot on the high ledge that had a view of the track well along towards the store and should anyone pass there, it would be easy to pull the rope up before they could come within sight of the waterfall.

Having watched Dan climb over the brink above me, I returned to the front of the small ledge to collect a load of provisions. A sound from below caught and held me. I peered over the cliff edge. Something was moving through the thick bush not far from the base of the fall. The searchers had already arrived, and the rope Dan had climbed still dangled against the wall of rock, a visible advertisement of our retreat.

I decided to chance what seemed to be the lesser risk, and, standing well back, in order not to be seen from below, I signalled Dan to haul up the rope.

Then, hidden by the tuft of bushes which Dan had used for the same purpose, I peered over the brink once more at the moving things below, afraid that any moment one of them should look aloft and see that moving rope. I remembered how keen-eyed they had been when I had tried to cross a few yards of open space near the store. But they were intent on the lay of the land about them; and one, evidently in charge,

was pointing here and there as though planning their method of search. I kept my gaze upon them for what seemed a long while, and when I once more glanced aloft the rope's-end was just disappearing over the brink of the high ledge. We were safe so far. It had not been seen.

The Chinese were very thorough in their search of the cliff-base. The nook wherein I had so recently been hiding was soon discovered and the way they loitered in it suggested that they had found some trace of recent occupation.

Weary of watching them, and feeling by now very hungry, I opened a tin of fish from the provisions strewn about the ground, and had breakfast. I finished off with a couple of oranges. Several orange-trees were growing among the bushes which crowded that small shelf of soil-carpeted rock.

After that I took another glance below. The search party was still busy, so I filled in the time by shifting our things from where Dan had left them to a small weatherproof recess under the cliff at the rear of the shelf. There they would be quite safe until the chance should allow us to haul them to the high ledge.

By the time I had done this job the Chinese below were clustered about their leader; and I could hear their shrill yabber above the deep notes of the waterfall. The search was evidently completed, but whether they suspected anything or not I could not say. At any rate one of them sat down and made himself quite cosy, as though prepared to stay there for the rest of eternity. The others went jog-trot along the

track, their loose jackets swaying from side to side. They disappeared into the green tunnel of the thick bush.

The one left behind did not stir for a long while. Then, with a movement so swift as almost to cheat the power of sight, a knife flashed and hid itself again, and the Chink was crouching instead of sitting. The hand that had drawn the knife was held curiously behind him with no weapon visible. Obviously he had heard something moving and was ready. I was glad not to be that something.

A second later I found out what it was. A wild pig scurried across the track and into the bush. The sentinel sat down and resumed his patient immobility. From where he was sitting he had a perfect view of the entrance to the little rocky nook in which I had been hidden.

I left him to it. On my lofty shelf I was quite safe and would have no difficulty in staying there all day, and many days, if need be. Meanwhile I decided to have a good look over it.

Although it was only of small area it was so thickly overgrown and had dug itself into the cliff in so many nooks and hollows that I was able to spend the best part of an hour wandering about it, noting what trees and shrubs were there, what its formation was, and what were the ranges of outlook from the various points of its slightly curved and irregular frontage. The time might come, I thought, when it would be of value to have these points in mind.

After exploring the bush and rim, I worked round the back wall from the outer point, along

into the corner of the cliff angle and thence towards the waterfall, which was about a chain from the nearest part of the ledge.

From below, and indeed from the ledge itself—until I looked more closely—it had seemed that this intervening distance was a space of bare, unbroken cliff front.

Now I discovered that along this, there extended a sort of gallery, eaten out of the cliff. It was invisible from below because the rock on the outer side of it still remained intact forming a balustrade, over the top of which I could just see without tip-toeing as I went the few yards that the gallery seemed to extend.

When I had gone those few yards I found that the gallery turned at right-angles into the cliff and became a tunnel. The tunnel went in about six feet. It then turned again at right-angles and continued towards the waterfall, behind which it became a large-sized chamber. A rock balustrade, somewhat lower than that along the gallery, formed a protecting wall across the front of this chamber.

I was puzzled by the regularity of the whole cavity. It looked strangely as though it had been hewn out long ago by human hands and weather-beaten into its present slight roughness. I cast the idea aside as foolish.

That, however, did not prevent me from enjoying the wonder of the place. I stood within that chamber, leaning slightly on the low balustrade, having first noted that I would not be visible from below, I gazed through the thin curtain of the waterfall iridescent in the morn-

ing sun, down to the dark green of the bush, and onward to the emerald transparency of the lagoon beyond.

It was indeed a wonderful mountain balcony, but how wonderful it really was I did not guess till I looked behind me to the back of that rock-hewn chamber.

What I saw there made a creepy feeling run through me as though I were alone in a house supposed to be haunted.

It was not without reason that Tamata had declared the lower shelf to have something queer about it.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE DARTING HANDS IN THE DARKNESS

AFTER the first gust of surprise and of eeriness I dived a swift hand into my coat pocket, and found that I had a box of matches. Next I hurried along the tunnel and gallery back to the open cliff-shelf and on to where our things were stored. Rummaging among tinned fruits, tinned fish, coconut oil, bags of rice and oatmeal, and tins of jam and butter, I found some candles. Taking a whole packet, I returned to that chamber behind the waterfall.

There was a flutter of mingled fear and wonder at my heart as I lit a candle and went towards the back of the cave and the thing that had so set me gasping, a thing that in any other place would have been nothing unusual. It was a flight of steps, hewn out of the back wall of the chamber and leading up into the mountain, into blackness, into a region of mystery.

I half-expected some fearsome being to spring upon me from that mouth of darkness, and it was with something of caution that I put my foot on the first step, held the candle-light among the shadows, and peered up into nothingness.

The thought crossed my mind that chance had

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led me to the very place of which Alick North had known, the place that Ling Loo was so eager to discover.

A secret chamber carved high in the cliff, evidently hundreds of years ago, and a flight of steps leading into the mountain certainly looked promising, especially as they were in the island of Malusa, that word which Alick North, as he lay dying in Hong-Kong, had whispered to Dan Rockley. And the temple Alick had hinted at, might it not be an underground temple?

All agog with excitement, I started cautiously to climb the stairs. After a dozen steps or more the blackness began to crowd in upon my lonely light.

Two more steps, and a huge hand flickered through the darkness and knocked the flame clean off the candle. Darkness rushed at me from all sides, and that same hand caught me a blow in the face.

It was not a hard blow, but there was something horrible about the feel of it. Panic seized me, tossed me from my balance, and sent me rolling, sprawling, and bruising down to the bottom of the stairs and into daylight once more. The panic was still upon me, and I dashed across the rock chamber to the tunnel-way. There I paused to glance back.

Neither man nor monster had followed me, and the tumble down the steps had done me no damage other than a few bruises. But I remembered Tamata's terror, and began to believe in tapus and all sorts of superstitions.

The bright light of the day steadied me after

a while, though I still felt inclined to leave the exploration of that mysterious stairway till Dan could be with me.

However, I at last determined to make another trial. I hated the thought of giving in, even for the time being, and I knew that if I waited for Dan's company I would have much less confidence to face any future danger. Besides, I did not like the thought of having to confess to Myra that I had been frightened by something I had not even seen. So I took out my revolver and cocked it, and having relit my candle and two others I advanced to the steps once more. Frankly, I was greatly afraid. But I remembered that courage is not much a lack of fear as a power to conquer fear.

About eight steps up I stood one of the candles in a niche in the wall. At the twelfth step I did the same with another candle. I was now close to where the hand had been.

With the third candle held high in my left hand, and the revolver in the right I went up step by step a little farther, and once again that hand darted at the flame. I fired wildly, at the same time crouching low on the steps, and then scuttled down as swiftly as I could to the second candle.

The noise of the shot echoed and re-echoed like peal on peal of thunder about me. There were wild eddies of wind in the darkness, and from above came a frantic whirling sound as many hands darted towards me. In a moment the second candle was toppled over and put out. But I had had time to see what those darting

things were, and, retreating to the bottom step, I sat there and laughed at my previous fears.

What in the darkness had been hands darting at me were only monstrous bats, horrible things certainly, but nothing to fear.

It was evident that I could not explore that stairway with a naked light, so I went back, out on the ledge to empty a bottle of sauce or something for a lantern. Before returning to the rock-hewn chamber, however, I went to the edge of the cliff and peered down. The solitary Chinaman was still sitting there, patient as Doom.

I was rather glad of this because Dan and the others would be expecting me on the high ledge as soon as that sentinel vanished, and now I did not wish to return there before I had explored the strange stairway, nor did I want to alarm them by remaining after the sentinel had gone.

With the candle in the bottle, and my head and as much of my face as possible protected by a bag I went back behind the waterfall and started once more up the steps. The bats were so numerous that it was like going through thick undergrowth in a high wind—with bat-wings instead of leaves beating all about me.

The steps continued up and up, with every now and then a landing. The roof of the stairway was arched, but the roofs of the chambers formed by the landings were alternately pointed and domed. This struck me as curious, since on that mysterious piece of paper the last sign or sketch showed what looked like a long building with a dome roof at one end and a pointed

roof at the other. The stairs, instead of continuing straight up, twisted to this side and that at each landing and at some of them even doubled back, so that I lost all sense of direction. The stairs seemed interminable. As I climbed higher the bats became fewer, and at last I passed above their zone altogether.

Presently I heard a rushing sound. It became more distinct as I ascended, until suddenly I reached a landing along one side of which ran a deep channel. Down this a stream of water ran and disappeared into a hole in the wall of rock. This hole was very little larger than the volume of water.

It occurred to me that this might be the stream which spouted from a similar sized hole in the cliff-face of our high ledge and winding across it plunged over the brink to become the waterfall. Evidently I had now climbed above where my friends were waiting for me.

The stairs now continued upward but now, as I ascended, there was the channel alongside of them, with the water cascading from the darkness above into the blackness below or flowing along the sides of the landings *en route*.

At last I came to one landing which formed a square room with a pointed roof. From a hole in the side of this chamber the stream flowed. Obviously I was not to have its company any longer on my strange climb. But there was no further climb to make. The stair did not continue past that chamber. The walls were solid rock everywhere with the two exceptions of the

hole whence the stream issued and the stairway by which I had come.

I searched for a long while, taking the remaining candles from the packet and lighting them all at once in order to examine the roof, which was about ten feet high where it joined the walls. I also examined the floor with great care. The walls, roof and floor all seemed as solid as the mountain from which they had been carved.

The tunnel-way whence the stream issued was large enough for a man to crawl into, but as the water filled it to within less than a foot of its roof there was obviously no passage that way.

I had to admit myself beaten. With high hopes of having found the place of mystery, and perhaps wonderful treasure, I had come all this way to find only blank walls.

On the downward journey I examined every landing and the walls of the stairs most carefully, but found no sign of any passage branching from them. So, thoroughly disappointed, I came out once more to the cliff-ledge and daylight.

The Chinaman was still on guard below.

I had some lunch, and after that I slept, waking about sunset, and still the sentinel sat immobile, watching the nook where I had hidden that morning.

As night thickened I prepared to camp in the hollow at the cliff-angle where our stores were packed, but as I did so a movement out in front



of me caught my eye. The rope had been lowered and was being dangled within a few feet of me.

My climb was quite hidden by darkness from the gaze of any watchers and soon I scrambled safely over the coping on to the high ledge once more. As I stood up Myra threw her arms round me, gave me a friendly hug, as pleased to have me back as I was to be with her once more, while Tamata gravely reached out a timid hand, and touched my face as though to make sure I was no ghost.

"You safe, Bili? Three days you might die. Me 'fraid you die three days. No go down no more. Tapu!" She pointed to the lower shelf.

As we sat round the fire in our secluded cave before going to sleep I told them all about the strange stairway, where hands darted through the darkness, the tempest of bat-wings whirred, and waters roared. We agreed that it was no wonder if superstitious natives declared the place tapu.

Dan had no notion of the purpose of that gallery and stairway, nor of when it had been built. All the time he had been on the island he had heard no whisper regarding it, and when he asked Tamata she merely shook her head.

It was agreed that he and I should take the first chance of exploring it. There we had to leave the riddle for the time being, because next morning we found that eternal Chinese still on guard at the base of the waterfall.

Meantime we set about arranging our plan of

life: there were many things to consider. First we had to choose pathways about the ledge which would be invisible from any watchers on the cliffs about us. This was not difficult. The bush was so luxuriant that for the most part we were able to pass through its depths like insects in long grass.

We arranged two bathing-pools in the stream—one for Tamata and Myra, and another, lower down, for Dan and me.

We also arranged two sleeping-caves comfortably, and set our provisions in order. Those on the lower shelf of the cliff could stay where they were until they were needed. In fact for the time being we decided to leave most of them there altogether as there was always a chance that Ling Loo's men would discover where we were and, by finding and forcing the entrance-passage or by ropes from the high walls of the cliff above us, might reach our ledge; in which case our only escape would be to the lower shelf.

To protect the passage-way into the high ledge, we fitted a large boulder in such a manner that it could be moved easily enough from the inside but only with much effort, if at all, from the outside.

These matters kept us busy during the morning and we then felt as secure as might be. That did not mean that we felt utterly safe. Whenever I shut my eyes I could see that Chinese face encircled with its frame of scar, and I always felt strangely as if Death peered from behind the sleekness of those features. I could

not think of Ling Loo without a curious cold shiver running about my body. It was not fear. I had known fear only the previous morning, and it had taught me that this was a different feeling, and one even more unpleasant.

At lunch I told Dan of something that had been worrying me. We were fairly secure. If our pursuers reached the high ledge we might retreat to the lower ledge.

"But," I asked, "how about the natives, not only down in Malusa Village, but in the other villages about the island? Evans has already maltreated one of them in trying to discover me. What would not Evans and Ling Loo together be capable of doing to find out, not only my hiding-place, but Dan and the Secret Cipher.

Myra had been quite joyous all that morning at the thought of how well we were hidden away, but with my question the merriment faded from her eyes, her look of contentment flickered out, and, with a sort of horrified gaze, she interjected:

"But they wouldn't do anything to the natives, would they? The natives don't know where we are."

"'Fraid that'd make darn little difference because Ling Loo would not believe them if they said so," Dan remarked. Then, turning to me, he went on "Fact is, Billy, I 'adn't thought o' that. Selfish-minded old derrylick I am! They might be torturin' or murderin' every kanaka on the confounded island."

He then said something in Polynesian to Ta-

mata, speaking too rapidly for me to get the drift of it.

"Tamata says it's all right. She thinks Ling Loo ain't ill-usin' 'em at all. Says she thinks 'e's sort o' friendly to 'em. P'raps he likes their colour."

"But," I inquired, "how on earth can Tamata know? She hasn't been down to the village, has she?"

"Course not, y' silly young galoot!" was Dan's reply. "When you been 's long as I 'ave among these 'ere duskies y'll know a thing or two more about 'em. They don't need telegraph wires. They just know—dunno how they do it, but there y'are!"

"Anyway, I'll run down to the village to-night to make sure," I said. "Goodness knows what might be happening. It's not fair to risk Tamata's guess being right."

I thought of all the kindly looks I had received from those friendly natives, of the cordiality of the older folks and the merry smiles of the younger boys and girls, of their sweet voices as they sang their strange slow melodies and on moonlit nights danced clad in native skirts, or gay-coloured lava-lavas, and bedecked with coronets of tiare and frangipane blossoms.

"You're a fairly stubborn youngster!" was Dan's response—"pig-headed, as I might say. So I s'pose if you say you'll go you will go. But you'll be a damn young fool to take the risk. Tamata knows what she's saying—them there natives is all right."

But in my mind was a dreadful picture of what that beautiful village might have already become. I could not have stayed contentedly on the high ledge that night; it was hard enough to remain till the darkness came. I was fairly sure of my scouting ability by now, and did not think the risk so very great.

Dan argued with me at intervals; but I felt that I had to go, and towards nightfall I went.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE FATE OF RARA

I STARTED in time to get through the wild bush and reach a track before darkness came. I took care to choose a route other than the one which led to the store.

By making for the beach on the far side of Malusa Village I came almost within sight of the lagoon and well into the coconut belt before I met anyone. There was a curious feeling of confidence upon me, and I swung along as though the *Shan Fang* and the *Ripalong*, with their masters and crews, had never existed.

But I kept alert, and thus heard the crackle of a foot crunching dry leaves before the owner of that foot could see me. I stood still, behind a large palm-bole, and waited.

The footsteps came hurrying toward Malusa along the rather ill-defined track. In a moment a native boy came by—it was possible to make out that much through the twilight. Stepping from cover, I spoke to him. It was Kuru, one of those in whose canoe Myra and I had escaped from the *Ripalong*. He glanced at me, and the whites of his eyes widen with fear. Then without a word he turned and ran as though all the

devils of his ancestral mythology were after him.

As it was no use trying to follow and make him speak, I went on towards the village. There was a sound of singing and laughter, of native carnival, as though some feast were being celebrated. Soon, through the ranks of palm-boles, I could see the glare of fires and torches. I went more cautiously, moving from palm to palm, and keeping a smart look out, until I was close enough to see details of the revelry.

It was a customary South Sea ceremony of welcome; not, as I first assumed, to some chief from one of the other islets of the group, but to Ling Loo and Captain Evans, who soon after arrived dressed all in white, and followed by the *Ripalong* crew. After them came some Chinese bearing boxes that turned out to contain presents of ribbons, beads, and bright Chinese cloths.

In front of the chief's house was a great spread of food, of oranges and breadfruit and bananas and guavas, of pigs roasted whole, and of taro and such, all set out on banana leaves.

I lay flat on the ground in the shadow of a small bush, listening to the delightful but rather melancholy songs, the voices of the girls and women, soft like the unceasing murmur of the south-east trades in the palms, and the deep boom of the men's voices, like the everlasting thunder of breakers droning along the reef.

In the unsteady gleam of the fires I saw dances—really fearsome warrior-dances accompanied by slapping of thighs and lolling of tongues and barbaric shouts, and the other dances in which

the women joined, which had seemed so extraordinary, so immodest, the first time I saw them, but which now I took as a matter of course.

I had come fearing to find a village dumb with terror or perhaps devastated. Instead all was merriment and song. Ling Loo was making friends with the natives and compelling Evans to do the same. In this he showed cunning, whereas Evans in maltreating one of the natives to get word of me had displayed only cruelty.

I could glimpse the kow-towing not only to the chief, Mana-hana, but to old squint-eyed Kopata, prophet and medicine-man, whom even Mana-hana himself had to obey for fear of having some deadly spell cast upon him.

I wanted to see what the end of the ceremony might be, whether Ling Loo intended treachery, or whether his friendliness was due to an intention to treat the natives as allies. So I lay still in the warm night while the great, slow stars, moving across the sky, marked the passage of several hours.

Every one was so busy with affairs of the ceremony that I was quite safe. Some, now and then, wandered a few yards away, fraying the edge of the assembly a little, but no one except Rara, the little girl who had been teaching me the Malusan dialect, came anywhere near me. On one occasion she wandered, rather dreamily I thought, in my direction. Had she come a little closer I would have called her softly. I felt it would be safe enough to speak to her because we had been good friends ever since I had arrived on the island.

It was far into the night, or morning, when rain came with such drumming fierceness that it put a sudden end to the shivoo. I was saturated in about ten seconds, but that mattered little.

Through the thick curtain of the downpour I could see the feasters, more like shadows than real people, scurrying for shelter. The fires were beaten out by the deluge. All was darkness save for the weak glimmer here and there of torches inside the native huts.

The drumming of the rain was so loud that I could have gone singing into the very centre of that village without being heard. I went, but I did not trouble to sing. Striding carelessly forward, secure in the darkness, I came near the chief's hut. More cautiously then I crept to the doorway.

Inside the torches flared; and I saw Ling Loo and Captain Evans, the former talking with grey-haired Kopata while Evans tried awkwardly to be pleasant to Mana-hana. They were all standing, as though the two guests intended to leave immediately the rain should cease.

For ten minutes or so I waited. Then the downpour switched off as suddenly as though an electric button had been pressed. It was no longer safe to loiter in the village. I scuttled round the corner of the chief's house, and sauntered away, hoping to attract less attention by boldness than by trying to sneak to the village outskirts.

The natives were coming from their shelters; several passed me at a little distance in the

gloom without taking any notice. Doubtless they mistook me for one of the *Ripalong* men.

But just at the edge of the village one native did trouble to look closely at me. Instantly he gave a frightened squeal, even as Kuru had done, and ran towards the central space, yelling excitedly. In a moment the whole assemblage was astir with excitement, and a glance showed figures hurrying from the chief's dwelling.

I ran.

Torches were coming after me, and men in loose-flapping jackets. I clattered noisily a little distance, then veered off and doubled back into hiding among the mazy roots of a great banyan. The jackets flapped on past me into the night.

For a second time the mere sight of me had terrified the natives. I felt as though I had been changed into some sort of basilisk.

While I was peering, first at the torches moving away through the night and then at the stray lights of the village, a hand clasped my arm.

Had not my clothes been glued to me by the rain, I would just have jumped clean out of them. A soft voice whispered: "Bili!"

It was little Rara. So far as I could judge in that lightless retreat, she was scared.

"You go quick, Bili," she whispered. "You not safe here."

"Just what I was thinking, Rara," I whispered back. "But how did you find me?"

"I just knew," she said.

"What's the feast all about. Rara?" I asked.

She told me as much as she knew. It was

enough to show that Ling Loo aimed to become a veritable ruler of Malusa by a fine pretence of friendship for Mana-hana and Kopata—especially the latter.

This was a crafty move to deprive us of any friendly aid from the natives. I could not blame those simple-hearted people for being swayed by the pretences and persuasions of the Chinaman—especially as the Chinese at all times can win to a much closer companionship with the Polynesians than can Europeans.

Rara also told me what effective means old squint-eyed Kopata had chosen to carry out the wishes of Ling Loo, and why it was those two natives had fled from the mere sight of me.

A tapu had been placed upon us.

Old Kopata, by mysterious rites and magic ceremonies, had so cursed us that anyone speaking to us, much less assisting us, would die in three days. I knew how deeply those superstitious natives believed in such things. They had only to fall under such a curse and they would lie down and die within the stipulated time. Knowing this, I wondered at the courage of little Rara.

“But, Rara, aren’t you afraid of the tapu?”

By watching the whites of her eyes in the darkness, I could see that she nodded her head. Then she whispered:

“But I like you, Bili. I was afraid for you when I knew you come here. I said ‘Little Rara, perhaps she save Bili.’ Now three days I die.”

Before I could say a word, she had turned and vanished into the night.

Nothing will convince a Polynesian that such mumbo-jumbo is nonsense, and I knew that only one thing could prevent Rara from dying as she had said. That one thing was for Kopata to lift the spell from her. It was dreadfully tragic. To give me a needless warning, she was going to face the death that would come in three days.

I lost all sense of caution, and ran straight back to the chief’s house. It was empty. So was the village except for a few youngsters who had been awakened by the unusual hubbub. The natives, led by curiosity, had all gone streaming away at the tail of my pursuers.

I do not know what had become of Ling Loo and Evans, whom I had quite forgotten. In fact I had forgotten everything but the thought of that bright little girl dying because she had tried to do me a good turn. I ran across to Kopata’s hut, hoping to find him there. He was, and he looked astonished as I dashed inside exclaiming:

“You old rotter! I’m going to give you a thrashing, and more.”

It was an easy threat, but one not easy to carry into action. He was grey-haired, certainly, but was still only in the fifties and, as he had been a warrior and was still vigorous and heavy, it was quite possible that my small amount of boxing science would be useless. However, that did not occur to me at the moment, so I can claim no credit for courage in facing him. It was merely the heat of my anger.

As I spoke to him I saw a quick movement of his hand towards a spear standing against the wall.

With one bound and forgetful of all science I was upon him; for some moments we were a wild jumble of arms and legs writhing on the mats which covered the earthen floor. He had the advantage of both weight and strength; but I was much the quicker, and, managing to break from him, I got to my feet.

The light from the two flares inside the hut was too unsteady to fight by; but I was able to dodge his mad rush, and landed several solid blows about his body, keeping close enough to prevent him from seizing a weapon. He was unaccustomed to fighting with his fists, and hit out wildly, until at last he threw himself off his balance with a savage swing of his right hand.

With all my weight and force I landed a blow with my left fairly in his jaw, and down he went. It was not a complete knock-out, but he was dazed long enough for me to seize some strands of flax and tie his hands behind him. Even before I had finished he recovered somewhat and started struggling, but I was able to keep him down until the knot was tied.

Then I leapt clear of his feet, seized the spear he had tried to reach when I first entered and ordered him not to move.

"Kopata," I said, "if your tapu business causes any death you'll be a murderer. I don't suppose that'll worry you, but there's one thing. Rara believes she will die in three days, be-

cause of your tapu. You have to see that she doesn't. Understand?"

He nodded.

"If Rara dies," I went on, "I'm going to shoot you. Understand that also?"

Again he nodded.

"Very well. Now I'm going."

I tossed the spear into the far corner and took a deep breath, for the fight, though short, had been swift and exhausting. But when I turned I felt less sure about going.

There, leaning against the doorpost, a yard or so from me, was Noosey, the carpenter, and hangman, of the *Ripalong*.

PART III  
THE TEMPLE



### CHAPTER XIII

#### THE KEY TO THE SECRET CIPHER

"Up with your flippers, young 'un!" growled Noosey. He had a revolver pointing straight and steadily at me. I obeyed.

"Righto!" he continued, "and mind you, no hanky-panky! I ain't takin' no risks with you. You come with me, alive or dead. It ain't every day a fellow can earn a whole keg o' rum so simple."

Evidently this was the reward offered for my capture.

"You think you're smart, don't you, dealin' it out to a nigger?" he taunted. "But y' ain't dealin' with a nigger now. Y' 'ave a white man up agin you this time.

"As I step back," he commended, "you step forward—step for step—and if you come an inch closer'n y'are now, bang goes this 'ere baby cannon! When you git out the hut y'll just march on ahead—to the beach. Come along!"

He stepped backward a few slow paces, and at each step I moved forward. This brought me to the door of the hut. Then a banana skin astray from the feast did me a good turn. Noosey's foot landed on it, he slipped a little, lost his

balance, and to recover switched his arm up so that the revolver no longer covered me. It was quite momentary; but it sufficed.

With a wild spring I was upon him, one hand making a grab for his right hand, which held the revolver, and the other aiming a blow at his face. The light was bad; and I missed both grip and punch. My weight, however, catching Noosey before he had righted himself, toppled him backwards. Down he went, with me sprawling over him. His head struck a rock. I heard a crack that sounded as though his skull had been fractured.

At the same time, his finger jerked the trigger, and the revolver went off. The stillness of the night and my fear of others arriving exaggerated the sound till it seemed that all the world, and even the great calm stars, must have heard that report.

Noosey lay still where he had fallen. I took the revolver from his grip. It was one fire-arm the less against us. Then I saw lights coming through the night. That shot had recalled the Chinese from their search for me, and they were closing in from several points.

Another glance at Noosey showed that he was beginning to stir. I put his revolver into my pocket, dashed into Kopata's hut, and picked up the spear I had tossed into the corner. Then I ran into the night and down a lane of blackness between two of the approaching lights.

Escape was not difficult. The darkness was opaque; and another hosing rain came down soon afterwards, smothering both sight and

sound, so that I was able to go stumbling through the coconut belt without fear, though the darkness made it hard work and slow.

After a while I came to rising ground, and kept upward until I reached the thicker bush. Round this I skirted till instinct, rather than anything else, brought me to a track along which I went, continually colliding with its leafy walls.

It was rather eerie in that blackness, with branches clutching at me from all round and above; and the great loneliness made it seem that I was the last living thing in the world. Besides, I was saturated, tired and sleepy.

After wandering on and upward for a while, I gave up hope of finding the high ledge in the night. On hands and knees I crept through the tangly blackness of the track till I came to some rocks. I crawled under what seemed in the darkness to be a sheltering jut, and there went to sleep.

When daylight woke me a couple of hours later, I found that the place where I had slept was on the brink of a small precipice. Had I gone six inches farther, or had I even rolled over in sleep, I would have gone toppling on to a rocky track some thirty feet below.

Even as I looked down, a Chinaman went trotting past below me and out of sight round a bend. I crawled back to the track I had left in the darkness and then I ran, for the moment quite panicky. That coolie, I guessed, was on a lower curve of the same track and coming up behind me.

Afterwards I felt ashamed, as I should have been a match for any one Chinaman. But at the time the weariness of a sleep in drenched togs had soaked up all my spirit.

Morning was high overhead before I got my bearings and made my way to the entrance to the high ledge. Myra was on watch so that I might not be kept waiting on the outside of the rock that we used to block the passage; she told me bad news: Dan was drunk again or, rather, had been. He was beginning to sober up a little.

The previous evening, after I had left, he had brought out the bottle of rum that he had sneaked from the store.

"Just a nip, lassie!" he had remarked to her. "Feelin' a bit out o' sorts."

The nip had ended when the bottle was empty. Then he had sung himself to sleep.

"It was a good job the rain made such a noise," Myra added, "or he might have been heard. But oh, isn't Dan comical when he sings?"

From the way she said it, I knew Dan had not been singing some of the songs I had heard him bawl when drunk. She would not have found them in the least comical.

Her news worried me a bit. Goodness only knew what Dan would be doing next! He had no more rum and he might become desperate enough to try to get some from the store. I began to fear that if he made such an attempt, and fell into Ling Loo's power, the scar-faced Chink would only have to offer a bribe of rum

and Dan would give away all the secrets in the world.

We went along to where he lay. He was still rather hazy, but looked a little ashamed.

"'S all right, Billy!" he explained, drowsily, "had to take a nip. Rheumatism, y'know! Always get it in the rainy season. Rum's th' only cure. 'S all right, Billy! 'S all gorn! threw the bottle away. Goin' to give up the booze now."

"Righto, Dan," I assented. There was not much else to be said. Every time Dan got drunk he was going to give it up.

I then set to work and made a lava-lava out of some cloth we had, and, dressed in this, I put my clothes out to dry.

That lava-lava gave me a fresh idea. I was already well browned. Some sun-bathing would brown me entirely. Then, dressed in native style, I could go reconnoitring with much more safety, so long as I did not allow myself to be seen at too close range. No amount of sun-tan could hide the fact that my features were totally unlike a native's, since I had, like most Australians, a long narrow face and an aquiline nose.

For two days I soaked in sunlight, smearing my body with coconut-oil. I became then nearly as dark as the Malusans, who, like the Samoans and Tahitians, are not really a very dark-skinned people.

The second night put my new idea to the test. I had an errand to the village, the errand which I had had in mind when I took the spear

from Kopata's hut. I went down the mountain before sunset, and after careful scouting near the store, came within sight of one of the Chinese. I allowed him to see me, though not too closely; and he took as little notice as though I had been a genuine Malusan.

Perfectly satisfied, I chose a safe hiding-place and waited till many hours of night had passed, and the village was well asleep. The moon gave just enough light.

Sneaking along to Kopata's hut, I entered quietly. The sleepers within did not stir. I did even better there than I had planned, for I took away with me another spear, to serve as part of my native disguise.

But I first left behind me in the hut the one I already had, so that when the old scoundrel of a prophet woke next morning he would see that spear standing up in the floor of his hut with a piece of paper attached to its shaft. On that paper was written in Malusan, which I had got Tamata to correct for me, the phrase:

"Remember the warning of Bili?"

If Kopata had not already removed that tapu curse from little Rara, I felt certain this would make him do so. Some time later I found out from Rara herself that he did remove it on the third day. But that is by the way.

After that several weeks passed very monotonously. By day we all of us did a deal of sun-baking at our respective bathing-places in the creek. Myra might easily have been mistaken for a pretty half-caste, such a fine brown tint

kissed her young body. I liked her all the more for it. Beneath the sun-brown was a rosy glow, such as blushes the skin of the Sydney surf girls.

Dan, unable to soak himself in rum and not yet desperate enough to make any mad attempts to get more, soaked himself in sunlight. It made a wonderful difference to him. He looked younger and cleaner. I began to understand why, in spite of his drunkenness and dirt, I had never been able to dislike him. The fact was he had quite a pleasant appearance and had probably been good-looking in his young days. It was now possible to see the true man, and the true man was very likeable.

A clearness and straightness of glance came to his eyes, and he walked more erect. Tamata, especially, noticed the change and whispered to me at times:

"Dan—very fine—beautiful! I very fond of Dan."

All through those lazy days we puzzled over the scrap of paper Alick North had given to Dan, trying forever to solve the riddle it held. But we could make nothing of it. Once or twice possible solutions came to one or other of us; but they never worked out to anything.

And still those two white schooners drowsed on the blue waters of the lagoon, and still the island was systematically trodden by searching parties from the *Shan Fang* and the *Ripalong*. Bands of natives were also enrolled for the same purpose; I suspect their searching was half-hearted—chiefly a big show of energy, and no-

thing more. Searchers had also visited the many smaller islands which formed the group.

From occasional scouting visits in the neighbourhood of the village I gathered hints showing that Ling Loo had virtually become overlord of the island.

I explored the mountain above us, and found it so rugged that the climb to the top of the cliffs which enwalled the high ledge was extremely difficult. In fact it was impossible except from two or three points.

The island of Malusa like all the high islands of the Pacific, is of volcanic formation, and the mountain itself must at one time have been a very active volcano with several craters. The way it had been torn about made it a ruin of precipices. The quarry-like hollow forming our high ledge had doubtless been made by the side of the mountain having been blown clean out.

Owing to the difficult climbing, the searchers had advanced very slowly in their attempts to explore the ranges. Yet twice we had seen figures moving against the skyline on the cliffs above us. As the patience of Ling Loo was an ever-flowing spring, I felt that sooner or later the high ledge would have its turn and be searched.

We hoped that something would occur—a visit from some ship, maybe—to succour us before that time should arrive. In any case, we still had the lower shelf to retreat to, and could there put up a strong fight. At least we thought so. We had sufficient food to last for some

months; and life passed pleasantly enough. It would have been Elysian but for the presence of those two schooners and the thought of our dreadful foe.

During those idle weeks Dan and I went down to the lower ledge of rock several times, and examined every inch of that strange stairway into the mountain. We ascertained that the subterranean stream, as I had surmised, was the same that gushed on to the high ledge. We even took a cord and measured the distance from the place where it left the stairway to where it spurted forth to daylight; we were surprised to find that the distance was but a few feet. There was only a thin shell of rock at that spot between the stairway and the cliff-face behind the high ledge. However, this did not give us the slightest hint as to the origin or purpose of that stairway. After several visits we gave up wondering about it. But still pondered on that piece of paper with its hieroglyphics.

One day Myra and I were lazing on a small beach beside the stream. It was delightful drowsing there beneath the shade of the over-slanting palms. I had the piece of paper lying on the sand beside us, having been puzzling over it, as usual. My mind drifted from it to haphazard talk with Myra.

"Billy," she reminded me, "you promised to tell me about how you ran away from the *Rip-along*. You have never done so yet."

I thought I had. But, as she assured me I had merely made odd references to it, I started

to tell her the whole story. The narrative came to where I fell through darkness, and in the morning found myself perched on a rock between the two walls of Chasm Island.

"It was an awkward sort of place," I told her. "The walls were straight up and down, with the sea beneath flowing through into the lagoon. Perched up there, I felt for all the world like . . . like . . ."

My eye glanced at the paper lying on the sand in front of me, and, I continued, "Like that silly little circle perched on the bar of that 'H' there." I stopped short. An idea had fairly stunned me.

I looked at that paper intently for a few seconds; then jumping up I waved it above my head and pranced about like a lunatic dancing.

Myra looked at me with the quizzical little glance that came to her eyes whenever I did something a little more foolish than usual—a glance that seemed to wonder if I were not just a little madder than most of the male kind. Then I sprawled beside her on the beach.

Above us the slow wind flowed through the dark greeneries of palms and trees and creepers, and above that the sky was quivering blue, with one dark column of rain far out at sea.

We had so far gone native that all four of us on the ledge were wearing lava-lavas. We had only one set of clothes each, and as they were torn enough already by the rough usage of the bush, we had decided to reserve them for

any chance that might bring us back to the safety of civilization.

So there, two brown bodies, half-clad in gay colours, and with a shawl of dark hair about the head of one, we lay full length on that white sand, beneath green trees and blue sky, while I told Myra the idea that had fairly stunned me.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CHASM ISLAND

It was an idea that looked indeed very like a solution of the secret cipher, and it was so simple that I wondered we had not thought of it before. That is always the way with puzzles.

The likening of myself, caught high in the gulch of Chasm Island, to the small circle perched on the bar of the "H," had flashed my thought, I cannot say how, to the elliptically-bent, snake-like thing on the sketch, the ends of which were joined by a small bar, as the two halves of Chasm Island were joined by the rock across the chasm. Following the same line of thought, or rather of guesswork, I then noticed for the first time that the ellipse roughly represented the shape of the coral reef encircling the big Malusa Lagoon, with Malusa Island at the north and Chasm Island at the south. Certainly the many other islands in the lagoon were omitted, but whoever had drawn the plan possibly did not wish to make it too plain.

Those small circles set in such curious places might show the course to be followed. If so, the circle in the centre of the ellipse being the first circle on the plan, would show that the

centre of Malusa Lagoon was the first objective, and from that point the chasm would become visible as the second objective. This chasm was then seemingly repeated below as an "H," with the indicator set on the bar, to show that the next step would be found by a descent to the rock jammed midway across the chasm.

The more I thought it over, the more feasible did it seem. Hitherto we had always taken the "HO MO" to be a Chinese word, or at best a Latinized hint that there was something to do with a man. It was exhilarating to see an entirely different possibility and perhaps it was this, rather than the reasonableness of the theory, that made me enthusiastic.

Of course, it was impossible to follow up the idea without a visit to Chasm Island—no easy matter with the crews of those two schooners searching Malusa for us and with the natives afraid even to speak to us, much less to lend us a canoe to cross the ten miles of lagoon.

When I explained my theory to Myra she was as keen to test it as I was and we talked over the possibilities till near lunch-time, when we strolled back to the cave, where old Dan sprawled asleep.

Sleep was his main pastime during those idle days, and Tamata's chief delight was to sit fanning the flies and mosquitoes from him and admiring the change that was taking place in him, the health that was glimmering up through that rum-soaked face, the new look of clean vigour, and the gradual fading of the signs of sottishness.

Tamata, good-hearted, dusky old ugliness that she was, seemed very proud to have such a fine white man as her property.

Myra woke Dan up by sitting on his chest and towsling his hair, after which she raced away followed by Tamata, to get lunch ready, leaving me to tell him my latest theory as to the meaning of Alick North's mysterious piece of paper.

That's the maddest idea o' the lot, Billy! Better give up worrying over it. I did long 'nuf ago. You're goin' dilly about it, lad—clean daft! The last guess you made showed you was nearly dotty, but it wasn't as clean dotty a one as this."

I forget what the previous guess had been, I had made so many shots at it, but Dan's discouragement of my new theory merely made me the more eager to test it. It was small use arguing however, and anyway Dan changed the subject as being of but small interest.

"Come along, Billy," he said. "Let's stroll down to the lookout while the tucker's gettin' fixed."

The spot we called the lookout was the brink of the cliff in the opposite corner to that which looked down on the small lower ledge. We saw nothing new. About us the air was full of drowsiness, a drowsy silence rather than sound. The sunlight lay on the lagoon below and on the wide ocean beyond. The two white schooners slept on the blue waters as though they were set there for all time. The only

movement was the undulating line of whiteness along the reef.

It was an unusually clear day for the wet season, and I thought Dan was going to remark on it, so that what he did say came somewhat unexpectedly: "How will we be able to get across to Chasm Island, Billy?" he asked.

"D'you think it worth trying?" I exclaimed.

"Guess I know you by now, lad. When you want to do a thing you mostly always do it. Pig-headed young dog! But, somehow, you generally seem to do the right thing, so p'raps it's not a bad fault. Have to pinch a canoe, won't we?"

"I'm afraid we will," I replied.

We could not see Chasm Island from where we stood because our ledge looked eastward across what was only a corner of the great lagoon, the rest of which lay to the south of Malusa Island and therefore round the shoulder of the cliff. But in my memory was a clear picture of the intervening distance and I could think of no other way to cross it. So I agreed with Dan feeling glad to find him willing to test what he had called my mad idea. We talked of the possibilities for a few minutes as we stood gazing through that drowsy air at the drowsy picture beneath it.

It was well we had not been standing right on the brink of the cliff, because suddenly we both jumped nearly out of our lava-lavas. A terrific sound had leapt from nowhere, and was roaring towards us. At first we could not tell where it was; but in a second the solid rock beneath us



was billowing up and down and the trees were dancing in a fearsome manner, an up-and-down movement altogether different from their motion when swayed in a gale. The whole effect was as though some unimaginably huge monster had gone galloping past deep underground, roaring infuriatedly as it went.

Dan recovered first. "Hum! Earthquake! Never had one here before. Women-folk'll be scared."

We started off at the double to our camp. Half-way along we met Myra racing towards us through the green tunnel. It was the first time she had felt a quake, so it is no wonder she looked rather startled.

Dan said he had often felt them in some of the other islands especially in Java, but the one we had just had, he said, was easily the worst he had known.

"The bobby-dazzler o' the bunch!" he assured us, as we hurried back and found Tamata, scared out of her wits, cowering in the back of our camp-cave.

We had lunch; and for the rest of that day we stayed in shelter, because it rained continuously—hour after hour of monsoonal downpour. As we sat in the steamy shelter of the cave and gazed out into the opaque curtain of rain, another possibility came to us: the island was sure to be flooded in parts, and should a canoe be missing the natives would believe that it had been washed away.

If I could reach one of the villages on the other side of the island from Malusa Village by

the following morning, and get a canoe away before day had become too bright, it would be possible to hide it in some secluded creek or cave along the shore. The coast of the island in parts was very rocky and gave good hiding-places.

We could then make the journey across to Chasm Island whenever we wished—provided we did not get caught in the attempt. One great point in our favour was that, living like natives we had all become brown enough to resemble them at a little distance. By wearing only lava-lavas and using a canoe, we might easily make the whole journey unmolested. Dan agreed that it was possible.

At first glint of light next morning I was plunging through saturated bush, and through the drench of rain, toward the southern shore of the island. There was small danger of any searchers being about; and I did not see a sign of a native. The creeks were roaring in such anger that it was wellnigh impossible to cross them high up. I had to follow down to the more level coastland where they had spread wide and shallow, and could be either forded or swum.

When at last I got to the beach I found the villages—or at least, the one I had come upon—quite deserted. Its people were doubtless taking refuge in caves on the high land.

They had drawn their canoes farther up than usual and had fastened them to palm-boles. Even so, most of them were afloat. I chose one of handy size and unfastened it. Others also I unloosened so that my action might appear more

like the work of the storm. Then in the grey light that filtered through the downpour I paddled round the coast towards the cliffs.

I found a small cave whose only approach was by water. There I hid the canoe and made it secure. I plunged into the water hoping for the best as regards sharks, swam round a small bluff and reached shore safely. So far, so good. We had a canoe, and I got back to the high ledge without any mischance.

At first it was proposed that Dan and I alone should make the journey to Chasm Island, taking one of our coils of rope. Tamata was well content to remain behind; but Myra so strongly insisted on going with us that we had to agree.

We allowed several days to pass so that any search for the missing canoe would be given over. Then one morning we rose at dawn and breakfasted. All our arrangements were complete; and the three of us set out for Chasm Island.

## CHAPTER XV

### A MYSTERIOUS SCREAM

OUR gay-coloured lava-lavas and our sun-tanned skins certainly made us look very much like the light-tinted Malusans whom we wished to resemble.

Myra was an especially good imitation, though of course at close range it was easily seen that she was no native girl. Her straight features, the fine curve of her lips, and her daintily-shaped nose, which almost continued the line of her forehead, were such as no Polynesian, beautiful though they often are, could ever possess.

She was as golden brown as a surf-girl, and her thick black hair, falling loose to her waist, was like a dark cloak that met and contrasted with the gaudy native skirt. In her dark eyes was a more dazzling glow than ever, a brightness of excitement, and the beauty of her as she walked there in the soft dawnlight was very wonderful.

Dressed as we were, the most difficult part was to dispose of the things we had to carry and still look like islanders.

We each had a revolver, and these together

with knives we carried in our waistbelts, with a girdle of leaves to hide them. Other things, such as food, matches, candles and sundries, were in a native bag belonging to Tamata. They were all right.

The rope had been more trouble, but we had folded it in loops instead of coiling it, and had woven a case for it from rushes, so that it looked somewhat like the long baskets in which the natives carry fruit.

Before leaving the ledge, we arranged that I should keep some distance ahead of Myra, while Dan, carrying the rope and Tamata's kit-bag, should loiter a few yards behind her. In the event of any of the searchers appearing I was to give an alarm if I could and skedaddle in some other direction. This would give Myra and Dan a chance to take cover. As the one best able to give any pursuers the slip, I would try to double back and rejoin my two friends. On the other hand, if I fell into any ambush and could not make a dash, Dan and Myra would be able to come to my help.

In this order we made for a mountain saddle whence a rough track led down to the far side of the island. Without seeing a soul we came to the cliffy tumble of coastline. I swam round the small bluff to the canoe and found it undisturbed in the small recess. I paddled it round to the others. A few minutes later we were gliding across the smooth water. The sun was coming up from the ocean rim between two columns of rain that stood blackly from sky to

sea in the manner so common to the wet season in the tropics.

We had not gone far before we were caught by a downpour. This very opportunely screened us while we were passing that part of the lagoon visible to the two vessels anchored off Malusa Village; though had we been seen, even through telescopes, I feel sure we would have been mistaken for natives.

Once past the first of the numerous small coconut-clad islets within the circle of the reef, we were able to set our course to keep one islet or another continuously between us and Malusa, so that the rest of the way was quite safe. After a couple of hours' paddling we stepped ashore on Chasm Island.

I was feeling excited. Indeed we all were. Within a brief while we should know whether or not our reading of the mysterious key had been correct. If it were, the hour was drawing close when we would know what was the mighty secret that had tempted Ling Loo to his years of patient search, and had made him willing to call even torture and murder to his aid.

I was for scampering madly through the palm-belt and up towards the crest of the island, but Dan had more sense.

"Steady on, lad!" he warned. "I know there ain't no kanakas livin' on this 'ere bit o' dirt; but there might be some o' them visiting it so to speak, as I might say."

It was not a long climb to the summit and so to the edge of the chasm. We lowered the rope

from a spot directly above the suspended boulder. It was plenty long enough.

Myra looked down. Switching her glance to me she asked with wonder in her voice:

"Is that where you landed when you fell into the chasm?"

I nodded.

"Thunderin' miracle!" Dan remarked, as he made one end of the rope fast round a jut of rock a few feet from the chasm's edge.

I had done so much climbing lately that I was becoming an expert; I was soon down once more on the boulder. With the walls of rock rising sheer, and falling as sheer, either side of me, I really felt, as I had said, like something perched on the cross-bar of a giant "H." The next step in unravelling that mysterious sign "HO MO" was to find the "O."

To remain standing in that straight-cut chasm, silhouetted clear against a background of sky or sea, was to be too conspicuous; so sprawling flat I examined the walls of rock and peered into the water beneath as it roared through from the open sea into the lagoon.

I found nothing. I gazed seaward. There was only a blank curtain of sky.

Next I peered across the lagoon towards Malusa; but another torrential downpour was drumming on the smooth waters, and I gazed into a bank of blackness.

A few moments later the downpour widened and took in Chasm Island. For the next hour I sat on the boulder, midway between sea and sky, and had a stinging showerbath. Then suddenly

the curtain of rain was torn aside. The sun blazed; and Malusa Island stood out, a tattered outline clear across the lagoon.

Still I had found nothing.

The boulder on which I was perched was about twenty feet from wall to wall. Moving slowly across it, I examined Malusa very closely—the only thing left to examine.

I had crossed nearly to the far wall when I gave a gasp. One of the lower peaks of Malusa stood sharp and clear—with a circular hole clean through it. The thing was unmistakable. The peak was pierced as by a huge tunnel some distance from the top and close to one side.

I have seen one other such pierced mountain, also in the South Seas, on the Island of Morea or Eimeo. It can be seen very distinctly from shipboard when approaching Papeete, in Tahiti.

I gazed intently for a few seconds. There was the "O" without doubt. My reading of those hieroglyphs was proving correct. I wanted to jump up and dance on that dizzy boulder. Instead, I took careful bearing of that pierced peak. So far as I could judge, it was separated only by a saddle from the main peak of Malusa Mountain on which our high ledge snuggled.

After that, I climbed back to Dan and Myra, and when I reported my discovery, Myra did what she mostly did when excited. She threw her arms round me, and ejaculated: "Lovely!"

Old Dan looked straight at me, with a sort of dancing gleam in his eyes, and said "Looks as though your dippy ideas are goin' to be right once more, don't it, Billy?"

I believe that he, too, was getting excited.

We hurried back to the canoe, for it was now near noon. We started to paddle back to Malusa, taking with us some coconuts for drink. We had some lunch on the way.

Because of our impatience it seemed a slow journey; but in time we got to the last of the islands that screened us from the schooners off Malusa Village.

It would have been wise to wait for another shower to hide us as we crossed that last stretch. But we were so eager that we decided to chance it. Before we were half-way across we had reason to repent that decision. A boat was lowered from the *Shan Fang*. Its paddles flashed swiftly in the sun. It was cutting through the water straight towards us.

We could not tell whether it were after us or not, but fear set our paddles dip-dipping much faster than was safe. Luckily we were soon screened from view of the other boat by the headland. Since our distance was much the shorter we safely reached the recess where our canoe had lain hidden and paddled straight into it, there being no time to chance a landing round the small bluff. The recess was fairly secure, consisting as it did of a deep fissure which, a little distance in, opened out to the right and curved back on itself in the form of a shallow cave. From the outside this turn was invisible. The cleft appeared to be a straight opening with a dead end.

We hauled the canoe up to the back of the cave which was above the water-line, and sat

on the parcel of rope, this being the softest seat in that rocky hole. There we were practically imprisoned as we had no means of learning the whereabouts of the boat from which we were hiding.

Dan offered an opinion: "Seems to me we'd best doss 'ere for the night. 'Bout the safest rabbit-hole we know, ain't it, Billy?"

Before I could reply a sudden sound of oars was caught by the walls of the fissure and tossed clearly back into our cave. The sound ceased with a splutter of water.

We assumed that the boat, doubtless the one which had left the *Shan Fang*, had passed on, but the next second we knew that it had not. We could hear a voice. It was that of Ling Loo:

"Do you mean to tell me, Evans, that you did not have this rugged piece of coast searched?"

"I was goin' to—I really was goin' to have it done, Mr. Ling Loo," we heard Evans reply, "but there hasn't been time yet, sir."

I was astounded at the change in the skipper's voice since last I had heard it. There was cringing fear in it. The thought of Evans mistering and siring a Chinaman was amazing; it made me wonder whether Ling Loo was but using the power given him by the skipper's opium thirst, or whether some more horrible means had been used to reduce that blustering sea-captain to such servility.

The voice of Ling Loo continued: "I thought you would have understood by this time, Evans, that I give but poor welcome to excuses. You know I am not satisfied that the missing canoe

was lost in the storm, and yet you neglect to search such a suitable hiding-place as this. Apparently, Captain Evans, a little more emphasis is needed to impress my wishes clearly upon your mind."

The cold calmness with which those words were said sent a feeling of horror through me. It was almost impossible to notice any change of inflection in the voice, yet it carried, in those polite phrases, a terrible sense of threat.

I glanced at Dan. There was a look of terror in his eyes. He knew more vividly than Myra or I could what might follow a threat uttered in such a way and by such a man. We heard that calm, clear voice once more. This time it spoke in Chinese.

Next instant the voice of Evans leapt to our ears in a sudden mad scream of agony.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE SEARCH FOR THE TREASURE

I COULD never forget the cruelties Evans himself had often ordered and enjoyed, but the sound of that scream made me want to save him from whatever thing was being done to him. It was unendurable that any man, however bad, should be left helpless in the hands of Ling Loo and his servitors. Of course, we could not know what had been done to Evans, but this only made that shriek the more horrible. It left such dreadful scope for imaginings.

I could not stand it . . . My thoughts made me mad . . .

Springing to the prow of our canoe, I seized it. I had some uncertain idea of launching it and dashing out of our retreat to make a frantic assault on the boat outside in the lagoon.

Dan sprang up at the same time. As my hand touched the canoe I glimpsed from the corner of my eye a swift movement of his arm.

That was all I knew for some time.

When I came back to consciousness my head was pillowed in red-and-yellow cloth. This puzzled me; for a moment I could not make out where I was. Then, looking up, I saw Myra's face leaning over me, a look of great anxiety

upon it, and tears, instead of the usual laughter, brimming her eyes. The red-and-yellow cloth was her lava-lava. My head was cushioned in her lap.

As soon as she saw me stir, she put a swift finger to her lips—a sign for silence. I turned towards the roll of rope. Dan was sitting on it, revolver in hand, and looking grave. He, too, put a finger to his lips.

I heard a gust of excited Chinese gabble. There was a splash of oars. We all expected that rowing-boat to appear round the corner of the rock that hid us. Instead the sound grew faint and ceased; as though it had passed beyond range of the funnel-mouth of our recess.

By this time I had recalled fully where I was; and the sound of that solitary shriek was once more ringing in my ears. I felt that I should never forget it—and, truth to tell, I never have. It still haunts me as a horrible memory. If ever a nightmare comes to me in my sleep that cry is sure to be part of it.

We sat silent and still for nearly half an hour. Then Dan stood up, stretched his arms above his head, yawned quietly, and remarked almost in a whisper:

"Think it's all right. 'Fraid they might 'a' gammoned to go and been hangin' round to listen. Thought at first they must 'a' heard Myra. But they'd 'a' been dead sure to 'vestigate, so to speak, if they had. The Chinky gabble must 'a' been about something else. Scared me, I tell you."

I wondered what noise Myra had made; but

Dan went on "Sorry to give y' the knock-out, lad. Guessed what y' 'ad in mind. It was th' only way to argue things over with you quietly like. Felt a bit the same way meself. But it'd been damn silly, lad, to go out an' git ourselves collared like loonies. Evans ain't worth it. P'raps we might help him some way a bit later. Brought it on himself, anyhow."

Then I found out what had occurred. Dan had landed a neat and very solid blow on my chin. Without a sound I had crumpled down, but Myra, not instantly guessing his motive, had leapt up and started hammering him with her bare little fists. She must have looked rather like a gazelle attacking a hippo.

The next instant she realized why he had acted so, and, squatting beside my insensible body, had taken my head in her lap. Luckily she had not uttered a word; but Dan had been much afraid that the general stir of my fall and her attack would be heard by the Chinese. Altogether, my impetuous folly had run us in for a very close call. It was fortunate that Dan could hit so straight at need.

As it would have been madness now to try to make for the high ledge, we settled down to spend the night where we were, making shift with a meal of hard damper and tinned meat, followed by coconut water for drink, the nuts we had brought with us from Chasm Island serving us in good stead.

The short twilight came just as we were finishing. We re-arranged the coil of rope as a seat, with the canoe as a back to it, and prepared

to pass the night. I did not mind for myself. But I felt sorry for Myra, and put my arm round her so that she might lean her head on my shoulder. That at least made her a little more comfortable.

As we were all very tired, it was not long before we slept. Several times during the night, however, I woke and found my bones all aching. But the feel of Myra nestling to me in the dark made me quite content to endure the discomfort, and gave me a remarkable feeling of endurance and self-reliance. I realized that she regarded me as her protector and depended upon me. There was a strange and wonderful sense of power in the thought.

The faintest grey of dark was filtering through the warm darkness and I was already awake when she opened her eyes slowly. A drowsy smile glimmered in them as she looked up at me. I had more than half a mind to stoop and kiss her, but I hesitated for fear she might think me silly. I need not have been afraid, for almost at the same moment Myra, with one of her usual flashes of impulsiveness, reached up and gave me a sudden little kiss on the lips.

I felt myself blush, probably because she had been more game than I had. But, after all, at the age I then was, a boy is often too shy to let a girl know he is at all fond of her, and I do not mind admitting now that I was getting more fond of Myra than I could have found courage or words to tell.

As she snuggled her head back to my shoulder

she said very softly: "Billy!" Then, with a swift, quaint little laugh, she jumped up.

Dan and I stood up also, and the next moment there were the three of us in a row, all very stiff and sore, and all stretching and yawning.

The grey eyes of dawn peeped round the rocky corner into our cave. We wasted no time but launched and loaded our canoe. Then we paddled cautiously into the lagoon and around the small bluff. After loading the other two I took the canoe back to its hiding-place and sank it in shallow water. Then I swam back to Myra and Dan.

Eating some damper as we went, and picking some bananas by the way, we set out for the pierced peak, by a different route from that by which we had reached the coast the morning previous.

Part of the way was through open coconut country. As we commenced to ascend we found a track which we followed until it veered in the wrong direction. Then we took to the bush. That was all right for a while, but later we came upon jungle patches and steep gullies, which led on into wildernesses of tall trees, of thick scrub, and endlessly-twining lianas. In this green gloom we lost our bearings, and wandered at random for several hours. It was well towards noon when we broke through and found ourselves on the top of a cliff.

Somewhat cautiously we looked over the brink. The country below was thick in patches. What we saw made us thankful for the chance that



had brought us to the top instead of the bottom of the precipice.

There were figures moving about. At first we noticed but a stray one here and there, but gradually we were able to trace a line of them. Some were Chinese, who seemed to be widely spread apart. Between them were natives, and even a couple of men in European dress, sailors, doubtless, from the *Ripalong*.

We watched for close on an hour, and found the general line of searchers, of whom we could count some twenty or thirty, advancing slowly and very surely. Every rocky nook, every clump of bush, every jungle mass was searched. The whole thing was systematic, and the advance was in the direction of Malusa Mountain which meant that it was also in the direction of the pierced peak. It was evident that the closer the line of search neared the high ledge, the greater would be the risk of leaving it. What was worse, the greater also would be the risk of remaining there. We went more cautiously after this for we did not know what other searchers might be about. By about three o'clock in the afternoon we reached the pierced peak.

It was very different from what it had seemed at the distance, but there was no doubt about it being what we sought. By standing midway in the opening and looking back towards Chasm Island we found that one end of the rock suspended in the gulch was in full view, while the other end was cut off by the angle of the chasm. This corresponded exactly with the position

from which I had discovered the hole in the peak.

This hole was formed by a mighty jumble of giant rocks, some as big as city buildings. They had been tossed by some tremendous upheaval so that a mighty archway was formed. It was some hundreds of feet high and wide, and about fifty yards through. The sides were wonderfully jagged and ill-shapen, although from Chasm Island they had seemed to form a smooth circle.

We had now located the landmarks indicated by the symbols "H" and "O." The next was something to represent an "M." From the end of the archway which we had first approached, nothing was discernible.

We set out for the other end, clambering up and down the face of enormous rocks, lowering ourselves into crevices between them, helping each other out of those depths to the tops of more great boulders and so on. It was as though the floor had been paved for traffic of giants and some earthquake had tossed the mighty cobblestones to chaos. Arrived at the far side, we stood in the centre and gazed ahead.

What we sought was so evident that we all saw it at the same instant. Across the saddle which separated the pierced peak from the main height stood two rocks, pointed, and close to each other. The outer sides of these rocks seemed almost straight down, while the inner sides were sloped. The effect was an unmistakable resemblance to the letter "M."

There was a light of expectancy in the eyes of Myra as we left that great archway, and a

similar light was glimmering up through the duller eyes of Dan. As for me, I was all a-tingle with excitement.

The sun was already well down the west by the time we reached the two rocks, and just as the hole in the peak, when we had got to it, no longer resembled an "O," so these rocks, now we reached them, no longer appeared the least like an "M."

We took post between them, and as we did so Dan remarked how the symbols of that mysterious key were bringing us back towards the very vicinity of our hiding-place. That, and the secret stairway beneath the high ledge, with its chambers having certain resemblances to the hieroglyphics of the key, made us wonder if, after all, we were merely being led back to the stairway, with its blind ending. We did not discuss it, having agreed to talk as little as possible, so that, if we were seen and mistaken for natives, our voices would not betray us.

From between the two rocks we could find nothing to resemble, even remotely, the next symbol, which was another "O," except the archway from which we had come. We wondered whether the secret was hidden among those mammoth rocks. It was a likely place for mystery. If so, this inclusion of the letter "M," leading needlessly to these two pointed rocks, could only be intended to make the key more difficult to decipher.

To ignore this theory meant that we were at a dead end, so far as we could see, there seemed little to do but go back to the archway.

Yet, although it was a reasonable assumption, I could not persuade myself it was right. I felt that our course lay ahead, and in that direction I sauntered, eyes alert both for enemies and signs of further symbols. The bush there was thin, owing to the stony ground.

Ahead, about a hundred yards, was a long shelf of rock, some ten feet high. I wandered along the base of it a short distance, then climbed it and returned along the top, chiefly because the scrub at the base, unlike the rest of the bush thereabouts, was thick and clumpy, making detours necessary.

Having come back opposite where Dan and Myra waited, both thoroughly tired, I stood and gazed about me, but finding nothing, climbed down the rock to go and rejoin the others.

But at the base of that small cliff I stopped short, my heart suddenly going at express speed, and my breath caught in my throat.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE LAST OF THE SIGNS

I HAD found the fourth symbol, the last "O" of "HO MO."

At least, I was quite satisfied that I had. It was circular, and in a direct line with the gap between the pointed rocks and the archway through the pierced peak.

That was enough. I took a sharp look about me. There was no sign of any if our pursuers. I beckoned to Dan and Myra, who were still waiting at the pointed rocks. They at once joined me at the base of the terrace and I pointed to my discovery.

It was a hole near by, like the mouth of a well, about three feet across, and close under the cliff, which there overhung like a veranda. The lip of the well was smooth, but, as it was in solid rock, I could not tell whether this was a natural cavity worn smooth by the polishing hand of Time or whether it had been cut out by man.

Although night was now fairly close upon us we decided to investigate as much as possible; so Dan unlooped the rope while I tied a small boulder to the end of it. We then took sound-

ings. After paying out maybe thirty feet of line we heard the slight thud of the rock striking bottom. There was no sound of a splash. The well was dry, a fact nowise surprising since the rain could never invade it owing to the veranda of rock above.

It was then arranged that I should climb down, with a candle and matches, while Dan, with two revolvers at hand, his own and Myra's, should remain on guard lest Ling Loo's men should discover us. Myra's part was to hide in a small shrub on top of the terrace and keep watch.

The next thing was to suspend the rope in the centre of the well so that it would be climbable. This was done by getting a stout sapling, placing it across the well-mouth, and tying the rope round it. I then started to descend.

For about ten feet the climb was easy. The walls of the well were rather jagged, but they were close enough for me to steady myself. Then they gradually receded till I could touch them only by reaching out an arm full length. After that I lost contact with them so that I was now unable to steady the rope. It began to spin round and round at a very unpleasant speed. It was uncanny, in that pitch darkness, to be whirling helplessly on a rope. I surmised that I had reached a cavern or chamber and was lowering myself from what was really a hole in the ceiling.

At last my right foot touched something like a twig or small branch. I felt round cautiously with the other. It came in contact with no-

thing. Still keeping a firm grip of the rope, I lowered my weight on to the something beneath my right foot. There was a sharp snap, as of brittleness breaking, and with a sudden drop of a few inches I landed on what seemed to be solid bottom. Not wishing, however, to take any chances I looped the rope round my waist.

Something whizzed past me in the blackness, and I felt, for an instant, like scurrying up that rope as fast as my sailor training would let me. I had thoughts of all kinds of fearsome things lurking in that black place of mystery.

But I resisted the impulse, and got out the candle and matches. The first match went out, as though the darkness were too thick for any light to live in it. The second match had better luck, and by the weak candle-flame I looked about to see where I was standing. A glance showed what had snapped beneath my foot. It was the rib of a human skeleton that lay with its eye-sockets staring up at the small circle of light formed by the well-mouth.

I wondered what tragedy was hidden behind that vacant gaze—whether this was some native who had fallen into the well in the darkness of night, some shipmate of Alick North trapped in trying to find the secret that Ling Loo would have given so much to know, or the relic of some grim fight among other seekers of the treasure—for we all assumed that hidden treasure alone could prove such a lure.

These wonderings raced through my thoughts while I took the most hurried of glances at those white bones. Then on the heels of my

conjectures came the thought that it was hardly likely to be a native who had died there, as no native would be wandering those hills at night. They are too much afraid of evil spirits.

That skeleton might have fascinated my gaze and held me for a long while had I not been anxious to see what sort of place I was in, and whether any of the fearsome monsters of my imagination lurked in its darkness.

The circle of light showed that I was standing on a rocky floor which seemed solid enough to be quite safe. I next held the candle high. With raised arm and head strained back I peered aloft. The light was just strong enough to hint at the formation of the chamber roof, and that hint set my blood racing.

The well I had descended was bottle-shaped, narrow at the top and widening towards the base. That was why the walls had receded from me as I climbed down. The roof of the chamber in which I stood was about ten feet above me, and the wide, circular break in it formed the base of the bottle-like exit. I was standing in fact, within a place which, so far as I had explored it, exactly resembled the figure beneath the words "HO MO" on Alick North's mysterious slip of paper.

What we had taken for a building with a bottle-shaped dome was in reality a subterranean gallery.

I was all a-thrill to go farther. But at that instant a hand darted from the gloom and knocked the candle out. There were other

movements through the blackness, and a soft whirr of sound.

I relit the candle. It was instantly dashed out again, not by one hand this time, but by several. This did not frighten me. I remembered how those hands in the darkness had scared me from the stairway beneath our high ledge, and how they had proved to be nothing worse than enormous bats. But if they did not alarm me they at least made it impossible to attempt anything more with a naked light. I loosed the rope from my waist, pocketed the candle, and started the climb back to Dan and daylight.

It was no easy task. As soon as my feet left the ground the rope commenced to spin in a dizzying fashion. This made the climbing hard work, and when I got to where the bottle-neck narrowed, the twisting of the rope scraped and battered me against the rough sides of the well, so that I was torn about and once or twice almost stunned. The thought flashed to my mind that maybe the skeleton below me had once been some one trying that almost impossible climb and, being stunned, had fallen to the bottom and died.

I wondered if my skeleton might yet be keeping that other one company down there in the batty darkness. That was a dangerous thought, but it did not live long.

I was too busy trying to protect my face and head from those rough walls of rock that seemed to be whirling at a mad speed round me. The only way was to try to take the blows on my bare shoulders, as my hands could offer no

guard. When at last I reached the narrow wall-neck, it was possible to use my feet as a brake against the sides. That steadied the rope and made the rest of the way easier.

When I reached the surface, I was so torn about and smeared with blood that Dan gasped: "Struth, Billy! What 'n earth bin doin'? Fightin' an old-man kangaroo or a bloomin' dragon?"

As we had nothing with us that could serve as a lantern, there was nothing to do but make for the high ledge to get a bottle-lantern, which meant a postponement of our investigations till next morning.

It was a pity. The line of pursuers beating the bush for us so systematically would reach the spot before many days, and would be certain to discover and investigate this strange well.

If it were what we believed it to be, Ling Loo would then have no further need to search for the secret key. Without the help of any sheet of hieroglyphics he would have found what he had so patiently sought for so many years. We could not tell what lay ahead in our quest, and it might be that the delay of even one night would prove disastrous. However, there was no help for it, and having hidden the rope we set out for the high ledge, which we reached just after dark.

Tamata had dinner set for us. We were not surprised. With the inexplicable power that so many natives possess, she had known we would be back that evening. Her wide, slow smile was much the same as she might have given if we had been returning from nothing more dangerous

than a swim in the shallow waters of the lagoon.

After a hearty meal, Myra appointed herself nurse, bathed my wounds and bruises and made some plasters of leaves which were very soothing.

We got up and had breakfast well before dawn. At the first flush of day we left the ledge to renew our search. This time Tamata came with us. We thought she might be useful to help Myra on the lookout.

The journey took nearly an hour. As a careful reconnoitring in the vicinity of the well failed to show any trace of Ling Loo's men, we felt it safe to get ahead with our task.

But when we came to the well-mouth itself and Tamata found out our purpose, she became terrified, and implored Dan not to allow a descent to be made. The well was tapu, she declared, and was more unholy even than the small shelf below the high ledge. In fact, it was worse than merely tapu. It was the entrance to the Malusan Hades. All sorts of horrible disasters would come upon us for even thinking of intruding on its secrecy. Those natives who knew of its existence were afraid even to mention it.

I was glad to hear that. The natives now in the service of Ling Loo would certainly not tell him about it, and would do their best to avoid it in their search for us. Of course, there was the chance that one of the Chinese might explore that particular spot, and in that case the tapu superstition would be no protection to us.

We tried our best to calm Tamata, but the

fear stayed wide awake in her eyes. All the same, when she found we were determined she consented to act as look out, taking a position with a different range of view from that of Myra.

Dan wanted to go down himself, but I argued that he was the better shot if it came to a fight, and would be more useful on the surface. At last he agreed. I was most eager to have the exploring of that underground chamber, although there was a certain amount of fear at the centre of my heart. Perhaps it was that which made me eager. It gave a spice of excitement to the adventure. Once more I descended the well.

At the bottom of the rope I stepped carefully. It was no fun treading on those brittle ribs if it could be avoided. Safely landed, I lit a candle, which was now protected by a bottle. This time I was able to take a good look about me. The bats were a great nuisance, hitting my face repeatedly and beating the gloom like falling leaves of coral-trees caught in a whirlwind.

The chamber in which I stood extended as a sort of corridor either way. I went warily through that gale of bat-wings for about twenty yards, and found that the corridor became a square chamber with a domed ceiling.

So far so good. That was still according to plan. I inspected the chamber hurriedly. It seemed to be a dead-end, with floor, walls, and roof of solid rock.

I next explored the other end of the corridor.

It was similar to the first, and also ended in a square chamber—but the roof was pointed.

This was still better.

It was the chamber I was seeking. The small circle, which was evidently an indicator on Alick's cipher, was placed beneath a pointed roof.

I gazed eagerly round, more than half expecting the dull light of the bottle-lantern to show me huge chests of silver ingots or golden doubloons.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE GOD OF THE FLAMING TONGUE

THERE was nothing. The chamber was not only quite empty, but seemed to be a dead-end like the one at the far end of the underground corridor. Its walls were of solid rock, and gave no hint to any crack or fissure.

I did not waste much time about them. The next instruction on old Alick's plan was the one word "DOWN." Like the other words, it might be only a symbol. Still the reasonable thing was first to make sure that it was not to be taken literally. I started to examine the floor. After half-an-hour's fumbling among the dustiness, I discovered neither ring-bolt nor any other trace of a trap-door, although I went over the whole area several times.

I changed plan. Taking my sheath-knife, and using the handle as a hammer, I set to work sounding the floor. Suddenly I caught a slight change of tone—a hint of hollowness.

It was directly under the point of the chamber roof. Roughly, the area of that hollow was six feet long and two wide. I discerned a scarcely visible crack in the floor, like the edge of an inset slab of rock. There was nothing to lift the slab by, so I tried the knife-blade around it.

Then I stamped on it. Suddenly I felt one end of it sinking beneath me. I managed to throw myself back to the solid floor. The slab slowly swung up level again. Evidently it was nicely balanced on some sort of hinge.

Knowing now what to expect, I tilted the end down once more, and gradually forced it into a perpendicular position, where it stayed.

By the candle-light I could see rocky steps leading down. I lowered myself through the opening, then swung the slab into place above me, taking care that it could not lock itself and imprison me. There were no bats now to be a nuisance.

I found myself at the top of a long stairway. I descended past several landings until I came to a tunnel which sloped slightly downwards. Down this I plodded for some time and came at last, after several bends, to a subterranean stream, which gushed from the rocky wall and flowed in a channel alongside the floor of the apparently endless tunnel.

The sociable gurgle of that stream was welcome. It had been a lonely journey through those unknown ways, with only a candle-flame to hold back the darkness that retreated sulkily step by step as I advanced, but still crept up step by step behind me.

After a while I came to the end of the tunnel—and the end was a blank wall of rock. It was a repetition of my experience of weeks before when exploring those stairs that led up from the small ledge. Hope had led me eagerly forward, hinting at some treasure or some wonder just

ahead; and the only result was a blank face of rock in the central deeps of a mountain.

The stream was more fortunate than myself. It was able to go straight on through a circular hole like a drainpipe in the wall of rock forming the tunnel-end.

A patient search of walls and floor showed no way onward for me—no trap-doors nor balanced slabs of rock. I decided to try the rather fearsome way of the water.

The hole into which the stream disappeared was a little larger than the volume of water. An air-space of maybe nine inches was left between the surface of the stream and the top of the drain into which it flowed. An experiment showed that by going feet first and keeping on one side, with my body raised on one hand, I could hold my face above the water and have a hand free for the bottle-lantern.

Leaving my lava-lava, revolver, knife, spare candles and matches in the tunnel, I got down into the cool water and commenced a slow, crab-like journey. As soon as I had got fairly into the drainway a sense of suffocation came upon me, and it was only by a strong effort that I continued. The big tunnel was all blackness behind me. By the time I had slid a couple of feet farther I felt complete panic. From the roof of the channel, trailers of slime dragged about me like blind eels or the feelers of an octopus.

Another foot and it became unendurable.

I was just going to return when the candle showed an abrupt lift in the channel roof. I held the lantern aloft and found that I had



passed through the drainway, which was really a sort of water-gate, to a continuation of the big tunnel.

Clambering from the water, I stepped on to the floor of that subterranean corridor and had a good look round. It must have been a queer picture—a naked boy rising from the darkness of the water and standing with a gleaming bottle held high in his hand!

Next I brought my other things through that water-gate. I found the passage easy enough now that it lacked the terror which the unknown always inspires. Continuing then along the tunnel I came after a while round a sharp bend and a little later saw light ahead. Since I knew myself to be deep in the heart of the mountain this light was surprising. I blew out the candle.

The light was not a glimmer of day.

Revolver ready, I went forward, silently save for the squelch of my feet in some slime of the rocky floor. The tunnel-mouth was now sharply framed against the luminousness ahead, and in a moment I was gaping out of the gloom upon the most tremendous and awesome spectacle any man could well look upon.

The light of the place came from a great streamer of flame far ahead and high aloft. By its glare I could see a monstrous cavern walled about with giant stone gods that towered into blackness. Between those fearsome figures were towering glooms even more fearsome.

I crouched toward the wall of the tunnel-mouth, afraid that some procession of barbaric priests might stalk from one of the black recesses and

seize me for sacrifice before one of those staring monsters. Though afraid to stay, I was yet too fascinated to run.

Alick North had whispered to Dan something about a temple and gods; but my imagination had never dreamed of such immensity as I now gazed upon. At most I had expected to find perhaps a dark temple that had long since been deserted, while this mysterious place, devoted to what grotesque worship, was evidently still occupied, since its lights were still burning.

It was bewildering.

None of the islanders had such a religion, nor did they ever mention that there were any strange priests on the island. Whoever dwelt in this subterranean temple surely had to go up to the sunlight sometimes, had to get food from somewhere, and must soon or late have been seen by the Malusans. Yet the natives had never hinted at anything of the kind.

I did not try to solve the riddle. These conjectures flashed through my mind as quickly as the fear of that tremendous place had flashed through my heart. I wanted to get away, back along those tunnels and stairs, back to the fresh air and my friends. At any moment I thought to hear some unseen bonze sound a discordant gong to call his fellows to worship.

Yet still I stayed cowering in my corner of darkness. And still I saw no sign of a soul. The silence of the place was complete. Even the flowing water made no sound. Maybe it ran at so slight a grade that it could no longer give forth a sociable gurgle. Its channel turned

to the left at the tunnel-mouth, and for the rest was invisible to me.

As I waited, my sight went exploring where my body feared to go. It scurried across the central floor of that cavern (a quarter of a mile long it seemed to be) and went scaling up and up, a hundred feet, to the shoulders of those giant gods. It perched dizzily on their eyelids, and stared into their cruel eyes. It sneaked up to the great light of the temple, and found that light to be a steady banner of flame pouring from the tip of the projected tongue of what was undoubtedly the high god of the temple since he was not only the largest but had all the far end of that great cavern to himself. It inspected two smaller points of light that burned low down and not far from me, one on either side of the temple and close to the walls of it. These were not sconces, as I at first had thought, but the flaming tongue-tips of two miniature idols.

All this my sight saw as it roamed that immensity of lights and glooms. But what fascinated me most of all was a great bank of darkness at the far end of the temple, just to the right of the great god. It was as though a curtain of velvet intensely black hung there from cavern roof to floor—a curtain so huge that no human hands could have woven it.

I wanted to creep to that mysterious curtain and crawl like an insect beneath a corner of it to find what wonders, what inner temple might be beyond. But once again the fear of barbaric priests and knives of sacrifice held me back.

I knew there must be priests or attendants somewhere about. Those lights were proof enough of that. They might burn unreplenished for a few hours, or even days, but that could be the utmost. And priests who would worship such hideous, staring gods must, I knew, be sworn to barbaric horrors. Besides, the feet of some of those gods were carved to form altars, and there were dark brown stains about them as though blood had trickled over those giant toes.

The figures were all more or less grotesque, either in attitude or form, and many were distorted as though being crushed beneath the weight of the walls which they appeared to support.

The high god at the end of the temple sat cross-legged, his hands in his lap, and he seemed to lean back, insolent and hateful, as though waiting for fresh human offerings to be tortured for his pleasure.

As I peered I noticed, for the first time, several human skeletons scattered at the feet of one of the gods nearest to me, an alarming spectacle in itself, but made doubly so because just at that moment a deep boom sounded from behind the mighty black curtain. Its echoes reverberated hollowly through the vastitude and the brooding sense of horror, interlaced by those deep mutterings, was too much for my courage.

Panic caught me. I turned, and slipped, picked myself up and went stumbling through the darkness of the tunnel, back whence I had

come, afraid to light the lantern, and guided only by the murmur of the water beside me.

The dead-end of the tunnel at the water-gate brought me up short. In fact I hit it so solidly that I reeled almost stunned.

I lit the candle, and wrapped my few possessions in the lava-lava. Holding this bundle and the lantern in one hand I went crawling into that slimy, suffocating hole through which the stream flowed.

Once past the water-gate, I felt safer. I plodded on somewhat wearily up that long tunnel and up those interminable stairs, back to the trap-door formed by the balanced slab.

It opened easily, and I climbed through to the chamber above.

I was beginning to breathe more freely. There was only the climb up the rope and I would be back with Dan, Myra and Tamata and the sunlight. I felt as though that climb would be a trifling feat. What matter if the rope did whirl and batter me against the jagged sides of the funnel? It was a jest compared with the tremendous glooms and the brooding horror of the place I had so lately visited.

Almost jauntily I went striding along the corridor to where the skeleton gazed at the small circle of light and where the rope would be pointing to fresh air and friends.

When I got there I found the rope was gone.

#### PART IV THE ATTACK

## CHAPTER XIX

### IN THE HOLLOW MOUNTAIN

For a moment I felt sick and faint. It was impossible to climb that funnel without a rope, and behind me was that terrifying temple. I was trapped. What troubled me even more, I feared that Myra and the others must have been captured by Ling Loo's men.

But fear fled when I noticed lying at my feet a couple of coconuts and a tin of meat. That set me searching further, and I found some bananas and a large hunk of damper. What interested me most was a piece of paper, part of a meat-tin label, jammed into a slit in the damper.

I held this close to the dull flare of the candle, round which the usual tempest of bats was whirling, and on the blank side found a pencilled message from Myra. What with the poor light and the faintness of the pencil marks on the glazed paper, it took some deciphering but at last I made out this message:

"Billy, we have to scoot. Chows not far off. Dan be back with rope to-morrow morning first thing. Love. Myra."

That left me more contented. Having gathered up the provisions I strolled along the corridor

and went down through the trap-door to the stairway, where I could at least eat without being fanned and flicked by those countless bat-wings. As the stone steps made a cold seat, I took the fibre from one of the coconuts and made a mat of it. Then I had a good hearty meal and my courage came back somewhat. It being still early morning, so far as I could judge, I decided to fill in time by going back to the temple.

I had a whole day and night to myself; and day and night were the same in that subterranean darkness. The long wait might be a good chance to see who were the priests of that strange place—a better job than sitting still in the darkness or burning my few candles uselessly.

The way of the water-gate seemed much shorter than before. I experimented a few times shooting through in a diving attitude. There was no telling when I might want to get through it in a hurry. To go with the stream was a simple feat. It was only necessary to slip into the channel in a prone position and to give a sharp kick-off, the impetus being quite enough to carry one clean through. To get back against the current was not so easy. But with a clean take-off it was quite possible.

Then taking my revolver, knife, matches, and a couple of candles, I left the water-gate and went towards the temple. After a while I blew the light out and let the murmur of the water guide me. At the tunnel-mouth I crouched once more in the darkness and peered forth upon those great gloomy gods.

The temple was exactly as before. There were

no signs of anyone having been about during my absence, no freshly-lit altars or sconces or anything like that; and although I waited till my bones ached there was still no sign of life.

It made the place more uncanny than ever. Those flaming lights promised solemn, priestly incantations. But that enormous cavern was silent as a catacomb, except that twice, from behind the immense black curtain near the high god there came the same booming sound I had heard before.

As nothing followed those sounds I began to feel a keen desire to explore farther, to find out what other entrances the temple had, and whence could come its inhabitants, whom I expected every moment to see.

Stooping low (and keeping close to the wall) I scurried round to the right until I came under the shadow of the nearest of the idols. There for a long while I waited afraid to venture farther. But after a time impatience got the better of my fear. I slipped round the front of the idol since there was no passage-way behind it, and again waited. After a spell, I scurried on to the far side of a second one.

In my eagerness to get to the cover of shadow I went round the corner so swiftly that I did not see what was before me till I had tripped over it. Probably I was glancing towards the great god as I ran. It was from that direction I most feared danger. At any rate, my foot caught in something and I fell with a rattle and clatter that echoed hollowly through all the gloom around and above me. The silence collapsed, shattered

into a thousand noises, as though it had been the smashing of a mighty dome of glass. At the same time there came once more that tremendous boom from behind the curtain, only far louder than before.

For endless moments I lay and trembled, too terror-stricken almost to breathe. Every moment I dreaded I might see fantastic long-robed priests come with curved knives from a hundred recesses to find out what infidel was desecrating their sacred retreat. None came. More or less reassured I looked about and noticed the thing that had tripped me.

It was a skeleton.

The shock of seeing where I lay set me scrambling to my feet. Those loose and brittle bones again clattered loudly, so that once more the silence was shattered and fell about me in countless fragments of noise.

Another long period went by; and still there was no sign of any other living being in that great place. I took heart to continue my exploring. I began to think that, whatever might be the explanation of those lights, the temple after all must be deserted.

Having gone so far safely, I decided to solve the mystery and crept tiptoe close in front of one of the two small figures of the flaming tongue. The idol itself was man-size carved from solid rock, and the flame was gushing like a burning gas-jet, from a small hole in the tongue-tip. But I was quite unable to discover how the flame was fed.

I continued my way, cautiously, fearfully, past

several more skeletons lying in a fantastic tangle and as I crept onward, I felt more than ever like some insect astray. The farther I went, the more certain it seemed that the place really was deserted.

Those skeletons told of visitors who had died long ago—who had probably found the temple deserted when they arrived, and who had died fighting, maybe, for the treasure it contained. To be sure, I had so far found no sign of treasure, but there were plenty of nooks within that vast cavern still to be explored.

At last I came near to that tremendous black curtain hanging from roof to floor. It was still an awe-inspiring thing. Once more from beyond it came a deep boom, that sent me scuttling for the shadows. Creeping along in their friendly gloom, I made towards the corner of the curtain.

Beyond it, I felt sure, must be an inner temple. Fear came back, though not so strongly, as I neared it. Quickly I ran round the giant feet of the last idol on that side of the cave, scurried across where, between the mighty toes, the floor was stained dull red, and so to where the great heel abutted against the wall of rock.

Timidly I crept forward. At last I reached the corner of that tremendous curtain—only to find that it was not a curtain at all, but a gap in the wall of the cavern—a gap so huge and extending so far back into the darkness that the jet blackness of it gave not the slightest reflection of the temple lights. This was what had given the curtain-like effect.

The mountain indeed was a hollow shell. Not

only did that vast cavity extend back into unknowable blackness but it fell sheer into deeps of darkness even more impenetrable; so that I who had thought to crawl, a speck of insignificance, beneath the curtain's mighty folds now found myself peering instead over the edge of a great subterranean cliff into an unfathomable abyss. Had my movement been less timid, I might easily have toppled over.

I slunk back, and, skirting the dizzy brink, went towards the high god, that wonder of patient quarrying, which towered above like a sky-scraper. The spout of flame from its tongue-tip was like a meteor aflame in a dome of sky. By its light I could see that, lofty though the idol was, the roof of the cave at this end was still well above it.

I walked round to the back of the figure and found a maze of passages and rooms. A flight of stairs led upwards into its interior. Up these I climbed cautiously and found myself on an altar set in the palm of one of the great hands. The body of the god rose behind. The lift of the thighs on either side of the altar made great bastions projecting into the cave and culminating at the knee.

Between these the altar seemed as in a valley, opening only towards the avenue formed by the two rows of lesser, though still tremendous images, that extended to the far end of the cave. The nearer deities were all great splashes of light and shadow from the flaring tongue above; but the ones farther along were mostly masses of evil-looking gloom.

Over all, the roof of the cave loomed dark, like a thunder-cloud lit by lightning. Standing there, a midget in the palm of the god's hand, I chanced to cough. Not one, but twenty echoes mimicked me, so that it seemed as if every one of those mighty figures had coughed also. The effect terrified me for a breath. Next instant, in a flash of mad recklessness, I coo-eeed.

The cough was bad enough; but to hear that avenue of glowering deities coo-ee, every one of them, from out their lofty abodes sent my blood cold. I could well imagine the over-powering effect of a priest's barbaric numbo-jumbo, thus echoed, on any audience kneeling terror-stricken on the floor far below.

And still I had seen no trace of any treasure. Indeed the wonder of the place had for the time being, driven such thoughts from me.

I climbed down the stairs, and continued round the wall of the cave, finding, not far from the high god, a tunnel-mouth similar to that by which I had entered. Making a note of its position, I explored the rest of the way back to where I had started. Finding nothing of moment, I came back to the unexplored tunnel-mouth near the high god.

The stream of water, which flowed, as I found, round the left side of the cave, continued along a channel within this tunnel. It was not long before I came to a dead-end, where the water disappeared through a hole exactly similar to the water-gate in the other tunnel.

This, I reasoned, would most likely lead out to the chamber to which, weeks before, I had climbed

from the lower ledge of our hiding-place on the mountain-side. I tried it, and found that, though the water was even closer to the roof of the channel than in the other water-gate, it was only the same distance through. A moment later I was standing in the chamber I already knew. I descended immediately to the lower ledge and there hungrily attacked some of our stored supplies. The others, I reasoned, would be safe on the high ledge by now. It was tantalizing to think that there was no way to signal them, that Dan would have to risk the long journey at dawn to the well-mouth to rescue me, and that I would have to go all the way up those stairways and tunnels, through the temple-avenue and the water-gates, before I could be rescued; whereas, if they had only known, Dan at that moment could have lowered a rope to me from the high ledge.

I made a bed in the cavelet, and, when night came, lay down to sleep. It was better than returning to those subterranean glooms to spend the night. With fresh air about me and bright stars over, I was well enough content. Or, rather, I tried to be. But at the back of my mind was an uneasy feeling as though some disaster hovered round. It disturbed my sleep for a long while.

When dawn spread through the east I woke. After a hurried breakfast I started off on the long climb to the well-mouth and Dan.

When I came to the temple, with its lights burning steadily and puzzlingly as ever, I decided to test the depth of that abyss into which I had

so nearly crawled: I threw a large rock over the brink: after a long silence there came from far down, a faint thud, then more and more, each one fainter until they died away. It made me glad I had not gone over myself.

I continued my journey and reached the tunnel-mouth at the far end of the temple. At that moment a terrifying boom rose from the chasm. Of course it had only happened so, but it seemed as though some monster down there had been enraged by the stone I had hurled into that crater of darkness.

At the same time the earth beneath me, and around, and over, rocked, and those giant statues swayed in crazy unison. I guessed it was an earthquake, and I didn't wish to experience one while underground. Without further delay I made for the well-chamber where Dan was to lower the rope for me, and there in the darkness I sat gazing at the small circle of daylight above. After about half an hour something crossed that circle; and a few moments later a rope was lowered.

I was not sorry. Although I again got battered and cut against the sides of the well, I did not greatly care, so eager was I to get up from underground.

The air smelt wonderful when I came to the surface. As I stepped on to the coping of the well I looked round to give Dan greeting. Instead of any such friendliness, however, several men sprang upon me, and dragged me aside.

They were Chinese.



## CHAPTER XX

### A MESSAGE OF TERROR

THE curve of an arm was about my throat, and bony fingers clawed and gripped my hands. In the struggle the log was tugged from across the well-mouth.

There were at least three Chinamen behind me, and a fourth was coming at me in front. I kicked him in the stomach. The kick was not enough to wind him, but as he went backward from the impact he caught his heel and fell.

It would have been nothing, but that, unable to get his balance he went toppling into the well, and the last I saw were his feet in frantic attitude shooting downward past the well brink.

The sight caused the others to relax their grasp on me for a second and I got my neck and one hand free.

Swinging round like a wild thing, I landed a blow with the free hand between the eyes of one of the Chinks. He staggered.

What happened next is a blurred picture in my memory. From a corner of one eye I glimpsed two or three natives running away. Evidently they were unwilling members of the party and, fearful of the tapu of the well, took the first chance to bolt.

At the same instant I glimpsed another Chinaman and a white man, a sailorman. They appeared together, as though they had just arrived. The Chinaman paused and made a shrill noise like the note of an Oriental fiddle. It was the same sound I had heard while watching Ling Loo's party at the store weeks before.

As he finished it, the white sailor gave him a swift blow on the chin and down he went. All this I saw and heard in an instant as I swung round at the Chinese who still held my left arm, and was trying to bend the elbow back to dislocate it. The pain was almost unbearable; but I managed to get in a light tap with my free hand.

It disconcerted him for a moment, and saved my arm. But the one who had half garrotted me was again upon me, and down I went beneath the two of them. The white sailor charged into the tangle, and started thudding blows upon those yellow bodies. In the struggle the lava-lava which was my sole covering got torn, and the rocky ground gave my naked body many scratches and bruises.

We all struggled to our feet. All but one. He was the one who had tried to break my elbow, and he lay unconscious, the white sailor having finished him for the moment.

I then saw who this sailor was. It was old Booky Ben, the one member of the *Ripalong's* crew who had shown any kindness; and the way he had battered those Chinese showed that his broken nose had not been dear payment for the fighting knowledge he had won,

The two Chinamen who remained, realizing that they were no match for us on a straight fight produced knives. Evidently they had been ordered to use weapons only as a desperate last resort, since Ling Loo naturally wished that our party should be taken alive.

Booky sent his man staggering back before the knife could do its work, but I was only able to seize the wrist of the other and prevent the blow from descending. Closing in, we struggled and wrestled, the knife coming closer and closer to my face with the slow, insistent strength of the sinewy adult behind it. Booky had followed up his staggering blow by a quick leap and a straight left which caught his adversary between the eyes. Its force would have downed an ox, and the knife fell from limp fingers as its owner dropped and lay like a crumpled piece of parchment paper.

The Chinaman with whom I still wrestled was getting the better of me. The point of that curved knife was now almost touching my face. I strained back and watched its terrible gleam coming irresistibly, down and down. Not only that. He was also forcing me back towards the well-mouth, and we were already right at the edge. I dared not step back another inch for fear my foot would be over the brink.

Booky reached me just in time. Seizing the knife and pulling it aside he swung me clear of the well. This effort brought the Chinese over its yawning darkness, and Booky landed a left hook to his jaw.

For a second time I saw the sickly spectacle of a man disappearing to death down the pit, and



The Chinaman was getting the better of me.

my mind found time to wonder if some such fight years or even centuries before accounted for the skeleton sleeping at the bottom of the well.

But there was no time to continue the wondering. That shrill call had been heard. There was a crashing through the bush from one direction, and in the opposite we saw three figures slipping round the face of a rock as they came towards us at the double.

I picked up my torn lava-lava, and a candle. These I jammed into Booky's pocket as he straightened himself for a deep breath.

"Quick, Ben!" I gasped. "This way! I know the way."

Rolling the log quickly across the well-mouth, and picking up my revolver from where it had fallen, I gripped it with my teeth, swung down to the rope, and started sliding into the darkness.

Booky followed, and just as he slid from sight he glimpsed several Chinese almost at the well. We went down that rope at such a wild rate that it took sheets of skin from my bare legs. It was not till afterwards, though, that I noticed that.

At the bottom I landed on something soft, and jumped aside with a shudder. It was one of those who had fallen down the well. No sound came from him, so we guessed that he was at least unconscious.

I dragged the body aside as Ben landed, and as I did so my foot touched something cold. It was the curved knife that had so nearly accounted for me. I seized it. Already the well-mouth was darkened by another figure descending, and as

Booky Ben stepped aside I sprang a few feet up the rope, and severed it above my head.

Ben guessed my idea, and as I dropped to the ground he whispered: "Good notion, sonny!"

The descending Chinese came to the rope-end, and dangled. Having no idea what was beneath, nor the distance of the drop, he hesitated. Another figure was descending above him. In the darkness there was an excited gabble, and the two figures commenced to climb back. Gripping the revolver, I cocked it and pointed it up the well. But it seemed too cowardly a shot, and I lowered the weapon without pulling the trigger.

We were fairly safe for the moment. It would take them some time to experiment and lengthen the rope, and that would leave us a fair margin for flight.

As for the two who had fallen down the well, we dared not light up to see whether either of them still lived. In any case, it would not be long till their compatriots would be able to succour them, if they were not past need of any aid.

"This way, Ben!" I called.

Fumbling in the dark, I led through to the chamber where the trap-door was. Fortunately Ben had matches. As it was now safe to do so, we lit the candle I had jammed into his pocket.

Down through the trap-door of the balancing slab we went, and down the stairs and along the tunnel towards the water-gate.

Being able to go more leisurely now old Booky Ben gave me some snatches of his story between breaths, telling how Ling Loo had been able to dominate Captain Evans for a week or two by

bribes of opium. During that time he had compelled Evans to sell him the *Ripalong* for a "whiff o' the poison," as Booky put it.

Ling Loo had then put his first mate, Quong Sun, in charge, taking all fire-arms away so that the three white men of the ship's company would have no chance to revolt. Noosey, the carpenter, was not likely to do so. He was as obsequious to Ling Loo as he had been to Evans, and only too ready to work whatever horrible deed that calm Chinaman might command.

The native crew of the schooner was rather pleased than otherwise at the change. So long as they obeyed orders, Quong Sun treated them reasonably, a thing they had never known under their former skipper.

Evans, meanwhile, compelled to remain on shore, took up his quarters in Dan's store. When the opium supply ran out, he began to get restive, and tried to arouse the Malusans against Ling Loo. But the natives remembered how he had treated one of them, and he failed.

Next, he sneaked aboard the *Ripalong* in a canoe one evening when he knew Quong Sun and the whites to be ashore. Armed with a hand-spike, he set the cowering native crew hoisting sail. But he had scarcely got the schooner under way when a boat had put off from the *Shan Fang*. Ling Loo with a well-armed party, boarded the runaway and seized Evans. "I heard," said old Ben, "that they trussed the skipper up like a roast fowl and took him aboard the *Shan Fang*. Dunno what they did, but next time I saw him his hair was grey and he looked about twenty years

older. Terrible haggard, and all that. Ling Loo only had to look at him and he'd grovel. The Chow used to make him help looking for you. I almost felt sorry for the old man. There was something awful about his look after that Chow had dealt with him."

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"Dunno, sonny. Saw him in a row-boat a few days ago with Ling Loo and some other Chows. They went off to the inside of the lagoon, and came back without him. Haven't seen him since."

"A few days ago," I exclaimed. I remembered now, hidden in that lagoon-side cave we had heard the cringing voice of Evans answering the calm speech of Ling Loo, and how the talk had ended in a single piercing scream.

I shuddered, and told Booky about it.

"That's about the end o' the old man," he replied.

By this time we had come to the water-gate, and he added: "You have some horrible holes to dive into, sonny! I don't mind hanging to a main-to'-gallant yard in a beam sea, but I don't like this sort of place."

"Just you wait!" I laughed. "This is nothing to what's coming."

He got through all right, even if he did object a bit, and shortly after we stood within the mighty presence of the temple-gods.

Ben gasped at first sight, and muttered: "So this is what the Chinky cow's after, is it?"

We then decided to block the water-gate through which we had come. Ling Loo's men

might easily follow us that far and, likely as not, would find out the secret of the waterway.

We therefore carried load after load of rocks up through the tunnel. With these we made a dam, close enough to block the water-gate for anyone trying to get through, but impeding the water only enough to bank it back and flood the gate. That, for anyone not knowing its secret, would, we thought, prevent its exploration.

Feeling fairly safe, we went back to the temple, had a look round it for Ben's satisfaction. Then we went down through the lower water-gate to the shelf of rock, where, with the sunlight and warm air and greenery about us, we pondered on how to let our friends on the high ledge know where we were.

Retreat up through the well-mouth was cut off, and there was no way of climbing either up or down from our small shelf of rock. Certainly we could stay there for weeks without starving, but Dan and Myra would be frantic to know what had become of me, and I was equally worried as to what was happening to them. Dan had promised to be at the well that morning. Ling Loo's men were there instead. Had Dan been captured in his attempt to rescue me?

Suddenly I thought of a way, and wondered why it had not occurred to me the day before. It was quite simple.

I wrote a message to Myra on a bit of a tea-packet with a stump of pencil that old Booky dug from a mixture of fluff and tobacco dust at the bottom of his coat pocket. We placed this in a wide-mouthed pickle-bottle, corked it up,

and, tying the bottle to the end of a stick, climbed the stairs up through the bats and darkness to where the subterranean stream left the tunnel-way and gushed through the hole in the cliff-face to come out on to the high ledge.

Pushing the bottle through at the end of the stick, we sat and waited. It was only a matter of time for Myra or Tamata to go there to get water and discover the message.

Meanwhile, I told Booky what I knew of the temple and of Ling Loo's quest and we were discussing the possible hiding-places for treasure when we felt the stick move. A few minutes later it was pushed back towards us. We pulled through, and found a return message.

My note had told briefly that I had found a way down to the lower shelf, and asked for a rope to be lowered as soon as it was safe. Myra's reply worried us a great deal. It said that Dan had left before dawn, but had not returned. Also it reminded me of something I had forgotten. Dan had the longer of the two ropes with him, and the short one remaining would not reach to the lower shelf.

Myra was as far as ever from me. The only thing was to wait for Dan to come back. I sent a return message to Myra, telling her we would wait where we were. She promised to send word through as soon as Dan returned—if, indeed, he were able to do so.

I was much afraid he had been captured by Ling Loo's men, but Booky Ben thought not. He explained that two parties of Chinese and natives had left with ropes to explore a mountain

gorge which was so enclosed by cliffs that they had been unable to find any way into it; and had decided to climb down from the top.

This news was alarming. From the description, that gorge was our high ledge.

Ben went on to tell how, on the way to the mountain-top, they had come across the well and had paused to investigate it. The rope had no sooner been lowered than I started to climb it, and the Chinese, somewhat astonished, had waited for me. From this he surmised that Dan would probably have seen the searchers about and taken cover. It was likely.

After a long wait, the stick was moved again, and we hauled another message through. Its arrival made me optimistic. I had no doubt it was to announce Dan's return. But when I read the message I went pale, I went mad, I battered with bare fists that wall of rock between us and Myra.

The message read:

"Dan not back yet. Men at top of cliffs lowering rope down to this ledge. I'm afraid, Billy! What'll I do? Tell me quick, quick!"

## CHAPTER XXI

### RETREAT FROM THE HIGH LEDGE

AFTER the first mad moment had passed I scribbled a message to Myra telling her to throw the short rope down to the lower ledge and then, if possible, to retreat with Tamata through the tunnel exit from the high ledge, and so to the base of the waterfall.

The short rope was long enough to reach from the lower shelf to the bottom of the fall, and would enable us either to haul them up or if not, to climb down to them.

Passing the message through, we waited a while. The reasonable thing would have been to go down to the lower shelf, but I could not leave the spot, even though a wall of rock did stand between me and my little sweetheart; for by this time I looked upon her as such, young though we both were.

The thought of those Chinese climbing down the cliff, and Myra perhaps finding it impossible to escape from the high ledge set rage and horror fighting within my heart. I must have looked as I felt; for old Booky put a hand on my shoulder, and gazing into my eyes, said:

"Cool down, sonny! It'll be all right. We'll

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fix 'em some way or other. The lassie'll be safe."

I did cool down a little; and a few moments later the stick, which still lay pointing through the hole in the rock was jerked sharply.

We thought the Chinese must have got down and, having noticed it, were curious to know what it meant. Ben seized the end, and pulled it through. The bottle was still fastened to it, and within was another message from Myra. It merely stated:

"Dan just arrived. Hurry down to low shelf."

We went down those steps, slipping and stumbling, and so out to the ledge. There we waited, gazing at the cliff-brink against the midnoon white of the sky above. As we did so three shots sounded from the high ledge. Their echoes were tossed back and forth within those imprisoning walls of rock.

Silence followed.

"Something doing, sonny!" whispered old Booky excitedly. "I'd give me granny's socks to be up there just now."

I said nothing. There were no words to express how I felt as I craned my head back and gazed aloft.

That wait was the worst few moments of all my life. It seemed an hour before there was a movement above and Myra, leaning over the cliff-edge, called down: "It's all right, Billy. Dan's fixing the rope."

He had brought the long one back with him; and in a moment it was wriggling its way down the face of the rock, like a giant python. We soon climbed up, and without a thought of any-

one else, Myra threw her arms about my neck; and as I held her round the waist, we kissed each other.

Tamata was there. She took no notice of our kissing. To her, it was the most natural thing in the world that young people should love each other. So, indeed, did it seem to both Dan and Booky.

It was, of course, the first time I had seen them together and as they stood there I was struck with their similarity. Each had a battered face, weather-lined, and reddened rather than browned by the salt airs of sea life. They were both heavy of build, almost ungainly; and both badly needed a shave. Certainly old Booky looked decidedly the older; but the only notable difference was really the work of life's mischances: Dan Rockley was minus his left ear. Booky Ben had his nose broken.

We hauled the rope up, but left it fast to the tree. As Myra and I followed the two old sailors through the tunnel of green gloom leading to our camp cave I learned what had been happening.

Just as Myra had got back to the cave to get the short rope, Dan had returned bringing the longer one. He had seen the Chinese working about the well-mouth, but, after waiting a long while and finding no chance to learn what had happened to me, he had given up, hoping, since he could see no sign of me, that I had somehow escaped.

Myra, breathlessly telling him how things stood, had at once led him to the spot where the stream spouted from the rock and showed him

the rope that had been lowered from the cliffs above. Two figures, in loose pants and jackets, were at that moment climbing down it. Their faces could not be seen, but there was no mistaking that they were Chinese.

Dan had then kept watch on them while Myra was sending the last note through the hole to us. After this he had told her to go back to the camp. But curiosity got the better of her; having gone only a few yards, she looked back.

The Chinese were three-quarters of the way down the rope when Dan had raised his revolver. At that Myra ran away. The sounds of three shots rang out. They were the shots Booky and I had heard.

I got the rest from Dan himself: The first shot had killed the topmost of the two descending Chinese, who, as he toppled head foremost down to the patchwork of rocks and greenery below, had nearly dragged the lower one with him.

The second shot had splashed on the cliff beside the other figure, which had begun to climb upward.

The third shot had found its mark, and the second Chinaman had gone toppling down the way of the first, but whether wounded or killed Dan could not tell. In any case, the fall completed what the revolver may have failed to do.

It was a gruesome recital, but cornered as we were, we could only be thankful that our adversaries were now reduced by four, while, thanks to old Booky Ben, we were now one stronger.

Ben took the revolver Myra had previously



carried; and we had a council of war at which it was decided that we should lower most of our things to the small ledge and retreat to it ourselves when it was no longer possible to hold the high one.

The rope that the Chinese had lowered had been hauled back, and there was no sign of life aloft; but when Dan, trying to get a clear view of the top, chanced to stand in an exposed position, there was a swift report and the ping of a bullet close by him. He dived for cover with surprising speed.

For the rest of the day we went to and fro and tossed many things, such as our blankets, tinned food, and so on, down to the small ledge, besides lowering other things more breakable.

No further attempt was made by our pursuers to descend on us, but towards evening we found ropes being lowered from three different parts of the cliff top. The three spots had been chosen as widely apart as possible. This meant that if Ling Loo was willing to lose a few men, as he undoubtedly was, he must succeed in reaching the ledge. Obviously it was only a matter of time before we would have to forsake it.

Meanwhile there was a danger that the passage through the water-gates might be forced, in which case we would indeed be in a desperate fix.

At tea that evening Myra asked why we should not prevent any more trouble and bloodshed by telling Ling Loo about the temple, especially as I had found no trace of treasure

in it. But both Dan and Booky thought such a course impossible.

We did not know yet what had happened to Captain Evans, who, if still alive, would be as keen as ever to do away with Myra and would bear a great grudge against the rest of us. Not only that. We had opposed Ling Loo; and Dan was certain we need never now expect mercy from him. The way he would take vengeance would be quite bad enough to imagine, much less to sample.

"No," finished Dan, "you don't git me chancing it. I'm goin' to fight as long's possible, and if we don't win I'm for death. However bad it might be, it's better'n that there Chow."

Remembering Ling Loo's calm face, his calm voice, his cruel eyes, and that solitary scream we had heard from the voice of Evans, I felt much the same about it as Dan did.

Night came just when we had finished tea. It was almost certain that an attempt would be made on our stronghold under cover of darkness. We realized that it would be impossible to see anyone descending those ropes and that it needed only three or four of our enemies to get down and we would be hard put to it defending ourselves. To stay on the high ledge meant that we might find ourselves in the morning surrounded by many well-armed men. Our only chance was to vacate the position immediately. This was not so easy. In the case of the males there was no difficulty; but for Myra and Tamata to descend the rope in the darkness was a hazardous task.

Dan went first, with Tamata following so close that she more or less rested on his shoulder. This reduced the risk of her falling, though I've often thought since that it was a great strain on the rope. However, their full weight was not on it, as the corner formed by the two cliffs gave something of foothold.

I followed, with Myra supported on my shoulder in the same way. It meant climbing down foot by foot, with a pause between each step to prevent any mischance, so that a good deal of time was spent in the retreat from the high ledge.

Ben came last.

When I signalled that we were safely down he altered the fastening of the rope, and tied a long cord to the end, the idea being that as soon as he had got down, he could give this cord a tug that would unfasten the rope from the tree and let it fall.

He landed breathlessly, and told us that he had heard shrill voices near at hand on the high ledge and movements in the bush. We thought he must have been mistaken, but he was certain the pursuit was already there.

While telling of this, Booky was tugging at the cord. The knot was more difficult to undo than he had expected, but just as Myra made some laughing remark, which the events of the next moment erased from my mind, the cord gave way. Bookey then pulled on the rope. It held for a second, gave way, and caught again for a second, as though someone above were holding on to it. Dan joined Bookey and the

two gave a final sudden heave so strong that when the rope lost its hold aloft they tumbled backward under cover of the cliff.

Myra and I, gazing upward, had been just able to discern, against the faint starglow of the sky, the movement of the rope sliding over the brink. Then we too leapt for cover from the falling rope. But we had glimpsed more than the rope coming over that brink.

A human figure, as though in hanging to the rope, it had been pulled from its balance, had leaned backward far out over the cliff-ledge, its arms thrown wildly above, trying to clutch at a star to save itself from falling.

At the same time a scream went up through the night, as though it, too, would clutch at a star.

## CHAPTER XXII

### FLIGHT FROM THE LOW LEDGE

A SECOND later something heavy, following the falling rope, crashed into the bush just in front of where we stood.

Dan scuttled across and lit a match. By its flicker we could see him stooping. He hurried back. As he commenced to haul the rope into the cave and coil it he remarked to old Ben:

"You're right. They're close on our heels. That's one there." He jerked his thumb towards where the weight had fallen, and added: "Dead!"

There was no need for comment. The chase was getting unpleasantly close. Once having got on our tracks, those loose-jacketed Chinese were not going to lose sight of us if they could help it.

Standing in that shelter we had a sort of confabulation. Dan and Ben did most of the talking. In fact, they did it all.

It was strange, maybe, but I fell into a day-dream (if one can day-dream in the dark) and gazing out through the fronded bush and across the darkened sea, my thoughts went full sail for Sydney. Possibly I was fatigued, body and soul, by the tense hours through which I had

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lately gone, so at a moment when there was all the need of action I was guilty of wasting time on reverie.

Myra sat on a rock, leaning her head somewhat wearily against my leg. It had been a long day for her, with a stiff climb down at the finish: I really think she slept for the moment, though she always declares she did not.

As I have said, I thought of Sydney, that city to which the eyes of half the Southern Hemisphere look with longing, and, wondering if we should ever see it again, pondered on the delight it would give me to take Myra through its hustling streets, on its crowded ferries, and among the thundering crowds at sports; what wonder it would be to her, accustomed to the loneliness of a remote island, to see the splendour of the city waterways by night, the forest of lights around the shores, and the ferry-boats, like great golden beetles with countless phosphorescent feet sliding to and fro. I thought of . . . . .

Just then Dan wiped Sydney from the map of my mind.

"Better ask Billy what he thinks of it," he was saying. "His ideas are pretty mad, but they mostly come out about right."

I was annoyed with myself for such silly dreaming, but before I could turn to Dan I saw something that made me thank my lucky stars that I had been gazing into the night. The others having their backs turned to that direction could not see what caught my eye.

It was a man, at the end of a rope, being

lowered down past the front of our shallow cave. He had almost reached the ground.

I had the revolver in my pocket, and the sensible thing would have been to draw it. Instead I quite forgot its existence and leapt at the figure hanging to the rope.

Myra, robbed of my support, tumbled sideways to the ground; and the fall raised quite a bump on the side of her head. Yet she swears she was not asleep at the time, which shows that it is no use arguing with a girl. Not even with a nice one.

The figure and I came to earth together in something of a tangle; but as I chanced to land uppermost I had the advantage.

The whole affair is confused in my mind. It could not be otherwise. But I know that as we landed, and just as I tried to hit out blindly in the darkness, my adversary gave a groan. At the same instant a heavy body dropped upon me and a sharp pain ran through my left arm, followed by a consciousness that still other weights not only toppled over me, but were wrestling and struggling madly.

Among the jumble of human limbs and bodies were voluminous and vehement curses in my own language which told me that at any rate two of those who struggled above me were Booky Ben and Dan. After a wild moment or two the combatants rolled aside and I was able to rise. The figure beneath me remained motionless.

A sharp pain darted through my arm once more.

Myra struck a match and, lighting a candle, revealed the cause of the twinges. A knife was sticking through the flesh of the upper part of my arm. It had doubtless been meant for some more vital spot, but its aim had gone awry.

Seizing the handle firmly and not waiting too long to think over it, I jerked the blade out, after which, I turned to where the others struggled. There was no need for any help from me. The fight was finished.

The limp figure on the ground was that of a Chinaman. He was moving slightly now, and giving out low moans. I could not understand why this should be, as there had been no chance for me even to punch him; before I could move him he gave a peculiar jerk; his body twitched; and he lay stiff. Dan rolled him over, and we found that in falling his arm had got twisted behind him and a knife which he was holding had been driven into his back. He was dead. Beside the body sprawled another of his race, seemingly dead. He had been descending the rope close after the one I had first seen and had fallen upon me when I had made the attack.

I looked aloft.

There was sufficient light to reveal another figure coming over the brink of the high ledge to descend the rope. Grabbing Dan's arm, I pointed up. By that time the figure was invisible against the blackness of the cliff, but Dan guessed what was coming. He darted into the cave for his revolver, and fired at random into the darkness.

We waited a while; and as there was no fur-

ther sign of anyone coming down, we surmised that the shot had been a sufficient hint.

While waiting, old Booky had looped the end of the rope into a running noose, and slipped it round the body of the unconscious Chinaman remarking, as he did so: "They can have this cove back. No good to us."

Shortly afterward those above hauled their rope back, and the limp body went bumping up into the purple opaqueness of night.

We resumed our council of war, but this time I did not day-dream. Nor did Myra sleep. Instead, she busied herself dressing my wound, while I put forth the mad suggestion that, as so many of Ling Loo's men were engaged chasing us, we might climb down to the base of the waterfall, hurry to the lagoon, get a native canoe, seize the *Shan Fang*, and away.

The others thought enough of it to go to the brink of the ledge and look down. They gave up the notion when they saw a fire lighting up the base of the cliff and heard voices.

Ling Loo had us surrounded.

We then discussed the possibility of holding the small ledge, and decided to try it. We thought it would be easy to prevent any descent upon it by daylight owing to the small space. Night was the danger-time, but the Chinese on guard below had given us a hint: so long as the ledge would supply fuel, we could keep a fire going to dispel the darkness.

We set to work and soon a blaze was tossing banners and streamers of light up the face of the cliff. A few minutes later a rifle snapped

above us and a bullet went ricocheting through the bush.

After that we had to feed the fire by tossing wood on to it from cover of the cave, taking turns to act as sentry out on the ledge past the range of the light. Thus the night passed well enough, and we all managed to get some sleep.

At dawn we reconnoitred the ledge and found a serious defect in the plans we had made. To prevent anyone descending at one particular spot it was necessary to take up a position which would be exposed to rifle-fire from the top of the side cliff.

Sooner or later, therefore, we would have to vacate the ledge, and our only line of retreat would be up the stairs into the gloom of the temple. Certainly we would have water there, so long as Ling Loo did not poison it above the top water-gate, but we would be without either fruits or sunlight, both so necessary to health. However, there was no help for it.

My arm was badly hurt, and as the pain made it useless it was arranged that I should keep watch while the others plodded up and down, through bats and darkness, with load after load of our provisions and other things, to the lower water-gate.

We picked, and added to our stores, as many oranges and citrons as possible, and hoped to stave off our fate for at least a few weeks. In any case the prospect was depressing, since it could be only a matter of time when we would have to come forth to fight long odds.

To surrender was unthinkable.

After a couple of hours of hard work, the most important of our stores had been shifted. Then things began to happen.

At the time, I was posted behind a mango-tree in a spot giving a good view of the cliff above. Suddenly I saw three ropes being lowered. After that two rifles from the top of the side cliff opened fire at random into the bush around me. At the same time boulders of varying size were tossed down both walls of the cliff, the heavier ones falling close by the base and those light enough to be hurled outward crashing here and there into the bush, a couple falling very close to my hiding-place.

We had expected an attack, but not a bombardment like this. The ledge was under a hail of missiles.

After the first volley the heavier boulders were discontinued, and only the smaller ones kept battering the ledge. At the same time six Chinese, two to each rope, came over the brink and started shinning down with the slickness of acrobats.

The others, never dreaming of such a fierce and sudden assault, were all away with their loads. But Myra returned to the cave a moment later, and I scurried across to her. In doing so a boulder nearly got me. We then hurried to the second sharp turn of the tunnel leading behind the waterfall. There I stayed, revolver ready, while she went on up the dark stairs for Dan and Booky.

It would have been easy to get up the stairs and safely through the water-gate before those

pursuers, who had to explore their way, could have caught up with us; but we had arranged to hold them back as long as possible in the gallery, which was well adapted for defence, and on the stairs, which were even better. This, we hoped, would enable us to account for several of them. Their numbers had already been reduced by five or six, and we thought it might be possible to hold them off till we had made the odds somewhat even, when we might venture on an open fight.

Conquering my desire to scoot, I crouched and peered round the corner hoping for Dan and Ben to arrive before our assailants discovered the gallery.

Alas! for my hopes: Myra had only just gone when I heard a patter of feet coming towards me from the direction of the ledge.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE SUBTERRANEAN STAIRWAY FIGHT

Two Chinese came round the first turn of the gallery. One was in loose trousers and jacket. The other wore white ducks of European design, rather tattered, and his face was framed in a red cicatrix . . . *Ling Loo!*

Either he was brave enough to take his share of the danger, or the loss of so many of their comrades had made his men so panicky that they would go only where he led.

I fired the moment they appeared. Considering my small experience of revolver-shooting, the aim must have been guided by luck. The loose-jacket Chink paused for the fraction of a second, as from shock. Then, the impetus of his pace asserting itself, he toppled over towards me, a knife and revolver clattering along the stone floor as he fell.

Ling Loo, who had been slightly behind him, pulled up short, raised a weapon, fired at me, and immediately leapt back out of sight. The bullet scored the wall just above me.

The man who had fallen lay inert, dead I believe; though I did not stay to find out—that

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corner was likely to be too warm in a moment or so. Dan and Ben had not arrived, so I retreated to the chamber behind the waterfall, taking up a position on the lower steps, from which I could command the entrance.

It seemed as though my mates should have arrived long ago. Yet there was still no sign of them. Nor did any sound of pattering feet from the opposite direction reach me this time to give warning. Instead a head poked suddenly round the corner and slant eyes peered into the chamber. They did not look instantly in my direction; and I emptied the second chamber of my revolver.

The head drew back very quickly. Indeed, I never saw one move so quickly before. It is fairly certain that my shot had missed.

Next moment half a dozen mad-looking figures dashed from the gallery and scattered across the chamber, screaming in a terrifying way and firing blindly ahead. They could have no idea what the interior of the chamber was like, nor where my shot had come from; but their leader had doubtless concluded that an impetuous attack would unnerve the defenders—he would naturally assume that there were more than one opposing them.

I fired one random shot; and because there were too many targets I hit none. Then my courage gave way: I scurried up to the first landing. Thence it was possible to see the bottom steps and the entrance to the stairway. Sprawling flat on the floor, with the great bats

whirring about me, I peered over the edge of the landing.

Several arms reached round from the the sides of the stair opening below, and I surmise, as many fire-arms were pointed up the stairs. Almost simultaneously, a number of shots splashed and chipped the steps beneath me, while two bullets ricocheted somewhere near. Reverberations went wrangling and grumbling into the darkness above and behind me, and there was wild panic among the bats. Fortunately, not knowing the angle of the stairs, none of the weapons had been aimed steeply enough.

I pointed my solitary revolver down, more in the hope of frightening the attackers and holding them back than of doing any damage. I pulled the trigger. Not a sound came from the weapon. For a moment I thought it had jambed. Then I realized that I had forgotten to re-cock it after the previous shot.

What with the clamber up stairs, the pain of my wounded arm, the excitement, and the fear of those yelling, slant-eyed, pursuers, I must confess that I was trembling like a leaf. With nervous hands I cocked my gun, and, wondering how many ages longer it would be before Dan and Booky Ben arrived, I peeped once more down from the edge of the landing.

My silence seemingly had persuaded those below that the stairs were safe. There was a surge of dark figures into that small space of daylight below. Indistinct blurs were stumbling up the stairs. I fired straight into them.

The blurs wavered. I again fired.

There was excited gabbling. The blurred mass receded through the opening.

To my astonishment, two more shots were fired into that mass as it surged back. They sounded suddenly alongside me, and made me jump like a startled bull-ant. Unnoticed by me in the rumpus, Ben and Dan had arrived.

Below it seemed as though wounded or dead were being dragged away by their comrades. The attack was repulsed.

"Good lad!" whispered Dan, "y' did it fine. Cripes! Billy, but you've got plenty of grit!"

I don't know whether it was the sudden relief from the strain, or what, but when Dan said that I collapsed at once. I wanted to sit down and cry. It is a silly thing to have to admit, but it is true. I had a hard job not to let my two old friends know.

In the darkness of the stairway I pulled myself together a bit, and when Dan asked a moment later: "Hurt at all, boy? Did the blighters get you?" I was able to answer without my voice sounding too husky. After that I was better.

It was a quarter of an hour before anything more happened. Then a figure appeared at the patch of daylight below. There was something peculiar about it, as though it were a dummy.

At the same instant, four words of English came stumbling up to us, words spoken by a voice full of fear: "For Gawd sake don't—"

They came too late.

Old Ben had fired, and his bullet silenced whatever was to follow.



But in those four words we had recognized the voice of Noosey the carpenter. With a moan, he sprawled down and was pulled from range of our sight by a rope that, so far as we could make out, was about his neck. It was gruesomely ironic that he should be thus handled after his long career as master of the *Rip-along's* running noose.

We all reloaded our revolvers, and, as we lay there in the darkness waiting for what next might happen, a tremor shook the solid rock on which we sprawled. Through the earth we heard the rushing of a mighty sigh. It was as though the mountain had shuddered at the deeds of slaughter that were invading the age-long quiet of its mysterious temple.

"Another blasted earthquake!" growled Dan, in a hoarse whisper. "Dunno wot's up! Never used to have 'em like this."

A whiff of smoke floated to us. I thought for the moment it was from some volcanic fissure. But in the patch of daylight below we saw the cause. A fire was leaping to flames at the foot of the stairs, the wood being thrown on from either side of the entrance. Ling Loo was going to smoke us out.

We stood it for a while, though the fuel was well chosen and the smoke rolled up the stairway in thick folds that blinded our eyes.

That was not all. When the fire was thoroughly alight we heard a sort of dull crash, as of some weight thrown on the pile. The smoke thickened. Then came a sickly smell of

burning clothes and a more sickly stench of burning flesh.

We were horrified. The Chinese dead would be carefully taken back to their own country for burial. That is the practice of the race. Obviously it must be the body of Noosey the carpenter thus cast to the flames. Dan's knowledge of Ling Loo made him mutter:

"Noosey was a swine; but I hope 'e's dead."

The hint that he might not be, made me more sick than ever, and I was glad when the others decided that we could stay there no longer. The fumes were suffocating.

We climbed up through the blackness, up past the bats that were being driven higher and higher by the invasion of smoke, to the point whence the stream gushed out to the high ledge. The smoke there was somewhat thinner. We paused. Dan had a notion of diverting the stream down the stairway, not only to drench the fire, but to make the steps more slippery for any attackers to climb. However, there was nothing with which to dam the hole successfully, so we continued our climb to the water-gate.

Myra and Tamata were waiting on the far side of it, anxious to know what had become of us and alarmed by the recent quake. Tamata was suffering an added fear. She was sure some dreadful monster would be after us for having violated the tapu. In the earthquake she had heard the roaring of its anger.

We did not know the minute that our pursuers might try to force the passage of the

water-gate. Then would certainly guess when they came to it that it was through this we had disappeared. As we could not block it by a dam like the upper gate, the only way would be to take turns as sentry. It would be easy to prevent anyone crawling through provided we saw them, which we would be able to do, so long as our supply of candles lasted.

We thought of trying to delay any attack on the stairs outside the water-gate; but Ben, who went through, reported that the smoke was now getting unpleasantly thick everywhere. Of course that was something of protection since no attack would be likely till it thinned; unless the Chinese had lungs much more leathery than ours.

Most of our things were strewn in the tunnel-way. We started shifting them up to the temple, which was the most airy place available, and a place where we would not need to burn candles.

Altogether we were in a pretty fix. Even if we were able to keep our enemies at bay, it was only a matter of a few weeks before our provisions would be gone. It would then be as difficult for us to sally forth through the water-gate as it was now for our enemies to force a way in to us.

The excitement and exertion had done my damaged arm no good. The wound was dirty, the pain severe, and I was feeling strangely tired. Dan disposed of me with kindly thoughtfulness. We would store our things in one of the galleries under the throne of the high god.

Ben, Myra and Tamata were to carry them up, I was to arrange them, and Dan was to stay on guard at the water-gate.

I was only too willing to accept my lazy part. But after a while the weariness became so great that I gave up even that much of the work and sat down.

Booky Ben had just gone for a fresh load when Tamata, inspired by her uncanny Island instinct, exclaimed: "Bad men! Bad men come—longa water!"

Terrified, she pointed to the far end of the temple where the tunnel led up to the top water-gate. For some time we had scarcely given this place a thought, assuming not only that it was secure, but that the whole of Ling Loo's men would be concentrated below us.

Tamata's warning was the more impressive in that she knew nothing of the existence of the top water-gate. Leaving her to tell old Ben where we had gone, Myra and I hurried along the vast avenue of stone gods to the tunnel-mouth at the far end. There I could go no farther. The weariness had suddenly become faintness. I fell limply to the ground, and lost consciousness.

When I came round, Myra was gone—my revolver and candle also!

Dan had told me I had plenty of grit. It was nothing to Myra's. She had gone forward alone.

I tried to rise, but could not. I crawled to the channel and rolled into the water. The shock revived me: I was able to stand up, though very

unsteadily. Supporting my weight against the side of the tunnel, I followed on into the darkness.

After I had staggered a few yards Myra came running back, her face deadly pale in the flickering light of her candle.

## CHAPTER XXIV

LING LOO'S MEN PASS THE WATER-GATES  
SHE told me breathlessly what was happening. Just as she had reached the water-gate, a yellow hand with long finger-nails had reached up from the water, between the end of the outflow and the dam we had built.

For a second the hand had waved and clawed about in the air. Then suddenly it had been withdrawn into the water.

A few seconds later the end of a long pole, a sort of battering-ram, was shoved through the water-gate, and commenced thudding against the dam, which straightway commenced to totter. At that Myra had hurried back.

"Run like mad for Ben and Dan!" I gasped.

I snatched the revolver and candle from her before she whisked away, and went staggering forward. Before I had gone very far Booky Ben overtook me.

When he had arrived at the temple with his load Tamata had told him where we had gone. Hurrying after us, he had met Myra, from whom he had learned how desperate was our situation.

Taking my candle, he said: "You git back, lad! Not fit to be crawling about."

I felt inclined to agree. The mysterious faintness was once more gripping me. My mind was drowsy. I wanted to sleep. The wound in my arm no longer pained. But the arm was so numbed as to be useless.

I turned back, but after going a few steps retraced them. The call of curiosity was too great. I simply had to see what was happening. Through the darkness I plodded on in pursuit of Ben.

After a while footsteps sounded ahead, coming closer. Where the tunnel made a turn, first to the left and then to the right, I met Ben hurrying back. Without a word he glanced hastily about. Choosing a niche in the wall, he placed the candle so that it would light the bend ahead but leave the other bend shadowed.

Taking my arm, he pulled me back round this darkened bend. Then drawing his revolver, he sprawled on the tunnel floor and signalled me to do the same.

"It's too late, lad," he whispered. "The devils are through. Heard voices, and saw a glim."

From where we lay we would be able to see anyone the instant they showed round the sharp turn ahead, and, since we were cloaked in shadow, we would be fairly safe, unless they fired very low. We were also protected somewhat by the angle of the tunnel.

It was not long before feet sounded slip-slap down the distance and a phrase or two of Chinky talk came echoing along to us. Then came

silence. Those approaching had doubtless seen the glimmering of our light.

A big Chow came charging round the corner. He was followed by three others. Ben and I fired at once. The foremost figure dropped. The others scuttled back. Several shots (fired blindly from round the bend) splashed harmlessly on the rocky wall above us.

The figure that had fallen lay still. A red mark was trickling along the tunnel floor, but after some moments the body twitched, and shuddered, and rising dazedly, tottered back whence it had come.

Dan arrived a little later, and, sprawling beside us, growled: "No place f' you, Billy! Too ill, an' anyway, t'other water-gate's got no one to watch it. You get back there slick."

There was hardly room for three to hold the turn, and the lower gate had to be guarded, so I got up and staggered drowsily down the dark way to Myra and Tamata.

Myra had a candle ready; the three of us started for the unprotected water-gate. A few steps, and I could stay awake no longer. In fact, those few steps were taken more in sleep than otherwise. I knew no more.

Myra told me afterwards that I fell limply to the ground. She shook me. It was no use. She ran for something to hold water, and splashed me, drenched me. Still I stayed sound asleep.

Tamata looked on, then sat down beside me and, swaying backward and forward, moaned: "Bili die! Bili die! Bili no wake no more!"

This sent poor little Myra nearly frantic, and

she went full speed through the temple, past those great, gloomy gods, who, after their repose of centuries, must have been amazed to see that wild little figure racing, with fluttering lava-lava, along their vast avenue and disappear into the tunnel-mouth at the end.

She came to where those two old sailormen still lay and waited. Dan could do nothing except curse himself for having drunk the last of the rum. Booky Ben was more useful. Diving his tar-stained hand into one of his pockets—he was the only one of us possessing a pocket, since he was the only one not in native dress—he brought out a small flask of brandy.

"Would 'a' drunk it long ago," he whispered, "if we 'adn't bin in such a corner!"

Myra came racing back, and forced a little of it between my teeth. My eyes opened. After a small drink the drowsiness lifted a little, though I could remember nothing.

"Billy! Billy!" Myra cried. "Wake up! wake up! The water-gate! We've got to guard the water-gate!"

I looked at her in a bewildered way, and said something about a very calm sea; my thoughts were aboard the *Ripalong*.

She shook me. She rubbed brandy on my forehead. Then she tried to get me to stand up. I did so, more like a drunken man than anything else. Again she implored me to wake up. Still I was all adrowse. Sending Tamata down to the water-gate to keep guard, she led me across to the channel and splashed me with both hands.

Gradually my mind cleared. I remembered

where I was and what had to be done; but when I tried to walk, my legs felt as though they were in diving-boots. Myra handed me the flask, and I took a good drink. There was a tingling through my body, like the tingling of an arm or leg that has been asleep and is just wakening. I was now able to walk slowly.

The wounded arm still hung useless. There could be little doubt that the knife which stabbed it had been poisoned. The wound itself was not serious, and could never have had such an effect unless some pernicious drug had entered it.

Myra and I started once more for the water-gate; but just as we were entering the tunnel Tamata came back wild-eyed and breathless. She had heard voices. Crawling forward, she had come in view of the gate. The candle we had been using was still burning, and its fantastic glimmer had shown three or four Chinese.

We were in a fine plight.

This tunnel, lacking the sharp bend of the one where Dan and Ben were, was not suited for defence, and hardly suited for even holding back our pursuers, since to retreat from it would mean being framed, clearly by the tunnel-mouth long before the exit could be reached, and thus being an excellent target.

The only chance was to defend the galleries beneath the throne of the high god. Even that was desperate enough, because a siege must soon compel us to surrender.

I wondered how many, by that time, would be against us. We had already accounted for

some seven killed and three wounded. We knew of at least three others still opposed to Dan and Ben, and Dan had estimated that there must be about twenty of them altogether, which left seven free to come at us through the lower water-gate.

It was rather heavy odds.

I sent Tamata off to tell Dan and Ben of the latest disaster, so that they might be able to make a counter-attack from the lower water-gate. I could not suggest this to them. Only the crudest message could be sent by Tamata. The rest had to be trusted to luck.

Myra and I then hurried to the high god's throne. The desperate news had been a strong tonic, and the drink of brandy had given me new strength. I took post at the mouth of a gallery commanding a view of the tunnel from which the attackers would come. The distance was too great for a revolver to be of much use. But I would at least know when they arrived.

One great disadvantage of the gallery-maze was that there were several entrances. It was possible for attacks to be made from many points. Also there was a danger of being cut off from the stairs and consequently from Myra, who was carrying provisions up to the altar place as quickly as possible. It was on that platform that the last stand would have to be, unless, indeed, the end came before we could retreat so far.

For maybe half an hour I stood peering from the shadowy corner of the gallery-opening. There was no sign of movement. The wear-

ness began to assail me once more; and I sat down, crouched and dozing, against the rocky wall.

There had been ample time for some word from Dan. Even were he or Ben unable to retreat from the tunnel, it seemed they at least could have sent Tamata back with a message. I was growing anxious. A feeling of tremendous loneliness was looming over me. The presence of Myra, who, after every few trips up those stairs, ran round to see how I was faring, only increased that feeling. Had she but been safe, I could have drowsed contentedly. In fact, that lassitude was so great that I could have just sprawled down and gone to sleep, leaving everything to chance. Sleep was the one thing I longed to have.

Suddenly a slight shadow moved against the inside wall at the mouth of the tunnel leading from the lower water-gate. The shadow was close to the floor. Something was coming out. A moment later a head was visible, moving along the surface of the stream. Its owner must have been crawling in the channel.

Another head was peering from the nearer side of the tunnel-mouth. I fired, just to scare them. There was small chance of hitting a target at the distance. Instantly one head shot back round the corner. The other ducked into the water. It did not reappear. The man to whom it belonged evidently had kept under water till he had crawled back to shelter.

An hour passed. Nothing further occurred, and still there was no word from Dan or Ben.

It looked as though something terrible had happened to them. If so, there would be the likelihood of a sortie from the top tunnel.

This made it necessary for Myra to take a post where she could see the far end of the temple. There she kept watch lest an attack should come from that direction.

At the end of the hour the assault from the lower water-gate was renewed in an unexpected manner. Masses of leafy branches and bushes were pushed from the nearer tunnel-mouth along the floor of the cave. They formed a screen several feet high around the exit, and were gradually pushed out fan-like, other bushes being piled on them to thicken and heighten the screen. From behind this screen our attackers, themselves invisible, would have a splendid view of the interior of the temple. To have fired at random into the greenery would have been wasting ammunition with a very remote chance of scoring a hit.

In a way, that screen was a good sign. Ling Loo had lost so heavily that he was compelled to take care of his remaining forces. Only necessity would cause him to take such precautions.

The movement of the screen changed its direction. It was slow, but systematic and sure. My shot at those two heads an hour previously had told them which way to look for resistance, and the mass of greenery was slowly moving towards me. It crept along near the wall to prevent any surprise.

It was uncanny. It was horrible.

For the moment, my lassitude was gone. Standing up, I took aim at that advancing mass and fired. As the echo rang hollowly through the vast vault of the cavern roof, the bushy mass broke into six separate pieces. Each piece trembled and shook with life. Spreading out, those six separate clumps of bush came sliding at me with the speed of men running. They were now only a dozen yards from me.

## CHAPTER XXV

### MYRA AND I MAKE A LAST STAND

ONCE more I took aim, this time at the bush nearest me. The greenery halted for a second, and again came sliding forward.

Myra had scurried round at the call of the first shot, and was crouching behind me, peering forth at those uncanny clumps of bush gliding and rustling toward us over the cavern floor. They were but a few yards off. I had little energy left and, to tell the truth, still less courage.

That terrifying advance was too much for me. As my shot snapped through the temple silence, I gasped: "The stairs!"

We turned together and fled, Myra half-dragging me by my wounded arm. My pace must have seemed a saunter to her. The tonic effect of the attack was beginning to weaken, and drowsiness was once more enfolding its invisible arms about me.

It was as well my fear had caused me to run when I did. In another second those Chinese would have been leaping upon me, and the three shots I had remaining would have proved futile in such a scramble.

### MYRA AND I MAKE A LAST STAND 239

The galleries beneath the high throne had been arranged so that some light reflected faintly through them from the temple. Our pursuers therefore did not have to get torches before they could investigate, and one of the attackers, chancing to follow the right passage-way, was close upon us at the gallery entrance leading to the stairs. I turned and fired twice. This made him pause, but it did more. It told him, and consequently the others, which way we had taken. They would have no need to search the maze of galleries.

The way up the stairs was a weary journey, but before the pursuit had caught up with us we reached the place where the altar had been.

Ling Loo still preferred to be cautious.

A small platform of rock, a sort of dais or sacrificial altar was the only cover available. Crouching behind it, we waited. By peering either over or round the corner of it we had a view of the stair exit.

Myra gave me another sip of brandy. "Only a small one this time, Billy," she said, with a brave show of cheerfulness.

But there was a tremble of her lips as she spoke. Her face was pale. For the moment I forgot Ling Loo, those devils pursuing us, our terrible danger, and our small hope of anything but an ugly death. I could only gaze at the brave girl crouching there in a flaring red and yellow lava-lava, with her dark hair falling like a shawl of night about her body, and her dark eyes smiling to hold back the fear in her heart.

I had just reloaded the revolver and cocked



it. Mechanically putting it down, I curved my arm round the dear little girl and kissed her. I think she, too, forgot where we were, for she threw both arms about me as I whispered:

"Brave little Myra!"

She made no reply. Nor did I say more. There was no need because kisses are so much more eloquent than words. We have often wondered since how long that forgetfulness lasted—how long those great, grim gods stared down at two young lovers crouching in each other's arms at the sacrificial altar, while the flaming light far aloft spouted from the projected tongue of the high god and kept back the mighty glooms that towered about us.

A rustling sound at the stair-mouth woke us from our wonder-dream.

I grabbed the revolver.

Myra whispered "Keep the last two shots, Billy dearest?"

I knew what she meant, and, nodding a "yes," looked once more towards the stair exit. Ling Loo's device had been so successful before that he was trying it again. It was not a man that was issuing from the stairs. It was those leafy branches. They welled up and overflowed around the top of the stairs till they formed a circle that quite screened anyone coming from below.

Because of the larger area which they enclosed, a random shot was likely to be even more futile than had been the case at the tunnel-mouth. I crouched and waited. Just as the barrier was completed, I noticed at one point of

it a movement of the leaves more definite than elsewhere.

I tried a shot at it.

Instantly there was a gabble of Chinese, and above it I could trace one voice with a different intonation than the others. It had a more intense and penetrating quality. I surmised it to be Ling Loo's. In English I could not have mistaken him. In his native tongue it was not so easy to be certain. But the idea I got was that he was ordering them, much against their own excited protests. Doubtless they would have given up long before had it not been for his dominating will. I had never thought Chinese could be so persistent in attack as these had proved. Fear of their chief was the only way to explain it.

The gabble died down. The penetrating voice was the last to speak.

The bushes on the side nearest the platform commenced to move slowly towards us.

I fired into them, aiming low.

There was a shriek, the bushes paused, and four or five bullets whizzed about us.

Once more the greenery crept forward, waveringly, as though propelled reluctantly in parts. I fired low once again, at the part which was moving ahead most decisively. This shot was followed instantly by a gabble of voices so excited as to suggest panic. The leafy barricade halted and stayed at halt. Behind it there seemed to be a scurrying and a sound as of a body being carried along the stone floor.

I crawled round to the opposite corner of the

altar and was able to glimpse part of the stair-mouth through a gap left by the advance of the screen. A figure slid grotesquely down the stair-hole as I looked. I fired a wild shot.

After that, all was silence. It looked as though the attack had been repulsed, at least for a while. I reloaded my revolver and wondered if a siege would follow.

Curiosity next made me scuttle across to the barricade and peer through. It was deserted. There was blood about the floor, and a smear of red leading to the stairs. I ran across and fired into the darkness of the descent, just to hurry the retreat.

A little later, from below, to the left of the great god, came a shrill sound. I hurried across the altar-place. The excitement had momentarily given me fresh vigour.

Myra followed. Together we went climbing up the tremendous curve of the great god's thigh. It was so rough-carved that we found ample foot-hold. At the crest of the curve we peered over, and could see down to the temple floor near where the curtain of blackness hung above the chasm.

We were just in time.

A huddle of loose-jacketed figures went struggling towards the precipice. They were evidently panicky, and in trying to carry two comrades away had mistaken the direction to the tunnel-mouth. From the height of our position they looked like a set of unreal figures seen from the topmost gallery of a theatre, and against the

curtain they reminded me of a tangle of people, dwarfed by a giant background, in some fantastic drawing.

They came near the brink before finding out their mistake. A couple broke away and toddled excitedly up and down, like scouting ants, and pointed towards the other side of the great idol. They had got their bearings at last.

To increase their panic, I fired towards the blackness of the chasm. The effect was wonderful. They dropped the two bodies they were carrying, and disappeared, with frantic gabble, under the curve of the god's thigh.

Eager to keep them on the run, we returned, half climbing, half sliding, down to the altar-place, and then down the stairs at a reckless pace. Dashing out from the maze of the left, we saw two Chinks, evidently dead, lying prone near the chasm edge.

They could wait.

We next ran through to the other side, and were in time to see a jacket flap and disappear into the tunnel darkness. We followed, keeping at safe distance behind the sound of gibberish that went hurriedly along the tunnel. I did not greatly fear ambush. The panic was too genuine and too complete.

We came in sight of the water-gate. The candle was still alight but was guttering to an end. The flame leapt and leapt desperately, as though clutching at a straw to save itself from drowning in the darkness that billowed about it.

By its gasps of light we watched the last two of the Chinese. The others had got through the gate, and these were fighting, each frantic to go first. One of them at last gave a savage lunge of his foot at the pit of the other's stomach, and dived into the water before the worsted one could recover his balance. Next moment he, too, slid into the watery darkness. I could easily have shot both while they wrangled there, but it would have been too cold-blooded. We wanted only our own safety, and while they were content to run we were only too willing to let them do so.

Myra took a candle from the scatter of provisions still lying about and set it up just as the flame of the other gave one last flutter and died.

While she acted so sensibly, I did a somewhat foolish thing. Not realizing that the flight of the Chinese might easily have halted once it was safely past the water-gate, I slid into the channel, and, giving a swift kick-off, in the way I had previously practised, slid through. I floated into black night and thick smoke on the far side.

The darkness was at least reassuring. Even if the fugitives had halted there, they could not see me.

I listened. Far down the stairs was a gabble of noise. Rising from the water, I went forward a little. The noise was growing fainter and fainter. The flight was continuing.

Returning through the gate, I left Myra on guard and plodded rather wearily back to the temple. The excitement of the flight had been a

great tonic; but its effect was once more giving place to that poisonous lassitude. In the temple I hurried across to where the retreating Chinese had left their dead. One was an ordinary coolie, ugly, dirty, flat-featured, with wide, gaping upper lip and a cut-back chin. His pose was the stark pose of death.

I glanced at the other and got a shock. The panic of the Chinese was explained. I was looking at the scar-circled face of Ling Loo. Without their leader to drive them forward, those attackers were a rabble whose sole ambition was to run. I hardly blamed them. What interest had they in their chief's greed for wealth or revenge, or whatever his motive might have been?

I gazed down at the awkward sprawl of him, and at the bedraggled and blood-spattered suit that he had erstwhile worn so fastidiously. I could not help thinking what a tragic waste of years, of energy—of a life, in fact—he represented. Yet, even as he lay there, something strangely impressive about his personality forced me to a certain respect for him. Something seemed to outweigh his cruelty; and a sense almost of pity came to me.

The body was so stained with blood that I could not tell where it had been hit.

"So this," I muttered to myself, "is the end of Ling Loo!"

But, because it was Ling Loo, and because his men had left him behind, I feared that they might be compelled by Quong Sun, his first

mate, to return for the body. Quong was unknown to me, and it would be unwise to risk anything.

So, with a parting glance at the great figure sprawled motionless before me, I went and rummaged among our things for some thin cord.

Finding a piece, I hurried back to Myra, and, taking a candle, went through the water-gate once more. There I arranged the string taut across the tunnel-way, about six inches from the floor. Continuing the string along and back through the water-gate, I fastened it to two tins, and poised them so delicately that the least pull on the cord would upset them. No one could then approach the water-gate on the far side without giving some warning to us.

Leaving Myra still on guard at the gate, I took one more sip of our remnant of brandy, to stave off that encroaching drowsiness, and started out to reconnoitre the way to the top water-gate. Tamata had not returned. There was still no sign of either Dan or Booky Ben, although I had sent them word of the great odds coming against Myra and me.

Their silence was alarming.

So I plodded up the tunnel, into the temple, past the towering mass of the high god, and along the centre of the avenue. But suddenly a thunder sound behind made me turn quickly. The noise came from the chasm.

It was another earthquake. They were becoming strangely frequent. The cavern about

me trembled, and the solid floor of rock beneath quivered as though it had cold creeps.

I could see the whole of the vast curtain of blackness hanging above the chasm, and as I gazed I saw, against the curtain, something that set my nerves all tense and started me running madly back towards the high god's throne.

PART V  
THE TREASURE

## CHAPTER XXVI

### LING LOO'S STRANGE MOTIVE

WHAT I saw, clearly outlined against that curtain of blackness, was a white-suited figure, rising to a tottering posture.

Ling Loo was by no means dead; but a glance showed me that I had little to fear from him, although he was making a brave attempt to fight the weakness due to his wound.

He could not have heard my bare feet on that stone floor, but he turned and faced me. Within that circling cicatrix, through which he had looked at life for so many years, was an expression of mingled agony and defiance.

The poise of his head was proud. There was neither fear, nor regret, nor thought of surrender in his heart. Instead there was about him an air of tragic splendour that I could not but admire. He had been cruel, and he would be so again if life gave him the chance.

His right hand clasped a revolver. I had not noticed it before, probably because I had taken such a careless look at him. As it was, I did not then notice it till I got quite near to him, when, lifting his arm, he tried to point the weapon at me. With a swift upward cut of my hand

I sent it twirling into the air. We were so close to the chasm that the revolver landed on the cavern floor, and slid over the edge into the blackness.

The effort of rising and of trying to oppose me had been too much for Ling Loo. He went limp, and crumpled down on the ground. The front of his once white coat was stained with smears and splashes of red. It was no time to continue the contest. I stooped and raised his head. He was almost unconscious.

Lowering him, I ran across to where I had left the brandy flask. It would be truer to say that I tried to run. These spasms of energy, each born of fresh excitement, left my strength ever further depleted, so that my pace was more a stagger than a run. By the time I returned with the flask, Ling Loo had revived somewhat, and as I stooped to place the drink to his lips he raised a hand slightly.

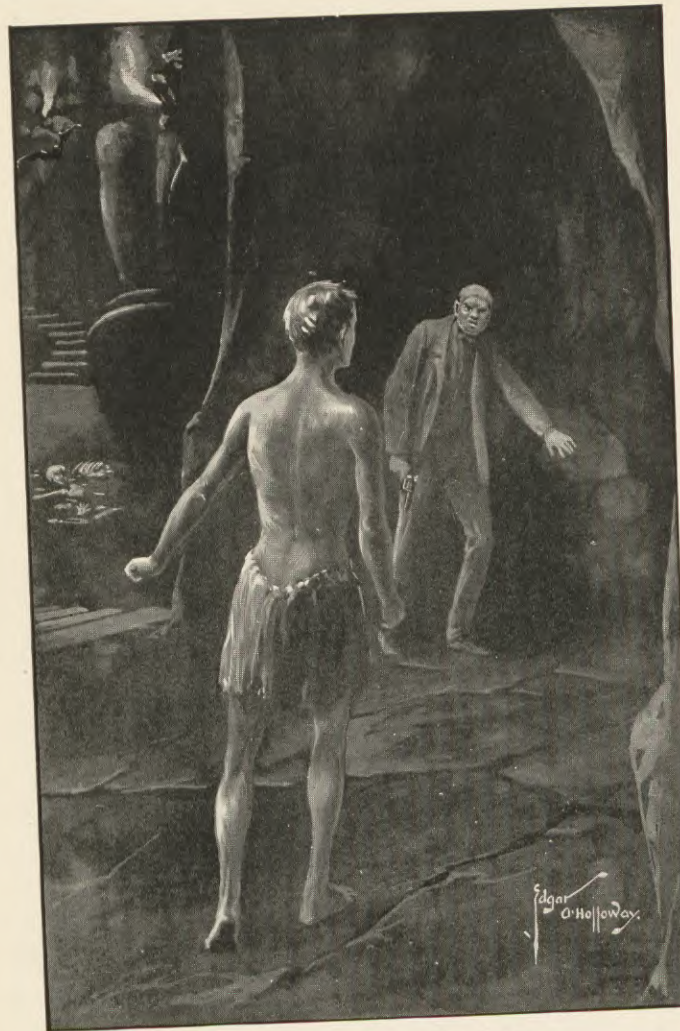
I paused.

His voice, a little weak but calm and precise as ever, spoke: "Young man! I have not the honour of your name." There he halted.

"Gordon! Billy Gordon!"

He went on as though, having attended to that formality, he could speak with propriety, "Very well, Mr. Gordon! Although we have been opposed to each other I must admire your courage. No one else had dared what you have, and so nearly succeeded; for I admit you have come close to success, though you must fail at last."

That self-confidence, even in the face of his



Ling Loo turned and faced me.

plight, and the imperturbability of his voice, were wonderful. For a second I felt that my recent elation at the defeat of his men had been foolish—that he must win in the end. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

"It is kind of you to succour your enemy," he went on, "but before I accept your aid, I must tell you that I am still unconquered, and that your present kindness shall not affect my ultimate treatment of you in the least. If you aid me instead of killing me, you do so to your own cost. Honour requires that I warn you of this."

It was a strange utterance, strictly to the letter of honour, yet softened by no trace of any merciful human feeling.

"O rot!" I exclaimed, "here! drink some of this."

He took the flask and as he lifted himself on his elbow he said "I have warned you?"

I nodded. He swallowed the sip that the bottle contained, and I squatted down beside him. My weariness compelled me to do so. All through the day of fighting I had been alternately faced by two enemies, the human from without, and the poison within. The former were repulsed, the latter was returning with ever fresh persistence.

As Ling Loo put the flask down, his eyes brightened slightly. He caught sight of my wounded arm and glanced swiftly to my face, with, I thought, a flash of satisfaction.

"Thanks!" he said, with a slight bend of the head towards the empty flask. Then he asked: "Wounded?"



"Yes!" I answered, "a bit of a stab yesterday evening . . . one of your men."

"Have you any more brandy, or other alcohol?" he asked.

"No," I answered, "that was the last I just gave you." "You may have guessed from the effects of the wound that the knife was tipped with poison," I added.

"You might be interested to know," he continued, "that there is only one antidote for that poison. It is alcohol. The effect lasts for forty-eight hours. Unless the drowsiness can be staved off during that time by doses of alcohol, death is certain. I think, therefore, Mr. Gordon, that there is small hope for you."

As he said this there was no change in his eyes, but his voice had the faintest tone of triumph. I thought of Myra, of her safety, and a sickening sensation came upon me. I tried to hide my fear.

"Not much!" I laughed, nervously enough, "take a lot more than that to kill me."

"It is curious," responded the calm voice, "that our friend Captain Evans used precisely the same words, though in different circumstances."

My blood ran chill. Again I seemed to hear the shriek of agony that had come to us as we hid in the lagoon-side nook, and for a moment I felt like hurling myself at that wounded Chinaman as he leaned before me on his elbow. Had it not been for my own great weariness I should have done so. As it was, before energy enough could well up within me, I remembered the

black deeds of Evans himself. That calmed my anger somewhat, thought it did not lessen my sense of horror.

"What became of Evans?" curiosity forced me to demand. "Is he dead?"

"I think we can take that much for granted," was the reply. "True, we have no death certificate, but the carnivora of the lagoon seldom issue such. You see, Captain Evans was unwise enough to oppose me. He was more. He was negligent. That is unpardonable. I impressed this upon him. I have my own methods. They are effective. But perhaps my man put a little too much emphasis when he was impressing my will on our friend, or perhaps Captain Evans had a weak heart. He gave a very curious scream as he straightened out. We put him overside. By the way, I have noticed that people with defective hearts succumb to pain much more quickly than others. There it not nearly the same amount of interest in handling them. I should imagine, now, that you have a strong heart."

I shivered as those eyes peered coldly at me from their circular scar.

"You callous . . ." I could not think what term would fit him, so I left it at that and went on. "It would serve you right if I tossed you over that cliff."

"From your point of view, undoubtedly!" replied Ling Loo. "On the other hand I may yet have the pleasure of so treating you. You see, after spending half a lifetime searching for this place it irks me to find anyone here before me."

"Afraid you might have to share the treasure?" I suggested.

Ling Loo showed a trace of surprise.

"Treasure!" he repeated, "treasure!"

"You know very well!" I said. "The gold that is supposed to be hidden here somewhere."

"That's strange," he said, more to himself than to me. "I was unaware of that."

I told briefly of Alick North's words to Dan and mentioned also the skeletons strewn about the temple.

For the moment I had forgotten my hatred, his cold-bloodedness, and was talking as to an ordinary acquaintance.

"Strange!" he soliloquized, and, addressing me continued, "still Mr. Gordon, I can assure you that I was unaware of any treasure."

"Then why on earth," I asked, "were you so keen to find the place?"

"Science, Mr. Gordon. There is such a thing as science." His continual "mistering" of me was quaint. "I need not tell you," he went on, "the long story of how I first learned of the existence of this temple. But having done so, I determined to find it. There is one subject interests me greatly. It is a large subject. Its centre is Easter Island, with its great stone idols. Its circumference is wide, but the most important part of it is the old Aztec civilization of Mexico, with its great temples, wherein was such curious worship, including human sacrifices in which the victims were pampered for months, to end by having their hearts torn out: a very interesting ceremony."

That strain of cruelty for ever intruded into his thoughts; but as he continued I found his talk fascinating.

"This temple is evidently a relic of some such worship. Its isolation here in the middle of the Pacific suggests wonderful possibilities. A vast continent must have existed here at one period. This temple is probably the key to undreamed revelations of knowledge."

For the first time there was a gleam of new light in his eyes. He was speaking eagerly. It was evidently a subject that thrilled him—possibly the sole thing on earth that could thrill this frozen personality.

"That knowledge," he went on, "was to be mine. It is to be mine. It means that science is going to hail the name of Ling Loo as one of the greatest of its devotees. After half a lifetime I have found it. It is unmistakable . . . Those idols! They are very cousins to the Aztec gods. Even the system of lighting, the tapping of great natural reservoirs of gas and regulating the flow so that they must burn for hundreds and thousands of years, are the same as in, at least, one Mexican temple lately unearthed."

In his enthusiasm he had risen and was standing rather unsteadily, gazing away down the great avenue of gods. I stood up too, unconsciously. The enthusiasm from Ling Loo's eyes, the alertness of that hideous face, was astounding. Still that voice spoke, but now with unusual tenseness.

"And to think that the wonder should be

shared by an ignorant youngster seeking treasure . . ."

He turned to me. His voice was once again suave as ever.

"It is ironic, is it not, Mr. Gordon? And as I do not like this form of irony, I think the best plan would be . . ."

He sprang at me like an infuriated beast, caught me by the throat, and by the weight of his body bore me backward to the ground. He was badly wounded, but his strength was still great, while mine was almost gone. The poison was creeping traitorously through my veins. Drowsy weakness had chained my limbs. I felt helpless, hopeless in the Chinaman's grasp, but with a fierce effort I rolled over and for a second was on top.

Next instant our wild strugglings sent me underneath.

But that was not all.

We had fallen near the edge of the chasm. Our rolling and struggling had brought us still nearer, so near, in fact, that as those fingers clutched more tightly at my throat, and while that great body was pressing me down, my head was hanging backward over the brink into the black void.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### MY DEATH SENTENCE

My strength had flickered out utterly, but just as I expected to be tumbled into the abyss two shots sounded from the far end of the temple.

Ling Loo's hold relaxed. One hand left my throat altogether, while the grip of the other slackened and I began to get a little breath once more. Raising himself slightly, with one knee still holding me down, he turned his head in the direction of the sound.

I could not see what was happening, but echoing through the hollows of that mighty cavern temple came a drift of Chinese gibberish.

Ling Loo, either forgetful of me or well aware how helpless I was, loosened his grip altogether, stood up rather unsteadily, and sent a thin, high call whirring down that avenue of gigantic images. It was the signal I had heard two or three times before.

With the freer breathing, enough strength came back to let me wriggle slowly so that I was no longer over the dizzy brink. I slewed round a little until, by raising my head a few inches from the floor, I could see down the length of the temple. Even that was an exhausting effort.

The first thing I saw was the empty brandy flask. It lay at Ling Loo's feet in a patch of blood, and twice his unsteady movements to keep his balance made him kick it. That much I noticed in an involuntary way as my gaze went hurrying down the temple to where, about half-way along, three loose-jacketed figures were running towards us.

As they ran, two more shots leapt through the silence. The Chinese took no notice of them.

Ling Loo raised his right arm, apparently to make some sign, but the efforts and his weakness from loss of blood caused him to stagger.

I slid farther away for fear he would fall on me.

With a few fantastic steps he had almost recovered poise when one of his feet landed on the flask. The smooth surface of it on the blood-wet stone made it slippery. It slid towards the precipice, and the foot went with it. To recover his balance, Ling Loo brought the other foot back quickly. He had been but a pace or so from that sheer drop, and this brought him suddenly balancing on the brink. His arms shot above his head. He swayed backward over the void, clutched spasmodically at the air, half-recovered himself, swayed again, and, again clutching grotesquely at nothingness, toppled slowly farther and farther, till, raising one foot in a futile way, he shot down into that abysmal blackness. Just as he vanished below the rim, a shrill scream left him, and faster than he plunged down and down, it fled up and up into the glooms above.

Only once before had I heard such a terrifying shriek. It was when, hidden in the lagoon-side nook, we had listened to the last sound uttered by Captain Evans. Ling Loo had taken the same farewell of the world as his victim had—a shriek of horror.

When they saw their chief balancing on the brink, the three oncoming Chinese had halted in quaint attitudes, like runners petrified. A fascination held them. They stood and stared for many moments after that scream had fled into silence.

An exciting gabble followed, and one of them came cautiously forward. I lay still, pretending death, and hoping they had not seen me moving. They took no notice of me.

The one who had advanced crept to the edge of the abyss, peered down, and, backing away, returned to his companions. There was more gabble, and gesticulations as though he were explaining that the great black curtain was but the darkness above a void.

All at once the trio turned and went at a jog-trot away along the temple. They disappeared into the tunnel at the far end.

They had seen the death of their chief. They did not want to see more. Their great wish apparently was to get away and be done with such a strange place.

As they vanished, a figure stepped from the shadow of one of the gods and came running towards me with a stiff-legged sort of motion and a sideways sway that suggested an old sailor.

It was Booky Ben. The familiar look of his broken nose was one of the most welcome sights I have ever seen.

"Didn't see y' at first, lad," he grunted, somewhat breathlessly. "Too busy watchin' the Chinky bloke topple into the bottomless pit. Hurt?"

"Not much," I answered.

Then he asked me half a dozen questions at once: What had happened? Where did Ling Loo come from? How did he get in? Where was Myra? and so on.

I replied that it was too long a story to tell just then, and explained that Myra was acting as sentinel down at the bottom water-gate.

In turn I asked where Dan and Tamata were, and why Tamata had not returned to us with any message.

During this talk Ben helped me to my feet. I could not stand alone. With him supporting me, or, rather, half-carrying me, we made our way to the far side of the temple. As we did so he gave me a few disconnected words, enough to let me know of the tragedy that had occurred.

Briefly, his story was that, after I had left him and Dan guarding the upper tunnel, nothing had occurred, for a while. Then came another attack. They repulsed it without seriously damaging their assailants, but just as the last of the retreating Chinese was disappearing round the corner to safety, he had turned and fired one more shot, quite at random. It ricocheted off the wall and, turning the corner, hit Dan in the shoulder close to the neck. Ben

could not make out what was really the matter, but thought the bullet must have damaged the spine. At any rate, poor old Dan had sunk down on the floor without even a moan and, although his heart was still beating, he had been unconscious ever since.

Ben had been unable to do anything for him, because he scarcely dared take his glance for a moment from the tunnel-way ahead.

Shortly afterwards Tamata had arrived.

She had given two words of her message, "Bili say—," then, catching sight of Dan, she squatted down and, forgetting all about her errand, forgetting, in fact, everything else in the world, she had taken Dan's head in her lap, calling to him in her native language.

Booky had tried to win my message from her, but it was locked hopelessly in her mind, and she had only looked at him from vacant eyes and stuttered brokenly that Dan was dead, that she would die too, that all the world was dead, and that it all come of our having disregarded the tapu.

In the end Booky Ben had given up. While old Tamata sat, a huddled thing of gleaming shadow, nursing her man and moaning over him, he had crouched against the tunnel wall peering ahead for any renewal of attack. The candle was still burning, but it was now very low. Ben had then reasoned that a fresh assault was less likely while it burned, but that a retreat would be compulsory as soon as it went out. So while the light still had several minutes of life ahead, he slid back round the corner,

pocketed both his own revolver and Dan's, and, hoisting his unconscious mate on his back, he had come stumbling slowly down the tunnel with Tamata following, dog-like, and still moaning.

They had come safely out into the temple, and were some distance along it when two shots behind told that the Chinese had followed closely.

Ben scuttled with his load for cover behind the nearest of the idols. Tamata had followed.

So far as we could judge, Ben must have come from the tunnel just about the time that Ling Loo had leapt upon me and borne me down. Struggling on the ground, we would not be conspicuous at that distance to one who was walking more or less head down beneath the burden of an unconscious man. Thus Ben had been slowly coming down the temple avenue while I was sprawling with those lean fingers on my throat, and my head over the brink of the abyss.

It was just as Ben and Tamata had taken cover from the Chinese that they had heard Ling Loo's shrill call. Instantly the three advancing Chinese, delinquishing the pursuit, had leapt up and veered in the direction of the signal, taking no notice even when Ben fired a couple of futile shots at them.

It was when the Chinese had retired, after seeing their chief's death, that Ben had caught sight of me and come to my aid.

By the time he had told me the main points of these happenings we reached the channel on the far side of the temple. Ben lowered me to

the floor and splashed me plentifully with water. The shock revived me; but breathing was still painful, my neck being swollen.

We had a few hurried words about what was best to do.

Any further attack by the Chinese was unlikely. Those from the top water-gate knew that Ling Loo was lost beyond all recovery.

Those at the bottom gate, also, would soon know. Ben did not think that Ling Loo's first mate, Quong Sun, had any interest in the adventure. In any case it was fairly certain that Quong, who had led the attack in the top tunnel, was one of those who had been wounded.

Our chief desire was to get out to daylight once more, at least for a while. The upper route, with its funnel climb, even if a rope had been left there, was impossible in our exhausted state and with Dan unconscious. There was a risk, on the other hand, that the Chinese were still in force on the lower route or out on the cliff ledge.

Booky postponed the discussion with "Anyway, lad, think it over while I go for Dan."

After a while he came back, a limp form over his shoulder, and Tamata toddling behind. He lowered Dan to the floor beside me.

"What d'you make of him, Billy?"

I did not know. Poor Dan looked tragically near to death. There was much blood about his shoulder; but a more distressing aspect was the way his head wobbled into Tamata's lap as she squatted down and started a melancholy croon.

As we gazed upon Dan's hard features, much less ugly now owing to his compulsory abstinence, he opened his eyes. A flicker of his old smile showed for a moment as he whispered:

"Goosed, Billy! Got me this time."

Then, looking up to the old face that leaned eagerly over him, he murmured:

"Tamata!"

That was all. Dear, drunken, brave, dirty, good-hearted old Dan Rockley was dead.

Tears came into my eyes. Tamata's voice leapt from a low moan to a high wail.

I began to believe in her tapu. Those skeletons scattered about the temple told how previous parties had fared when they had dared to violate that cavern temple, and now the great gods seemed to smile down upon us as though watching as we, also, one by one, went the same road of death. Alick North had died, and goodness knows how many others who had stood in the path of the scar-faced Chinaman. Noosey was dead. So was Captain Evans. Ling Loo himself was gone, as also were many of his men. Now Dan was the latest, and Tamata was going to die. She said so; and when a Polynesian decides to die he, or she, just sits down and does so.

Then I remembered that I would be the next if Ling Loo's words were true. The poison would take effect within forty-eight hours from the time of the wound unless some spirit could be got to counteract it. Our prospects of obtaining any were small, and nearly half the time limit had gone by.

Yet I could not quite believe Ling Loo's words. Certainly I was ill. That lassitude had continued to fold itself more and more tightly about me. It was difficult to combat the persistent drowsiness that flooded my brain. But I still hoped it would pass away.

I told Booky about it and he looked serious.

"Ling Loo said forty-eight hours, eh?" I nodded. "Billy," he replied, "that's dead serious. Straight! Ling Loo was a queer sort, but he always meant what he said."

Again I nodded. Ling Loo had given good evidence of that.

"Well then, Billy," Booky Ben continued, "if Ling Loo said forty-eight hours, forty-eight it is."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### DEPARTURE OF THE SHAN FANG

OLD Ben's words left me fairly hopeless. The drowsiness of the poison creeping through my veins made everything about me seem unreal; and the high wailing of Tamata's voice was like someone calling afar off, through a dream.

I wanted only to be near Myra. There was a sense of comfort in her presence that none of the others could give. To be near Myra . . . . and to sleep . . . . I aroused myself enough to mumble:

"Let's get down to the water-gate!"

Ben must have noticed the faint sound of my voice for he started sprinkling me afresh with water. Once more the mist cleared a little from my eyes. He helped me to my feet. Leaving the pathetic old woman to nurse her dead, we struggled down through the tunnel darkness and came to where, in the low light of the candle, Myra sat watching the two balanced tins that were to tell if anyone approached the far side of the water-gate.

They were undisturbed.

Myra jumped up and, putting her arms around me, took my weight from Ben. In a few words he told her what had happened while she had

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been on guard there. We had a brief conference.

We were all eager to get out to the daylight of the ledge. The gloom of these subterranean ways was more than ever terrible, haunted as it now was by all those deeds of death.

"We've only a limited time to find some grog to save your life, lad!" he said. "That's if there's any to be found at all. The skipper and Noosey most likely got down on what was in the store. If so our only chance is the *Ripalong* and the Chows might get off with her as well as their own hooker at any moment. We'll just have to chance running into trouble between here and the ledge."

That gave me an idea. If my plight made the haste necessary, it was up to me to go ahead and scout, especially as I was already in such danger that a little more risk would be neither here nor there. I proposed it, hoping that the cold plunge through the water-gate would give me strength enough to go by myself.

But Myra spoiled the scheme. She insisted on going with me. Ben, in turn, would not hear of this so we agreed to go all together.

Ben returned to the temple. He lifted the body of old Dan Rockley on his shoulder and, with Tamata following, rejoined us. We could not leave the grief-stricken old soul alone in the temple and this was the only way to get her to come with us.

We crawled through the water-gate, and with flickering candles went slowly down the long stairways. It was a strange procession. Myra



had to half carry me. Behind us came old Booky, bending under his burden, and last Tamata, trailing the tattered echoes of her melancholy wailing.

The smoke was suffocatingly thick all the way down. At the bottom of the steps, within the chamber behind the waterfall, were the remains of the fire. It had been scattered wildly. We did not stay to examine it for fear of the horrible relics it might contain. Instead we hurried on, as quickly as such a lame procession could, out to the lower ledge, to the green trees and palms, to the blue of the sky high over, and the deeper blue of the sea away below and beyond.

On the calmness of the lagoon the two schooners still drowsed.

The afternoon was nearly gone. Only that morning had we retreated to the temple; but the interval had been so crowded with hazards and excitement and terror that we seemed to have been imprisoned for weeks in those cavernous recesses.

There was no sign of Chinese anywhere, but there were clear signs of their panic-stricken flight. Two ropes still dangled from the high ledge above, and a third hung from where we stood to the base of the waterfall. It was doubtless by means of this that the Chinks had fled.

Booky placed the body of Dan under the shade of the mango-tree. There in the warm, scented air, Tamata squatted beside the ugliness she had loved, swaying and crooning her never-ending dirge.

By this time I could see forms only as through

a fog. The effort of struggling down from the water-gate had left me so exhausted that I crumpled down helplessly a few moments after we reached the ledge, and they carried me to the shallow cave where our camp had been. Myra brought a billy of water from the fall and bathed my head. That was a balm of delight. Such drowsy contentment came over me that I no longer wished to waken from it. There Booky left us and, climbing down the rope to the bottom of the waterfall, set out to find the antidote that was to save my life.

Every little while Myra scampered across to the brink of the ledge, or round to the lookout gallery, for signs either of Ben or our foes.

Just before darkness came racing across the world, she returned from one of these visits, and, shaking me roughly, shouted in my ear that a native outrigger was paddling out to the *Ripalong*. We guessed that it contained Booky Ben, and that his search at the store had been in vain.

A few moments later I drowsed off into complete unconsciousness.

The next I knew was the sound of voices calling me, as from a great distance. Still farther off was a thin sound of wailing. Gradually I roused. There was a taste of rum in my mouth. My eyes opened to the glare of a fire.

Myra was bending over me, and old Booky stood alongside. Aboard the schooner, it seems, he had found several barrels of the ship's liquor still intact. He had also learned that the Chinaman who had been put in charge of the vessel

by Ling Loo had shortly before hurried back to the *Shan Fang*. As the sole remaining white member of the *Ripalong's* crew, Ben had ordered the native boys to stand by the vessel, stating that he would be aboard again in a day or two.

When he got back to the ledge I was very low, and they had been greatly afraid that the antidote was too late. It is no wonder that dear little Myra, as soon as I awoke, threw her arms around my neck and with her face against my shoulder broke down completely. As I did not know what else to do, I just held her to me and (foolishly enough, I've no doubt) kept telling her there was no need to cry. Suddenly she looked up at me and behind her tears was a quiet happy smile—the most wonderful I have ever seen. She said softly:

"Of course there's no need to cry. Not now, Billy! But I couldn't help it."

Old Booky got busy making tea, leaving us to ourselves. For a while we sat silently there in the quiet night, our arms about each other.

Tamata's dirge had died away. She had fallen asleep, or so we thought, but next morning we went across to the mango-tree and found that the strange old soul had kept her word. Her dead body lay beside Dan Rockley's in the green shadow. There, later on, we buried them in the one grave. It was a primitive ceremony, but it had more of sacredness and sincerity than polished hearse and black garb can ever know.

Through all that day the lassitude of the poison still threatened to overcome me; but the

rum held it at bay, and by the evening its effect had passed away as Ling Loo had foretold.

We had done but little during that day. All three of us needed rest. But when the following dawn flamed above the morning-bank of clouds we awoke to a sense of new life. Several rain-storms had galloped over Malusa Island during the night. The bush was steamy-sweet with perfumes. A feeling of exhilaration caught us. Even the grave of our two friends beneath the mango-tree lost anything it had possessed of sadness. It seemed idyllic that they should sleep together in such a beautiful place.

Together, then, the three of us, all that now lived of the many who had been searchers for the strange temple, with its promise of treasure and its testimony of skeletons, went strolling along the gallery to the lookout behind the waterfall. As we glanced through the curtain of water to the bay below we got something of a shock.

There was only one vessel in the lagoon. It was the *Ripalong*.

Instinctively our gaze lifted towards the horizon. Far out we could see the white spread of a vessel bearing northward before a fresh breeze.

"That's good-bye to the *Shan Fang*," commented Ben.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### BARS OF BULLION GOLD

DURING the next day or two we shifted quarters to the *Ripalong*, taking care not to forget the little trunk that contained all Myra's possessions, including her only frock. The latter was important now that we had some hope of once more getting back to other ways of life. In the same way we treasured the ragged trousers and coat that alone remained to me as clothing.

Our first visit to the village was amusing. At sight of us the natives scurried all ways, believing us to be ghosts. It was not till we had shouted after them, telling them we were quite alive, that little Rara came up and, reaching forth a trembling hand, touched my face. After that they gradually lost their fear of us, and the village resumed its dreams beneath the slant palms, untroubled by such terrifying visitants as had so recently compelled them, day after day, to search the fastnesses of their island.

During those few days none of us suggested going back to the Temple of Skeletons. Our memory of the dreadful things that had happened there was too vivid. But the sunlight and the healthy life of the beach had its effects. The thrill of adventure once more began to tin-

gle our blood; and one morning old Booky Ben announced that he was going.

"Billy, I was intending never to go near that museum again. But somehow I'd like to have a last look at it. There must be something there to account for all those skeletons. Must be treasure there somewhere, even if old Scar-face hadn't heard of it."

That was very likely. After all, we had never made a thorough search of the temple. There had been too much else to fill our thoughts.

For the first time since we had left the ledge I was feeling the same way as Ben about the possible treasure. Maybe there was a lift in the air that morning. Myra, too, was willing. With three hurricane lamps from the schooner we set out for the waterfall, up the rope to the lower ledge, along the gallery, up the bat-haunted stairs, through the lingering smoke, through the lower water-gate and so once more to that subterranean hall of monsters.

In a way it was good fun exploring that great place now we were no longer driven by fear. First we examined well the maze of passages beneath the high god's throne. Our only fresh discovery there was one more skeleton. It crouched in a small recess off one of the passages—a fearsome sight because of some rusted chains tangled about it. There is no call to describe how these were arranged. Even now a shudder goes through me at a thought of the terrible death of that unfortunate, shackled as he was

in such devilish fashion. We took care that Myra should not see it.

From those galleries we went on to explore the rest of the temple. It took a long while to go carefully, first along one side and then the other, peering into every rocky corner for passage entrances, or secret recesses, or hidden doors.

Under two of the stone figures we found tunnels like those beneath the great god, and a stairway leading similarly to an altar set in the lap of each. Still there was no sign of treasure, and as we came for a second time to the far end of the temple, up near the passage-way leading to the top water-gate, Ben remarked:

"My mistake, I'm afraid, Billy. Don't seem to be anything here but bones and stones."

That about summed it up. Alick North's cipher-key showing the way to the treasure had led only as far as the temple. If the gold had been hidden in some secret corner the key might have been expected to indicate it. But there was no hint of such. Possibly someone else had found it. Yet neither Dan Rockley nor the natives had known of any visitors to Malusa who could have been on such an errand. Ben and I were discussing the possibilities when Myra interrupted us rather irrelevantly,

"I wonder what the two little gods were for. They look out of place somehow all by themselves, and so small."

Because there seemed to be nothing else to do we strolled across to one of them, and rather in-

differently started to look for some hint of its purpose.

I was trying once more to puzzle out the secret of the flame that poured so steadily from the tongue-tip when Myra, who had sauntered round behind the image, gave a sharp cry of fright.

"The floor! I felt it move. It began to sink under me."

We investigated. A large slab of stone, fitted to be almost indiscernible in the floor, was balanced, like the one closing the tunnel above the top water-gate, so that the weight of anyone on the end of it would cause it to tilt slowly open. Possibly, during my previous examination of the place I had not chanced to step on it, or, maybe, it had been loosened by the earthquakes. Beneath it were some steps.

We propped the slab open and descended to a passage which communicated with a trap-door similar to that behind the duplicate idol on the far side of the temple. Half-way across, the passage opened into a fairly large chamber.

At one corner of this there was an opening and more stairs leading down to further mysterious depths. But we did not worry about it at the moment because in the opposite corner was a sight that made our hearts leap. Alick North had been right.

There was treasure in the temple, and we had found it.

A pile of gold ingots were stacked snugly against the wall. They were small, but their weight was proof of their worth.

"A couple of hundred thousand quid if there's a penny," gasped Ben, and, putting down our hurricane lamps we joined hands and danced round like kids. It must have been a queer sight, three live figures, three lights, and three times three tangled shadows whirling about like gnomes deep in the middle of a mountain.

Then we discovered that we were not the first who had been there. In one corner and half behind the golden pile lay yet one more skeleton, sentinel of that century-old hoard.

For those ingots must have been there hundreds of years. There was no other way to account for them. They were exactly like those described in tales of buccaneer days. Doubtless some Spanish galleon had been captured by her crew, or by pirates, and, blown far off her course, had ended as a wreck on Malusa, whence a series of events had led to the temple being found and used as a hiding-place by cut-throats who had fought and died there, the secret of the treasure dying with them.

It was under the very eye-sockets of maybe the last of them that we had danced that mad measure of triumph. We moved those crumbling bones aside before we started to shift the treasure to the temple floor above.

I had been for exploring the stairway leading down from the other corner of that chamber before troubling about the removal of the gold, but Ben argued:

"Plenty of time for that, lad! when we have

this bullion stowed aboard the hooker. Bird in the fist, you know!"

As Myra was of the same opinion I had to give in, and it turned out to be lucky that they had their way, though I would give a lot to know what was at the bottom of those unexplored stairs.

Having got the whole of the treasure safely shifted into the light of the temple we looked at the time. It was close on sunset outside, though in that great place of everlasting light there was neither day nor dark.

We decided to return aboard the schooner for the night and get some of the native crew next day to help shift the treasure.

This was not so easy.

When we assembled them after breakfast next morning and told them what we wanted they seemed very chary about understanding the task; and though we offered a good reward only three were game to volunteer.

With these we rowed to the part of the beach nearest the waterfall, and marching single file through the bush came to the hanging rope and so reached the ledge.

The natives were very nervous when they came to the stairway, and much more so when they saw the temple. They would certainly have bolted had they not been more afraid to return through the darkness by themselves than to remain with us and the lights.

We had brought sugar sacks for carrying the ingots. Myra and I shifted smaller lots along the temple to the tunnel entrance; thence the

three natives carried more substantial loads down to the ledge and tossed them over into the bushes below. There was no fear of the Malusans touching them, and there were no whites on the island except ourselves, so that it was quite safe to treat those bars of gold as though they had been but firewood or road metal.

Ben acted as overseer and lantern-bearer for the three native carriers.

It was a fairly long job, but at last we were getting near the end of it. There were only a couple of loads remaining.

Ben and the boys were away with one lot and Myra and I had gone to the far end of the temple for our last load when suddenly, from the chasm where the mighty curtain of darkness hung, there came that booming noise once more.

"Another earthquake?" said Myra.

It was. Before we could say more it came. The rock floor beneath us started shivering as though it had been quicksand. We left the load and hand in hand went racing along that great avenue of the gods.

The quake was not like previous ones, a sharp shock and over. It increased in severity each second. Those monstrous images towering above us seemed to sway all ways. A crushing sound behind, followed by a loud explosion, made us glance back as we ran. One of the idols had crashed to the floor and shattered one of the two small figures of the flaming tongue, from the ruins of which a column of fire was roaring upward like spouting gas in flame.

Next instant there was another crash ahead and a more fearsome explosion, this time aloft. The long-projecting tongue of the high god had broken and, tumbling to the floor, clattered to fragments that bounced like gigantic hail.

It was a close call. Had it fallen a second or so later we would have been underneath the plunging mass.

At the same moment a great burst of fire roared from the tongue-less mouth far overhead and, fanning out and along the roof, continued to blaze in wild disorder. It was as though the temple had a ceiling of flame. The heat was suffocating. As we stooped low and scurried on beneath that roasting canopy sounds of toppling stone and bursting flame chased us. By the time we reached the tunnel-mouth and gave one last glance behind, the temple was a cataclysm of immense toppling images, of shivering rock, of boulders dancing, of noises growling and roaring, of bellowing fountains of flame.

It was a nightmare race to the water-gate over a floor that quivered. The tunnel sides and roof shuddered as from terror. Beside us ran the horrifying thought that the passage ahead might have fallen in, or might crush us as we ran. At one place the roof had collapsed but we were able to clamber over the debris and get past. The water-gate was still intact and we got safely through, though the mountain mass was still quivering, and the rumblings far underground were louder than ever. They were like

roarings from some monstrous dragon in torment, deep in its subterranean lair.

I thought that the island was going to burst into eruption, and expected every moment that we would be blown skyward.

We were nearly down to the open air of the ledge before the quake began to lessen. There we met old Booky Ben puffing up the stairs to find us, though, as he afterwards explained, he thought we must have been killed long before.

Afraid that the quake might recur, we hurried out to the ledge and down the rope. At the first growl of the shock, the native boys had vamoosed. We found them down by the boat, gazing wide-eyed towards the mountain. Nothing could persuade them to return, even as far as the waterfall. But, having gone to so much trouble for the treasure, we were not going to leave it scattered in the bushes by the cliff-base.

So we told the boys to find a canoe and get back to the *Ripalong*. We retained the ship's boat and set about carrying the gold down to the beach.

The distance from the waterfall was not great. By evening we had all the treasure safely aboard the schooner.

Next morning we made ready to sail away.

## CHAPTER XXX

### END OF THE TEMPLE AND ITS SECRETS

My only regret at thought of departure was curiosity as to the stairs that led downward from where we had first found the treasure. But Ben would not hear of any return to the temple. He had had quite enough of it.

When we told the Malusans we were about to sail, there was no mistaking their feelings. They were glad. Their superstitious minds feared all sorts of trouble from our disregard of their tapus, and they obviously blamed us for all the disturbances that had recently visited their island.

They had known nothing of earthquakes previously. The memory of even the oldest native contained no such experience, and their legends only served to convince them that the trembling of their island came from the wrath of some devil-god deep underground.

The funnel-shaped hole we had descended was to them the entrance to their mythical hell, and by our exploration of it we had incensed all sorts of Polynesian deities.

As we left the village, after saying farewell, and went strolling beneath the coco-palms towards the beach, dark faces and beautiful large

eyes showed from the entrances of the huts as though taking a last glimpse of something they feared. Of all of them from chief Mana-hana down, little Rara alone was game to come to the lagoon-side to see us off. We shook hands with her and her eyes seemed unusually bright, as though filled with tears ready to flow.

We stepped into the boat and pulled out into the lagoon, waving to her now and again. When we climbed aboard the schooner she was still standing there gazing towards it, her gaudy lava-lava making a bright patch of scarlet where the white beach and green grass met.

Our difficulties were by no means over. With the native crew we had enough hands to man the *Ripalong*, but neither Ben nor I knew anything about navigation. It was easy enough to sail away from Malusa, but not so easy to reach any set destination. However, we had to take the chance. We knew where Australia lay and our only hope was to use the south-east trade to keep a general direction towards the Queensland coast.

It was midday by the time we had worked the vessel out of the lagoon, and during the afternoon we made such good headway that by sunset only the heights of Malusa Mountain were visible above the horizon.

After tea, Myra and I strolled aft for a last look at our island of adventure. It was wonderful to be there, leaning on the rail of the little schooner, with the trade wind singing through the rigging and with that lovely little girl beside me. Her large eyes, darker and more glow-

ing than ever in the evening light, had a dreamy tenderness in them as they glanced up to mine. Her hair hung loose, making a dark frame for her beautiful face and falling down over my arm as it folded about her waist. I had just stooped above her uplifted face and kissed her lips when old Ben, strolling past at that moment, commented:

"Anyway you youngsters have a right to kiss each other if ever anyone had."

"I think so too," said Myra.

Our old friend was about to go forward when a strange thing happened.

Away astern Malusa Mountain was now a dark mass outlined against the flashes of summer lightning. The air was warm and sweet with the island scents that drift so far to sea. It was a night of dreamy peacefulness. But all at once from the direction of the island there came a low rumble of sound, somewhat like thunder but with a more fierce tone of anger through it. We stared across the water.

Almost at that instant the hollow mountain exploded in black smoke, threaded with spouting fire. This was followed by a continuous burst of flames roaring up like a fountain of fire into the sky. A moment later the schooner danced and rolled, then gave one mighty heave as though thrown across the crest of a tremendous wave; then she gradually settled to her leisurely course once more.

Then we knew. Those earthquakes had been but the prelude to the re-awakening of a long-quieted volcano. The strange Treasure Tem-



ple was lost for ever, blown skyward with whatever secrets it still held.

It was while we still stood watching that strange fountain in the night that Myra and I first tried to tell each other of our love, though that was more for the pleasure of speaking of it than the necessity of putting it into words. It was there, too, that she first promised herself to me, and that I in turn promised myself to her as soon as we were old enough to marry. And it was there that we took our last look at the island as it spouted its fountain of flame into the night.

Next morning Malusa was no longer visible and we settled down to our haphazard course for home. Our luck held. In fact, the winds were especially kind since a northerly gale sprang up when we estimated that we were coming towards the Great Barrier Reef. By running before the wind we came in sight of the coast in the vicinity of Cape Moreton, well clear of the dangerous Barrier. From there we had no trouble in sending a message into Brisbane by a passing steamer, and getting a tug to tow us safely to port with our strange cargo of *Mystery Gold*.

Of course that mass of treasure made us all wealthy, but, after all, the greatest treasure I found on Malusa was my beloved Myra, the wonderful girl who promised herself to me as we stood by the schooner rail that night watching Hollow Mountain roaring into the darkness like a fountain of flame on the far horizon.

