



THRILLING ADVENTURES

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The Black Pearl



A slug spewed out, spinning the man around like a tenpin

***Murder and Theft Stalk the Decks of the "Banda Lu"
in this Gripping Yarn of Pulse-Stirring
Adventure on the High Seas***

By CAPT. KERRY McROBERTS

Author of "Legion of the Frontier," "The Sultan of Hell," etc.

CAPTAIN JIM ANDERSON, master of the little South Seas trading schooner *Banda Lu*, received the order when he put in at Batavia. Along with it came a money transfer drawn on a San Francisco bank for the amount of \$5,000, payable, if and when, the order was executed. He showed it to his mate, a much older man with greyish hair and leathern face.

"See," Captain Anderson said, his keen blue eyes sparkling, his thin, firm lips rippling in a smile. "It's enough to bring us out of the red, if we can find the pearl to match it."

The mate turned, spat over the rail, shifted his cud of tobacco from one jaw to the other.

"If we can find it!" he replied, seemingly unenthused. "It's a large order. It's so long ago since we got

that pearl I've forgotten its size and color. Besides, that 'Frisco outfit must think we can find a needle in a haystack. Black pearls are hard to match—"

The young captain smiled again. Taking a small package from his pocket, he lifted the cover deftly, fingered a small black pellet, slightly opalescent.

"But they've made it easy," he answered, holding the object in such a manner that the mate could examine it closely.

The mate narrowed his eyes, squinted. Grunting acquiescence, he walked away.

An hour later the *Banda Lu* turned her prow from Batavia, headed for the lesser known pearl beds of the Flores Sea.

Bull Olund, renegade, beach-comber, and a first-class example of tropic scum of the last degree, but now, by the grace of the devil, cook on the little schooner *Banda Lu*, stepped softly across the sodden deck in the darkness.

A vague shape loomed before him, slightly darker than the blackness mantling the fo'c'sle. The shape moved with a gentle heave and grace, swaying with the movement of the solid deck, totally unaware of the approaching footsteps aft.

BULL OLUND moved closer, his huge muscled arms dangling at his hips. His gnarled hands were clenched, talon-like, ready. The dark figure seemed to swirl. Olund leaped at the same instant, his tense hands groping forward.

The outthrust fingers encountered what they sought. Something soft, yielding. They clenched vise-like about the throbbing throat of the fallen *kanaka* beneath him.

The town of Lombolen, across the bay, was black as the intervening waters themselves, though here and there flickering yellow lights braved

the humid gloom. Above the lazy yellow lights the dim rolling crest of the mountain range behind the town could be distinguished. And over all a million staring, cold-eyed stars blinked brightly as they watched Bull Olund at his task. But the stars did not talk. Neither did the blackness of the night.

THE air was hot, heavy and sodden. Bull Olund cursed the forced sweat that trickled down his hairy arms, thence to the struggling *kanaka* boy's neck, making his grip much less secure and certain. The confounded heat! Once this last thing was done, he intended to leave the tropic climes, never to set foot off temperate soil again.

He had chosen the very bows of the schooner for his job—the point furthest away from the cabin below. He thought of the captain and mate.

"Haw!" he gloated throatily. "It'd take a devil of a racket to wake them dopes!" His teeth flashed in an evil grin. "Thought they fooled me with that fake set-up, eh? Lyin', of course, to put me off the track. Thought they had kept it secret, and when I caught them with it, caught them cold, they said it was a fake. That the real thing was coming later. It's just a gag. I know it. *Pfft!* I'll show them. I'm no fool."

The trembling body beneath him gave a sudden violent quiver, then went limp and flaccid like a suddenly thawed deck swab.

For a moment Bull's talon-like grip held about the distended throat. Then he lifted himself and stepped softly to the narrow peak of the deck, dragging the limp body behind him. In the darkness he could only feel his way, and even that none too well. He stumbled over the taut bight of anchor cable and swallowed a profane oath.

Feeling about in the darkness be-

yond the chain, his hands came finally in contact with a length of manila rope, loose coiled on top of a heavy iron gear, part of a dismantled winch which was no longer used. He grinned as his finger touched the teeth. The gear was heavy. The rope just long enough!

Quickly, he tied the line under the *kanaka* boy's shoulder, making sure that it wouldn't slip. He had to work swiftly and surely. Fastening the other end of the line about the gear wheel, he silently lifted it, grinning malevolently, to shove it over the low bulwarks of the bow. He then lowered it away until it reached the water a full fathom below, leaning over the side and peering into the blackness to make sure.

He smiled again when the gear splashed on the surface; then, feeling along the line behind him, he nodded approvingly. The heavy iron gear sank beneath the surface and the line grew taut underneath the dead *kanaka*'s shoulders.

He let it slip through his hands slowly. The sinking gear dragged the body forward toward the side; it caught momentarily in the angle between the deck and the low bulwarks. Bull stooped, giving a forceful shove that dislodged it and carried it well over the side. There was another slight splash. He heaved a sigh of relief and rubbed his wet hands on his drill trousers.

"**T**HAT'S done," he whispered hoarsely. "It went off like clock-work. All according to the program I made up. The next thing—well, I'll wait until I hit 'Frisco for that. The lousy liars!"

He gloated throatily, then stepped swiftly aft. Before the hatchway leading to the cabin he paused a moment, staring once more into the unrelieved shadows of Lombolen across the dark and eerie bay.

The soft, plaintive throbbing of a

twanging guitar wafted across the blackness. He was sick of that continual thrumming, too. But only a single yellow light showed against the background of the night. Bull spat toward the town.

"When that crew is so soused they can't walk, they'll bring 'em back in the dingys." He turned his head. "As for me, I'll take 'Frisco."

HE stepped toward the bow bulwarks. Leaning over, he peered outboard toward the bows. He swayed as the little schooner rolled slowly with an oily heave of the sea. He felt a slight jerk as the bow lifted up against the short drift of anchor chain they had let go in the shallow bay. Then, tearing his eyes from the dim bows and turning back, he ejaculated:

"He's blamed well out of the way. Now for the next act."

Feeling his way with his hand on the side bulkhead, he glided noiselessly toward the cabin. Then, taking a match from his trousers pocket, he ignited it against his coarse thumbnail. It cast a pale, flickering beam ahead of him. Objects flashed into view.

To his left, the open galley door—his own sanctum. He grinned grimly. Over there behind the stove, on a rack behind the galley pipe, the cabin broom—the skipper's own special pride. He had made it himself; a bamboo handle, thick dun-colored brush of coconut fiber laced with raw hemp. The shadow of the stove pipe moved over it as the match burned low in Olund's hand.

"They won't wake up," he mumbled. "They got enough to keep them under for a long time yet."

He chuckled confidently. They weren't the only ones on the *Banda Lu* who could think up clever schemes. They thought they were smart, eh? Trying to fool him because they caught him looking at

the thing the night they left Larantua, just after they had bought it from the native Moro diver. Saying it was a fake, eh?

They laughed, too, when telling him the story of the pearl. How a rich banker in San Francisco had bought the first one and presented it to his wife. Now he was having the earth scoured for its mate. The lady wanted a pair of earrings, and one was no good without another to match it. The gem broker had sent a specially prepared artificial gem, a replica of the original, so Captain Anderson wouldn't have so much trouble finding a pearl that matched.

What a foolish tale! Bull Olund thought. What an obvious lie. It had been concocted just for him. They had been too open about it, too friendly. They went out of their way to explain it all. It was fishy from the beginning.

Boldly pushing open the door to the officers' cabin, he stepped softly in. The tiny beam of his flickering match disclosed two men on opposite sides of a small table, asleep, heads resting upon folded arms.

NEAR their elbows were two heavy enamel-ware coffee cups in their chipped saucers. One of them was tipped over. A whiskey bottle, still almost full, stood upright, farther away. Holding his breath, Bull Olund surveyed them. They were breathing heavily. He coughed.

The men did not move.

"Captain Anderson! Mr. Hildegaard!" he called.

Still they did not move.

"It's still there, by God!" Bull stepped closer, greedily eyed a long tubular object on the table. Then he snatched the small tube of bamboo from the table, hiding it instantly inside his shirt.

He had it! His huge body trembled perceptibly. The low flaming match scorched his fingers. He held

back an oath, turned toward the door again.

Feeling his way forward again through the blackness, he paused in the passage next to the galley. Then, taking the bamboo tube from his shirt, he twisted the plug from it and pulled from inside a small bit of wadded *kapok*. His fingers trembled visibly and his thick lips quivered uncontrollably as he separated the matted fiber. Something solid touched his finger tips. He thrilled to the velvet touch of the object as it rolled in the palm of his hand.

"MINE! Mine!" he gloated. "All mine!"

From his pocket he took a watch case. It was nothing but a shell, the works absent; now it was going to come in handy. With his thumbnail he opened the back of it. Then, with the *kapok*, he carefully wadded the object he had taken from the bamboo tube. It was a good hiding place, most unlikely of suspicion.

Stepping across the passage and entering the galley, he lit another match, then swiftly burrowed his hand into the bucket of coral sand under the stove. From his cache there he took two brown pellets of raw opium, stuff that he had got from Huey Ling's at Makassar. He dropped these into the pot of still warm coffee simmering on the back of the stove. Taking up a heavy cup, he dipped it into the coffee pot and splashed the contents on the galley deck. He tipped the cup on its side and laid it on the edge of the puddle. Then he deliberately laid himself down in an awkward sprawling heap over the coffee cup, in the midst of the slop on the floor.

A sharp blow in the ribs awakened him some hours later. But Bull Olund made no sound, made no move other than that of his simulated heavy breathing.

He was kicked again.

"Get up, you drunken scum!"

The toe of the mate's boot was no less hard than the voice that accompanied it. Still Bull Olund lay limp and apparently unconscious, neither batting an eye nor moving a muscle. By the pink of his eyelids he knew it was day. They would be hauling up the anchor soon to get under way for Makassar. The other *kanakas* would be back from their spree on the beach at Lombolen. The water would be aboard—and the captain and the mate would have lost.

He heard the mate's footfalls as he returned to the cabin. Heard him speak to the captain.

"That lousy beachcomber we took on as a cook! He's flat as a rag on the galley deck. Doped, too."

Bull Olund heard the patter of two pairs of boots on the schooner's deck. He had to be doubly careful now, careful to give not a sign of his consciousness. He heard their quick breaths, their hectic chatter, and pictured the tall, clean-shaven young captain bending over him to study his exhalations. He gulped purposely in heavy, heaving gasps, simulating the effect of too much opium.

"I'll be blamed!" the skipper's voice.

A tense hand seized his shoulder and shook him hard.

"Olund! Get up!"

IT was the mate's voice, much rougher than usual.

"See that cup there, Skipper, spilled over. It was in the coffee all right. He probably got the dregs."

There was a rattle on the stove.

"Yep," the mate drawled. "There's a couple half dissolved pills still in the pot. Some devil—"

"Let me see," the captain snapped. "You're right, Mate," after a moment. "The poor devil got it heavier than we did. Well, let him lie there.

As soon as we get under way, send a couple of *kanakas* down and have him brought up on deck."

They walked away and left him alone.

O LUND chuckled inwardly. They didn't suspect him. He had done his job well, following old Huey Ling's directions about the opium to the letter. Putting just enough of it in the officers' coffee to render them senseless until he had accomplished his purpose. Yet not enough to prevent their lifting anchor in the morning and getting under way. The whiskey they had poured in their coffee had killed any unusual odor, any peculiar taste that the opium might have imparted.

Suddenly a thought struck him as he lay there in the growing light. Funny, neither of them had made mention of the article that had been stolen. Now why—

Bull shrugged.

They were playing smart again. They knew it must be on the ship some place and were simply carrying on as though nothing had happened.

The mate's stentorian bellow wafted down from forward. The *kanakas* on the deck began to chatter excitedly. Bull Olund could visualize what was going on, even though he saw nothing. When he finally heard the slap-slap run of water against the sides, and felt the deck beneath him heel and slant gently, then hum with vibrant life, he knew the *Banda Lu* had taken the wind in her spread of canvas and was heading out on her last leg to Batavia.

Minutes afterward he heard footsteps again coming down. He relaxed purposely, waiting, going limp and flaccid as a wilted plant.

"Carry him on deck." It was the captain's sharp, precise voice.

Hands tugged at his shoulders and

knees. When he felt himself being lifted, he folded up spinelessly, letting his head drop back as if it were tied with a string. Up he went, eyes still closed, mouth open and gasping heavy breaths.

"Put him down there!" The captain's voice was crisper now. "Douse him with water!"

Bull Olund thought quickly. The captain and mate had come out of their daze an hour before. Even if he had been given a heavier dose, it was about time he was beginning to come out of it. A dash of water should hasten his recovery. The drench of water came when he wasn't expecting it, nearly strangling him. The salt was raw in his throat. He quivered slightly, moved his head perceptibly in a rolling movement.

"Give him another!"

Olund took it flush in the face. He groaned, slightly opening one eye, saw the captain and the mate standing nearby regarding him keenly. Both men still looked somewhat haggard. He groaned again, opened the other eye, turned on his side and drew up his knees. He had seen Chinese in the opium dens of Batavia do the same thing when coming out of the hop.

The mate chuckled dryly.

"**H**A! Pretty good, eh, Skipper? Shoot it up, Olund. Get it out of your stomach. Must have been something you ate that poisoned you. Nothing to worry about."

Bull Olund, simulating desperate illness and nausea, heard them turn and walk away.

For a half hour or more he lay prone on the deck, the hot tropical sun beating down unmercifully on his back. Infrequently one of the crew would come and dash a bucket of sea water over his head, then patter on again.

Then the sun got so hot that he

had to move or be roasted alive. Dragging himself over to the cabin rise he sat up and leaned against it, his leonine head flopping down on his barrel chest. One of the crew had set down a bucket of water. Lukewarm as it was, he gulped it down greedily in copious drafts. Then he went back to his place and hung his head over the low bulwarks.

THE *Banda Lu* had already beaten past the heads of Lombolen Bay and was straightened out on her northwesterly course which would take her to Makassar. With the wind that was now bellying the sails, it wouldn't take long to make the passage. Bull Olund was glad of that. This cursed play-acting was beginning to pall on him.

When they dropped anchor at Makassar, he would thank the captain for the job, bid him good-by and make his departure. At Makassar he could ship on another schooner for Manila, and from Manila he could take a steamer for the States. Then good old San Francisco and a new start—a couple of years, and he could make the \$5,000 grow to \$50,000. He knew plenty of ways to do that.

He had planned it all well—to perfection, in fact. The captain and the mate weren't so smart as they thought they were. He wondered if they would say anything about the loss when they got to Makassar. Their actions seemed peculiar on that point.

He settled himself more comfortably against the cabin rise. He was hungry, hungry as a wolf; but he dared not eat. People coming out of opium dazes had no appetites for long hours afterward. He'd make up plenty for the food he'd missed, though, when he got to Makassar.

Vaguely, sitting there in the dazzling sunlight, he wondered about

the *kanaka* he had put over the bows the night before. Nobody had mentioned yet that the boy was missing. Had the captain and mate told the crew some story about the missing boy, purposely, as a part of their game?

Hours he spent thus, with the infinite patience of a man who feels he has done his job well and can afford to wait.

Twice the young captain passed him, bending his tall frame slightly to peer down, his keen blue eyes reflecting an inquisitive light. The mate paused before him once, just when the broiling sun was directly overhead. He glared at Bull, his black eyes snapping.

"'Bout time you're gettin' on that galley job, scum! Snap outa your hop!"

Bull returned the burning stare with a weakly reproachful look.

IN the middle of the afternoon Bull dragged himself upright, and was surprised to find that he really was in a weakened condition. He had to steady himself with a hand on the grip rail, as he felt his way down to the hatch.

Reaching the galley, he flopped on a case for a moment. Gradually he felt his strength returning, and taking the broom—the captain's special broom—he began the daily clean-up. When he finished the gallery he staggered to the cabin. The captain was lying on the port side of the swinging table, reading a magazine.

"Come here a moment, Olund," he said. "There's something I want to tell you."

What now, Bull wondered. Certainly there could be nothing that would harm him. He must remember to simulate signs of very recent acute physical distress. He swayed on his feet dizzily, blinked his eyes and wet his lips with his tongue.

Getting up, the captain went to

his locker and took out a bottle of whiskey. Two glasses were already on the table.

"Mr. Hildegaard, the mate, already knows what I am about to tell you," Captain Anderson began, filling the glasses. "As you are the only other white man aboard, I think you should know, too. Maybe you can help."

BULL OLUND felt the hot blood course through his veins. His nerves tingled. He steadied himself.

"Yes, sir. I'll be glad to do what I can," he said politely.

Captain Anderson raised his glass with a nod to Olund to do the same. Both swallowed their portions.

"Something happened down there at Lombolen, Olund. You weren't the only one to be drugged, you know."

Olund started, simulating surprise.

"Drugged? Why—er, I thought you said it was something I ate—"

The captain smiled.

"Drugged, yes. All three of us. But that's not what I was getting at. When we came to this morning the black pearl, the artificial one, was gone. Some one stole it while we were unconscious."

"Gone! Stolen?" Olund repeated, comprehension, bold and acute, showing in his blinking eyes. "They drugged us so that—"

He broke off abruptly, fearing he was putting it on too thick. Then with his hand still gripping the table, he swayed dizzily.

"But who?" he mumbled weakly.

"The *kanaka* boy we kept on watch has disappeared. That's the only clue. You've got to help us. I want you to go up topsides and play sick. It seems certain that the missing *kanaka* took the pearl. The others may know something about it. Keep your ears open even if you are still groggy."

"The artificial pearl is worth a

hundred dollars; besides, I have to return it with the draft to Makassar in order to get my money. You've been in these parts long enough to understand that *kanaka* lingo. You get the pearl back and there's twenty-five dollars in it as a reward."

Bull Olund tensed his fists slowly. The veins in his neck distended. His voice raged with indignation.

"If I could find the dirty scum who doped us! But say, Captain, if the missing fellow stole the pearl, why don't you turn back to Lombolen?"

SMILING, the captain shook his head.

"No," he said. "I don't want to waste that much time, now. The schooner with the Moro diver and the real pearl will be in at Makassar when we get there. I must meet him on time. Have some arrangements with the bank, you know. Well, get on the job now, Olund. Keep your ears open."

Olund turned away. He was jubilant. The captain didn't suspect!

"Just leave my broom on the table there, Olund," the captain called. "I want to do a little cleaning here, myself."

Grinning broadly, Olund turned back and handed it to him. With high elation he crawled out on the deck and dragged himself wearily forward, where he took a position that enabled him to seem to be watching and listening to the *kanakas*.

Inwardly he laughed at the young captain, the simple fool with the childish blue eyes. He was still trying to pull the wool over him. A fake black pearl worth a hundred dollars! Did Anderson actually believe him such an utter fool?

He pressed his hand against the watch case in his pocket and grinned grimly to himself. He had done his part perfectly. Right where he was sitting now was where the iron

gear had been. And right ahead of him near the hawse hole was where the *kanaka* boy had caught when the heavy gear was dragging him down to the bottom—to remain for all time.

Tomorrow he would be in Makassar. The world would be rosy then. But now he must appear weak, exhausted. Thinking, planning, Olund fell asleep.

* * * * *

The *Banda Lu* worked slowly in toward the wharf at Makassar. Captain Anderson was at the wheel, his blue eyes held straight ahead. The stern-visaged mate was down at the engine, ready to kick out the clutch when the captain shouted.

Bull Olund chuckled to himself. Another minute or two and the schooner would be eased into the wharf and secured. In a few minutes he himself would leave here forever. With the uttered hope, of course, that the lost pearl would show up in time.

CAPTAIN ANDERSON shouted. The engine gears clashed, running free. The brown boy standing in the bows shot a swift looping line ashore. The *Banda Lu* eased in to crunch against the piling.

Smudged with grime and oil-streaked, with sweat pouring from his brows, the mate came up, wiping his hands on a bit of waste, with the captain's broom under his arm. The brush was smudged, too.

Captain Anderson locked the wheel and went forward. Bull Olund, smiling confidently, approached him with outthrust hand.

"Captain," he said genially, "I thank you for signing me on when I needed some money. I'm grateful, but darn sorry about that pearl. If I hear of it, I'll send you word."

Captain Anderson's keen blue eyes flashed, fastened on Olund's. The mate sauntered over, a chew of to-

bacco making a big lump on one cheek. The captain's broom was in his hand.

"Good-by, Mr. Hildegaard," Bull said.

"Good-by, Olund."

He turned away, his heart pounding tempestuously. He was thrilled to the innermost core by his final success. It showed on his heavy features. It showed in his striding carriage as he walked.

"Mr. Olund!"

THE words came very softly, very gentle in tone, from the young captain's lips. But there was a strange note in that softness. For an instant the impulse to leap and run almost overcome Bull, but he stifled it. Nothing could be wrong now. He turned back with an ingratiating smile.

The smile froze on his lips!

The mate leaned lazily upon the broom. But the captain had his hand on something that made Olund's eyes pop—a heavy .45. The muzzle was pointed straight at him.

Bull blinked, flushed, forced a harsh, grating laugh.

"What's the idea?" he stammered.

Captain Anderson smiled. But there was no humor in the smile.

"You're not leaving us yet, Olund. I just wanted to see what you would do. Everything worked fine, eh? You drugged us, stole the fake pearl, murdered one of the crew—and thought you were getting away with it, eh?"

The grim muzzle of the .45 never wavered.

The blood drained from Bull's face, leaving it pallid and sickly in hue. For the first time his nimble brain refused to function. He stammered, sputtered.

"Me? I—I steal a fake pearl—murder—"

The captain's eyes did not leave him.

"Come, now, Olund. Why not prove out a man just once? Of course you killed that brown boy. Who else did?"

It was a bluff, Bull figured. He regained instant control of his faculties. They had tried to third degree him. The fools!

"Why, you crazy fools! That *kanaka* who drugged us stole the pearl, swam to shore, and—"

A harsh, sardonic laugh crackled from the mate's throat. The captain interrupted.

"You say he swam away, Olund? How could he when you weighted him down with an iron gear wheel, to say nothing of strangling him to death beforehand? You see, Olund, you're not so smart. The best of plans—"

The mate snapped in brutally:

"Your line fouled the anchor chain, you fool! His body came up when we hauled in the anchor."

RAGING torments of hell tore at Olund's brain now. He recalled, in a flash, how it must have happened. He had lowered the gear over the side gently. When the body caught he had given it an extra heave. The gear slid down one side of the chain, the body down the other. The length of manila had fouled under water. When the anchor came up—

Fate had tricked him.

"Give me that pearl you stole," Captain Anderson said evenly.

Bull Olund's dreams and hopes tumbled in utter chaos about him, but he wasn't one to cringe and ask for succor. He ripped the watch case from his pocket, thumbed it open, showed them the stolen pearl in the wad of *kapok*. Then, instantly he clamped it shut again.

"Like blazes I will," he screeched hysterically. He swung up his arm, hurled the watch far out into the muddy stream. "There's your lousy

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THE BLACK PEARL

(Concluded from page 145)

pearl. Dive for it!" Captain Anderson and the mate laughed.

"Still, you don't believe us, eh?" the captain said. "You still think we're fools? Show him, Mate. Show him he's crazy as a loon."

The mate lifted the broom from the deck. Slipping off a small section of the bamboo handle, he reached in with his finger and pulled out a wad of fluffy *kapok*. From this, as the captain pressed the gun into Olund's ribs, he extricated something round and velvety, ebon-like. The real pearl!

"Yes," the captain said. "You drugged, you stole, you murdered for a mere bauble, when the real pearl hung in the rack on your gallery shelf, inside this little pet broom of mine. Now you'll hang for your folly. The fake was really a fake, you see. You made a mistake—a very bad mistake."

Bull Olund swayed on his feet. His knees sagged. But not for long. With a bellow of infuriated rage he leaped, hands outflung toward the young captain's throat.

The .45 flashed. A slug spewed out, turning Olund about like a ten-pin. Quick as lightning the young captain reversed the gun, bringing the butt down in a swift, sweeping arc to crash with a dull thump on top of Bull's head. Olund sagged down, falling limp to the deck.

"Put him in irons, Mate," Captain Anderson directed calmly. "We'll hold him for the authorities. Tie a bandage around the wound in his arm so he won't bleed to death."

"Aye, sir," the mate said.

Across the turbid waters of the estuary of Makassar a light breeze blew warmly—a breeze that spoke of easy passage to the States.