

THE COAST OF HATE



By **FREDERICK L. NEBEL**

Author of "Flame Island," "Typhoon McQuade," etc.

Men shunned the Flying Moon as a devil's deep-sea curse. For grim mystery haunted her musty cabins. The shadow of death marched step for step with whoever manned her sun-scorched decks.

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THREE things can break a man in the Islands. Booze, the Tropics—or an unexpected streak of tough luck. Jack Ridlon, one-time sailing master in the Island trade, had been broken by the last of these.

A native uprising, coupled with a poor crop year, had about ruined his newly acquired plantation on the Borneo coast. And a tidal wave, catching his place the following month, had completed the wreckage.

A string of tough breaks, one following close on the heels of the other—that was all. But together they broke Jack Ridlon. They brought him to Macassar, a free-lance adventurer in search of the quick fortune which he must have to save what was left of his precious plantation. They brought him to old Jake McGarry, from whose age-wrinkled lips he first heard the strange tale of the *Flying Moon*. And they brought

him at last back to the sea—on one of the most adventurous voyages he had ever made.

It was this way. . . .

McGarry had offered him a loan which was at once refused. Then, his old eyes twinkling a bit, McGarry told him of the *Flying Moon*—and offered him a berth in its empty master's cabin.

"She's a good ship, Jack." It was McGarry speaking. "She's a two-masted schooner, fast and with a fair bottom. But there's something queer in the wind behind her. A month ago she came in from Ceylon in charge of her mate, McKimm. Captain Andy Bronson had died at sea and been buried at sea, ten days out from here. McKimm showed me the log. Andy was old and his heart was bad. It was the Malay steward who found him in bed dead. Apparently heart failure.

"I had a large interest in the schooner. Not that I wanted it, but Andy 'd been hard up about a year ago

and I helped him out that way. After I'd got the details from McKimm, I decided to use the schooner outright. There were papers filed here that automatically gave me possession of the schooner if Andy died.

"Then I let McKimm go. I wanted to overhaul the old tub, and besides I didn't like McKimm. He got all hot and bothered because I dismissed him. Should have seen him. Never saw a guy so mad.

"So I didn't see him for a week, and then one day he blew in and wanted to buy the schooner. I said I didn't want to sell. He got me sore by crabbing so much when I fired him. He kept jumping his price. I kicked him out. I don't know where he got the money, but no man in his right senses would pay what he offered for the *Flying Moon*. There's something else behind it.

"Now she's loaded for a cruise up the coast. I've scoured the beach for a skipper to take her out—and *nobody will take her*. Last guy was old Plummer. He accepted, and then a day later he wrote me a note and said he'd changed his mind."

"McKimm still here?"

"Somewhere around. Haven't seen him. The thing is, Jack, that I've overhauled that tub and made something out of her, and she's got to make money. Why McKimm wanted her, I don't know. But there's something mighty peculiar."

Ridlon grinned. "And you want me to take her out?"

"Want to?"

"I need money. There's a girl waiting for me in S'pore, and she's waited too long already."

"Then—"

"Show me the dotted line!"

THERE might have been worse places than the Yellow Lantern, but they were few and far between.

It stood outside the edge of Macassar, a low, rambling shack thrown up beneath the palms. Unpainted, weather-whipped, it was an ugly blot on the beach, a port of call for hard-drinking

sailormen and the twisted scum that drifted there from the fag ends of the earth en route for nowhere in particular.

But to Jack Ridlon it was neither unique nor interesting. His wandering years had carried him into many strange, unlovely haunts—and his sledge-hammer fists and iron courage had often carried him out. Only thirty now, he had done a lot of living in the raw and the rough. He had about him a steely air that was not aggressive, but that gave you the impression of rigid resistance in time of danger.

A casual man, friendly but blunt, whom experience had given the knack of distinguishing between a two-legged rat and a man four-square.

The interior had a greasy look and a greasy smell. A few lanterns cast a dull yellow glow upon twenty-odd of the roughest, toughest-looking men he had ever seen gathered in one room. All the tables were filled, so he passed on up to the bar. Because he wore clean fresh whites and a new sun helmet—because he looked straight and bore the hallmark of a clean-living man—he drew the attention of almost every man in the bar.

He leaned against the bar and ordered a drink, with no intention in the world of drinking it. The barman was a slack-faced, pock-marked Chinese, who wore a dirty undershirt and a mean, sullen look that seemed directed against no one individual, but against the world at large.

Ridlon said, "Is Captain Plummer here?"

The Chinese looked at him hostilely, then turned and went into a room off the left of the bar. He came back with a large, ponderous Chinese—two flabby chins above a black blouse, thick, bulbous nose, his yellow face smeared with sweat, and eyes hidden between slanted slits of flesh.

His voice was guttural, harsh, rasping. "I am Ah Wong," he said, and seemed proud of it. He put his long-stemmed pipe between his thick lips.

"I was just looking for Captain Plummer," said Ridlon.

"Who are you?"

"Ridlon."

Ah Wong spoke slowly, laboriously, but in English oddly precise. "The name Ridlon is of no significance to Ah Wong. But he will convey message to Captain Plummer."

"There's no message. I want to speak to him personally."

"Regret very much Captain Plummer is sleeping due excess of liquor." He puffed on his pipe, and his eyes seemed to close entirely. But Ridlon knew that he was being keenly scrutinized.

He was about to say that he would return later when there came the sounds of heavy but unsteady footfalls mingled with loud, blistering oaths. A door burst open, and a short, broad man reeled into the bar, his hair slapped over his forehead and his shirt open to the waist. He was streaming perspiration.

"Who the hell put me to bed again?" he yelled. "I said no man was to put me to bed. I can stand my likker. I'm a shipmaster and I can sail any wind-bag afloat. I—"

Loud guffaws reverberated through the bar. Captain Plummer, going the way of all booze-drinking flesh, soggy with rot-gut rum, stamped the floor.

"DON'T you go laughing now, dammit!"

The guffaws increased in number and volume.

Someone said, "Strike me pink, if it ain't Plummer come t' life again! Old bloke, you passed out like a bloomin' light."

"Ah-r-r, you're a liar!" cried Plummer, staggering.

Ridlon caught hold of his arm. "Captain Plummer," he said in a low voice, "I'd like a few words with you."

"You talk like a gentleman. Who are you?"

"Captain Jack Ridlon, new master of the *Flying Moon*."

Plummer blinked, and his jaw dropped. "Well, it ain't my fault. But I'm a master, too. Shake!"

He thrust a grimy, sweaty hand into

Ridlon's. Ridlon drew him along to the farther and deserted edge of the bar.

"Did you say you was blowing me to a drink?" Plummer gulped.

"If you must, go ahead. But I'd lay off."

"Ah-r-r, likker's good for a man!"

Ah Wong remained at the other end of the bar, impassive, puffing on his pipe.

Plummer, though he hung on to the bar, sagged and wobbled like a man deprived of leg muscles. A glass of rum slid over the bar and he grabbed at it, slopped it down his throat. He coughed and wobbled. Ridlon bit him with a keen, speculative stare.

Plummer started babbling. "Listen, I was a crack master once. I was in the Rio trade, and I sailed a tea clipper from Bombay to London . . . Say, I'm a good master yet!" He glared, as if Ridlon had challenged him.

Ridlon's voice was low, beside Plummer's ear. "Look here, why did you take that job old Jake McGarry offered you and then chuck it up?"

"Huh? I didn't want it. D' you say I could have another drink?"

"Listen to me, Plummer! Why did you? McGarry was willing to give you a chance to turn over a new leaf—to get out of this stink-hole. Why did you chuck it up?"

Plummer blinked, and his head rolled on his shoulders. He sniffed and rubbed his nose. He was an appalling example of what drink can do to a man.

"Didn't—hic—didn't want it. S' long, mate."

He reeled away, but Ridlon caught hold of his arm and pulled him back to the bar. "Listen, Plummer—who scared you out of that job?"

"Lemme go! If I want to drink, I drink, and if I want to chuck up jobs I'll chuck 'em. I'm a crack master—" His knees broke and he sagged badly.

Ridlon jerked him up. "Steady, Plummer. Get hold of yourself!"

Ah Wong's eyes seemed to be burning between the narrow slits of flesh.

He rasped, "Mister Ridlon will unhand Captain Plummer!"

Ridlon said, "You keep out of this!"

A shadow passed over Ah Wong's fat face. "Ah Wong is not in habit of being addressed in manner such! Mr. Ridlon will take immediate departure!" His voice grated and boomed. Yellow fangs appeared slowly and then were hidden by tightly pursed lips.

RIDLON heard chairs scraping and looked around. Half a dozen ragged, grimy men were standing, their thumbs hooked in their belts. They looked cunning, vicious. The lanterns swayed in the breeze that blew in from the beach, and light and shadow moved across the men's faces.

There was a heavy step on the rickety veranda and a man walked in through the door—was stopped short by the strained silence and the scene before him. He frowned perplexedly, scowled. He was long and lanky, heavy-boned, with an iron jaw, black sullen eyes and a wide, sarcastic mouth. Hair grew thick and matted on steel-ribbed arms, and a revolver sagged at his hip.

"What the hell!" His mouth twisted downward, and his voice rumbled heavily, like thunder.

One of the men said, "Ah-r-r, this bloke 'e comes in 'ere an' starts messin' about."

The newcomer's black eyes slashed toward Ridlon and clamped on him. Then they swung to Ah Wong.

"What's up, Ah?"

"Mr. Ridlon was in act of misusing Captain Plummer when Ah Wong painfully intervened. Ah Wong was rudely told to keep out of it."

The newcomer hitched at his belt and laughed shortly. "That all? Cripes, it looked worse." He shot a glance at Ridlon and jerked his head toward the door. "Out, chum. Take the air. You're in rotten company."

"You don't have to tell me that," chuckled Ridlon. He was leaning easily against the bar, mildly amused.

Plummer was wobbling and blinking. "'S nothin'. Nobody did nothin'."

Ah Wong rumbled, "Mr. Ridlon will take immediate departure!"

Ridlon sighed. "I wish you'd shut up. This is a public bar and if I want to stay here I'll stay. As a matter of fact, I merely want a few words with Captain Plummer. If he'll walk along the beach with me— Will you, captain?"

"No—oh, no. I'm contented here."

The newcomer stood spread-legged in the center of the floor. "I don't know who you are, chum, but I told you to take the air. I don't like your mug."

"I don't like yours. Why let that worry you?"

The other came forward, planting his feet firmly. He squared off in front of Ridlon, raised his fist, turned it back and forth and kept looking from it to Ridlon.

"You see that?" he barked.

"Sure," smiled Ridlon mockingly.

"That says you go out. Ah Wong doesn't want you here, and he's a friend of mine. Now get!"

Ridlon asked, offhand, "Who the hell are you?"

"Rush McKimm's my name."

Ridlon's eyes keened. "One-time mate of the *Flying Moon*."

"What's that to you?"

"Nothing. I'm her new master."

There was a low growl of unpleasant surprise among the men. Ah Wong's eyes opened wide, then shut down again, and his face looked murderous. Captain Plummer stared, and seemed to sober up. McKimm's dark eyes glinted.

He blurted, "Get out!"

"Look here," snapped Ridlon, his voice taking on an edge, "if you think you can bulldoze me you're off your nut! Where do you rate your nerve, you loud-mouthed bum?"

"Why, damn you!" bellowed McKimm, and his fist shot out.

"Brain him, Rush!" yelled one of the mob.

BUT Ridlon had ducked, shifted his feet. His fist streaked through the yellow murk and slammed between McKimm's eyes. McKimm howled with

rage and cut loose with an overhand shot that hit Ridlon like a thunderbolt and crashed him against the bar. Ridlon's sun-helmet bounced off. He flung aside as McKimm struck out again, and sliced a short blow that smacked against McKimm's ear. He followed up with a terrific jolt to McKimm's jaw, and the big man staggered, shaking his head.

"Brain him, Rush!" thundered those in the bar.

But Ridlon was after McKimm like a whirlwind, his fists working with the deadly precision of pistons. Another shot flush on the jaw sent McKimm reeling across a table. Table and McKimm crashed to the floor, and McKimm groped in a glassy-eyed daze . . .

The pock-marked Chinese barman picked up a bottle, leaped stealthily to the bar as Ridlon was backing up, and raised it.

"Hey!" shouted Plummer. "Don't do that!" He picked up another bottle and heaved it.

It burst to smithereens against the Chinaman's head, and he plunged to the floor, screaming.

"A-e-e-e-e!" cried out Ah Wong, his face contorting with rage.

Ridlon, spinning, saw McKimm rising while six others made for Plummer, who seemed shocked after having flung the bottle. Ridlon streaked for his gun and jumped to protect Plummer.

"Back, you scum!" he snapped. "I'll drill you. *Back!*"

The place was in an uproar.

"Plummer, you better come with me. Fast!"

Ridlon grabbed Plummer's arm and lunged with him toward the door. He stopped on the threshold, his gun covering the room threateningly. McKimm was scowling and reeling slowly about. The others crouched like wolves at bay. Ah Wong's lips were writhing across his fangs, and red murder shone in his eyes.

"Oh, Lord, I didn't mean to start this!" groaned Plummer.

"Run," clipped Ridlon. "I'll join you. Head for town."

Plummer sagged off, broke into a trot.

Ridlon said, "Now the first rat that shows himself in this doorway before I reach the palms will get a bad case of lead poisoning. As for you, McKimm—cross my trail again and your days are numbered. Tough guys, eh? What a laugh I get out of that! Good night!"

He backed out swiftly, back down across the beach, his gun trained on the door. Out of that door flamed a dagger of red fire and smoke, and a bullet whistled past Ridlon's head. He pulled his trigger. Flame belched from the muzzle, and a scream burst from the Yellow Lantern.

Back—back to the shadow of the jungle. Then he turned and broke into a gallop. He caught up with Plummer, grabbed his arm and helped him along.

"Oh, Lord, Ridlon!" he panted.

"Save your breath, old-timer. You've still got the makings of a man—and a white one!"

CHAPTER II

STARKEY—AND MYSTERY

RIDLON was standing in Jake McGarry's office, a well-seasoned brier clamped between his strong teeth.

"So you got gay last night," said McGarry.

"Kind of."

McGarry's sea-blue eyes twinkled. "You're still a hellion, I guess. What about Plummer?"

Ridlon shrugged. "He didn't know a thing. Only thing he knew was that when McKimm heard he was to be master of the *Flying Moon*, McKimm threatened to kill him. Plummer fell for it. Booze has weakened him, but there's a spark of man still left. He showed that last night when he beamed the Chink who was aiming to bean me. I told Plummer to make the voyage with me. He backed down, so I got him drunk and took him on board and locked him up there, I hope that's his last."

"You're a fool, Jack. He's sunk. I gave him a chance and he turned it down."

"I'm giving him another. Well, I guess we sail."

"Yeah."

"Any passengers?"

"One. A man named Starkey. Bought passage to Saudakan, the end of your run. He'll be on board now, I guess. A motor tug will take you out into the stream. Good luck, Jack."

They shook, and Ridlon slapped on his white-topped seaman's cap and strode out. He went down past the company's go-downs, out onto the wharf, and jumped aboard the *Flying Moon*. Malay seamen were stowing gear, and a small, slim white man sat on a battened hatch smoking a pipe.

"Mr. Starkey?" asked Ridlon.

"Yes, Captain. Good morning. How are you?"

"Fine. Hear you're going to Saudakan."

"Yes." Starkey had risen to shake hands. He was a man of perhaps forty, with crinkly brown hair, a tawny complexion, alert gray eyes and a small, square chin. He wore clean but unpressed whites, and carried a battered sun helmet under his arm.

Ridlon said, "I suppose Mr. McGarry told you that there is something unusual connected with this packet."

"Oh, yes. Quite. But I'm rather an old hand in the islands, y' know, and that sort of thing doesn't worry me." He smiled, showing even, white teeth. It was a provocative, amused smile, bright and oddly mocking, but altogether engaging.

He looked aloft. "Charming weather!"

"Yes," said Ridlon, and turning away, added, "See you later."

He went down into his cabin, in the semi-deckhouse after.

Ungka, the Malay steward, was brushing up, moving about like a dark shadow.

"Good morning, Tuan Besar," he said softly.

Ridlon nodded and sat down at the table, looking over a sheaf of papers.

He heard the Malay's quiet movements and looked up.

"Ungka, you were with Captain Bronson. How long?"

"Four years," said the Malay, dusting an object that stood upon a wooden bracket attached to the bulkhead.

"What is that?" asked Starkey.

"A Buddha molded of clay, *Tuan Besar*. Captain Bronson passed many days at sea molding in clay—animals, heads. He also collected old coins. This was the last he molded, two days before he died. He glued it to this bracket. A kindly man was Captain Bronson."

The Malay went on dusting.

Ridlon stared at the sleepy-eyed Buddha . . . old Bronson, a kindly man, molding in clay to pass the time. He sighed.

A little later the big motor boat came alongside to tow them out. The Malay *serang* was standing near the wheel, spitting betel juice overside. Starkey sat on the battened hatch, smoking. He was staring into space, his eyes narrowed, his face oddly grim. At sight of Ridlon he brightened up, smiled.

The motor boat took the schooner's bow line and the Malay *serang* toyed with the spokes of the wheel. Wharf lines were cast loose, and the schooner began moving. Ridlon stood aft and watched Macassar drop away. Out in deep water, where a wind puffed from the south, the tow-line was discarded and the sails set. The schooner heeled, the sheets filled, and sidewash began gurgling along the bow.

ALL that day the *Flying Moon* plowed up the Celebes coast. The sea ran in streams of deepest indigo and greenest emerald, and the wind strummed in the rigging. The native sailormen lounged in the bow.

At about noon Ridlon brought Plummer out of the forward deckhouse. The old sailing master crouched, looked about, looked at the jungle coast, looked at Ridlon. His brows bent.

"What's the meanin' of this?"

Ridlon smiled. "Taking you for a cruise. You're my chief mate."

"Who said so?"

"I did. You were rotting back there, old-timer, and you're getting a chance to start over. You saved me from getting my brains knocked out, and I want to help you in spite of yourself. I shan't be long on this job, and you'll get my place—if you play the game."

Plummer looked at the deck. His fists clenched. He took three measured steps to the rail, leaned on it, gazed at the creaming sidewash. He turned and looked aloft, keening his eyes. He brought his eyes down and stared at Ridlon.

"Should I take charge of the deck, sir?"

Ridlon smiled. "Yes, Mr. Plummer."

"Aye, sir," he said, and strode past Ridlon with a dogged expression.

A little later Starkey accosted Ridlon on the way aft and said, "I didn't know you were carrying another passenger."

"I'm not. That is Mr. Plummer, my mate."

"Oh, I see." Starkey smiled. "I last saw him in the Yellow Lantern, quite drunk."

"You've been in the Yellow Lantern?"

Starkey flicked him with whimsical glance. "Yes. Beastly hole, don't you think?"

"Yes," nodded Ridlon. "I was in there last night. Got in a brawl with a bird named McKimm."

"Oh, McKimm!" softly.

"You know him?"

Starkey's gray eyes seemed to freeze for a split second. Then he laughed shortly. "Oh, rather!" He turned and strolled away.

Ridlon stared after him, mildly perplexed by the man's manner.

NIGHT came down, laid its velvet blanket over the sea, and the stars hung low and radiant, bathing the white-sailed schooner in a luminous mist. Phosphorescence streaked over the sea like tongues of cold, white fire. The lighted binnacle threw a dim glow up into the brown face of the half-naked helmsman. A couple of sailors crooned

a low, soft melody. The masts creaked quietly, and the schooner rolled lazily on her course.

At ten Sharkey said he was going to turn in, and drifted forward toward the 'midships deckhouse. Ridlon remained aft, leaning on the taffrail and watching the white wake fall away. He was trying to rebuild the dream of his plantation, and the girl who would go with it. It meant hard lines for a while, but he had resolved to rebuild, toward which end he was willing to work at anything to obtain some measure of funds.

An hour passed, and the wheelman was relieved by another. The man who had been relieved slipped forward and was lost in the shadows. Ridlon yawned and went toward his cabin. As he entered he saw Starkey, clad in pajamas, turn swiftly away from the bookcase. They regarded each other.

"Oh, thought you'd turned in," said Ridlon, concealing a mild surprise.

"I had. But then I couldn't sleep, so I came in here to find a book. Hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all."

Starkey breezed out, saying, "Good night, Captain!"

Ridlon peered at the door, muttered under his breath, "That bird puzzles me!"

A figure appeared in the doorway—Ungka, the steward.

"Will Tuan Besar have a drink before going to bed?"

"No, thanks, Ungka."

"Very well." He bowed and turned to go out.

"Oh, Ungka—a moment."

"Yes, Tuan?"

"You saw Tuan Starkey come in here?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"But half an hour ago, Tuan Besar."

"Good night, Ungka."

"Good night, Tuan."

The Malay disappeared.

Ridlon began undressing. What the devil had Starkey been doing in the cabin for half an hour?

CHAPTER III

PAHLAWAN LAGOON

DAWN cracked in a thin line along the eastern rim of the visible universe. The sun crashed into the world and spilled crimson from east to west on the level surface of the sea. The schooner was sloshing wetly on a starboard tack. The masts wheeled slowly.

Plummer, pipe in mouth, took a hand from his pants pocket and pointed astern. "Sail, sir—ain't it?"

"Looks like it," nodded Ridlon.

The Celebes coast was a dim blur miles off to starboard. The sea was a waste, a desert of water restless beneath the brightening sky. The schooner was a white speck in a wide world of loneliness.

Starkey came breezing aft along the port runway. "I say, isn't that a sail?"

Ridlon was now using binoculars. "Yes—a schooner, by her rig. Must be eight miles away."

He put the binoculars back in the case by the wheel.

Plummer was peering at Starkey. "Say, mister, ain't I seen you before?"

"To be sure," smiled Starkey. "In the Yellow Lantern. You were having a bit of a binge."

Plummer's face fell. He turned and shuffled away, dejected.

Starkey asked, "What is our first port of call, Captain?"

"Pahlawan Lagoon. With this weather we should anchor there to-night."

Starkey was stuffing his pipe. He peered intently toward the spot of sail on the horizon. "Lonely waters. Lonely coast."

"Bad coast," said Ridlon, eying him sidewise. Then, like a bolt from the blue, but quietly—"Starkey, what's your game?"

Starkey was in the act of striking a match. He stopped and opened his eyes wide. "What do you mean?"

"What were you doing in my cabin last night?"

"My dear fellow, I was getting a book!"

Ridlon chuckled. "Take you half an hour?"

"To be sure!" His eyes were whimsical. He struck the match, cupped his hands and lit up. Then he laughed outright. "You amaze me, Captain!"

"You puzzle me, Starkey."

They were sparring like gentlemen.

Starkey let smoke drift from his nostrils; said, "I assure you, old man, I did not intend to be a puzzle." He looked aloft and away. "Charming weather!" And strolled off.

At noon they faced each other again in the cabin over the table. Ungka served. Starkey talked volubly. He was very animated, very engaging. But sometimes Ridlon noticed that when he talked and smiled most, his eyes roamed about, keen, searching. He was a queer manner of a man—affable, congenial, engaging. But beneath this exterior Ridlon sensed a cool watchfulness. And he wondered if in the twinkling of an eye this man could be dangerous.

What was he? He spoke of going to see someone in Saudakan—an old friend with the British Company.

"But why did you choose a slow coasting schooner?" asked Ridlon.

"I like them. Besides, I'm in no hurry. Attractive cabin you've got. Where'd you pick up the Buddha?"

"Was here when I came. Captain Bronson used to mold out of clay to pass the time. Made that just before he died."

"Very novel indeed!"

THE good weather held. At four that afternoon they were beating northward hard by the jungle coast. The wind had swung around to the schooner's quarter and she was logging along at a lively gait. Breakers were foaming on the reefs, and the slanting rays of the sun turned the flung spray to showers of diamonds.

At six they rounded a headland, and Plummer said, "There's Pahlawan Lagoon."

Ridlon saw a solitary white bungalow,

forlorn on that lonely beach, and off to one side a cluster of native huts. He saw a man come running down from the bungalow, waving his hands.

The *Flying Moon* dropped anchor in four fathoms. Her sheets came down, and a white man, sitting in a canoe paddled by two natives, shouted joyously. The canoe drew alongside, and the white man clambered on board. He was old, unkempt, wizened, but his eyes shone and he grinned whole-heartedly.

"So glad to see you men! Papers—you've got papers, Captain—news-papers?"

"Yes—and mail," smiled Ridlon.

"Ah, thank God! I've had no news for four months. Have dinner with me."

He grasped eagerly the packet of newspapers which Ridlon extended, and his fingers shook as they handled a couple of letters. He seemed happy as a child with a new toy.

"We'll take your supplies ashore in the smallboat, Mr. Arnold," said Ridlon. "And I guess we'll be glad to join you at dinner."

"Ah, yes! You must join me!"

Six crates of canned goods went ashore in the small boat. Pahlawan Lagoon was a God-forsaken station, and Arnold was the only white man there—the only white man within a hundred miles. When they all sat around the table—Ridlon and Starkey and Plummer—Arnold's happiness seemed boundless. He asked questions of the outside world, listened eagerly for answers. Starkey did most of the talking. He talked well and told a lot of funny stories. Arnold laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Tell us some more," he urged.

"Well, I should like to, but my dear man, I've run out. But look here. I have a whole book of them on board. I'll get it. Let's make this a gala night. Not often you have visitors, Mr. Arnold! He rose. "I'll be right back. I'll bring along some cigars, too."

"Yes, hurry," said Arnold, wiping his eyes. "This certainly is a memorable night."

Starkey went out, and Arnold went right on plying Ridlon and Plummer with questions. Plummer had not drunk much that evening. He was clean-shaven, and the bleary look had gone from his eyes. More than once his eyes lingered on the bottle, but he looked away and smoked instead. The minutes passed, then half an hour, and the conversation began to drag.

Arnold got up and went to the door. "What's keeping Mr. Starkey?"

No one answered, but Ridlon went out onto the veranda and Plummer followed. They peered at the white shape of the schooner lying in the dark lagoon. They sat down and waited, smoking. Finally Ridlon stood up.

"I'll be right back," he clipped.

He walked down the beach. A knot of natives were hanging around and he asked them if they had seen a canoe return from the schooner. One stood up and said no—said that the *tuau* had paddled out alone in an outrigger. Ridlon went on to his small boat. The two seamen standing by, ran it through the surf, hopped in and rowed him out.

Drawing alongside the schooner, Ridlon saw no outrigger. He went on board and met Ungka coming from the galley.

"You see *Tuan* Starkey?" he asked.

Ungka said, "He came—he went, *Tuan Besar*, alone."

Ridlon muttered a low oath and strode into his cabin. He stood by the table, peering about. Everything was in order. Ungka came in and stood beside him.

"Something is wrong, *Tuan Besar*?"

Ridlon shrugged. "*Tuan* Starkey is not here, neither is he at the bungalow."

Then Ungka pointed—hissed, "Look! The Buddha is gone!"

Ridlon's eyes swung toward the bulkhead. He jumped to the bracket. The Buddha was gone.

He looked down—bent to his knees. He stood up holding a piece of clay—half of the Buddha's head, one eye drooping lazily. His fist closed over it. He pivoted, strode to his desk, opened a drawer and pulled out a revolver.

"Starkey can't be far!" he muttered.

CHAPTER IV

BEYOND THE JUNGLE

RIDLON sat in the smallboat. His natives idled at their oars, turning their eyes slowly, searchingly. The lagoon was dark, the water smooth and flat and heavy like mercury. At the farther end glowed the lights of the bungalow and some native beach fires. The smallboat was edging along, the jungle shore, where trees and vines hung outward and where there was no beach.

An oar moved, sliced the water keenly, left a scar that glowed briefly and was then gone. A bird screeched. Another whistled, flute-like. The silence of lagoon and jungle trembled.

Ridlon peered, listened. The natives sat like dark images, keenly alert. Suddenly one pointed.

"*Tuan!*" he whispered.

Ridlon looked at the native, then followed the direction which his arm indicated. He saw, dimly, an outrigger half-concealed in the matted short growth. An oar rose, plunged swiftly but with velvet softness into the water. The smallboat slid toward the bushes, rasped against them, thumped gently against the outrigger.

Ridlon caught hold of a vine, said, "Report to *Tuan Plummer*. Tell him to wait by the *Flying Moon*."

"Aye, *Tuan*."

Ridlon swung from the smallboat up into the thickets. The jungle closed over him, a fretwork of darkness through which stuttered innumerable little noises, the voices of the night and of the wilderness. No breeze stirred. The wet earth was porous, flexible like rubber, beneath his feet. Vines slipped over his head and across his arms as he pushed forward. Great bush plants swished against his knees.

Presently he came out upon a narrow trail, stopped and listened and peered, his gun gripped in his hand. He breathed an oath. Why hadn't he dealt harder with Starkey when he found him in the cabin that night? But the fellow was

so mighty engaging. You couldn't help liking him. Even now Ridlon did not dislike him. He was merely determined to get him and make him confess what he knew about the *Flying Moon*, and why he had taken the Buddha.

He ran along the trail, pushing through swarms of insects that clung to his sweating face. He brushed them off, but others came back. Thorns tore his shirt to ribbons, lacerated his flesh. He stopped and mopped his face and listened. The muffled crash of breakers rolled in through the jungle.

Ridlon carried on, probing his way through the darkness. Ten minutes later he came out upon a beach. Surf creamed and rustled, and a cool breeze blew against his face. The beach was narrow but it stretched far and away along the rim of the sea. There were fresh imprints in the sand, made by a white man's boot.

Ridlon broke into a run, keeping well in the shadow of the jungle wall. His feet crunched in the sand, crackled against old shells. Palms waved and whispered over his head. Cool silver fire flecked the sea.

Suddenly he saw a man walking along the beach, up ahead. He stopped and squinted. It was Starkey, swinging steadily onward. Ridlon crept forward, hanging to the shadows, careful of his footfalls. Starkey stopped, looked around, then after a moment continued walking.

Ridlon continued. He gained slowly because he was cautious of how he moved. He did not wish to kill Starkey. He wanted to get close enough so that he could cover the other so quickly that Starkey would have no time to smoke his way out.

He did not under-rate Starkey. Ridlon knew men, and he knew that, among those wayward islands, a friendly, smiling man may be more deadly than a swaggering bully. He remembered a man called Preacher Smith, who went into the wildest Solomons, crooning soft ballads while he ran his guns hot against head-hunters.

Half an hour passed. Then Starkey

stopped, looked back, looked across the sea, sat down on a chunk of driftwood and stuffed his pipe. He was lighting up when Ridlon leaped from the shadows.

"DON'T move, Starkey!"

Starkey tensed, jerked his match away from his pipe—then relaxed and put the flame back to the bowl, puffing slowly. He flung the match away and turned casually.

"Hello, Ridlon."

Ridlon stood at ease, his gun flush against his hip. "I'll take your gun, Starkey."

"My dear man, I have no intention of using it."

"I'll take it." Ridlon held out his hand.

Starkey sighed and passed over a large automatic. Ridlon slipped it into his pocket.

"Now where's that Buddha?"

"Buddha?"

"Yes," nodded Ridlon.

Starkey smiled. "I haven't got it."

"Stand up."

"Very well."

He stood up and Ridlon searched him, stepped back; said, "What did you do with it?"

"In the first place, I never had it."

Ridlon clipped, "Dammit, Starkey, you lie! Why did you run away?"

"I didn't run away. I came for a stroll."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"As you will. I come of a temperamental family. Once my father walked from London Bridge to Eton all night in the rain." He grinned, white teeth showing. A droll man.

"Starkey, I'm serious. You took that Buddha. You took passage on the *Flying Moon* for a reason."

"Naturally. To see some friends in Saudakan."

"That's a lie!"

"Have I the Buddha on my person?"

"No. You hid it."

"Nonsense. Charming night, don't you think?"

"No! You'll walk ahead of me,

Starkey—back to the schooner. We're going to have this thing out." He jerked his gun. "Get moving!"

Starkey shrugged and smiled and swung off down the beach. He whistled a tune. His gait was jaunty, carefree. The rags of his shirt fluttered in the breeze.

CHAPTER V

GUN TALK

THEY were pushing back through the matted jungle when the sound of a shot cracked afar.

"Hear that?" Starkey flung over his shoulder.

Before Ridlon could reply, a series of shots echoed through the jungle. The men stopped and stood in the darkness, their faces indistinct one to the other. More shots cracked, brokenly.

"Move, Starkey, and move fast!" Ridlon shoved him forward.

Starkey moved, broke into a run. Ridlon lunged behind him. They bludgeoned their way through the tangled growth, heard the intermittent bark of guns, and when they were nearing the lagoon they could see red flashes slicing through the darkness. They worked around to the landing beach, plunged out into the open and saw a group of natives standing near the surf.

"Trouble aboard the schooner," remarked Starkey.

The roar of men and the roar of guns hammered in across the lagoon, echoed in the jungle.

Ridlon grabbed a native. "What happened, you fella?"

"*Tuan* Arnold along other *Tuan* takem *prahu* go along schooner. Pretty soon white man *prahu* come along past reef—" He gestured wildly.

Starkey said, "There is another small-boat lying alongside, Ridlon!"

Ridlon stared and saw it, saw the burning gun-flashes. His jaw set hard and his eyes keened. His neck muscles bunched. He clipped, "I wonder if there are any rifles in the bungalow."

"Let's see," said Starkey.

Ridlon stared at him. Starkey smiled.

"Temporary truce, Captain."

"I don't need your help, Starkey."

"Plummer and Arnold and your native boys do. Come on." He swung up to the bungalow.

Ridlon followed and they found a couple of Winchesters, loaded up and shoved spare shells into their pockets. Down the beach they ran, piled into an out-rigger. Both took up paddles, and the paddles dug savagely into the water. So intense was the fighting on board the schooner that no one saw the out-rigger approaching. It snaked through the water swiftly, purposefully. It ran up under the bow, thumped, swayed as Ridlon and Starkey stood up.

Ridlon swung up, slid over the bulwarks. He saw a heaving, twisting mass of men amidships. He saw the flash of steel, heard the stamping of bare feet and the thud and scrape of boots. A screaming spectre tore past him and went overside. The air was electric, murderous.

Starkey slipped beside Ridlon and squinted. "I've half an idea I see old Plummer having a blasted time of it." With that he leaped nimbly over a winch and streaked down the port runway.

Ridlon lunged down the starboard runway. He lurched to a stop as old Arnold, his clothes in rags, staggered into him. The trader was gripping his Winchester hard, and his eyes were glazed. Blood was on his head.

"Damnation, Captain!" he choked. "Pirates! They slipped up alongside in a smallboat and took us by surprise!"

"Get out of this, Arnold!" clipped Ridlon. "You're hard-hit. Slip into one of the boats alongside!"

"Never! What—have these lice come ashore and loot my station? Never! I — *Watch it!*"

A huge man came driving at them, a roar bursting from his throat. He swung his rifle mightily. It swished past Ridlon's head and banged against the rail, and the impetus of the man's lunge carried him hard against Ridlon.

"You—McKimm!" exploded Ridlon.

"By cripes!" bellowed McKimm, and wrapped his long, hairy arms around Ridlon.

RIDLON lurched and heaved, and they spun against the 'midships deck-house—strained, tussled.

"I been aching for this, you pup!" snarled McKimm. "I'll break you in two!"

Ridlon said nothing. They lost their rifles and fought with their hands. Both men of hard bone and muscle, they were well met, fighting their own personal fight while others swore and battled about them.

Starkey was fast, dynamic, cooling swift and deadly in his attack. Numbers did not seem to matter to him. He slashed into the thick of it, dodged, struck, side-stepped, swung his rifle with lightning speed and devastating effect.

There was old Plummer, his face smeared with blood but his jaw set like a steel chisel—his hair plastered over his ears, his eyes burning fiercely. Plummer with a revolver in one hand and a belying pin in the other—Plummer slugging his way into a knot of cursing, hard-fighting case-hards, many of whom had not so long ago thrown jibes at him in the Yellow Lantern. Plummer stark-sober was a different man from Plummer the drunkard. He was brimstone, rough on rats.

There were the Malay seamen, lean and sleek and brown and as hard to hold as a greased pig. Ten of them. Ten brown men darting in and out, and two lying dead on the bloody deck. There were the steward and the Chinese cook, armed with carving knives and heaving everything from frying pans to soup kettles.

And there were the raiders, a score of them, the sweepings of the farther islands, the bilge and the chaff of humanity—the spawn of the sea and the coasts of hate.

Ridlon and McKimm broke, and a raider came hurtling from the roof of the 'midships deckhouse with a sweeping knife. Ridlon saw him out of the

corner of his eye. He ducked, and the man catapulated against the rail. His head cracked.

McKimm picked up a rifle and was making to brain Ridlon, when like a stroke of lightning Starkey spun into view, swung his rifle and caught McKimm's in mid-career. McKimm was shocked; then he howled with rage and turned on Starkey.

"I seen you before too!" he snarled.

Starkey wore an icy grin. He side-stepped, swung his rifle in a short, flat arc and brought it sharply against McKimm's ribs. McKimm staggered and went down even as one of his men swung a rifle for Starkey's head. Starkey merely moved his head and the gun-butt skidded off his shoulder, but floored him. The man who had struck, raised his gun again as Starkey was groping up.

Plummer appeared, wild and ragged, looking for trouble. He saw the start of the blow and flung himself at the man's legs. Both crashed down. A Malay appeared, silent as a ghost, and put a knife deftly into the neck of Plummer's opponent.

A new burst of gun-fire broke loose, and the in-fighting broke up. The men scattered, while muzzles belched flame and lead. Ridlon, unable to find his rifle, lugged out his revolver and smoked his way aft through the powder-drenched chaos.

Diving headlong, he crashed unexpectedly down the cabin companion and went stumbling the length of the cabin, over a chair, over his desk. He rebounded and swung his gun toward the entrance. It blazed luridly as a man came through, firing. The man screamed and pitched sidewise.

Another man shot through. It was McKimm, wild as a savage. Ridlon pulled his trigger, and it clicked on a dud. McKimm cut loose with a fast, thundering shot that went clean through Ridlon's side and sat him down on the settee.

McKimm kicked the door shut and bolted it. His eyes were bloodshot and flaming. Blood trickled down from his

forehead. Smoke still drifted from his gun as he jumped over and pointed it against Ridlon's head.

HIS voice rumbled. "Now we'll settle this, you lousy bum! Where are they?"

"Where's what?"

"You know what I'm talking about!"

"I'm damned if I do!"

McKimm's lips writhed. "Where's them pearls?"

"What pearls!"

"Damn your lousy soul, talk sense!"

Ridlon lay panting on the settee, blood oozing through his shirt. "I don't know what you're talking about."

McKimm shook his gun violently. "Them pearls! I'm talking about them pearls! Them pearls that Cap Bronson had aboard this wind-bag! Them pearls that he found in Ceylon! Them pearls that he hid aboard this schooner! You got them! You knew about them, and that's why you took the job here, to find them. Where are they? I want 'em! I'll rip your heart out to get 'em! So help me living cripes!"

In a flash Ridlon began to see light. The mystery of the *Flying Moon* was no longer a mystery. Bronson had hidden pearls aboard her. He must have hidden them because he suspected that McKimm wanted them . . .

He said, "I know nothing about the pearls, McKimm. I never knew Bronson had any. I took this job because I need a job. You're crazy!"

"Am I? Listen, you slob—who's that other guy on board?"

"A passenger!"

"Yeah, is he?"

"Of course. And, by George, McKimm, you'll swing for this! Piracy! You attacked my craft—"

"I don't care about laws, Ridlon! Lay off that crap! I want what I want! Where's them pearls? Where are they?"

"I don't know! And if I knew, you low-lived scum, do you think I'd tell you!"

McKimm flung himself upon Ridlon, grabbed him by the throat, hurled him to the floor. Wracked with pain from

his wound, Ridlon struggled up, and a kick from McKimm's boot sent him down again. He groaned and drops of blood dripped from his jaw. Above, out on deck, the chaos of conflict still raged, and he heard it—heard the shots, the snarls and the cries of men, the pounding of feet.

Ridlon did not want to die. He had too much to live for. He was young and proud, and there was a girl waiting for him, and a plantation to be rebuilt on the Borneo coast.

He felt the blood crawling down his side, and pain slashed up through his ribs. Instinct prompted him to rise to his knees, then up to his feet, swaying, lurching. And before him, through a haze, he saw the flaming, lustful face of McKimm—saw teeth bared and eyes wide and wild with a terrible anger, and he knew he was face to face with a killer.

"I—don't—know, McKimm."

"So help me, Ridlon, I'll beat you to a pulp!"

A SHOT shattered a port-hole and clipped out the light that hung in brackets. The cabin was plunged into darkness. Ridlon flung away and heard McKimm crash past him. Of a sudden he remembered the automatic he had taken from Starkey. He felt in his pocket. It was there.

As he pulled it out, there was a blaze from McKimm's gun in the opposite corner. Ridlon fired at the blaze, but nothing happened. He pulled the trigger twice. There were no reports. With an oath he flung it away and dived down behind the desk, as two more shots from McKimm's gun slammed across the room.

Crouching behind the desk, he remembered the drawer. He opened it, probed inside. His fingers closed over the hilt of a knife. He drew it out. What chance had a knife against a gun? Slight, but there was nothing else he could do.

He remained there, listening. It was hard to hear anything but the bedlam on deck. Minutes dragged, and his

wound jerked at his ribs. Then the desk jarred. Ridlon, reacting with electric swiftness, heaved it over and away from him. Two gun flashes blazed, and the shots hammered the ceiling.

Ridlon, exerting every ounce of energy, leaped up and plunged headlong into the darkness. He collided with McKimm and McKimm gave ground. His knife rang sharply against McKimm's gun, and then the gun glanced off his head. McKimm dropped it, and a split second later steel rang against similar steel. McKimm, too, had a knife!

They fell over a chair and rolled apart. Ridlon flung farther back, rose, crouched, and his eyes ached trying to pierce the darkness. He moved warily along the bulkhead. Outside, a gun flamed close to a port-hole, and his head was in momentary silhouette. McKimm saw it and leaped. Ridlon twisted away, and there was a rasping sound as McKimm's knife slashed through the upholstery of the settee.

Off-balance, he fell sideways against Ridlon and let out a cry of surprise. Ridlon wheeled and struck—felt his blade slice through flesh. McKimm's bull-roar thundered and he hurled himself bodily against Ridlon and flattened him against the bulkhead.

His blade slashed through the darkness and thudded into the bulkhead, grazing Ridlon's ear. He lunged back, yanking the knife with him, and Ridlon, striking again, drew blood and went storming after McKimm like Hades let loose.

He forgot his pain. His blood was keyed high, and he wanted to live; he wanted to rebuild that plantation and make that girl his wife. Courage outstripped pain—righteous fury overwhelmed caution. Ridlon became a cyclone, a plunging, slashing, devil-may-care man fighting for his life. He crashed about like a bull in a China shop. He felt the plunge of McKimm's blade in his left arm, but he struck out before McKimm could withdraw it.

And McKimm became aware of this cyclone. McKimm no longer charged. He ran, hurtled about the cabin, struck

back only when he was cornered. There was no stalking now, no business of one awaiting the other's next move. Because Ridlon was eternally on the move, burning up his energy, fighting with the high hot courage of a man who knows he is in the right.

McKimm bolted. He found the door, threw back the bolt and rushed upon deck. Ridlon sailed after him, out through the main fight—his whole fury concentrated on one man, and that man, McKimm.

CHAPTER VI

A BLADE OF VENGEANCE

"**B**Y JOVE!" exclaimed Starkey. "Ridlon's stark mad."

Plummer said through bruised lips, "Stop him! We got this fight in hand without him killing himself!"

It seemed that McKimm's courage had snapped. He raced forward, the length of the boat, turned in the bow. He stood, his chest heaving and blood-streaked, his eyes wide with fear. He saw Ridlon running toward him and he yelled for Ridlon to stop.

But Ridlon was half-blind, half-deaf. He kept charging, and McKimm, eyes wide with horror, turned and jumped into the lagoon. Ridlon did not stop. He cleared the bulwarks and plunged into the water. He came up spluttering, and saw McKimm swimming.

He plowed after him, churning the water, his knife between his teeth. It was the Ridlon of eight or ten years ago, the high-stepping young blood who had roved wild beaches, downed yellow mutinies, and fought bushmen on the raw New Guinea coast.

McKimm must have reasoned that the shore was too far away. He turned, treading water, his knife raised and gripped hard. His face was a blur in the gloom, fringed with the ripples that gleamed intermittently. Ridlon forged toward him, trailing a phosphorescent wake.

They met in five fathoms, gleaming

wetly. Steel flashed, missed and churned up the water. Ridlon shot his legs behind him and cannoned through. They came to grips, went beneath the surface, turned about and over and pushed their blades toward each other.

Simultaneously they broke and shot to the surface. Ridlon came up, shook his head, snapped water from his eyes, spat it from his lips. He was weakening, because he was badly wounded. But he went after McKimm, clutched for him. McKimm pushed him under, tried to straddle his shoulders. Ridlon ripped free, curved beneath the surface, in the wet darkness, slipped up to the open.

He found himself directly behind McKimm. His legs snapped outward and backward. His left arm swung around McKimm's neck, and McKimm screamed, lurched in the water. Ridlon's knife swung upward, slashed downward. Then he braked it, gasped, cursed. It was hard to plunge a knife through a man's neck!

"Drop your knife, McKimm—or I'll kill you!"

"Ugh—oh-o-o—"

"Drop it!"

McKimm dropped it. Ridlon relaxed, treading water.

"Now swim toward the schooner."

McKimm, gulping, struck out wearily. Ridlon lagged. He felt as if he were going to collapse. His arm, his legs, were like lead. His body was like one great sore. But he fought hard, and he saw a smallboat moving away from the schooner, toward him. He must remain afloat until it reached him. There was a girl—a plantation. . . .

Suddenly he saw McKimm stop and thrash the water wildly. He heard McKimm's screams. He saw another figure rise out of the lagoon; caught the faint gleam of steel. A whirl of water and bodies—a choked cry—and then diminishing ripples.

RIDLON saw phosphorescence streaking toward him. A brown head moved across the water, lean brown arms swung rhythmically. He recognized Ungka, his steward.

"Ungka, what have you done?"

"Killed the man who killed my former master, *Tuan*! Let me assist you."

"You shouldn't have done that! He was unarmed—"

"*Tuan* Bronson was also unarmed."

"But if you knew, why didn't you tell—"

"I but just learned, O *Tuan*. Your hand."

Ridlon was conscious of Ungka's strength. He needed it. He let the Malay haul him through the water. The smallboat picked them up and carried them back to the schooner. Ridlon was drawn on board by eager hands—the hands of Plummer and Starkey.

"By the Lord Harry," said Starkey, "you're cut to ribbons, old man!"

Ridlon sagged against the 'midships deckhouse. His eyes roved about wearily. He saw dead lying on the deck. He looked farther aft and saw the raiders bunched together, under guard of five armed Malays.

Plummer was taking his arm. "Come on, sir. You need rest and you need to be patched up."

Ridlon dragged his feet aft. The Malays murmured a sympathetic chant, and Arnold said, "Here's the scum, Captain."

Ridlon looked them over. A sorry lot now, ragged and dirty and craven.

He said, "You are perhaps aware of what's coming to you. Piracy. The lot of you will be taken to Macassar. Mr. Plummer, what about the craft they came in?"

"They say she's anchored around the point. The *Manchu Queen*, a two-masted schooner owned by Ah Wong."

Ridlon nodded. "Take four men, Mr. Plummer, and man her. Lay a course for Macassar. We'll keep in sight of each other. First, though, put these men in chains, in the forward deckhouse here. We sail at dawn."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Ungka came up and said, "*Tuan*, I am something of a doctor. Your cabin . . ."

"Yes," nodded Ridlon.

He sagged down into his cabin. A

light was burning, and the place was in disorder. Ridlon sank down on to the settee. Ungka swept out and came back a few minutes later with a basin and then took the medicine kit from Ridlon's desk.

Ridlon closed his eyes. Ungka worked swiftly, deftly. Sometimes Ridlon had to grit his teeth. Sweat poured down his face.

"Am I too crude, *Tuan Besar*?"

"No. Fine."

Sweat lay in the hollow of his eyes like puddles.

It was fully an hour before Ungka stepped back, leaving Ridlon swathed in bandages.

"Now see to the others, Ungka."

"Aye, *Tuan*. Rest easily."

Ridlon nodded and closed his eyes.

Minutes later a mild voice said, "How are you, Ridlon?"

RIDLON opened his eyes and saw Starkey standing beside him. "All right, I guess."

Starkey sat down, puffing on his pipe. He looked at Ridlon, smiled his provocative smile.

"Truce is over, eh?"

Ridlon frowned. "Starkey, everything is over. I know that you took passage on this hooker for some reason. McKimm raved about pearls. I said I knew nothing about them. Ungka said he found out that McKimm killed Bronson—"

"Yes, I told him."

"You?"

"Quite." Starkey drew a rumpled piece of cloth from his pocket, smoothed it out. "Listen to this: 'My mate, McKimm, may kill me—either with a gun, a knife, or with poison. In Ceylon I acquired four pearls of great value. He knows. I am hiding them in this Bud-dha.'"

Ridlon continued to stare.

Starkey thrust his hand into his pocket, took it out and opened it. In his palm lay four pearls.

He said, "I was in Ceylon when Bronson acquired the pearls. I heard of his strange death. I read that there were

no heirs. Being more or less a soldier of fortune, I came to find the pearls. I spent many hours in the Yellow Lantern. From bits of conversation I gathered that McKimm was hard on the rocks. Therefore it was natural to suppose that he had not found the pearls. I was resolved to take passage aboard this schooner whenever she should sail. I say, Ridlon, do you blame me—since I admit I'm a soldier of fortune?"

Ridlon shook his head. "No. I should have done the same. But, dammit, man, I searched you on the beach—"

Starkey broke in with a laugh. "My dear fellow, do you know that you carried the pearls throughout the fight?"

"What!"

"Indeed." He winked. "Did you try to use that automatic you took from me?"

"Yes. It wouldn't work."

"Naturally. I'd taken out the clip and put in the pearls before you caught me. I had no desire to try killing you. I found the gun on the floor here afterwards."

"How did you know they were in the Buddha?"

"I didn't," said Starkey. "I merely reasoned that McKimm, while he was still mate here, must have searched everywhere. I spent that half-hour—he chuckled—"searching too. Then I began to think about Bronson molding in clay."

"You're clever."

"No. McKimm was merely dumb."

He looked down at his hand. "By the way, two of these are yours."

"Nonsense! I—"

"You carried them throughout the fight."

"Can't hear of it!"

Plummer came in and said, "I'm ready to board the other schooner, sir."

"All right, Mr. Plummer," Ridlon grinned. "How are you feeling?"

"Never felt better in my life!"

Plummer went out, and Ridlon said, "There's a re-made man. He's been purged by fire. I knew he had a spark left. I caught the spark."

* * * *

It was in Macassar, a week later. Ridlon was convalescing in McGarry's bungalow. Starkey had winged a west-bound boat that morning, and the pirates were in jail, along with Ah Wong.

A messenger came up the hill and gave Ridlon a small package. He opened it and two pearls fell in his hand. There was a note:

DEAR RIDLON:

These two pearls should bring you twelve thousand dollars. I insist that this is your share, since you carried them through the fight and played an altogether square hand. I am leaving no address, because I have none in mind. Cheerio, old bean!

STARKEY.

Ridlon stared down at the pearls. A distant look crept into his eyes. The ghost of a smile moved across his lips. He called back the messenger.

He sent a cable to a girl—in Singapore.

THE END



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