

TWICE-A-MONTH

Sea Stories Magazine

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The Thousandth Man

Clinton H Stagg

When "Greek meets Greek" is a mild diversion compared with the conflict which ensues between two "down-east" Yankee brothers who meet, after many years, to decide the question of supremacy between them.

Granite-hard, cold-blooded and without compunction, the test takes the form of the younger brother attempting to accomplish what eight men had failed to do, and the outcome determines which of the two shall be the one in a thousand to live.

This is one of the most gripping yarns placed before our readers in many moons.

NINE hundred and ninety-nine men die. The thousandth lives. In the Orient, a man lives only because he is the thousandth of the thousand.

If your thoughts have given all the white men in China silk shirts and linen, and filled the poppy-laden air with the sound of tinkly temple bells, it is because you have Kipling mixed with your geography. Or it may be that your thoughts have never got above the parallel where Singapore sticks its nose down toward Australia.

But up in Shanghai, the winter wind kicks up the old Kiao-chau till even the tubby *tonghangs* dance on their beams, and the junks, with their inch-thick-rattan sails, keep the *llying* joss burning from one end of the China Sea to the other.

Perhaps that is why Simeon Thatcher picked Shanghai, when the devil sent him to the Far East and whispered into his ear that money was to be ground

out on the millstones. And Simeon Thatcher did grind it out. Between the devil and the deep blue sea he made a fortune that men only guessed. The devil was ever at his elbow, directing. His ships were on the four seas, collecting.

The Orient had never changed Simeon. Nothing could. He was cold and hard as the coast cliffs of his native Maine. He was tough and wiry as the steel cables that dropped his ships' anchors in a hundred ports. At sixty his back was as straight as his conscience was crooked; and his back was bent neither for man nor god.

In his godown office, near the quays where his ships had crowded out the Dutch traders, he sat in his straight-backed chair and fingered the reins of his hundred pack animals that plowed the ocean. In the center of that bare house, and his house was as bare as his heart—a blue-flame German oil

stove filled the air with the stench of Yang-lang petroleum. The windows were tight locked. Over his head, the big palm fan waved back and forth, pulled by the string around the big toe of the Manchu coolie who squatted outside the door.

The door opened softly, and the squat German clerk, whose eyes stared out fishily behind the thick lens of his spectacles, entered. He choked a bit over the stifling atmosphere. Outside, he had a window open. But Simeon Thatcher did not believe in fresh air. It might get into his soul. When the clerk reached the side of the desk, Simeon raised his eyes, blank eyes that held neither light nor shade. In all the years the German had entered that office softly, he had never seen emotion of any kind in those eyes. They never changed.

"The Japs have taken the *Agatha*," he said in his heavy German. "Vincent tried to escape. He iss dead. Ten thousand pounds' worth of seals."

The blank eyes lowered to the rice-paper sheet, with its jumbled Chinese marks. The German clerk knew that signal of dismissal. But for three years he had been silent when he had made these reports. He spoke again, very slowly, and with shakes of his head that seemed to make the big eyes blink. "That is the eighth in thirty-five months, Herr Thatcher."

The eyes raised. "Let nobody through the door. I am busy." Simeon's voice was as devoid of expression as the eyes.

The fat German clerk shivered, though the room was oven hot. The door closed behind him, and at the open window he sucked in great gulps of the cold air from outside, as though purging himself of the unclean air he had breathed in that inner office. And outside, with no blank eyes to see, he shook his head slowly. He spoke softly, almost wonderingly, to himself.

"Eight ships in three years the Japanese patrols have taken. Eight ships that were filled to the hatches with furs of the seal. Eight ships and five captains, who fought for the extra money he promised. Always when the holds were filled. Always the Japanese patrols. And he says nothing." Shrugging his shoulders, he went back to his desk. "Perhaps in his silence he prays to the devil to send him more of the devils of the sea who are willing to take the chances for the money he offers—but never gives. The seal furs do not enter the Kiao-chau. It must be true that the Japanese, too, have devils to guide them. Always when the holds are filled!"

Inside, Simeon Thatcher had taken a thumbed book from a drawer. He opened it to a page. A stub of pencil plowed heavily through a name. It was the fifth of a list—the last. He turned to another page, then another. At the last page in the book he stopped. That page was dirtier than the rest, but it had no entries, as had the other pages. Only the name showed at the top. It was Jonathan Thatcher.

For an instant, only a single instant, the blank eyes seemed to glow and flame. Then the fires back of them were quenched. The granite-gray hardness came again. Minutes passed. The waving fan overhead swayed the thin rice paper in his hands as he studied it. The book lay under his elbow. The door opened softly.

Simeon Thatcher looked up as the little German stood beside the desk. The clerk was staring at him; staring as though he would assure himself that this man whom he had seen in this chair for years was a being of flesh and blood. His mouth opened. A stammered syllable came through the stuttering lips. The voice of the seated man sounded:

"Send him in." That was all; just three words.

"You—you——" Even a greater thing than those staring eyes which bade him go now compelled him to speak. "It is you—you who wait out there to see Simeon Thatcher. You—out there!"

"Send him in."

There was no more change in the voice than there was in the words, but the German's face paled, and his hand shook. Never in his years of service had the man at the desk given him a second command. Other men had been given second commands in that never-changing voice—and they had ceased to be other men.

The clerk stumbled out of the room, and between his shoulder blades he seemed to feel the eyes of Simeon Thatcher. He almost fell over the half-asleep coolie, whose toe waved the fan. Then he beckoned to the man who waited. Not until the man had passed through the door, and it had closed once more, did the clerk force his trembling lips to words.

"Two!" he choked, and the sound of his own voice seemed to frighten him. "The devil has given the world *two!*"

Simeon Thatcher rose as the man entered the room. Once more his eyes gleamed and glowed; just as the fires burned in the eyes of the man whose stare matched his. Simeon Thatcher might have been gazing at himself in a mirror. The same eyes of granite-gray, seething like molten stone now, met his. There was the same thin nose, with its turn of cruelty; the gash of mouth; the squareness of chin. For twenty years, Simeon Thatcher had not seen his brother; yet he had known how he would look. Jonathan Thatcher always looked the same—the twin of the man whose hundred ships sailed the four seas.

The flames died, and their light left the eyes of the two men cold and gray. The newcomer spoke.

"I will take your next poaching ship

above the Aleutians. I will bring back the skins." Simeon Thatcher might have uttered those two sentences. His twin brother's voice was as flat and dead as his own.

"Eight of the best captains on the seas have failed," Simeon Thatcher said in his monotoned voice. "The Japs seem to know just when to strike. It is piracy they practice, of course, waiting for the full ships instead of patrolling their grounds. But they have the law. I will get the skins from under their very noses if I have to lose every ship! I will not be beaten."

For a second the flame leaped to his eyes again; only that seemed to make of the last words a challenge. The voice had never changed.

"I will bring back the skins." Jonathan Thatcher repeated his statement without any sign of the eye gleam. "I do not send men out with orders. I do the thing that is to be done."

The lips of the man who had not shown emotion of any kind in twenty years curled back from his teeth in a sneer. "I am the one who has done things. I have my ships! You—you have your master's certificate, just as every rum-swilling hound in the South Seas has." He stepped nearer his brother. "Why did you leave the South Seas?" he demanded harshly.

"To bring back the skins." The brother's eyes were still blank. "Twenty years ago, I opened the Manchurian trade to you when you had failed. I was the one man of the thousand."

"Bah!" It was a snarl. "The thousandth man! A captain, like a thousand other captains! It is Simeon Thatcher who is the one man in a thousand; the one man who has fought his way to the front; who lives and rules!"

Once more stare met stare. "The nine hundred and ninety-ninth man may live a long time, but in the end he dies." Jonathan Thatcher still gazed

steadily. "Have you a poaching ship ready?" he asked.

Simeon walked back to the desk. Under cover of its top, his hands knotted and unknotted as he fought back the rage and hatred he had shown for the first time in twenty years. No man on earth but this one before him had ever changed a line in his mask of a face. In a second, he had won his victory.

"The *Brixton* will be ready within the week," he said.

"A fast ship," nodded his brother.

"You will never return." Simeon Thatcher picked up the book at his elbow.

"I will bring back the skins. I am the thousandth man."

Jonathan Thatcher turned on his heel. The door opened and closed softly.

The man inside had opened the book to the dirty last page. Beneath the name of his brother he wrote: "*Brixton*, sailed——" His eyes were blank, but his dead soul was being fired with the pit fires of his master.

Captain Thatcher stood on the quay at the end of The Street Where Fish Rot and watched the three-funneled *King Fisher* limp out toward the China Sea for its annual trading trip among the Dutch East Indies. He knew the *King Fisher*, just as all the South Seas knew its long deck house, its dirty white sides, with the great splotches of rust showing through the paint that had been put on years before. Some day that ship would go to the bottom, but Simeon Thatcher would collect the insurance.

In her berth, the *Brixton* lay, taking the last tons of coal. Her sides showed unbroken surfaces of fresh white paint. Her two funnels were dark gray, and the short deck house was spotless white. Even now the painters were coiling their ropes and preparing to leave.

Captain Thatcher's eyelids lowered slightly. No other sign of emotion showed. His sampan was waiting. As the coolies rowed him out to the ship, his eyes never left the slow-moving *King Fisher* as it steamed out slowly, rolling heavily as it caught the first sharp winds of the China Sea. He swung up the side of the ship and jumped lightly to the deck, to face the stocky Scotch engineer, Monkkitrick.

The engineer fell back a step, staring. "Ar-r ye goin' with us, master?" he stammered

Captain Thatcher's level eyes stared at him. "I am Captain Jonathan Thatcher," he said quietly "We sail at midnight."

The engineer shook his broad shoulders, as though the physical action would make his mind comprehend more easily the miracle his eyes saw. "Captain Thatcher, of the South Sea trade?" he finally stammered. "Th' br-other?"

A nod answered him.

"Then we ar-r goin' to the south routes?" The Scotch engineer's voice was eager.

"Above the Aleutians," corrected Captain Thatcher evenly.

The black tan of the engineer's face lightened. "God, man!" he almost shouted, so great was his amazement and disbelief. "Poaching in the *Brixton*? A bright, white ship, and with Japs in the stokehold! Death it is, sir! Death!"

"We sail at midnight!"

Captain Thatcher turned on his heel and went forward. The engineer leaned heavily against the rail, and his tongue licked his thick lips. Then words formed in his throat, and, curiously enough, they were the words the little squat German had voiced in the outer room of Simeon Thatcher's godown office.

"Two! The de'il gave the world two of them!"

In his cabin, back of the bridge, Cap-

tain Thatcher's gash of mouth tightened so that it became invisible. He stood at the port and stared out over the waters of Kiao-chau. A freshly painted white ship. Japs in the stoke-hole. And the Aleutians! It was suicide to take such a ship on such a trip with the waiting Japanese patrols ready to pounce when the holds were filled. Captain Thatcher could see the eyes of Simeon Thatcher gleaming and glowing with the twenty years of stored-up hate. A bigger thing had come than beating the Japanese. The *Brixton*, fastest ship of all the hundred, would be sacrificed—but Simeon Thatcher would know that he alone of all the East was the thousandth man. Jonathan Thatcher would not turn back. Brother knew brother.

Captain Thatcher glanced at his heavy German-silver watch. He walked to the deck and ordered the cockney second officer to lower a boat. For three hours he plied the stink holes of Shanghai. In the sampan that took him back to the *Brixton* was a great roll of canvas, a dozen big cans. Asprawl on the sampan bottom, under the feet of the rowing coolies, a dirty little white man, with tangled, matted hair, slept off the effects of the opium that reeked in the rags that covered his body. And behind came another sampan, with bundles of long bamboo poles lashed together.

At midnight, the *Brixton* sailed. Captain Thatcher was on the bridge. Beside him, the little cockney gripped at the bridge rail and whispered prayers to the God he had deserted for many years. Back in his cabin, the third officer, a North Sea pick-up, cursed his curses to the devil he had followed all his life. The *Brixton* was an instrument of revenge; the trap of brother for brother.

The little cockney shifted his eyes, to stare at the man who looked steadily ahead through the darkness.

"It's a 'ell of a note!" he said, and there was a note of helpless, plaintive complaining in his voice. "A 'ell of a note!"

"We'll bring back the skins." Captain Thatcher's black eyes made his second officer shiver, then he turned and went to the fourth cabin of the nest behind the bridge.

The stench of stale opium filled the small, white room. The man he had picked up in Shanghai lay like a log on the bunk where he had been tossed. For seconds Captain Thatcher stared down at him. Then he picked up a grimy hand that dangled limply over the bunk edge and examined it closely. He dropped it, and straightened up.

"We'll bring back the skins!" he muttered slowly.

For days the *Brixton* plowed steadily ahead. On the second day, the opium-dead man had come alive. There had been a long talk in his cabin. The little cockney had heard cursing in every dialect in the Far East. He had heard the ever-even voice of Captain Thatcher. Then the opium smoker had gone down to the forward hold. After him had been lowered the canvas, and the big cans. A dozen lanterns filled with petroleum had followed. And for the days of the journey following, the third officer sat on the open hatch with a revolver, and kept the slant-eyed crew from that hatch.

Down in the engine room, the Japanese gaffir sat on his little stool on the boiler bridge and kept his men steadily at work. Once the captain had come down into the hot depths of the ship and watched the brown, naked men at work.

"Satisfact'?" asked the Japanese gaffir mildly, with a wave of his lean brown hand toward the men below him.

Captain Thatcher had not answered. The granite-gray eyes hardened a bit more, then he climbed the iron ladders to the open air and the deck.

Monkitrick followed him. "The imp will see that the steam falls when the patrols gi'e us th' run!" he warned. "An' there's no work to be got from the dogs if he is not in his chair. Kill them all; an' they'll fair smile at ye. But 'tis only the gaffir in his seat puts the fear of their heathen gods in their breasts. They ha' a thought of him as a god, too, ye know, up here in the North, just as the Malays ha' of their *zangzai*."

"We'll bring back the skins!"

That was all Captain Thatcher said; that was all he ever said. His eyes and face were as cold as the arctic winds that were beginning to freeze the spray on the bridge rails; his chin was as hard as the steel plates under his feet.

On the deck, the sealers—Japs, all of them—were getting ready. The boats were being prepared. The red-and-black seal buoys were lined along the deck with their anchor sheets. There was no sign of the Jap patrols. They were waiting, and were careful not to frighten a poacher. On the forward hatch, the third officer stared glumly out at sea. Beneath him, the fifth white man on board did his mysterious task away from the sight of eyes.

This is not a story of seal catching. Eight men before Captain Thatcher had caught their seals. For two months the *Brixton* roved above the Aleutians. Sometimes she was near Kamchatka and the rocks of Cape Lopatka, dodging the Russians a dozen times. Almost to Dutch Harbor her course took her, where the United States patrols were vigilant.

The aft hold was filled with the green skins. A great roll of canvas had been lifted from the forward hold, and was lashed to the deck under many coverings of tarpaulin.

On the wide, open stern, the opium smoker, clear-eyed and with hands that were steady, spent the days in cutting

the long bamboo poles and lashing them together. The Japs scowled at him, just as they scowled at everything they did not understand. But he never spoke.

When Captain Thatcher was on the bridge, the three white men in the cabin talked in whispers, and with many shakes of the head.

"A de'il that's silent as the de'il up front!" muttered Monkitrick. "Doin' his child's play when there's work for a mon."

The third officer shook his head. "Painting!" he growled. "Painting! That's what he was a-doing! Painting pictures!"

"It's 'ell!" sighed the little cockney; then his voice rose in bitterness: "Wot good's the hunder' pun extra the old snake offers. Nobody ever gets back! An' wi' a ship painted corpse white, an' a crew of yellow monkeys."

Monkitrick shook his head. "'Tis hate behind it all. The South Sea fair bristles wi' stories o' Captain Thatcher, an' there's hate in th' hear-rt o' the mon in Shanghai. He wants only one Thatcher in the East!"

"It's 'ell!" groaned the second officer. "An' a little south China girl a-waitin' fer me, back there!"

Forward, on the bridge, Captain Thatcher paced back and forth, back and forth, his lips tight shut, and his eyes sweeping the sea.

The forward hold took its share of the green skins. The sealers' boats were lashed on the deck. The nose of the *Brixton* turned south with the first spring winds.

"Full speed!" ordered the captain, and the big engines sent the ship toward Shanghai and the blank-eyed man in his godown office by the quays. On the wide stern deck were piled many square frames of bamboo that had been lashed together.

When the last pole was cut to its length and had gone to make the design

the rag-clad man's fingers fashioned he went up to the bridge.

"Can I have a smoke of hop now?" he whined. "It's all done, all ready to be put up."

Captain Thatcher looked him over from head to foot. "You've got it out of your system now," he said quietly. "Straighten up, and go back home, where your brush can make a man of you."

The eyes of the man blazed. "Home!" he snarled. "I've got no home! I never had any since you needed me in the South Seas, for just such another trick like this. I was rotting comfortably in a Shanghai opium joint till you dragged me out and gave me a few more cursed years to live! You always drag me out. You always find me when I've forgotten that I ever could wield a brush, when I've forgotten everything but the opium dreams! Why can't you let me alone?"

"I needed you," Captain Thatcher said evenly. "I get what I need." He turned away from the man and toward the sleepy-eyed Chinaman, who was keeping the ship on its course. He spoke over his shoulder:

"In my cabin, you'll find enough to keep you going two days. I'll not want you after that!"

For two days the ship plowed steadily. For two days the man who spoke to nobody but the captain lay on his bunk while the sickening smell of burning opium was constantly in the nostrils of the other white men in the near cabins.

Over the *Brixton* had suddenly come a tension. It was in the attitude of the crew, and the slant-eyed sealers who loafed around the deck. It got down to the engine room, and Monkitrack cursed the steam gauges.

On the third day, a speck on the horizon, came a smudge of smoke.

"'E's comin'!" complained the little cockney. "The hatches are a-coverin'

of the skins, an' 'e's arfter us. 'E'll catch us, too, with them dorgs down below solgerin' the fires."

Captain Thatcher did not answer. He stared down at the forward deck, with its rows of red-and-black seal buoys that lay alongside of the rail. Apparently he did not know that the second officer was on earth. He raised his voice and called:

"Yosi!"

The slant-eyed first sealer sidled from under the bridge and stared up insolently. Astern of them, a ship filled with his countrymen was crawling up steadily. To-morrow, or next day, his brothers would come over the rails, and he would get his share of the green skins under the hatches. He had gotten his share in five of the eight ships the Japanese patrols had taken from Simeon Thatcher.

For a second, Captain Thatcher stared down at the slant-eyed sealer. Then he spoke quietly, almost sleepily. "There were twenty-one buoys along the deck when we left the last grounds," he said.

The Japanese looked down at the long row of read-and-black floaters. Then he turned and shrugged his shoulders. "Eight-ee', now," he murmured softly, with mocking respect.

"Yes," nodded Captain Thatcher. "I see there's only eighteen." He swung around slowly and walked to the bridge ladder that led to the deck.

The cockney sucked the air in between his broken teeth with a loud hiss. His breath had seemed to stop at the captain's first quiet word. The even question had seemed suddenly to make the air heavy and unbreathable. Its sinister significance was at once apparent to the second officer. He knew where the three missing buoys had gone, just as he knew the captain knew. They had been tossed overboard in the wake of the speeding ship: a signal to the waiting patrol that the hatches cov-

ered full holds, and that the course of the ship was south.

The cockney had expected an explosion of some kind. Yet Captain Thatcher had seemingly dismissed the whole thing. He had left the bridge, to go to his cabin.

Again came the hiss of the sucking breath. Captain Thatcher was on the deck below. The Japs slouched forward from the shelter of the fo'castle. The chief sealer stared at Thatcher with slant-eyed insolence.

"Bind Yosi's arms with that buoy anchor rope," ordered the captain.

The crew hung back, looking at the chief sealer. He shrugged his shoulders, and his lips twisted in a sneering grin. Captain Thatcher's hand went to his pocket. A revolver flashed in the sunlight. Very slowly his fingers twisted the nickled cylinder, and the snapping clicks sounded loud in the stillness that had come over the *Brixton*. With the same calm deliberation the pistol muzzle raised. The report sounded crashingly. The Japanese chief sealer crumbled to the deck with uncanny lack of sound.

"Gawrd!" gritted the cockney on the bridge.

"Bind Yosi's arms to that buoy anchor rope," ordered the captain. The crew huddled back against the fo'castle. For the first time in the twenty years that the cockney had plied the China Seas did he see fear in the expressionless face of a Jap. But only for a second did the tableau hold. That order came again, cold, icy. The huddled rats broke, with the fear of the blank-eyed captain gibbering on their lips. The arms of the dead chief sealer were bound to the anchor rope of a buoy.

"Overboard!" said the captain shortly. "We'll make the course marking plain for the patrol."

He turned his back square on them. The second officer's gun slipped from his pocket as the huddled crowd swayed

forward; then a hysterical laugh sounded in his throat. Captain Thatcher needed no pistol to protect him from the men.

"'E's a devil!" stuttered the little cockney, and with the back of his hand he wiped from his eyes the warm perspiration that had streamed down from his forehead. He shook himself as a dog shakes itself on leaving the water. "But 'e'll bring back the skins! Gawrd, yes!"

As the hours passed, the black smudge of smoke on the horizon grew to the low outlines of a Jap cruiser. Every minute it showed more plainly over the curve of the sea. On the bridge, Captain Thatcher paced slowly, eyes sweeping the waters. In the cabin, the second and third officers shivered in the hot closeness, and drank many drams of rum and water.

"Yosi was a mighty big man!" declared the third, with heavy shakes of his head. "When they catch us, it won't be a pleasant death!"

"Never a word 'e said!" muttered the little cockney. "Just shot 'im like a dawrg!"

"To kill a Jap chief among a crew of Japs!" murmured the third wonderingly. "I've seen men torn to pieces for less!"

Early in the afternoon, Captain Thatcher summoned the Scotch engineer to the bridge.

"Speed?" he asked curtly.

Monkitrick shook his head, and under the black tan a lighter shade was showing. "Th' steam never gets above a hunder fifty. We need two-ten!"

"I'll fix that." The captain turned to the bridge phone to summon the second officer. Monkitrick's hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

"God, mon!" The engineer's voice shook with the fear that was in him. "Ye'll no be killin' the gaffir? Not an ounce of work we'll get if ye do! 'Twill be like shootin' the entire boiler crews

—an' the de'il back o' us is creepin' up fast."

Thatcher turned on him slowly. His thin lips curled back, to bare his teeth. "No wonder the skins were never brought back!" he said contemptuously, and that was the only sign of emotion a man on the *Brixton* ever knew him to show. "The blood of you North Sea men is ice water." He looked the engineer over from head to foot. "Have you a spare Gerhardt spring pop valve?" he asked, and the quiet evenness was back in his voice.

The engineer nodded his surprise at the question.

"Reverse the spring, so that it will open to let out its stream of steam if the pressure falls below two-twenty!" ordered Thatcher.

"But I dinna——" The Scotchman scratched his head.

"Are you competent to do that?" The blank eyes held just a hint of gleam.

Monkitrick did not answer. He touched the peak of his cap and went below. The second officer came on the bridge, and Captain Thatcher went back to the small white cabin, where the smell of opium was heavy, and the man he had picked up in Shanghai slept his drugged sleep. The captain's fingers raised the eyelids, and he bent down and examined the eyes closely.

"Another day," he nodded in satisfaction. He went to his own cabin and took a pair of steel handcuffs from a drawer, which he pocketed.

From the bridge end, the second was watching the Jap patrol astern. He turned as the captain came back.

"'E'll catch us in the morning," he said gloomily. "We're only makin' three-quarters speed, an' losin' every minute!" His voice became a complaining whine. "Why can't we kill the gaffir wot's sittin' down there with a devil's grin on his face lettin' the steam drop?" He whirled on the captain in

sudden, hysterical fury. "Why didn't you stay down in th' South, where you belong? 'E on'y wanted the skins! But you killed Yosi, an' now 'e'll rip us to pieces!"

"We'll land the skins in Shanghai!" said Thatcher icily.

The first long rays of the setting sun were aslant the Japanese Sea when Monkitrick came up to announce he had fixed the valve. Thatcher followed him to the engine room. He tested the Gerhardt that had the spring reversed so that any pressure less than two hundred and twenty pounds would release the plunger and send forth a jet of steam that would rip an hole through an inch board.

"Bring your Stillson to the stoke-room," he ordered, and with his own hands he tied back the spring with a chain.

Monkitrick followed silently.

On the gaffir's bridge over the boilers the Jap eyed them mockingly. Below him, the coalers moved slouchingly, sleepily to their passing. The engineer cursed as he saw the gauges.

"Hunder twenty!" he snarled.

"Satisfac'?" sneered the Japanese gaffir, but under his loose shirt his fingers were fumbling at a knife handle. He hissed a word in his own language. The men below dropped their shovels and stood looking up, their slant eyes gleaming threat.

Thatcher paid no attention. He was examining the great pipe that went across the boiler fronts, on a level with the bridge.

"Cut off the steam here!" he commanded.

Monkitrick almost dropped the wrench. "'Twill kill a boiler!" he gasped.

"Cut off the steam!"

The engineer went to the end of the bridge and turned the great wheel of the gate valve. The men below had grouped together at the foot of the

narrow iron stairs. The gaffir eyed Thatcher with death in his stare. His fingers fumbled at the knife. But Thatcher's broad back was to him, contemptuous, ignoring the death that waited to spring.

"Take off this waste cock!" ordered the captain. "It's the same size as the pop, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Monkitricks, past questions now, did as he was told.

"Screw in the Gerhardt!"

It was done. The releasing valve stuck its nose out over the bridge. Thatcher tightened the chain that held the spring back. Then he whirled on the balls of his feet like a cat and pinned the gaffir to the iron rail, ripping the knife from his shirt and sending it clattering to the steel floor. A sudden movement came below. A shaking of the iron stairs. With a swing of his arms, Thatcher lifted the gaffir over the edge, and held him above the heads of the Jap stokers.

"Another step, and I'll throw him down!" he said. "I'll break him to bits so his body and soul will never get together in the hereafter!"

The Japanese screamed a command. The men below moved away from the foot of the iron stairs.

"Turn on the steam!" Captain Thatcher lifted the Jap over the rail and set him down. Monkitricks's hand shook as he turned the big wheel. If there was a single weak link in that chain on the valve a jet of boiling death would leap out at the captain's chest. The steam hissed back in the pipes. There came a warning clink of the chain that seemed to press all the life out of the engineer's lungs. But the valve held.

Once again Thatcher swung the Jap around as though he was a bag of meal. He held him tight with one arm that crushed the gaffir's ribs. His hand darted to his pocket. Came a flash of handcuffs. Two clicks, and the gaffir's arms were tight behind him, hands held

to the iron upright of the bridge rail in front of the valve with its chained steam.

His quiet voice sounded in the silence. "Tell the stokers to make two-twenty pounds!" he said slowly to the gaffir. The Japanese snarled something, and writhed. Thatcher went on in his blank voice: "In fifteen minutes I am going to take the holding chain off the valve. That steam will eat its way through you in a second, unless there's two hundred and twenty pounds' pressure to hold it closed."

"God, mon!" Monkitricks staggered back against the rail, and his face was green with the sudden nausea. The gaffir writhed and twisted so that the bridge shook. Then a screamed command sent the shovels clattering. For fifteen minutes the stokehole was filled with the noise of work. The Japs shoveled as they had never shoveled before. The steam rose in the gauges. Hundred and seventy! Eighty! The *Brixton* under them pounded and throbbed with the leaping speed. Two hundred! The gaffir was screeching, and drool was showing on his white lips. The engineer, against the rail, was calling on his deity, over and over. Two-twenty! Two-twenty-five!"

Thatcher stepped quietly over to the gauge and took off the chain. An instant's hiss, and click of the spring sounded like the roar of a big gun. Then he faced the gaffir once more.

"The instant the gauge falls below two-twenty, that steam will rip you to pieces, and boil you while it does!" He spoke to Monkitricks: "Stay here and shoot the first man that tries to come up that ladder. Though every one you shoot will make the others work harder to keep this dog alive. I'll send the third down in a minute."

The engineer's tongue moistened his dry lips. "Yes, sir!" he muttered through his clenched teeth, and he kept his eyes away from the Jap and the

valve, while the shudders shook his body.

The captain went back to the bridge and ignored the wondering glances of the little cockney second. Behind them, the cruiser was receding fast. There came a futile puff of smoke from a gun as the Japs behind realized that something had gone wrong.

"South-southeast!" ordered the captain of the Chinese helmsman, and the *Brixton* shifted toward Guam, and away from China.

Through the long hours of the night, the *Brixton* pounded its way south. In the stokehole, a pasty-faced brown man clawed at the steel floor of the bridge with his feet, and stared into the inch hole of the Gerhardt valve, screaming his orders in a voice that was cracked and broken. Beside him, the third officer shivered, despite the heat of the boilers, and edged away every minute to the other end of the bridge, only to go back sheepishly. And the valve held pent its living steam.

Morning came on the open sea. There was no sign of the pursuing Japanese. Simeon Thatcher had made his one mistake of giving his brother the fastest of all the hundred ships.

Only the cockney shook his head. "The wireless!" he complained bitterly. "'E'll wake every Jap boat on the islands, an' we'll have to round them to get into Kaio-chau! 'E won't gi' us a chance!"

The northern point of Japan was two hundred miles abreast of them when Thatcher routed a heavy-eyed man who was in his cabin.

"Get busy!" he ordered curtly. "There'll be a thousand boats on the lookout for the *Brixton*. And no ship ever got around those islands and into Kiao-chau when the wireless has been working."

The opium smoker cursed the blank-eyed man, but he slouched astern to his piles of lashed bamboo poles. The Jap-

anese crew, whimpering dogs now because of the fear for the gaffir below that would be ripped to pieces with red-hot steam if they failed to obey the devil on the bridge, obeyed the commands of the cursing man. The bamboo frames were lashed into position along the deck at the rear of the short deck house. A great frame was reared at the deck-house end, abaft the stack.

Steadily the *Brixton* kept her course away from Japan and the watching patrols that were scouting the sea. At midnight, she turned in toward the Chinese Sea. At dawn, the great rolls of canvas were unslung, and the second officer rubbed his eyes and gasped as the opium smoker and his Japs swung them over the frames. They were painted to represent a long addition to the deck house, and a third smoke-stack! He watched the thing grow as the lashings were made fast.

"Gawrd!" he muttered a hundred times. "It's the *King Fisher*, the balliest ol' tub on the line! The *King Fisher*, that everybody knows in the North and South Seas!" He looked at the broad back of Captain Thatcher, who stood at the other end of the bridge. "'E'll bring back the skins!" His voice made it something between a curse and a prayer.

For half a day, the *Brixton* plunged on through the warm seas. Then a splotch of smoke showed ahead. Thatcher went into the stokeroom once more. He wasted no glance on the pitiable figure that was handcuffed to the iron rail. He chained the Gerhardt valve tight, and the red-hot steel burned great welts in his hands and arms, to which he paid not the slightest attention.

"Bring the steam down to a hundred!" he said quietly. The gaffir screamed an order. The shovels were laid aside. And when the boat ahead came close enough to use glasses, the *King Fisher*, notorious tub of the

Thatcher ships, was wallowing and limping into port. The lookout did not bother to come close. It sheered off, to dash northward.

In its lame way, the *Brixton* picked a course around the southern island. A hundred ships were sighted. A hundred ships took one look, and scouted northward and westward, for the unmistakable *Brixton*, the first of nine ships that had eluded the vigilant patrol up north.

Back in his cabin, the opium smoker was again dead to the world, and dreaming of the death that was coming in the stink holes of Shanghai. On the bridge, the little cockney sang snatches of a coster song, and planned things for his south China girl. Captain Thatcher's blank eyes looked ahead, always ahead, toward the quay near The Street Where Fish Rot, and the little godown office.

Where the yellow waters of Kiaochau begin to mingle with the blue-green of the China Sea, the captain ordered the canvas and lashed poles

thrown overboard. The *Brixton* steamed in, triumphant, with the green skins under the hatches.

In the godown office, the little German clerk rubbed his hands as he left the inner office, after reporting the sighting of the poacher. The fan waved slowly, with its string around the big toe of the Manchu coolie.

Simeon Thatcher turned to the last dirty page in his little book. He filled out the return date with a stub of pencil, and laid the book methodically back in its drawer.

From a little box he took two white pellets. For a fractional instant his eyes gleamed and glowed; then his tongue lifted the two pellets from his steady palm. His head went forward very slowly, until it rested on the rice-paper sheet, with its squat Chinese characters.

His mode of death was perhaps easier than the one he knew was speeding toward him on the *Brixton*. The question of the thousandth man was settled.