

CLASSICS TO GO

CURSED



GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

Cursed

George Allan England

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CHAPTER I

AT BATU KAWAN

Slashed across the copper bowl of sunset, the jagged silhouette of tawny-shouldered mountains, fringed with areca-palms in black fretwork against the swift-fading glow, divided the tropic sky. Above, day yet lingered. Below, night's dim shroud, here and there spangled with glow-lights still or moving, had already folded earth in its obscurity.

Down from that mountain crest the descending slopes fell through grove and plantation to the drowned paddy-fields and to the miasmatic swamps, brooded by settling mists like thin, white breath of ghosts that in this Malay land all men gave faith to.

Nearer still, it reached the squalid *campong* of Batu Kawan. Batu Kawan, huddled in filth, disorder and disease between the steaming arsenical green of the lowlands and the muddy idleness of the boat-jammed Timbago River. Batu Kawan, whence the New Bedford clipper-ship, *Silver Fleece*, should have sailed two hours ago on the high tide, this 18th day of February, 1868. Batu Kawan, pestilent, malodorous, sinister, swarming with easy life, hemmed round with easier death.

William Scurlock, mate, was looking townward, leaning with crossed arms on rail. The umber smudge of half-light in the sky, fading over the torn edge of the mountains, revealed something of his blond bigness, freckled, weather-bitten, with close-cropped hair, a scarred jaw and hard teeth that gripped his cutty-pipe in bulldog fashion.

Scurlock seemed to be engaged with inward visionings, rather than outward. The occasional come-and-go of some dim figure in the waist of the ship, the fan-tan game of four or five Malay seamen—for the *Silver Fleece* carried a checkerboard crew, white, yellow and brown—as they squatted on their hunkers under the vague blur of a lantern just forward of the mainmast, and the hiccouging stridor of an accordion in the fo’c’s’le, roused in him no reaction.

Nor, as he lolled there under the awning, did he appear to take heed of the mud-clogged river with its jumble of sampans and house-boats, or of the thatched huts and tiled *godowns* past which the colorful swarm of Oriental life was idling along the bund. This stewing caldron of heat, haze, odors, dusk where fruit-bats staggered against the appearing stars said nothing whatever to the mate. All he could see in it was inefficiency, delay and loss.

Not all its wizardry of gleaming lights in hut and shop, its firefly paper lanterns, its murmuring strangeness could weigh against the vexing fact that his ship had missed the tide, and that—though her full cargo of tea, rattan, tapioca, cacao and opium was under hatches—she still lay made fast to the bamboo mooring-piles. What could offset the annoyance that Captain Alpheus Briggs, ashore on business of his own, was still delaying the vital business of working downstream on the ebb?

“Devil of a cap’n!” grumbled Scurlock. He spat moodily into the dark waters, and sucked at his pipe. “Ain’t it enough for him to have put in a hundred boxes of raw opium, which is liable to land us all in hell, without stealin’ a nigger wench an’ now drinkin’ samshu, ashore? Trouble comin’—mutiny an’ murder an’ damnation with trimmin’s, or I’m no Gloucester man!”

Savagely he growled in his deep throat. Scurlock disapproved of Batu Kawan and of all its works, especially of its women and its raw rice-whisky. The East grated on his

taut nerves. Vague singing in huts and the twangle of musically discordant strings set his teeth on edge. He hated the smells of the place, all seemingly compounded of curry and spices and mud and smoke of wood fires, through which the perfumes of strange fruits and heavy flowers drifted insistently.

The voices of mothers calling their naked little ones within their doors, lest Mambang Kuning, the yellow devil who dwells in the dusk, should snatch them, jarred upon his evil temper. So, too, the monotonous *tunk-tunk-tunk* of metal-workers' hammers in some unseen place; the snuffling grunt of carabaos wallowing in the mud-swale beyond the guava clump, up-stream; the nasal chatter of gharry-drivers and Kling boatmen; the whining sing-song of Malay pedlers with shouldered poles, whence swung baskets of sugar-cane and mangosteens. Scurlock abominated all that shuffling, chattering tangle of dark, half-clad life. The gorge of his trim, efficient, New England soul rose up against it, in hot scorn.

"Damn the Straits!" he grumbled, passing his hand over his forehead, sweaty in the breathless heat. "An' damn Briggs, too! It's my last voyage East, by joycus!"

Which was, indeed, the living truth, though by no means as Scurlock meant or understood it.

A plaintive hail from the rough brick coping of the bund drew his atrabilious attention. The mate saw that a brown, beardless fellow was making gestures at him. A lantern on the quarterdeck flung unsteady rays upon the Malay's nakedness, complete save for the breech-clout through which a kris was thrust. In his left hand he gripped a loose-woven coir bag, heavily full. His left held out, on open palm, three or four shining globules. Scurlock viewed with resentment the lean, grinning face, lips reddened and teeth jet-black by reason of long years of chewing lime and betel.

“Turtle egg, sar, sellum piecee cheap,” crooned the Malay. “Buyum turtle egg, sar?”

Scurlock’s answer was to bend, reach for a piece of holystone in a bucket by the rail, and catapult it at the vagabond who had made so bold as to interrupt his musings. The Malay swung aside; the holystone crunched into the sack of eggs and slid to earth.

The screaming curse of the barbarian hardly crossed the rail ahead of the flung kris. The wavy, poisoned blade flickered, spinning. Scurlock stooped away; the fraction of an eyewink later would have done his life’s business very neatly. Into the mizzen-mast drove the kris, and quivered there.

Scurlock turned, strode to it and plucked it out, swearing in his rage. The Malays at fan-tan by the gleam of the slush-light under the awning grew silent. Their fantastic little cards, of gaudy hue, dropped unheeded; for they had heard the name of Ratna Mutnu Manikam, god who brings death. Wherefore they shuddered, and turned scared faces aft; and some touched heart and forehead, warding off the curse.

Back to the rail, kris in hand, ran Scurlock.

“*Juldi*, you!” he shouted, with an oath unprintable. “Top your broom, you black swine—skip, before I come ashore an’ split you! *Juldi jao!*”

The Malay hesitated. Scurlock, flinging “*Sur!*” at him, which in the *lingua franca* denominates a swine, started for the gangway. Silently the Malay faded into the little fringe of brown and yellow folk that had already gathered; and so he vanished. Scurlock was already setting foot upon the gangway that led slantwise down to the bund, when through the quickly coagulating street-crowd an eddy, developing, made visible by the vague light a large head covered with a topi hat wrapped in a pugree. Powerful shoulders and huge elbows, by no means chary of smashing right and left against the naked ribs, cleared a passage, amid grunts and

gasps of pain; and once or twice the big man's fists swung effectively, by way of make-weight.

Then to William Scurlock's sight appeared a tall, heavy-set figure, rather dandified, in raw yellow bamboo silk and with very neatly polished boots that seemed to scorn the mud of Batu Kawan. A first glance recorded black brows of great luxuriance, a jungle of black beard contrasting sharply with a face reddened by wind, weather and hard liquor, and, in the V of a half-opened shirt, a corded neck and hairy chest molded on lines of the young Hercules. This man would be going on for twenty-eight or so. Fists, eyes and jaw all lusted battle.

Alpheus Briggs, captain and part owner of the *Silver Fleece*, had returned.

CHAPTER II

ALPHEUS BRIGGS, BUCKO

For a moment, Briggs and Scurlock confronted each other, separated by the length of the gangway. Between them stretched silence; though on the bund a cackle and chatter of natives offended the night. Then Captain Briggs got sight of the kris. That sufficed, just as anything would have sufficed. He put his two huge, hairy fists on his hips; his neck swelled with rage born of samshu and a temper by nature the devil's own; he bellowed in a formidable roar:

"Drop that knife, Mr. Scurlock! What's the matter with you, sir?"

A wise mate would have obeyed, with never one word of answer. But Mr. Scurlock was very angry, and what very angry man was ever wise? He stammered, in a burst of rage:

"I—a Malay son of a pup—he hove it at me, an' I—"

"Hove it at you, did he, sir?"

"Yes, an'—"

Tigerish with drunken ferocity, Briggs sprang up the plank. A single, right-hand drive to the jaw felled Scurlock. The kris jangled away and came to rest as Scurlock sprawled along the planking.

"*Sir*, Mr. Scurlock!" fulminated Briggs—though not even in this blind passion did he forget sea-etiquette, the true-bred Yankee captain's "touch of the aft" in dealing with an officer. No verbal abuse; just the swinging fists now ready to knock Scurlock flat again, should he attempt to rise. "Say *sir* to me, Mr. Scurlock, or I'll teach you how!"

"Sir," mumbled the mate, half dazed. He struggled to a sitting posture, blinking up with eyes of hate at the taut-muscled young giant who towered over him, eager for another blow.

"All right, Mr. Scurlock, and don't forget I got a handle to my name, next time you speak to me. If any man, fore or aft, wants any o' my fist, let him leave off *sir*, to me!"

He kicked Scurlock heavily in the ribs, so that the breath went grunting from him; then reached down a gorilla-paw, dragged him up by the collar and flung him staggering into the arms of "Chips," the clipper's carpenter—Gascar, his name was—who had just come up the quarterdeck companion. Other faces appeared: Bevans, the steward, and Prass, the bo'sun. Furiously Briggs confronted them all.

"Understand me?" he shouted, swaying a little as he stood there with eager fists. "Where's Mr. Wansley?"

"Asleep, sir," answered Bevans. Wansley, second-mate, was indeed dead to the world in his berth. Most of the work of stowing cargo had fallen on him, for in the old clippers a second-mate's life hardly outranked a dog's.

"What right has Mr. Wansley to be sleeping?" vociferated the captain, lashing himself into hotter rage. "By God, you're all a lot of lazy, loafing, impudent swine!"

One smash of the fist and Bevans went staggering toward the forward companion ladder, near the foot of which a little knot of seamen, white, brown and yellow, had gathered in cheerful expectation of seeing murder done.

Briggs balanced himself, a strange figure in his dandified silk and polished boots, with his topi hat awry, head thrust forward, brows scowling, massive neck swollen with rage and drink. Under the smudgy gleam of the lantern on the mizzen, his crimson face, muffled in jetty beard, and the evil-glowering eyes of him made a picture of wrath.

Briggs stooped, snatched up the kris that lay close by his feet, and with a hard-muscled arm whistled its keen edge through air.

"I'll keep order on my ship," he blared, passionately, "and if I can't do it with my fists, by God, I'll do it with this! The first man that loosens his tongue, I'll split him like a herring!"

"Captain Briggs, just a moment, sir!" exclaimed a voice at his left. A short, well-knit figure in blue, advancing out of the shadows, 'round the aft companion, laid a hand on the drunken brute's arm.

"You keep out of this, doctor!" cried Briggs. "They're a mutinous, black lot o' dogs that need lickin', and I'm the man to give it to 'em!"

"Yes, yes, sir, of course," Dr. Filhiol soothed the beast. "But as the ship's physician, let me advise you to go to your cabin, sir. The heat and humidity are extremely bad. There's danger of apoplexy, sir, if you let these fellows excite you. You aren't going to give them the satisfaction of seeing you drop dead, are you, captain?"

Thrown off his course by this new idea, Briggs peered, blinked, pushed back his topi and scratched his thick, close-curling poll. Then all at once he nodded, emphatically.

"Right you are, doctor!" he cried, his mood swiftly changing. "I'll go. They shan't murder me—not yet, much as they'd like to!"

"Well spoken, sir. You're a man of sense, sir—rare sense. And on a night like this—"

"The devil's own night!" spat Briggs. "God, the breath sticks in my throat!" With thick, violent fingers he ripped at his shirt, baring his breast.

"Captain Briggs!" exclaimed Scurlock, now on his feet again. "Listen to a word, sir, please."

"What the damnation now, sir?"

“We’ve lost the tide, sir. The comprador sent word aboard at four bells, he couldn’t hold his sampan men much longer. We should be standin’ downstream now, sir.” Scurlock spoke with white, shaking lips, rubbing his smitten jaw. Hate, scorn, rage grappled in his soul with his invincible New England sense of duty, of efficiency, of getting the ship’s work done. “If they’re goin’ to tow us down to-night, by joycus, sir, we’ve got to get under way, and be quick about it!”

Briggs dandled the kris. Its wavy blade, grooved to hold the dried curaré-poison that need do no more than scratch to kill, flung out vagrant high-lights in the gloom.

“For two cents I’d gut you, Mr. Scurlock,” he retorted. “*I’m* master of this ship, and she’ll sail when *I’m* ready, sir, not before!”

“Captain, they’re only trying to badger-draw you,” whispered Filhiol in the bucko’s ear. “A man of your intelligence will beat them at their own game.” Right well the doctor knew the futility of trying to get anything forward till the captain’s rage and liquor should have died. “Let these dogs bark, sir, if they will. You and I are men of education. I propose a quiet drink or two, sir, and then a bit of sleep—”

“What the devil do you mean by that, sir?” flared Briggs, turning on him. “You mean I’m not able to take my ship out of this devil’s ditch, to-night?”

“Farthest from my thought, captain,” laughed the doctor. “Of course you can, sir, if you want to. But this mutinous scum is trying to force your hand. You’re not the man to let them.”

“I should say *not!*” swaggered the captain, with a blasphemy, while low-voiced murmurs ran among the men, —dim, half glimpsed figures by the mizzen, or in the waist. “Not much! Come, doctor!”

He lurched aft, still swinging the kris. Ardentlly Filhiol prayed he might gash himself therewith, but the devil guards his own. With savage grimace at Scurlock, the physician whispered: "Name o' God, man, let him be!" Then, at a discreet distance, he followed Briggs.

Scurlock nodded, with murder in his eyes. Gascar and Bevans murmured words that must remain unwritten. Under the awning at the foot of the forward companion, white men from the fo'c'sle and Malays from the deck-house buzzed in divers tongues. Briggs, the while, was about to enter the after companion when to his irate ear the sound of a droning chant, somewhere ashore, came mingled with the dull thudding of a drum, monotonous, irritating as fever pulses in the brain of a sick man.

Briggs swerved to the starboard quarter rail and smote it mightily with his fist, as with bloodshot eyes he peered down at the smoky, lantern-glowing confusion of the bund.

"The damned Malays!" he shouted. "They've started another of their infernal sing-songs! If I could lay hands on that son of a whelp—"

He shook the kris madly at a little group about a blazing flare; in the midst squatted an itinerant ballad-singer. Tapping both heads of a small, barrel-like drum, the singer whined on and on, with intonations wholly maddening to the captain.

For a moment Briggs glared down at this scene, which to his fuddled senses seemed a challenge direct, especially devil-sent to harry him.

"Look at that now, doctor, will you?" Briggs flung out his powerful left hand toward the singer. "Want to bet I can't throw this knife through the black dog?"

He balanced the kris, ready for action, and with wicked eyes gauged the throw. Filhiol raised a disparaging hand.

"Don't waste a splendid curio on the dog, captain," smiled he, masking fear with indifference. Should Briggs so much as nick one of the Malays with that envenomed blade, Filhiol knew to a certainty that with fire and sword Batu Kawan would take complete vengeance. He knew that before morning no white man would draw life's breath aboard the *Silver Fleece*. "You've got a wonderful curio there, sir. Don't lose it, for a mere nothing."

"Curio? What the devil do I care for Malay junk?" retorted Briggs, thick-tongued and bestial. "The only place I'd like to see this toothpick would be stickin' out of that swine's ribs!"

"Ah, but you don't realize the value of the knife, sir," wheedled Filhiol. "It's an extraordinarily fine piece of steel, captain, and the carving of the lotus bud on the handle is a little masterpiece. I'd like it for my collection." He paused, struck by inspiration. "I'll play you for the knife, sir. Let's have that drink we were speaking of, and then a few hands of poker. I'll play you anything I've got—my watch, my instrument case, my wages for the voyage, whatever you like—against that kris. Is that a go?"

"Sheer off!" mocked Briggs, raising the blade. The doctor's eye judged distance. He would grapple, if it came to that. But still he held to craft:

"This is the first time, captain, I ever knew you to be afraid of a good gamble."

"Afraid? Me, afraid?" shouted the drunken man. "I'll make you eat those words, sir! The knife against your pay!"

"Done!" said the doctor, stretching out his hand. Briggs took it in a grip that gritted the bones of Filhiol, then for a moment stood blinking, dazed, hiccoughing once or twice. His purpose, vacillant, once more was drawn to the singer. He laughed, with a maudlin catch of the breath.

"Does that gibberish mean anything, doctor?" asked he.

“Never mind, sir,” answered Filhiol. “We’ve got a game to play, and—”

“Not just yet, sir! That damned native may be laying a curse on me, for all I know. Mr. Scurlock!” he suddenly shouted forward.

“Aye, aye, sir,” answered the mate’s voice, through the gloom.

“Send me a Malay—one that can talk United States!”

“Yes, sir!” And Scurlock was heard in converse with the brown men in the waist. Over the rail the captain leaned, staring at the singer and the crowd, the smoky torches, the confused crawling of life in Batu Kawan; and as he stared, he muttered to himself, and twisted at his beard with his left hand—his right still gripped the kris.

“You damned, outrageous blackguard!” the doctor thought. “If I ever get you into your cabin, God curse me if I don’t throw enough opium into you to keep you quiet till we’re a hundred miles at sea!”

Came the barefoot slatting of a Malay, *pad-pad-padding* aft, and the sound of a soft-voiced: “Captain Briggs, sar?”

“You the man that Mr. Scurlock sent?” demanded Briggs.

“Yas, sar.”

“All right. Listen to that fellow down there—the one that’s singing!” Briggs laid a hand on the Malay, jerked him to the rail and pointed a thick, angry finger. “Tell me what he’s sayin’! Understand?”

“Yas, sar.”

The Malay put both lean, brown hands on the rail, squinted his gray eyes, impassive as a Buddha’s, and gave attentive ear. To him arose the droning words of the long-drawn, musical cadences:

Arang itou dibasouh dengan ayer

Mawar sakalipoun tiada akan poutih.

Satahoun houdjan di langit ayer latout masakan tawar?

Sebab tiada tahon menari dikatakan tembad.

Tabour bidjian diatas tasik tiada akan toumbounh—

On, on wailed the chant. At last the Malay shook his head, shrugged thin shoulders under his cotton shirt, and cast an uneasy glance at Briggs, looming black-bearded and angry at his side.

“Well, what’s it all about?” demanded the captain, thudding a fist on the rail. “Sayin’ anythin’ about me, or the *Silver Fleece*? If he is—”

“No, sar. Nothin’ so, sar.”

“Well, what?”

“He sing about wicked things. About sin. He say—”

“*What* does he say, you cinder from the Pit?”

“He say, you take coal, wash him long time, in water of roses, coal never get white. Sin always stay. He say, rain fall long time, one year, ocean never get fresh water. Always salty water. Sin always stay. He say one small piece indigo fall in one jar of goat-milk, spoil all milk, make all milk blue. One sin last all life, always.” The Malay paused, trying to muster his paucity of English. Briggs shook him roughly, bidding him go on, or suffer harm.

“He say if sky will go to fall down, no man can hold him up. Sin always fall down. He say, good seed on land, him grow. Good seed on ocean, him never grow. He say—”

“That’ll do! Stow your jaw, now!”

“Yas, sar.”

“Get out—go forrard!”

The Malay salaamed, departed. Briggs hailed him again.

“Hey, you!”

“Yes, sar?” answered the brown fellow, wheeling.

“What’s your name—if pigs have names?”

“Mahmud Baba, sar,” the Malay still replied with outward calm. Yet to call a follower of the Prophet “pig” could not by

any invention of the mind have been surpassed in the vocabulary of death-inviting insult.

“My Mud Baby, eh? Good name—that’s a slick one!” And Briggs roared into a laugh of drunken discord. He saw not that the Malay face was twitching; he saw not the stained teeth in grimaces of sudden hate. Gloom veiled this. “I’ll remember that,” he went on. “My Mud Baby. Well now, Mud Baby, back to your sty!”

“Captain Briggs,” the doctor put in, fair desperate to get this brute below-decks ere blood should flow. “Captain, if you were as anxious as I am for a good stiff game of poker and a stiffer drink, you wouldn’t be wasting your breath on Malay rubbish. Shall we mix a toddy for the first one?”

“Good idea, sir!” Briggs answered, his eyes brightening. He clapped Filhiol on the shoulder, so that the man reeled toward the after-companion.

Down the stairway they went, the doctor cursing under his breath, Briggs clumping heavily, singing a snatch of low ribaldry from a Bombay gambling-hell. They entered the cabin. To them, as the door closed, still droned the voice of the minstrel on the bund:

*Sebab tiada tahon menari dikatakan tembad,
Tabour bidjian diatas tasik tiada akan toumbounh.*

One drop of indigo spoils the whole jar of milk;
Seed sown upon the ocean never grows.

CHAPTER III

SCURLOCK GOES ASHORE

Sweltering though the cabin was, it seemed to Dr. Filhiol a blessed haven of refuge from the probabilities of grievous harm that menaced, without. With a deep breath of relief he saw Briggs lay the kris on the cabin table. Himself, he sat down at that table, and while Briggs stood there half-grinning with white teeth through black beard, took up the knife.

He studied it, noting its keen, double edge, its polished steel, the deft carving of the lotus-bud handle. Then, as he laid it down, he offered:

"It's a genuine antique. I'll go you a month's wages against it."

"You'll do nothin' of the kind, sir!" ejaculated Briggs, and took it up again. "The voyage, you said, and it's that or nothing!"

The doctor bit his close-razored lip. Then he nodded. Filhiol was shrewd, and sober; Briggs, rash and drunk. Yes, for the sake of getting that cursed knife out of the captain's hands, Filhiol would accept.

"Put it out of harm's way, sir, and let's deal the cards," said he. "It's poisoned. We don't want it where we might get scratched, by accident."

"Poisoned, sir?" demanded Briggs, running a horny thumb along the point. His brows wrinkled, inquisitively. No fear showed in that splendidly male, lawless, unconquered face.

“For God’s sake, captain, put that devilish thing away!” exclaimed the doctor, feigning to shudder; though all the while a secret hope was whispering:

“Heaven send that he may cut himself!” Aloud he said: “I’ll play no game, sir, with that kris in sight. Put it in your locker, captain, and set out the drink. My throat’s afire!”

“Poisoned, eh?” grunted the captain again, still with drunken obstinacy testing the edge. “All damned nonsense, sir. After that’s been run into the Oregon pine of my mizzen, a couple of inches—”

“There’s still enough left to put you in a shotted hammock, sir, if you cut yourself,” the doctor insisted. “But it’s your own affair. If you choose to have Mr. Scurlock take the *Silver Fleece* back to Long Wharf, Boston, while you rot in Motomolo Straits—”

With a blasphemy, Briggs strode to his locker. The doctor smiled cannily as Briggs flung open the locker, tossed in the kris and, taking a square-shouldered bottle, returned to the table. This bottle the captain thumped down on the table, under the lamp-gleam.

“Best Old Jamaica,” boasted he. “Best is none too good, when I win my doctor’s entire pay. For it’s as good as mine already, and you can lay to that!”

Speaking, he worried out the cork. He sniffed at the bottle, blinked, peered wonderingly at the label, and sniffed again.

“Hell’s bells!” roared Briggs, flaring into sudden passion.

“What’s the matter, sir?”

“Old Jamaica!” vociferated the captain. “It *was* Old Jamaica, but now smell o’ that, will you?”

Filhiol sniffed, tentatively. In a second he knew some one had been tampering with the liquor, substituting low-grade spirits for Brigg’s choicest treasure; but he merely shrugged his shoulders, with:

"It seems like very good rum, sir. Come, let's mix our grog and get the cards."

"Good rum!" gibed Briggs. "Some thieving son of Satan has been at my Jamaica, and has been fillin' the square-face up with hog-slop, or I never sailed blue water! *Look* at the stuff now, will you?"

He spilled out half a glass of the liquor, tasted it, spat it upon the floor. Then he dashed the glass violently to the boards, crashing it to flying shards and spattering the rum all about. In a bull-like roar he shouted:

"Boy! You, there, boy!"

A moment, and one of the doors leading off the main cabin opened, on the port side. A pale, slim boy appeared and advanced into the cabin, blinking up with fear at the black-bearded vision of wrath.

"Yes, sir? What is it, sir?" asked he, in a scared voice.

Briggs dealt him a cuff that sent him reeling. The captain's huge hand, swinging back, overset the bottle, that gurgled out its life-blood.

"What *is* it?" shouted Briggs. "You got the impudence to ask me what it is? I'll learn you to step livelier when I call, you whelp! Come here!"

"Yes, sir," quavered the boy. Shaking, he sidled nearer. "What—what do you want, sir?"

"What do I *want*?" the captain howled; while Filhiol, suddenly pale with a rage that shook his heart, pressed lips hard together, lest some word escape them. "You swab! Catechisin' me, are you? Askin' *me* what I want, eh? If I had a rope's-end here I'd show you! Get out, now. Go, tell Mr. Scurlock I want him. Jump!"

The lad ducked another blow, ran to the cabin-door and sprang for the stairs. Ill-fortune ran at his side. He missed footing, sprawled headlong up the companion stairway.

With a shout of exultation, Briggs caught up from a corner a long, smooth stick, with a polished knob carved from a root—one of the clubs known in the Straits as “Penang-lawyers,” by reason of their efficacy in settling disputes. He grabbed the writhing boy, now frantically trying to scrabble up the stairs, in a clutch that almost crunched the frail shoulder bones. Up the companion he dragged him—the boy screaming with terror of death—and hurled him out on deck, fair against the wheel.

The boy collapsed in a limp, groaning heap. Briggs laughed wildly, and, brandishing the Penang-lawyer, advanced out upon the dim-lit planking.

An arm thrust him back.

“You ain’t goin’ to hit that there boy!” shouted a voice—William Scurlock’s. “Not while I’m alive, you ain’t!”

A wrench and the club flew over the rail. It splashed in the dark, slow waters of the Timbago.

Briggs gulped. He whirled, both fists knotted. Then, swift as a cobra, he sprang and struck.

Scurlock dodged. The captain’s fist, finding no mark, drove against one of the spokes of the wheel with a crash that split the hickory. As Briggs had never cursed before, now he cursed. For a second or two he nursed his damaged hand.

The brief respite sufficed. Scurlock snatched up the boy. He started forward, just as the doctor appeared at the top of the companion.

“Captain Briggs, sir!” cried Filhiol, in a shaking voice. Still he was hoping against hope to keep the peace. “Are you hurt, sir?”

“To hell with you!” roared Briggs, now forgetting sea-etiquette—surest indication of the extremity of his drunken passion. He lurched after the retreating Scurlock. “Back,

here, you bloody swine! Drop that brat, and I'll show you who's boss!"

Scurlock laughed mockingly and quickened his stride. Mad with the rage that kills, Briggs pursued, a huge, lunging figure of malevolence and hate. Before he could lay grips on Scurlock, the mate wheeled. He let the fainting boy slide down on deck, whipped out a clasp-knife, snicked open the blade. Holding it low, to rip upward, he confronted Briggs under the glimmer of the mizzen-lantern.

Now this was raw mutiny, and a hanging matter if Scurlock drew one drop of the captain's blood. But that Scurlock cared nothing for the noose was very plain to see. Even the crimson rage of Briggs saw death knocking at the doors of his life. Barehanded, he could not close for battle. He recoiled, his bloodshot eyes shuttling for some handy weapon.

"Damn you, if I had that kris—" he panted.

"But you ain't, you lousy bucko!" mocked Scurlock. "An' you turn your back on me, to go for it, if you dare!"

Briggs sprang for the rail. He snatched at a belaying-pin, with wicked blasphemies. The pin stuck, a moment. He wrenched it clear, and wheeled—too late.

Already Scurlock had snatched up the boy again. Already he was at the gangway. Down it he leaped, to the bund. With the unconscious boy still in the crook of his left arm, he shoved into the scatter of idling natives. Then he turned, raised a fist of quivering hatred, and flung his defiance toward the vague, yellow-clad figure now hesitating at the top of the gangway, pin in hand:

"I'm through with you, you rum-soaked hellbender! He's through, too, the boy is. We'll take our chances with the Malays an' the plague."

Scurlock's voice, rising out of the softly-lit tropic evening, died suddenly.

“Come back, Mr. Scurlock, and bring that boy!” cried the doctor, from the rail.

“I’ve got nothin’ against you, sir,” answered Scurlock. “But against *him*. God! If I come back, it’ll only be to cut his black heart out an’ throw it to the sharks. We’re done!”

A moment Briggs stood drunkenly peering, half minded to pursue, to match his belaying-pin against the mate’s dirk. Gurgling in his throat—for excess of rage had closed upon all speech—he panted, with froth upon his black beard, while dim figures along the rail and on shore waited great deeds. Then all at once he laughed—a horrible, deep-throated laugh, rising, swelling to mighty and bestial merriment; the laugh of a gorilla, made man.

“The Malays and the plague,” he thickly stammered. “—He’s said it—let ’em go! They’re good as dead already, and hell take ’em!”

He swung on his heel, then strode back unsteadily to the companion. Down it he lunged. Still laughing, he burst into the heat and reek of the cabin.

“Come on, doctor,” cried he, “our cards, our cards!”

CHAPTER IV

THE CURSE OF NENEK KABAYAN

"He'll steal no more of my Old Jamaica," exulted Briggs, flinging himself into a chair by the table. "And that sniveling boy will give me no more of his infernal lip! Skunks!" He picked up the bottle, still containing a little rum, and poured a gulp of liquor down his throat. "On my own ship!"

"Where are the cards, sir?" asked Filhiol. His voice, quivering, was hardly audible.

"Petty game," burst out the captain, "no good. Make it a real one, and I'll go you!"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Stakes worth playin' for! Man-size stakes! You got money in Boston, sir. Some fifteen thousand. I'll play you for that, plus your wages this voyage!"

"Against what, sir?"

"Against my share of the ship's cargo, and my share of the *Silver Fleece*, herself. And if I scuttle her, as scuttle her I may, in case the insurance money foots bigger than the ship's worth and the cargo, I stake that money, too!"

The doctor pondered a moment, while Briggs pressed a hand to his thick neck, redly swollen with heat and rum. Suddenly the captain broke out again:

"That's an A1 gamble for you, sir. When I land my West Coast natives at San Felipe, and slip my opium into Boston, there won't be a shipmaster walk up State Street that will be better fixed than I'll be."

"Bring out the cards, sir," answered the doctor. "But the kris goes in as part of the wager?"

"Yes, damn it, and I'll be generous," slavered Briggs. He jerked open the table drawer and fetched out a well-thumbed pack of cards, which he flung on the green cloth. "I'll put up a stake that'd make any man's mouth water, sir, if he *is* a man! Though maybe you're not, bein' only a sawbones!"

"What's that, sir?"

"The yellow wench asleep in my berth—Kuala Pahang!"

"Done!" exclaimed Filhiol, humoring the ruffian to all possible limits, till liquor and heat should have overcome him.

"Deal the cards, sir!" cried Briggs. "I may be a bucko, and I may be drunk to-night, but I know a man when I see one. I'm not too drunk to add your wages and your savin's to my plunder. Deal the cards!"

Filhiol had just fallen to shuffling the pasteboards when a groan, from behind the door of the captain's private cabin, arrested his hand. Frowning, he swung around. In his tensing hand the cards bent almost double.

Briggs buffeted him upon the shoulder, with huge merriment.

"*She's* not dead yet, is she?" exulted he. "No, no, not yet. Even though everybody in this devil's hole claims the wenches will die first, before they'll be a white man's darlin'." His speech had become so thick as to be hardly speech at all. "All infernal liars, sawbones! She's been here already two days, Topsy has. An' is she dead yet? Not very! No, nor not goin' to die, neither, an' you can lay to that! Nor get away from me. Not while I'm alive, an' master o' the *Silver Fleece*!"

The doctor's jaw set so hard that his tanned skin whitened over the maxillary muscles. Very vividly Filhiol still

perceived the danger of general mutiny, of mass-attack from Batu Kawan, of fire and sword impending before the clipper could be got down-river and away. Come all that night, he must cling to Briggs, warily, humoringly.

After all, what was one native girl, more or less? The doctor shuffled the cards again, and dealt, under the raw light of the swinging-lamp. A louder cry from the girl turned Briggs around.

"Damnation!" he blared, starting up. "If the wench gets to howling, she'll raise the town. I'm goin' to shut her jaw, and shut it hard!"

"Quite right, sir," assented the doctor, though his deep eyes glowed with murder. "But, why not get under way, at once, drop down the river to-night, anchor inside Ulu Salama bar till—"

Briggs interrupted him with a boisterous laugh.

"Even Reuben Ranzo, the tailor," he giped, "could give you points on navigation!" He stared at Filhiol a moment, his face darkening; then added harshly: "You stick to your pills and powders, Mr. Filhiol, or there'll be trouble. I won't have anybody tryin' to boss. Now, I'm not goin' to tell you twice!"

For three heartbeats their eyes met. The doctor's had become injected with blood. His face had assumed an animal expression. Briggs snapped his thick fingers under the physician's nose, then turned with an oath and strode to his cabin door. He snatched it open, and stood there a moment peering in, his face deep-lined in a mask of vicious rage.

"Captain Briggs!"

The doctor's voice brought the ruffian about with a sharp turn.

"*You* mutinous, too?" shouted he, swinging his shoulders, loose, hulking, under the yellow silk of his jacket.

“By no means, sir. As a personal favor to me, however, I’m asking you not to strike that girl.” The doctor’s voice was shaking; yet still he sat there at the table, holding his cards in a quivering hand.

“You look out for your own skin, sawbones!” Briggs menaced. “The woman’s mine to do with as I please, an’ it’s nobody’s damn business, you lay to that! I’ll love her or beat her or throw her to the sharks, as I see fit. So now you hear me, an’ I warn you proper, stand clear o’ me, or watch out for squalls!”

Into the cabin he lunged, just as another door, opening, disclosed a sleepy-eyed, yellow-haired young man—Mr. Wansley, second-mate of the devil-ship. Wansley stared, and the doctor stood up with doubled fists, as they heard the sound of blows from within, then shriller cries, ending in a kind of gurgle—then silence.

The doctor gripped both hands together, striving to hold himself. The life of every white man aboard now depended absolutely on seeing this thing through without starting mutiny and war.

“Get back in your cabin, Mr. Wansley, for God’s sake!” he exclaimed, “or go on deck! The captain’s crazy drunk. If he sees you here, there’ll be hell to pay. Get out, quick!”

Wansley grasped the situation and made a speedy exit up the after-companion, just ahead of Briggs’s return. The captain banged his cabin door, and staggered back to the table. He dusted his palms one against the other.

“The black she-dog won’t whine again, for *one* while,” he grinned with white teeth through his mat of beard. “That’s the only way to teach ‘em their lesson!” He clenched both fists, turning them, admiring them under the lamp-light. “Great pacifiers, eh, sawbones? / tell you! Beat a dog an’ a woman, an’ you can’t go far off your course. So now I’ll deal the cards, an’ win every cent you’ve got!”

"The cards are dealt, sir," answered Filhiol, chalky to the lips.

"Yes, an' you've been here with 'em, all alone!" retorted the captain. "No, sir, that won't go. Fresh deal—here, I'll do it!"

He gathered the dealt hands and unsteadily began shuffling, while the doctor, teeth set in lip, swallowed the affront. Some of the cards escaped the drunken brute's thick fingers; two or three dropped to the floor.

"Pick 'em up, sir," directed Briggs. "No captain of my stamp bends his back before another man—an' besides, I know you'd be glad to knife me, while I was down!"

Filhiol made no answer. He merely obeyed, and handed the cards to Briggs, who was about to deal, when all at once his hands arrested their motion. His eyes fixed themselves in an incredulous, widening stare, at the forward cabin door. His massive jaw dropped. A sound escaped his throat, but no word came.

The doctor spun his chair around. He, too, beheld a singular apparition; though how it could have got there—unless collusion had been at work among the Malays in the waist—seemed hard to understand.

So silently the door had slid, that the coming of the aged native woman had made no sound. Aged she seemed, incredibly old, wizen, dried; though with these people who can tell of age? The dim light revealed her barefooted, clad in a short, gaudily-striped skirt, a tight-wrapped body-cloth that bound her shrunken breast. Coins dangled from her ears; her straight black hair was drawn back flatly; her lips, reddened with lime and betel, showed black, sharp-filed teeth in a horrible snarl of hatred.

Silent, a strange yellow ghostlike thing, she crept nearer. Briggs sprang up, snatched the rum-bottle by its neck and

waited, quivering. Right well he knew the woman—old Dangan Jouga, mother of Kuala, his prey.

For the first time in years unnerved, he stood there. Had she rushed in at him, screamed, vociferated, clawed with hooked talons, beaten at him with skinny fists, he would have knocked her senseless, dragged her on deck and flung her to the bund; but this cold, silent, beady-eyed approach took all his sails aback.

Only for a moment, however. Briggs was none of your impressionable men, the less so when in drink.

“Get out!” he shouted, brandishing the bottle. “Out o’ this, or by God—”

The door, opening again, disclosed the agitated face of Texel, a foremast hand.

“Cap’n Briggs, sir!” exclaimed this wight, touching his cap, “one o’ the Malays says *she*, there, has got news o’ Mr. Scurlock an’ the boy, sir, that you’ll want to hear. He’s out here now, the Malay is. Will I tell him to come in?”

“I could have you flogged, you scum, for darin’ to come into my cabin till you’re called,” shouted Briggs. “But send the pig in!”

The bottle lowered, as Briggs peered frowning at the silent hag. Uncanny, this stillness was. Tempests, hurricanes of passion and of hate would have quite suited him; but the old Malay crone, standing there half-way to the table, the light glinting from her deep coal-black eyes, her withered hands clutching each other across her wasted body, disconcerted even his bull-like crassness.

The seaman turned and whistled. At once, a Malay slid noiselessly in, salaamed and stood waiting. Texel, nervously fingering the cap he held in his hands, lingered by the door.

“Oh, it’s you again, Mud Baby, is it?” cried the bucko. “What’s the news Dangan Jouga has for me? Tell her to hand it over an’ then clear out! Savvy?”