

# The House of the Wicked

A STORY OF ADVENTURE AND INTRIGUE IN THE FAR EAST

By Eleanor Gates and Frederick Moore

FRANCIS WEATHERBEE, an adventurous young American wandering through the Far East, ships as second mate on the schooner *Lillebonne*, from Manila to Java. The captain of the schooner, Blodgett, proves to be a sodden drunkard, and the first mate, Noakes, such a brutal tyrant that on a misty night, off the coast of Borneo, Weatherbee slips away in a small boat. Rowing shoreward, he finds himself in the mouth of a river, and in the mangrove jungle that fringes the water he stumbles upon a good-sized steamer. At first the vessel seems to be derelict, but on climbing aboard Weatherbee discovers a surprising state of things.

The vessel is the *Tai-Lan*, owned by Thaddeus Stone, a great figure in the trade of the East. Stone, an elderly millionaire, has suspected his wife, a beautiful girl, of an intrigue with a younger man named Houghton. To punish these two, he has trapped them on the *Tai-Lan*—which has been reported lost in a typhoon—and is holding them as prisoners in this remote hiding place, with a white man named Markin and three native servants as their jailers. Markin frankly explains the situation to Weatherbee, and tells him that as he now knows Stone's secret he cannot be permitted to leave the *Tai-Lan*.

To this virtual imprisonment the American has to submit. He meets his fellow prisoners in the ship's dining saloon, which is divided by wire partitions into two compartments, one for Mrs. Stone—or Ellice Loring, to use her maiden name—and one for Houghton. Here they are quartered—not in physical discomfort, for they are well fed, and have books and a piano—but under the cruel mental torture of being practically buried alive in their sunless, solitary cages.

On telling Houghton of his experience aboard the *Lillebonne*, Weatherbee learns that the schooner is one of Stone's ships, and is probably bringing supplies for the *Tai-Lan*. The prospect of the arrival of Blodgett and Noakes is an alarming one.

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OVERHEAD, on the deck of the *Tai-Lan*, the pounding and scraping of the sea ladder ceased. Weatherbee shook his head regretfully.

"I'm afraid I forgot our situation when I asked you to sing," he said to Ellice Loring. "It came exactly at the wrong time. They'll think we're too cheerful, and—"

"No, no!" she interrupted, and waved a white hand indifferently.

"If they were to take away your piano," he went on, "I should feel that it was my fault."

"No danger," she declared. "You forget that the piano was put here for me to use. I fancy our master jailer, as he sits thinking about us in Manila, or wherever he is, enjoys himself like a man who catches and cages birds, and then allows them to go on singing. It salves what is left of his conscience, for he can pride himself on his generous treatment," she concluded, with a laugh.

A crash against the side of the *Tai-Lan*, somewhere forward, told of the dropping of the ladder overside. Through the nearest port, over which a piece of mosquito netting was moving gently in the breath of wind, there sounded a loud, clear voice, in which there was a touch of jocularly:

"Hello there, Nick!"

"That's Blodgett!" whispered Weatherbee at Houghton's ear. "Maybe Noakes hasn't come."

Now Markin answered, his words being somewhat blurred:

"How are you, captain? Didn't expect you for another month."

"Orders from the chief. Say, you ain't got any news for me, have you?"

"What makes you ask?"

"Oh, I don't mean the lady and her friend. I just heard her concert. No—I've had the devil's own luck. New second mate of mine jumped out in the night when we was anchored a mile or so out, and took my dinghy. What 'll we do?"

Markin was evidently in a playful mood.

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"Is he a tall, handsome young gent, dressed up like a beach comber?" he inquired facetiously.

"You *got* him?"

The captain, apparently, was not convinced by the description.

"That's all right," Markin answered. "I got him. Look right here, cap'n—here's your dinghy!"

"A-a-a-ah!"

It was a rumbling bellow that came from a third throat, and it expressed diabolical satisfaction.

Weatherbee and Houghton exchanged a quick glance. There was no need to speak. Both knew that, under the bows of the *Tai-Lan*, was the man most to be dreaded.

Then Noakes's voice sang out:

"So you picked up that dude, eh? Well, that's the best thing I've heard since they told me, 'Blinker Noakes, you're born!' Skipper, recollect what you promised? If he was here, you said he was mine to handle. Well, I'll learn him to jump ship!"

"How'd you come to get him?"

This was Blodgett once more, and it seemed as if he was avoiding an answer to the mate.

Markin guffawed.

"Spied him just outside, in a wisp of fog. Put my glasses on him, and didn't recognize him; but as I knew the dinghy was from the *Lillebonne*, I made up my mind I'd better call him in and be on the safe side. Of course, at first, I thought you'd sent him, but as he didn't seem to be looking for the *Tai-Lan*, I tinkled the gong, and he pushed into the brush down there, looking as puzzled as a monkey. When he found the old ship, he was still more upset; and when he came aboard, I could see that he didn't know what it was all about. So I invited him aft, after he'd prowled for a while in the chart room."

Blodgett burst into loud laughter. He was plainly relieved and happy to find that Weatherbee was not at large; but Noakes rolled out an oath.

"Aw, he knowed you was here! He got away from the *Lillebonne* just to find you, never suspecting *we* would come up the river. I savvy that guy! I been on to him since he put foot in the schooner!"

"I think you're wrong," Markin observed carelessly. "He couldn't see the *Tai-Lan* from where he was. Leastways, he couldn't see that it was a ship. I've tried it from the river myself."

Noakes began to growl.

"If he could or he couldn't," he retorted, "anyhow, I'll give him a few pointers on sneakin' off and takin' a boat along!"

A moment, and there came a straining and a creaking, as pressure was put on the wooden cross bars of the ladder. Some one was mounting to the steamer's deck.

"Suppose we sit down," suggested Houghton.

His voice was curiously strained. When he seated himself, he raised the heel of his right foot, rested the toe of his dress pump on the matting, and fell to jiggling his knee. Weatherbee had noted the same habit only a short time before.

"This man is quiet," he reflected, "but, underneath all that quiet, he's wretchedly nervous!"

For some reason, he did not feel nervous himself.

"I suppose," he pondered, "that after a man's done just so much worrying over a thing, he works his worry off, and he's prepared to take it as it comes. Maybe I'm confident, because I know that with one good blow on the jaw I can lay my friend Noakes out flat. In that case, I shan't let him up again. He'll stay flat!"

As several pairs of shoes thumped and pounded the deck above, coming aft along the saloon deck, Houghton faced around upon the younger man. It became evident that what was going through Weatherbee's mind was also in the mind of his companion—the thought of a fight.

"In spite of what Miss Loring has said," he began, "if they insult you, don't fight, except as a very last resort. I mean, don't fight until you're sure beyond a doubt that whether you fight or not you're in for hard treatment. I'll tell you why, Mr. Weatherbee. If you fight, and they're rough with you, I shall be tempted to be drawn into the trouble. Well, that's what I don't want to happen. I must go on living, and I want you to go on living. You understand me, I am sure. You'll keep your temper, won't you? We mustn't run any chances of leaving this girl shut up down here alone!"

Weatherbee's reply was as hearty as he could make it.

"We don't want to leave Miss Loring alone," he declared. "We surely don't. I see your argument. I'll remember your caution. I won't forget how she's situated."

A curious smile crossed Houghton's grave face.

"Sometimes it's a bit difficult for a man to hold himself," he went on. He jerked his head toward a near-by cabin door. "I've got some golf clubs in there, and I would hate to tell you how many hundreds of times I've rehearsed using them on somebody!"

His knee danced harder than ever.

"Natural enough," was Weatherbee's comment.

Silently he made a point of remembering the clubs.

After that, for a while, no more was said. At intervals, a yellow light, diffused and faint, would strike upon a port, and upon the branches hanging against it, as if a lantern were being moved in the boat which had come alongside. At the same time, the three who were listening and waiting could hear more poundings and thumpings on deck.

"Supplies for the Tai-Lan," Houghton explained. "They're always put aboard at night, like this. That shows, I think, that they don't let the native crew in on the secret. They probably make 'em believe that the boxes, and so on, are for some settlement not far away, or that it's a bit of smuggling or gun running."

To Weatherbee, the transshipment of the stores in the night cleared away all that had puzzled him.

"This is what Noakes didn't want me to see," he said. "Naturally, I would ask more questions than a native sailor, or I would keep quiet and draw my own conclusions. Also, when I got back to Manila, I would surely do some dangerous talking!"

"They'll leave you here with us, right enough," added Houghton, with finality.

An hour passed. Evidently the boat's load of stores was aboard, for Markin and his guests could be heard from the direction of the well deck, where chairs were being pulled about. Glasses could be heard clinking, too, and there was the constant murmur of conversation, with much rough laughter.

"I don't believe they'll come in here tonight," Weatherbee declared. "It's late, and they'll stay out where it's cool."

Houghton roused himself.

"Ellice, my dear girl," he said, "you might as well get some rest while you can."

Leaning back in a low grass chair, facing them, she moved her dark head from side to side.

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"I couldn't rest," she answered cheerfully. "There's no use of my trying to sleep. I won't hide the truth from you. I expect those three gentlemen to make a call. Oh, not to look at you and me, Will! The captain and his assistant will want to refresh their eyes with the sight of their lost second mate." She smiled. "I know that if I'm here when they come, they'll behave better than if I weren't here, and you two were alone."

"You're anxious," asserted Weatherbee, "and I'm the cause of your anxiety. I'm sorry for that. Supplies have been brought here before, and you didn't worry. Well, if you can, look at it this way, please, both of you—a few hours ago, neither of you knew I was on the face of the earth. No matter what happens, forget, a few hours from now, that you've ever seen me."

To that neither Houghton nor the girl made any reply; but the former, rising and coming to his visitor, held out his hand.

"I'm going to say good night," he announced; "but not because I'm going to bed, for I'm not. It's you who must have some rest. You look tired enough to fall over sideways."

"You're right," said Weatherbee, as he shook hands. "I'm as tired as a dog; and it's good common sense to get rested as much as possible before anything happens."

"Stay here five minutes longer," bade the elder man. "I'll change into something lighter. Then I'll take the first watch. When it's past midnight, I'll wake you."

Houghton disappeared into a cabin, but without entirely closing the door. Left alone, Weatherbee sat down again. The girl fanned herself languidly, but neither spoke.

Presently, as he listened intently, Weatherbee realized that the voices outside were drawing away and away, slowly, gradually. As they went, they lulled him, so that he could not help closing his eyes.

When he awoke, Houghton was beside him again, wearing a soft white shirt and duck trousers. A glance at his own watch showed Weatherbee that nearly three-quarters of an hour had passed. He sprang up, a trifle disconcerted at being caught asleep.

"But I'm as fit as a fiddle," he declared, "and I couldn't sleep again right away, to save my life. It's always like that when I get forty winks; so you take a nap."

Houghton smiled a wry smile.

"I couldn't settle down, either," he confessed. "What do you both say if I read?"

He read; but it was soon evident that neither of the others was listening.

"As I don't know myself what I'm reading," Houghton admitted, chuckling, "I suppose the best thing that two of us can do is have a game of cards."

It was over the game of cards, when Weatherbee could speak so that the girl would believe he was referring to the game, that he made a suggestion.

"Mr. Houghton," he half whispered, "when that bunch shows up, I want them to find us quarreling. Then do you demand that I should be taken out of here. If I stay, I'm going to be a source of worry to Miss Loring."

Houghton would not consent to carry out the suggestion.

"No," he said, going on with his playing, and also speaking low, "I don't want you to leave. You're on the Tai-Lan for good, and that means under lock and key; and there's no other place where you can be comfortable—and be safe for Markin. Don't mention such a thing to Ellice Loring. You can be a great help to her, if you will. Stay with us, Weatherbee, until fate gives us a new deal."

"But if Noakes starts any brutal tactics here?"

"You're safest here."

They played a second game, and then sat back, unable to concentrate their minds even on the cards. There was to be only a short period of suspense. Presently, with a rattling of a ring knob on some door of the social hall above, the voices of the three men suddenly broke loudly upon the ears of the prisoners. Harsh and most blatant of all was the voice of Noakes.

"Here they come!" announced Weatherbee, under his breath.

At once they lighted cigarettes. Then, with a composure that his inner feelings belied, Weatherbee sat back in his chair. Ellice Loring was continuing to fan herself languidly. Houghton pretended to be half asleep.

With his heart uncomfortably active, Weatherbee essayed a smoke ring—as down the companion came three pairs of feet.

Markin led the way. When all of him was in sight, this was such a changed Markin that Weatherbee, watching, with head tipped back and lids half lowered, almost forgot the mate, who came last.

Markin's walk was different; so was his general bearing. He did not shuffle. He kept his head up. His air was official. He ignored his prisoners—Weatherbee included. The smiles which, throughout the day, had wreathed his full face were gone. Now his expression was dark, lowering, sulky.

When Markin spoke, Weatherbee realized that even his speech was not what it had been throughout the day. He did not drawl lazily, or clip his words. He was curt, precise.

"He'll bear close watching," he was saying. "I don't want to criticize you gentlemen, but you let a sly one get through your fingers this time!"

As Markin halted at the bottom step of the stairs, Blodgett came lurching past him. The captain's long, sea-browned countenance was flushed with both liquor and anger. He carried his big, awkward frame unsteadily.

"So here you are!" he burst out at Weatherbee. "You're a parlor sailor, I see. First-class passenger stuff is what you want. Step up to this wire and lemme git a look at you! I've got a word to say to you, I have! Come, I say! Stand to your feet!"

Weatherbee did not obey, but he took the cigarette from between his lips.

"Skipper," he said good-naturedly, "please come back at a more suitable time to talk about this matter. Come back when you're sober."

The captain's long face was divided by a stiff black mustache. This now began to lift and fall belligerently, as Blodgett stuffed his hands into his pockets, sprawled his feet in order to secure his balance, and squared himself in front of Weatherbee's chair.

"Friends of yours, eh, this couple?" he demanded. "That's the kind of cattle I shipped, is it—a man that's working against my owner?"

"I don't care to serve under a drunken captain," replied Weatherbee.

With a deep, explosive breath, Blodgett swung himself half around and made back unsteadily toward the companion.

"All right, Mr. Noakes," he announced thickly. "You take him over. This place is too hot for me!"

He hauled himself up the stairs by a hand on the brass railing.

Noakes slouched forward in his heelless slippers. His yellow eyes were wide.

"Just a accident that you skipped when we was off the mouth of this river, warn't it?" he demanded harshly. "Ba-a-ah! You think I'm a fool, hey? I know the low-down on why you jumped out—somebody hired you to ship with us. Now own up, you swine!"

Weatherbee answered quietly.

"Use your brain, Mr. Noakes," he suggested. "If I'd known about the Tai-Lan, would I have come straight to her, in order to have the pleasure of talking to you again? Or would I have waited until you had cleared out with the Lillebonne?"

A gleeful grin showed the toothy gap in the mate's mouth. He gave a toss of his head that sent his stringy, bleached locks off his narrow forehead.

"Sure enough!" he exclaimed. "I thought you was playin' us slick, but you was just gettin' away from work—and me! Well, you done it, didn't you? Here's the best place to have a rest any man ever found—to have a rest and be a reg'lar pet!"

The mate's thin, bristling face twisted in laughter. Weatherbee continued to smoke composedly.

"The thing to do is not to let him feel that he's got a rise out of me," he thought. "Taking the situation indifferently will bring down his tail feathers."

"And won't you be pleased," Noakes went on, "when I tell you that you're goin' to be a pet of mine? Ha-a-a-a! Won't that be fine? You see, Mr. Markin here, he's goin' on his vacation, and for a spell I'm to be in charge of the Tai-Lan."

Houghton sprang up.

"Mr. Markin, I object to this change of command," he declared angrily. "You know yourself that the man beside you is unfit to take over this job. Look at him—unclean, shiftless, ignorant!"

Noakes burst into loud and raucous laughter.

"Worse'n that!" he taunted. "I don't wonder you object! Go ahead! Keep it up! It'll do you a lot of good!"

Then, for half a minute, there was silence. Weatherbee stayed in his chair, the butt of his cigarette between his fingers, his look on Houghton. To challenge the plans of his jailers was, as he knew, useless. His mind was centered on that golf bag full of metal-headed sticks.

Houghton once more addressed Markin.

"So far," he said, his voice trembling with the force of his emotions, "though

we've been outrageously treated by being shut up here, we give you credit for courtesy and consideration; but this man! It isn't in him to give us either courtesy or consideration. And here, locked away from the light, and from life, almost, is this young woman—"

Noakes broke out into laughter again.

"Oh, you're worried about *her*, all right, all right!" he observed ironically.

Markin took a letter from an inner pocket of his coat.

"Mr. Stone's orders," he said briefly. "They were brought by Captain Blodgett. I can't alter 'em. Mr. Noakes is in charge now."

"But you're coming back again, Mr. Markin?"

"Say, they're crazy about you, Nick!" chortled the mate, shifting his gangling figure from slipper to slipper.

Markin was answering.

"Don't bring on trouble—I'll be back in a month."

"Then you'll leave orders about our treatment?" persisted Houghton. "It will be understood that things will go on here as they have these last fourteen months? You certainly haven't the heart to go out from this swamp and know, as you go, that we're going to be abused and insulted!"

At that, Weatherbee rose and stepped forward.

"Mr. Markin," he began, "you know as well as I do that there can be no feeling against this gentleman here, and the young lady. In the eyes of the new commander of the Tai-Lan, I'm the only one who deserves bad treatment. Well, I feel that if I'm taken—"

But Houghton would not let Weatherbee proceed.

"No, no, no!" he cried vehemently. "I know what you're going to say—you want to be put in another part of this steamer, where you can be knocked around without our seeing it; but neither Miss Loring nor I will consent to that. We protest, Mr. Markin! We protest with every ounce of humanity in us! Mr. Stone thinks he owes us this awful punishment. We have submitted, because there was nothing else to do; but this man has done nothing. Certainly the leaving of the Lillebonne shouldn't lay him open to ill usage or torture. We want him here with us, Mr. Markin. I beg of you not to make the change he asks for. It's splendid of him, but—"

Markin raised a hand to make an impatient gesture, as if the pleading annoyed him. It was Noakes who spoke.

"Houghton, you'll git along all right with me, if you behave yourself," the mate observed significantly; "but I don't like swank, if you git what I mean. When a man's behind the wire, the best thing he can do is to be quiet and easy like, and hold his tongue."

Houghton turned his back on the mate and walked away.

"I'll stand for no lawlessness, mind that!" Noakes went on. "The way you're treated will depend on how you behave, and you can just put that in your pipe and smoke it! Beginn'n' to-morrow, I'm master aboard the Tai-Lan, and all by myself. Things 'll run as usual; but none o' you'd better lose sight of the fact that I'm master here!" He faced toward Markin. "You mean to say they've got *books*?" he demanded.

"Orders," was the laconic reply.

"My land!" returned the mate, disgusted. "Books, and a piano!" His peaked face was turning in the opposite direction now. "Comforts of trippers is what I call 'em. Why, the place is run like a liner! No wonder this bunch feels high and mighty! What's needed here is a shift o' tricks, that's what! When a man like you comes in, Mr. Markin, these guys ought to be made to stand up to attention, properly respectful."

Houghton turned around and again addressed Markin.

"You ought to be able to see right now how things are likely to be with us when you're gone from this ship, and we're at this man's mercy!" he said.

Markin tossed his arms impatiently.

"I been here longer than I took on for," he replied with temper. "It's a lazy life, but a little of it goes a long ways. I've treated Mr. Stone the best I know, but I need a change. I can't dictate to Mr. Noakes how he's to run things. He's in control, I tell you. Behave yourselves, and I guess you'll get along all right."

Houghton faced toward Weatherbee and stared, his face colorless and working. Plainly he was aghast at the new situation—something neither of them could have possibly foreseen.

Markin was about to go. As if a sudden humorous thought had occurred to him, he glanced toward Houghton.

"But I'm glad to hear you're hankering for me to return," he observed. "I'm quite a pleasant gentleman, I am. It 'll seem nice to be missed!"

"You mean that life aboard the Tai-Lan, from now on, is going to be hell for us," Houghton retorted.

Noakes chuckled as he swung slowly around upon the speaker.

"If a hell's what you're lookin' for," he said jovially, "I can match any man at that game. You make things hard for me, I'll make things hard for you. Oh, I'm always fair, I am! I give back exac'ly what's give me. As for this crimson explorer of Borneo rivers"—he grinned at Weatherbee—"he ain't done with me, as he'll jolly well find out. There ain't no Cap'n Blodgett to stand in my way here. I'm top boss!"

"Oh, let it go at that!" snapped Markin, as if he himself were weary of the other's covert threats.

Weatherbee turned to Houghton.

"I believe," he remarked, "that all the while I was aboard the Lillebonne I was under suspicion, and that I was being brought right here. Skipping the schooner, and being lured in here by Markin, simply saved them the trouble of bringing me here as a prisoner."

Once more Noakes laughed outright.

"You got it!" he declared. "Here was where I told the cap'n you belonged. If we didn't land you here, you'd have landed us all in Bilibid Prison, or some other place, for the balance of our lives."

Weatherbee did not answer him.

"Steady as she goes!" continued Noakes, quite as if he had been replied to impudently. "We'll git on fine, old chum, you and me! How about the lady passenger?"

The palm leaf fan was going steadily. It continued to wave. The girl did not turn her eyes toward the four men.

"S'pose I have a look at her," persisted Noakes. "Any objection, Mr. Markin?"

"Not a bit from me."

"Stand up, lady!" Noakes gave the order lazily. "I like to see what kind of folks I'm goin' to be in charge of."

He sauntered close to the wire screen on that side. Miss Loring did not seem to have heard him.

"So-o-o!" remarked Noakes. "You think you can snub me, do you? Well, maybe you can; but maybe, also, it 'd be nicer if you was to say 'good evenin', nice

and pretty, like one decent citizen to another. You seem to forgit, lady, that I'm takin' over Mr. Markin's job."

Still she did not notice him. He shrugged. Markin was now at the foot of the companionway, evidently impatient to be gone. The mate turned that way.

"All right-oh," he said easily; "but when Mr. Markin's gone, and I'm skipper here all by my lonesome, it's goin' to be all hands on their feet when I show up, I can tell you that! A new rule! Also, Mr. Markin, it strikes me there's too much tobacco wasted down in this place. It ain't good for the air—smells up the place so it's stale and bilgy below here."

Though the light was dim, Weatherbee could see that the girl's face was blazing with wrath. Noakes saw it, too. He pointed a finger at her.

"I guess you'll come into the wind before I'm done with you!" he promised pleasantly. "If you'll remember that top-gallant manners and fancy duds don't go with me, it might help things along. 'Speak when you're spoken to' is a rule of mine. I got other rules, too—good ones! From to-morrow on, they'll go in this old hulk, or I'll know a good reason!"

"Come out of this hot hole!"

It was Markin who spoke, from halfway up the companion, his tone showing suppressed annoyance.

"Right-oh, Nicky!" Noakes took another half dozen steps, stopped again, thrust his fingers into the wire mesh on the side occupied by the men, and shook it, as if testing its strength. Then, speaking very loud to Markin above him, whose feet only were visible on the steps: "I should think open ports would be dangerous for us. I'm agin pampering this outfit. A little work to do is my idea of runnin' the Tai-Lan, and not so much time for litterchoor. Make the bunch dig, and give the rest of the ship a rest—Chink and all. Ye-ah—that would be real popular, I'm thinkin'!"

Weatherbee, looking at the long-haired, wizen-faced mate, made one comment to himself.

"You black villain!"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Markin called down irritably.

Noakes was following at a leisurely pace. He paused on the bottom step.

"Cure 'em of airs!" he drawled.

Whereupon he stopped long enough to

do a little dance and strike an impudent attitude.

Then Weatherbee, watching that evil countenance, saw it suddenly change, and in a way that puzzled and dumfounded him. The amber eyes looked into his intently, and with meaning. Next, having glanced in the direction of the stairs to the social hall, Noakes gave the two men an exaggerated but solemn wink. Last of all, as he moved off, he puckered his unshaven lips and began to whistle—carelessly, and so low that what he was whistling was barely audible.

The tune was "Annie Laurie."

## XI

THE whistled strain died away on the dark stairway.

A moment later, Weatherbee, who did not yet guess that there was anything significant about the trilling of the old song, got his first hint of the truth. Houghton and Ellice Loring started to their feet. Then, rigidly immobile, they looked up the carpeted steps to where Noakes had just disappeared. On both their faces was blank amazement.

Next, with a choking cry, the girl swayed around until her back was toward the two men; and then, trembling with emotion, and whispering half aloud, she dropped to her knees beside a chair. As for Houghton—whom Weatherbee had judged to be habitually composed and self-controlled, even if there was extreme tension under his usual quiet—he began to pace to and fro in his half of the dimly lighted saloon, his cheeks glistening with tears that he did not attempt to hide.

Weatherbee pondered as he watched the two.

"Something has affected them all at once," he said. "They're not mourning. They're just about crazy with joy. Now what under the shining sun—"

Presently, he came nearer to the truth.

"It was the way Noakes looked and winked," he decided. "And then, too, he whistled 'Annie Laurie'—that was the same tune Houghton whistled at me. H-m! This is a funny proposition! If 'Annie Laurie' means something good to them, how does it happen to be mixed up with that skinny devil of a Noakes?"

He frowned, for he was not only puzzled, but annoyed.

"Noakes!" he thought. "That imp of

Satan can't have anything to do with what means good to anybody! *Noakes*, of all creatures in the world! Why, why—pshaw, it isn't so! I'm on the wrong track—a million miles northeast of the real facts, probably."

"Ellice?"

It was Houghton, addressing the little white heap across the corridor. Up came the dark head, and the girl smiled back.

"Yes, Will—I'm all right."

"Dear child!" Houghton returned, his voice breaking.

As once more Ellice Loring buried her face in her arms, Weatherbee knew that, impossible as it might seem, the conclusions he had arrived at were correct. Houghton and the girl were like new beings. Beyond question, the melody had worked the transformation in the prisoners. "Annie Laurie" was a signal.

"By thunder, yes!" he vowed silently. "Houghton tried it on me, but I didn't know its meaning, and that's why she cried, and he looked discouraged. They realized that I wasn't sent here to help them; but now this hellion of a *Noakes* has whistled it, and they're dizzy with happiness. Sure, it's a signal—can't be anything else! It means help."

Help from *Noakes*! It was this that was so difficult to comprehend, to square with all that Weatherbee knew about the scrawny, mean-faced, overbearing, insulting specimen from whom he had fled because he did not wish to commit murder.

"This low-down slave driver," he marveled, "doesn't seem to be what I thought he was at all. Well, of all the surprise parties that I've ever had in all my born life!"

The girl was speaking again.

"I don't want to be foolish, Will, but I—I—"

"I understand," he soothed. "You aren't any more foolish than I am. Just rest, dear child. Take it easy. You've had so much to stand to-day."

Somewhere a door slammed. To ask for absolute silence, Houghton drew his breath through his teeth sharply; then all kept still to listen. Evidently Kum Lee was busily preparing a late supper, for the three could hear him rattling his pots and pans, and singing over and over a bar or two of some shrill Chinese song in a high, squeaking falsetto.

They could also hear quick footsteps in the galley passage, where Dukun was prob-

ably hurrying back and forth with trays. From the well deck came a chorus of men's voices. The talk was loud, the laughter boisterous.

"Booze, do you think?" Houghton asked Weatherbee.

"Shouldn't wonder."

"Does—er—that *Noakes* fellow drink?"

"Coffee."

"Glad of that! As a rule, if a man's bad, he's just so much harder to deal with if he liquors up."

Weatherbee felt a sting of something between mortification and jealousy.

"They don't intend to make a confidant of me," he concluded. "They don't fully trust me yet. That's all right—I don't blame them. How could they feel sure of me? They can't. For all they know, I may be here to trick them. I may be in cahoots with Markin and Stone. But they're strong for *Noakes*—for the man I've been abusing since I got down here!"

The situation had its humorous side, too. He laughed silently at himself.

"It certainly is a cracking fine joke on me!" he thought. "Here I've figured that *Noakes* treated me as rottenly as he could because he was too all-fired mean to live; and all the time there were other reasons that I didn't know of."

He made a resolution. He would not pry—would not ask a single question.

"What means good luck for them," he argued, "means good luck for me, because we're all in the same pickle. I'll rest the case there, and be Johnny-on-the-spot when I'm needed."

Thinking that his companions might have things to say to each other that they would not care to have him hear, he decided to take advantage of Houghton's offer of clothes. With the latter holding the lamp, Weatherbee selected from the wardrobe cabin a complete change, including pyjamas and white low shoes. He carried the things to a cabin which the elder man said was to be permanently his.

The tiny room was a pleasant surprise. It was scrupulously clean. Evidently it had been got ready for him earlier in the day. Crisp sheets were on the lower berth, the gimbal lamp was polished and full of oil, the floor matting looked new, and on the washstand were plenty of towels, a pitcher of water, and a shaving outfit.

He bathed, shaved, and dressed himself in a suit of silk undergarments, a thin white

cotton shirt, and a pair of white duck trousers. The shirt and the trousers were a surprisingly good fit. Inside the waistband of the latter was the label of a Shanghai tailor. The undergarments had never been worn before. In them were the folds and the pins which had been there when they were taken down from a shelf of a dealer in the Calle Rosario, Manila. The shoes were a trifle too large, but comfortable.

When, leaving his own lamp burning, he came out of his cabin and into the light of Houghton's lamp, he became conscious of the fact that his appearance had undergone what was, to them, a startling change. He felt embarrassed and apologetic.

"I'm afraid I didn't know how rough I looked before I washed up," he said to Houghton.

The latter smiled.

"It's made a difference, your shave and so on," he admitted.

He appeared to be weighing something in his mind, and Weatherbee was not slow to guess what the problem was. He decided to speak frankly.

"I imagine you've felt uneasy about me," he began. "Well, all I can say is that I shan't mind if you don't tell me anything; but don't consider me an enemy—please! It's hard to be suspected by both sides. I'm on yours—I swear I am. You can count on me as long as I can stand on my feet and fight!"

Houghton came to him with the air of a man who has settled a doubt to his own satisfaction.

"Mr. Weatherbee," he said, "you look to me like a man who can be trusted."

"Mr. Houghton," answered Weatherbee, "I can."

Houghton clamped a shaking hand around the young man's arm.

"You—you heard that tune?" he asked.

"Yes; but please don't feel that you have to explain anything. I feel that I've complicated the situation here, and—"

"You haven't. I was glad to have you come; but now we're even happier than ever. Do you understand why?"

Weatherbee showed his white teeth in a frank grin.

"I've got my own opinion," he admitted.

Houghton drew in a deep breath.

"We'll soon know for sure. All we've got to do is to wait. Noakes has his orders to stay. Markin will go. Then—"

The younger man looked rueful.

"You'll think I'm an utter idiot about Noakes. Can't help my mistake. Ever since leaving Manila he's acted his rôle of human devil in first-class shape."

"That's all right," Houghton answered reassuringly. He kept his voice low. "Don't forget that we must seem to dislike the man as much as ever. We mustn't stop hating him until Markin's off our decks."

"Right!"

In the early part of the evening they had all been too anxious, too apprehensive, to rest. Now they were too much excited. They dared to talk only a little. They could not read or play cards. Ellice Loring sat in a grass chair, fanning herself, and smiling into space. Weatherbee and Houghton walked about restlessly, or sought one of the screened ports and peered out into the blackness.

"We'll know soon," Weatherbee told himself. "Unless Noakes is still suspicious of me, he'll be back with more than a tune!"

At the end of an hour or so, he discovered that Houghton and the girl, for some reason, did not feel so certain as they had at first on the score of what might happen during the day that was soon to dawn. It was Ellice Loring who first showed doubt.

"Will," she whispered across to Houghton, "you don't think that maybe it's all a trick, do you?"

"A trick?"

"That man might just be tormenting us," she faltered.

Weatherbee hastened to attempt to dispel her misgivings.

"Noakes isn't taunting you," he declared firmly. "If he'd wanted to do that, he'd have done it while Markin and the captain were here. He'd have got as much pleasure out of seeing us all suffer as he could. He'd have told you that you had lost out, that he understood that the tune is a signal, and that you needn't hope."

"Unless he thought he could get more pleasure out of us by first letting us *think* there's a chance," argued the elder man slowly, "and then smashing us in the face with the facts."

The girl spoke again.

"Perhaps a certain person got away, but was captured. If they treated him cruelly enough, wouldn't he be compelled to tell everything? Wouldn't the truth be forced out of him? Perhaps they whipped him, or tortured him!"

Houghton's reply was evasive.

"We won't feel too sure about anything," he said carelessly; "but for a while, anyhow, we'll permit ourselves to hope."

"Oh, I'm afraid it's all too good to be true!" sighed the girl.

"I can only argue as Mr. Weatherbee has," reminded Houghton. "The mate evidently knows the signal. If he's against us, wouldn't he have let Markin and the captain in on the whole proposition? It didn't seem to me that he had done that." He faced Weatherbee again, and with a genial smile. "One thing we can definitely congratulate ourselves upon," he added. "We've got at least one new friend!"

Weatherbee thanked him.

In the well deck, judging by the sounds that came to them at frequent intervals, the trio of merry-makers were still imbibing. Blodgett's voice was the loudest of the three—evidence that he was intoxicated. As for Markin, his speech was as hilarious as it was thick.

To keep the dining saloon as cool as possible, the two gimbal lamps were put out, and the three prisoners sat in darkness. They were talking low and cautiously when, a little while later, they heard a lock being turned in a door of the social hall. The door was opened, and some one entered stealthily.

The three in the dining saloon, waiting with breath suspended, heard that some one advance to the top of the stairway. Preceding him came a little round spot of light, like that cast by a flash light held in the hand. The spot found the top step of the carpeted companionway, and stayed there until the person holding the flash light set a slippered foot into the little circle of brightness.

It was Noakes. He came on down toward them silently. He did not speak until he was standing in the corridor, close to the two men. Then he whispered, so cautiously that he was barely audible:

"Mr. Weatherbee?"

For a moment Weatherbee was too much surprised to answer. The change that had come over Markin was a transition from hearty friendliness to a curt ignoring. Here was another change—one amazingly different, for Noakes, once a brutal tyrant, was now both friendly and respectful. Weatherbee felt sure that he had been utterly mistaken about the mate of the *Lillebonne*.

The other two had also caught that wel-

come note in the man's voice. From across where the girl was seated there came a smothered exclamation. Houghton got to his feet.

Weatherbee followed suit.

"Here!" he breathed.

Noakes considerably refrained from flashing his light into the face of any one of the three, and let it go out.

"Markin's asleep," he told them, "and Blodgett's good and drunk, so it'll be safe enough to tell you what I got to say."

"Man! Man!" broke in Houghton.

"E-e-easy!" The whisper was drawled soothingly. "If Markin was to wake up and find me here, I might have to kill him. Don't speak too loud, will you? You see, I couldn't dope the Chink and the Malay; so when I tell you some things, don't none of you holler out. Don't ask questions, either. I'll tell you everything quick as I can. First off, I want you all to feel sure that I'm on your side. I didn't dast to bring a letter along—was 'fraid I might get searched. 'Stead of a letter, there's something I can tell you, Mr. Houghton, that'll make you satisfied about me. It's this—once, in the steamer *Ta-Ming*, you told a friend of yours named Bradley about a planter named Carmichael, and—"

"True!" pronounced Houghton.

"Well, I'm from Bradley. You'll sure believe it if I show you something."

There was a moment's wait, followed by the click of metal, as if two steel objects had come in contact. Then came a sound of soft brushing along the matting, and once more the light shone. In its round yellow spot, lying under the lower edge of the wire partition, were four automatic pistols.

Like one, Weatherbee and Houghton stepped forward, and each stooped to seize a pair of weapons. Thereupon the soft yellow spot was blotted out, again leaving the saloon black; and the silence was as profound as the dark.

Presently Noakes went on:

"When Yatin got away from here, he looked for the guard at the end of the bridge out yonder. If there is such a feller, he didn't happen to be on the job that particular day, because Yatin says he didn't see nobody. He made his way through hundreds of miles of jungle. To make a long story short, Mr. Bradley was setting in his office one morning when a clerk tells him there's a Malay outside that

wants to see him. Of course, like everybody else, Mr. Bradley didn't doubt the yarn about the Tai-Lan being lost in a typhoon. Well, here comes in Yatin, in rags, dirty, just a skeleton of a man—"

Houghton murmured gratefully.

"And he told where you and the lady was, and why, only he couldn't give no sailing directions. Say, maybe Mr. Bradley didn't set up and take notice! He took the Malay straight home with him, and had a doctor look him over and fix him up. Next Bradley got me to come to his place, and we dredged Yatin for every scrap of information he had in him. Last of all, on a chance that the lad was stringing us, either for cash or to please somebody smarter'n he was, we checked up on him. The parts of his yarn that we could check held water.

"'Blinker, it's all so,' Mr. Bradley says to me.

"He was strong for having old man Stone arrested, and making him own up to the whole dirty business. The trouble was that Stone was gone somewhere in his yacht, and we couldn't find out where. With you locked up in this smothering hole, we couldn't just set down and do nothing till he come back. We hung on to Yatin close as a barnacle. We certainly was good to him—clothes, money, grub—all that sort of thing. All this while we studied hard about what we could do. We had to go mighty careful. We figured that even if we had your reckonings, we wouldn't want to risk fetching a coast guard for you, because Markin would escape to the jungle after fixing his clockwork to blow this old hulk up.

"The Lillebonne come into port about then. We took Yatin down to look at her. He hadn't been able to recognize the other Stone boats that we'd showed him, but he knowed the Lilly, and he knowed Blodgett by sight; so we figured she was your supply ship.

"'I got a master's ticket,' I says to Bradley. 'I'll go as mate with Blodgett, and bring them folks out of that swamp, if it takes a arm!'

"'You've got a little family, ain't you, Blinker?' he says back to me.

"'Yes,' I answers, 'a wife and baby girl.'

"'I don't want you to take no more chances in this affair than you have to,' he tells me.

"'Well, Mr. Bradley,' I says, 'I can't back down from this, it's so darn rotten bad; and who else could you depend on?'

"He couldn't think of nobody else to handle the job; so—"

"You'll never regret coming," Houghton vowed solemnly.

"That's all right, sir," Noakes replied. "Mr. Bradley, he's been a good friend to me. Well, to go on, Blodgett's mate was a feller named Dow. I hired a little bungalow out Malate way, and put Yatin in charge of it. Then one night, when Dow was drinking at Timke's, I coaxed him into a victoria for a nice, cool, restful ride. We drove up to the bungalow, and that's where he is now, with Yatin waitin' on him. The rest was a pipe. Mr. Bradley worked the business. He got hold of a letterhead from Stone's office, and borrowed a sample of his handwriting from a friend in some bank. He wrote Blodgett, signing Stone's name. The order told Blodgett to take me on as mate, because Dow was being sent on another job, and Stone wanted me to relieve Markin here.

"'Proceed at once,' the order said.

"I went aboard the Lillebonne, handed Blodgett the order, and watched him read it. Say, it was a clincher. It worked like a first-chop charm. The scheme was so blamed flat-footed that Blodgett didn't suspect forgery. It seems that there'd been talk of sending somebody to give Markin a rest, so Blodgett walked right into the trap with both feet.

"I mentioned the Tai-Lan, and pretended I admired Stone, and sympathized with him on account of the low-down way he'd been treated by his wife. Things seemed to be going grand. Then, before we sailed, Blodgett, when he was part drunk, took on Mr. Weatherbee here. That bothered me. I couldn't get out of Blodgett who Weatherbee was, and if he'd ever worked for Stone or not. That explains, Mr. Weatherbee, why I hunted through your dunnage."

"Why were you so confounded hard on me?" Weatherbee wanted to know.

"I could see you was above your job—was too smart for a second mate. I was afraid you was one of Stone's right-hand men. To test how the skipper would act if I was mean to you, I begun picking on you the night we sailed. I discovered that Blodgett didn't bother to take sides; also that you didn't run to him with the story that I was hazin' you. So far, so good.

"'I won't trust him,' I says to myself. 'I'll make life miserable for him. Either he'll be scared stiff of me, or he'll dig out—and I don't care which. If a break comes betwixt me and the skipper, the second mate 'll mind his own business.' And I went right on roughin' things for you."

"But you allowed me to get away from the schooner."

"Sure! I put the crew on paint work, so that the dinghy could be overside while we was at anchor. I says to myself, 'He'll sneak in toward the coast and hide, or make up the river, and that 'll leave clear sailing for me. On the other hand, if he turns up on the Tai-Lan, why, I'll apologize for thinking he was against Stone—and that 'll fool him; but if he don't go away with Blodgett and Markin—if he stays to watch me—it 'll be all over with Mr. Weatherbee before very long!'"

"Wasn't I tickled when I knowed you'd skipped sure enough? And maybe it didn't throw Blodgett into the air! That told me what I wanted to know—you and Blodgett weren't in cahoots—you wasn't a Stone man. When the skipper and me got alongside here, though, and Markin told us he had you aboard, it was my turn to hit the sky."

"'This Weatherbee is Houghton's friend,' I says to myself, but I wasn't able to figure how you'd found out about the Tai-Lan."

"Then Markin bragged how he'd coaxed you along in from the river with the gong, and had you locked up. I swore at you, and he told me that whenever I felt like it I could give you a taste of rope."

"So *that's* how he feels about me!" observed Weatherbee dryly.

"Markin sure is a sweet rascal," Noakes added. "Blodgett's an angel alongside him. I wouldn't trust him the length of my arm. If he gets wise, he'll give us trouble!"

Houghton began to speak in a suppressed whisper:

"The keys, Noakes—the keys to let us out! We'll take our pistols, and go up and make prisoners of that precious pair!"

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned the mate. "I ain't got the keys—not yet. They'll hand 'em to me nice and friendly when they tell me by-by. You see, Mr. Houghton, if I was to do like you suggest, we wouldn't know how to look after that clockwork,

would we? He told me about that cute contraption the first five minutes I was aboard here. Good thing he did, too, because I felt like shooting him right down there on his dirty foredeck, exac'ly like I'd shoot a cobra. Didn't I praise the idea, though?"

"'Mr. Markin,' I says to him, 'that insurance business—it means you got a grand brain!'"

Houghton showed irritable impatience.

"Make him prisoner," he urged, "and take the keys away from him. If he's locked up here, he'll tell you how to manage the clockwork, rather than let the steamer blow up with him in it."

Not until later did Weatherbee understand that Houghton, following the secretive arrival of Noakes, had found good news harder to bear than bad. However, while registering his opposition to the elder man's suggestion, he took care to argue with the utmost patience and deference.

"This is the Orient," he reminded. "Out here, if a man's clever, he'll play the game slow and cautiously, the way it's played by the men who've been raised and trained here. That's why I believe in allowing things to take their natural course. Let's learn how to keep ourselves safe from the dynamite; then we'll get possession of the keys, and see the Lillebonne sail. When we all come out of here, you and Miss Loring will be able to take your time in getting your eyes accustomed to daylight. The cook and the Malay boy can be locked up in here. That 'll cut off the chow from the bridge sentry astern. If there is one, and if he comes looking for grub, he's ours!"

"Right!" pronounced Noakes. "You've got it, Mr. Weatherbee. You know, Mr. Houghton, you been so long down here in this dark place that your eyes ain't going to be much good for a spell. The lady, she'll be helpless, too."

"But if you let the Lillebonne go without us," countered Houghton, "and they take their longboat and the dinghy, where's a boat of the Tai-Lan that's seaworthy? Every one must be cracked wide open by now. That means we'll all have to stay where we are."

"We'll soak a boat so she won't leak," the mate answered. "It 'll be no trick at all to get one into the water."

"Then where?" demanded Houghton. The new note of vehemence was stronger

than ever in his voice. "Are we to drift around, waiting for some schooner to pick us up?"

"There's a settlement just south of here," Noakes explained. "Blodgett told me about it; and the Chink and the Malay'll help us row."

"St! St!"

The sound showed Houghton to be both disgusted and irascible. In the dark, he moved away down the inclosure. Weatherbee stole after him.

"I know what staying on, even for another hour, must mean to you," he said sympathetically; "but, Houghton, for the sake of Miss Loring, let's do this thing in the most peaceful way that we can."

"Yes, yes—just as you say!"

Weatherbee tiptoed back to Noakes.

"I'll turn in now," he announced, "and get some shut-eye. I want to be in good shape to help you to-morrow morning if you need me."

"That's the stuff!"

The light shone just long enough to locate the bottom step of the stairs. Then it described a joyous figure eight in the air, and went out. With a soft scuffing of his slippers, Noakes took himself up and away.

During the next quarter of an hour no one spoke in the dining saloon; but Houghton paced continually, and Weatherbee could hear his hard breathing and his occasional low-muttered exclamations. He decided to address the other on some pretext, and went to join him.

"Now I know why you whistled 'Annie Laurie' at me, Mr. Houghton," he said.

Somewhat to his surprise, Houghton chuckled gayly.

"Do, eh? I was testing you." Then the thoughts of the other went to Yatin. "Malays are strange men," he told Weatherbee. "You think they're not troubling themselves about the fix you're in. They seem cold, and not inclined to talk about your proposition; but all the time they're working things out their own way. Look at this man who's saved us! 'Yatin,' I said to him, 'do you believe you'll be able to get away and fetch help to us?' And he answered, 'Tuan, that is under the gift of the gods. Them must I conciliate by prayers and offerings.' May his gods be kind to him!"

Weatherbee wondered about the girl. In the thick dark, even her white frock was

not discernible, and she did not move. He hoped that she was asleep; but presently he heard her whispering tremulously.

"That boat, Will—the one that's to be soaked up tight," she said. "I've got so many lovely dresses with me. I was taking them to Hongkong, and they're fresh and new. I should hate to leave them behind me!"

Houghton did not reply.

"Can't you rest?" Weatherbee asked softly.

"No! All the time I'm thinking, 'Oh, I shall go on deck! I shall see the sky again!' If only I could drive the dark away this very minute! But I'm happy—so terribly happy!"

Now Houghton spoke, and again he showed an ill temper which, even to the younger man, who did not know him, seemed contradictory.

"Please don't announce our departure!" he exclaimed almost rudely.

After that, no one spoke.

The night drew to an end, and the veiled ports became disks of gray, as a meager light filtered through them. Weatherbee made out Houghton, seated by the big table, his arms upon it, and his face hidden.

Across the corridor, the third prisoner was bolt upright. She saw Weatherbee looking, and flashed a dazzling smile his way.

"Hollow-eyed, but happy!" she announced in an undertone.

He nodded.

"Same here!"

A few moments later, as they waited, Weatherbee heard, coming in to him from the swamp outside, a voice that he did not recognize. It was the voice of a man, but not of a young man. It was well modulated and mild.

"Good morning!" it said. "Is Mr. Markin about?"

"Still abed, sir."

Noakes was the second speaker.

Weatherbee heard Ellice Loring rise. Without looking her way, he hurried to the nearest port, put aside the mosquito netting, and looked out. The vines outside were being agitated, evidently by a boat. By craning his utmost, he was able to see the stern of the boat, painted a glaring white.

The mild voice began once more:

"I don't seem to remember you. Where do you come from?"

"Mate of the Lillebonne, sir. Dow had to go on another job, sir, and Captain Blodgett put me in his place. You don't remember me, sir, but I was second mate two years ago in your steamer, the Algerian, when she was on the Saigon run."

"In-deed!"

The word was pronounced with a strange inflection.

"Will you come aboard, sir?"

What the mild voice returned, Weatherbee did not hear. His attention was caught by a sound behind him. He drew his head out of the frame of the port, and looked around. It took a moment or two to accustom his eyes to the dim light of the saloon. When he could see Ellice Loring again, he saw that she was standing against the wire wall on her side, the fingers of both hands twined in its iron weave. Her face was chalk-white, its expression mingled horror and despair.

In a smothered voice, she uttered a name:

"Stone!"

## XII

"STONE?" repeated Weatherbee.

Then, certain that she was right, he wavered on his feet, as if from a blow. When he could think, it was of the forged letter, and of Noakes.

"Stone will know about the forgery of the orders in the first five minutes," he decided. "He'll ask Markin about the mate, and that 'll fetch out the letter. What then? Do we lose out? We've got our guns. We mustn't wait until we're searched. We can't have them taken. Oh, for one second with Noakes—just one!"

Gently he awakened Houghton, who appeared much as he had on first acquaintance. As briefly as possible, and as quietly, Weatherbee told the news.

His brief rest had evidently done Houghton good, for he matched the younger man in calmness.

"Really!" was all that he said, when he heard that the millionaire was coming up the ladder.

To Weatherbee, Houghton's calmness was disquieting.

"Of course, you understand that it puts us in a bad situation," he reminded his fellow prisoner.

The other laughed.

"Don't worry because I'm not exploding over Stone," he said. "Since coming

here, I've learned to smolder. What I'll do if I ever *stop* smoldering—"

"We're armed," broke in Weatherbee. "If we can't get out of this pickle by using our wits—with Noakes to help us on deck—we must fight!"

Houghton felt for his pistols, patted them, and broke into a grin.

"Naturally," he returned. To the girl, standing against the wire, and looking through it at him, he added: "Well, dear child, things *do* come, don't they, to the man that waits?"

She did not reply—did not even move.

"It's struck her dumb," Weatherbee thought. "This can't go on. I wasn't sent here for nothing. Maybe I was born just for this emergency!"

Two or more men had entered the social hall at the top of the stairs. One of them was speaking.

"I'm drawing wages from you, Mr. Stone," he said. "I'm this kind of a man, that I don't never go back on my bread and butter. When I'm hired, Mr. Stone, I'm hired."

"Up there!" shouted Weatherbee. "Somebody come down, will you? Come quick! This woman's cut her wrist! She's bleeding to death! *Help!*"

With a swift scuffling of his slipper-shod feet, Noakes came to the head of the stairs.

"What's the row down there?" he demanded roughly.

When Ellice Loring heard Weatherbee's shout, she stared across at him in bewilderment. Houghton caught the younger man's arm, whispering a question. Weatherbee did not reply; but that he had some definite move in mind both of the others now understood.

He signaled the girl to lie down. Promptly and silently she let herself slip to the matting, with the back of her head resting against the wire, and both of her hands under her.

"Mrs. Stone is dying!" Weatherbee cried next. "Dying, I tell you! Don't wait! Come! Come, for God's sake!"

With all his strength he beat upon the partition against which he stood.

"Well! Well!"

This was the mild voice once more. A moment later the bare feet in the slippers, and two other pairs which were immaculately white, came into sight as they descended the companionway.

"Hurry! Hurry!" implored Houghton.

His pleading had in it such a ring of truth that Noakes moved his gangly legs faster, advancing ahead of Markin and his supposed employer.

"Now what's that dame up to?" he scolded. "Is she gone crazy, or what? Ain't she ashamed to act like this when the boss is here?"

He stalked down the corridor toward the huddled figure of the girl.

Weatherbee was looking with mingled emotions at a smallish man in a suit of tropical gray, who followed at a little distance behind Noakes. At either side of Stone's head, showing under the brim of a rather wide straw hat of fine material and native make, was gray hair. The millionaire's mustache was also gray, and military in cut. Below it was a carefully trimmed goatee.

He walked slowly, accustoming himself to the dim light; whereupon Markin forged ahead of him, to join Noakes beside the prostrate figure that lay against the heavy screening.

"Is she breathing?" Houghton quavered. He had no eyes for Stone. "Is she still breathing?"

"Get up! Turn over, and let's have a look at you! What are you trying to pull?" Noakes growled, as he poked the girl's elbow with the toe of a slipper.

"Don't do *that*!" Houghton screamed it, as if fairly beside himself. "Unlock that side! Unlock it quick, and let me in there!"

Markin swung his head halfway around. "No talk from that side!" he snarled. "If there's any more of it, I'll shut you into a cabin, and there you'll stay!"

Noakes turned deferentially to the millionaire, who now stood beside the two men.

"You give 'em too soft a living," he declared. "Excuse me saying it, sir, but you're too good, it looks to me, and too gentle!"

"Right!" snapped Markin. "Here they sit, cool as you please, doing nothing but pass the time comfortable, while you, chief, pay a Chink and a Malay to wait on 'em!"

"Like they was decent folks," supplemented Noakes. "Mr. Stone, I sure think you're the kind-heartedest man I ever did see, considering the way you been treated."

"But she's fainted!" This was Houghton. "Or she's dead!"

The girl appeared to be in a serious con-

dition, for her shoulders rose and fell with her heavy respirations. Stone looked down at her.

"Dead?" he said. "That's what she deserves to be. Too bad she isn't! If she's started something, Mr. Markin, by all means give her time to finish the job."

She moaned.

"You're glad to find me lying here, suffering!" she said in a weak voice.

"I am!"

"The living dead! To see me, broken and almost blind—I suppose for you it's a dream come true, isn't it?"

"If I'd given you what you deserved, I'd have had you whipped within an inch of your life. I'd have spoiled the looks that your admirers made so much of!"

The fingers hanging at Stone's sides alternately straightened and clenched, working like the fingers of a man who yearns to tear and strangle. The girl moved feebly.

"You want to kill me! Oh, if you could only find it in your heart to have a little pity on me! Haven't you punished me enough for something I never did? Won't you let me go free? Give me a chance for my life! Don't go away and leave me here to die alone in this terrible place!"

Stone gave a short laugh.

"Alone?" he asked ironically. "Why, my dear, you're not alone. Didn't I leave a very handsome *Lothario* here with you? And I hear he's feeling quite well, as usual. Surely you're not complaining about being *alone*! Didn't you want Mr. Houghton all to yourself? Wasn't that why you were going to Hongkong? Of course it was! And now you don't want to stay here with him. Why, that's an awful slight to the gentleman!"

Noakes laughed in loud appreciation.

"Have mercy!" she pleaded. "Have a little mercy!"

"I must have a look at your dungeon mate," went on Stone, facetiously. "Where is that excellent person?"

"Don't go!" she begged. "Don't refuse to hear me!"

Noakes glowered down at her.

"Stop botherin' Mr. Stone!" he commanded roughly. "You that spent his money like it was water, and had the whole town of Manila laughing at him!"

"Not quite so bad as that," corrected Stone. "Manila is mourning the lady, you know. As for me, I'm a popular widower."

"I'd let her stay a few years more," went on Noakes. "Why, this ain't a jail, boss! This is a darned house boat!"

"You're right, my man!"

As he turned about, Weatherbee noted, even in the stress of the moment, that the lips of the millionaire were screwed into a cruel smile. His eyes were half shut, too. Weatherbee also noted how trimly elegant was this aged husband whom Ellice Loring had called "our master jailer." His silk shirt had narrow stripes. He picked at a bow tie of soft black silk.

"Crafty!" was Weatherbee's silent appraisal of the millionaire. "Vain—unscrupulous—suspicious!"

"Where's a light?" Stone demanded. "I want to get a look at our fascinating gentleman on the other side."

"Here, sir!"

Noakes offered the flash light. The morning sun had not yet penetrated the outside walls of greenery in sufficient force to have any appreciable effect on the painted ports.

The millionaire took the tube, pressed the button, and swung the round, yellow spot of light up and in a half circle, as if making a quick examination of the dining saloon.

"Arranged very cleverly, Mr. Markin," he declared. "Very cleverly! I congratulate you!"

"Thanks, chief."

"Couldn't have done better if I had superintended the business myself!"

He pointed the electric flash straight before him. The light fell full upon Weatherbee's face.

Since Stone had come into the dining saloon, Weatherbee had not spoken; and Stone, now suddenly finding himself face to face with the stranger, stood for a long moment, studying him keenly.

In that time, some curious reflections went through Weatherbee's brain. In fact, it was as if two brains were functioning in his head at the same time. He did not forget what there was to do. He was fully conscious of Stone's position, of Markin's, and of the mate's. He was also taking the measure of the millionaire.

Weatherbee was a good judge of men; and he saw before him a sample of that particular type of man which supplies the white-settled portions of the world with fake religionists, with "doctors" who claim to have a new cure for every human ill,

and with discoverers of weird "philosophies" guaranteed to remake civilization—in short, the type that is the born fakir.

"That eye of his caused all the trouble," Weatherbee thought. "I've seen that very brand of egotistical charlatan going around the small towns and mesmerizing everybody. No wonder the poor girl got into his power—her mother, too! Here's just the man to think up a diabolical scheme. He's certainly a first-class snake!"

The skin around Stone's partly shut eyes doubled its crinkles, and a lurking smile on his gray-fringed mouth grew to a broad, pleased grin.

"Is this the new birdling in the ungilded cage?" he inquired, with the air of a man who has delivered himself of a witticism.

Weatherbee returned a mocking bow. It angered Stone. He turned on Markin.

"I can't understand how this man came to be aboard the *Lillebonnel*!" he barked. "Confound that Blodgett, anyhow—drunk all the time! I've told him, over and over again, *never* to take on *any* man without my personal approval!"

"I fixed it by locking him up," Markin bragged.

The boast only angered Stone more; and what Weatherbee was expecting happened.

"But you're doing the same thing yourself!" the millionaire charged.

"What do you mean, chief?"

"I mean letting a man I don't know come aboard here!"

Facing Noakes, and indicating him, Stone's back was close to the wire partition on Weatherbee's side.

"Chief!" Markin was thoroughly roused to his sense of personal injury. "You fixed that yourself!"

"I?"

"That letter you sent—the letter you give Blodgett for me! It said this man—"

He swung a plump hand toward Noakes.

"What letter? What are you talking about? I sent no letter, either to you or to Blodgett!"

A moment of silent and breathless questioning—the kind of a tense moment that precedes storm and chaos. Stone stared at Markin. Markin stared at Stone. Both stood as still as wooden images.

From the galley came sounds that told of breakfast activities on the part of the servants, who were gabbling cheerfully in their pidgin English.

Then, as Markin, snorting and grumbling

under his breath, rammed his hands into both trouser pockets, searching for the disputed document, another expected thing happened.

"Grab him!" Weatherbee ordered.

Thrusting all his fingers through the interlacing wire of the partition, he seized Stone by the two collars of his shirt and coat. Noakes, with a deep intake of breath, flung himself on Markin and bore him to the deck. Ellice Loring scrambled to her feet.

Two desperate struggles ensued.

Cursing and shrieking, Stone dropped the flash light and tried with all his strength to pull himself out of Weatherbee's grasp—which, as the wires of the partition were a part of it, was none too secure. His hat fell off, disclosing a bald head.

The contest between Noakes and Markin was still fiercer. Neither spoke as they swayed and bent, for Markin had fought to his feet again, and steadily drew Noakes in the direction of the galley door. Heavily built as he was, he succeeded in keeping the slighter body of Noakes between himself and Houghton, so that the latter was unable to wound or even to intimidate him.

This for ten seconds or more. Then, with a bellow, Markin freed himself, and, gasping and dodging, stumbled his way to the end of the passage, drawing a weapon as he went. In the brief moment that he was exposed to the fire of the other two men, their shots rang out, and his answered, sending three bullets whistling through the saloon, and filling the air with thick smoke.

The galley door was splintered by Houghton's bullet, while the lead from the mate's pistol flattened against an angle iron with a musical *ping*. Markin's missile hit a wire above Houghton's head, glanced, and lost itself in the dark at the foot of the stairs.

Then Markin was gone, whanging the door at his back, and yelling directions to the Chinese and Dukun, whose wild scampering could be heard. Noakes, pocketing his pistol, took Stone in hand, holding him as easily as he might have held a fifteen-year-old boy.

"Keep still, you old scamp!" commanded the mate.

He jerked Stone to his feet, pushed him toward the door just shut by Markin, and held him against it, making him a defensive barrier against any further bullets from that direction.

Stone shook inside the gray suit, and his goatee trembled with his under lip.

"What are you trying to do with me?" he blubbered. "What does this mean?"

"Mr. Weatherbee," said Noakes, "you better answer him. It's you that's got the combination."

Weatherbee, leaving Houghton to watch in the direction of the stairs, moved along the partition until he was close to the new prisoner.

"Mr. Stone," he explained, "what this means is very simple. We intend to free two people whom you have treated outrageously—innocent people. To do that, we must have control of the ship. We have that, because we're all armed—and, old moneybags, we'll hold you to make sure of our own safety!"

### XIII

His thin frame thrust against the door of the galley passage, Stone continued to whimper and twist, like a small boy about to be caned. In that light, his face wore a greenish hue. His milky blue eyes roved. His goatee jerked as his chin twitched.

"You—you can't mean—are you men going to kill me?"

Noakes was binding the millionaire's wrists with a bit of rope. He guffawed.

"We'll leave that question to the lady," he answered, and turned an eye, in which humor twinkled, on Ellice Loring, standing close by, silent, self-contained, but pallid with excitement.

"Lady," said the mate, "had I better croak this old devil? If I don't, he'll live to be eighty, and you'll be tied to the old guy forever. When he's dead, though, you're free, and the richest widow on this side of the globe. And, lady, I'd just as soon kill him as a fly. I could do it without turning one bleached hair."

"Stop your foolishness!" laughed Weatherbee. "Where are the keys? We've got to get outside this wire."

Noakes was on his knees now, fettering Stone's ankles with a temporary hobble.

"No keys," he replied; "but here's files." He poked several rasps through the partition. "Honest, Mr. Weatherbee," he chuckled, "I thought you'd never say when I was to jump on our fat friend. You sure had me sweating!"

From the galley were coming no sounds either of movement or voices; but Markin could be heard bawling angrily at Blodgett,

as if rousing him from his drunken stupor to action and a sense of the seriousness of things.

Weatherbee, his pistols handy, was filing like mad at a heavy strand of wire.

"I had to wait," he explained, "until the old gentleman was so close that I could get hold of him. Also, I wanted to hear his views—whether he intended to act like a human being or not."

"I have an undoubted right to discipline my own wife!" Stone spluttered. "Her staying here has never been anything but temporary!"

"Dear, kind old gentleman!" retorted Weatherbee. "Do you call a year and a half temporary?"

The millionaire was now secure, and Noakes had his pistols in hand again.

"I'll keep watch on Kum Lee's sliding windows at the back here," he said. "Seems to me we might get picked off through one of 'em."

"Good!" agreed Weatherbee. "Miss Loring, please go at once and put on something dark. As you're dressed now, you're a regular target."

As she turned to carry out this judicious suggestion, Stone broke out into a shrill cackling.

"Miss Loring!" he mocked. "So she's miss here, is she? Lawyer Houghton's got her divorce, eh? She's—"

"That 'll do, sir," Weatherbee interrupted. Filing in a straight, perpendicular line, he was working at a fourth wire. "You'll keep still, or we'll gag you. In this temperature you won't find a gag pleasant—especially later on, when the sun's up, and more especially as we don't intend to spare you any of our small supply of drinking water."

"Better change into black duds yourself, Mr. Weatherbee," cautioned Noakes. "Like you are, you ain't such a snide mark."

Houghton, too, was in white.

The filing made a loud creaking. Weatherbee stopped it, and turned a face wet with perspiration toward the figure seated at the far end of the long table. Houghton was watching the stairs intently. Also, he was mumbling to himself; and by the shaking of his shoulders Weatherbee knew that the elder man was silently laughing.

"Too much strain!" Weatherbee thought sadly.

He heard a movement from outside. He dropped the file.

"What became of Stone's gig?" he asked Noakes.

"The yacht's skipper went back with it, but it's to come here again for Stone after sunset."

Pistols ready, Weatherbee darted to a port, and was just in time to see the moving stern of the Lillebonne's longboat. He fired once—twice—a third time. The boat rocked madly and retreated out of range.

"Markin," Weatherbee warned, "the minute you leave this ship to go for help, your employer will get a couple of lead pills where they'll do the most good! The same thing will happen the second anybody arrives from either the Lillebonne or the yacht. We mean business!"

"Aw, go on!" was the growling retort.

"Send Dukun to us with breakfast for five, and no nonsense!"

"Dukun skipped out."

"Where's Kum Lee?"

"Went with him."

"Why didn't the guard on the bamboo bridge stop 'em?"

"I dunno," was the sulky reply.

"One thing more," Weatherbee went on. "This old bird of a Stone is *our* insurance. To collect from him what you've earned by doing his dirty work, you've got to have him come out of this saloon alive. If Stone dies, you lose the reward of your faithful service."

Evidently Markin was still at water level—either standing in the prow of the longboat, or holding to the bottom of the ladder, for Weatherbee could hear his answer plainly.

"You let the chief go," he ordered gruffly, "or I'll let the Tai-Lan blow up!"

Weatherbee laughed.

"You will, eh? Go ahead and do it! This old rascal and the four of us will go to glory together!"

As Markin could be heard thumping his way upward once more, Weatherbee left the port. He stopped beside Houghton for a moment.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Not a bit of it!" was the hearty response. "Never felt better in all my life. Just praying that Markin or Blodgett will give me a chance by exposing themselves on yonder staircase!"

He swayed with mirth.

*(To be concluded in the February number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)*

# Colonel Cash, A. H. G.

A FRIEND OF THE HUMAN RACE HAS SOME SURPRISING  
ADVENTURES IN THE TEXAS OIL FIELDS

By Olive McClintic Johnson

THE day had something to do with it. Colonel Cassius Clay Patterson always said so. Stern materialists to the contrary, so conservative and sedate a figure in the legal world as Colonel "Cash" Patterson never would have gone to seek his fortune in the oil fields on any other day than Friday, the 13th.

He reached his office early that morning. He unlocked the door, gathered up the few letters and circulars that lay on the floor just inside, and carefully locked the door again. It would never do to allow his neighbors in the dingy building to see him at his janitoring.

He swept and dusted carelessly that morning. His usual meticulous regard for corners and out-of-the-way places was forgotten. Affairs weighed heavily upon him. The problems of life troubled him.

It was strange, too. The colonel had helped so many others to fortune, it seemed that a modicum of ease and riches would have accrued to him in his old age.

With one of those swift retrospective glances that reveal a half century in a twinkling, he reviewed a past full of achievement and honor. He had served his State in the Legislature, long and well. It had cost more than it ever paid in dollars and cents, but the record was a proud one.

In his town, old and aristocratic Tyler, where he and the madam had come on their wedding journey, he was considered a leading citizen. He had fostered the town, and had cared for it and its people, as if he were some kindly feudal lord ruling and improving his demesne.

No beggar ever left his house unfed, and he was an easy mark for book agents and all such loquacious, persuasive gentry. The poor knew upon whom to call when in distress. He visited the sick, and the widow

and orphan rose up to call him blessed. He was a graduate of the University of Human Kindness, and thereby entitled to wear after his name the honorary degree of A. H. G. — *amicus humani generis*, a friend of the human race.

Strange that such a man should set his eyes upon the fleshpots of the oil fields! But the colonel was harassed by debt. Creditors assailed him with their importunities. He had nothing with which to appease the butcher or the baker.

His temporal affairs had proceeded with increasing parlousness since the passing of his wife. The madam had known how to guide his ability into effectual lines. All would have been so different if she—and Stephen—had lived!

The colonel had married late in life, and there were years between his first-born and his last-born. Laura, the elder of his children, was a wraith of a woman, a helpless cripple. He loved her as one loves a poem, a dream, or some lovely but unreal object of affection; but Stephen warmed all the fibers of his heart.

Stephen was life, energy, healing. He was the madam incarnate. The colonel adored his boy, his glorious man child, upon whom he was already beginning to lean when the war came, commandeering human props and crutches and commanding feeble old men to stand alone. Stephen had gone to France in command of an infantry battalion, and had not come home.

In a deep abstraction Colonel Cash brushed the morning's sweepings upon a paper and thrust them into the stove. He put away the broom and duster, and turned to his desk.

His eyes fell upon the calendar. He had changed it the last thing before leaving the day before. Friday, the 13th!