

296 *Friday*

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FIRE SHIP

King of the Islands
in a stirring South
Seas Adventure

By CHARLES
HAMILTON

Fire-Maddened Savages!

BIG-FELLER fire stop, sar!" said Koko, the brown-skinned boat-swain of the Dawn.

Ken King—King of the Islands—nodded. Standing by the rail, his eyes were fixed on the reddened glow far across the dusky waters. Night lay on the Pacific, the stars scintillating like diamonds from a sky of black velvet. It was close on eight bells when Kit Hudson, the mate, was to relieve his skipper on deck.

The ketch was making hardly three knots before a light wind. Ken King, as he walked the deck under the stars, was wishing for what Koko would have called a "strong-feller" wind to fill his sails. He had lost time pulling out of Ululo, when he had run many miles out of his course to maroon Van Duck on the Albatross Rock. And time was money to a South Sea trader.

But he forgot that as his eyes picked up that red glow far off in the darkness of the south-east. It was a fire at sea. Far off the course of the Dawn that red glow came through the dusky night, and Ken knew that he had to carry out the first duty of a sailorman—to help other sailormen in distress at sea.

The Hiva-Oa crew of the Dawn had left their sleeping-mats, and all four were staring at the distant glow. Only Danny, the cooky-boy, was still snoring in the galley. But as Ken rapped out sharp orders, and the ketch changed her course, Danny's fuzzy head emerged into the starlight. Then there was a hurried tread in the companion and Kit Hudson came quickly on deck. It was not yet eight bells, but the swing of the heavy boom, the rattle of blocks, had instantly awakened the mate.

"What's up, Ken?"

"Fire at sea," answered Ken, with a gesture towards the distant glow. "We've got to help, if we can."

Slowly but surely the red glow intensified as the ketch drew nearer. Sparks in myriads flew from the burning vessel; burning spars and smouldering ropes fell hissing into the sea.

"A schooner!" said Ken, breaking a long silence.

"De savvy that feller schooner, sar!" said Koko. He gave a chuckle. "That feller schooner Sunda, sar, belong feller Dussman Van Duck!"

"My sainted Sam! It's the Dutchman's ship, Kit!" exclaimed King of the Islands. "Van Duck's schooner, that we left at Ululo! And—"

"And his crew pulled out with her, as he never came back," said Hudson. "I reckon they would." He shrugged his shoulders. "I reckon they meant to run her to the Solomons—but they'll never make the Solomons now. The Sunda's a goner."

Ken nodded, his face grim. Fore and aft, the schooner was ablaze; and the Dawn was now near enough for the shipmates to pick out black figures moving against the dancing light of the flames. A boat had been lowered and some of the black crew were standing up in it, others handing down stores and weapons. They did not seem to have observed the approaching ketch. Not a glance was turned towards the Dawn.

Neither did the black boys seem to be making any effort to subdue the fire. Their only thought seemed to be to escape from the burning schooner.

Cackling with excitement, howling and yelling to one another, they were



Yelling savagely, the Solomon Islanders pulled towards the Dawn, firing as they came.

hurriedly and clumsily packing the boat. Kegs, boxes, bundles, packages of all kinds, were pitched over the side, many of them missing the boat and splashing into the sea. There was no white man aboard the Sunda to command; and the black boys were a panic-stricken mob.

King of the Islands felt a pang as he watched the wild scene. The Sunda was a lost ship. But the boy trader could not blame himself. Van Duck had attacked him in the lagoon at Ululo, and had not the Dutch freebooter fallen into his hands, that attack might have ended in the massacre of the Dawn's crew. When he marooned the Dutchman on the lonely Albatross Rock, he had no doubt that Van Duck's savage crew, left to their own devices, would seize the schooner. Evidently they had done so and put to sea—and this was the result!

Crash! came a mass of top-hammer—crash! came the mainmast. Sparks and burning fragments rained into the sea and the boat alongside. Black figure after figure leaped from the burning schooner to the boat, scared yells and howls mingling with the roar of the flames.

"Steer clear, Ken," advised Kit Hudson. "The Sunda will burn out—no help's possible now. They've got the boat. We couldn't take that crew of cannibals on the Dawn. Steer clear, old man! It will mean shooting if they get alongside."

Ken did not answer. He stood watching the Solomon Islanders with a grim brow.

There were two dozen black boys from Malaita in Van Duck's crew; a close fit for an open boat at sea, though the Sunda's boat was roomy. But not all the black crew were in the boat. About a dozen were there scrambling among all sorts of stores and plunder that had been flung in. Now they were shoving off, in hot haste, without waiting for more stores or for their comrades still on board the schooner. From the flame and smoke on the Sunda, black faces glared and gibbered, and man after man leaped into the sea, to swim after the boat.

Six men sat at the oars, pulling—Koyo, the black mate, standing up and shouting to them. Burning fragments fell in and round the boat, and the black boys panted and sweated in the heat from the burning schooner.

Some of the desperate swimmers caught hold and dragged themselves in—but here and there a dark head disappeared under the water and did not reappear. It was a wild and terrible scene.

The Dawn was within two cables' length, so far unnoticed by the mob of the wildly excited blacks. But now, as the boat pulled away from the burning Sunda, Koyo sighted her, yelled, and waved his hand to his comrades. Black fierce faces stared round, and the boat pulled hard for the Dawn.

Kit Hudson slid his hand to the revolver at the back of his belt.

"Ken—" he muttered.

King of the Islands drew a deep breath. There was nothing to be done for the Sunda. She was doomed to burn down to the water and sink. He would gladly have done anything in his power to help the survivors, crowded in an open boat a hundred miles from land. But

the looks on the fierce black faces told only too plainly what would happen if Van Duck's savage crew came near enough to rush the ketch.

Ken made a sign to Koko at the wheel. As the Dawn bore away there came a loud fierce yell from the Sunda's boat, telling only too plainly the intentions of the savage crew.

Two or three of the blacks were armed with rifles. They lifted them and fired after the ketch, the bullets screaming wide of the mark. As the Dawn glided away, the Sunda's boat pulled in pursuit—but in a matter of minutes, it was little more than a black speck against the red glare of the burning Sunda. It dropped from sight—but it was long before the Dawn's crew lost sight of the Sunda, burning like a torch on the dark rim of the sea.

The Watching Boy

BARNEY HALL sat up on the sleeping mat on the dingy deck of his lugger, rubbed his eyes, and scowled at the three Tonga boys who formed his crew.

The lugger was anchored in the lagoon of Kohu—the lonely uninhabited atoll, lost in the wastes of the Pacific, where, if Barney's belief was well founded, Tom Daly had found pearls. Somewhere on Kohu was Peter, whom he believed to be the pearler's son—the boy who knew where the pearls were cached, if only Barney could have laid hands on him.

Barney and his crew had hunted for the pearler's son through the thick palm groves, the tangled bush, the rocks and caves of the coral reef without finding a trace of him. Barney wondered at times whether the boy had put to sea in his frail canoe. If that was the case, Barney was wasting his time on Kohu. But he still lingered, his surly temper growing more surly and savage with every hour of vain searching.

He had lain down to sleep in the heat of the tropic day. The cackling voices of the Tonga boys awakened him, and he sat up, scowling at them.

But the scowl faded from his rugged, bearded face as he saw that the three were gathered in a group, staring across the lagoon at some object in the distance on the shore.

"You feller Soo, what thing you see, eye belong you?" he rapped out sharply. Soo, the boat-steerer, looked round.

"See feller white boy, sar, eye belong me!" he answered.

The Tonga trader bounded to his feet. He joined the Tonga boys and stared at the circling white beach of the lagoon. It was utterly deserted.

"What place you see that feller boy, Soo?" snarled Barney.

"That feller stop along top belong palm-tree, sar!" said Soo, pointing with a dusky finger.

Far away across the bush, near to the outer rim of the island, rose a tall palm-tree high over the bush and other palms.

Clinging to the slanting trunk was a figure, toy-like in the distance. Barney's eyes fixed on it. He could not have said, at the distance, that it was the boy he had been seeking. But he had no doubt that it was.

He snapped an order, and Soo brought the binoculars from the dingy little cabin of the lugger.

Hall clamped the glasses to his eyes, focused them on the distant palm, and Peter rushed into clear view.

The boy was clamped against the tall, slanting trunk, holding on with one hand, shading his eyes from the sun with the other, staring steadily and earnestly into the east.

From the lugger, only the circling shore of the lagoon and the dark bush could be seen. But from the summit of the high palm the boy had an uninterrupted view of the wide reef that encircled Kohu, and the sea that rolled beyond. He was watching the sea in the direction of distant Lukwe.

Barney Hall knew why. It was because Black Tom Daly had run into Lukwe with a bag of pearls that the secret of Kohu had become known. The pearler had been still at Lukwe when Barney had pulled out in his lugger to make Kohu. The boy was watching the sea for his return. Barney could guess that easily enough.

No doubt the boy was puzzled by the pearler's continued absence. No doubt, too, he wished to convey a warning to him, when he came, that he had enemies to expect there. Barney wondered whether the watcher on the high palm could see anything but the rolling Pacific.

For two or three minutes the trader of Tonga stood with the glasses fixed on the boy. Peter made no movement, no sign, from which Barney concluded that he saw no craft on the Pacific. It seemed likely enough, to Barney, that Tom Daly's boat had gone down in the hurricane in which his own lugger had a narrow escape. Anyhow, the pearler had not returned to Kohu, and Peter watched for him in vain.

Barney lowered the glasses at last. He turned to his crew, his sunken eyes gleaming under his shaggy brows.

"You feller boy, you go along bush," he rapped. "You go along feller palm, along white boy he stop. You bring that feller white boy along lugger belong me, two piece gold stop along hand belong you!"

The three Tonga boys jumped at once into the shallow water between the lugger and the beach. They plunged ashore, scrambled up the beach and scuttled into the bush.

Barney lifted the glasses again, and scanned the tall palm with anxious eyes. Peter seemed to have forgotten his enemies on the island and the possibility that they might sight him at his lookout. His eyes remained fixed on the open sea.

Hall's heart beat faster. Once his crew were at the palm, the boy would fall into their hands like a ripe coconut. And once the boy was in his hands, the secret of Kohu was his, and his lugger would pull out to sea with Tom Daly's pearls on board.

A sudden ringing oath broke from the trader. He saw the distant head give a jerk. The boy was looking downward.

Some sound had caught his wary ear. The slim figure was sliding down the slanting trunk. Barney Hall dashed down the glasses, his rugged face and the Tonga crew would minutes more and the Tonga crew would be on the spot. But they were still struggling through the hot, close bush, as Peter started sliding down the palm.

The Tonga trader grabbed up his rifle, a desperate gleam in his deep-set eyes. If the boy dropped into the bush before the Tonga crew could reach him, the rain hunt had to recommence—with the possibility every hour, of some rival for the pearl, putting in at the island. Every hour during his stay on the atoll, Barney Hall had feared to see the topsails of Van Duck's schooner looming out of the blue, or the tall cedar masts of the Dawn, for he knew that the Dutchman was after the pearls, and he believed that King of the Islands was on the same track.

With gritted teeth, the trader of Tonga threw his rifle to a level. It was a long range—far from an easy shot, and it was only a matter of moments before the slim, active figure sliding down the palm would disappear into the bush below. Barney Hall took careful aim, and pulled the trigger.

Bane! The report of the rifle roared over the silent lagoon, thrown back in a thousand echoes from the circling bush. From the reef, a swarm of sea-birds wheeled, with startled cries.

Barney watched. The distant figure was still sliding down the palm. He was not hit—the range was too long, the target too difficult. With a savage face, Barney fired again and again, pumping bullets from the Winchester, filling the silent bush with thundering echoes, until he saw the sliding figure vanish into the bush below the palm.

He flung the rifle to the deck, spitting angry oaths. There was a chance yet. The Tonga boys must be very close to Peter by now. At last they emerged from the bush and came panting down the beach.

But they came alone. Peter had escaped and the hidden pearls were as far as ever from the clutches of the Tonga trader.

gradually, it seemed to Van Duck that there was something familiar in those fuzzy heads.

They were all blacks, not brown men from a Polynesian island, like Ken's crew. Black men in brown men's waters. As they came clearer to his view he knew that they were Solomon Island boys. And then the truth rushed into his mind. In utter amazement he stared at his own black crew, in the Sunda's boat!

He picked out face after face, that he knew. And, forgetting for the moment that the coming of the Sunda's boat meant rescue for him, he gritted his teeth with rage, for this meant that the Sunda was lost at sea.

Another thought came into his mind as he realised that these were the crew of the Sunda, and he backed away out of sight behind a jutting rock, to watch unseen. He had ruled his crew by force and fear. They had no love for him, no loyalty, and they were little likely to push on to his rescue if they knew. Once among them, he would not be long in retaining his authority by the strong hand, but if they saw him from a distance they were more likely than not to jam over the tiller and give the Albatross Rock a wide berth.

Grimly he watched, skulking behind a sheltering rock. He had no firearms, and it was with his revolver that he was accustomed to enforce the obedience of his savage crew. And he had no doubt that there were deadly weapons in the boat. Nevertheless, he waited eagerly for the blacks to land.

The boat was threading the reefs now. Koyo, standing up, was watching the rock, never dreaming for a moment that there was anything living on the Albatross, save the crying gulls. There was a patch of beach at the foot of the jutting rock and there the black crew ran the boat ashore. Van Duck, still unseen, ran his eye over them. Fifteen, he counted. Not all the crew had escaped when the Sunda went to her account.

The boat was made fast and the blacks scrambled ashore. There was a sudden startled shout from Koyo, and the rest of the crew gathered round him, staring at the sand at which Koyo's black finger was pointing. Van Duck grinned. He knew that Koyo had seen one of his footprints in the sand, and was amazed to see it there. He was a dozen yards from the blacks and their excited cackle came plainly to his ears.

"White feller stop!" exclaimed Koyo. "You see, eye belong you, boot belong white, feller foot makee mark along sand."

The blacks stared at the print of Van Duck's heavy sea-boots, and cackled with surprise and excitement. Then they stared round them in search of the white man whose feet had left those unexpected traces.

"You feller boy!" rapped Van Duck. There was a howl of startled amazement from the black boys, that well-known voice fell on their ears. Their eyes almost started from their black faces as Van Duck strode into view from the rocks. In bemused astonishment they stared at their skipper, rooted to the sand.

With a swift stride Van Duck placed himself between them and the boat.

"Feller white master Van Duck," stammered Koyo, finding his voice at last.

"Feller white master stop along this place."

"What name you comey along Albatross Rock?" demanded Van Duck.

"Comey along this place, sar, along feller schooner no stop," answered Koyo.

"Big feller fire stop along that schooner, sar."

Van Duck gritted his teeth under his red beard. His schooner had been burnt at sea—a likely happening enough, in the hands of a crew of untutored black boys.

"This feller crew go along boat belong Sunda, along feller schooner no stop, sar," said Koyo. "Makee go along Lu'uo. Stop along Albatross, sar, along water he no stop."

Van Duck muttered curses in his red beard. The loss of his schooner—almost all he had—was a heavy blow to him. Yet he realised that had not the Sunda been lost at sea he would never have

seen the boat's crew at the lonely rock. They were trying to make Lu'uo, forty good sea-miles to the north-west, and whether from carelessness in loading the boat, or the natural imprudence of the black boys, water had run out! Otherwise he would never have seen a fuzzy head of them at the Albatross.

Leaving them staring and muttering to one another, the Dutchman stepped into the boat. After days of freedom, the black boys were far from eager to come back to the rule of his iron hand, and as they began to recover from the surprise of that unexpected meeting, they exchanged looks and whispers of which the Dutchman did not fail to understand the purport. But long before the slow wits of the Malaita boys could work to any purpose, the Dutchman was ready to deal with them.

The boat's load lay about in utter disorder—empty kegs, half-empty bags and sacks, blankets, three or four rifles and revolvers, boxes of cartridges, hatchets, knives—all sorts and conditions of stores, piled anyhow. Van Duck's eyes gleamed at the weapons. He grabbed a revolver and cartridges, and in a few moments had a loaded weapon in his hand. The black boys' muttering became a deep murmur. The murmur deepened as Van Duck, with a swift hand, pitched the remainder of the firearms into the sea. In a bunch, the black boys came towards the boat—still uncertain, but with their native ferocity gleaming in their eyes.

Van Duck gave them a fierce glare. He was master again now, though the slow-witted blacks, half-resolved on mutiny, did not realise it.

"You feller boy! You makee fill feller keg along water!" rapped Van Duck. "You makee fill keg too quick, or my word, this feller knock seven bells out of you."

Koyo looked round at his comrades. Then he answered:

"This feller crew, sar, no likee feller Dussman stop along boat along this feller. White master stop along Albatross, along this feller crew stop along boat!"

Van Duck grinned savagely. Had the blacks thought quickly and acted promptly, he would have been at their mercy. But quick thought and prompt action were not part of the mental outfit of the Solomon Island boys.

Without answering, the burly Dutchman jumped out of the boat, the revolver clutched in his hand. The black boys wavered and backed away, the Dutchman following them up. Like a spell, the habit of obedience was already falling on the crew.

"You feller Koyo, you give this feller skipper bad feller talk!" said Van Duck; and the butt of the revolver crashed on the Malaita boy's head.

Koyo, with a yell, staggered and fell to the sand. The rest jumped away with a cackle of alarm and excitement. Van Duck reversed the weapon and aimed it at the sprawling Koyo.

"You no shoot, sar, gun belong you!" Koyo, dazed, yelled wildly. "This feller Koyo plenty good boy along you, sar. This feller Koyo good boy too much."

For answer, Van Duck kicked him. Koyo scrambled away, howling dismally, the rest of the crew eyeing the scene in uneasy alarm.

"You makee fill feller keg along water!" roared Van Duck. And there was a rush to drag the kegs from the boat—Koyo, still howling, the most active of the crew.

THE tinkle of ukuleles was waited on the soft breeze across the lagoon of Lu'uo. Under the crescent of moon, the lagoon gleamed like dim silver. The Dawn lay at anchor and King of the Islands, from his deckchair, could see the dancing on the beach—crowds of brown natives, their dark hair adorned by red blossoms of the hibiscus, dancing

in the glimmering moonlight, among them the crew of the Dawn, and contented as he sat and watched the happy scene on shore. All the crew had beach leave, and Kit Hudson was ashore. Ken had an account book on his knee, and had been entering figures in it; but his task was finished, and now he sat idly watching the beach, till Hudson and the crew came back in the whaleboat. For nearly a week the Dawn had lain in the Lu'uo lagoon, and trade with the natives had been good.

Lu'uo was a small atoll off the beaten track. Few ships came into the lagoon. Copra and pearl-shell and hawks-bill turtle were to be had in plenty. It was in such out-of-the-way spots that King of the Islands picked up much of his trade—useful to him, though not worth the while of the big ships.

Sitting in the deckchair, watching the scene on the beach, Ken was thinking—his thoughts going back to Kohn, and the boy Peter. What had become of the boy? Whether, as seemed only too likely, he had fallen into the clutches of Barney Hall, Ken could not know. He was more than a hundred miles from Kohn now, and never likely to clap eyes on that solitary island again—never likely to know the fate of the boy. More than once he had regretted having allowed Peter to quit the Dawn—yet the boy was his own master, and he could not have kept him on board by force.

From Van Duck, at all events, he was safe. It would be long before the Dutch freebooter sailed the Pacific again.

Ken heard, without heeding, the sounds of craft on the lagoon. There were a dozen canoes or more paddling under the glimmer of the moon.

But he sat up and listened as he realised that from the direction of the reef passages there was a sound of oars in rowlocks. A white man's boat was pulling under the moon-glimmer.

There was no vessel but the Dawn in the lagoon. The boat he could hear came from the open sea—some missionary's whaleboat, was the thought that came into the boy trader's mind.

He rose to his feet and looked across the glimmering water in the direction of the boat that came from the Pacific. It was manned by a black crew. The moon glimmered on black faces, fuzzy heads, bare black limbs. The man who steered was half-hidden by a big grass-hat, and Ken could not see whether he was a white man or a black. But all the rest were black—a crowd of them; too numerous a crew for the size of the boat.

"My sainted Sam!" breathed Ken, a sudden suspicion coming into his mind. He remembered the boat that had left the burning Sunda a week ago. It flashed into his mind that this was the boat—that this was Van Duck's Solomon Island crew.

The boat had pulled in, heading for the beach across the lagoon—but, as if the crew had suddenly seen and recognised the anchored ketch, it swerved, and made direct for the Dawn. Ken made a swift step towards the companion. On a peaceful island like Lu'uo he did not carry weapons; his revolver was below, in the state-room. But he stopped as the boat bumped against the hull of the Dawn, and two or three black hands grabbed and held on at the low foreboard. From under the big grass-hat came a hoarse, savage voice—a voice that made Ken wonder, for a moment, whether he were dreaming.

"Ach! It is the Dawn—the Dawn! I have found you again, King of the Islands!"

It was the voice of the freebooter whom King of the Islands had believed to be still marooned on the Albatross Rock, forty long sea-miles from Lu'uo. And even as that hoarse howl of triumph and malice rang in his startled ears, the Dutch freebooter came clambering over the rail, and fast after him came his black crew!

Next Week : VAN DUCK'S VENGEANCE

Van Duck Takes Command

VAN DUCK stood on the Albatross Rock, stared seaward, and passed his rough, hairy paw over his dazzled eyes. What he saw was what, for endless days, he had hoped to see. But now that a sail was on the sea-
rim, he could not believe it. His heart was sick with hope deferred and he doubted what he saw.

Standing on the rock, he watched, and doubted, till he could doubt no longer. It was a sail!

Not a ship—not even the smallest ship that ploughed the wide waters of the Pacific. It was a boat that was slipping down to the lonely rock. An open boat at sea, so many long miles from land, could mean only one thing—a wreck. The boat's crew were the survivors of some sunken craft. No doubt they were heading for the nearest land, taking in the Albatross Rock on their way. Barren as it was, there was water and food on that lonely islet. It was the fortune of the sea—his ship had gone down, but the surviving boat was steering a course that would save the marooned freebooter.

Whoever they were, they would take him off that lonely rock. Only to escape—that was all he asked. Then revenge on King of the Islands and the pearls of Kohn, if his rivals had not already killed them.

At last he was able to pick out some of the crew, and he noted that every face was black. Gladly he would have seen white men—but black or white, they should take him from that rock. He would have taken his chance even with a crew of cannibals in a canoe.

Fuzzy head after head met his staring eyes, but no sign of a white man. And

PRAIRIE PETE & PRONTO



QUICK ON THE DRAW?



WAL STRANGER



HOW'S THAT?

