

A FORTUNE IN PEARLS!



CHAPTER I

DANGER AHEAD!

"BLACK FELLER stop!" shouted Koko, the brown boatwain of the *Dove*.

"What?"

"Solomon Island feller, say, he stop!"

King of the Islands leaped to his feet. Kit Hudson, the mate of the *Dove*, came running up from below. From the *Hiva-Oa* crew came a startled cackle. Even Danny, the cooky-boy, put a flaxy head and a startled face out of his galley.

There was a light wind on the Pacific. The ketch was making a bare four knots on her course for distant Laru. Ahead of her lay the channel in the Penguin Reef—a wilderness of jagged coral rocks that stretched for a hundred miles north and south. In its widest part the channel was a cable's length—in its narrowest, a few fathoms. But it was an easy run in fair weather, and the *Dove* was gliding into it from the open sea, when the boatwain gave the alarm.

A minute before, all had been calm on the *Dove*. Koko was at the wheel. King of the Islands sat at the taffrail, his eyes on the coral channel, and on the long lines of white reef that ran north and south. The *Kanaka* crew stood ready at the ropes. Danny was singing, in his galley. The mate was taking his

wash below. Ken King, the boy trader of the Pacific, had no bigger worry on his mind than a light and variable wind, which slowed down his run to Lawa. But all was changed when Koko's keen eyes, keen as those of an albatross, picked up the war-canoes in the channel ahead.

"Solomon Island boys!" repeated King of the Islands. He shaded his eyes with his hand from the glare of the sun, and stared ahead. "You savvy plenty that fellow Solomon Island boy, Koko?"

"Savvy altogether too much, sar."

Kit Hudson jumped out of the little companion, with a rifle in his hands. He joined his ship-mate, staring past the bulging canvas at the distant shapes in the coral channel.

"Canoes!" he said.

"Aye, aye! But we're a long step from the Solomons," said King of the Islands, "they're war-canoes—but—"

"Solomon Island fellow, sar!" said Koko, positively.

The ship-mates watched, keenly.

Far ahead, in the coral channel, they picked up the canoes—tall-prowed war-canoes, three of them, crowded with dark figures, and fuzzy heads. Here and there, in the sunlight, was the gleam of a weapon. From a great mass of reef that rose six or seven feet above the sea, smoke curled up against the blue sky, from a camp-fire or cooking-fire. The canoe crews, whether Solomon Islanders or not, had camped on the reef, and pushed out in their canoes at the sight of the white man's ship coming into the channel.

"Looks like a war-party, Ken," said Hudson.

"It does," Ken nodded, "but—I've never heard of a raiding gang from the Solomons coming so far west. I can't make them out at this distance—"

"We see that fellow, sar, eye belong us," said Koko, "no savvy too much that fellow Solomon Island fellow, sar."

"Danny!" called out King of the Islands.

"Yessar!" The cocky-boy came running.

"You fetch long-feller glass, along cabin he stop."

"Yessar."

Danny paddled below on his bare feet, and returned with the binoculars. King of the Islands changed them to his eyes, and focused them on the canoes in the coral channel.

"My saluted Sam!" he ejaculated, as the distant figures rushed into clear view in the "long-feller glass". "Koko's right! A war gang from the Solomons, Kit! Look!"

He handed the glasses to Hudson. The mate of the *Dawn* looked, and nodded. And the faces of the ship-mates grew grave and serious. Never before had King of the Islands heard of a raiding war-party from the Solomons so far from their native islands. But there was no doubting the evidence of his eyes and the binoculars. Three long, high-prowed canoes, packed with black cannibals, barred the coral channel ahead of the *Dawn*, and all the savage eyes in the canoe crews were fixed on her as she came. Likely enough, they

had camped in the coral channel to watch for some passing craft—with all the more chance of success, because no man would have suspected the presence of raiders from the Solomons in those waters.

Kit Hudson whistled.

"They mean business, Kan," he said.

"Looks like it."

"Like plenty 'nive head belong to 'feller, 'nake along canoe-house along Solomon, na," said Koko.

"They won't 'nake our heads in a hurry, in their canoe-houses," said King of the Islands.

The ketch was gliding on. The canoe crews, in the distance ahead, grew nearer and clearer. The Hiva-Oa boys, on the *Dave's* deck, cast anxious glances at their skipper. They hoped to hear the order to go about, and flee from the coral channel where those scores of savages waited and watched to attack.

But no such order came from King of the Islands. He stood watching the distant canoes, his face grim and set.

Hudson gave him a rather dubious look.

"We could back out and go round the reef to the south, Kan," he murmured.

"We've got a date at Lava," answered Ken. "Hudson's expecting us."

"Aye, aye! But—"

"We can't lose days going round the reef," King of the Islands shook his head. "We should be days late at Lava. And that's not all. We've got to give the news. Every craft in these seas runs this channel, going east or west—day time a schooner or sloop from Lava may come along, and fall into the hands of those head-bangers—we've got to put them on their guard, Kit, and spread the news, to save lives."

"Right!" agreed Hudson.

"Break out the rifles," said Ken. "We'll run through them without firing a shot, if we can—if they attack us—"

"Not much 'f' about that," said Hudson, with a grin.

"Then they'll take what's coming to them!" said Ken. "They won't get on board the *Dave*. This isn't our first scrap, old man, and it won't be our last."

Hudson nodded, and went below to break out the rifles. There was a judder of excitement from the Kanaka crew, as the rifles were hoisted out. Certainly the Hiva-Oa boys would have preferred to see the ketch go about. But there was consolation to the simple Kanaka mind in blazing away with any kind of firearms.

The *Dave* stood steadily on her course, the canvas flapping in the light wind. The canoes were nearer now, and every detail was clear to the eye—black men kneeling at the paddles, others grasping spears and war-shields, all eyes fixed on the ketch. That the savages intended to attack, there was no doubt at all; and the odds were heavy, for there were at least fifty or sixty black boys from the Solomons packed in the canoes. But Ken's face was cool and calm, and the crew had confidence in their boy skipper.

Not every heart was beating faster, as the *Daws* swept down on the war-canoes in the coral channel. A spear whizzed in the air, dropped, and struck splashing in the dock. A loud, fierce, almost blood-curdling yell burst from the packed savages, and they came with a rush to the attack.

Ken's voice rang out, sharp and clear.

"Fire!"

Koko stood like a frozen image at the wheel. The *Daws* surged on, with the three canoes round her. Crack! crack! crack! crack! Ken King and Kit Hudson, standing by the port and starboard rails, pumped bullets from their Winchester into the canoes. The *Miva-Oa* boys blazed away in wild excitement, hardly taking aim at all; but in the packed canoes it was scarcely possible to miss. Wild and frantic yells rose like pandemonium from the canoes, as the hot lead tore through flesh and bone, and black man after black man rolled over among bare legs and feet, or pitched headlong into the sea.

For a minute—a long minute—it looked as if the savage bands must come clattering and yelling up the low foreboard of the *Daws*. But one canoe, with half its paddlers sprawling, fell astern; another backed from the blast of rifle fire; and the third crouched under the sharp prow of the *Daws*, going under and leaving the crew struggling in the water. The *Lotah* surged on, followed by frantic yells and howls and screams, with one canoe in pursuit, but a volley over the taffrail stopped the pursuit in a moment more.

Kit Hudson dropped the butt of his rifle to the deck, and wiped a stream of perspiration from his brow.

"We're through," he said.

"Are, are?"

Ken looked back. One of the canoes had sunk; the other two, crowded with howling savages, drifted and rocked on the water, dotted with swimmers. The *Daws* was through, heading for the open Pacific beyond the reef. The bows of the defeated savages died away, as the *Daws* sailed out of the Paganin channel; and sped on under the red sunset seaward for distant Lova.

CHAPTER II

DANDY PETER'S PASSENGER.

"PULL OUT—for keeps!"

Dandy Peter of Lovaes muttered the words aloud. He had muttered them a dozen times, and the three black Lovaes boys who formed the crew of his cutter, looked at one another, and wondered of what the "Teller white master" might be thinking.

The cutter *Zee-Cat* was moored at the coral wharf at Lova. Peter Parsons, a dandy in his spotless white ducks and Panama hat, sat in a Mahomed chair on the dock, with a chart on his knees.

Occasionally he glanced at the chart: and then lifted his eyes to the beach of Lava.

The island looked in tropical heat. Natives in white lava-lasses lounged under the palms, back of the shirting white beach. In the deep shady verandahs of the traders' bungalows, traders and planters sat, in dusky shade, but not in coolness. Dangling benches, nodding palms, the blazon of the blue skies, blinding sunshine, made up a scene to which Peter Parsons was too accustomed for him to heed it. It was upon Hanson's bungalow that his eye continually turned, as if he expected to see someone emerge from the building. And then again his glance dropped to the chart on his knees. And then he rolled another of his numberless cigarettes, and smoked, and muttered.

The Lukwe boys lolled idly, and stared betel-out. They had nothing to do, but to watch their skipper curiously, and wonder what it was that was perturbing him so deeply.

Dandy Peter did not heed them. Whether the black boys overheard his mutterings, or understood them if they heard, he cared nothing—even if they guessed that he was thinking of pulling out of the islands. That would have surprised the crew, for they knew that the *Sea-Cat* was due to sail for her home port at Lukwe, taking on board a passenger for that island. Lukwe lay a good hundred miles to the east; but when Dandy Peter lifted his gaze to the sea, it was to the west that he looked. Westward, seventy miles from Lava, lay Pita, where the Sydney steamer called. And it was of Pita, and the Sydney steamer, and of saying a long farewell to the islands, that Peter Parsons was thinking.

But he was uncertain as yet.

Dandy Peter of Lukwe, trader, poasi-pocher, kidnapper of Korakins, and many other things in his time, had come to a parting of the ways. Unscrupulous, false to the core, ruthless as a tiger-shark, the dapper skipper of the *Sea-Cat* was the most desperate of the rough crew on the lawless island of Lukwe. But even the rough crew on Lukwe, he knew, would never stand for what he had in mind now—there was a limit, even on Lukwe. And even if they tolerated him there, it would not help, for the law had a long and strong arm that could reach even to that wild and lawless island. If Dandy Peter did what he now contemplated doing, Lukwe was no refuge for him—nothing could save his skin but pulling right out of the islands, and starting afresh in a new world across the Pacific. If he did this thing, he had to sail, not east, but west, from Lava, and disappear from all who had known him.

Once more he dropped his eyes to the chart.

With his slim, nicotine-stained forefinger, he traced the long line of the Penguin reef, thirty miles west of Lava. He traced the channel that cut through the heart of the reef. He traced the farther course, from Penguin to Pita—forty miles on. A run of seventy miles in all; and where was the peril of pursuit? There was not another vessel in the lagoon at Lava, even if any skipper had been disposed to attempt raising down a desperado who was known, on all the islands, to be as ready with a capstan-bar as a word, and as ready with a revolver as a capstan-bar.

Danger, if there had been danger, would not have deterred Dandy Peter of Lukwa. But there was none. Frado, the pearl-buyer, would step on the cutter, a passenger for Lukwa. The cutter would pull out of the lagoon, as if bound for that island. And then—!

Dandy Peter drew a deep, deep breath.

The wind that came over the Lawa reef was hot. That did not affect Peter Parsons, hardened to tropical suns. But he noted its direction. It had been variable all day; but it had veered more and more to the east, and now it was south-east by east. A contrary wind for Lukwa, necessitating endless wearing and tacking to get on his way; but a fair wind for the west—and Pitt and the Sydney steamer! It was as if the forces of Nature were playing into his hands, tempting him to the last desperate deed of a desperate life.

"Foller white master Frado covey, sir," said Jacky, the boat-steward of the *Sea-Cat*, and Parsons looked up sharply.

A little dark man in a white hat was descending the steps of Hanson's bungalow, back of the beach.

Dandy Peter's eyes fixed on him.

This was Frado, the half-caste Portuguese pearl-buyer; a well-known figure on every beach from New Guinea to the Marquesas. He was the passenger for whom the cutter was waiting. Pedro Frado had finished his business on Lawa—a pearl island where he had doubtless made good trade—and was ready to avise aboard the *Sea-Cat*, for the trip to Lukwa, his next stop. Often Pedro Frado made his trips in a whaleboat with a native crew; sometimes he picked up a passage in a trader or pearler. This time he was taking a passage on Dandy Peter's cutter—little dreaming of the black thoughts that were in the mind of the sea-lawyer of Lukwa.

Peter Parsons' eyes glinted, as he watched the little Portuguese, in his white hat with the black bag in his hand. Only two well the Lukwa skipper knew what would be in that bag; partly that Frado had brought on Lawa, added to the stock he had brought with him after visiting many other islands. The little, dried-up man, in his shabby clothes, was known to be one of the richest men in the islands; and the sea-lawyer of Lukwa did not need telling that he carried a fortune in that black bag.

Peter Parsons drew a deep, deep breath.

Up to that moment he had been uncertain. Now his mind was made up, all of a sudden; and once it was made up, his purpose was fixed and immutable.

He threw aside the chart, and rose from the Madeira chair.

"You foller boy?" he snapped.

"Yessar!" piped the three Lukwa boys.

"You stand ready, hand belong you, cast off, along that foller white master covey aboard."

"Yessar."

Once more Peter Parsons turned his eyes to the western sea, beyond the cypress reef that enclosed the lagoon of Lawa. He gave a start, as he caught sight of a tall sail on the blue waters.

His even white teeth came together with a click. The tall sail was still distant on the sea; the hull below it invisible. But the sea-louyer of Lukwe knew the craft that was heading down to Lavea from the west—a craft that was good for tan knots, but that was now doing barely four in an unfavourable wind.

"King of the Islands!" muttered Parsons.

His dark handsome face blackened in a scowl. There was no love lost between the sea-louyer of Lukwe, and the boy trader: they had had trouble more than once, and Peter Parsons had not had the best of it. And King of the Islands was a friend of Pedro Prado, the little Portuguese pearl-buyer.

But the Lukwe skipper shrugged his slim shoulders. He would not have hesitated to carry out his purpose, now that he had formed it, if King of the Islands had been anchored in the lagoon within a biscuit's toss of his cutter. And King of the Islands was still far away—the wind, veering more and more to the east, was forcing him to make long tacks in bearing down on Lavea. Long before he sailed into the lagoon, the *Sea-Cat* would be outside the reef and away. And once on the open sea, with a following wind, Peter Parsons would have defied any wind-jammer in the Pacific to run him down.

He stood watching the tall sail on the sea for a minute. Then it disappeared on a long tack, hidden by palm groves on the island. Peter Parsons shrugged his shoulders again, and turned towards the coral wharf, to greet his passengers.

The little Portuguese came down the beach to the wharf, and crossed it to the moored cutter. Dandy Peter met him with a nod and a smile.

"Ready to pull out, Mr. Prado," he said.

"Been!" said Pedro Prado. He stepped over the low rail. "But the wind, weather, he is not good for Lukwe, isn't it?"

Dandy Peter smiled. He did not expect ever to see Lukwe again, and if Prado saw it, it would not be from the deck of the *Sea-Cat*. But that was Dandy Peter's secret, till the time came to show his hand.

"Oh, we'll make it, Mr. Prado," he answered. "I reckon the *Sea-Cat* can lie as near the wind as any wind-jammer in the islands."

"Been!" said Pedro, again.

Dandy Peter rapped orders to the Lukwe boys, and the moorings were cast loose from the bellheads. Pedro Prado stood watching the shore, as the cutter got under way for the passage through the island reef to the open Pacific. He had laid his black bag on the Madama chair, and stood rolling himself a cigarette. Peter Parsons glanced at him, several times, with a strange glimmer in his eyes, as the cutter glided away across the shining water. As the *Sea-Cat* entered the reef passage, he stopped closer to his unsuspecting passenger.

What followed made the three Lukwe boys leap with amazement. Toto and Kelo almost dropped the ropes: Jacky, who was steering, very nearly lost his hold on the tiller. Their startled eyes almost popped from their black faces, as Dandy Peter, with the sudden swiftness of a tiger-shark darting on its prey, closed in on the little Portuguese, grasped him, and whirled him off his feet—and, with one swing of his starry arms, tossed him over the rail, to sprawl on the reef.

Pedro Prado sprang on rough and rugged coral, dazed by the fall. The *Sea-Cat* glided on. The Lukoo boys, in amazement and terror, stared at the desperate of Lukoo. Dandy Peter snarled to the boat-steerer.

"Keep her steady, you black scab, s'pose you no like lawyer-cann stop along back belong you."

"Yesset," stammered Jacky.

On the coral reef, Pedro Prado staggered to his feet. Dandy Peter looked back at him—gesticulating, screaming, almost dancing with fury. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned away, looking to the west: and the cutter, her tall sail full of wind, rushed out upon the Pacific, and the hapless pearl-buyer and the island of Luvu were left alone.

CHAPTER III

A FORTUNE IN PEARLS!

"WHITE MAN stop along reef, sah."

"My white man!" ejaculated King of the Islands.

The *Dawn* was coming down on a long tack to the reef passage of Luvu. More and more the uncertain wind had veered against the beach, after passing the Penguin channel. It was a slow and weary business, tacking down to the island: but it was all in the day's work to the big traders, and they were glad, at least, that they looked like getting into the Luvu lagoon before the sunset faded into night.

The passage from the open sea into the lagoon was narrow, bristling on either side with rugged rocks and stretches of reef. Over the reef the scungilla stirred and called. It was Koko who picked up the solitary figure on the rocks, and Ken and Kit, and all the crew of the *Dawn*, stared at it, in astonishment. What a white man could be doing out there on the lonely rocks was rather a mystery to them.

"Bwis belong that fellah no walk about, sah," remarked Koko. And the Hira-On boys grinned.

The little man on the rocks was wildly excited. Evidently he had seen the ketch coming in, and he was waving his hands, wringing his hat, gesticulating, almost dancing in his excitement.

"Suffering cats!" exclaimed the mate of the *Dawn*, "It's Prado!"

"Prado!" repeated King of the Islands.

"That little Portuguese."

King of the Islands stared hard at the little figure on the rocks, and nodded.

"It's Pedro Prado," he said, "but what is the name of Davy Jones is he doing there?"

"Goodness knows!"

"He wants us to pick him off the rocks, at any rate," said Ken. "Something's happened to him—goodness knows what."

He waved his hat to the little Portuguese. Prado waved back, frantically, and they could see that he was shouting and yelling, though as yet his voice did not reach them.

They watched him, puzzled, as the ketch drew slowly nearer. From where Dandy Peter had flung him on the reef, Prado could have regained the island beach, by a long and difficult clamber over rugged coral, indented with deep fissures and crevices. But he had seen the tall sails of the *Dawn* in the distance, and waited to be picked up. His excitement was so intense, his little black eyes popping, his hands waving and gesticulating, his swarthy face almost convulsed, that it was perhaps no wonder that Koko concluded that "brain belong him, no walk about," which was the Kanaka's way of expressing that he was "off his head."

The ketch surged into the coral passage. Prado's screaming voice reached the ship-master at last, in a wild mixture of Portuguese and *bacho-do-cer* English.

"Ahey! The Dawn! Anigo-moa King of the Islands! Quo-pena! You stop along reef along you take me along ketch belong you, anigo-moa! Estora oora pressa! Quick! I am rob! Sim, sim, sim, I am rob! O ladrao! O ladrao! O ladrao! Help! You stop along this place, anigo-moa!"

"O ladrao!" repeated Koi. "That's a Portuguese word for thief! What on earth has happened to Prado?"

Hudson whistled.

"He carries a fortune with him, from one island to another," he said. "Hut—oh Luvu—it's impossible! We'll soon know."

It was not needed for King of the Islands to "stop along reef". The *Dawn* glided near enough the coral rock on which Prado stood, or rather danced, for the little Portuguese to make a spring at the low rail. Almost in a twinkling he was clambering aboard with the activity of a monkey and the ketch surged on towards the inner lagoon.

The Kanaka crew eyed the little man with grinning faces. Prado grey them no heed. He almost danced up to the ship-master, and clutched King of the Islands by the arm.

"Anigo-moa!" he panted, "I am rob—rob—rob! O ladrao! My wealth—a fortune in pearls! O ladrao take along cutter belong him, and I—I am pitch on a reef—I fall on a reef, and o ladrao he sail for Luvu—"

"A Luvu matter?" said Koi.

"Peter Parson—O ladrao—"

"Dandy Peter?" said Koi, with a whistle.

"Sail! sail! sail! Yes, and yes, and yes!" shrieked Prado, dancing again. "I am a passage to go to Luvu, he's it! I take a passage along cutter belong Dandy Peter! Often I take such a passage, isn't it? Porque-moa? But I am rob—I am rob—" Prado waved wild hands and shrieked.

"By gum!" said Koi Hudson, with a deep breath. "That's the limit, even for Dandy Peter of Luvu. Pearl-ponder and nigger-stride—but this—"

Koi stared blankly at the little Portuguese. He knew Peter Parson

only too well. But he could scarcely believe this, even of the sea-lawyer of Larkew.

"Do you mean that Peter Parsons has robbed you of your pearls?" he asked.

"Sini! sini! Sini, unhoi! Sini! An perolai! An perolai! An perolai!" yelled Prado. "An perolai—the pearls—stop along bag belong me—stop along cutter belong Dandy Peter—me stop along reef along o ladraso thing over a rail, hand belong him! O ladras! O ladras!"

It was not easy, in the wild excitement and fury of the little Portuguese, to elicit exactly what had happened. Almost every other word was "O ladraso"—the thief! But the ship-mates of the *Sawa* got the story at last, and their brows darkened. It was, as Haddock had said, the limit, even for the dapper desperado of Larkew.

Prado had taken his passage on the *Sea-Cat*, as he might have taken it on any other craft trading among the islands. And Dandy Peter had coolly pitched him on the reef as he sailed out of the lagoon, keeping on board his precious bag containing "an perolai"—the pearls. At a single stroke, Dandy Peter had made a fortune in pearls. But even now that they knew what had happened, the ship-mates found it hard to understand. Dandy Peter was none too good for such an act—he had sailed near the wind often enough before; but could he hope to get away with this—to find safety even on a lawless island like Larkew after such a robbery of a white man? Sounded as he was, Dandy Peter was always cool and calculating; but it looked as if desperate greed had caused him to forget prudence for once.

Pedro Prado was still telling his story, over and over again, with waving hands, his speech punctuated with "O ladraso", when the *Sawa* sailed into the lagoon, and moored at the coral wharf.

The ship-mates were full of sympathy, but they could do nothing—the *Sea-Cat* was long gone, and doubtless well away on her course for Larkew, far out of sight of Larva. Indeed, there was no certainty that Parsons had headed for his home port: as likely as not, he might make another island, to dispose of his plunder before sailing back to Larkew. The *Sea-Cat* had vanished into the boundless Pacific, and pursuit was a hopeless proposition. The long arm of the law would reach him—he could not get away with this. That was little comfort to Pedro Prado, who was thinking less of vengeance on "O ladraso" than of the lost pearls.

"I am ruin! I am ruin!" wailed Prado. "O ladraso, he make fortune—it is seven thousand English pounds—a fortune! But I—I am ruin! Sini! sini, the law he shall get him—sini, sini, sini—me an perolai—me an perolai—but the pearls—but the pearls! An perolai no stop! An perolai no stop any more altogether! Seta mil—seta mil—seven thousand—seven thousand of your English pounds! I am ruin! O ladraso! O ladraso!"

The little Portuguese stepped on the coral wharf, and went limply up the beach to Haddock's bungalow. Ten minutes later all Larva knew of the robbery, and was buzzing with excitement over the desperate exploit of Dandy Peter.

On the deck of the *Dawn*, King of the Islands clenched his hands, with a glint in his eyes.

"If one could get after the swab, Kit—!" he said. "Poor old Prado! If one could get after that thieving sea-lawyer, Kit, before he can get shut of the pearls—"

Hudson shook his head.

"Nothing doing, ship-mate," he said.

There was nothing doing, and King of the Islands had to admit it. But it came hard. Somewhere, far out on the rolling Pacific, was the swift *Sea-God*, and a fortune in pearls in the greedy grasp of Dandy Peter. And the ship-mate of the *Dawn* could do nothing.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRACK OF THE PEARL-THIEF?

NIGHT on Lava—the lovely night of the tropics. Glimmering stars shone down from a sky of dark blue velvet. Southward, the Southern Cross hung like a necklace of glittering jewels in the heavens. The lagoon rolled glimmering in the starlight; ashore, the palm trees nodded their feathery heads. Lights gleamed from the bungalows, and from the beach came the trickle of music, where natives in glimmering lava-lavas danced under the stars, with the red hibiscus blossoms glowing in their dark hair.

Kit Hudson, stretched in a deck-chair, was thinking of his bunk. Kofo sat on the coverings of the cabin skylight, quietly twanging his ukulele. On the deck the Hiva-Oa boys lolled or slumbered, and the snore of Dandy the cooky boy came from the galley, where Dandy slept among his pots and pans.

But King of the Islands was not thinking of sleep.

He paced to and fro on the little after-deck, his boyish brow wrinkled in thought, his lips hard set. He was trying to think out the problem—some hope of laying Dandy Peter by the heels, before the sea-lawyer of Lufwa could escape into the boundless spaces of the Pacific with Prado's fortune in pearls. The little Portuguese had gone ashore, the picture of despair: it was not likely that he was sleeping, at Hudson's bungalow. King of the Islands would have given much to help him.

And abruptly, the boy trader came to a stop, in front of the deck-chair where his comrade sat.

"Kit!"

Hudson smiled faintly.

"Here's ahead," he said. "There's nothing doing, old man—but if you've thought of anything—"

"I think I have," said King of the Islands, quietly. "Kit, we've got to help Prado if we can. He's a good sort, and he's done us more than one good turn. And that double-crossing scoundrel Parsons—"

"I'd be glad to see him within reach of my knuckles, Kit. But—"

"Look here, Kit, I've been thinking it out. Where do you think Parsons will lay his course from here?"

"Lukoo, I reckon. He was scheduled to sail for Lukoo—that's where Prado was taking his passage."

"Aye, aye! But he knows that he will be looked for—he can't get by with a crime like this, and carry on, Kit. The law would pick him up at Lukoo," said Ken.

Hudson nodded, slowly.

"That's true, Ken! More likely he will lay a course for another island—Tahiti, as likely as not—to sell the pearls, and keep clear."

"The law would pick him up more easily at Tahiti, or Samoa, on in the Fiji, than at Lukoo, Kit."

"That's true," said Hudson, again.

"Dandy Peter has done a good many things, pretty desperate things, Kit, and walked round the law. But he can't get by with this. There's no safety for him in the Pacific, unless he maroons himself on some solitary atoll—and I reckon he did not want Prado's pearls, to hide with them in a grass hut on some lonely island."

"Hardly," said Hudson. He looked puzzled. "I don't quite get it, Ken! Looks to me as if Peter Parsons has forgotten his cunning, and landed himself this time. Prado may never get his pearls back—but Dandy Peter's booked for jail if he stays in the Pacific Islands at all."

Ken's eyes glistened.

"That's what I've been thinking out, Kit," he said. "Parsons has gone a step too far for safety—the Pacific is big, but it won't hold him after this. He will be a hunted man all through the islands, Kit! Parsons knew that, as well as we know it, when he tipped Prado off his cutter and stole the pearls. He's too cunning; not to count up all the chances. There was only one clear course ahead of him—to pull out."

"Pull out!" repeated Hudson.

"Pull out of the islands," said Ken. "Pull out for keeps! And why not? He's made a fortune in pearls, to take with him. Kit, I've thought it out; and it's a ton of opeps in an oyster of pearl-shell that Parsons, when he planned this, planned to pull out—and disappear from the islands for good and all."

Hudson was silent for a full minute, thinking it over. Then he nodded.

"I reckon you've got it, Ken! Parsons is pulling out—he would never have dared otherwise."

"I'm sure of it," said Ken.

"But that gets us nowhere," said the mate of the *Siren*. "If he's pulling out of the islands, there's less chance than ever of getting a sight on him, and getting back Prado's pearls."

Ken shook his head.

"Think that over," he answered. "If Parsons is pulling out, he's got to hit some port of call for a steamer. What's the nearest?"

"Pia," answered Hudson.

"And the Sydney steamer's due at Pita to-morrow," added King of the Islands. "Parsons would know that."

"By gum!" said Hudson. He sat up, in the duck-chair, "Ken, old man, you've worked it out. An Australian sovereign to an inch of shell-money that Parsons was going all out for Pita when he pulled out of here."

"That's how I've figured it," said Ken. "And the wind's good for Pita."

"But—where do we come in, all the same? Parsons slipped out under a good wind, while we were beating down to Larva. We could never beat him to Pita, even if we tried it on."

"No!" said Ken, slowly. "But—"

"If that's his game, he will make Pita in time to pick up the Sydney steamer, with a wind like this behind him," said Hudson. "He's got too good a start for us to think of ransacking him down, Ken. If that's his game, the steamer will be gone, with Parsons on board, half a day before we could raise Pita."

"But—I" repeated Ken. His face set grimly. "The Penguin Reef lies between Larva and Pita, Kit. And there's a war-gang from the Solomon Islands camped on the channel through the Penguin."

"Suffering cats!" exclaimed Hudson.

He leaped to his feet, his face ablaze with excitement.

"If Parsons doesn't know—I he exclaimed.

"He can't know," said Ken. "I've put the traders here wise to it, when I went ashore to see Hanson. Nobody here had heard of that war-gang—some of them find it hard to believe now I've warned them—a Solomon Island war-gang so far from the Solomons. Parsons pulled out before we came in, and he can't know a thing. If he's making Pita, he will make it by the channel in the Penguin—and run right into that bunch of cannibals."

Hudson whistled.

"He won't get through as we did, Ken! That little cutter—a single man—they'll have him, Ken."

"I reckon they've got him already."

The mate of the *Drum* whistled again. If King of the Islands had worked it out correctly, Peter Parsons had fled with a fortune in pearls, to fall into the hands of the black boys from the Solomons. He had sailed with a fair wind from Larva, expecting to make Pita in the early morning—but he had known nothing of the deadly peril that lurked on the Penguin Reef.

"By gum!" said Hudson. "He wouldn't have a dog's chance, Ken. If we've got it right—if he was making Pita—it would be after sundown when he reached the Penguin—he wouldn't even see them before he ran into them, not a dog's chance, Ken. By gum, he would have made a better guess to play Pradie fair, and sail east for Lukwa. A bag of pearls won't save him from the cooking-pot."

Ken nodded.

"If we've figured it out ship-shape, we shall find Peter Parsons on the Penguin Reef—dead or alive!" he said, "and if he's still alive, I reckon he will be glad to see the mate of the *Drum*—for the first time in his life! He could

never get through that sea-gang and make Pita. If that was his course, we've got legs—and Prado's pearls. Koko!"

"Yessar!"

"Show a leg, old coffee-bean! We're sailing."

"Yessar!"

Koko laid down his sticks, and jumped up from the cabin counting. The Hiss-On boys rubbed sleepy eyes as the boatswain's whistle strilled out. Under the stars, the *Dawn* glided away across the lagoon; the Kamikau wondering; Ken and Kit with eager faces. Outside the island reef, the wind was fair for the west—the wind that had baffled them so long in beating down to Lova, filled the canvas and drove the ketch swiftly seaward.

Ken was sure, or almost sure, that he had divined the plans of the Lakew sea-lawyer. If he were wrong, Pedro Prado's pearls were gone for ever, whatever might happen to "O Idras" afterwards. But if he were right, Dandy Peter's fight had been stopped at the Penguin Reef, and they would find him there, dead or alive, and a fortune in pearls with him. And the ship-mates of the *Dawn* could only wait, and watch, and hope, as the ketch heaved swiftly westward under the glimmering stars and the jewelled blaze of the Southern Cross.

CHAPTER V

DANDY PETER'S LUCK!

"FORTUNE—FORTUNE at last!"

Dandy Peter grinned and shooked.

In the dusk of the stars, the *Sea-Cat* was speeding before the wind, with mizzen and jib drawing full. Every minute now Dandy Peter expected to raise the Penguin Reef. Long sea-miles lay astern between him and the man he had robbed, and if he had thought of pursuit, he would have laughed at it. He was well away for Pita, for the *Spissey* steamer and a new life in a new world—with a fortune in his grasp.

His dark handsome face was craftant. Of the curious, half-scared eyes of the Lakew boys, continually turned on him, he took no heed, or of their exchanges of glances and muttered words in their own dialect. More than one wild and lawless deed the Lakew boys had witnessed, since they had sailed with Dandy Peter—but the robbery of Prado's pearls was the most wild and reckless of all—it had startled them, even in Dandy Peter. Lucky, at the tiller, Toto and Koko at the sheets, watched Peter Parsons unceasingly—unhounded by him. They knew what he had done, they could see Prado's pearls running through his greedy fingers, but Peter Parsons heeded a black boy no more than he heeded a flying-fish.

He sat with his Panama hat inverted between his knees, the pearls in the

hat, ranning them through his fingers again and again, glowing over them as they glimmered in the starlight. Pedro's black bag lay on the deck—where Parsons had tossed it carelessly after taking out the pearls—the other contents had no interest for him. Like a milky stream the pearls flowed through his fingers in the hat. More than a hundred of them—some small, some large—several of them great pearls of great value. Parsons had counted on gaining a prize—but he had hardly expected so much. There was a fortune in the glimmering pearls that cascaded through his fingers. A fortune that ran into thousands—such a fortune as he had never dreamed of making in years of trading, black-biding, pearl-poaching, smuggling.

It was well worth pulling out of the islands for this! They would never see him again on Lukou: Black Parley and the rest of the Lukou gang would never set eyes on him again. He would vanish from the islands; and when Pedro Prado set the law in motion, they could look for him as long as they liked—they would not find him, a rich man under another name, in a far land!

All was peace sailing.

He had but to run the reef channel in the Penguin, and sail on to Pita—in ample time for the Sydney steamer next day. He could sell his cutter at Pita—he would not need to tiddle about the price, with a fortune in his hands. Once he had stepped on the steamer, all was clear. At Sydney he could sell the pearls—at a better price than in the islands—ten thousand pounds, as likely as not, or more. Then a new life under a new name—and old Prado could whistle for his pearls, and the officers of the law could whistle for the pearl-thief. The handsome blackguard of Lukou laughed aloud as he thought of it.

Toto's voice interrupted him.

"Pellee reef he stop, sar."

Peter Parsons jumped up, and stared across the glimmering Pacific to the west. Dandy, in the tropical dusk, long lines of foam leaped into view, stretching far to north and south. It was the Penguin Reef, barring the sea like a great barrier for a hundred miles or more from end to end. A break in the long lines of surf marked the channel.

Dandy Peter rapped an order to the boat-steward. The cutter swept on. He knew the Penguin channel like the back of his hand: it was easy to run after sundown—he would have run it fearlessly at midnight without the gleam of a star.

Dandy Peter unbuckled the belt from his slim waist. On the inner side were little pouches, where he packed money, when he had any. Now he packed the pearls into them, buttoned them securely, and buckled the belt round his waist again. He replaced the Panama hat on his handsome head, and went to the binnacle. As soon as the *Sco-Cat* had run the Penguin, he would get a few hours' sleep—and turn out when Pita was raised under the light of dawn. Fair weather and a fair wind—a clear course before him: there was not a care on his mind.

North and south—starboard and port, stretched the long lines of surf.

But the wide dark opening in the reef lay before the cutter. Dandy Peter sailed his craft into the channel, as care-free as if he been sailing it into the lagoon at Lutwa. His mind was dwelling on Fitz—the Sydney steamer—riches and ease in a new land.

"Oh, sir!" came a sudden shout from Koko. The black boy was peering into the dusk of the channel with a startled frightened face.

Dandy Peter swung round on him, savagely.

"You black rascal! What cause you sing out, mouth belong you?" he snarled.

"Oh, sir! Black feller he stop!"

"Oh, sir!" It was a yell from Totto. "Canoe he stop!"

"Black feller along canoe he stop!" howled Jacky, at the tiller.

"You rascal, you plenty too much fright along black feller he stop along canoe belong him!" snapped Parsons.



It was only for a moment that he stood spellbound. The next moment his revolver was springing fire.

But the next moment he knew. It was an native canoe from Lovo or Pita that the Lukwe boys had seen.

Two long dark shapes loomed in the gloom, closing in alongside the cutter, port and starboard. Fancy heads, black faces, glittering eyes, gleaming spear-points, showed up in the night. Dandy Peter caught his breath, staring blankly, with unbelieving eyes. A war-party in those peaceful waters—a war-gang from the far-away Sokosans—he had never dreamed of it, could never have dreamed of it.

But it was only for a second that he stood spell-bound. Of danger on the Penguia he had never dreamed: he was taken utterly by surprise. But he was quick on the uptake, accustomed to facing sudden perils, and facing them with desperate courage. His hand flew to the back of his belt, and the next moment his revolver was spinning fire.

"Steady, you fellow lucky!" he shouted. He rained bullets into the mob of black faces, as the screams of savages came clambering up the low sea-board. "Keep her steady, you crew."

But five times lucky the boat-steerer did not heed the voice of his master. Toto and Koko, yelling with fear, darted below; and Jacky, abandoning the tiller, darted after them. The cutter yawed as the tiller swung free, and Peter Parsons almost lost his footing, and the *Sea-Cat* lost way.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Dandy Peter's face was white. He knew that his fate was upon him. But with desperate courage he put up a hopeless fight. A howling black savage rolled over at every shot from the revolver. But they were swarming on board, port and starboard, fore and aft, yelling like demons. And as the last shot was fired, and the desperate man clubbed an empty revolver, they closed in on him. His last fancy blow stretched a savage at his feet with a cracked skull: and then heavy hands were upon him, and he was dragged down—still struggling like a tiger. In that dreadful moment, the thrust of a spear, the crash of a war-shah, would have been almost welcome: for he knew why they were taking him alive. With his last breath he fought and struggled and tore; but tapa cords were knotted on his strong limbs, and he was thrown on the deck, a helpless prisoner.

And as he lay, panting, despairing, the howling savages spread over the cutter, plundering, rooting out the terrified Lukwe boys, and binding them hand and foot. Toto, Koko, Jacky, sprawled on the deck beside their skipper, jabbering with terror, while the triumphant yells of the savages echoed and re-echoed over the coral reef. A grinning, crowd dragged the prisoners, at last gabbling from the cutter to the reef where the camp-fire smoked. There they were flung down on the coral: and Dandy Peter, with a furtive in pearls pocketed in his belt, looked up at the dark velvety sky, and knew that he had given his life for that phantom fortune: that the cruel cords that bit into his flesh would never be unloosed, until he was led out to die under the shark's-tooth knife—his fate the cooking-pots.

CHAPTER VI

OVERHAULED!

SUNSET ON THE PACIFIC.

A glimmer of light in the gloom, and the sun leaped up in the eastern sky, and it was day again.

King of the Islands, with a rifle in the hollow of his arm, stared anxiously seaward.

The Penguin Reef had been a dark, shapeless blur, marked only by the long glimmering lines of white surf that foamed and boiled on the edges of the rugged coral. Now it leaped into view, and all eyes were turned on it, as the Dove, leaning to the wind, glided swiftly on towards the channel in the reef.

Faintly, dimly, against the sky, a curl of smoke rose from the reef. It marked the spot where the ketch's crew had seen the camp of the Solomon Islanders; where they had beaten off the attack of the cannibals the day before.

"Savite he stop along reef, ar," said Koko. "Along smoke he stop, black foler stop."

Ken nodded.

The Solomon Island war-gang were still camped on the reef by the channel. That was enough to tell Ken King that Dandy Peter, if he had passed that way, had never got past the Penguin. Alive or dead, Dandy Peter's fight had been stopped on the Penguin Reef, if he had been making Pita.

"We've got him, Ken," said Kit Hudson. "E—"

"If he was making Pita," said Ken.

"Aye, ay! And I reckon he was."

"I reckon it was the only course he could set, to save his skin," said King of the Islands. "But we shall soon see!"

He drew the binoculars from the leather case, and focused them on the reef. He was sure, almost sure, that Dandy Peter had set a course for the port of call of the Sydney steamer; and, knowing nothing of the war-gang from the Solomons, must have run the channel, and fallen into their hands. He was almost sure; and now that the sun was up, he would know whether the Sawyer of Luke was there, or whether he had wasted time in a vain pursuit. Even Koko's keen eyes could not pick up the savages' camp at the distance; but in the powerful glasses it was clear and clear. And Ken's face set grimly at what he saw, in the strengthening sunlight.

Midway through the channel, where the reef was high, the camp-fire smoked. Two canoes were tied up—the tall-prowed war-canoes of the Solomons. Farther off, a cutter lay, hauled over, mast and rudder tangled in rugged rock, aground. It was Dandy Peter's cutter—Ken knew the Sea-Cat

at a glance, though the cutter was almost on its beam-ends. On the reef, round the smoky fire of sea-wood, a score of dark figures, tiny in the distance, could be picked up. And near at hand, as King of the Islands searched the reef with the "long-foller glasser", he made out four figures that lay motionless—three of the faces black, one white—Dandy Peter and the three Laka boys, prisoners of the cannibals.

Ken drew a deep breath.

"Look!" he said.

Hudson scanned the reef through the binoculars.

"That's that," he said, with a nod.

"No doubt about it now," said Ken. "Dandy Peter was making Fita, and he ran right into them. And—" He paused.

"And I reckon that when he misses our sail, it will be the gladdest sight he has ever clapped his eyes on," said Hudson. "Dandy Peter's for the cooking-pots—unless we save him."

"Black feller makes kai-kai along that feller white master, sar," said Koko, "Black feller along Solomon likes long-pig too much."

"We're in time to save his worthless life," said King of the Islands. "But—we're gone too soon, Kit. They're banking up the cooking-fire—you can guess for what!"

The ship-mates are silent, as the white ketch ran on before the wind. They had followed Dandy Peter for Prudo's pearls; but they were in time to save him from the dreadful fate his lawless greed had brought upon him. So far, the savages did not seem to have observed the tall sail bearing down on the reef. They were occupied in preparations for the feast of "long-pig": one or more of the prisoners was to be sacrificed, before the sun was an hour higher in the blue heavens. The crew was sweeping into the channel, when a sudden commotion among the Solomon Islanders told that they had seen her. Black faces stared at the ketch as she came sweeping on: black hands grasped spear and war-club, and there was a rush for the canoes.

King of the Islands glanced round over his crew. Every hand grasped a rifle: every face was tense.

The savages were scrambling into the canoes. But the Dawn was within easy range now, and King of the Islands rapped out the word. A blaze of rifle-fire burst from the ketch as she swept down the coral channel.

Yells and howls answered from the Solomon Islanders. But if they had been thinking of attack, they abandoned that idea, as the volleys from the ketch crashed into the oases.

No doubt their experience of the previous day lingered in their busy minds. For a minute or two, there was yelling and howling of wild war-cries, brandishing of spears and clubs: then, as the hot lead from the ketch rained on them, the canoes pulled desperately down the coral channel, to escape to the open sea beyond. Whizzing bullets and gleeful yells from the Hiva-Oa boys followed them as they fled.

Ken dropped the butt of his rifle, and shouted to the crew. The firing

died away as the fleeing canoes vanished into the blue Pacific. The *Jawa* howl-ed; and the boy trader leaped on the reef.

And Dandy Peter, twisting painfully in his bonds, lifted his head, and stared with starting eyes at King of the Islands.

CHAPTER VI

HAND OVER!

"King of the Islands!" muttered Dandy Peter, huskily.

He stood unsteadily.

Ken's sleep-knife had cut through his bonds, and he was free. Koiko was releasing the Lakwe boys. The sea-lawyer of Lakwe tottered as he stood. He was free, but his limbs ached from the cruel grip of the tapa cords.

He stared at the boy trader—at Kit Hudaan—at the *Jawa*—at the grinning Hiva-Oa boys. For some moments he seemed hardly able to believe what he saw, or to realize that he has escaped the terrible fate that had been so close.

Through the long hot night he had lain despairing, dreading what the day would bring. And now—

Now he was free, and the canoes and the cannibals had vanished into the boundless Pacific. He pulled himself together. His cutter lay aground on the reef, leeward far and off. But he could sail her again, now that he was free. And there was still a fortune in pearls in his belt. But—*if* the ship-mates of the *Jawa* knew! Did they know?

"You've saved me," he muttered. He made a gesture towards the smoky fire of sea-wood, and the cooking-pots that lay where the savages had dropped them. "You've saved me—from that!"

"Aye, aye," said Ken.

Fansoa eyed him, stealthily. Did he know?

He was pulling himself together, more and more. Did King of the Islands know about Pradie's pearls? That question hammered in his mind.

Ken smiled grimly.

He could read the sea-lawyer's thoughts in his furtive face.

Dandy Peter had narrowly escaped a fearful fate. But he had escaped it—and it was already receding into the past in his mind. His thoughts had reverted to his loot. King of the Islands had saved him; but there was wealthy hostility in the sea-lawyer's eyes as he looked at him.

"You put in at Lureu?" asked Fansoa.

"We did."

"I reckoned you were making Lureu, when I raised your sail across the reef, before I pulled out for Lakwe," said Fansoa, casually.

"You pulled out for Lukwe? You're a long way off your course for Lukwe, Peter Parsons."

"Contrary winds," explained Dandy Peter. "I reckon I'd have done better to stick in the lagoon at Luvu and whistle for a wind." He gave Ken another stealthy look. "You didn't make a long stop at Luvu?"

Kit Hudson grinned. Ha, like his shipmate, could read the doubt in the Lukwe sea-lawyer's mind. Had they seen Prado—had they heard of the robbery of the pearls? If they had—

"Only a few hours," answered King of the Islands.

Dandy Peter breathed hard. If the boy trader knew, he was not in a hurry to tell him. Did he know?

"Lucky for me you came on this course," he said. "I reckon you know the natives were here—you must have run this channel yesterday, making Luvu."

"Oh, we knew," answered Ken. "We had a brush with them, running the channel, and sank one of their canoes."

"Better luck than I had—single-handed, on a cutter, I had no chance. They got me." Dandy Peter shrugged his slim shoulders. "But a miss is as good as a mile. I reckon I'll give my cutter the once-over—it won't be easy getting her off the reef—" He made a movement.

Kit Hudson laughed. Dandy Peter gave him a quick look, and then his eyes shot round again to Ken King's grim face. Did they know?

"Is that all you've got to say, Peter Parsons?" asked the boy trader.

"If you want my thoughts—"

"You can cut that out."

Dandy Peter caught his breath.

"What else?" he muttered.

"Nothing about pearls?" asked Ken, grimly.

The sea-lawyer of Lukwe started, and his hands clenched involuntarily.

"Pearls?" he repeated.

"You thieving swab!" said Ken, contemptuously. "We've saved you from the cooking-pots; and if we hadn't had word with Prado at Luvu, you'd walk off under our noses with his pearls in your pockets! You rat, we came after you for his pearls."

"You came after me—?"

"We figured it out that you were making Pita, to get out of the islands, and we figured it right!" snapped Ken. "You were not making Lukwe, you rat—you were making Pita for the Sydney steamer, with Prado's pearls—and we came after you to pick you up here, dead or alive!"

Dandy Peter grinned his teeth.

Hudson laughed again.

"The game's up, Parsons," he said. "Cough up the pearls—and thank your lucky stars that we don't clap you in irons on the litch and take you back to Luvu."

The sea-lawyer stood panting.

"Make it a trade?" he said, hoarsely. "What's Prado to you? I tell you, the pearls will sell for ten thousand pounds—make it a trade, share and share alike—"

"Oh, suffering cats!" ejaculated Kit Hudson.

"It's a fortune," breathed Parsons. "A fortune in pearls! Let Prado whistle for them—it's every man for himself, in the islands. Share and share alike in a fortune—we three! What do you say, Ken King?"

Ken looked at him.

He did not answer. He called to the boatwain of the *Dove*.

"You feller Koko,"

"Yassur."

"You bring feller lawyer-cane along this place."

"Yassur."

King of the Islands fixed his eyes on Parsons' eager face.

"You rat!" he said. "You thieving rat! Hand over the pearls—every one of them—hand them over, and don't say another word! One word more from you, and I'll order my Kanaka to give you six dozen with the lawyer-cane."

Dandy Peter's lips opened—but they closed again. With a face of fury, he unbuttoned his belt. Koko came back with the lawyer-cane—but it was not needed. In silence, breathing fire, but without a word, the sea-lawyer of Lukwa handed over the pearls.

The *Dove* glided away from the Penguin Reef, making long tacks for Luvu, with good news for Pedro Prado when she sailed into the lagoon. The ship-captain left a savage, desperate man behind them. Through the long hot hours Dandy Peter and the Lukwa boys laboured to get the cutter off the reef; and when they succeeded, at last, it was a dismantled and dilapidated craft in which Dandy Peter sailed away. But he did not sail for Fua—the Sydney steamer was of no use to him now. Dandy Peter was not, after all, pulling out of the islands with a Fortune in Pearls.