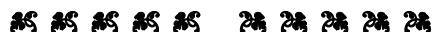


On the Road to Amurang

Ponga Jim

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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When he reached the road, Ponga Jim Mayo hesitated. Behind him, the wide, cool verandah of the Dutch Club echoed with soft laughter, the click of billiards, and the tinkle of glasses. There was a glow in the sky over Glandestan Way. But Ponga Jim's eyes turned toward the Puncar Wharves, where the SEMIRAMIS was tied.

His frown deepened. Balikpapan was no place for an empty ship. But it was better than having it at the bottom of the Molucca Passage, like the SILVER LADY.

He hitched his shoulder to shift the heavy Colt automatic. Abruptly he faded into the shadows of the shrubbery, gun in hand.

„Jim,“ a voice called softly. „Hold it.“

A drunken seaman was staggering down the road in stained dungarees and a grizzle of gray beard. He lurched closer, peering into Jim's face. Ponga Jim slipped the gun back into its holster.

„Damn you, William! If this is the way the British Intelligence works, the enemy will have to fumigate to get rid of you!“

Major Arnold chuckled. Then he grew serious.

„Jim, don't you own the SEMIRAMIS now?“

„If you call a down payment owning it. But the way things look, I'll never get a cargo for her. She's lying over at Puncar Wharves, as empty as my pockets will be tomorrow.“

„What's the matter? Are the shippers afraid?“

Jim spat disgustedly. „Do you blame them? The ARAFURA, gone without a trace somewhere in the Sea of Celebes. The VITI QUEEN, last sighted off Flores. And now it's the SILVER LADY, with a thousand tons of tin. In case you don't know, tin is valuable stuff. And a half-dozen sailing craft gone.“

„I know, Jim. Japan has threatened for years to take all the Far Eastern Dutch and British colonies if England went to war in Europe. There won't be a British or Dutch ship in the Indies within thirty days!“

Ponga Jim whistled. „Submarines?“

„We don't know. Subs demand a base.“

Jim stared thoughtfully down the dark road. Thousands of islands, with lagoons, streams, and bays—

„You know all these damn islands, Jim. If you were going to hide a submarine base, where would you do it?“

„There's a lot of places on Halmahera, on Buru, or Ceram. But there are places along the coast of Celebes, too. Nobody really knows these islands yet, William. But if I were going to base subs, I'd pick a spot on the Gulf of Tolo.“

„That's Celebes, isn't it?“ Major Arnold asked.

„Yeah, an' not a track or clearing for miles and miles. A lonely country with cliffs and canyons six hundred feet straight up and down. Waterfalls and rapids that plunge over a wilderness of rocks. William, there's jungle back there that would turn a monkey's stomach sick with fear!“

„Listen, Jim,“ Major Arnold said slowly. „I'm going to do you a favor. In return you can do me one. Li Wan Fang has a consignment to deliver that means a contract for him. The SILVER LADY was to handle it. The cargo goes to Amurang, Menado, and Wahai.“

„What a pal you are! Between Menado and Wahai is the Molucca Passage. And on the bottom of the passage is the SILVER LADY! You wouldn't put a guy on the spot, would you?“

The major grinned cheerfully. „You wanted a cargo, didn't you? All I ask is that you keep an eye open for a sub base.“

„An' go prowling around the Gulf of Tolo and get my rudder shot off? Listen, you scenery bum. I'll keep my eyes open, but I'm not getting the SEMIRAMIS sunk running errands for you.“

„Ssh!“ Major Arnold whispered suddenly. His voice became querulous, whining. „I sye, Guv'nor. Let a chap 'ave the price of a beer?“

„A beer?“ Jim snapped harshly. „Here’s a guilder. That ought to get you off the streets.“

Jim spun on his heel and strode down the road. A car swung around a bend behind him. For an instant, its headlights sharply revealed three men. Ponga Jim’s breath came sharply, and his hands slid from his pockets. He walked toward them.

Everyone in the islands knew Pete Lucieno. Short, fat, and oily, he participated in everything crooked in the Indies. With him were Sag Dormie and a huge man with a great moonlike face. Sag Dormie was known all too well in the islands. He had done time in the States and Australia. Some said he’d escaped from Devil’s Island penal colony. He was kill crazy. The big man was new. Looking up into his face, Ponga Jim felt his hackles rising. The man’s eyes were dead.

Years before, in the States, Ponga Jim had been climbing a mountain. Pulling his head over the edge of a great, flat rock, he had found himself staring into the ugly eyes of a rattlesnake. That snake’s eyes had been blank like these.

Ponga Jim looked at Pete and grinned insolently.

„What are you doing in Borneo? I thought they were putting a bounty on rats.“

Pete Lucieno’s eyes narrowed. „At least my ships have cargoes,“ he said softly. „They don’t lie rusting at the dock.“

„Yeah? Some people will carry anything for money. But you can have that stuff. I’ve got my own cargo. Sailing tomorrow for Amurang, Menado, and Wahai.“

„Where?“ Sag Dormie leaned forward intently. Jim noticed that Pete’s eyes were eager. „Taking the Molucca Passage?“

„You bet! Want to come along? There’s always room for rats in the bilges.“ Even as Jim watched Sag, he sensed the real danger was in the placid, fleshy man beside him.

Sag’s hatchet face twisted into a sardonic smile.

„Through the Molucca Passage? I want to live a few years yet!“

„You are too sure of yourself, Captain,“ Lucieno said, his beady eyes gleaming from under his brows. „What of the SILVER LADY?“

„Cap Marlin was my friend,“ Ponga Jim said coldly. „He was sunk. I only hope the guys who got him come after me.“

He brushed by them and strode along the road. There was work to do and a cargo to load before daybreak. Yet he was uneasy. It had been only a matter of weeks since he had thrown Pete Lucieno for a loss by preventing the landing of munitions on the coast of New Guinea. Lucieno would never forgive that. What was more natural than that he should know of this threat that hung over the masts of British and Dutch shipping? Who else would dare locate a submarine base in the islands?

Jim walked up the gangway. A slim, dapper young Chinese stepped from the shadows behind the companionway.

„Captain Mayo? I am Li Wan Fang. I have been informed you would transport some cargo for me. I took the responsibility of ordering it on the docks in readiness.“

„Yeah—okay,“ Jim said, startled. „You surprised me. Chinese in these waters don’t often speak good English. On second thought; neither do the white men.“

„I went to the University of California for two years and took it very seriously. Then I went to the University of Southern California for two years. Now I take nothing seriously.“

„We're going to get along,“ Ponga Jim grinned. „Do you know the chance we're taking?“

Li nodded. „But I must make delivery at once. And you have a reputation for getting results, Captain Mayo.“

„It'll take more than that,“ Jim said crisply. He spun on his heel. „Mr. Millan! Get those hatches open and tell Haynes to power the winches.“

It was hours later when he went below. The SEMIRAMIS was already dipping her bow into the heavy seas. The deck was still a confusion of lines and gear. It was going to be good to lie down. And he'd need all the rest he could get.

Opening the door, he stepped into his cabin. The wind caught the door, jerking it from his hand. He turned and pushed it shut.

When he looked around again, he stared into a gun muzzle. Beyond Sag Dormie, Pete Lucieno and the other man were sitting on a couch.

Jim hesitated. It was only for the flicker of an eye, but he found there wasn't a chance to shoot it out. Sag had him covered, yet was out of the line of fire of Lucieno and the big man. Ponga Jim relaxed.

„Visitors, I see. Just where do you boys think you're going?“

„Dussel thought this would be a good way to go to—to Menado,“ Sag said. „So we moved in when you weren't looking. I've been wanting to see how tough you were.“ He struck suddenly, smashing the back of his hand across Jim's lips.

Ponga Jim felt something burst inside and then dribble away, leaving him cold with anger. But Sag Dormie's gun was steady, and he did not move. Lucieno had a gun out, too. Mayo tasted blood in his mouth. He started to lift his hand to his mouth. The gun butt was just inside his coat—

„He's got a gun, Sag,“ Lucieno said. „In a shoulder holster. He carries it so always.“

Sag jerked the gun from Mayo's holster and stuck it in his belt.

„I'll handle this. You won't need a gun anymore, Captain Ponga Jim Mayo.“

Dussel moved his big body, and the settee creaked.

„You are to proceed as if nothing has happened, Captain Mayo,“ he said. „You will go to Amurang, discharge cargo there, and then go on to Menado. I trust you will be discreet. Otherwise it might be necessary to take steps.“

„You think you'll get away with this?“ Jim queried casually. „You got to go topside sometime. What happens when the crew finds out?“

Dussel smiled, his pulpy flesh folding back like sodden dough.

„They know already. The last two cases you hoisted aboard contained my men. By now they have taken command. Your crew will do the work. My men will superintend it. Job Dussel does not make mistakes.“

„I wonder about that. Do you think I'm going to take this lying down? And when this is over, what happens?“

„It is immaterial to me how you take this. When this is over, you and your ship will lie at the bottom of the Molucca Passage.“

Dussel's voice was utterly final. For the first time in his life, Ponga Jim felt a rush of desperation. His eyes met Dussel's and fastened there. In the gross, white body before him was cold brutality, a ruthlessness almost reptilian. This man would stop at nothing.

Ponga Jim pushed the cap back on his head and slipped his thumbs behind the broad leather belt.

„Nothing to lose, eh?“ he said. „I like it that way, Herr Dussel. You guys can pilot this ship. These are dangerous waters. But if I get knocked off anyway, what's it to me?“

Dussel's heavy-lidded eyes gleamed.

„I thought you would understand, Captain. You will obey orders carefully. You have heard of the Malay boot, Captain? It is child's play to some of the tortures I could use. If you don't obey—“ He smiled. „But you will.“

Ponga Jim shrugged. „You win.“

Job Dussel's face remained folded back in a flabby smile.

Turning, Ponga Jim went topside. Daylight had come, and the sun was sparkling on the choppy sea. Thoughtfully he climbed the companionway to the wheelhouse.

Slug Brophy, his chief mate, was standing watch. His tough, hard-bitten features were surly. In either wing of the bridge lounged a man with a Luger automatic. There was another in the wheelhouse. When Jim walked into the chart room, the man followed to the door, standing aside to let Brophy enter.

„Keep everything quiet, Slug,“ Jim said. „We hold this course until we get out of the strait. We're calling at Amurang and Menado before we make the Molucca Passage, then south to Wahai.“

Ponga Jim paused. The guard was still standing in the door. Jim's finger touched the chart.

„I expect Herr Dussel to take over after we get into the passage.“ Jim touched the chart again, and his voice was precise. „We'll have to be careful right here. It's a bad spot, where things usually happen. Until then it should be plain sailing.“

Slug nodded. „Okay, Cap. I get it.“

The days were bright and sunny. The old SEMIRAMIS rolled along over the sea, doing her ten knots without a hitch. The crew moved carefully. Ponga Jim slept on the settee in the chart room. No further words were spoken. Yet he knew the crew was ready and waiting. But they didn't get a chance. Herr Dussel remained below, usually in conference with Lucieno.

Sag Dormie was wearing two guns openly now, and there were ten armed white men. Slowly Ponga Jim's spirits ebbed, but he continued to watch. There was bound to be a break.

It was almost midnight, and he was to go on watch. He swung his feet down from the settee. Pulling on his woven-leather sandals, he heard the lookout sound the bells, warning of a ship to starboard.

Instantly he was on his feet. He could see the squat, powerful mate on the bridge. Not far away, the two guards engaged in low-voiced conversation. The guard in the wheelhouse was nodding against the bulkhead. It was one chance in a million, and Jim took it.

His hand groped for the switch controlling the light on the topmast. He began switching the light on and off, his eyes intent on the topmasts of the approaching ship.

LI WAN FANG, BALIKPAPAN, ENEMY ABOARD GET WORD M.W.A. SIGNED MAYO.

He was sending the message the second time when one of the guards saw the flickering light. As the guard leaped from the deck of the wheelhouse, Jim slammed a vicious right to his chin. He toppled back. Just as the two guards jammed in the port door, Jim sprang out. A bullet shrieked after him. He went down the companionway and crashed into Herr Dussel, just issuing from the captain's cabin.

Mayo hurled a terrific right at Dussel, and missed. A smashing right sprawled him to the deck. He sprang to his feet, amazed at the huge man's astonishing speed. Jim stabbed out with a wicked left. He might as well have hit a wall. A powerful blow struck him on the chin, and he rolled back against the bulkhead. Before he could get in the clear, two more vicious punches hit him.

Staggering, Jim tried to crouch. An uppercut jerked him erect. A lightninglike right cross sent him spinning. Dussel followed, for a killing punch. Jim struggled to his feet, rolled away, and then circled warily.

He wanted to tear into the giant, battle him to the wall, and beat him down. But there was no time for that. Even if he won, there were the other men.

Job Dussel was crowding him into a corner. Jim backed away carefully. Suddenly he reached back and grabbed the rail. He kicked out viciously. The blow caught Dussel in the chest, staggering him across the deck.

With the agility of a panther, Jim leaped over the rail to the main deck.

He landed running. A bullet smashed into the hatch coaming nearby. Another one whipped by his ears. He threw himself to the deck, landing on one shoulder. He rolled over to momentary safety behind a winch.

Something hard lay under his hand—a wooden wedge used for battening a hatch. The sky had clouded over, and a few spattering drops of rain were falling. In the glare of occasional lightning, he could see four men with rifles on the bridge. Two more were on the captain's deck, where he had battled Dussel.

Coming forward were Sag Dormie and three thugs. Behind him was the tightly battened number one hatch. Beyond that was the forecastle, and above it the forecastle head, and nothing else but a spare ventilator lashed to the steam-pipe housing and a small hatch into the forepeak. Of course there was the anchor winch. But he couldn't see a possible hiding place.

Instinctively Jim knew these men were out to kill him. Crawling to his feet, grasping the wedge, he waited. At a distant flash of lightning, he hurled the wedge. He had the satisfaction of hearing the solid smack of wood against flesh. A gun roared, but it was a chance shot. He knew he hadn't been seen.

He reached the forepeak and waited tensely. Aft, on the bridge, he heard Dussel roaring.

„Go ahead, you fools! He's not armed!“

It was only a matter of minutes. He was trapped. The forepeak was a hole without exit. Behind him was the bow, dipping slightly with the roll of the ship.

He crept close to the rail. He heard two men reach the forecandle head on the port side, not twenty feet away. Someone else was just stepping from the companionway, even closer.

Ponga Jim knew he could hesitate no longer. He crawled through the rail and lowered himself over the side of the ship. The bow dipped. For an instant he felt a wave of panic.

Clinging desperately, he grabbed through the hole of the bow chock. A slip meant a plunge into the dark waters below. He shifted his other hand to the chock and then lowered himself into the flukes of the anchor.

It was a wild gamble, but his only chance. He thanked all the fates that the SEMIRAMIS was blunt bowed. A light flashed on, off, and then on again.

„Chief!“ Dormie shouted, his voice incredulous. „He’s gone. He’s disappeared!“

„Search the forepeak, you damned numbskull!“ Dussel roared. „If that devil gets away, I’ll kill you. Search the forecandle, too.“

Crouching on the flukes of the anchor, Ponga Jim waited tensely. The old barge would soon be dipping her bows under. After that his time would be short. Feet pounded on the deck. He heard the men cursing.

„Maybe he slipped past,“ Dormie grumbled. „It’s dark enough. He couldn’t hide here.“

A wave splashed over Ponga Jim’s feet. The bow dipped and black water swept over him. He clung to the anchor, shivering.

Minutes passed. Feet mounted the ladder again. He heard a man muttering. Then the fellow walked across the deck and stood by the bulwark overhead.

Another sea drenched Jim to the skin. He clung to the flukes, trying to keep his teeth still. The ship gave a sickening lunge. His feet fell clear, and for a moment he hung clear as the bow lifted. Then lightning flashed.

As he pulled himself up, he saw a man leaning over the bulwark. It was Longboy, one of his own crew.

With a roar, a huge sea swept over Jim. The SEMIRAMIS lifted her bow.

„Psst!“ he hissed sharply. Longboy looked down, startled. „Get a line,“ Jim whispered. „It’s the skipper.“ The man wheeled around from the rail. In an instant, a line dangled in front of Jim’s face. He went up, hand over hand. Just as the bow dipped under another big one, Jim tumbled on deck.

„Lookout!“ a hoarse voice shouted. „Come to the bridge.“

„Getting too rough here,“ Jim commented. „They’ll have you stand watch there. Tell Brophy I’m safe, but be careful. Then you three stand by. I’m going to start something, and damned quick!“

As Longboy hurried aft, Ponga Jim went down the companionway, into the forecandle. What he wanted now was a weapon. It was dark inside.

Suddenly a cigarette glowed. It was a guard. In the faint glow of the cigarette he saw the glint of metal. The guard’s head turned.

Ponga Jim swung. He had only the mark of the glowing cigarette, but it was enough. He felt bone crunch under his fist. The man crumpled. Jim struck a match.

A frightened face peered from the curtains of a bunk, then another.

„Out of those bunks now!“ Jim snapped. „I’m taking over.“ He picked up the guard’s Luger and fished two clips from his pocket. He turned on the powerful lascar behind him. „Where are these fellows? You just came off watch, didn’t you?“

Abdul nodded. „Two mans in crew’s mess. Two mans below. One man on poop deck. Three on bridge. Small fat man, he sleep. Two other mans sleep. Big fat man, he talk this Dormie.“

„Right, Abdul, you get that man on the poop deck. Then you, Hassan, Mohamet, Chino, get the two men below. Chino, slip on this man’s coat and cap. Go to the ladder an’ call them. They’ll come up.“

„Yes, Tuan. We understand.“ The four men slipped out on deck, their naked feet soundless in the rising storm.

Ponga Jim turned to the two men who remained. They were short and powerful men, alike as two peas. Both wore green turbans.

„Sakim, you and Selim go aft. One of you tell Millan. Then meet me by the crew’s mess.“

Dampness touched his face. He stood grasping the rail. A wave, black and glistening, rolled up and then swirled by. A storm of spray swept across the deck. He tasted salt on his lips. Rain and spray beat against his face. The green starboard light stared down at him, a solitary eye. It was going to be a bad time before morning.

He started aft, walking fast, his knees bending to the roll of the ship. Job Dussel wanted a showdown, and he was going to get it. Jim couldn’t wait for Menado, not even for Amurang. Maybe his message would get to Li Wan Fang, maybe not. It was a chance he couldn’t afford to take. Major Arnold had said that not a British or Dutch ship would arrive for days.

What the plan was, he could only guess. One thing he knew—they had done for Cap Marlin and the SILVER LADY. Now they threatened peaceful vessels that carried no munitions, no soldiers, only traded quietly among the islands. Ponga Jim’s jaw set hard, and his eyes narrowed.

Suddenly he laughed. He caught the rail of the companionway to the deck outside his cabin and swung up. His hand was on the door, the Luger ready. A light flashed across him from the bridge. The Luger snapped up and roared. The light crashed out. He heard the tinkle of falling glass and then someone moaned. There was a shout from the wheelhouse.

Ponga Jim jerked the door open.

„Get ‘em up!“ he roared. He stopped, amazed. The room was empty!

He sprang inside and rushed to the adjoining cabin. It was also empty. Wheeling, he raced for the door. From above came a shout, a shot. Aft, he heard sounds of confusion. He leaped to the deck outside his cabin door. A blast of wind and spray struck his face.

A guard stood in the opening of the amidships passage. Even as Jim’s eyes caught the flash of movement, the rifle roared. A shot clipped by his head. Jim fired. The man staggered and then jerked up the rifle again. Jim fired again. The man dropped the rifle and grabbed his stomach with both hands.

Jim made the bridge in two jumps. He came face to face with Brophy. The Irishman was grinning.

„Everything under control, Cap! You got one, I got one, an' the other got away. Get Dussel, Dormie?“

Jim's brow creased. He was staring aft. Something had slipped up somewhere.

„No. They weren't in the cabin.“

He strode into the wheelhouse, Longboy was standing there with a rifle. The man at the wheel was grinning.

„Steady as she goes,“ Jim said. He turned to Longboy. „Get in the chart room and open the port aft. Watch carefully. Shoot to kill.“

Abdul appeared around the corner of the deckhouse. Behind him were Chino and Hassan. When they reached the bridge, Ponga Jim looked quickly from one to the other.

„Two we kill. Mohamet, he die, too.“

Ponga Jim sighed wearily. „Chino, you stand by here. Brophy, keep this bridge. Don't let anybody but our men come up.“

Jim slipped cartridges into the Luger. He started down the companionway. It was blowing a gale now. Every few minutes the sea came roaring over the bow and swept aft, gurgling in the scuppers.

Selim was standing in the door of the galley when they went aft. Sakim was just beyond. Both were watching the door of the crew's mess.

„How many?“ Ponga Jim asked.

„Two. They stay still, Tuan. Something funny.“

Ponga Jim stepped quickly to the mess room door. The two men sitting at the table were dead. One was the man he had shot in the passage. The other was probably one of those killed below. They had been propped up to delay pursuit.

Five men killed, and one of his own. Gunner Millan came running down the passage, gun in hand.

„Where'd they go? What the devil's happening?“

Ponga Jim shrugged grimly. „I wish I knew. We got five of them. There are five left, besides Dussel, Lucieno, and Sag Dormie. We got them outnumbered two to one, but half our boys are on duty.“

„Listen, Cap,“ said Slug Brophy, running. „That guy Dussel radioed some ship. I heard him tell Lucieno they were going to meet us in Himana Bay.“

„That's the answer,“ Jim cried. „Dussel decided to hole up until help comes. He doesn't want to waste his men.“

„But where is he?“ Millan asked.

„Somewhere aft. Either the poop or below.“ Ponga Jim turned to Brophy. „You better get back on that bridge. No traffic in here, but you never can tell. Swing north about thirty degrees. I'll give those guys at Himana something to think about.“

Brophy went forward, teetering with the roll of the ship. Jim motioned to Selim.

„You and Sakim stand by with the rifles. If one of them shows his noggin, blast it off. Abdul, you and Hassan turn in and get some sleep. Gunner, radio Amurang, Gorontalo, or someplace. Get in touch with Major Arnold or Li Wan Fang. Try to get some dope on a converted merchantman.“

„You don't think it's a sub?“ Millan asked.

„If it was, they'd never pick Himana Bay. There's a native village, and a sub would attract too much attention. It's only a few hours across the peninsula to Gorontalo. An armed freighter could lay there a week.“

Dawn broke, with the sun bright and the sea choppy. Ponga Jim was drinking coffee in the wheelhouse when Selim came up with a rush.

„Men gone!“ he shouted. „He take boat off poop. All gone!“

„What?“ Jim demanded. „Well, maybe it's good riddance.“

He stood up and raised the binoculars.

„Selim! Get below and turn out the crew. Send Millan to me.“

Gunner Millan came running. He was minus a shirt, but had strapped on a gun. Ponga Jim turned quickly.

„Go aft and jerk the cover off number five. Then hoist out that gun you'll find in the 'tween decks under canvas. I want it mounted aft. You know how to handle that. Lucky this damned old barge is a war veteran and still carries her gun mounting.“

„Where'd you get the gun?“ Millan asked.

Jim grinned. „I knocked over a load of munitions a few weeks ago. That gun looked good, so I kept it and sold the rest. Unless I'm mistaken, we're going to have the fight of our lives. I didn't get the idea until Selim told me Dussel and his boys got away—“

„Got away?“ Millan cried.

„Yeah, they launched that lifeboat from the after wheelhouse. It was a gamble, but they took it. The weather broke about four bells. They'll contact that cruiser of theirs.“

„It'll take them a couple of days to get to Himana,“ Millan exclaimed. „By that time we'll be in Amurang.“

„No,“ Jim said. „There's a radio in that boat. Himana Bay isn't more than thirty or forty minutes from where they left us. Even if the radio wouldn't do it, they could sail with the breeze they've had since they started.“ He pointed with the hand that held the glasses. „There's smoke on the horizon. Unless I miss my guess, that will be them.“

Millan clambered down, and Ponga Jim crossed to the wheel.

„Swing back to eighty degrees. At four bells, change her again to one hundred and thirty degrees.“

Longboy mumbled the course back to him, and Jim walked back to the bridge. It was going to be a tight race. Changing course was going to bring them up on him faster. But it was going to take him in close to the coast, nearer Amurang, in waters he knew and where his shallower draft would be an advantage. The other ship was doing at least fifteen knots to the SEMIRAMIS's ten.

Slug Brophy came up, looking tough.

„This is going to be good, Cap. Ever see Millan handle one of those big guns?“

„He used to be on the HOOD. I never saw him work.“

„That guy could knock the buttons off your shirt with a sixteen-inch gun.“ Brophy chuckled.

Ponga Jim glanced aft. „She's coming up fast. Looks like about forty-eight hundred tons.“

„Yeah,“ Brophy muttered. „And riding fairly low. But she’s not loaded by a damn sight.“

Ponga Jim pointed to a spot on the chart.

„See that? That point is Tanjung Bangka. Right about here is a patch of reef. She lies in about a fathom and a half. Loaded the way we are, she will give us just enough clearance. You’re taking her over.“

„Maybe she’s not so deep now, Cap. What if there ain’t that much water?“

„Then it’s going to be tough. We’re going over, and I only hope that monkey back there follows us!“

Ponga Jim ran down and hurried aft. Selim, Sakim, Abdul, and Hassan were all standing by with rifles. Millan crouched at the gun with two men.

Smoke leaped from the bow of the other vessel. A shot whistled overhead. Another blasted off to starboard.

„Get that gun if you can,“ Jim said quietly. He picked up a rifle. „I want that monkey in the crow’s nest.“

Whipping the rifle to his shoulder, he fired three times. The man in the crow’s nest slumped forward. His rifle slid from his hands.

Millan’s gun roared. Jim saw the shell smash into the bulkhead of the forward deckhouse. The gun crashed again. At the same instant a shell blasted open number four hatch, ripping a winch and ventilator to bits.

„There goes my profit on this trip,“ Jim said. „I never did care for war.“

Millan’s gun crashed. They saw the shell shatter the enemy’s gun. Millan fired again. A shot struck the SEMIRAMIS amidships. Mayo winced.

He ran to the rail and glanced at the faint discoloration of the reef.

„A fathom and a half is right,“ he said cheerfully. „I must report that to the Hydrographic Office. Get that after gun when she strikes the reef. When we swing alongside, let them board us. They will, because they’ll be sinking!“

„Are you nuts?“ Millan protested.

There was a terrific crash astern, a grinding scream as the bow of the pursuing ship lifted over the reef. With a tortured rending of steel plates, the big freighter slid over the reef, canted sharply to starboard. Ponga Jim turned and raced for the bridge.

„Hard to port!“ he yelled at Brophy. „Swing around and come in alongside.“

Millan’s gun banged, then again. Someone was shouting from the bridge. Rifle shots swept the deck of the SEMIRAMIS. Back aft, Millan was coolly battering the larger ship to pieces. The shells were smashing the superstructure into a mountain of twisted steel.

The SEMIRAMIS slid alongside. Ponga Jim dived for the ladder, gun in hand. A bullet slammed by his head and went whining off over the sea. He snapped an effective shot at a big German sailor.

The main deck was a pitched battle. Abandoning his gun, Millan was leading the lascars to stem the tide of men leaping from the rail of the wrecked ship. From the bridge, Slug Brophy was working two guns, firing from the hips.

Ponga Jim fired twice. Something struck him a terrific blow on the head. He pulled himself erect, feeling the warm rush of blood down his face. Something

smashed into the bulkhead beside him and he found himself staring at a mushroomed bullet. With an effort, he pulled himself around.

Sag Dormie was standing on the edge of the ruined number four hatch. Just as Jim looked up, Sag's gun blossomed fire. Miraculously, he missed. Ponga Jim's gun swung up, roaring a stream of fire and lead.

Blank astonishment swept over Sag's face. Still trying to lift his gun, he toppled back into the black maw of the hatch.

Shooting and slugging furiously, Ponga Jim leaped into the brawl on the main deck. Hassan was down, his body riddled. Big Abdul stabbed and ripped a heavy knife at a circle of enemies. Jim's shot cut one of them down. Another man wheeled to face him. Mayo slammed him with the barrel of the gun. The man wilted.

But where the hell was Dussel? Blood streaming down his face, Jim stared around. He saw him, standing on the bridge of the other ship. As he looked up, Job Dussel saw him and beckoned.

Jim cleared both rails at a leap. Job met him at the top, his white, pulpy face wrinkled in a smile. Then the big man leaped.

But this time Jim was ready. Rolling under a left, he slammed each fist into the big man's body. Dussel crowded him back, swinging. When he tried to duck he was caught with a wicked uppercut that knocked him back against the wheelhouse. There was no chance for boxing. It was a matter of standing toe to toe on the narrow bridge and slugging.

Dussel hooked a vicious right that knocked him to his knees and then shot out a kick that Jim barely evaded. Staggering to his feet, Ponga Jim was blinded by the blood from his scalp wound. He scarcely felt the terrific driving force of those blows that rained about his head and body. Driving in, he weaved and bobbed. He felt only the killing desire to batter that gross body against the bulkhead, to drive him back, back, back!

Ponga Jim stared. The huge, hard body, seemingly so soft, was impregnable, almost beyond injury. But the face—

Jim crowded closer, swinging both hands. A blow staggered him. But he went under and whipped up a left hook that bared Dussel's cheekbone. A terrific right knocked Dussel sprawling along the bridge.

Someone was shouting at Jim. He looked up, dazed. A slim white cutter had swept up, scarcely a half-dozen yards away. Standing on the bow was Major Arnold, immaculate in a white and gold uniform!

„Jump!“ Major Arnold yelled. „That scow is sinking under your feet! Stop playing slap hands and move!“

„William,“ Jim gulped. He suddenly felt relaxed and empty inside. „You look sweet enough to kiss. Am I seeing stars or are those gold buttons?“

„Just jump, damn you!“ Arnold roared. „If you don't, I'll come after you!“

Jim stared around. The water was creeping over the decking of the bridge!

Jim sprang to the rail of the bridge and off into the water. Dripping, he was hauled aboard the cutter. He could see the sturdy old SEMIRAMIS standing off.

„Look!“ Major Arnold said suddenly.

On the bridge of the sinking freighter, Job Dussel had tottered to his feet. His wide, repulsive face was horribly smashed and bloody.

Staggering to the rail, Dussel toppled blindly into the water. With a grinding crash, as though it had waited for that instant, the freighter slipped down into deeper water. Only swirls of water marked the spot...

Ponga Jim turned to Major Arnold.

„William,“ he said. „I got so busy there at last, I never did find out where your sub base was located.“

„You said the Gulf of Tolo before you started,“ William grinned. „That gave me a lead. Then the VALAPA BAY relayed the message you sent with the mast light. I knew if they were aboard the SEMIRAMIS, it was because they had to get to the Molucca Passage, or to some boat en route. That pointed in the same direction. We investigated and found the submarine base.

„You see, Dussel and Lucieno didn't dare show themselves on a British ship. The Dutch were watching for them, too. Then the boys found you were going to Amurang, Menado, and Wahai, so they slipped aboard. Job Dussel sank the SILVER LADY. He also sank those other ships, sank them without a chance. He was aiming at paralyzing the entire trade of the islands—and he came damned near success. He was a brute, all right!“

Ponga Jim Mayo wiped the back of his hand across his bloody mouth.

„Yeah, he was a brute,“ he said. „But, William“—Jim pointed back at the reef, where the waters were stirring slightly over the rocks—„that guy could fight! Boy, how that guy could fight!“

