

South of Suez

Ponga Jim

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Chapter 1

The heavy concussion of the first shell brought Ponga Jim Mayo out of his bunk, wide-awake in an instant. He was pulling on his shoes when he heard the whistle in the speaking tube.

“Skipper?” It was Gunner Millan. “We’re running into a battle! Can’t see a thing but red flashes yet, about three points on the starboard bow. Sounds like a battlegoon.”

“Put her over to port about four degrees,” Ponga Jim said quietly. “Have the watch call Brophy and get the gun crews topside.”

He got up, slid into his dungarees, and slipped on the shoulder holster with the forty-five Colt. There would be no need for it at sea, but he had worn the gun so long he felt undressed without it.

When Ponga Jim reached the bridge the sky was lit with an angry glow of flame. Two freighters of the convoy off to the starboard were afire, and something was lifted toward the sky that looked like the stern of a sinking ship. They could hear the steady fire of six-inch guns and then the heavy boom of something much bigger.

Second mate Millan came toward him along the bridge, swearing under his breath.

“Skipper,” he said. “I must be nuts, but I’d swear that gun wasn’t smaller than an eighteen-inch, and there’s nothing afloat carries a gun that big!”

“Sounds like it,” Jim said briefly. “Might be a sixteen. The TIRPITZ, maybe. But you wouldn’t think they’d gamble a battleship in waters as narrow as the Red Sea.”

The blazing wreck of one freighter was directly opposite them, and suddenly a low, ominous blackness moved between them and the blazing ship. For a few minutes it was clearly outlined against the red glow of flame.

Squat, black, and ugly, the monster glistened in the reddish light. It was built low and completely covered by what appeared to be a steel shell. Even as they looked they saw the muzzle of a heavy gun belch flame. A big freighter, almost a mile away, was attempting to escape. Even as they watched, the shell struck it amidships.

Suddenly, but with every move so perfectly detailed as to seem like a slow-motion picture, the distant freighter burst. The amidships vanished and the bow and stern seemed to lift away from it and then fell back into the flame-tinged water. Then there was a slow rain of black debris.

“Gun crews standing by, sir,” First Mate Slug Brophy said, as he came up. He saluted snappily, but he was scowling as he looked off across the water. “What the devil kind of a craft *is that?*” he demanded. “Looks like she was a seagoing tank.”

Ponga Jim nodded. "It's what I've been wondering why someone didn't do," he said crisply. "That's a new battleship. No elaborate superstructure, no basket masts or turrets. She's completely covered by a steel shell and probably bomb-proof. She's built along the lines of a streamlined Merrimac."

"Lucky that fire's in her eyes and we're back here," Slug said. "One shell from her and we'd be blown so high we'd starve to death falling back."

"Yeah." Jim studied the warship through his glass and then glanced ahead. "Gunner, lay all five guns on that baby. I'm going to give her a broadside and then run for it."

"You're nuts!" Brophy exploded. "Why, Chief—"

"You heard me," Ponga Jim said sharply. "Get going."

He stepped into the wheelhouse.

"Selim," he said to the pockmarked, knife-scarred man at the wheel, "aren't we abreast of the old smuggler's passage through the reef? It gives us about five fathoms, doesn't it?"

Selim nodded, lifting his eyes from the compass.

"I take her through?" he asked.

Ponga Jim studied the mystery ship ahead thoughtfully and then the nearing bulk of a large rocky island.

"Yeah," he said. "We'll fire that barge a broadside and then slip around that island and through the reef passage. They can't follow us, and blacked out the way they have us these days, we'll be invisible against that rocky shore. We got a chance."

He stepped back to the bridge and lifted his megaphone.

"You may fire when ready, Gridley!" he said and grinned.

The crash of the five 5.9s left his ears momentarily dead and empty. The freighter heeled sharply over. With his glasses on the warship, Ponga Jim waited for the SEMIRAMIS to recover.

"All right, Gunner," he called. "Once more!"

He had his glasses on the warship when the salvo struck. He scowled and then spun on his heel.

"Hard over!" he snapped crisply. "Show them our stern, if anything." He stepped on the speaking tube. "Chief," he called, "give me all she's got! We're in a spot, so keep her rolling."

Slug Brophy and Gunner Millan had returned to the bridge. The squat first mate wiped his face with a blue handkerchief.

"You sure pick 'em big when you want trouble!" he observed. "See those five-point-nines slide off that shell? Like rice off a turtle's back! What kind of a ship is that, anyway?"

"That ship," Ponga Jim said quietly, "can destroy British and American naval supremacy! The United States has the biggest, best, and most efficient navy afloat, but we haven't anything as invulnerable to attack as that ship!"

Behind them a gun boomed, and off to the left a huge geyser of water lifted toward the sky. Ponga Jim glanced aft and then looked at the black bulk of the rocky island. Selim was cutting it close, but no one knew the Red Sea better than he did.

The SEMIRAMIS steamed straight ahead and then, at a low word from Selim, slowed to half speed as he turned the ship at right angles to her course. Ponga Jim stared into the darkness ahead, hearing the roll of the surf on the coral reef. He put his hand up to his forehead, to find he was sweating.

Brophy stood close beside him, staring down at the black, froth-fringed reef dead ahead.

"You sure this guy knows what he's doing?" Slug muttered. "If he doesn't—"

"He does," Mayo said quietly. "Selim was a smuggler in this sea for several years. He knows every cove and passage in the eleven hundred miles of it."

As if to prove his statement, the reef suddenly seemed to open before them, and an opening, invisible until they were close up, appeared in the reef.

In a matter of seconds they were through and in the clear water of the inside passage...

Two days later the SEMIRAMIS steamed slowly into the harbor at Port Tewfik and moved up to the place at the dock that had been made ready for them.

"Mr. Brophy"—Ponga Jim turned to the chief mate—"get the hatches off and the cargo out of her as quick as you can. Take nothing from anybody, use any gear you need, but it must get out. Also, I want a man at the gangway every hour of the day and night. Nobody comes aboard or leaves without my permission. Also I want one man forward and one aft. All to be armed. Understand?"

"You must be expecting trouble," a cool voice suggested.

Ponga Jim turned to find himself facing a square-shouldered young man with a blond mustache and humorous blue eyes. He was a slender man with a narrow face, dark, immaculate, and with a military bearing, and had just boarded the SEMIRAMIS with a companion.

"William!" he exclaimed. "What in time are you doing in Egypt? Thought you were in Singapore?"

Major William Arnold shrugged his shoulders.

"Trouble here, too," he said. "Heard you were coming in, so thought I'd drop down and see you." His gaze sharpened. "Have any trouble coming up from Aden?"

"We didn't," Ponga Jim said drily, "but we saw a convoy get smashed to hell."

"You *saw* it?"

Ponga Jim was nodding as Major Arnold quickly added:

"Jim, let me present Nathan Demarest, our former attaché at Bucharest. He's working with me on this job."

"Glad to know you," Ponga Jim said, and then he looked back at Arnold. "Yes, we saw it," he said briefly, and went on, as his glance went back to Demarest. "Arnold will tell you that I don't run to convoys, so we were traveling alone. About six bells in the middle watch I got a call and got on deck to find a big warship blasting the daylights out of the convoy. Only one destroyer remained in action when we came up to them. And that not for long."

"A ship?" Arnold demanded. "Not submarines?"

"A ship," Mayo repeated. "A ship that couldn't have been less than forty thousand tons. She was streamlined and completely shelled over like a floating fort, and she mounted eighteen-inch guns."

“Your friend Captain Mayo is a humorist,” Demarest suggested to Arnold, smiling. “There is no such ship.”

“I’m not joking,” Ponga Jim said stiffly. “There was such a ship, and we saw it.”

Arnold looked at his friend thoughtfully.

“What happened, Jim?” he finally asked.

“We were coming up in the darkness and were unseen. I gave them two salvos from my guns, and then we slipped around an island and got away.”

“You hit her?”

“Yes—direct hits—and they didn’t even shake her. Just like shooting at a tank with a target rifle.”

Demarest’s face had hardened. “If this is true we must get in touch with the Admiralty,” he said. “Such a ship must be run down at once.”

“If you’ll take my word for it,” Mayo said slowly, “I’d advise being careful. This ship is something new. I don’t believe bombs would have any effect on her at all. She looks like someone’s secret weapon.”

Ponga Jim Mayo glanced at the winches.

The booms were being rigged, and in a few minutes the cargo would be coming out of the freighter.

“Is this what brought you here, William?” he asked. “Or something else?”

“Something else,” the major said. “Have you heard of Carter’s death? Ambrose Carter, the munitions man? He was found shot to death in his apartment near Shepherd’s in Cairo three weeks ago. Then General McKnight was poisoned, and Colonel Norfolk of the CID, who was investigating, was stabbed.”

“McKnight poisoned?” Ponga Jim exclaimed. “I heard he died of heart failure.”

“That’s our story,” Arnold agreed. “We mustn’t allow anyone to know, Jim. But those are only three of the deaths. There have been nine others, all of key men. Some poisoned, some shot, one stabbed, two found dead without any evidence of cause of death, others drowned, strangled, or snake bit.”

“Snake bit?”

“By an Indian cobra. The thing had been coiled in one man’s bed. When it bit him he died before help could get to him. Jim, they called me here because these deaths can’t be explained. Carter, for instance, was an acknowledged pro-Nazi, a former friend of Hitler’s. If it weren’t for that, it would seem logical the Nazis were starting a reign of terror, killing off the leadership for a major attack in the Near East.”

“If not the Nazis,” Jim protested, “then who could it be?”

“I wish I knew.” Arnold’s eyes narrowed. “But you’d better come along and tell this to Skelton. He’s in charge here in Port Tewfik. The man who will have to know and to act.”

Chapter 2

Seated in the office of Anthony Skelton, two hours later, Ponga Jim Mayo repeated his story, quietly and in detail. Two other men were there besides

Demarest and Arnold. One he was introduced to as Captain Woodbern, of the Navy. The other was General Jerome Kernan.

Before Ponga Jim's story was completed, Skelton was tapping his desk impatiently. Captain Woodbern was frankly smiling.

"Major Arnold," Skelton said abruptly, "I've heard a great deal of your ability. I've also heard of the work Captain Mayo has been doing in the Far East. Which makes me the more surprised at your taking our time, Major, with such an obvious cock-and-bull story. This Captain Mayo evidently has a peculiar sense of humor or is susceptible to hallucinations. Such a story as his is preposterous on the face of it!"

Arnold stiffened. "I know Captain Mayo too well, Mr. Skelton," he replied stiffly, "to doubt his word. If he says this story is true, then I believe it is true!"

"Then you're more credulous than any intelligence officer should be!" Skelton snapped.

"Captain Mayo evidently saw something," Captain Woodbern said, smiling, "but I'm afraid the darkness, the battle, the flames, and the general excitement caused his imagination to work a little overtime."

General Kernan turned slightly in his chair. He was a big man with a hard jaw, a cold eye, and a close-clipped mustache.

"Mayo isn't the type to be seeing things, Skelton," he said. "Major Arnold has known him for some time, and his work has been valuable. I want to hear more of his story."

Skelton glanced down at some papers on his desk. "We'll see that proper investigation is made," he said shortly. "In fact, we have already ordered two destroyers to the scene."

Ponga Jim leaned forward. "Then, Mr. Skelton," he said quietly, "you've sent two destroyers to destruction. Either they will return having found nothing, or they'll never come back." He got up abruptly. "Thanks for believing my story, General. As for you, Skelton, I'm not in the habit of having my word questioned. All I can say or do about that here and now, is to assure you that you are following the same trail of incompetence and smugness of others who didn't believe Hitler would attack Britain, did not believe in parachute troops, or that the Japanese would bomb Pearl Harbor and the Philippines while suing for peace. Well, do what you choose. I shall investigate further myself!"

Skelton's eyes blazed.

"No," he said sharply, "you won't! In the Far East your blunderings may have been occasionally convenient, but we want no civilian interference here. You make one move to investigate or to interfere and I'll have the SEMIRAMIS interned for the duration!"

Ponga Jim smiled suddenly. He leaned his big brown fists on the edge of the desk and looked into Skelton's eyes.

"Listen, pal," he said coldly, "you may have a lot of red tape around the throats of other men. But I'm not subject to your orders, and I'll sail when and where I please. If you want to intern my ship, I've got five-point-nines and plenty of ammunition. You'll think you've tackled something. When I get ready to sail, I'm sailing. Stop me if you feel lucky."

He glanced at Arnold.

“Sorry, William, but you can’t help that. Be seeing you.” He strode from the room.

Skelton’s face was deathly white. “I want that man put under arrest and his ship interned!” he snapped.

General Kernan got to his feet.

“You’re starting something with the wrong man, Skelton,” he said smoothly. “If necessary Captain Mayo would shoot his way out of harbor or sink trying.”

“Nonsense!” Skelton snapped.

“No.” Kernan was looking after Mayo thoughtfully. “The man’s a Yank, but I was doubting if they had any left like him. Now that I know they have, I feel a lot better. Mayo’s another of the school of Perry, Farragut, Decatur, and Hull.”

Nathan Demarest left the room quietly, glanced down the hall along which Mayo had gone, and then stepped into an empty office and picked up the telephone.

Ponga Jim walked swiftly down the street and then stopped in a place for a drink. When he turned to leave, he saw a slim, wiry man sitting at a table near the door. The man did not look up, but something in the man’s attitude made Mayo suspicious. He would almost have sworn it was the same man he had seen loitering outside Skelton’s office as he left. He scowled. Who would want him followed in Suez?

The quay was a litter of piled barrels and cases, of gear and bales. Ponga Jim was just passing a huge crane whose bulk forced him to the edge of the dock, when a black body catapulted from the darkness and smashed him with a shoulder, just hip high. He felt himself falling and grabbed desperately, catching his attacker by the arm. They fell, plunging into the black water with terrific force, but even as they sank Ponga Jim felt his attacker’s arm slip from his grasp, and the next instant the man had drawn a knife and lunged toward him.

Ponga Jim dived and felt the hot blade of the knife along his shoulder. His lungs all but bursting he slammed a punch into the man’s belly. He saw his attacker’s mouth open, but the man was a veritable fiend, and he lunged again with the knife, teeth bared. Ponga Jim pushed away, kicking the man in the belly. Then they broke water.

Instantly, the fellow took a breath and dived, but Ponga Jim went down with him. At one time Ponga Jim had been a skin diver for pearls. The swift thought flashed now that this fellow was good, and he had a knife, but—

The man swung in the water, his body as slippery as an eel’s, and then he lunged at Ponga Jim with the knife. But Mayo was too fast. He dived again, catching the man’s wrist. Turning the arm, he jerked it down across his shoulder with terrific force.

Then he pulled free, smashing a fist into the fellow’s belly for luck. As he swam he could see the man sinking, his teeth bared, his mouth leaving a trail of bubbles. The arm was broken.

Ponga Jim swam to a small boat dock and scrambled from the water. For a moment he stood there, dripping and staring back, but there was nothing to be seen. He put his hand up, and it came away from his shoulder bloody.

“Somebody,” he muttered softly, “doesn’t like me!”

The dark shape of the SEMIRAMIS loomed not fifty feet away. He climbed the ladder to the dock and then moved warily toward the freighter. As he came up the gangway, a dark shape materialized from beside the hatch. He recognized the half-shaven head of the big Toradjas, one of his trusted crew.

"It's all right, Lyssy," he said. "It's me."

"Something happen astern, Captain. Somebody—" Lyssy saw Ponga Jim's dripping clothes, and his eyes widened. "Somebody try to kill you?"

"That's right." Mayo glanced back at the dock. "Keep your eyes open. Who else is on watch?"

"Big London, he forward. Longboy aft. Sakim, he around somewhere, too."

"Has anyone been here?"

"Yes, Captain. One man he come say he want to talk to you. He say very important. He say General Kernan send him."

"Where is he?" Ponga Jim demanded.

"In your cabin. You say no man come aboard, this man he worry to see you. We lock him in."

Ponga Jim grinned. "Okay. You stay here."

He quickly climbed the ladder to his deck and then fitted his key in the lock of his door. He swung it open—and stopped dead in his tracks. The man sitting in Jim's chair, facing the door, had been shot above the left eyebrow.

Slowly, Ponga Jim reached behind him and drew the door to. He circled the body, studying it with narrowed eyes. Then he stepped behind the body and sighted across the dead man's head in line with the wound. The bullet had come through the open porthole. In line with the port was the corner of the warehouse roof. Whoever had fired the shot had stood on that corner and made a perfect job.

Ponga Jim went out to the deck and called Lyssy.

"Did you hear a shot?" he demanded.

"No, Captain, nobody shoot!" Lyssy said positively.

That meant one thing to Ponga Jim. A silencer had been used.

"The man up there is dead," he said. "He was shot from that warehouse roof."

Sakim came up, and Ponga Jim hurriedly scratched a note.

"Take this message to Major Arnold at this address," he instructed. "Give it to no one else. Then return here."

He went back into his cabin and, closing the door, careful not to disturb the position of the body, he searched the murdered man's pockets. He spread everything he found on his desk and studied the collection carefully. There was a key ring with several keys, a billfold, a fountain pen, a gun, some odd change, mostly silver, and a ticket stub indicating that the victim had but recently arrived from Alexandria. Also, there was a magnificent emerald ring, the gem being carved in the form of a scarab.

Turning his attention to the billfold, Ponga Jim found a packet of money amounting to about eighty Egyptian pounds, around four hundred dollars. In one pocket of the billfold was a white card and on it, in neat handwriting, a name.

ZARA HAMMEDAN

After a few minutes thought, he pocketed the key ring, the card with the name, and the emerald ring. On second thought, he returned the ring to the table, retaining the other things he had chosen.

Chapter 3

At a sudden rap on the door, Ponga Jim looked up. He opened the door to find Major Arnold, General Kernan, and Nathan Demarest awaiting him. They had come promptly in answer to Mayo's note.

Arnold crossed at once to the body and made a cursory examination.

"Then this man who has been killed never managed to talk to you?" General Kernan asked.

"No," Ponga Jim replied. "I was delayed myself. Someone tried to add me to your list of killings."

Arnold looked up quickly. "I noticed you were wet. Did they shove you in?"

Ponga Jim nodded. He was looking across the room at a mirror.

"Yes. Good attempt, too. But I don't kill very easy."

"What happened?" Demarest asked. "Did you—catch him?"

"No. I killed him. He cut me a little, but not much."

"But you were in the water," Demarest persisted. "How could you kill him?"

"I killed him," Ponga Jim said quietly, "in the water. He got his belly and lungs full of it."

Demarest's eyes narrowed a little, and then he glanced at the body. "That man was a half-caste," he said. "But his killers must have taken him for you."

"I don't think so," Ponga Jim said. "I think the killer knew who he was shooting."

"So do I," Kernan said. "This man who was shot came here with a message for you. He came to me first, learned you were here, and said he would talk to no one but you. Had some message for you."

Arnold straightened up. "Had you noticed something, Jim? No identification on this man. Not a thing. We can check on this ticket stub and the gun, but I'm sure they will give us nothing."

"What about the ring?" Ponga Jim asked.

"Old, isn't it?" Arnold said. "And odd looking. It might be a clue."

Ponga Jim picked up the ring. "Look at that again, William. Emeralds and rubies were carved into scarabs only for royalty. The emerald itself is big, the ring too heavy for ordinary wear. It's probably a funeral ring, and probably dates back three thousand years. That ring is museum stuff. But I'll bet it didn't come from any museum."

"Why?" General Kernan asked. He examined the ring curiously.

"Such prize archaeological specimens are too well cared for. And if anything as valuable as that were lost, everyone would have heard of it. No, this man, whoever he was, had found a tomb and had been looting it."

"He might have picked it up in some thieves' market," Demarest protested.

“What I’m wondering,” Arnold said, “is how all this can tie in with your mysterious battleship? A thief with a stolen ring or one looted from a tomb could scarcely have anything to do with such a thing.”

“That battleship,” Ponga Jim suggested, “or even if I was crazy and it was only a submarine or two, must have a base. The first problem, it seems to me, is to locate that base. The fact that the ship is in the Red Sea gives us a chance to keep it here—if we can. My theory is that this dead guy may have known where the base is, and maybe that knowledge ties in with that ring.”

Major Arnold stayed on after the others had gone.

“Go slow, Jim,” he advised. “Skelton doesn’t approve of civilians’ interfering in government affairs, and he persists in maintaining that you have no right to have an armed ship, that actually you’re a pirate.”

“Yeah?” Ponga Jim chuckled. “Maybe he’s right. I’m an American, even though I’ve spent little time there. My shipping business is in war areas but I’m not asking America’s protection. I protect myself. But seriously, William, this business has got me going in circles. Why the rush to kill me? Who knows, except you guys, that I saw that warship? Who knows that a shipowner and skipper like myself would ever dream of investigating the thing? Why should this guy with the ring come to me?”

Arnold nodded. “I’ve thought of that,” he said. “Frankly, Jim, other people have, too. Skelton even hinted that you might have sunk that convoy.”

“*What?*” Ponga Jim’s face hardened. “Some day that guy’s going to make me sore.”

“But see his angle. You have guns. There were two destroyers with that convoy, but what would prevent you from giving one of them a salvo at close quarters when they expected nothing of the kind? And then the other?”

“There’s something in that,” Ponga Jim admitted. “But you and I know it’s baloney. And where does this killing me come in? Only one way I can see it. These babies have an espionage system that reaches right to the top here in Egypt. They know about me coming through; they know about my plan to go on.”

Arnold was thoughtful. “Jim,” he said slowly, “I’ve got a hunch. You’ve knocked around a lot. Suppose you were right, and this isn’t a Nazi deal? Who or what could it be? My hunch is that you know, and somebody knows you know, and is afraid you might talk.”

Ponga Jim frowned. “I know? What d’you mean?”

“Suppose that while knocking around—you used to be in Africa—you stumbled across some person or place connected with this. You have forgotten, but someone in this plot hasn’t.”

Mayo nodded. “Might be something to it. But what?”

“Think it over. In the meanwhile, we’ll have this body taken off your hands.”

When Arnold had gone Ponga Jim walked out on deck and called Selim and Sakim.

“Listen,” he said. “You boys used to be wise to everything that happened in the Red Sea. I want you to go out into the bazaars, anywhere, and I want the gossip. I want to know more about this warship we saw. I want to know about the guy that

was killed in my cabin. Above all, I want to know something about a woman named Zara Hammedan!"

The two Afridis stiffened.

"Who, Nakhoda?" Selim said. "Did you say Zara Hammedan?"

"That's right."

"But, Nakhoda, we know who she is!" Selim hesitated. Then: "I will tell you, Nakhoda. This is a secret among Moslems, but you are our protector and friend. There is among Moslems a young movement, a sect of those who are fanatics who would draw together all Moslem countries in a huge empire. These men have chosen Zara Hammedan for their spiritual leader: She is scarcely more than a girl, Nakhoda, but she is of amazing beauty."

"Who is she? An Arab?"

Selim shrugged. "Perhaps. It is said she is of the family of the Sultan of Kishin, leader of the powerful Mahra tribe, whose territory extends along the coast from Museinaa to Damkut."

Slug Brophy came up as the two were leaving.

"Any orders, Skipper? We'll have her empty an hour after daybreak."

"Yeah."

Ponga Jim talked slowly for several minutes, and Slug nodded.

"Can you swing it?" he asked finally.

"Sure." Brophy hitched up his trousers. "This is going to be good..."

A few minutes after daybreak, Ponga Jim went ashore and headed for Golmar Street. As he disappeared, Brophy stepped out on deck. With him was Big London.

"That's the lay," Slug said briefly. "The chief's going alone. You follow him, see? But keep that ugly mug of yours out of sight. I got a hunch he's sticking his neck out, and I want you close by if he does. He'd raise the roof if he knew it, so keep your head down."

The giant black man nodded eagerly and then went ashore. Brophy looked after him, grinning.

"Well, Skipper," he muttered, "if you do get into it, you can use that guy."

For three hours, Ponga Jim was busy. He dropped into various bars, consumed a few drinks, ate breakfast, and lounged about. In his white-topped peaked cap with its captain's insignia, his faded khaki suit, and woven leather sandals, he was not conspicuous. Only the unusual breadth of his shoulders and his sun-browned face somehow stood out. The bulge under his left shoulder was barely noticeable.

The streets of Suez were jammed. War had brought prosperity to the port, and the ships that came up from around the Cape of Good Hope were mostly docking here. Hundreds of soldiers were about the streets. Ghurkas, Sikhs, and Punjabis from India, stalwart Australians and New Zealanders, occasional Scotsmen, and a number of R.A.F. flyers. And there were seamen from all the seven seas, thronging ashore for a night or a day and then off to sea again. There was a stirring in the bazaars, and rumors were rife of new activity in Libya, of fighting to break out in Iraq once more, of German aggression in Turkey.

And the grapevine of the Orient was at work, with stories from all the Near East drifting here. To a man who knew his way around, things were to be learned in the bazaars.

Ponga Jim went on to Port Said, flying over and later flying back. At four in the afternoon, he presented himself at Skelton's office.

He was admitted at once. Demarest, Kernan, Arnold, Woodbern, and Skelton himself were there.

"Glad you dropped in, Mayo," Skelton said abruptly. "I was about to send for you. Our destroyers wirelessly that they could find only wreckage. Two more destroyers coming up from Aden effected a junction with the same report. What have you to say to that?"

"The warship could have hidden," Ponga Jim said quietly. "You would scarcely expect it to wait for you."

"Hidden? In the Red Sea?" Skelton smiled coldly. "Captain Mayo, a warship could not be concealed in the Red Sea. No ship could be."

"No?" Ponga Jim smiled in turn.

"No," Skelton said. "Furthermore, Captain Mayo, I have deemed it wise to order your ship interned until we can investigate further. I am a little curious as to those guns you carry. I also hear you carry a pocket submarine and an amphibian plane. Strange equipment for an honest freighter."

"The spoils of war," Mayo assured him, still smiling. "I captured them and have found them of use. And I hate to disappoint you, Skelton, but I'm afraid if you expect to intern the Semiramis you are a bit late."

"What do you mean?" Skelton snapped.

"The SEMIRAMIS," Ponga Jim said softly, "finished discharging shortly after daybreak this morning. She left port immediately!"

"What!"

Skelton was on his feet, his face white with anger. The other men tensed. But out of the corner of his eye, Ponga Jim could see a twinkle in General Kernan's eyes.

"No doubt you'll find the SEMIRAMIS," Ponga Jim said coolly, "since you say no ship can be concealed in the Red Sea. Good hunting, Skelton!"

He turned and started for the door.

A buzzer sounded, and behind him he heard Skelton lift the phone.

"What?" Skelton shouted. "Both of them?" The telephone dropped back into the cradle. "Gentlemen," Skelton said sharply, "the destroyers sent from this base to investigate Captain Mayo's report have both been sunk. A partial message was received, telling how they had been attacked. Captain Mayo, you are under arrest!"

"Sorry, gentlemen," Mayo said, "but I can't wait!"

He swung the door open and sprang into the hall.

"Stop him!" Skelton roared.

A burly soldier leaped from his position by the wall, grabbing at Mayo with both hands. Ponga Jim grabbed the big man by the wrist and hurled him over his back in a flying mare that sent the big fellow crashing into the opposite wall. Then he was down the hall, out into the street, and with one jump, was into the crowd.

Another soldier rushed from the building and started down the steps close on Ponga Jim's heels. A Herculean black man, lounging near the door, deftly thrust his foot in the way, and the soldier spilled head over heels into the crowd at the foot of the stone steps.

Rounding a corner, Ponga Jim slipped into a crowded bazaar. He stopped briefly at a stall, and when he left he was wrapped in a long Arab cloak, or aba, and on his head was a headcloth bound with an aghal. With his dark skin and his black hair he looked like a native.

He walked on, mingling with the people of the bazaar. Twice soldiers passed him, their eyes scanning the bazaar, but none looked at him.

But as Ponga Jim drifted slowly from the bazaar and out into the less crowded streets, a slim, hawk-featured man was close behind. And a little further back, Big London, his mighty muscles concealed by his own aba, trailed along, watching with jungle-trained cunning the two men in the crowd ahead.

Chapter 4

The marketplaces of the East teem with gossip, and stories are told over the buying of leather or the selling of fruit or in the harems.

To hear them, many an intelligence officer would pay a full year's salary.

During the morning, Ponga Jim had heard much. Now, in his simple disguise and with his easy, natural flow of Arabic, he heard more. A discreet comment or two added to his information.

Several points held his interest. If the Nazis were behind the mysterious killings of the key men who had been murdered here, and if they owned the mystery warship, why had Ambrose Carter been killed, known as he was to favor Hitler? And what had he been doing in Egypt?

Who was the man who had been shot aboard the Semiramis? Where had he obtained the scarab ring? Why did he want to talk to Ponga Jim and no one else? And what was his connection with the girl, Zara Hammedan?

And last but not least, what could Ponga Jim Mayo possibly know that the enemy might fear?

Whatever it was, it had to be something he had known before he left Africa, several years before. There seemed only one answer to that. He would have to go over all his African experience in his mind, recalling each fact, each incident, each person. Somewhere he would find a clue.

In the meanwhile, he would have to avoid the police and even more, the killers who would be sure to be on his trail. The card that had been found on the dead man, the card bearing the name of Zara Hammedan, was the only good lead Ponga Jim had, and to Zara Hammedan he would go.

He had already learned that she lived in the Ramleh section of Alexandria. So at eight o'clock, moving up through the trees, Ponga Jim looked up at the Moorish palace that was Zara Hammedan's home. There were no windows on the lower floor; just a high, blank wall of stucco. Above that, the second floor projected over

the narrow alley on either side of the house, and there were many windows, all brilliantly lighted.

A limousine rolled up to the entrance, and two men in evening dress got out. For an instant the light touched the face of one of them. He was Nathan Demarest!

As other cars began to arrive, Ponga Jim studied the house thoughtfully. Had there been no crowd he would have shed his disguise, approached the house, and sent his own name to the lady. But now—

Keeping under the cypress trees, he worked down along the alley. At one place the branches of a huge tree reached out toward the window opposite it. Ponga Jim caught a branch and swung himself into the tree with the agility of a monkey. Creeping out along the branch, he glanced through the window into a bedroom, obviously a woman's room. At the moment, it was empty.

The window was barred, and the heavy bars were welded together and set into steel slides in the window casing. Ponga Jim crept farther along the branch, a big one that had been cut off when it touched the house. Balancing himself, he tested the bars. Almost noiselessly, they lifted when he strained.

They wouldn't weigh a bit under eighty pounds, and it was an awkward lift. Looking about, he found a fair-sized branch and cut it off with his seaman's clasp knife. Then, leaning far out, he worked the set of bars up and propped the stick beneath them.

It was quite dark, and in the dim light Ponga Jim could see nothing beneath him. Once, he thought he detected a movement, but when he waited, there was no more movement, no sound. He pushed the window open with his foot and slipped through the window.

Below, in the darkness, the jungle-keen ears of Big London, who had been watching Ponga Jim slowly working the bars up, had heard a soft step. He faded into the brush as softly as a big cat. A man slid slowly from the dark and glanced around, trying to place the black man, and then slid a knife from his sleeve. And as Ponga Jim leaned far out toward the window, he drew the knife back to throw.

A huge black hand closed around his throat, and he was fairly jerked from his feet. Struggling, he tried to use the knife, but it was plucked from his nerveless fingers by the big black. Before the man knew what was happening, he was neatly trussed hand and foot and then gagged.

Ponga Jim gently closed the window behind him and glanced around. There was a faint perfume in the room. He crossed to the dressing table and slid open a drawer. Inside were some letters. He had started to glance over them when a voice in the hall startled him. Instantly, he dropped the packet into the drawer and stepped quickly across the room and into a closet.

The door opened and a woman came in. Or rather a girl, followed by a maid. Her hair was black, and her eyes were large, and slightly oblique. Her white evening gown fitted her like a dream and revealed rather than concealed her slender, curved figure.

She wore a simple jade necklace that Ponga Jim could see was very old. Standing in the darkness, he watched through the crack of the closet door, fearful that the maid might come to the closet.

Zara Hammedan, for it was obviously she, glanced up once, straight at the door behind which he stood. Then the maid started across the room toward him.

“No, Miriam,” Zara said suddenly, “just leave the things. I’ll take care of them. You may go now. If anyone asks for me, tell them I’ll be down shortly.”

The maid stepped from the room and drew the door closed. Zara touched her hair lightly and then put her hand in a drawer and lifted a small, but businesslike automatic. Then she looked at the closet door.

“You may come out now,” she said evenly, “but be careful! You should clean the sand from your shoes.”

Ponga Jim Mayo pushed the door open and stepped out, closing it behind him.

“You,” he said smiling, “are a smart girl.”

“Who are you?” she demanded. Her face showed no emotion, but he was struck again by its vivid beauty.

“I am a man who found another man murdered in his cabin,” Ponga Jim said quietly, “and that man had your name written on a card that was in his pocket. So I came to you.”

“You choose an odd way of presenting yourself,” Zara said. “Who was this man?”

“I do not know,” Jim said. “He came to see me, and in his pocket was a ring with an emerald scarab.”

She caught her breath.

“When did this happen?”

“Shortly after midnight. The man was shot by someone using a silencer from across the street. So far the police know nothing about the murder. Or about the ring or your name.”

“Why did I not know of this?” she asked. “It seems—”

“One of your present guests knows,” Ponga Jim said. “Nathan Demarest.”

“He?” She stared at him wide-eyed. “But who are you?”

He smiled. “I’m Jim Mayo,” he said.

“Oh!” she rose. “I have heard of you. You came here, then, to learn about the murdered man?”

“Partly.” He sat down and took off the headcloth. “The rest is to find what he wanted to tell me, where he got that ring, and what you know about a certain warship now in the Red Sea. Also, what there is to this Moslem movement you’re heading.”

She smiled at him. “What makes you think all of these questions have anything to do with me?”

“I know they have,” he said. “And I’ve got to know the answers, because somebody’s trying to kill me. I was attacked last night, shoved in the harbor by a killer.”

“You?” she exclaimed. “Was it a man with a scar across his nose?”

“Sure,” Ponga Jim said. “That’s him.” He took a cigarette from a sandalwood box and lit it. Then he handed it to her. “A friend of yours?”

“No!” The loathing in her voice was plain. “But the man was a pearl diver from Kuwait. I don’t see how—”

“How I got away? I’ve done some diving myself, lady, and a lot of fighting. Now give. What’s this all about?”

“I can’t tell you,” Zara said. “Only—if you want to live, take your ship and leave Egypt, and don’t ever come back!”

“That’s not hospitality,” he said, grinning, “especially from a beautiful girl. No, I’m not leaving. I’ve been warned before and threatened before. I’ve as healthy a respect for my own hide as the next man, but never have found you could dodge trouble by running. My way is to meet it halfway. Now somebody wants my hide. I’d like to see the guy. I’d like to see what he wants and if he knows how to get it.”

“He does. And I’ll tell you nothing but this—the dead man was Rudolf Burne, and you are marked for death because of three things. You beat a man playing poker once who never was beaten before or since, you know where the emerald ring came from, and you know where the warship is!”

“I do?” Ponga Jim stared. “But—”

“You’ll have to go now!” Zara said suddenly, her eyes wide. “Quick! There’s someone coming!”

He hurried to the window. She stood behind him, biting her lip. Suddenly he realized she was trembling with fear.

“Go!” she insisted. “Quickly!”

“Sure.” He slid open the window and put a leg over the sill. “But never let it be said that Jim Mayo failed to say good-bye.” Slipping one arm around Zara’s waist, he kissed her before she could draw back. “Goodnight,” said Ponga Jim. “I’ll be seeing you!”

As the steel grate slid into place, he heard the door open. Then he was back in the foliage of the tree and in a matter of seconds had slid to the ground.

“Now,” he told himself, “I’ll—”

At a movement behind him he whirled, but something crashed down on his head with stunning force. There was an instant of blinding pain when he struggled to fight back the wave of darkness sweeping over him, then another blow, and he plunged forward into a limitless void.

Chapter 5

When Ponga Jim’s eyes opened he was lying on his back in almost total darkness. A thin ray of light from a crack overhead tried feebly to penetrate the gloom. He tried to sit up, only to find he was bound hand and foot and very securely.

His head throbbed with agony, and the tightly bound ropes made his hands numb. After an instant of futile effort, he lay still, letting his eyes rove the darkness. The place had rock walls, he could see—one wall at least. There seemed to be some kind of inscriptions or paintings on the wall, but he couldn’t make them out.

The air was dry, and when he stirred a powdery dust lifted from the floor.

Lying in the darkness he tried to assemble his thoughts. Most of all there hammered at his brain the insistent reminder that he, himself, knew the answers to the puzzling questions that had brought him to this situation. Zara had told him that he knew the man behind the scenes, where the ship was, and where the ring had come from.

But there was something else—a memory he couldn't place, a sensation of lying in the bottom of a boat and hearing voices. Now he slowly pieced together that memory, scowling with effort to force the thought back to consciousness. In that swaying darkness he half remembered, with spray on his face and damp boards against his back, he seemed to have heard a guttural voice saying in triumph:

"That will be the biggest convoy of all! Forty ships, and they are helpless before the KHAMSIN."

Then another voice that had muttered, "And only two days to wait!"

Ponga Jim Mayo lay still, his head throbbing. For the first time in a life of fierce brawls, barroom brannigans, gunfights, and war on land and sea, he was helpless. Not only was he imprisoned somewhere far from civilization, he was sure, but he was bound so tightly that even to wriggle seemed impossible. The feeling came over him that he was not just imprisoned. He had been carried here to die.

His mind sorted out his memories. The warship was in the Red Sea. Zara had told him that something in his own past, something he had forgotten but another remembered, linked him with the base of the warship.

Carefully, trying to neglect nothing, he tried to recall that long, narrow, reef-strewn sea of milky, sickly water. He remembered the sandstorms sweeping across the sea from the desert, the days of endless calm and impossible heat when the thermometer soared past one hundred and thirty degrees.

He remembered rocky islets and endless, jagged coral teeth ready to tear the bottom from a ship, sandy shores where desert tribesmen lurked, ready to raid and pillage any helpless ship, pirates now as they had been ages ago in Solomon's time.

And along those mountainous, volcanic shores where no rain fell were ruins—ruins of the heyday of Mohammed, of Solomon, of Pharaohs; ruins whose names and origins were lost in the mists of antiquity. No like area in all the world has so many ruined cities as the shores of the Red Sea and the edge of Arabia where it faces the Indian Ocean.

Even in Mokha, once the center of the coffee trade, in 1824 a city of twenty thousand inhabitants with a shifting population that made it much larger, only two or three hundred Somalis, Arabs, and Jews now lived in ruined houses of stone, crawling like animals in rags from their lairs, cowardly and abject, but ready to fight like demons if need be. Mokha was now only a memory, with its streets heaped with debris, its stone piers crumbling into the stagnant, soupy sea.

Yet somewhere along the shores of the Red Sea was a base. A base that must be well equipped and fitted for at least minor repairs, with tanks filled with water and fuel oil. But where?

His memory searched around Hanish Island, around many a *Ghubbet* and *chor*, down the Masira Channel and past Ras Markaz, across the dreaded Rakka shoals and up to Jiddah town, where the Tomb of Eve with its wide, white dome stands among the old windmills.

Somewhere in that heat, sand, and desolate emptiness was the base for the battleship of mystery he had seen.

Now Europe, Asia, and even America were at war, and in the Near East the bazaars were rife with whispers of intrigue, with stories of impending rebellion, of

the gathering desert tribes, of restlessness along the Tihama, of gatherings in the Druse hills. And then out of the night—murder.

Hard-bitten old General McKnight, who knew the East as few men did—murdered, poisoned with his own sherry. And Norfolk, shrewd criminal investigator, stabbed suddenly on a dark street. One by one the men who could fight this new evil, this strange, growing power, one by one they were dying, murdered by unseen hands at the direction of a man who sat far behind the scenes pulling the strings upon which puppets moved to kill.

Ponga Jim stirred restlessly. That was the horror of it, to know that he knew the clue, that somewhere down the chaotic background of his past was the knowledge that could end all this killing here.

Suddenly, he stiffened. There had been a movement, a sly, slithering sound. And for the first time, he became conscious of a peculiar odor in the place. His eyes had gradually grown accustomed to the dim light, and now, with a skin-crawling horror, he saw!

On a heap of broken stone and piled earthen jars was a huge snake, lifting its ugly flat head and looking toward him! His throat constricting with terror, Ponga Jim's eyes roved again. And now that he could distinguish things better and in the dim vagueness could see grotesque figures, of carts, animals, and workmen painted on the walls, he knew he was in a tomb! He was lying where a sarcophagus once had lain, on a stone table probably three or four feet above the floor.

Turning his head, he could see the dim outlines of great coils, more snakes. And still more.

He looked up, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead, and it dawned upon him what had been done. Above, a loosely fitted stone slab had been moved back, and his body had been lowered into this old tomb. Soon he would fall off the table to the floor, and the snakes would bite. Or he would die of thirst or of starvation.

Ponga Jim felt with his feet toward the edge of the stone table. He got his ankles over, and a thrill went through him as what he had hoped proved true. The edge of the stone slab on which he lay was clean-cut, sharp!

Hooking his ankles over the edge, he began to saw. It would take a long time, but it would have to be. A snake moved, rearing its head to stare, but he worked on as sweat soaked his clothing.

It seemed that hours passed, but still he worked, on and on. Above him, the light grew dim and darkness closed down.

Suddenly, dust spilled in his face, and above him he heard a grating as of stone on stone. He looked up, and above him was a square of sky and stars, blotted out suddenly by an enormous shape.

“Captain Jim?” The voice was husky with effort. “You down there, Captain?”

“You're right I am!” Ponga Jim's voice was hoarse with relief. “Watch it! I'm tied hand and foot, and this place is crawling with snakes. Get a line and rig a hook on it.”

“Captain, they ain't no more line up here than there's nothin'! This here place is nothing but rock and sand. Ain't no fit place for no snake even.”

“Wait!”

In desperation, Ponga Jim hacked viciously at the edge of the slab and suddenly felt the weakened strands give. He hacked again, kicking downward against the stone edge, sawing, jerking against the corner.

The snakes were stirring restlessly now. He knew what would happen if one struck him. Within an instant he would be bitten a hundred times. Snakes, like rats and men, can be gang fighters.

But the rope fell loose.

He crawled to his feet, staggered, and almost toppled from the table into the crawling mass below.

Ponga Jim's hands were bound, but even if they had not been it was a good ten feet to the hole above.

"London," he called, "scout around and find something to haul me out of here or I'll start knotting these snakes together. If I do I swear I'll toss you the hot end to hold!"

"Don't you be doing that!" Big London said hastily. "I'll see what I can find."

Ponga Jim bent over, working his slender hips between the circle of his arms and bound wrists. Once he had them down over his hips he stepped back through the circle and straightened up, his arms in front of him. Then he began working at the knot with his teeth. It was a matter of minutes until the knots were untied.

Shaking the ropes loose, he gathered up the pieces. He had about eight feet of rope; a bit less when he had knotted the two together with a sheet bend.

There was sound above him.

"Captain"—Big London's voice was worried—"I reckon you going to have to start working on them snakes. They ain't nothing up here like no rope."

"Lie down!" Ponga Jim said, "and catch this rope! I'll toss it up, you take a good hold, and then I'm climbing. And you better not let go!"

"You just leave it to London, Captain," the black man assured him. "I'll not let go!"

Big London caught the rope deftly. Then Ponga Jim went up, hand over hand. When he reached Big London's hands, he grabbed the big man's wrist. London let go of the rope and caught him. In a few seconds he was standing in the open air.

"Thanks, pal!" Ponga Jim said fervently. "I've been in some spots, but that one—"

"Captain," Big London said, "we better be going. This is clean across the Gulf of Suez and way down the coast. They spent the best part of the night and morning coming down here."

Ponga Jim looked around. It was bright moonlight.

"Is there a high cliff right over there?" He pointed toward the southeast. "One that drops off into the water? And is there a black hill right over there?"

"Sure is, Captain," Big London said. "I took me that black hill for a landmark. I smuggled myself away on their boat, hoping they'd leave one man alone so I could take over, but they never. Then I waited, hid out till they took you ashore. I wanted to follow, but they got clean away with three men with guns still on the boat. I had to slip over into the water when they started again, swim ashore, and then trail you up here."

“You did a good job.” Ponga Jim chuckled. “The joke is on them. This place is the Ras Muhammed, the tip of Sinai Peninsula, and right over there, not three miles from here, in one of the neatest little bays in this area, is the Semiramis!”

An hour and a little more passed before they reached the shore of the little inlet surrounded by high cliffs. At a cleft in the rock they made their way down to a beach of black sand and decomposed coral. The freighter was anchored, a dark blotch, not a hundred yards offshore. At Ponga Jim’s shout, a boat was hastily lowered.

No sooner had Ponga Jim reached the freighter than he called Brophy.

“Slug,” he said, “get number five open and break out that amphibian. I want her tuned and ready to take off by daybreak. This is going to be quick work.”

He walked into the cabin, tossed off his clothes, and fell into his bunk. In seconds he was sound asleep.

Chapter 6

Four men and a woman sat in the spacious living room of Zara Hammedan’s Ramleh residence. Zara’s face was composed, and only her eyes showed a hint of the strain she was undergoing.

One of the men stood up. He was well over six feet and broad shouldered, and he moved with the ease of a big cat. There was a great deal of the cat about him—in his eyes, in the movements of his hands. His hair was black, but white at the temples, and his eyes were large and intensely black. His face was swarthy and his arched eyebrows heavy. There was about him something that spoke of a sense of power, of command, and in every word, every gesture, was an utter ruthlessness.

“You see, gentlemen?” he said lightly. “Our plans move swiftly. There was a momentary danger, but Captain Mayo has been taken care of. He was dropped into the Tomb of the Snakes this morning. By this time he has been dead for hours. By tomorrow noon the convoy will be well into the Red Sea. It carries fifty thousand soldiers, many planes, much petrol, and much ammunition. By tomorrow at dark that convoy will be completely destroyed. As always, there will be no survivors.

“And tomorrow night? General Kernan and Major Arnold will be shot down. Within an hour a reign of terror will begin in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, Suez, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Aleppo. By tomorrow night at midnight, the British will be leaderless in the Near East. Rebellion will break out.” The man paused. “Then we will take over.”

“I do not like it.” The man who spoke was slender and bald, and his small eyes were shrewd. “It is not practical. And that Ponga Jim was disposed of in too theatrical a manner. He should have been shot. I would never leave such a man alive.”

“The man is just a man.” The imperious words of the tall man were smooth, cold. “One would think, Herr Heitn, that you thought him supernatural.”

Heittn smiled thinly. "I know this man," he said shortly. "Did I not use every means to dispose of him? Did he not kill my brother? Did he not handle Count Kull like he was a child?"

"Strength is not enough," the tall man said. "It takes brains!"

"You got something there, Chief," one of the other men said. His jaw was heavy, his nose flat. He looked like a good heavyweight boxer. "But I been hearing about this guy Mayo. He's a tough cookie."

"But I know how to handle 'tough cookies,' Mullens," the tall man assured. "You have only to handle your end. You have your men ready?"

"You bet," Mullens said. "I got four of the best rodmen that ever slung a heater. All of 'em with tommy guns. We'll mow your pals Kernan and Arnold down like they were dummies."

"Then we're all ready. You're sure about the time, Demarest?"

"Yes," said Demarest. "The time is right. Everything will move perfectly. The destruction of this convoy, the fourth consecutive convoy to be totally destroyed, will wreck the troops' morale. A whispering campaign has begun. Kernan cannot be replaced. He knows the East too well."

Heittn was watching the tall man steadily, his eyes curious.

"I don't understand your stake in this, Theron," he said abruptly. "What is it you want? You are not German. You are not just an adventurer. I do not understand."

"No reason why you should, Herr Heittn," the man called Theron snapped. "You have a task to do. You will do it. What you think or do not think is of no interest to me if your task is well done."

Zara arose and excused herself. Theron's eyes followed her as she left the room. They were cold, curious.

"What of her?" Demarest asked. "You are sure of her?"

"I will be responsible for her, Demarest. She has too much power among the Arabs not to be of value to us. But she must be kept with us always."

The group broke up. Heittn was first to leave. He took his hat and started for the door, then glanced swiftly around, and with surprising speed darted up the stairs toward Zara's room. There he tapped lightly on the door.

It opened at once, and before Zara could speak, Heittn slipped into the room. He looked at the girl narrowly.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

The German looked down at the small automatic in her hand.

"You will not need that, Fräulein," he said gently. "What I want is of interest to us both. I want to know about *him*." He pointed downward. "Can we trust him? What does he want? Who is he?"

Zara's face paled. She glanced toward the door. It was locked. She crossed to the window, started to close it, and then caught her breath. The steel bars were gone!

But when she turned, her face was composed.

"I know no more than you, Herr Heittn," she said calmly, "except he seems to have unlimited funds. Also, he is ambitious."

Heittn nodded. "Ah!" he said seriously. "That is what I have seen, Fräulein. Too ambitious. And he has power, too much power. Sometimes"—he shook his head

worriedly—"I think he is beyond us all, that man. He is not a National Socialist, yet he is too strong with the party for me."

"But what could he do?" Zara protested.

"Do? A strong man with money, ambition, and courage—what can he not do in such times as these? Nations are rising and falling; men are discouraged, afraid. They will look anywhere for shelter. The weak admire the strong, and that one, he is strong. He is cruel. I admit it, Fräulein. I am afraid of him!"

Casually Zara Hammedan lighted a cigarette. Her eyes strayed toward the closet door, now closed. She frowned a little. The bars from the window had been slid up out of sight again, and that could mean but one thing. Ponga Jim Mayo was somewhere in the house.

She looked at the German shrewdly. "Herr Heittn, your government does not appeal to me, you know that. But I would even prefer the dictatorship of Nazi Germany to what would follow the success of these schemes in the Near East! I do not know more about that man than you do, but I do know that Captain Mayo knew, or knows, something that he does not wish anyone to know."

"And Mayo is dead," Heittn said slowly.

"Perhaps." Zara flicked the ash from her cigarette. "You had better go, Herr Heittn. It grows late."

The Nazi turned to the door and then glanced around.

"I go, but I have a plan to make our friend below be a bit more reasonable." He smiled. "*Guten Abend, Fräulein!*"

As Heittn walked swiftly down the hall he glanced over the stairs, but no one was in sight. With a quick smile, Heittn went down the carpeted stairs. He had reached the door when a voice froze him in his tracks. Something in the low, even tone sent a chill up his spine. He turned slowly.

Theron stood in the shadow near the door from the wide living room. The light fell across his face. There was something regal in his appearance. In his right hand, he held a Luger.

"I thought you left us, Herr Heittn?" he said coldly. "I do not like spies!"

"Spies?" Heittn shrugged. "Come, come, Theron! That is hardly the term. I went up to see Miss Hammedan about—"

"But searched my room in the meantime, is that it? Give me that blueprint, Herr Heittn. Give it to me, at once!"

"Blueprint?" the Nazi was puzzled. "I don't understand."

Above in the darkness, Zara slipped from her room and looked down. In her hand was an automatic. She hesitated and then lifted it slowly.

"Don't!"

A hand closed over her wrist, and the voice that spoke to her was low. Demarest stepped up beside her.

"Not now," he said. "Without him, nothing would work. He holds all the strings. The whole plot would be useless and we would be exposed."

In the silence they could hear the words that were being spoken at the front door.

"All right, Herr Heittn," Theron was saying. "It does not matter. But if the blueprint were to leave this house, it would matter."

The sound of the automatic was flat and ugly in the dim hallway. Heittn's face went sick, and the man stepped back, two short steps. Then he sat down, abruptly, with a thin trickle of blood coming from the hole over his heart.

Her face deathly pale, Zara Hammedan turned abruptly and went to her room. Nathan Demarest glanced after her and then returned to his own room.

Zara closed the door and then turned. In the dim light the man sitting on the bed was plainly visible. His peaked cap lay beside him, and he still wore the faded khaki suit and woven leather sandals. She could see the butt of his automatic under the edge of his coat.

"You—you must go quickly!" she protested. "He killed Herr Heittn. He will stop at nothing now!"

Ponga Jim lifted an eyebrow. "What I want to know is—who is he?"

"Theron," she whispered. "He will be coming up, too, wanting to know what Heittn said to me. Go—quickly!"

Ponga Jim's eyes were bright.

"Theron. That answers a lot of things!" He stepped to the window, put a foot over the sill, and reached for the thick branch. "So long, beautiful. Be seeing you!"

Chapter 7

Ponga Jim had reached the ground and was starting to slip back into the trees when he saw them. Four men closing in on him.

He knew what that meant, and he didn't hesitate. He jumped the nearest one, hooking a left short and hard to the man's head. It hit with a *plop*, and the man's head flew back. He dropped like a sack of meal.

A shot clipped by his head, and Ponga Jim dropped into a crouch as his own gun came out. The big automatic roared. Once—twice—three times.

Two men dropped, a third screamed shrilly and staggered back into the building. Holding his left shoulder, Ponga Jim ran. He dodged through the trees with bullets clipping the leaves about him, ducked into an alley, and then crossed into another street. A car was waiting with the motor running. He jumped in.

"Move!" he said, and Sakim let the car into gear and stepped on the gas.

Ponga Jim glanced at his watch. It was three A.M. At noon the convoy would be attacked, and he had until then, and until then only. It was going to be nip and tuck if he made it.

He felt sick. Fifty thousand soldiers coming up the Red Sea toward Suez, fifty thousand Anzacs to strengthen the Army of the Nile. He knew the plot now. What he had overheard and what he had found in his ransacking of Theron's room had told him the whole story.

Native mobs running riot in the streets, men dying by the thousand—Kernan, Arnold, all of them.

The car slowed up as it neared the American Export Line's office on the Rue Fouad. A man stepped from the shadows, and the car whined to a halt. Major Arnold hit the running board with a jump.

“Jim! What’s happened?” Arnold’s face was tense. “When Selim found me he said all calamity was to break loose today. What do you know?”

As the car raced across town, Ponga Jim told his story quickly and concisely.

“Ptolemais Theron is the man behind it all,” he said. “He’s a bad one, William! I’ve known of him for years. He and I played poker once with two other men in the place of Mahr-el-din in the Kasbah. Ring Wallace was there and Ski Jorgenson. Theron had just sidestepped a term on the breakwater for illicit diamond buying and was working on a deal to sell a lot of world war rifles to the Riffs. We were talking of the Red Sea, and Ski—”

Ponga Jim stopped short, and his face went blank.

“By heaven, William, I’ve got it!”

“Got what?” Arnold’s face was tight, stiff.

“William”—Ponga Jim’s voice was low with emotion—“Ski Jorgenson had been working a salvage job in the Gulf of Aqaba, near Tirān Island. He told us of finding some huge caverns under the cliffs of the islands—one room five hundred yards long, with a dozen chambers opening off from it, and water in that main chamber. He told us about what a swell smuggler’s hangout it would be. And the entrance is deep. A ship could come and go—if it had no masts!”

“You mean that’s the base of that mystery battlewagon?” Arnold’s face lit up. “By the Lord Harry, if it is we’ll blast the place in on them!”

“That’s the base. Theron wanted me killed because I knew too much. When Ski told about the caverns he also told some stuff about the ancient tombs at Adulis, and the chances are Theron’s been robbing them for the gold to put this deal over. That would be where Rudolf Burne got the emerald ring he had. Probably he was in on the deal, got cold feet, and came to me because he knew I wouldn’t turn him over to the police. But he was shot before he could talk.”

The car slid to a halt, and Arnold dropped out.

“Don’t worry about us,” he said drily. “We’ll be all set.”

“Wait!” Ponga Jim put a hand on Arnold’s arm. “Don’t say a thing about yourselves—I mean you and General Kernan. I’ve already arranged for that. I’m going to have Selim, Sakim, Big London, and Longboy standing by. They’ll get the men who’ll be sent to kill you.

“Don’t trust anyone. Somebody high up is in this, somebody close to you.” He paused. “Oh, yes! Remember Carter? He built the KHAMISIN. Built the plant for it for the Nazis.”

“Okay.” Arnold smiled suddenly and held out his hand. “I don’t know what you’ve got up your sleeve, but good luck. And in case something slips up—it’s been a grand fight!”

Ponga Jim grinned. “Listen, pal. Just to keep the record straight. Keep Zara Hammedan undercover. She means well, and—”

“Who?” William grabbed Ponga Jim’s arm. “Why, you didn’t mention her! Where did you—”

“Shh!” Mayo said, grinning. “It’s late, William, and you’ll wake up the neighbors. Zara? Oh, we’re just like that!” He held up two fingers. “A honey, isn’t she?”

Selim stepped on the gas.

“I hope you get shot!” Arnold yelled after him.

Tirān Island, at the southern end of the Gulf of Aqaba, is six and a half miles long and in the south part is about five miles wide. Chisholm Point is steep and cliffy, but Johnson Point, the northwest tip of the island, is low and flat, of sand and dead coral. South of the point, two flat, sandy beaches afford good landing, but the coast elsewhere consists of undercut coral cliffs.

It lacked but a little of daylight when Ponga Jim Mayo stepped ashore on one of those sandy beaches. Slug Brophy scowled at him in the vague light.

"I don't like it, Skipper. I don't like shooting at no ship when you're aboard it. And if they catch you they'll fill you so full of lead you'll sink clean through to China."

"Forget it," said Mayo. "I've got my job to do—you've got yours. Have the boats and life rafts ready, alright? We've got one chance in a million that the SEMIRAMIS will come out of this, but a chance. All I'm figuring on is crippling the KHAMSIN—that's the name of the mystery battleship—so she can't move fast. Then maybe she can be kept busy until the convoy escapes. Have the sub over right away. Jeff and Hifty from the engine room can handle it."

The boat shoved off into the darkness, and Ponga Jim climbed the gradually shelving beach. He paused there, looking over the island: sand, decomposed coral, and rock, with here and there some grass. He was going on a memory of what Ski Jorgenson had said several years before, that there was an opening of the cave to the island itself, aside from the huge mouth that opened into the gulf.

He found it by sheer good luck, after he had looked for an hour. It was already daylight when he saw the small hole Ski had mentioned. Surprisingly, there was no one near it. He slid through and found himself in a passage where he could stand erect. He hurried, hesitated at a branching passage, and then chose the larger. It opened into the huge cavern so suddenly that he almost walked right out into the open.

Even so, he stopped in his tracks, staring. He stood in the darkness at one side of a huge cavern, its domed roof lost in the shadows overhead. But what held his gaze was the warship.

It was at least five hundred feet long, painted black, but glistening with metallic luster. The hull seemed to be built like that of any battleship, but above deck the ship was covered with a turtleshell covering. There were two turrets forward and one aft, each looking much like slightly less than half a ball where the rounded surface lifted above the shell. The turrets, obviously, could turn to cover any point from dead ahead to a complete right angle on either side.

Between, in three tiers, like guns in a fort, were smaller guns. Nowhere on the ship was there any exposed deck, any open space. The ship was completely covered with a steel housing from stem to stern.

There were lights around the ship, and men working. Ponga Jim could hear the clangor of metal and could see a great moving crane, and obviously the branch caverns were fitted with shops for the building and upkeep of ships.

Keeping in the shadows, Ponga Jim worked his way to a place where the cavern narrowed. His plan was to get aboard and keep the quarter pint of nitroglycerine he had intact—which meant keeping himself intact.

Dozens of men were working and sweating. Armed guards patrolled the area near the ship, and at any moment Ponga Jim knew he might be seen. Warily, he dodged behind a pile of oil drums, waiting.

The German who came around the corner of the pile came without any warning, and Ponga Jim looked up to see the man staring at him. He saw the man's eyes widen, saw his mouth open, and then Ponga Jim took a chance and smashed a right hand into the man's belly. If the fellow knocked him down with that nitro in his pocket—

The big German's breath was knocked out of him, but he swung a wicked punch while trying to yell. And somehow he got out a knife. Mayo ducked the punch, and smashed both hands into the man's wind, but then the knife came down in a vicious stabbing cut. Ponga Jim started to duck, but the knife struck him, and he felt the blade bury itself in his side. He smashed his fist into the German's throat, smashed and smashed again.

Fiercely, in darkness and silence, their breath coming in great gasps, the two fought. A terrific punch rocked Ponga Jim's head, and that smoky taste when rocked by a bad one came into his mouth. Then he smashed another punch to the Nazi's windpipe and hit him hard across the Adam's apple with the edge of his hand. The German went down, and Ponga Jim bent over him, slugging him again.

There was no choice. Even now if the man were found, they would search and Ponga Jim would die. And not only he would die, but fifty thousand soldiers would die, men would die in Alexandria, Cairo, and Port Said; for the news of the attacked convey was to be the signal for the beginning of the slaughter. Innocent people would die and brave men. Worse, a tyrant as evil as Hitler would come to power here in the Near East, a killer as ruthless as a shark of the sea, as remorseless as a slinking tiger.

The Nazi sank at Ponga Jim's feet. Behind the piled drums as they were, they had remained unseen. He picked the big German up and felt a white-hot streak of agony along his side.

Remembering a huge crack in the cavern floor back about fifty feet, he carried the man over to it and dropped him in. He did not hear the body strike bottom.

"Sorry, pal," he muttered, "but this is war. It was you or them."

Creeping back, he studied the ship. There was no activity in front of him. That meant a chance. He walked out of the shadow and calmly went up the gangway into the ship. A man glanced up, but at the distance Ponga Jim must have looked like any other officer, for the man went on with his work.

Ponga Jim found himself in an electrically lighted tunnel. He could see the amazingly thick steel of the ship's hull as he went forward, walking fast. He passed several doors until he got well forward. Then he went into a storeroom.

He found a place secure from observation, slipped off his coat, and taking a deep breath, twisted to look at the wound. It had gone into the muscle back of his ribs from front to back. He plugged the wound and then tried to relax.

Chapter 8

It was the throb of engines that awakened Ponga Jim. Dimly he was conscious they had been going for some time. By the feel of the ship he knew they were in open water.

Timing was important. The convoy's attempted destruction would begin it. Ponga Jim rolled back the sacks and stepped out into the storeroom. He glanced at his wristwatch. It was early yet.

He went to a port and glanced out. The sea was calm, only white around the coral. The sun was hot and the air clear except for the dancing heat waves over the rocky shore.

He looked again, and his hands gripped the rim of the port. He felt his heart give a great leap. They were nearing Gordon Reef in the Strait of Tirān! He saw the small, iron ship plainly visible on the rocks of the reef; the wreck had been there so long it was hardly noticed anymore.

But today it meant more. Today, if all went well, a pocket submarine of a hundred tons would be lying there, waiting—the submarine he had captured in the Well of the Unholy Light, on Halmahera.

He was watching, yet even then he could just barely see the ripple of foam when the sub's periscope lifted. In his ears he could hear words as though he were there himself. He could hear Jeff speaking to his one-man crew: "Fire one!" Then, after a few seconds, "Fire two!"

Ponga Jim saw the white streak of a torpedo and heard someone sing out above; then he saw the second streak. The big warship was jarred with a terrific explosion and then a second or two later, with a second. A shell crashed in the water only dozens of feet from the tiny sub. But the periscope was gone now.

Ponga Jim gripped his hands until the fingernails bit into his palms. How much damage had been done? Would Jeff and Hifty get away? Thank God the warship had no destroyer screen to pursue and drop depth bombs.

There was shouting forward, and he could feel the ship slowing down. He set his jaw. Now it was up to him. Now he would do what he came for and end this scourge of the sea once and for all.

He found a uniform in the pile of junk in the storeroom and crawled into it. Then he stepped out into the passage again.

No one seemed to notice him. Men were running and shouting in the steel tunnel. He joined those hurrying men. He gathered that the first torpedo had hit right where he had wanted it to. From the stolen blueprint, he had known that the extreme bow and stern of the warship were but thinly armored. Elsewhere, twenty inches of steel protected the waterline. The second fish had wasted itself against that steel bulwark.

As he dashed forward, a man passed him, and Ponga Jim saw a startled look come into the man's face. The fellow stopped, and Ponga Jim ducked into the passage leading down. A moment later he heard a man yelling, and swore viciously. To be discovered now!

At a breakneck pace he went down the steel ladder. Water was pouring in through the side into one of the blisters below. Into two of them. He heard a petty officer assuring another that the damage was localized, that the Khamsin would be slowed a little, but was in no danger of sinking.

Above them, Ponga Jim heard a shouted order. He ducked toward a steel door in the bulkhead. The petty officer shouted at him in German, but he plunged through. Then he stopped and placed the bottle of nitroglycerine against the steel bulkhead.

The door swung open again, and Ponga Jim flattened against the bulkhead. Men dashed through. On impulse, Ponga Jim stooped, caught up the bottle and sprang back through the door and then ran for the ladder. A man shouted and grabbed at him, but he swung viciously and knocked the man sprawling into a corner. Another man leaped at him with a spanner, and Ponga Jim scrambled up the ladder and then wheeled and hurled the bottle down the hatch near the damaged side of the ship!

There was a terrific blast of white flame, shot through with crimson. Ponga Jim felt himself seized as though by a giant hand and hurled against the wall. He went down with a jangle of bells in his head, and above him he could hear the roar of guns, the sound of shells bursting, and a fearful roaring in his head...

Ponga Jim fought back to consciousness to find himself lying on some burst sacks. Struggling to get to his knees, he realized the deck was canted forward.

There was blood all over him. He turned, and sickened at the sight that met his eyes. The deck was covered with blood, and a half dozen men lay around him, their bodies torn and bloody. He crawled to the wall, pulled himself up, and glanced down into the yawning chasm where he had thrown the nitro.

The compartment was full of water, and it was still rising, slowly but surely. He started aft, feeling his way along the steel tunnel in the dark.

His head throbbed, and something was wrong with one of his legs. He had an awful feeling that part of it was gone, but he struggled along, conscious of the steady burning in his side.

The world was full of thunder, and he could hear the heavy crash of the mighty eighteen-inch guns above him. He was thankful he had stuffed his ears with cotton before starting this. He had known there would be a battle. But were they shelling the convoy? He fought his way to a port and wiping the blood from his eyes, stared out.

In a kind of madness he saw, across the world of smoke and flame, the ugly stern of the old SEMIRAMIS. Her rusty sides were scarred with red lead, but the 5.9s were firing steadily.

With a stretch of coral reef between the SEMIRAMIS and the warship, and the freighter itself almost out of sight in the deep, high-walled inlet where it had been concealed, she presented a small target and one that called for careful firing. It was too close for the big guns and in an awkward position for the smaller guns. Gunner Millan, he saw, was doing just what he had been told to do. All of the 5.9s were aimed at one spot on the bow of the KHAMSIN and were pounding away remorselessly.

But the KHAMSIN was not staying to fight. The convoy was still to be attacked, and crippled though the mystery battlewagon was, she had only to get out into the sea to bring those big eighteen-inch guns to bear on that convoy. She was injured, but proceeding as scheduled.

Clinging to the port, Ponga Jim heard an ominous roaring. Then he saw a V-shaped formation of bombing planes. The first one dipped and then another, and then the warship was roaring with exploding bombs. He turned from the port and started aft again.

Dazed, he staggered from side to side of the tunnel. He had done what he could. What remained was for the navy to do. He staggered forward, saw a steel door in the hull, and fell to his knees, clawing at the dogs. He got one loose and then another.

Suddenly there was a wild shout. A man was rushing toward him, his face twisted with fury. Nathan Demarest! He sprang at Ponga Jim Mayo, clawing for a knife. Mayo caught the dogs, pulled himself erect, and then stuck out his foot. Demarest was thrown off balance and went to his knees, but then he was up. Ponga Jim jerked another of the dogs loose and spun around, bracing himself for Demarest's charge.

The man flung himself forward, and Mayo started a punch. It landed, but Demarest struck him in the chest with a shoulder. The door gave suddenly behind them, and both crashed through and fell, turning over and over, into the water!

Vaguely, Ponga Jim was grateful for the warmth of the water and then for its coolness. He felt someone clawing at him, pushed him away, and then caught hold and kept pushing. Darkness swam nearer through the water, and he lost consciousness once more.

When his eyes opened he stared up at a sort of net of steel, and when he tried to turn his head his neck was stiff as though he had taken a lot of punches. He tried to move, and someone said:

"Take it easy, mister."

He managed to get his head turned and saw a man in a British naval uniform standing by.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Everything's okay," the seaman said. "You're on the MARKLAND, of Sydney. This is one of the convoy."

The seaman stuck his head out the door. "Tell the old man this guy is coming out of it," he yelled.

Almost at once a big, broad-shouldered man came through the door with a hand outstretched.

"Mayo!" he exclaimed. "Sink me for a lubber if I didn't get a start when they brought you over the side. You and that black man of yours!"

"What happened?" Ponga Jim asked. "How's the SEMIRAMIS?"

"Huh, you couldn't sink that old barge!" the captain roared. "Sure as my name's Brennan, you can't! But she's lost the starboard wing of her bridge, two guns are out of commission, there's a hole through the after deckhouse, and about ten feet of taffrail are blown away, but no men killed. Some shrapnel wounds. The sub got back safe."

The door pushed open, and Major Arnold came in.

"Hi, Jim!" He gripped Mayo's hand, grinning. "You did it again, darn you!"

"The KHAMISIN?"

“Still afloat, but the navy’s after her. They are fighting a running battle toward Bab el Mandeb. But she’s down by the head and badly hurt. She’ll never get away. Everything else is under control. We got Theron. Your boys wiped out Mullens and his gang when they tried to get Kernan and me.”

Arnold turned toward the door.

“General Kernan is here,” he informed, “with Skelton. They want to see you. Skelton says he owes you an apology.”

“Yeah?” Ponga Jim lifted himself on an elbow. “Listen, you—”

The door opened and General Kernan and Skelton came in. Skelton smiled.

“Fine work, Captain! We’ll see you get a decoration for this.”

Ponga Jim stared at him, his eyes cold. For an instant there was silence, and then Skelton’s smile vanished, his eyes widened a little, and his muscles tensed.

“William,” Ponga Jim said carefully, “arrest this man. He is a traitor. He was working hand in glove with Theron, and I have documentary evidence to prove it!”

“What?” Kernan roared. “Why, man, you’re insane!”

Skelton’s eyes narrowed as he stared at Ponga Jim. Then he sprang back suddenly, and there was a gun in his hand.

“No,” he said tightly, “Theron told me someone stole some papers. Of course it’s true! I’ve made fools of you all! And if it hadn’t been for this thick-skulled sailor with his fool’s luck, we’d have won, too! He’s a great man, Theron is, a great man! Do you hear?” His voice rose to a scream and then cut off sharply. “But you three will die, anyway. You three—”

Big London’s powerful black arm slipped through the door and around Skelton’s throat. Then London jerked, and there was an ominous crack. He dropped Skelton’s body.

“I didn’t mean for to kill him, Captain,” he said sheepishly. “But his neck was so little!”

“Who got me aboard here?” Jim said, ignoring the body.

Arnold swallowed. “Big London. He was coming behind in the small boat with two others as you had suggested when you said you’d unload as soon as possible. He dived in after you.”

“Demarest?”

“Was that who you were fighting with?” Arnold frowned. “I had been watching him. I had the dope on him, but before I could have him arrested, he slipped away.” He hesitated. “By the way, when we flew down to join the convoy, we brought somebody with us. She wants to see you.”

“She?”

“Yes.”

Jim looked toward the voice. Zara Hammedan was standing in the door.

“Are you surprised?”

“Surprised?” Ponga Jim looked up at Arnold with a grin. “William, can’t you see the lady wants to be alone with me?”

Arnold gave a snort and turned toward the door.

“And by the way, old chap,” Ponga Jim added, “don’t slam the door when you go out!”

“That guy!” Arnold said sarcastically. “Shoot him, drop him over the side, and he comes up with a blonde under one arm, and a brunette under the other! What can you do with a guy like that?”

