

The Dancing Kate

Gold is How You Keep It

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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It was a strip of grayish-yellow sand caught in the gaunt fingers of the reef like an upturned belly except here and there where the reef had been longest above the sea. Much of the reef was drying, and elsewhere the broken teeth of the coral formed ugly ridges flanked by a few black, half-submerged boulders.

At one end of the bar the stark white ribs of an old ship thrust themselves from the sand, and nearby lay the rusting hulk of an iron freighter. It had been there more than sixty years.

For eighteen miles in a northeast and southwest direction the reef lay across the face of the Coral Sea. At its widest, no more than three miles but narrowing to less

than a mile. A strip of jagged coral and white water lost in the remote emptiness of the Pacific. The long dun swells of the sea hammered against the outer rocks, and overhead the towering vastness of the sky became a shell of copper with the afternoon sun.

At the near end of the bar, protected from the breaking seas in all but a hurricane, a hollow of rock formed a natural cistern. In the bottom were a few scant inches of doubtful water. Beside it, he squatted in torn dungarees and battered sneakers.

"Three days," he estimated, staring into the cistern, eyes squinting against the surrounding glare. "Three days if I'm careful, and after that I'm washed up."

After that—thirst. The white, awful glare of the tropical sun, a parched throat, baking flesh, a few days or hours of delirium, and then a long time of lying wide-eyed to the sky before the gulls and the crabs finished the remains.

He had no doubt as to where he was. The chart had been given him in Port Darwin and was worn along the creases, but there was no crease where this reef lay, hence no doubt of his position. He was sitting on a lonely reef, avoided by shipping, right in the middle of nowhere. His position was approximately 10°45' S, 155°51' E.

The nearest land was eighty-two miles off and it might as well be eighty-two thousand.

It started with the gold. The schooner on which he had been second mate had dropped anchor in Bugoiya Harbor, but it was not fit anchorage, so they could remain only a matter of hours. He was on the small wharf superintending the loading of some cargo when a boy approached him.

He was a slender native boy with very large, beautiful eyes. When the boy was near him, he spoke, not looking at him. "Man say you come. Speak nobody."

"Come? Come where?"

"You come. I show you."

"I'm busy, boy. I don't want a girl now."

"No girl. Man die soon. He say please, you come?"

Dugan looked at his watch. They were loading the last cargo now, but they would not sail for at least an hour.

"How far is it?"

"Ten minutes—you see."

A man was dying? But why come to him? Still, in these islands odd things were always happening, and he was a curious man.

The captain was coming along the wharf, and he walked over to him. "Cap? Something's come up. This boy wants to take me to some man who is dying. Says not to say anything, and he's only ten minutes away."

Douglas glanced at the boy, then at his watch. "All right, but we've less than an hour. If we leave before you get back, we'll be several days at Woodlark or Murua or whatever they call it. There's a man in a village who is a friend of mine. Just ask for Sam. He will sail you over there."

"No need for that. I'll be right back."

Douglas glanced at him, a faint humor showing. "Dugan, I've been in these islands for fifty years. A man never knows—never."

Misima, although only about twenty miles long and four or five miles wide, was densely wooded, and the mountains lifted from a thousand to three thousand feet, and as the south side was very steep, most of the villages were along the northern shore.

The boy had walked off and was standing near a palm tree idly tossing stones into the lagoon. Taking off his cap, he walked away from the wharf, wiping the sweat from his brow. He walked back from the shore and then turned and strolled toward the shade, pausing occasionally. The boy had disappeared under the trees.

At the edge of the trees Dugan sat down, leaning his back against one. After a moment a stone landed near his foot, and he glimpsed the boy behind a tree about thirty yards off. Dugan got up, stretched, and hands in his pockets, strolled along in the shade, getting deeper and deeper until he saw the boy standing in a little-used path.

They walked along for half a mile. Dugan glanced at his watch. He would have to hurry.

Suddenly the boy ducked into the brush, holding a branch aside for him. About thirty yards away he saw a small shanty with a thin column of smoke lifting it. The boy ran ahead, leading the way.

There was a young woman there who, from her looks, was probably the boy's mother. Inside, an old man lay on an army cot. His eyes were sunken into his head, and his cheeks were gaunt. He clutched Dugan's hand. His fingers were thin and clawlike. "You must help me. You are with Douglas?"

"I am."

"Good! He is honest. Everybody knows that of him. I need your help." He paused for a minute, his breathing hoarse and labored. "I have a granddaughter. She is in Sydney." He put his hand on a coarse brown sack under his cot. "She must have this."

"What is it?"

"It is gold. There are men here who will steal it when I die. It must go to my granddaughter. You take it to her, and you keep half. You will do this?"

Sydney? He was not going to Sydney; still, one could sell it and send the money to Sydney. He pressed a paper into his hand. "Her name and address. Get it to her—somehow. You can do it. You will do it."

"Look," he protested, "I am not going to Sydney. When I leave Douglas, I'm going to Singapore and catch a ship for home—or going on to India."

"You must! They will steal it. They have tried, and they are waiting. If they think you have it, they will rob you. I know them."

"Well." He hesitated. He had to be getting back. Douglas's appointment at Woodlark was important to him. He would wait for no man in such a case, least of all for me, who had been with him only a few weeks, the man thought. "All right, give me the gold. I've little time."

The woman dragged the sack from under the cot, and he stooped to lift it. It was much heavier than it appeared. The old man smiled. "Gold is always heavy, my friend. Too heavy for many men to bear."

Dugan straightened and took the offered hand; then he walked out of the shack, carrying the gold.

It was heavy. Once aboard the schooner it would be no problem. He glanced at his watch and swore. He was already too late, and the tide—

When he reached the small harbor, it was too late. The schooner was gone!

He stood, staring. Immediately he was apprehensive. He was left on an island with about two dozen white people of whom he knew nothing and some fifteen hundred natives of whom he knew less. Moreover, there was always a drifting population, off the vessels of one kind or another that haunt Indonesian seas.

Woodlark was eighty miles away. He knew that much depended on the schooner being there in time to complete a deal for cargo that otherwise would go to another vessel. He had been left behind. He was alone.

A stocky bearded man approached. He wore dirty khakis, a watch cap, and the khaki coat hung loose. Did he have a gun? Dugan would have bet that he had.

From descriptions he was sure he knew the man.

“Looks like they’ve gone off and left you,” he commented, glancing at the sack.

“They’ll be back.”

“Douglas? Don’t bet on it. He calls in here about once every six months. Sometimes it’s a whole year.”

“It’s different this time,” he lied. “He’s spending about three months in the Louisiades and Solomons. He expects to be calling in here three or four times, so I’ll just settle down and wait.”

“We could make a deal,” the man said. “I could sail you to the Solomons.” He jerked his head. “I’ve got a good boat, and I often take the trip. Come along.”

“Why? When he’s coming back here?”

Deliberately he turned his back and walk away. Zimmerman—this would be Zimmerman.

At the trade store they told him where he could find Sam, and he found him, a wiry little man with sad blue eyes and thin hair. He shook his head. “I have to live here.”

“Douglas said—”

“I can imagine. I like Douglas. He’s one of the best men in the islands, but he doesn’t live here. I do. If you get out of here, you’ll do it on your own. I can tell you something else. Nobody will take the chance. You make a deal with them, or you wait until Douglas comes back.”

Twice he saw the boy, and he was watching him. He lingered near the trees where he’d been when he first followed him, so he started back. He’d have to see the old man, and packing that gold was getting to be a nuisance.

When he got back to the shack, the woman was at the door, mashing something in a wooden dish. “He’s dying,” she said. “He hasn’t talked since you left.”

“Who is it?” The voice was very weak.

He went inside and told the old man he would have to leave his gold. The schooner was gone, and he had no way to get to Woodlark and overtake her.

“Take my boat,” he said.

His eyes closed, and nothing Dugan said brought any response. And Dugan tried. He wanted to get away, but he wanted no more of his gold. From Sam’s manner he knew Zimmerman was trouble, very serious trouble.

The woman was standing there. “He is dying,” she said.

“He has a boat?”

She pointed and he walked through the trees to the shore. It was there, tied up to a small dock. It wasn't much of a boat, and they'd make a fit pair, for he wasn't much of a small-boat sailor. His seamanship had been picked up on freighters and one tanker, and his time in sail was limited to a few weeks where somebody else was giving orders. He'd done one job of single handing with a small boat and been shot with luck. On one of the most dangerous seas he had experienced nothing but flying-fish weather all the way. Still, it was only eighty miles to Woodlark, and if the weather remained unchanged, he'd be all right. If—

The boy was there. "Three of them," he said, "three mans—very bad mans." And then he added, "They come tonight, I think."

So how much of a choice did he have? He left at dark or before dark, or he stayed and took a chance on being murdered or killing somebody. Anyway, the sea was quiet, only a little breeze running, and eighty miles was nothing.

The best way to cope with trouble was to avoid it, to stay away from where trouble was apt to be.

The only thing between where he was and Woodlark were the Alcesters. He had sailed by them before and would know them when he saw them.

He glanced down at the boy. "I'll leave the boat on Woodlark."

The boy shrugged. "Wherever."

He had shoved off at sundown with a good breeze blowing, and even with his caution he made good time, or what was good time for him. He had the Alcesters abeam before daybreak, but there was a boat behind him that was coming on fast. His silhouette was low, so he lowered the sail a little to provide even less and gradually eased the helm over and slid in behind one of the Alcesters.

It was nearing daylight, but suddenly it began to grow darker, and the wind began blowing in little puffs, and there was a brief spatter of rain. He was running before the wind when the storm came, and from that time on it was sheer panic. On the second or third day—he could not remember which—he piled up on the reef, a big wave carrying the boat over into the lagoon, ripping the hull open somewhere en route.

When daylight came again, the storm was blowing itself out; the boat was gone but for a length of broken mast and a piece of the forward section that contained a spare sail, some line, and some odds and ends of canned goods. And the gold.

He had saved the gold.

Dawn was a sickly thing on that first morning, with the northern sun remote behind gray clouds. He made his way along the reef, avoiding the lacerating edges of the coral until he reached the bar.

The old freighter, one mast still standing and a gaping hole in her hull, was high and dry on the sandbar. A flock of gulls rose screaming into the air as he approached, and he walked over the soft sand into the hole.

The deck above him was solid and strong. Far down there was a hatch, its cover stove in, which allowed a little light at the forward end. Here all was secure. Sand had washed in, making a hard-packed floor. Dugan put down a tin of biscuits and the few cans he had brought along and went back outside.

It was just one hundred and fifty steps to the water of the lagoon and the hollow in the reef where rain had collected in the natural cistern. The hollow in the reef

was just three feet deep and about the size of a washtub. It was half full, and the water, although fresh, was warm.

For the moment he had food, shelter, and water.

Gathering driftwood, of which there was a good bit, he built a shade over the cistern that would prevent a too rapid evaporation but could be removed when it rained.

There would be fish, shellfish, and crabs. For a time there might be eggs, and the first thing he must do would be to cover the reef, as much of it as he could reach, and see what he could find that was useful. Then he must get a fragment of that torn canvas and make a pennant to fly from the mast of the wrecked ship.

The work kept him busy. Scrambling over the reef, careful not to slip into a hole or break an ankle on the rough, often slippery rock, he gathered driftwood. Slowly the several piles grew.

At night he sat beside his fire in the hulk and ate fish and a biscuit.

After a while he lost all awareness of the sea. It was there, all around him, and it was empty. Occasionally, when his eyes strayed that way, he saw distant smoke. He rarely looked at the sack of gold.

For the first time he deliberately faced his situation. From his pocket he took the worn chart, but he did not need it to face the fact. The reef was a lonely, isolated spot in the Coral Sea, in an area where ships came but rarely. Aside from the sandbar itself there was only the ruffled water and a few black stumps of coral rising above it.

This was no place for a man. It was a place for the wind and the gulls, yet there was a little water, there was a little food, and while a man lived, there was always a chance. It was then that he looked up and saw the schooner.

It was tacking, taking a course that would bring it closer to the reef. He shouted and waved a hand, and somebody waved back. He turned and walked toward the wreck.

When the dinghy came in close to pick him up, he waded out and lifted his bag of gold into the boat. Then he climbed in. There were two men in the dinghy, and they stared at him. "My—my water—it was about gone. You came just in time."

The men stared at the sack, then at him. The place where the sack rested against the thwart had dented the sack. Only sand or flour or something of the kind would make such an impression. And the sack had been heavy. He couldn't say it was shells or clothing. They'd know he lied.

Yet it was not until he came alongside the schooner that he realized how much trouble he had bought for himself. He glanced at the schooner's name and felt a chill.

The DANCING KATE.

Bloody Jack Randall's schooner. Of course, he was never called Bloody Jack to his face, but behind his back they knew him by that name. He had killed a man in a saloon brawl at Port Moresby. There'd been a man shot in Kalgoorlie, but insufficient evidence released Randall. He was reported to have broken jail in New Caledonia after killing a guard.

After he was aboard, it was Randall's mate, a lean, wiry man with haggard features, who kicked the sack. "Hey? What you got in there? It looks mighty heavy."

“Gold.”

It was a sullen, heavy day with thick clouds overhead and a small sea running. Kahler’s eyes went to the sack again. “Gold?” He was incredulous.

“Yes.” He slid his knife into his hand, point toward them, cutting edge uppermost. “This weighs about a pound. I measured the weight by this, and it is more than they thought.”

“They?”

“A man in Misima asked me to deliver it to his granddaughter in Sydney.”

“What kind of a damned fool would do that?” Kahler asked.

“A man who knew who he could trust.” He glanced at Randall. “Where you bound?”

Randall hesitated. “East,” he said finally. “We been scouting around.”

“How about Woodlark? I’ll pay my passage.”

“All right.” Randall walked forward and gave the change of course to the Bugi seaman. There were four of the Bugis, some of the best sailors among the islands; there was Randall himself, Kahler, and the big man who rowed the boat. That would be Sanguo Pete, a half-caste.

Taking his sack, he walked forward and sat down with his back against the foremast.

Kahler came forward. “We’ll have chow pretty quick. One of those Bugis is a first-rate cook.” He glanced down at him. “How’d you survive on that reef? You must be tough.”

“I get along.”

“By this time they probably figure you’re dead,” Kahler said.

“Maybe.”

He knew what they were thinking. If something happened to him now, no one would know any better. Well, he promised himself, nothing was going to happen. He was going to meet Douglas at Woodlark.

When they went below to eat, he let them go first. He paused for a moment near one of the Bugi seamen. His Indonesian was just marketplace talk, but he could manage. He indicated the sack. “It is a trust,” he said, “from a dying man. He has a granddaughter who needs this.” He gestured toward the reef. “The sea was kind,” he said.

“You are favored,” the Bugi replied.

“If there is trouble—?”

“We are men of the sea. The troubles of white men are the troubles of white men.”

He went below. There was a plate of food at the empty place. Randall had not begun to eat. Coolly, before Randall could object, he switched plates with him.

“What’s the matter?” Randall demanded. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I trust nobody,” he said. “Nobody, Mr. Randall.”

“You know me?”

“I know you. Douglas told me about you.”

They exchanged glances. “Douglas? What do you know about him?”

“I’m his second mate. I’m joining him at Woodlark. Then we’ll arrange to get this”—he kicked the sack—“to that girl in Sydney.”

“Why bother?” Kahler said. “A man could have himself a time with that much gold.”

“And it will buy that girl an education.”

“Hell! She’ll get along—somehow.”

The food was good, and when supper was over, he took his gold and went on deck. Randall was a very tough, dangerous man. So were the others, and it was three to one. He could have used Douglas or Hildebrand. Or Charlie—most of all, Charlie.

The sails hung slack, and the moon was out. There was a Bugi at the wheel, another on lookout in the bow. These were tricky, dangerous waters, much of them unsurveyed. He settled himself against the mainmast for a night of watching.

The storm that had wrecked his boat had blown him east, far off his course. It could be no less than a hundred miles to Misima and probably a good bit more.

The hours dragged. A light breeze had come up, and the vessel was moving along at a good clip. The moon climbed to the zenith, then slid down toward the ocean again. He dozed. The warmth of the night, the easy motion of the schooner, the food in his stomach, helped to make him sleepy. But he stayed awake. They, of course, could sleep by turns.

At one time or another there had been a good bit of talk about Randall, Sanguo Pete, and Kahler. They had a hand in more than one bit of doubtful activity. He was half asleep when they suddenly closed in on him. At one moment he had been thinking of what he’d heard about them, and he must have dozed off, for they closed in quickly and silently. Some faint sound of bare feet on the deck must have warned him even as they reached for him.

He saw the gleam of starlight on steel, and he ripped up with his own knife. The man pulled back sharply, and his blade sliced open a shirt, and the tip of his knife drew a red line from navel to chin, nicking the chin hard as the man drew back.

Then he was on his feet. Somebody struck at him with a marlin spike, and he parried the blow with his blade and lunged. The knife went in; he felt his knuckles come up hard against warm flesh, and he withdrew the knife as he dodged a blow at his head.

The light was bad, for them as well as for him, and one might have been more successful than three; as it was, they got in each other’s way in the darkness. The man he had stabbed had gone to the deck, and in trying to crawl away, tripped up another.

He had his gun but dared not reach for it. It meant shifting the knife, and even a moment off guard would be all they would need.

One fainted a rush. The man on the deck was on his feet, and they were spreading out. Suddenly they closed in. The half-light was confusing, and as he moved to get closer to one man, he heard another coming in from behind. He tried to make a quick half turn, but a belaying pin caught him alongside the skull. Only a glancing blow, but it dazed him, and he fell against the rail. He took a cut at the nearest man, missed but ripped into another. How seriously, he did not know. Then another blow caught him, and he felt himself falling.

He hit the water and went down. When he came up, the boat was swinging. The Bugi at the wheel was swinging the bow around. As the hull went away from him,

the bow came to him, and there were the stays. He grabbed hold and pulled himself up to the bowsprit.

For a moment he hung there, gasping for breath. He could see them peering over the rail.

“Did you get him, Cap?”

“Get him? You damned right I did! He’s a goner.” He turned then. “You cut bad, Pete?”

“I’m bleedin’. I got to get the blood stopped.”

“He got me, too,” Kahler said. “You sure we got him?”

Randall waved at the dark water. “You don’t see him, do you? We got him, all right.”

After a moment they went below, and the tall yellow seaman at the wheel glanced at the foremast against the sky, lined it up with his star. His expression did not change when he saw Dugan come over the bow and crouch low.

There was no sound but the rustle of bow wash, the creak of rigging, and a murmur of voices aft. He moved aft, exchanging one glance with the Bugi, and when he was close enough, he said, “Thanks.” Not knowing if the man understood, he repeated, “*Terima kasi.*”

He knew the Bugi had deliberately put the rigging below the bowsprit in his way. The wonder was that even with the distraction of the fighting Randall had not noticed it.

His gun was still in the side pocket of his pants, and he took it out, struggling a bit to do so, as the dungarees were a tight fit. He put the gun in his hip pocket where it was easier of access. He did not want to use a gun, and neither did they. Bullet scars were not easy to disguise and hard to explain when found on rails or deck houses.

Sanguo Pete loomed in the companionway and stood blinking at the change from light to darkness. There was a gash on his cheekbone that had been taped shut, and there was a large mouse over one eye. He hitched up his dungarees and started forward, a gun strapped to his hips. He had taken but two steps when he saw Dugan crouched close to the rail.

Pete broke his paralysis and yelled, then grabbed for his gun. It was too late to think about the future questions. As Pete’s hand closed on the butt, Dugan shot him.

Randall loomed in the companionway, but all he saw was the wink of fire from Dugan’s gun. He fell forward, half on deck.

Pete lay in the scuppers, his big body rolling slightly with the schooner.

The Bugi looked at Dugan and said, “No good mans.”

“No good,” Dugan agreed.

One by one he tilted them over the side and gave them to the sea.

“My ship is waiting at Woodlark Island,” Dugan said.

The Bugi glanced at him. “Is Cap’n Douglas ship. I know.” Suddenly he smiled. “I have two brother on your ship—long time now.”

“Two brothers? Well, I’ll be damned!”

Kahler was lying on the bunk when he went below. His body had been bandaged, but he had lost blood.

“We’re going to Woodlark,” Dugan said. “If you behave yourself, you might make it.”

Kahler closed his eyes, and Dugan lay down on the other bunk and looked up at the deck overhead. The day after tomorrow—

It would be good to be back aboard, lying in his own bunk. He remembered the brief note in the Pilot Book for the area.

This coral reef, discovered in 1825, lies about 82 miles east-northeast of Rossel Island. The reef is 18 miles in length, in a northeast and southwest direction. The greatest breadth is 3 miles, but in some places it is not more than a mile wide. At the northeastern end of the reef there are some rocks 6 feet high. No anchorage is available off the reef.

Wreck. The wreck of a large iron vessel above water lies (1880) on the middle of the southeastern side of the reef.

If they wanted to know any more, they could just ask him. He’d tell them.

