

The Undoing of Bambino

by H.P. Holt



WHEN you go a sailing to the region of lonely islands in quest of copra you can, if you wish, leave at home everything with which civilization has blessed you—except cash. Checks, I.O.U.'s, and promises to pay, are matters that do not enter into the philosophy of those with whom you propose to deal. You drop your mud-hook off some coral strand and begin to bargain with an isolated, gin-soaked trader for the accumulation of copra that he has on hand, and you may or may not come to terms if you have cases of beads, or knives, or magenta shirt-waists to offer; but try wiggling a handful of good American dollars under his nose and watch the happy expression that comes into his eyes.

For that reason we had on board the *Apia Maid*, when she sailed out of New York, money enough to pay for every ounce of copra she could carry. Steve Kent, the skipper and owner, had provided half of our cash: the rest, by a series of miracles, I had raised myself. Every cent I had ever saved and every penny that I could borrow, were there. If the *Apia Maid* had taken it into her head to go to the bottom I might almost as well have borne her company, for I should indeed have been eternally undone, financially.

But the *Apia Maid* was the trimmest craft of her kind afloat and cold cash was by

no means the most precious thing we had on board.

Merle Kent, the skipper's daughter, had come with us; and ever since I first saw Merle, in short skirts, I knew she was the finest girl breathing. She had eyes that held you as firmly as three-inch manila rope and every year she had become more beautiful. When I grew up and asked her to marry me she laughed, not unkindly, but just enough to show me how foolish I was to expect any such thing. Merle Kent could have had her pick of—but I must get on with my story.

Captain Kent had been battered about afloat long enough. He knew the South Seas like a book; and, what was still more important, he knew there was money to be picked up among the islands in the copra buying trade. After careful deliberation he had retired from the command of the old boat on which he was employed, bought the *Apia Maid* outright, and prepared to rest on his laurels. I had sailed under him for years. On this trip I was going as chief mate. If all went well I should be skipper of the vessel next time she put to sea. Kent took Merle along with him for two reasons. Firstly he thought she would enjoy the voyage. Secondly Merle insisted on going, which was quite sufficient reason in itself. Moreover the skipper couldn't refuse her anything, any more than I could

have done if she had loved me instead of laughing at me.

The vessel was empty when we left New York, save for one batch of cargo which we were carrying out to a planter called Strickland, who lived on the island of Lanea. We had to pass Lanea on our way to the copra hunting grounds. Strickland was a very old friend of the skipper's, and he told Kent, the last time we called there, that he was on the brink of making a vast fortune. He suspected that there were mineral deposits on Lanea, enough to take his breath away. Under the thin layer of surface earth the island was solid, just as it had been kicked up from the bottom of the sea by volcanic action at some time. All he had been able to do so far was to scratch away on the top, which was wearing, to say the least of it, for a man who needed machinery and dynamite. We had the machinery and dynamite in our hold.

Strickland had urged us not to breathe a word of this to a living soul, as he was not alone in the field. Somehow or other Banbino, the Portuguese governor, had got wind of what Strickland was after. And Banbino was as artful as he was fat. He must have turned the scales at two hundred and fifty pounds. Layers of him wobbled like jelly as he waddled. But he held the populace of Lanea in the hollow of his corpulent hand. He had elevated the art of graft to a positive science; and as he personally owned the only landing place on the island, Banbino's power was painful and peculiar. Apparently he only had to raise a finger and his merest whim became inflexible law. No wonder Strickland had enjoined us to be as silent as the grave.

The moon got into my head on our run into the South Pacific. It has that effect on a fellow if his heart's desire is leaning over the rail six inches from his elbow and singing softly to the thrum of the propeller, while the stars are blazing away like a scene in a fairy world and a warm breeze straight from the

islands of romance is fanning his cheeks and toying with an adorable curl on the girl's forehead. The magic of the night seized me. Merle's hair was the color of burnished copper. It seemed, suddenly, that I just could not go through life without her.

Riding bravely, recklessly, for a fall, I took her tiny hand in mine.

"Merle, I wish you'd reconsider—" I began; and then her soft song merged into a trickle of silvery laughter.

This time it hurt. I felt myself bristling, but held a tight rein.

"I'm sorry if it sounds funny, but I'm trying to ask you if you will marry me," was my comment.

"You're not serious, Dicky?" she replied after the briefest of pauses during which I distinctly felt my heart knocking against my ribs.

"I'm dreadfully serious, Merle—more serious than I ever was in my life."

"But don't you ever make love to a girl, Dicky, before you propose to her. I mean, really make real love," she said tauntingly, withdrawing her hand.

"You've never given me a chance, since—since you went into long frocks," I retorted.

"Dicky, you are delicious," she said, and a moment later she was again singing the same haunting refrain. There seemed nothing else for me to do but smoke, so I lit a cigar, but I soon pitched it into the phosphorescent trail astern, realizing that I was handling her in a delicate situation almost as a crew of raw Kanaka deck-hands ought to be handled. The fact was, I had not had time in my seagoing days to study those little arts and graces which are so dear to the feminine mind. Right there, in that bath of starlight, with every fiber in my being aching for this girl, and with the laughter at my second proposal still ringing in my ears, I vowed I would begin to learn.

"I'm sorry," I said, with an assumed

air of tragedy. "I don't think I was cut out for a lover. Never mind, I won't bother you again," I added, lying glibly.

Merle stopped singing.

"Now Dicky, don't get angry and spoil an otherwise perfectly heavenly voyage," she said.

And then I lit another cigar and felt as awkward as a pig in a passage.

It was a week later when we picked up the boom of Lanea, and under the guidance of a cutthroat who called himself a pilot we tied up at the one-horse wooden wharf.

Strickland came aboard and shook the skipper's hand as though he was a long-lost brother.

"You've got the things?" he asked eagerly, although he might have known we didn't go to Lanea to gather blueberries.

"Sure we've got 'em," said Kent. "And for goodness' sake don't let your niggers drop any of these cases of dynamite near my ship or—"

"Hush!" said Strickland warningly, looking round to see no one had heard. "If Banbino gets wind of the fact that you have brought dynamite here there'll be the devil to pay."

The skipper frowned.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"Just this," replied Strickland. "Banbino is negotiating for a monopoly of the mining rights on the island, and he's moving heaven and earth to prevent my going ahead, but he won't be able to stop me because my lease is as legal as my birth certificate. What he can do, though, is to tie my hands so that I shall be dreadfully handicapped for a time, if I can't outwit him. I have communicated with the Portuguese government, and after a while, though it may take a year, Banbino will have his wings clipped, at least to this extent, that I shall have an entirely free hand. But he's framed up a new law prohibiting the importation of dynamite onto the island, on

the ground that he fears some kind of a revolution. But, you know, there isn't any one on the place to revolt. Oh, he's clever. Unfortunately, a long time ago I told my foreman, a Portuguese, that we should be stuck till I got some dynamite, and he's put Banbino wise."

"I see," said Captain Kent thoughtfully. "Well, what do you want me to do?"

Strickland looked puzzled.

"He can't touch me once I get the stuff onto my own estate," he said. "The trouble is, if you land the dynamite you might find yourself in an awful fix, and I don't want to drag you into it."

Fooling with the laws of port authorities is a highly dangerous pastime everywhere; but, as I have said, Captain Kent and Strickland were very old friends, and the skipper of the *Apia Maid* would have done a great deal to serve the planter, especially in such an emergency. Moreover, Strickland had once nursed Kent through fever on some God-forsaken island and saved his life. That made Kent doubly anxious to do what he could.

A smile slowly dawned on the skipper's face.

"The dynamite is in plain wooden cases," he said. "I'll have a stencil cut and mark the cases 'Canned Beef,' before it goes ashore. I don't know anything about any dynamite. If I do that, can you work the rest after the stuff is landed on the wharf? You haven't got a bunch of custom officials in gold braid here, you know."

"That ought to work," agreed Strickland. "If only some idiot doesn't drop a case of canned beef I think I can fix it."

Being rather an expert, I cut the stencil. The thing seemed somewhat of a joke—so far. Before long we had thirty cases on deck, all innocently marked. The winches were screaming. Ten tons of machinery was being lowered onto the ramshackle wharf.

Two of our sailors, with the fear of the hereafter instilled into them, were carrying the dynamite ashore up the gangway, and stowing it into one of Strickland's wagons. The "harbor master," a dago with a strong penchant for gin, was safely below in the hands of the steward, and likely to remain there as long as the gin lasted.

Suddenly the enormous figure of Banbino, making heavy weather of it, appeared on the wharf. By his side was a hatchet-faced, angular woman with thin lips and quick ferrety eyes. She hovered constantly either in the wake of Banbino or abreast of him, as though afraid to trust her spouse out of sight.

"Who's the lady?" asked Merle, taking in the vision at a glance.

"That's Banbino's wife," Strickland explained. "She never leaves him."

"What a touching couple!" Merle murmured.

Strickland grinned.

"They say she touches him with a flat-iron or a broomstick, or anything else handy, when she gets her dander up," he said. "She has the temper of a fiend from the infernal regions and she's consumed with jealousy. Not," he added. "that Mrs. Banbino has no occasion for jealousy, according to what one hears, but it has become an obsession with her, and I fear she is a painful thorn in his side."

Banbino was now at the foot of the gangway.

"Well, capitaine," he called out. "You had good weather, eh?"

"Pretty fair," replied Kent. "Won't you come aboard?"

Banbino already had his weather eye on the cases which the sailors were carrying ashore. He was pretty certain of their contents. He scratched a pudgy chin with a pudgy forefinger.

"Canned beef, eh?" he said slowly.

"You got a lot, Mr. Strickland. You let me have a case, eh?"

"Sure," said Strickland, with a pained smile. "I—I'll send one right down to you."

"No, no," replied Banbino, beckoning to a man on the wharf. "Pedro, you take that up to my house." he pointed decisively at one of the cases on deck.

"Not that one," said Strickland. "Say, I'll—"

Banbino was growing red at the wattles, his suspicions now fully aroused. How much of it was bluff I do not really know, but he picked up the case with his own fair fingers.

We all took a step or two backward.

"For the love of glory!" said Strickland. "Put it down carefully."

"Quite so," said Banbino, gingerly replacing the case on deck. "The importation of explosives, as you know, has been forbidden. Capitaine, I shall have to detain your ship at Lanea until this matter is settled."

The figurative fat was in the fire. Banbino flatly demanded payment of a fine of five thousand dollars, ordered confiscation of the dynamite, and looked as though nothing less would really satisfy him than Strickland's head on a charger.

Captain Kent looked grave. He had a suspicion that Banbino's law would not hold water; but he was not sure whether, if he acted defiantly and sailed away, that would not bring the whole force of the Portuguese government immediately down on his trail.

"The devil of it is," Strickland said. "I haven't got five thousand dollars, nor anything like it. I'm mortgaged up to the hilt."

Clearly an impasse had arrived. Banbino refused to leave the ship until the fine was paid, and the skipper and I began to view the situation as nothing less than calamitous. We had the five thousand dollars in cash; but that was to buy copra with. Of course the demand was a species of blackmail, but by

whatever name you called it that made no difference to the situation. If we paid the money we might get it back some time, after disentangling miles of red tape; and, to make matters more tantalizing, we were almost in our copra hunting ground. Kent attempted to argue the matter with Banbino, but the old villain was as fierce as a bear in a nest of hornets, and as hard as adamant. Things were at their blackest when I saw a curious expression flit across Merle's face.

"Dad, I want you to give me a hand in this," she said while Strickland and Banbino were at it hammer and tongs. "I don't promise anything, mind, but it's a chance."

"Rubbish, girl!" replied the skipper. "I wouldn't even have you speak to a pig like—"

But Merle Kent silenced her father with a look. He knew there were moments when further discussion with that young lady was useless. He received peremptory orders to hide himself in the chart-room and so, unostentatiously, he faded from the scene on deck. Merle also disappeared. A few moments later, acting on instructions, I approached the Portuguese.

"The captain wants to see you in his cabin, below, sir," I announced. "I think perhaps something can be arranged."

Puffing and fuming, Banbino descended the companionway, his wife casting a petulant look after him.

Banbino must have been amazed when he found, instead of the skipper, nobody but the prettiest girl in all the South Seas awaiting him in the cabin. On the table were pen, ink, and paper.

"The capitaine—is he not here?" the Portuguese asked with an anxious glance over his shoulder. He knew the very heavens would descend on him were his spouse to learn that Merle and he were alone there together. He mopped his massive brow with a handkerchief. "Diabo! I came here to see the capitaine," he spluttered.

"I am captain here for the present," Merle said. The light of battle was in her eye. I was just within reach, in case of necessity, but also just out of sight. "Please sit down. I want you to write something," she went on.

Banbino collapsed, like a jellyfish, into a chair.

"Diabo!" he exclaimed, picking up a pen. "What is it I write?"

"You are going to write a letter to Captain Kent and another to Mr. Strickland apologizing for your very suggestion that dynamite was imported to Lanea on this ship."

Banbino flung the pen down on the table.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "And the fine—five thousand dollars. That must be paid!"

Merle leaned forward over the table and fixed him like an overfed beetle, with her eyes.

"Then I shall scream!" she said bluntly.

"You—you—" Banbino began, aghast.

"Be quick, or I shall scream right now!"

Banbino, betwixt the devil and the deep blue sea, made an attempt to rise. Merle opened her mouth wide.

"No, no," he commanded, shaking with suppressed anger and fear, but not attempting to pick up the pen again.

"I shall scream aloud that you tried to kiss me," Merle prodded remorselessly.

Banbino was nearly foaming at the mouth. Suddenly he wilted like a lettuce leaf in the hot noonday sun.

"What is it I write?" he asked feebly, drawing a sheet of paper toward him.

Merle dictated crisply, and for a few minutes the Portuguese wrote as if it pained him a great deal. Then he attempted once more to rise.

"One moment, please," the girl ordered, motioning him back into his seat.

“Dicky,” she called softly to me, “see that Mr. Strickland’s wagon starts away with that canned beef, and then let me know.”

A little later Banbino was permitted to regain the deck. His wife, whose patience was now exhausted, addressed him angrily in Portuguese, and he answered her with apparent meekness. He shot a hungry look at the wagon which was disappearing in the distance, and then shaped a course for the gangway and the shore.

“Here, Mr. Strickland,” Merle said, handing him one of Banbino’s letters. “You may need this.”

Strickland glanced through the document, and his jaw dropped.

“How, in the name of Heaven, did you—” he began.

“That’s a state secret,” replied Merle demurely.

Ten minutes later we had cast off. The skipper was on the bridge. Merle and I were leaning over the rail, in the sheltered place behind the after wheel-house, watching the

island of Lanea disappear astern.

“Merle,” I began awkwardly, “you’re a marvel. I wanted to come in and choke the old villain, but I had to laugh, all the same. Your dad’s tickled to death. But,” I went on, still grinning, “I never guessed you’d go as far as that when you said you were going to frighten him. Suppose he’d got nasty—suppose—”

“Well, you were there, handy.”

“I know, but—”

“Dicky Curtis, don’t be an idiot,” she said. “Do you think I could stand by and see an old thief like that rob me—rob us— rob—I mean, if we hadn’t been able to buy any copra this trip, where do you suppose we should have got the funds to get married on?”

“We? Us?” I stammered, hardly believing my ears. Then it came home to me with a rush, out of a clear sky, so to speak. Nobody could see us where we were. I put my arms round her suddenly, and held her tightly while I kissed her a dozen times or more.

“Dicky—Curtis,” Merle said, in between kisses, “you—kiss—are—kiss—an—kiss—idiot!”