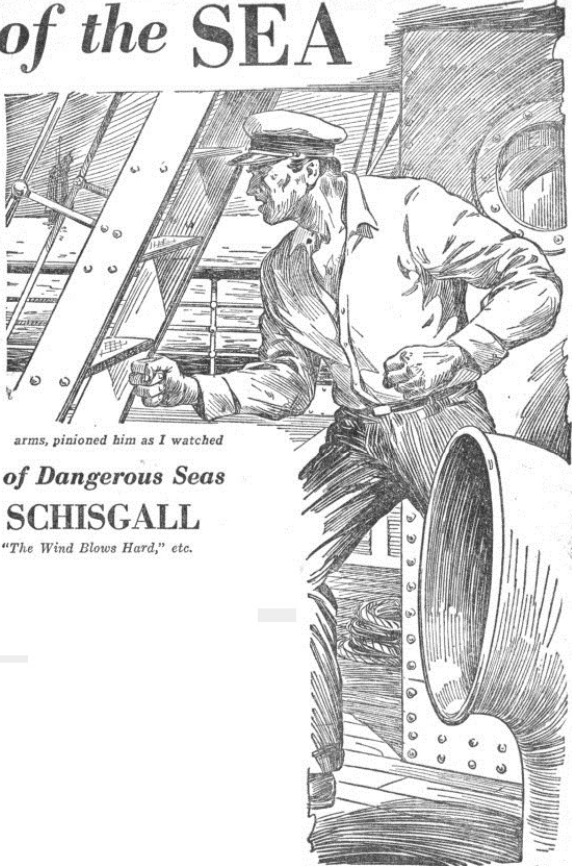


HOODOO of the SEA

He caught Russel around the

A Complete Novelette
By **OSCAR**
Author of "The Sultan Is Waiting,"



arms, pinioned him as I watched

of Dangerous Seas
SCHISGALL
"The Wind Blows Hard," etc.

Captain Dan Russel, Biggest Jinx of the *Java Waters, Gambles Against Neptune!*

Chapter I
Fists

EVEN now I can't tell you exactly how the fight started. We had finished unloading the *Eastern Gull* on the quays of Surabaya, and Captain Cook had announced that we would steam out of the Kali Mas in the morning. We were to take the rusty old freighter through the islands again, seeking another cargo of copra for delivery in Java.

Leaning over the rail and smoking my pipe, I felt at peace with the world. The night was lovely, with a full moon pouring its white radiance over the houses of Surabaya. I was

just thinking of turning in, when Captain Cook emerged from his quarters—as big and muscular a skipper, I imagine, as the Java Seas had ever known.

He was fully six-feet-three, and his weight did justice to his height. Close to sixty he was; but, looking at him casually, you'd have sworn, despite his curly grey hair, that he couldn't be much beyond forty-five.

"Well, Mr. Warden," he said cheerfully, "how about coming ashore for a last drink?"

I had been his mate for seventeen years, and I had never refused an invitation to drink with Jerry Cook.

It was in Gan How's *pasangrahan*—a noisy, dirty, little saloon frequented by

Javanese, Eurasians and Europeans—that we had our first glimpse of the red-haired young man.

He stood alone at the end of a long, liquor splashed bar, and seemed to be the only one in the crowded place who was finding no pleasure there. A whiskey glass stood in front of him, untouched. His deep-set eyes were fixed in bitter preoccupation on the wall in front of him.

If I looked at him with unusual interest, it was, first, because I felt certain he was an American; and secondly, because he was so tall—almost as tall as Captain Cook himself. He must have heard us order drinks in English, but he didn't even glance in our direction. He continued to glower at the wall—his eyes almost savage, his lips clamped tight in a sullen, bitter line.

"Have another, Warden," the captain genially invited. "It'll be a couple of months before you can stand up to a bar again."

APPARENTLY he had given the red-haired stranger scant attention. I, too, forgot the fellow. A few drinks put me in a rollicking frame of mind and, while the *gamelan* orchestra played its noisiest, I found myself dancing with one of the Eurasian girls. She laughed up gayly into my face and did her best to lure a few coins out of my pocket.

And then, of a sudden, it happened.

A shout of alarm from the Chinese barkeeper made me turn my head in time to see the red-haired man crash a fist against Captain Cook's jaw.

Cook staggered back, arms flailing, eyes round in amazement. He would have fallen if he hadn't found a sudden desperate hold on the edge of the bar. For an instant he rocked there, dizzy and off balance. He had to shake his head like a dog emerging from water before his wits returned.

I immediately started toward the captain. The music abruptly stopped. The

dancers halted. Everybody gaped in bewilderment.

"Why, damn you!" blurted Captain Cook.

His voice was hoarse. His big face was suddenly flushed in a way I knew was dangerous. With a few drinks under his belt, he was usually a pretty hard man to handle. And before I could reach him, he lunged straight at the red-haired man, swinging his tremendous fist straight at the younger man's head.

It was a blow furious enough to fell a bull. But it missed—missed widely because that red head was unexpectedly jerked aside. The fist flew over the stranger's shoulder and was still traveling forward when an answering blow caught Captain Cook flush on the chin.

"*Tuan!*" the barkeep yelled in agonized protest. "*Tuan*, no! Stop!"

Neither man paid any heed. They were mixing things up enthusiastically now. You could hear the ugly thuds of blows. They stood toe to toe, battering each other's abdomens. They fought lustily, cursing and panting and giving no quarter. To my amazement, I saw that Captain Cook—whom I'd never known to lose a fight—was getting the bad end of the encounter.

Slowly, inexorably, he was retreating. The redhead was pressing him along the edge of the bar. Blood dribbled from the younger man's nose, but he seemed unaware of it. Something like a gargoyle's grin—malicious and completely contented—distorted his features. He appeared to be actually enjoying this fight. He smashed a fist into the captain's face, another into his chest. His arms worked like pistons.

The Chinese barkeep lifted a bottle as though it was a club. So I flung a chair at him.

It missed, but it diverted his aim. He hastily lowered the bottle and backed away.

Naturally, I had no doubt that Captain Cook would eventually send the red-haired

stranger crashing to the floor. For the past seventeen years I had seen the captain in action too often to have any qualms as to what would happen. Even his age couldn't affect the power of his blows.

I waited expectantly, watching. But the fight ended as abruptly as it had begun when four native policemen smashed their way into the door.

There was a great deal of jabbering in Javanese. Captain Cook, who knew the language, passionately argued with the policemen. There was blood on his mouth, and he had to spit it away in order to talk. Somebody picked up his seaman's cap and jammed it on his grey hair. He seemed to be pleading with the officials to allow the fight to continue.

But they obdurately shook their heads. They had no desire to make an arrest; these waterfront encounters were no novelty. Yet they did insist that the fight immediately stop.

So presently Gan How's *pasangrahan* was decently quiet again. Captain Cook, however, was far from appeased. Glaring across a dozen heads, he rapped out to the red-haired stranger:

"You're damned lucky these fellers butted in to save you! If I ever run across you again, even the police won't keep you on your feet!"

Having wiped the blood away from his nose, the red-haired man grinned in that savage way of his.

"If you think you can do it," he retorted, "I'll meet you any time you say—anywhere!"

It'll have to be before dawn. I'm sailing in the morning."

"Fine!"

"You can look me up on the quays. I'm Captain Cook of the *Eastern Gull*."

The red-haired man nodded. "I'll remember," he promised. "Only I don't aim to go chasing after you. If you're interested, you

can locate me on the quays, too. I'm Dan Rassel—Captain Rassel."

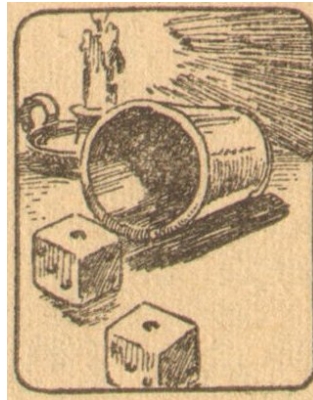
The red-haired man picked up his seaman's cap and strode out of the *pasangrahan*. I turned to speak to Captain Cook.

But I didn't. I stood bewildered, my lips falling open.

Something had happened to Jerry Cook, something that could not be explained either by the fight, by the blows he had sustained, nor by the liquor he had drunk. He sagged against the bar. His face was suddenly white and stunned. Round-eyed, he gaped at the door through which Dan Rassel had vanished. A ghost of the past gripped him.

For an instant I thought his knees were going to crumple under him. He stood blinking at the door in a kind of horror, as if he had seen something unspeakably fantastic and stupefying.

CHAPTER II Captain's Orders



"DAN RASSEL!" I whispered in a kind of awe, as we left the *pasangrahan*. "Hoodoo Rassel!"

Capt. Cook pressed a handkerchief to his injured lips, already swelling. Despite the many drinks he'd gulped down, he was completely sober now. He walked stiffly, eyes turbulent. In silence we crossed a moonlit market place and looked out over the iridescent Kali Mas. It was while we strode along the quays in the direction of the *Eastern Gull* that Cook suddenly grasped my arm so

fiercely that I winced.

“Warden, what do you know about Dan Rassel?”

“Why,” I replied, startled by the harshness of his voice, “only what everybody else knows. He’s the man who lost those two ships, isn’t he?”

“I asked you what you knew about him,” Captain Cook repeated tensely. “What’ve you heard? Come, man, all of it!”

There was something about Captain Cook I couldn’t recognize. In wonder I answered:

“Only the usual waterfront gossip. The way I got it, they gave him his first command—the *Capricorn*—when he was twenty-nine. He wrecked it on the coast of Celebes—about two years ago. Cracked up on the rocks and lost five men.”

“Go on!” grimly. “What else?”

“A court of inquiry absolved him completely. He even got another command—the *Unity*. Three months later he struck bad weather just north of Borneo and sent the *Unity* to her grave on a hidden reef. He didn’t lose any lives that time, but the ship went to the bottom. Since then nobody’s been willing to give him any command. He can’t even get an officer’s berth. They call him ‘Hoodoo’ Rassel—or ‘Jinx’ Rassel. Everybody’s convinced he’s jinxed. No skipper in his senses will sign him on.”

“So you don’t think he’ll ever get another command of his own?”

“Never.”

“Even if they know those wrecks weren’t his fault?”

“Now, Captain,” I protested, “you know the way shipowners are. You ask them to sign on a captain who’s lost two vessels, and they’ll drop in a faint.”

Cook glowered, said nothing further. We reached the *Eastern Gull*, went aboard, and he at once retired to his quarters.

I remained alone on deck, filling a pipe

and speculatively regarding the moonlit buildings of Surabaya. I knew now how the fight in the *pasangrahan* had started. Cook had told me. He had inadvertently swung his arm to emphasize some point in his discourse to the barkeep, and his hand had struck Dan Rassel’s chest. He must have had several drinks in him by that time, because instead of apologizing he asked the red-haired young man not to crowd him; to move over.

Rassel had retorted by telling him not to swing his hands at random. And words had suddenly led to blows.

Captain Cook had been in too many fights during the past seventeen years for me to be startled by finding him in another melee. What did puzzle me was his inordinate interest in Dan Rassel.

I was still leaning over the rail when a hand touched my shoulder. It was Captain Cook.

“Warden,” he said quietly, “I’m going to ask you to do something for me—something out of your line. I’m hoping I can count on you.”

“Do what?” I asked suspiciously.

“Go up the quays and see if you can locate Dan Rassel. He said I’d find him along the waterfront. I have an idea he’s around, keeping his word.”

“You want to finish that fight?”

“Well”—narrow eyed, he peered away across the glimmering water—“not exactly.”

“What then?”

CAPTAIN COOK stiffened. “Never mind the questions, Warden! You’ve been with me seventeen years; this is the first time I’m asking you to do something off the ship.” His eyes were feverish. “I want to get Dan Rassel aboard the *Eastern Gull*. When he’s here, I want him locked up below!”

“What the devil—” I began.

“Of course, you’re privileged to refuse.” His voice hardened. “But I’m asking

you as man to man to stand by me in this. Will you, Warden?"

I didn't know what to say. Virtually, he was ordering me to shanghai Dan Rassel. It wasn't like Captain Cook. It wasn't like myself, either, to contemplate such a thing. Perhaps he saw my indecision, for he snapped:

"I promise you no trouble will come of this. I'll handle the whole matter once he's aboard and locked below."

"What's the idea, Captain?" I faltered.

"An idea of my own—one I can't talk about." His voice was hard again. "I want to take Captain Dan Rassel to sea with me."

"But he's a hoodoo!" I blurted. "The biggest jinx in the Java Seas. If you took him aboard, Captain— Hell, if any of the men forward knew it, they'd—they'd—"

"Jump ship?" he demanded scornfully.

"Absolutely!"

Captain Cook laughed mirthlessly. "None of the boys will desert, Warden. Besides"—he paused significantly—"there's no reason for any of them to know he's Dan Rassel. Not till we're out at sea, anyhow."

Though I pride myself on not being as superstitious as most sailors, I confess I had no hankering to travel with a man like Rassel on board. Most of the crew, I felt certain, would flatly refuse to sail with somebody who had lost two ships in the past two years.

"If you tell Rassel I want to see him," Captain Cook went on quietly, "chances are he'll come without any trouble. He'll probably think I want to fight it out, and that red head of his won't allow him to hold back when there's a fight in sight."

Squinting at Captain Cook, I tried to understand him and couldn't. I wanted to refuse. Yet I had sailed with him through many storms—both on sea and ashore—and I'd grown to respect him. True, he was always rough and ready for a fight. But underneath his tempestuous spirits stood a strong, honest man.

Even now, while he asked me to shanghai a stranger, I couldn't feel he was doing anything criminal. He must have a reason—one which some day I might comprehend.

"If those are your orders," I said, "all right. They'll be carried out." I turned to go.

It wasn't hard to locate Dan Rassel. Despite the lateness of the hour, he sat on an overturned keg at a deserted spot on the quays. With those embittered eyes of his fastened on the moonlit Kali Mas, he scarcely turned his head as I approached.

"Captain Rassel?"

My blunt words made him look around. When he recognized me, he smiled twistedly.

"Captain Cook's friend, isn't it?"

"Captain Cook's mate."

"Well? What is it?"

"Captain Cook wants to see you."

"You can tell him to come here."

I thought quickly, then went on: "That's impossible tonight. He had a little too much to drink. He's under the weather—in his cabin. But he's been raving about you ever since he got there. He ordered me to go out and find you."

"Waiting for me on board his own ship, eh?"

I hesitated. "Of course, if you'd rather not come," I said, "that's all right with me. Captain Cook said you'd probably be afraid."

The last words brought Dan Rassel to his feet, glaring.

"Afraid? Of that old porpoise?" he snapped. "Come on!"

He took the wind out of my sails by the alacrity of his response. Before I realized what was happening I was trailing him as he strode rapidly toward the *Eastern Gull*. There was angry vigor in his strides, and his expression was pitiless.

"If he wants to fight it out, I'll give him all he's looking for!" Rassel laughed

harshly. "I need something to limber up my muscles—to remind me that I'm a man!"

PRESENTLY he led me up the gangplank to the deck of the *Eastern Gull*. As if he'd been on the ship many times, he turned straight toward Captain Cook's quarters. And as he passed through shadows—

It happened so quickly that I myself was caught unprepared. I had a brief glimpse of Captain Cook leaping out from nowhere. He caught Rassel around the arms, pinioned him, dragged him five steps before the man could find his footing. A hatch was open. A wild fling on Captain Cook's part sent Rassel into the blackness. I heard him clatter down the companionway, heard him thud on the deck below.

Then oaths were exploding out of the dark pit, and Captain Cook, smiling queerly, was battening down the hatch.

The captain had sent the watch below. We were alone on deck. He raised his rugged face to look at me, and I discovered that he was smiling.

"That'll hold him," he said quietly. "We'll sail with him at dawn."

"But why?" I repeated desperately. "What's the idea, Captain?"
"You'll see."

CHAPTER III We Put to Sea



AT dawn, when an unearthly opalescent glow lay upon the Kali Mas, we steamed out of Surabaya. Captain Cook was on the bridge, and I kept pacing the deck, nervously watching the hatchway which kept

Dan Rassel a prisoner. I expected to hear yells and oaths storm up from below; shouts which would have to be explained to a bewildered crew.

To my astonishment, however, Dan Rassel made no sound. He seemed to accept the situation fatalistically. I didn't realize then, as I learned later, that a year of unremitting bitterness had made this man indifferent to almost anything which might happen to him. Nothing concerned Dan Rassel any more—nothing save the fact that he would never again be entrusted with a ship. But that was enough to ruin him.

We were five hours out of Surabaya, pitching over the long swells of blue Java seas, when Captain Cook summoned me to his quarters. In his eyes was a curious glint, half humorous, half malicious, as he snapped:

"Mr. Warden, release the prisoner." I blinked. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Give him the freedom of the ship."

"But—"

"Don't argue about it. He won't dive off."

"It's the crew I'm thinking of," I protested. "Once they learn we've got 'Hoodoo' Rassel on board—"

"Damn the crew. Do as I tell you." He spoke without rancor, almost apathetically. Yet there was a weary determination in his voice.

I myself opened the hatch. "Rassel!" I called into the dark depths. "Come up here."

Several moments passed without response. It occurred to me that he might have fallen asleep or that he might be hurt. I was on the point of going down to investigate when his long figure slowly mounted the companionway. He looked up at me contemptuously, his cap set on the back of his head.

"Thought you were going to starve me down there with the rats," he said.

"Captain Cook's orders are that you're

to have the freedom of the ship.”

“Damned nice of him,” Dan Rassel said sarcastically. He emerged on deck and drew in vast draughts of the salty wind. The contemptuous smile lingered on his lips. “Where’s your captain?” he demanded.

“In his quarters.”

Rassel started forward. I tried to hold him back. He shoved me out of his way, continuing along the deck as if I didn’t exist.

Well, Captain Cook had ordered the freedom of the ship for this man. So I did nothing, and he boldly pushed open the door of the captain’s cabin and halted on the threshold.

Looking over his shoulder, I saw Cook bending over a chart. At the sight of Rassel he straightened slowly, without excitement, drew the cigar from his lips. He studied the red-haired man appraisingly.

Rassel spoke first. “As scurvy and yellow-spined a trick as I’ve ever heard of,” he rapped out harshly.

“What is?” The captain’s voice was without emotion.

“Shanghaiing me like this. What’s the idea? You want to get even on board your own boat, is that it? Fight it out where you’ll have a whole crew to back you up!”

Captain Cook shook his head. “No,” he said quietly, “I don’t think I want to fight it out. Not here, anyhow. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“Than what was the idea of bringing me aboard?”

“I wanted a chance to think about you, to decide what to do with you—and I was leaving Surabaja, so I had to take you along.”

“Seems to me,” scoffed Rassel, “you’re going into a lot of trouble over a barroom fight.”

“Maybe.”

A hint of a sneer twisted Rassel’s lips. “I’ve heard of you before, Captain Cook. All sorts of stories. Most of them told how you were quick tempered, but a pretty square

fighter. I had an idea you could take a beating without acting like a kid.”

“And you don’t think I can?”

“I see you can’t. Well”—the sneer persisted—“I’m here. What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing.”

“No fight?” in astonishment.

“No, not now.”

“Keep me in irons, I suppose?”

Captain Cook’s face hardened. “You’re to have the freedom of the ship as you were informed.” The captain turned back to his charts. “I’ll thank you, Mr. Rassel,” he snapped, “to leave me alone. I’ve got business to tend to.”

Rassel turned away and went to lean over the rail, his eyes fixed speculatively on the horizon. Watching him, I became more than ever convinced that this man had lost his interest in life. Ashore or shanghaiing—it made no appreciable difference.

WITHIN half an hour, of course, the men learned that Hoodoo Rassel was aboard. The news traveled among them swiftly, frighteningly. They stopped work to stare at the stranger at the rail. Into their eyes came quick unease and alarm. They whispered to one another.

For Dan Rassel had become a symbol of death in those waters. Most men, tinged with native superstition, would have sworn that to go to sea with Captain Rassel on board meant certain calamity.

By that time, however, we were a good many miles from Java, and there was nothing the crew could do about him. I had an uncomfortable suspicion, nevertheless, that at the first port we made a delegation would present itself to Captain Cook demanding that Dan Rassel be put ashore.

But that was the captain’s concern, not mine. As for myself, I had my hands full. Mr. Bleak, the second mate, was down with some

tropical disease—a fever that caught him intermittently and stretched him in his berth for days at a time. It held him this afternoon and some of the hands began to mutter that it was the first indication of trouble aboard ship.

“If you deliberately put a jinx like this *Rassel* on your decks,” growled one of the men, “what can you expect? You mark my words, from now on you’ll see plenty trouble on board this ship.”

Yet nothing much occurred that day; nor the next.

Three days later, however, off the coast of Sumatra, we ran into ugly weather. It was the monsoon season, and we ran into a beauty that hurled thirty-foot waves at the prow of the *Eastern Gull*. But worse, we had wandered close—much too close, I thought—to the rocky coast. Unless we could hold our headway against those tremendous, smashing seas, we could easily ride into trouble.

Captain Cook never left the bridge. With the *Eastern Gull* rolling and straining and pitching crazily, so that a man had to cling to something for support at every step, he didn’t dare to leave his post.

Darkness found us closer than ever to the reef strewn shoreline. I felt worried—desperately worried. So did everybody else. I had never known Captain Cook to take a ship so close to shore in a storm. The crew were crying openly that if we ran into disaster it would be because Jinx *Rassel* was on board.

Once I saw *Rassel* picking his way along the deck, his face grim and soaked and savage. His eyes blazed. When he spied me, he yelled into the teeth of the wind:

“Satisfied now?” A laugh broke from him—a harsh, mirthless laugh. “You might have known when you took me aboard that you’d run into something like this! Ten to one you don’t last out the night!”

“Shut up!” I said.

He laughed again in that same rasping way. “So Captain Cook thought he’d bring me

aboard to have his revenge, did he? That’s funny—damn funny! Mark my words, *Warden*. He’ll crash on the reefs before morning. It’s happened to me twice in storms like this. It’s my hoodoo!”

“Shut up,” I yelled back at him. A great fan of swishing salt spray splashed over both of us. “If you go around talking like that to the men, so help me, I’ll break a pin over your head!”

“I don’t have to talk to them,” he retorted. “They know it. I’m jinxed, *Warden*! So is this ship. You watch!”

I MOVED among the men, trying to make them forget the presence of *Dan Rassel*. But they wouldn’t. Their eyes were enraged. Though it sounded mutinous, they were boldly expressing their opinions of a captain who would take a jinx on board.

One man pointed through the blackness and shouted: “Those reefs ain’t a mile away! And we ain’t making any headway against these seas!”

He was right. The engines were giving all the power they had, yet the *Eastern Gull* was waging a feeble, losing battle against those mountainous seas.

Until midnight we continued our struggle. Once, in a flare of greenish lightning, it seemed to me that I could see the rocks of Sumatra hardly half a mile away. The sight jolted me.

“Mr. *Warden*!” The captain’s stentorian voice boomed to me along the deck. I turned to see him silhouetted in the light of the open door of his cabin. “Come here!” he bellowed.

I was drenched when I stumbled into his quarters. So was he—a huge figure whose curly grey hair was pasted down around his ears. He glared at me as he shut the door.

“Where’s *Dan Rassel*?”

“Up forward.”

Captain Cook nodded. He was haggard

with weariness. His eyes were inflamed, red rimmed. Yet there was a certain air of smug satisfaction beneath his exhaustion. While I watched in bewilderment, he turned to his bunk, picked up a long strip of cloth.

“Warden,” he said, “I want you to bind up my arm—my right arm. Make me a sling.”

“What’s the matter?” I gasped.

“Nothing.”

“Then why—”

“Do as I tell you,” he cut in. “I want my right arm in a sling.”

I stared at him in amazement. I couldn’t stir—until he thrust the cloth into my hands.

“You heard me!” he snapped. “Get busy!”

“Who—who’s on the bridge?” I whispered.

“Ballard. He’ll be all right for a couple of minutes.”

“Do—do you realize we’re less than half a mile from those reefs?”

“The sling!” snapped Captain Cook. “What are you waiting for?”

He thrust out his arm. His manner was authoritative, insistent. Though I had some faint urge to rebel, there was a savage brilliance in his eyes that compelled me to obey. Quickly, awkwardly, I bound up his right arm in a sling. When I finished he nodded approvingly and peered deep into my eyes.

“Now listen, Warden,” he said softly, “there’s one more thing I’m going to ask of you. You’ll probably think I’m crazy. But I know what I’m doing. I want you to obey.”

“What is it?”

“You’re going to pretend you’re sick. You fell on the deck—cracked your head against something. You’re to lie on my bunk, groaning, half conscious, when Dan Rassel comes in here. Is that clear?”

“What are you talking about?” I blurted, momentarily forgetting his rank. “I can’t— Good heavens, Captain, with this

storm and those reefs—”

“You heard my orders? I’ll expect you to obey them. I’m assuming full responsibility for everything.”

He actually shoved me to his bed. I fell upon it, propped myself up on my elbows and gaped at him. Was the man mad? His own good arm in a sling, and I pretending to be half conscious—what was it all about?

He pulled the door open, winced against the blast of wind and rain that struck him. Cupping his left hand around his lips, he roared into the darkness:

“Rassel! Captain Rassel!”

Sheer curiosity kept me on that bed. Wide-eyed, I watched while the captain yelled the name again. He had to shout for a full minute before Rassel at last lurched into the cabin. He was soaked, breathing heavily. He swung his eyes from Captain Cook to me, and that sneering smile returned to his lips.

“I hope you didn’t call me in here to bellyache,” he rasped. “You might’ve known what would happen to you when you took me on board the *Eastern Gull*! I’m jinxed—jinxed! You should’ve known!”

Captain Cook, leaning heavily against a chair, croaked in a low, unrecognizable voice: “To hell with that! There’s no time for superstition now.”

“What d’you want?”

“You’ve got master’s papers, haven’t you?”

“You know it damn well!”

Captain Cook breathed heavily. Something like importunity flared in his eyes. “Look, Rassel,” he said in that deep, hoarse voice, “we’re in a bad way.”

“Taking on water?”

“No. But we’re less than half a mile from those reefs.”

“I saw them,” Rassel said tightly.

“My second mate, Mr. Bleak, is laid up with fever. My first mate, here, cracked his head on the deck and is useless. He’s been

lying there for the past fifteen minutes, groaning.”

I was flat on my back, my eyes half closed. What it was the captain had in mind I couldn't yet judge. Yet I felt somehow persuaded to play his game.

“As for me,” went on Captain Cook, “I—I've had an accident. I'm all in, Russel. Fell down the companionway from the—bridge. I was caught on the wet steps by a lurch of the ship.”

“Arm broken?” Russel asked him quickly.

“I don't know. All I know is it hurts like hell. And I'm dizzy. I—I can't stand up much longer. I've been on that bridge six hours.”

“Well?”

“You're the only other man aboard, Russel, who holds officer's papers. Will you”—Cook gulped hard—“will you take over the ship and ride it through the storm?”

CHAPTER IV The Jinx



THERE was an interval of silent tension during which both men peered at each other. The *Eastern Gull* pitched and rolled, creaking in every plate. Outside you could hear the scream of the monsoon, the uproarious crashes of giant waves. It seemed to me that Captain Cook must have lost his mind—to ask this man to take the bridge.

Rassel probably had the same thought. He asked in a strained low voice: “Do you realize what you're saying, Captain Cook? You know my reputation.”

“To hell with reputation! Neither my mate nor I are in any shape to take the *Eastern Gull* through this storm. We need somebody with steady nerves, somebody who can hold his feet up there. You've been a master in your own right. What do you say?”

“You know that on two other occasions I failed to bring my ship through?”

“I'm not talking about other occasions,” rapped out Captain Cook. “How about now?”

Again there was an instant of uncertain stillness. Then, of a sudden, Dan Russel tugged down the peak of his cap, sent a swift glance through a porthole into darkness. Lightning flashed vividly. He must have had a glimpse of the rugged Sumatra coast. He went doggedly to the door.

“I'll take over,” he said. “That is, if the men will take orders from me.”

“I'll see that they do,” the captain promised grimly.

With Dan Russel on the bridge, I stood at the porthole in the captain's quarters and gaped out in increasing terror. Whenever lurid lightning flared, I had a momentary glimpse of the rocky, boiling shore. It seemed nearer than ever. It was like a magnet, irresistibly drawing the *Eastern Gull* toward doom. Perspiration was dribbling down my cheeks.

“Captain,” I said hoarsely, “this is crazy!”

“Leave it to me.” His voice was curt. He, too, was at a porthole, watching the coast.

THE ship heaved more wildly. It seemed to me that the seas had grown higher, more eager to overwhelm us. I'd never known the *Eastern Gull* to roll and pitch as madly as she did this night. Occasionally a man passed the porthole, his hands desperately clinging to whatever he

could seize for support.

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded.

Captain Cook shook his head. His face was tense and drawn and determined.

“Do you realize what you’re risking?” I shouted. “It isn’t only the *Eastern Gull*—it’s the men that are on board!”

“We’ll be all right.”

“With a hoodoo on the bridge—”

“He isn’t a hoodoo. He’ll pull us through.” Captain Cook looked at me in a strange way. “If we get too close to those reefs,” he added softly, “there’s nothing to prevent my going up on the bridge. But meanwhile—I intend to give him his chance.”

“To wreck us!”

“To get us through this storm.”

“But why?” I expostulated. “Why? What interest have you in him?”

To that he said nothing.

That night seemed the longest I’d ever known. It dragged through centuries. Time after time men lurched into the captain’s quarters to report trouble. Something was wrong in the engine room. Two lifeboats were carried away. Part of the after rail vanished over the side. Each time a sailor appeared Captain Cook pushed me into the bed, made me lie there. He himself, with his right arm in a sling, sat down and received reports gravely. “Better go up and tell it to Captain Rassel,” he said quietly. “He’s running things for the time being—while I rest.”

You could tell that the men thought something had gone wrong with Captain Cook’s brain. To rest in a storm of this kind was unheard of. Yet the training of seventeen years stood him in good stead that night.

Captain Jerry Cook had taught men to respect him, to trust in his judgment. In seventeen years he had never been wrong. And so, even when he placed a jinx on the bridge, our men were inclined to accept his action with a kind of mute, doglike trust. Yet

they were terrified. You could see it in their eyes.

And whenever I rose to look out of the porthole I couldn’t blame them. It seemed to me that the reefs of Sumatra, with white foam smoking over them, were scarcely a quarter of a mile off our port. The *Eastern Gull*, though her screws heroically churned the seas, was making pitifully little headway against those tremendous waves. Inexorably, steadily, we were being pushed toward the rocks.

“For God’s sake, Captain,” I pleaded harshly, “get out there and take charge! We’re riding straight to hell!”

“I’m taking full responsibility.”

“But the lives of these men—”

“They’ll be all right.”

And then came the maddest hours I had ever known—hours during which I waited in agonizing suspense to feel the *Eastern Gull* hurl herself upon the reefs. Once, as she quivered, it seemed to me that I could feel rocks graze her hull. With a cry I started toward the door. But Captain Cook seized my shoulder, flung me back violently.

“My orders are that you stay here!” he rasped.

“But those reefs—”

“Those weren’t reefs. Be quiet!”

He was insane. I felt almost positive of it. To hand his ship over to a man like Dan Rassel, while he himself remained inactive at a time like this—it wasn’t human. I had a feeling that as first mate I ought to overpower the captain—mutinous as it might seem. For the sake of the crew I ought to—

But I didn’t do it. I couldn’t because I knew Jerry Cook wasn’t insane.

He knew exactly what he was doing and why—though he wasn’t telling anyone. There was anxiety in the deep lines of his countenance as he peered out of the porthole. He, too, saw how close we came to those reefs. He, too, must have been praying throughout that night. But he never lost his

poise.

He could be deprived of his command for an act of this sort. And he must have realized it. Yet he remained stubborn and determined. And I stayed with him—waiting in anguish to hear the crash—

The miracle happened. We didn't smash.

At dawn the wind died as suddenly as it had swept across the seas, and the huge waves began to subside. Gaping out of the porthole, I could see that we were now more than a mile from the coast of Sumatra—a mile that was eloquent of safety. I turned, exhausted and dizzy, to gape at Captain Cook. He sat wearily, his arm still in a sling, and smiled at the floor. It was a queer smile, utterly unlike anything I had ever seen on his features. And he looked very old.

"He's pulled us through," I whispered. "I knew he would."

For a while I couldn't speak. As the morning brightened, the *Eastern Gull's* screws seemed to take a firmer hold on the seas. We forged ahead with greater speed and steadiness, pitching regularly over rhythmic swells. It was half an hour later that the door unexpectedly opened to frame the red-haired Dan Rassel.

He looked ready to collapse. His face was soaked. His red hair lay pasted to his forehead. He'd lost his seaman's cap, and his coat hung open. He leaned limply against the door.

"Well, Captain, looks like we came through the night safe enough," he said hoarsely.

"Thanks, Rassel."

The red-haired man grinned twistedly. His eyes swung to me. "Feeling better?"

"Why, I—yes, thanks," I stammered. "I'm all right now."

"Well enough to take over on the bridge?"

"Eh? Oh, yes—yes, sure."

"Because if you are, I'm going below for some coffee—and a bit of sleep. We'll be all right now."

Captain Cook didn't speak at all. He continued to stare at the deck, while Rassel turned and staggered out of our sight. It was only after the man was gone that Cook drew a long, audible breath. "First port we get to," he said in a tired voice, "I'll put Dan Rassel ashore."

FOUR months almost passed before we returned to unload another cargo of copra at Surabaya. We worked hard that day, and when it was all over Captain Cook invited me as usual to join him in a drink ashore. We walked through the moonlight to Gan How's *pasangrahan* on the waterfront.

Captain Cook and I went to the bar, swallowed a couple of whiskeys. And we had been in the place scarcely half an hour when Dan Rassel entered. I put down my glass and stared at him in surprise.

He had changed. No longer were his deep-set eyes embittered. They looked lively now, even gay. When he saw us he came straight to the bar with a boyish grin and thrust his hand out to Captain Cook.

"Hello!" he said cheerily. "I heard your ship had come in. I've been hunting you for the past hour. How are you?"

Captain Cook slowly thrust his glass aside and wiped a hand across his mouth.

"No hard feelings for the—shanghaiing?"

Rassel laughed. He sought the captain's hand and pumped it heartily. He ordered whiskey for the three of us. Then, comfortably leaning his elbow on the bar, he said:

"Maybe you don't realize what you've done for me. That night when you had me take the *Eastern Gull* through the storm—actually lifting her off the reefs, as it were—you broke my reputation for being a jinx. I saved the ship

that night, and you gave me my chance to do it. Don't think I don't appreciate the fact that you spread the news all through the Eastern seas. You even cabled your owners. Oh, I heard about it! You told them that if it hadn't been for me the *Eastern Gull* would have gone to smash. Well, the news got around."

RASSEL paused to pick up his glass. He raised it toward the captain, as if in toast.

"It got around," he went on easily. "Men began to laugh at the reputation I used to have before that night. A month ago I got another ship. She's out in the Kali Mas now. I'm sailing tomorrow for Adelaide."

I watched Captain Cook and I could see a light of joy glow in the depths of his eyes. He smiled—the first genuinely happy smile I'd seen on his countenance in months. He caught Dan Rassel's hand in a mighty grip.

"I'm proud to hear, it," he said softly. "Good luck to you."

And that was all.

We had several drinks. Then the captain and I started back for the *Eastern Gull*. Apparently Cook had had a few too many, because his steps weren't too steady. In fact, I had to hold his arm.

"Why did you do it?" I whispered at last.

"Do what?"

"Give Dan Rassel his chance."

Captain Cook didn't immediately reply. He gazed away across the moonlit Kali Mas. For a time I thought he wasn't going to

answer at all. So I told him:

"You're not fooling me. You shanghaied him because you wanted him on board if a storm came up. You wanted to give him that chance—to break his reputation as a jinx. I'm asking—why did you do it?"

"Yes," Captain Cook agreed softly, slowly. "I guess maybe you are entitled to know." He hesitated, and glanced at me obliquely with eyes at once searching and uncertain. "I'll tell you, Warden. But if you ever open your mouth about this to a living soul—if you ever mention it anywhere, at any time, to Dan Rassel, or anybody else—so help me, I'll break every bone in your body."

"Go ahead," I said quietly.

Captain Cook drew a long breath. His jaws hardened.

"Warden," he said huskily, "some thirty years ago, when I was much younger, I—I did something mighty rotten. I had a wife and son then. I deserted them at Singapore."

I gaped at him. In my astonishment I all but stopped.

"Deserted them," he grated. "A couple of years later I learned that my wife had died. I didn't know what had happened to the boy. Somebody took care of him. In fact, I didn't hear of him again until—well, until two-three years ago, when he got into trouble on the reefs of Borneo." Captain Cook gulped. "I don't mind telling you, Warden, that after I deserted my wife and kid, I—I changed my name. Had to do it to keep out of trouble. In those days, you see, my name was—Rassel."