

TWENTY GOOD SHIPS

Serial Story by
Gunby Hadath

CHAPTER 49 Vacca Decides

WHERE the trail wound out of sight, and just before it began to rise to enter the pass, the bearded man and his two companions stopped, and for persons who were hastening back to a gunboat their action took a rather peculiar turn.

For, bidding the other two stay where they were a moment, their leader knelt and placed an ear to the ground, until, satisfied that nobody came in pursuit, he jumped up, nodded, and darted off to his right, to lead the way down a fissure in the flank of the mountain which opened into a small and rocky ravine overshadowed by the masses of foliage above. Dipping, as this ravine did, instead of ascending, it was obviously anything but a pass across the mountain; nor could even such a versatile craft as a gunboat have walked up out of the sea and found anchorage there.

But the men held swiftly on till they came to a cleft in the rock from which a little current of smoke filtered out. Immediately the trio slipped through this cleft, to be confronted by a cavity of some dimensions where a fire of hibiscus wood was alight with big bunches of the mountain bananas beside it.

"No go! My bluff didn't work," spoke the man in white ducks.

A figure which was tending the fire looked up. "Vacca too artful," it murmured. "Bora Bora him fear so. Bora Bora him fear all the time Vacca too much sly."

The bearded man let out a wild laugh. But Bora Bora put his hands to his lips.

"Hush! You wake him!" he whispered. "Him gone sleep a bit." And he pointed to a prostrate form in the shadow.

"You must wake him, man. You'll both have to get away quick!"

The sleeper started bolt upright. "I heard you," he cried.

The voice was the voice of Jim. And so was the face. Those steady eyes were his. Those bare feet were his. And the rags that alone remained of his clothing were his, though Polgelly would undoubtedly have disowned them.

"I heard you," he repeated, as he got up. "But how do you mean Get away?"

"Just that," growled the big bearded man, who had gulped down some water. "If they lay their hands on you, Jim, your life's not worth a cent. You know where my cutter is. Bora Bora can sail her. There's no sense in staying here to be killed."

"And what about you?" Jim said.

"I'm different, my lad."

Jim thought a moment.

"Vacca won't strike till Lutz gets back," he said.

"No, I daresay not, for they're guessing about your Consul. And I've started them guessing more—till they learn there's no gunboat." The man's voice was sombre and solemn. "Aye, Vacca sent one of his rogues to check up on my gunboat. My gunboat!" he echoed, smiling bitterly.

Another pair of lips at this identical instant were parting into a smile, but a smile of elation. These belonged to Pedro, Vacca's dark-skinned partner, who, having ascended a spur from which both lagoon and ocean were visible and found not even so much as a smudge of smoke on the horizon, was hastening back with his news when he saw Lutz ahead on the trail.

He shouted to Lutz, "Well, you haven't hurried yourself!"

Lutz turned on him with a snarl.

"And whose fault is that? You let that islander slip you, you clumsy oaf!"

"He got away like an eel, Lutz."

"And a nice dance you have led me in consequence! But that little brig of your own caught it hot; and serve you right. What happened? Why, this! The Squire's lad wouldn't come clean, so I had him ferried across the lagoon to your brig, then sent my two men back to Vacca with the one-armed seaman they'd captured. That left five of us on the brig, your crew and myself, and I clapped the lad into the hold to come to his senses. But bless me if the native didn't swim out and free him; and the first thing we knew the brig was filling with water—"

"He'd scuttled her!" interposed Pedro.

"A fine watch you'd set, Lutz!"

"Watch be blowed! I was fast asleep. So were your beauties. I was sleeping like a log, and hadn't I earned it?"

"You speak as if you were the only one," Pedro retorted. "How much chance have I had of any shut-eye since we landed two days ago. But about my brig? What's become of her?"

"We salvaged her, and this morning she stood out to sea to work round to the bay again. But she'd make a pretty slow leg of it on those tacks."

"And the lad?" muttered Pedro.

"Shark's meat, both him and the native," purred Lutz, "for they didn't land on the island again, that I know of."

"But you hadn't got anything out of him about the Consul, you say?"

"No," scowled Lutz; then whipped a small book from his pocket. "But I've got all we want," he continued in a different tone. "See this book? It's that tomfool Squire's diary. After your brig had gone I pulled back by myself, had my rest out, then searched and came across this." He tapped the volume exultantly.

"That Squire has been entering it up all along, and the last entry notes that after a confabulation they had decided not to take the British Consul into their confidence until they could lodge their claim to the island at the same time. So now we know all we need; and I reckon that's good, Pedro!"

"Ah," said Pedro. And suddenly, "Seen any signs of a gunboat?"

Lutz stared with all his eyes. "Not I!" he averred. "And why should I?"

So Pedro told of their visitor of the morning, and had barely finished before their return to the camp, where they found Vacca awaiting them with rising impatience.

But after he had heard their reports and read in the diary there descended upon the three men a strange, sudden silence, while avoiding one another's eyes they pursued the same thought. It was Vacca who broke this silence in a hoarse whisper.

"As heaven's my witness, at the start of this business I never dreamed we'd have to take it so far."

"Nor I," muttered Lutz. Beads of sweat had sprung out on his forehead.

"You're with us?" said Vacca to Pedro.

"I've no choice," said Pedro. "It's a fortune or gaol, or worse."

"Then you had better assemble the men. Leave the prisoners in the hut, but keep them tight bound and set a guard over them. Vacca paused reflectively for a moment. "Aye, and for our own sakes, Pedro," he resumed, "it's all or none, eh, Lutz? If the lads want their share in the pearls they must be in this up to the hilt with us. So have the party ashore from the schooner and launch; tell them to see to their guns and to bring that brigantine's captain and his men with them, including the couple who are recovering from shot wounds. And what about your brig, Pedro? She hasn't shown up yet."

Pedro glowered at Lutz, who shrugged his lean shoulders.

"I shouldn't be surprised if they're at the pumps again," he said sourly.

CHAPTER 50 On the Beach

AFTER Ajax Runnell and his crew had exchanged the captivity of the brigantine for that of the hut, where the Squire's party were lying, Vacca from his seat under the tree put the case bluntly and forcibly to his followers.

Reminding them that they could be charged with piracy for seizing the Britishers' ship and with murder for the death of the lad and the islander, he drew a picture next of the riches within their grasp. "So it's their lives or ours," he said. "If one of the Britishers escapes to tell the tale we're dead men."

Composed, as it was, of the scourgings of the South Seas, of scoundrels whom Lutz had recruited in San Francisco, of broken men who would stick at nothing for money, and of natives who were fugitives from the law, the muster was unlikely to hang in two minds. One said viciously:

"And about that American Consul?"

"He's not a Consul," smiled Vacca. "He's an impostor. He shammed he came in a gunboat. There isn't a gunboat. But whoever he is he means mischief; so he and his two chums dolled up as bluejackets must take the same road as the rest, lads." He wiped his brow. "And when they're all under the sand," he said, "we set to and get up the pearls, and every man of you shall have his full share."

Several of them moved restlessly, but Vacca stayed them.

"No," he commanded, "wait. We'll make one clean job of it. As soon as that so-called Consul comes back, as he promised, we'll have the Britishers out and line them up and I'll hold them in talk while each of you marks down his man. You'll keep your guns in your pockets and shoot through the

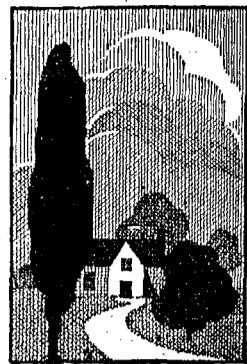
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