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Mad Devils

What Became of a Cargo of Coconuts

By CHARLES EDWARD BANGS

As the Yang rounded the headland I noticed off to the starboard two hulks, red with rust, awash under the branches of the big trees that grew in a dense forest far out into the shallow water of the lagoon. One steamer was wedged in between great holes, the tops of its masts showing oddly above the overhanging greenery. The other lay well over upon its side, like some portly marine monster that had taken shelter between the white man in the tropics appeared in the stern of a boat which glided out from under the trees.

Before our gangplank was fairly lowered a tall, rawboned young Englishman, distinctly of the "gentleman" type, came over the ship's side and introduced himself as Shackelford, the man with whom I had contracted to carry a load of nuts to Liverpool.

"No, I haven't a black on the place," he explained in response to an inquiry of mine as we took our places in his flat bottomed boat, manned wholly by Chinamen, and started for his bungalow, whose corrugated roof blazed in the intense sunlight through a rift in the cocconut grove. "It costs three times as much for Chinese labor, but for some reason I can't get a nigger to come near the plantation."

"That's strange." "Wait till tonight and you'll hear as horrible a row as you ever heard. Then you'll know. The mountains back there are alive with apes. That is why I put up a twenty-five foot high barbed wire fence."

"That evening we were sitting in the bungalow, sipping whisky and soda and swapping yarns about Penang, when a volley of barks, sharp as the rattle of musketry, made me spring up in alarm."

Shackelford put down his glass and haw-hawed. "It's only those blasted apes," he explained when he had managed to control his mirth. "Take down that rifle and come along."

Armed with the rifles, we made our way to the edge of the grove nearest the spur of the mountain. As we approached a chorus of snarls greeted us, and in the clear starlight I saw a host of infuriated apes hurling themselves against the barbed wire fence.

For a time the brutes paid little heed to our fusillade. Then, under the leadership of a huge gray ape, they broke and made for cover.

The great grizzled brute was the last to retire, and at the edge of the jungle it turned and gibbered at us in a way that made my flesh creep. It seemed to voice the fathomless hatred of the whole jungle world for the usurper man.

The next morning on our way back to the steamer I asked Shackelford about the two wrecks.

"Oh, I fancy the fool captains could not steer straight," he replied lightly. "Longstreth—that's the chap I bought the grove from—said that both ships were loaded with coconuts. He would not talk much about it, though—too sour to talk about anything."

Later, to satisfy my curiosity, I rowed over and had a look at the hulks, and as I examined them I noted two facts that kept me speculating for days. Before either steamer went into its present position the boats had been hastily slashed away, and there wasn't a single cocconut to be seen in either hold.

That night I spent ashore again with Shackelford, and when I returned to my ship the following morning I found it in an ominous state of excitement. Usually the Chinese portion of it occupied the forward part of the main deck, eating and sleeping in the corners among the steam winches. The lascars had always claimed the fore-castle head, where their tall, gaunt bodies and swathed heads seemed an inseparable part of the ship. Now, however, race and caste were forgotten, and turbans and pigtails mingled promiscuously in groups that whispered eagerly in a dozen corners.

Pherson died of cholera, I locked the door behind him, left my revolver on the table, where he could meditate upon its use as we talked, and then asked him a few pointed questions. He turned white under his inky skin, but soon pulled himself together and began to lie to me. I knew it by the way his eyelids flickered. The bay was too hot for even a Chinaman to live on; the lagoon was full of sharks; the typhoon season was coming on—these and a dozen other reasons for leaving at once slipped from his oily tongue and left me more puzzled than ever.

After that experience I spent no more nights ashore, but watched continually for the slightest hint of rebellion. Early the next morning when the coconuts began to arrive on the big bamboo rafts I noted with a grin of satisfaction that all hands set to work packing them into the hold with un-alacrity which they had never before manifested in my service.

Taking on cargo occupied a week, and during that time I never left the ship's deck farther than the cabin.

The following evening we put out to sea, the men working like demons to get away before night shut down, Shackelford laughing all the while at their eagerness to be rid of what he declared to be "the finest spot east of Suez." His Chinamen—I shall never forget that last glimpse of them—squatted upon the empty bamboo rafts, their eyes wound about their unshaved heads, the sweat still streaming down their naked bodies to the flimsy cotton pantaloons corded about their waists, and viewed our departure out of their narrow eyes with features as impassive as those of a stone Buddha.

What did they know about the two rusty hulks, the gray "thing" that haunted them, and what had they told my crew? I wondered. Worn out with a trying week, I turned in.

A shock buried me from my berth, and as I groped about in the darkness for the key of the door the sound of crashing timber and of branches trailing across the cabin window made me guess my surroundings. Springing on deck, I turned instinctively to the wheel, and there, bowed over it like an old man and clutching the spokes with hairy hands, was a huge gray ape—the very monster Shackelford and I had failed to bring down the night of the raid upon the cocconut grove!

At sight of me it relinquished its hold upon the wheel and sprang at me, baring its teeth in sudden rage. Whipping out my pistol, I began to fire and back away and brought it down with a shot in its gaping mouth just as it was reaching out its horrible corded arms to seize me. As it collapsed with a gasping shudder at my very feet I sprang backward from sheer repulsion and in doing so fell into the lagoon through a hole in the railing that the thick branch of a tree had carried away.

Not till then did the full significance of what had transpired dawn upon me. Crew there was none, but apes from the surrounding trees and the two rusty hulks that had so puzzled me and that now lay on either side came swarming upon the steamer till they covered everything—winches, forecastle head, the empty davits, the spare anchors, the very rigging—with a gray, writhing mass that struggled and fought and screamed in a wild rush for the coconuts, which could easily be reached through the main hatch, left open to prevent overheating. Swimming round to the rudder, now completely out of water above the madly racing crew, I climbed up beyond the reach of sharks and listened to the appalling pandemonium till the last cocconut must have been removed from the hold, when the brutes gradually dispersed through the forest.

Afraid to venture back on deck, at daylight I mounted a piece of the round house that had been swept overboard and made my way on the incoming tide up the channel which led to the plantation. On the edge of the grove I paused in incredulous wonder, and then the truth came home to me. Under a fierce attack of the apes the wire fence had at last given way, and the cocconut grove was in ruins. Shackelford's bungalow I found in a state of pillage so complete that only the four upright posts remained, and the flimsy huts occupied by the Chinese laborers were scattered about as if struck by a typhoon.

Not far from the ruins I found Shackelford's beautifully stained meerschaum pipe trampled into the earth by a host of passing feet, and protrud-

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ing from under a tattered cocconut leaf was a Chinaman's cue, streaked with gray, but no Celestial at the severed end. Prepared for the worst, I was hastening down the newly beaten path toward the jungle when a groan to my left attracted my attention, and, rushing over, I found Shackelford and his Chinamen neatly trapped under the barbed wire fence.

"You see," Shackelford explained when I had pried up the edge of the deadly netting, which they were unable to raise with their bare hands because of the inch long barbs, "we were poking the bally brutes off the fence with sharpened bamboos and having no end of fun when their weight doubled the whole thing over and shut us into a square little fort as a fellow could wish for. Ha, ha!"

Shackelford, followed by a score of bedraggled Chinamen, crawled out stiffly from his involuntary but lucky imprisonment and looked ruefully at his blood spattered clothes. "They ripped and tore at the netting like a lot of mad devils," he continued, "and the blood from their lacerated feet came through on us like a shower of warm rain, but none of us was hurt except Ah Cong over there. He was a bit careless and let his pigtail stick out through the netting. Lucky thing I had a knife, you sour old heathen!" turning to a grizzled Chinaman whose cue had been severed close to his head, "or that big ape that got hold of the end of it would have pulled it out by the roots." And Shackelford laughed uproariously as he reached for his pipe, examined the coloring with the eye of a connoisseur and then began to dig the dirt out of the bowl. "But I don't understand what made the brutes all quit and go tearing away toward the bay," he added thoughtfully as he opened his tobacco pouch.

For answer I led him down to the third derelict and showed him the empty hold.

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