

1 THE RIFT

Dyak and Malay fell like tenpins before the murderous fire that was poured upon them from the invisible death-dealing mechanism hidden amidships. Those who were not killed dropped their weapons and fled precipitously for their prahu.

Sing Lee, jabbering excitedly, had come to Virginia's side, and was loading the belt with ammunition from the magazine. The balance of the fight was short-lived, for scarcely had the enemy turned to flee than Sing's forecast proved correct. The loud report of the gun had aroused the sleeping men of the Ithaca's crew, and a dozen members of it led by Bududreen and von Horn were soon leaping over the vessel's side to board the prahu.

Virginia was watching the prahu from one of the cabin ports. She saw the momentary hesitation and confusion which followed Sing's first shot, and then to her dismay she saw the rowers bend to their oars again and the prahu move swiftly in the direction of the Ithaca.

It was apparent that the pirates had perceived the almost defenseless condition of the schooner. In a few minutes they would be swarming the deck, for poor old Sing would be entirely helpless to repel them. If Dr. von Horn were only there, thought the distracted girl. With the machine gun alone he might keep them off.

At the thought of the machine gun a sudden resolve gripped her. Why not man it herself? Von Horn had explained its mechanism to her in detail, and on one occasion had allowed her to operate it on the voyage from Singapore. With the thought came action. Running to the magazine she snatched up a feed-belt, and in another moment was on deck beside the astonished Sing. The pirates were skimming rapidly across the smooth waters of the harbor, answering Sing's harmless shots with yells of derision and wild, savage war cries. There were, perhaps, fifty Dyaks and Malays--fierce, barbaric men; mostly naked to the waist, or with war-coats of brilliant colors. The savage headdress of the Dyaks, the long, narrow, decorated shields, the flashing blades of parang and kris sent a shudder through the girl, so close they seemed beneath the schooner's side.

"What do? What do?" cried Sing in consternation. "Go b'low. Klick!" But before he had finished his exhortation Virginia was racing toward the bow where the machine gun was mounted. Tearing the cover from it she swung the muzzle toward the pirate prahu, which by now was nearly within range above the vessel's side-- a moment more and she would be too close to use the weapon upon the pirates.

Virginia was quick to perceive the necessity for haste, while the pirates at the same instant realized the menace of the new danger which confronted them. A score of muskets belched forth their missiles at the fearless girl behind the scant shield of the machine gun. Lead pellets rained heavily upon her protection or whistled threateningly about her head-- and then she gave the weapon to the Dyaks. Such a hail of bullets issued forth as none there had ever before beheld. Dyak and Malay fell like tenpins before the murderous fire that was poured upon them from the invisible death-dealing mechanism hidden amidships. Those who were not killed dropped their weapons and fled precipitously for their prahu.

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