

THE MYSTERY SHIP!

By G. L. DALTON

Wung Li, the menace of the China Seas, gets more than he bargains for when his cut-throat pirates attempt to seize the mystery ship, Emperor!

THE FIRST CHAPTER

Blackmail !

TRouble was brewing in the captain's cabin of the coastal steamer, Emperor, which was lying alongside a wharf at Hong Kong.

Two men faced each other across the cabin table. The first was a clean-cut youngster in the brand new uniform of a skipper in the mercantile marine. The other was a small Chinaman whose frock coat flopped down below his knees.

The Chinaman was speaking.

"My master, Wung Li, says you must pay him five thousand dollars. Your ship will

then be safe. If you refuse to pay, it will be at your peril."

Bill Wilson's fist came down on to the table with a thump that made the electric lamp dance.

"You yellow-skinned blackmailers!" he exclaimed. "D'you think I'm going to pay tribute to a gang of cut-throat pirates?"

The Chinaman shrugged his shoulders.

"This is your last chance," he said. "Wung Li's patience is short."

Bill glared at his visitor.

"Wung Li can go to blazes!" he replied. "If he wants five thousand dollars off me he'll be blinking unlucky."

The Chinaman smiled sneeringly.

"You will soon regret your decision," he said. "You will have many reasons to wish that you had paid."

"Sez you!" exclaimed Bill.

The Chinaman put on his bowler hat.

"I will bear your message to my illustrious master," he said. "Wung Li will be very amused. Other captains have also refused to pay. They are dead!"

With a significant motion he drew the back of his hand across his throat.

Bill raised his eyebrows.

"Wung Li will smile on the other side of his ugly face if he pokes his nose on board my ship," he growled. "Hop it!"

The Chinaman saw that argument was useless. He sneaked out of the cabin and made for the gangway. Bill watched him until he was lost in the deep shadows of the warehouses on the other side of the wharf.

"That blackmailin' pirate hasn't wasted much time," he muttered. "But, by gosh, he'll get it in the neck if he tackles me."

Bill did not speak boastfully. He had every reason to be self-reliant. He had just been given command of the Emperor, and was the youngest skipper on the steamers engaged on the Chinese coastal trade.

Wung Li was the scourge of the South China Sea. He was the most notorious of all the pirate chiefs and had numberless crimes on his blood-stained hands. Even the British naval patrols had failed to discover his hidden lair on one of the numerous islands which dotted the coast.

Striding along to the officers' quarters, Bill pushed open the door.

Andy Fergus, the chief engineer, and Sparks Duncan, the wireless operator, were playing draughts, but they shoved the board aside as Bill came in.

Sparks grinned broadly.

"Got rid of your mandarin?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Bill. He described how he had refused to pay Wung Li's demand.

By the time he had finished Andy's face was grave.

"I'm not sayin' you dinna' do right," he said. "But, skipper, you're takin' an awfu' risk. Wung Li's as cunnin' as a snake, and more dangerous."

Bill shook his head.

"I've considered the risk," he declared. "I won't pay a cent. I'll defy the murdering scoundrel while there's breath left in me. Are you fellows going to back me up?"

Sparks did not hesitate.

"I'm on!" he exclaimed. "We'll turn his pigtail into a horse-hair sofa."

Andy was more deliberate. It was his nature to make up his mind slowly.

"Yes! Count me in," he said after a pause. "It's more than time that somebody had the pluck to stand up to Wung Li."

The three shipmates shook hands over their bargain.

Sparks looked at Bill.

"What's the big idea, skipper?" he demanded. "What are you hiding up your sleeve?"

Bill grinned.

"It's this," he replied. "I've made up my mind—I'm going to turn the Emperor into a mystery ship."

"What?" exclaimed Sparks and Andy in chorus.

"A mystery ship," repeated Bill. "As you chaps know, I love working out new dodges. Several bright ideas have come into my head for giving Wung Li a mighty hot time if he tries to plant any of his pirates on board my ship."

Sparks whistled.

"That's a topping notion," he said. "We can help you. I'm pretty useful with electricity and Andy's the snake's hips on steam."

Bill gave a satisfied nod.

"We've got a week before we are due to sail," he said. "I'll get permission to shift the Emperor over to the naval yard where we can work without being overlooked by Wung Li's spies."

Andy rubbed his oily hands.

"That's fine," was his comment. "Wait a minute, I'll fetch the plans of the ship an' then we'll work out the details."

The police of Hong Kong did not know that the ferocious pirate, Wung Li, made frequent visits to the port. Neither were they aware that he possessed a luxuriously furnished house in the town.

It was to this house that the Chinaman hurried after his visit to Bill.

He was at once admitted into the presence of Wung Li himself.

Attired in a long and costly silk robe and wearing earrings of priceless jade, Wung Li motioned to him to come forward with his fan.

"You have been a long time, To Ping," was his greeting.

To Ping bowed double from his waist.

"The English captain was obstinate, Excellency," he replied.

Wung Li scowled and closed his fan with a snap.

"He refuses to pay?" he demanded.

To Ping again bowed.

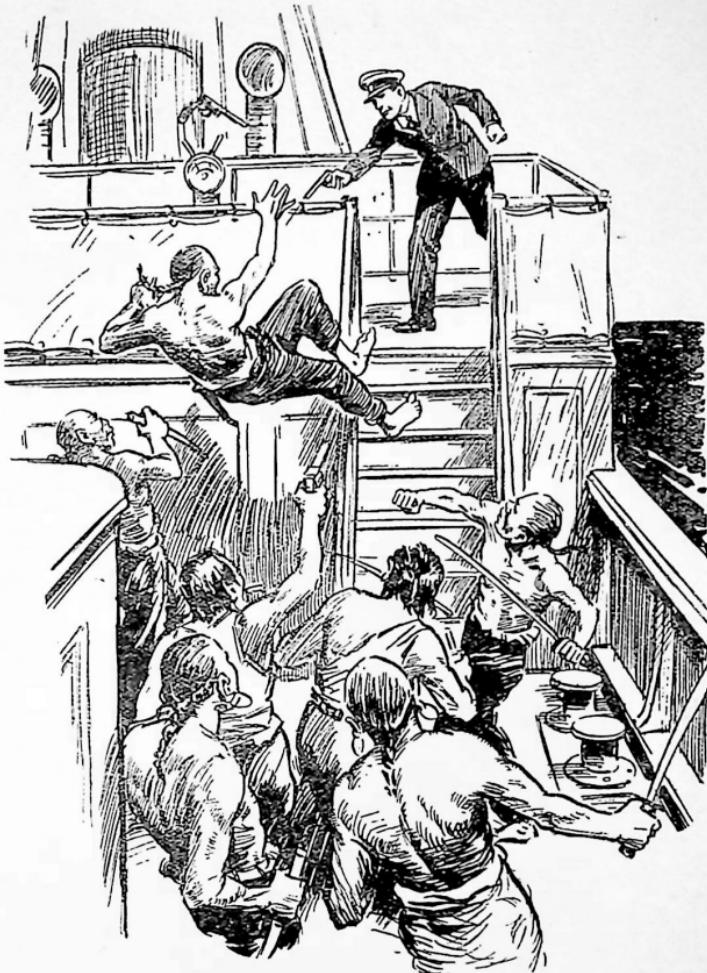
"That is so, Excellency."

"For that foolishness he shall pay double," exclaimed the pirate chief.

To Ping plucked up courage.

"Excellency, the captain said that if you poked your nose on board his ship you would smile on the other side of your ugly face."

Wung Li's lips curled back and exposed his teeth.



Jerking an automatic from his pocket, Bill took aim and fired. The leading pirate flopped to the deck with a thud.

"For that insult he shall die," he snarled. "He shall be tortured to death."

He clapped his hands twice and a huge Chinaman entered noiselessly. It was Chang Fen, the pirate chief's lieutenant and as big a villain as his master.

"I await your Excellency's commands," he said.

Wung Li spoke swiftly.

"You are to capture the steamship Emperor on her next voyage," he began. "Here are my instructions. You and thirty of my men will book tickets and sail as passengers. You will hide your pistols and daggers under your robes. I shall await the Emperor in my junk. I shall order a gun to be fired. That will be the signal for you to take possession of the ship."

Chang Fen bowed.

"I understand, Excellency."

Wung Li tapped his nails with his fan.

"The captain is to be brought to me alive on board the junk," he said.

Chang Fen understood the threat in Wung Li's words and a cruel glint appeared in his eyes.

"It shall be as you command, Excellency," he answered.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Pirates Attack !

BILL took a glimpse through his binoculars at the headland they were fast approaching. A week had quickly passed, and on the previous day the Emperor had taken aboard cargo and passengers and set out from Hong Kong.

Throwing a plume of smoke across the sky, the steamer ploughed through the calm sea at a steady ten knots. From the bridge Bill looked down on a peaceful scene.

Several of the Chinese passengers, who had embarked at Hong Kong, were lying on the deck enjoying the sunshine. Others walked up and down chatting to one another. Loud exclamations came from a group who were gambling round a fan-tan mat.

Sparks was making his way along the deck, threading his way among the passengers.

Several of the Chinamen spoke to him politely, but Sparks appeared to be in a hurry, for he kept glancing at his wrist-watch.

Finally he reached the ladder leading up to the bridge, and bounded to the top.

Bill took a pace forward.

"Find out anything?" he asked.

Sparks jerked back his cuff.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed.

It was not a wrist-watch after all that he was wearing, but a delicate instrument, something like a compass, invented by Bill. Across the dial the needle was still flickering in an agitated manner.

Bill nodded. Metal objects acted like a magnet on the needle and caused it to vibrate.

"All the Chinks must be hiding guns," said Sparks. "The needle jumped as I passed each one of them."

"Then we can expect the fun to start soon," remarked Bill. "I suppose they hope to catch us napping."

Sparks pointed out the tallest Chinaman. It was Chang Fen disguised as a respectable silk merchant.

"That's the fellow to watch," he observed.

"He's a walking arsenal. The needle almost jumped off its spindle when I stood behind him."

"Righto," said Bill, and went into the wheelhouse, where the quartermaster, Sam Huggins, a former naval man, was steering.

Bill spoke down the engine-room voice-pipe.

"Hello!" boomed Andy's voice from the depths below.

"Keep your eyes skinned," said Bill. "Trouble's brewing!"

Andy replied with a bloodthirsty chuckle.

Bill suddenly felt the ship veer slightly from her course. Huggins was twirling the spokes.

"Junk rounding the 'eadland, sir," he exclaimed.

Bill stepped out on to the bridge and examined the approaching craft through his glasses. The junk was crowded with men. Her three large sails were up and her course was set to pass close by the Emperor.

Lowering his glasses, Bill turned to Huggins.

"What d'you make of her, quartermaster?"

Huggins shifted the quid of tobacco he was chewing into his other cheek.

"Bit doubtful, in my opinion," he replied. "Looks to me mighty like a fighting junk."

Bill nodded in agreement.

"Anyhow, I'm taking no risks of being surprised," he said. "Give the warning, quartermaster."

Huggins gave two sharp blasts on the siren. This sounded like an ordinary warning whistle to the helmsman on the junk to keep out of the steamer's path. As a matter of fact, it was the signal to the Emperor's small crew to take up their stations.

Only one or two sailors were actually on deck, and as soon as they heard the siren they left their work and quietly disappeared.

Sparks' job was in the wheelhouse, where he took up his position before an instrument board on which a number of switches were fixed.

"Keep her on her course," said Bill to Huggins. "I don't want 'em to know we suspect there's trouble brewing."

"Aye! Aye!" replied the quartermaster.

Hands in his pockets and whistling a jazz tune, Bill strolled up and down the bridge in full view of the passengers. He scarcely seemed to be taking any notice of the junk as it crept steadily nearer.

The Chinamen had stopped their chattering. Those who had been squatting down scrambled to their feet and were watching the approach



"Look out!" There was a sudden exclamation from Huggins. Bill and Sparks turned to see Chang Fen, a dagger between his teeth, take a flying leap from the mast to the bridge.

of the junk. As the two vessels closed up, Bill noticed a group of men busily engaged on the poop of the junk.

The distance rapidly narrowed. Suddenly the men on the poop sprang back. There was a lurid flash of light followed by a loud explosion.

"Blank cartridge!" exclaimed Bill.

It was Wung Li's signal.

In an instant the scene on the deck of the Emperor was transformed as Chang Fen uttered a hoarse cry of command. The peaceful passengers betrayed their true characters. Snatching off their long robes, they stood revealed as muscular, half-naked pirates.

Chang Fen pulled a pistol from his belt and fired a shot into the air.

Bill flung himself flat on to the bridge. All the pirates were armed to the teeth with pistols, sawed-off shot-guns and daggers.

"Look out, Andy!" shouted Sparks down the voice-pipe.

Brandishing their weapons and uttering ferocious yells, half the pirates, led by a man with only one ear, rushed down the steps that led to the engine-room.

The remainder, headed by Chang Fen, made a frenzied rush for the ladder leading up to the bridge.

"Here goes!" muttered Bill.

Jerking an automatic pistol from his hip pocket, he took aim and fired. The leading pirate jumped a yard in the air and flopped to the deck with a bullet through the calf of his leg.

The pirates stopped their rush tactics. There was a ragged volley of shots and a splinter of wood curled up from the planks too close to Bill's head to be comfortable.

A tremendous commotion had broken out on the junk. Firearms were being discharged and tins banged to encourage Chang Fen and his comrades.

Crawling on his hands and knees, Bill entered the wheelhouse. Sparks and the quartermaster were bending down, watching the proceedings through eye-slits in the steel plating.

Bill wondered how Andy was getting on and rang up the engine-room.

"All right?" he asked.

"O.K.!" replied Andy. "The deevils are hammerin' on the door like mad, but they won't get it open till I'm ready for 'em."

Sparks gave a shout.

"Get down," he yelled.

Bill ducked just in time. Another volley

of shots rang out and the wheelhouse windows fell into jagged splinters.

The pirates were climbing up to every point from which they could shoot down on to the bridge.

One of the rascals swarmed up into one of the small boats and dragged up a companion after him. This brought them up level with the bridge. Levelling their pistols, they took aim.

Bill grinned.

"Give 'em a ducking, Sparks!" he exclaimed.

Sparks touched a switch on the instrument board.

The result was surprising. The small boat swung completely over and tipped the two pirates out head-first. With amazing agility the first grabbed hold of a rail as he was falling and pulled himself back on to the deck. The second disappeared with a splash in the sea.

While this was happening a one-eyed pirate was pulling himself on his stomach along the deck until he reached the bottom of the ladder leading up to the bridge.

In this position he was invisible from the wheelhouse.

With great stealth the pirate put his naked foot on the bottom rung and began to climb up, but no sooner had he touched the ladder than a bell tinkled in the wheelhouse.

"Somebody's on the ladder," exclaimed Bill. "Fetch him off, Sparks!"

Sparks pressed down another switch. Pivoted from the top, the ladder swung upwards at a terrific speed and hurled the one-eyed pirate clean across the width of the bridge. He fell with a crash on the foredeck and lay there motionless.

Huggins made a sudden exclamation.

"Look out!" he cried.

A dagger between his teeth, Chang Fen had swarmed a short distance up the mast. As the quartermaster spoke he took a flying leap on to the bridge.

With a bloodthirsty howl his companions rushed forward.

But Bill jumped out to meet Chang Fen. Before the Chinaman could regain his balance, Bill rammed in a right to the jaw.

It was a tremendous blow and timed to the second. Chang Fen's teeth rattled together. Blood appeared at the corner of his mouth for he had also bitten his dagger. Arms flying wildly he staggered backwards and fell off the bridge.

He would have broken his neck if his fall had not been broken by two of the pirates who were running forward. The three collapsed in a heap and rolled into the scuppers together.

But as quick as Bill had been in knocking Chang Fen from the bridge, other pirates had taken advantage of the time. Already two of them were clambering up to the bridge, and many others were rushing across the deck, knives flashing in the sunlight.

The situation looked ugly for the three on the bridge, to say the least. Bill and Sparks rushed forward to repel the attack, while the quartermaster held the ladder with a revolver.

As two pirates came up over the bridge rail, Bill and Sparks let drive. Simultaneously there were two thuds, followed by two anguished yells. The pirates lost their balance and crashed down on the heads of their comrades following behind. In a jumble of arms, legs and bodies,

the whole lot fell to the deck, landing on other pirates who were not quick enough to get out of the way. Yells and oaths rent the air as the pirates sprawled over the deck.

Bill, Sparks and the quartermaster took shelter again in the wheelhouse, ready this time for the next onslaught.

The Emperor's funnel bent completely over and from it billowed dense clouds of black smoke, smothering the pirates. Uttering shrill yells, they turned and fled.



THE THIRD CHAPTER

"Shocking!"

THE pirates withdrew a short distance and held a council of war. Things were not going the way they planned.

Meanwhile, the other members of the gang were trying to batter their way down into the engine-room.

A stout door barred their progress.

On the other side of the door stood Andy, one eye glued to a tiny peephole.

The leader of the pirates thrust his pistol against the bolt and pulled the trigger. There was a deafening report in the narrow passage but all the damage done by the bullet was to fetch a flake of paint off the steel barricade which faced them.

"Wow!" exclaimed Andy. "I'm thinkin' it's time I shifted 'em back on deck."

He picked up a long flexible tube and screwed it carefully into the peephole. At the end of the tube was a huge pair of bellows worked by compressed air.

Andy turned a tap and there was a hiss as the bellows began to work.

In a second the passage was full of a fine powder which shot out from the jet with terrific force.

The pirates yelled in agony. Red-hot needles seemed to be sticking in their eyeballs. Their nostrils were scorched and every time they panted for breath they carried the burning powder into their lungs.

Clawing the air, they fought among themselves to get out of the passage. Terrified and half-blind they scrambled back on to the deck.

Bill saw them rush out of the companion-way and chuckled.

"I shouldn't have thought that two or three pounds of black pepper would have routed a gang of pirates!" he exclaimed, for that was what the powder consisted of—simply black pepper. Bill's brain-wave had worked with a vengeance.

Chang Fen rallied his men. He was trying to urge them on to another attack.

The crew on the junk had redoubled their yelling. Another gun was fired. Wung Li was becoming impatient.

Sam Huggins cut himself another quid of tobacco.

"Gosh!" he said. "This is better than the pictures!"

"Yes," agreed Sparks. "But I shouldn't like Wung Li to get hold of me. The danger's not over yet."

Suddenly Chang Fen withdrew his men towards the stern.

They broke up into groups and began to assemble a pile of boxes, coops, rafts—anything made of wood on which they could lay their hands.

Bill saw through their little game.

"Great Scott!" he shouted. "The blighters are going to fire the ship!"

The pirates were working at top speed.

"I'll soon stop their game!" muttered Bill.

He turned to Sparks.

"Smoke 'em out!"

Sparks turned a handle. The whirr of machinery was heard and an amazing thing happened.

The ship's funnel bent backwards. The plates of it glided together as Sparks turned another wheel and the top of the funnel turned completely over until it pointed downwards over the bewildered mob of pirates.

Bill was at the engine-room voice-pipe.

"All the smoke you've got, Andy," he said.

Clouds of dense black smoke and billowing sparks shot out of the funnel and completely smothered the pirates. They began to cough and sneeze. Dropping the boxes they fled out of the smoke and came bolting along the deck, smothered all over with soot.

Chang Fen led them. Mad with terror and rage they charged at the bridge.

The pirates were desperate. They meant to overpower the cool Englishmen or die in the attempt. Uttering shrill yells and brandishing their weapons they dashed forward.

Bill judged the distance.

"Now, Sparks!" he exclaimed.

There was the click of a switch, and, without any warning, the entire section of the deck on which the pirates were running began to spin round at a tremendous speed.

A great circle had been cut through the planks. In the centre, underneath, was a spindle driven from the engine-room, and this



C. P. SHIPTON

Facing page 160

HOLDING THE BRIDGE!

carried the deck round and round like the turntable on a huge gramophone.

Chang Fen and his gang were thrown from their feet. They didn't stand a chance. Faster and faster the deck went whirling round.

The pirates collapsed into a great heap of tangled limbs, clawing at the planks to try to retain a hold. But the tremendous force rendered them helpless.

Bill chuckled at the success of his device.

"They're off!" he exclaimed. "Watch 'em walk the plank, new style!"

The "new style" came into operation as Sparks touched the switch again. The speed of the turntable was increased still more, and the dizzy pirates became dizzier, until one after another they were spun from the turntable.

Chang Fen was the first to go. Legs and arms waving helplessly, he was shot off the revolving deck and sailed clean over the rails and into the sea.

In quick succession the other pirates followed him. Chink after Chink was thrown into mid-air. Splash succeeded splash until the water was dotted by the heads of the swimming men.

The last one went over the side with a yell, and Sparks shut off the power. The deck stopped spinning.

The crew on the junk couldn't understand what was happening as they saw their comrades propelled over the side of the steamer.

Wung Li stood on the poop. He shook with anger.

Scared out of their wits, Chang Fen and his gang swam to the junk and were hauled on board.

Chang Fen shrank back from Wung Li.

"The steamer has a magic spell cast over it," he said. "An evil spirit caught hold of our legs and threw us into the sea."

"You bungling fool!" snarled Wung Li, shaking his fists at the Emperor, which was steaming rapidly away.

Across the water, from the Emperor, floated the sound of the whistle:

"Cock-a-doodle-do!"

THE END

A Flying Visit to St. Jim's

Conducted by Monty Lowther

For those with half-a-guinea and half-an-hour to spare, a joy-ride over St. Jim's in an aeroplane may be confidently recommended. Get it second-hand from me, here and now, and see how you like it.

We step into the plane on Wayland Moor and in less than two minutes a superb range of buildings is glittering below us in the bright spring sunshine.

It is the Wayland Gas Works. For a moment we thought it was St. Jim's.

Now we come to St. Jim's. We recognise it by the tiny white speck near the gates, which we know to be Taggles' head with a handkerchief thrown over it to keep off the flies during his afternoon nap.

Let's descend a couple of hundred feet and get a closer look at things. Ah! That's better. Now we can see the imposing mass of the School House building in detail. But what is that funny little cattle-shed near it? A pair of field-glasses reveals that it is not a cattle-shed but the New House.

These field-glasses are good. With their aid we can even see a worm crawling down the steps. Is it a worm, though? No, it's not; it's Mr. Ratcliff.

Fire! Fire! Surely that's a fire over there? We can even hear the agonised choking of the half-suffocated victims. All serene, though. It's only Crooke and Mellish, "enjoying" themselves with a packet of cigarettes behind the chapel.

Who's that, flashing a reflector in our eyes? But perhaps it's not meant to be a reflector? Come to look at it, it's D'Arcy's world-famed monocle. Good old Gus!

Just look down there. Must be an optical illusion; we've never seen a walking dictionary before, have we? Yes, we have; it's Herbert Skimpole himself.

What about that automatic barrel, then? Quite unusual to see a barrel steering itself across the quad. Must be Baggy Trimble; it is.

Well, time's up now. 'Fraid that's all we get for half-a-guinea. Good-bye, St. Jim's.