

Mystery Adventures

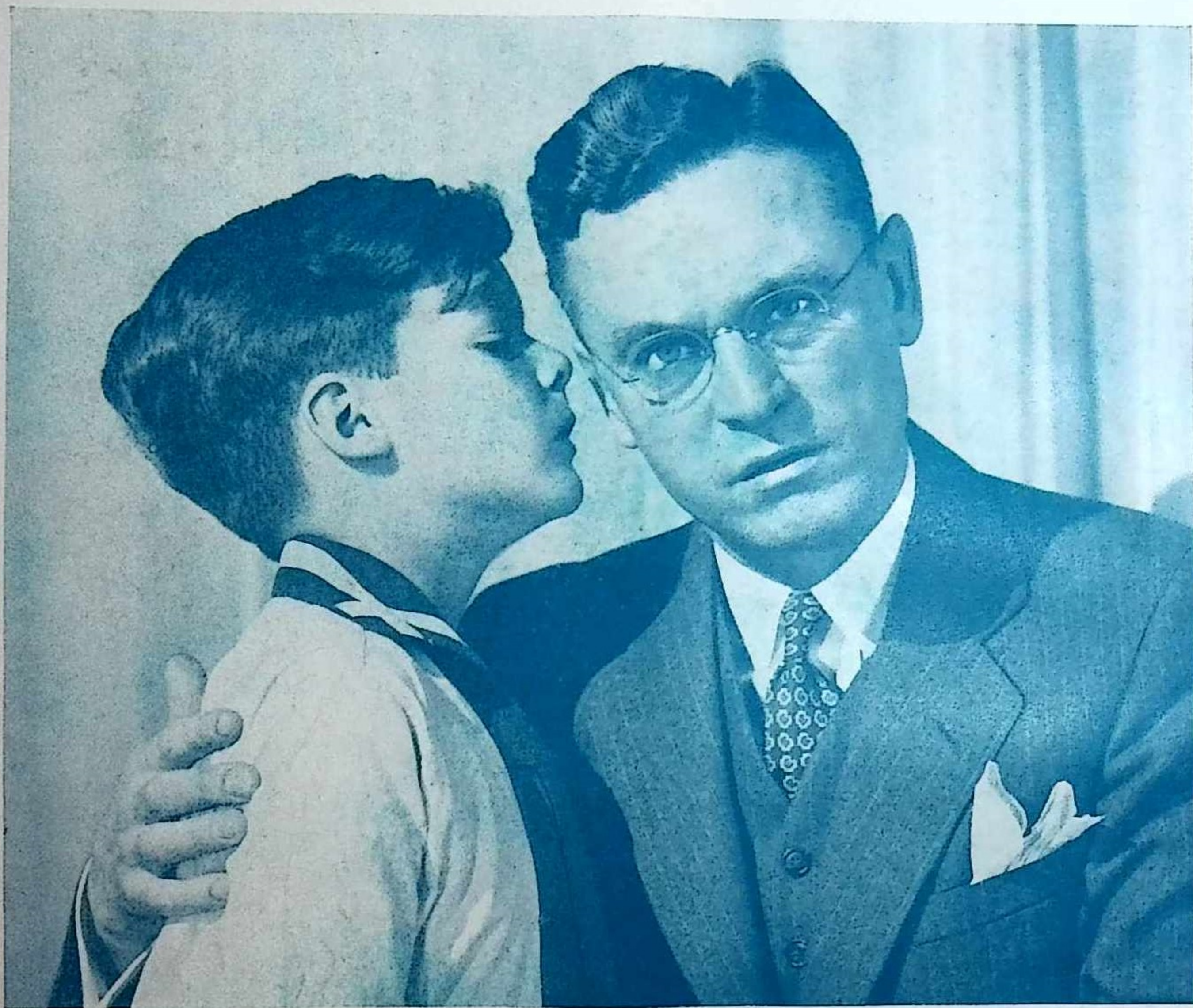
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December



PEARSON

Jungle Fires — The Island of Lost Ones



If you want the truth, go to a child

LATELY, Jepson had felt himself slipping as a salesman. He couldn't seem to land the big orders; and he was too proud to go after the little ones. He was discouraged and mystified.

Finally, one evening, he got the real truth from his little boy. You can always depend on a child to be outspoken on subjects that older people avoid.

* * *

You, yourself, rarely know when you have halitosis (unpleasant breath). That's the insidious thing about it. And even your closest friends won't tell you.

Sometimes, of course, halitosis comes from some deep-seated organic disorder that requires professional advice.

But usually—and fortunately—halitosis is only a local condition that yields to the regular use of Listerine as a mouth wash and gargle. It is an interesting thing that this well-known antiseptic that has been in use for years for surgical dressings, possesses these unusual properties as a breath deodorant. It puts you on the safe and polite side.

Listerine halts food fermentation in the mouth and leaves the breath sweet, fresh and clean. The entire mouth feels invigorated.

Get in the habit of using Listerine every morning and night. And between times before social and business engagements. It's the fastidious thing to do.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL Co., St. Louis, Mo.



J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute
The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

Be a Radio Expert

Many make **\$30 \$50 \$75** a week

I will train you at home for many Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs

Do you want to make more money? Radio offers you many opportunities for well-paying spare time and full time jobs. And you don't have to give up your present job or leave home and spend a lot of money to become a Radio Expert.

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts operate their own full time or part time Radio sales and service businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$8,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I have trained are holding good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read their statements. Mail the coupon.

There's a Real Future in Radio for Well Trained Men

Radio already gives jobs to more than 300,000 people. In 1935 over \$300,000,000 worth of sets, tubes and parts were sold—an increase of 20% over 1934! Over 1,100,000 auto Radios were sold in 1935, 25% more than in 1934! 22,000,000 homes are today equipped with Radios, and every year millions of these sets go out of date and are replaced with newer models. Millions more need servicing, new tubes, repairs, etc. Broadcasting stations pay their employees (exclusive of artists) more than \$23,000,000 a year! And Radio is a new industry, still growing fast! A few hundred \$30, \$50, \$75-a-week jobs have grown to thousands in less than 20 years!

Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you

Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly! Throughout your training I send you plans that made good spare time money—\$200 to \$500 a year—for hundreds of fellows. My training is famous as "the Course that pays for itself."

I Give You Practical Experience

My Course is not all book training. I send you special Radio equipment and show you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loudspeaker installations. I show you how to build testing apparatus for use in spare time work from this equipment. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

You Get a Money Back Agreement

I am so sure that I can train you successfully that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. I'll send you a copy of this agreement with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 18 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what radio offers YOU! MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, Pres., National Radio Institute
Dept. 6NM,
Washington,
D. C.

THIS FREE BOOK HAS HELPED HUNDREDS OF MEN MAKE MORE MONEY



This Coupon is Good for ... One FREE Copy of My Book

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6NM, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....



Broadcasting Stations

Employ managers, engineers, operators, installation and maintenance men for fascinating jobs and pay up to \$5,000 a year.

'Set Servicing
Spare time set servicing pays many \$5, \$10, \$15 a week extra while learning. Full time servicing pays as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week.



Loud Speaker Systems

Building, installing, servicing and operating public address systems is another growing field for men well trained in Radio.



HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS



\$80 Monthly in Spare Time
"I work on Radio part time, still holding my regular job. Since enrolling five years ago, I have averaged around \$80 every month."
JOHN B. MORISSETTE, 773 Silver St., Manchester, N. H.

Makes \$50 to \$60 a Week

"I am making between \$50 and \$60 a week after all expenses are paid, and I am getting all the Radio work I can take care of, thanks to N. R. I."—**H. W. SPANGLER, 508 Walnut St., Knoxville, Tenn.**



Operates Public Address System

"I have a position with the Los Angeles Civil Service, operating the Public Address System in the City Hall Council. My salary is \$153 a month."—**R. H. ROOD, R. 136, City Hall, Los Angeles, Calif.**



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MYSTERY ADVENTURES

"Life is a mystery as deep as ever death can be."—M. M. DODGE

Vol. IV. No. 4.

December, 1936

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Under New Management

How often have you seen the sign: "Under New Management" in some shop window? Not having any plate-glass window in which to hang the sign that MYSTERY ADVENTURES is under new management beginning with this issue, we had to use the contents page instead. . . . The first number is always the hardest; if the editor manages to wiggle through this one he gets his second wind by the time he reaches the next deadline. . . . As Ben Bernie says: "I hope you like it." . . . I've put in everything but the kitchen stove, and by this I mean, that you'll find included in the following pages the most thrilling selection of yarns that has come my way in a long, long while . . . for instance, BOOMERANG! GREED, JUNGLE FIRES and OUTI OF THE ATOLLS. . . . I'll eat the page this is written on if this isn't the best fifteen cents worth of entertaining stories to be found anywhere for the price. . . . Step right this way, La-deez and Gents! The show starts in a few pages. Wade in to your heart's content. . . . I figure it will take you at least a couple of nights to read the entire issue, and where else could you buy two evenings' fun for fifteen cents? . . . When you've finished, pass MYSTERY ADVENTURES along to a friend and then buy some other fellow's magazine . . . he needs your loyal support as much as I do, and I can afford to be generous after you've laid your cold cash on the line for the copy you hold in your hands (or did you borrow it from a friend? Oh, well, it doesn't matter, just so somebody bought it!) . . . I'll be seein' you along about this time next month. . . . And I'll do my darndest to try and gather together as good a collection of yarns as you'll find in this number. . . . I know that four of them are top-notchers because I've already signed them on, but I can't promise anything as to the rest. . . . You'll have to take that chance, and if Steve Brodie took a chance when he jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge I guess it won't hurt you to part with the better part of a quarter on a blind date where all you have to do is sit back and let the characters in the stories run all the risks and a swell bunch of writers do all the work of holding your interest from the first page to the last. . . . And while I think about it: I'm not asking you to write and tell me how you liked my magazine . . . how's that for a variation on an old editorial theme? . . . Don't take your pen in hand, just have your money ready to shell out for the next issue and I'll be satisfied . . . but if you must write the editor, either to bawl him out or give him a pat on the back, go ahead and see if I care!

Yours truly,
THE EDITOR.

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Edited By HAROLD HERSEY

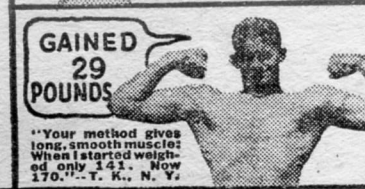
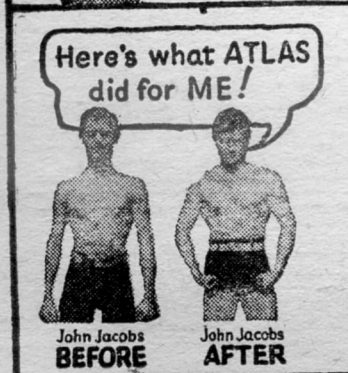
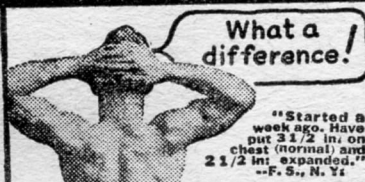
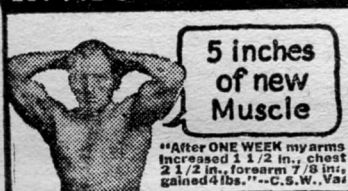
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ATLAS**

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picture, but a
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an ordinary small
snapshot. No
muscles "painted
on" or retouched
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as he looks today!

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make those stomach muscles of yours hard ridges!

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hogany base.

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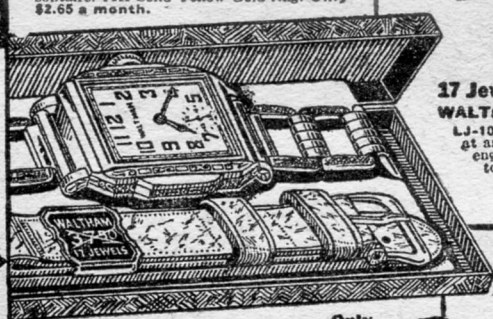


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Only \$2.65 a month

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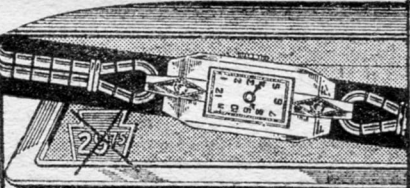


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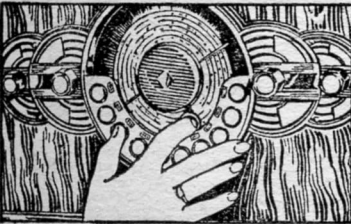
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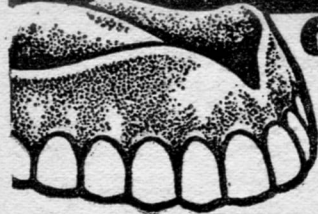
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HEAT, humid, sticky, smothering. Evil, putrid smells . . . smells of stale tequila, unwashed humanity, smoking kerosene lamps, the festering jungle.

Lazy, plunking drone of guitar and mandolin punctuated with maddening, urging throb of drums. Two passionate Zacateco girls stamping out some wild tropic dance with clumsy grace of cattle, their golden naked bodies shining strangely in the murky light. Wild,

insistent cries: "La Jolla! La Jolla! La Jolla!"

"The rats call her The Jewel," Ramsey muttered, laying fat hand on Ned Henley's arm. "Now you'll see something. The girl is swell!"

Into the saffron glare of the dirty kerosene lamps a girl flashed. Her white skin, bare above the shoulders and below the shapely knees, startlingly contrasted with the bronze bodies of the Indian girls. Cloud of sweeping ringlets, pearls gleaming between lips red as the coffee-berry. For an instant she poised like a wild, free bird, white arms extended, then whirled into a flaming, sensuous dance of tropic lure. The drums quickened their song; hoarse roars of approval burst from white, brown and black throats. The girl was like a blazing spirit of wild abandon deigning to grace this lair of disgust. Hardly she seemed to touch the rough board floor with dainty toes; one could have sworn she floated on wings invisible.

"Man, she's white, and in this hell," gasped Henley, but Ramsey's fat fingers warned him to silence.

"Don't be an ass, Henley, some of those peons know a smattering of English. You're not in the States now. This is Yucatan. God! but she's great."

The girl had momentarily flitted into the darkness. Now she was back, holding before her a gorgeous fan where flaming flowers of the dank jungle blended with gay plumage of gorgeously feathered tropical birds.

She whirled—and the clouded light streamed over her naked, slender back. She was facing the roaring men, the fan veiling her bosom. Her teeth gleamed as fifty



She whirled—and the clouded light streamed over her naked, slender back

throats bellowed commands to drop the glowing veil. A dozen times she whirled, almost seemed to lose the fan as she faced the spectators, vanished with a tantalizing laugh as a dozen tense men lunged toward her.

Henley saw that Ramsey was licking his thick lips with hot tongue as they moved out into the stagnant air, and an increasing dislike for his gross companion filled his soul. "Wanted you to see her," Ramsey was panting; "she's worth lookin' at.

Who is she? Just like the rest of the breed you'll find down here in the tropics. Spawn of buccaneers, Indians, negroes. She's got more white in her than most of them. Poor as dogs, with nothin' but their pride and hate of the white man. Riff-raff! Yet they're all Castilian to hear them tell it."

"But she is beautiful—the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," protested Henley; "surely she must be white. Daring enough for a native, I'll admit. But you noticed she never dropped the fan."

"No, she's too smart for that. If she did it a few times her lure would be gone, and old Pedro wouldn't pay her a few measly pesos to draw his crowd of cut-throats. Not that she'd care, especially if there was some fool white man ready to be trapped. She's dangerous, Henley, my boy, and just the thing you want to avoid down here."

"Thanks for your advice, Ramsey," answered Henley dryly, "I'll remember it in case I happen across the lady."

"Now don't get huffy, I'm talkin' for your own good. I've seen many a bright lad from the States turn native and go to the devil down here. This jungle fair sickens you after you're here a spell. Silence and the cursed vegetation—with eyes watching every move you make. A man goes to hell afore he realizes it. And this La Jolla is bad medicine. She's got some hold on the natives—they figure she's some sort of a witch. No white man has anything to do with her, and she hates us all and always causes trouble. A machete across her back is what she needs. She'd have got it long ago if it wasn't that if any man laid a hand on her it would bring the whole jungle about his ears."

Henley smothered the hot retort trembling on his lips. He could not afford to quarrel with Ramsey so early in the game, for he had been particularly instructed by his company to keep on good terms with the man. Sent down from New York to take charge of the sugar plantations and essay the dubious task of converting losses into profits, Henley had need of the friendship of such a man as Ramsey. Ramsey he knew for what he was: an adventurer who had garnered wealth in the flaming tropics as a gun-runner, instigator of revolutions, head of a band of renegades ruthless as himself, defiler of women.

But he was not at Agua Prieta to quarrel with the calling of any man. But while Ramsey ranted Henley privately determined to seek La Jolla on the first opportunity and offer his friendship. The morning found him riding swiftly along a jungle bypath to where inquiries from his staring majordomo had directed him.

The jungle thinned, broadened into a

space cleared by the machete, changed to a grove of gleaming white coffee trees. Henley noted the strangling bejuca, vegetable python of the jungle, had been cut away, the heavy crop of berries, the general appearance of orderly care. The path turned among scattered mahogany trees, widened into a broad clearing set with stately palms. A small jacale, made of palm rods and leaves, interlaced and held together with long strands of the tough bejuca vine, nestled under a palm like a flower in a nest of verdure, with gorgeous flowering vines trailing over roof and walls.

Fastening his horse to a tree Henley advanced toward the low door. And, as though she had been watching for him, the girl of the dance appeared, a machete gleaming in a strong, brown hand. The sun shimmered over her bare arms and legs, but she held her head high and fronted him with hostile eyes, daringly, boldly.

Henley's helmet was off instantly, his hand extended, and with a sweeping bow he greeted her with the old Castilian phrase of courtesy: "I am at the feet of her worship, *Señorita*."

For a moment she stared in surprise, her eyes melted, then her lips set in a straight slash of scarlet. "You are not wanted here, Gringo," she flared hotly, ignoring his hand with a contemptuous shrug of brown shoulders. "La Jolla welcomes not spying dogs. Go! And come not again, Gringo, or the machete shall teach you better."

"Pardon, *Señorita*," he answered courteously, striving to calm her flaming anger with gentle speech, "I am no spy, and I called to offer my friendship, if I may. We are near neighbors—"

"And you thought because you saw La Jolla in the shameful dance she was yours for the asking?" she scoffed in biting contempt. "Begone, I say. I want none of your people at my beautiful home. Shame of your mother! Are you going?"

Henley stepped back, dark anger flushing his face. He thought he caught the glint of mocking black eyes from the tangled background of vegetation, as

with a grim laugh he untied his horse and vaulted into the saddle. For an instant he returned the black scowl of the girl, smiled as she raised the machete threateningly, then rode slowly away.

"And come not again, Gringo, else the machete shall paint your white skin," the girl called after him mockingly. Henley turned the horse into a path cut through the jungle toward the sluggish river, and thought soberly over his cold reception. Plainly someone had carried evil talk of him to La Jolla, or the girl had been turned bitterly against his race by harsh experience. It was not the way of the jungle-dwellers to be openly hostile to the white man, on whom they depended for quick markets for their crops and profitable labor. And courtesy to the stranger is the strongest of the many inviolate laws of tropical Mexico.

At the hacienda he questioned old Juan Costa, his majordomo, closely, but the old fellow shook his head. "Not that I know, Don Neddo, but it is well one has little to do with La Jolla. She is the woman of wiseness. It is not well to quarrel with her. She is a witch, at her word the peons leave the hacendados," Juan whispered, with many furtive glances around him.

So already Juan through the mystic telegraphy of the jungle knew La Jolla had repulsed his friendly call. "So if we vex the fair lady our workers will move out, leaving the sugar to spoil, eh, Juan?"

"Yes, Don Neddo, she is of the great power. Also it is well not to talk of her too much. She has long ears, and her imps always watch and carry the tale. But she has been the Holy Virgin to the peons, Don Neddo, nursing the baby in the sick night, helping the old man when the fever strike, giving of her little to the ones poorer than she. We are all poor here, Don Neddo, but the great white chiefs."

More Henley would have known of the wild woman, but Juan professed ignorance with many squirmings of shoulders and outthrust hands. Either the old majordomo could not, or would not, tell who

she was or whence she came. But that Juan stood in abject terror of her was plainly evident. His next trip to Agua Prieta told Henley that the coarse denizens of that sink of iniquity were also aware of his discomfiture at the hands of La Jolla. Leering whites no longer used the polite "Mr." or "Señor" when addressing him, and several broken men insisted on him drinking the evil tequila with them. Amazed, bewildered, Henley completed his purchases at the company store, ignored the brazen advances of a half-stripped Tehuana girl, and was in the saddle when Ramsey rode up leisurely.



"They figure you're turned native, or about to do it," Ramsey grinned after a brief talk, "that's what comes from foolin' with any of them yellow women. They ain't sure The Jewel wouldn't like to get a white mate, and they figure you're willin'!"

"To blazes with all of you!" burst out Henley wrathfully. "How you know all the rot you're talking beats me, but I felt sorry for that girl—"

"Now, son, don't get sore at me," soothed Ramsey, "I understand what you meant, but this scum here don't. I told you this jungle has eyes everywhere, eyes watchin' every move you make, watchin' you eat and sleep. And never a sight of them. That's what gets your nerves after you've been here a spell. Now, no

tellin' how many eyes watched you ride out to see La Jolla. No doubt she was expectin' you and had her little piece all ready. And before night signal-drum, fires and messengers had spread the yarn all over this damn' jungle. She's a wild, dangerous woman, and like as not she'd have sliced you down with her machete, or cut your bare back with a rope of twisted bejuca, if she hadn't been afraid account of you bein' a white man. You wouldn't have been the first man she marked. I tell you, son, we've got to stick together."

Henley went back to his hacienda with black rage against all former friends in his heart. He fought the jungle savagely, struggled with the indifferent natives, turned his own hand to the work of clearing the crawling vegetation away with fire, swung the machete with his men, bent every energy to wrest success out of the general sloth enwrapping the sugar fields and mills. The sweating peons shrugged narrow shoulders and mocked his efforts, hindering the work in a hundred ways almost impossible to prevent.

Sugar burned in the iron kettles, the green army of the jungle invaded the fields of cane despite Henley's wild efforts to keep the plantations clear, part of the first shipment of sugar to the wharves at Agua Prieta was lost through holes in the bags.

Ramsey of the paunch and calculating eye sympathized, offered advice, cursed the natives savagely. Always he was ready to offer aid, the while he blamed all the trouble on the pretty shoulders of La Jolla. But despite the man's seeming friendship and kindly offices Henley felt his distrust growing. When the sugar bags were cut Henley called the headmen together, and warned he would shoot the next man taking bribes. He put Maria, a stalwart Amazon, in charge of the women making the sugar-cakes, and under her biting tongue and ready lash the work improved. And despite Ramsey's reiterated assertions he stubbornly refused to admit The Jewel was the secret enemy corrupting his workers and baffling his ef-

forts. Yet it was a nameless, intangible, silent force he met at every turn—a force intent on breaking him and sending him in despair from the plantations—the sort of warfare a hating woman might be expected to wage.

AND the enemy was winning! Henley grimly admitted it to himself as one evening he halted his horse under the shade of a mighty saber tree, cleared a path through the dense vegetation to the river, and prepared for a swim. The teeming night-life of the jungle was commencing to stir, but he planned to seek brief haven in the cool water from the blistering heat before swarms of insects drove him to shelter. Draping the rough towel he had brought over a shrub, Henley threw off his clothes, posed for an instant for the plunge.

He shrieked as a crushing Thing struck him with deadly might, struggled madly as cold, clammy folds wrapped around him. The deadly embrace slowly tightened, and he felt his bones bending under a deadly pressure that clamped his limbs together like iron bands and crushed the gasping breath from his throat. Another loop of the awful folds pinned down his arms. A hideous, fanged head waved a scant four feet from his face.

A startled scream, a woman's scream, filtered to his reeling senses. His glazed eyes caught the shine of steel—the horrible folds slightly relaxed. The world spun in a red haze as he battled for breath—then all was black.

Henley came to himself to feel hard yet tender hands kneading his shuddering body. His eyes opened drowsily, and he struggled to sit up. Gentle hands forced him back, continued the thrilling massage. Again his eyes opened—to meet the compassionate gaze of La Jolla!

"Mother of God! I was in time," he heard her gasping as from a great distance, "thank the Virgin I was in time."

Henley sat up with a sudden effort. His face was burning hotly as he clutched up a garment and flung it about his loins. And with the movement the girl vanished

like a dream. Vainly, wildly, he called her name, but the jungle gave back only the screech of a parrot, the mocking ridicule of a black monkey swinging curiously from an overhanging branch. He shuddered as he saw the dismembered body of a huge boa writhing in the wiry grass. Hastily dressing he found his horse, trembling with terror, fastened to the mighty bole of the saber, and rode dazedly back to the hacienda.

La Jolla had rescued him from the grip of the mighty serpent. Then she must have been watching him, following him. And clearly she wished him well, else she would not have risked her own life to save his. He could have almost sworn he had felt her red lips on his in the first delirium of returning consciousness. His face burned at the thought of the girl's eyes on his naked body, the while he thrilled to the memory of her gentle hands and the look of tenderness in her eyes. La Jolla had caught his terrified horse and tied it to the tree—but why had she vanished when he would have crawled through the dust to kiss her feet?

All that night Henley tossed fitfully on his couch. His body was a mass of bruises where the deadly folds of the boa had constricted; every movement brought a twinge of agony. And through the long hours drums sounded from the jungle depths. Were they sending forth some new message to the unseen listeners? Henley wondered dreamily. With the dawning came Ramsey.

"I've been thinking it over, my boy," he began, after customary remarks on the horrible heat, the cursed natives, and the trouble of moving the sugar, "and I tell you what I'll do. You're just about worn out, what with this damned heat and the troubles you're having with the peons. You've got a good crop, but it must be moved pronto, or your profits are gone. You just run up to New Orleans for a couple weeks—a steamer's leaving Agua Prieta tomorrow—and I'll get your sugar loaded if I have to flay every damned man and woman on the hacendados. I know how to handle 'em, lad, I'm an old hand

at the game, and they'll jump when I crack the whip."

But Henley shook his head. "No, Ramsey, I'm going through with it, no matter what it costs. I'll be hanged if I'll quit now. If I'm licked I'll go down fighting, but I'm not licked yet—not by a long way. My people didn't send me down here to run because things went bad. Thanks for your offer, but I'll get that sugar out or die trying."

"But I tell you somethin's brewin'. Them drums last night was mighty funny. And that woman ain't showed up at Pedro's layout for a week."

"You still think she's stirring up the peons against me?" questioned Henley with a half-smile.

"'Course she is. You want to forget your ideas of women when you're dealin' with the likes of her. First thing you know you'll wake up with a machete at your throat and the mills burnin'. It's happened down here afore."

"Well, Ramsey, I'll have to take the chance. Many thanks for your interest, but I've got to see this through on my own hook."

Vainly Ramsey remonstrated, urged, held out vague threats. "All right, you young fool," he ended disgustedly, "I've done my best to save you, you can't say I ain't. But I tell you hell's liable to pop about your ears when you least expect it."

Henley watched him ride off with a grin. As surely as though the man had openly threatened, Henley knew the fat one plotted mischief. Ramsey had not heard of his adventure with the boa, and La Jolla's timely rescue—else he would have mentioned it. And something sung in his heart with the conviction La Jolla was his secret ally. For a time he considered visiting the girl and expressing his thanks, but sober second thought counseled the first overture should come from her.

IN the fields he found the men working steadily. At the creaking sugar-mills, where nude boys drove the mules in never-ending circles, mighty Tehuana women,

stripped to their sturdy waists, stirred the boiling mixture in bubbling kettles. It seemed to Henley the workers were showing a new respect, yet over the peaceful scene he was conscious of impending menace. There was something in the air, an intangible feel of danger, as though some force in the mystic jungle belled a note of warning. He told Felipe, fiercely-mustached mandador, to double the guards at the mills, and not to permit any white man on the plantations. The old boss raised shaggy eyebrows, but nodded he understood.

With the coming of the brief period of twilight Henley's uneasiness strengthened. "I'm a fool," he told himself angrily, "must be getting a bad touch of nerves. Probably the result of being squeezed by that snake." He shivered at the remembrance of the clammy folds around his body.

Lighting his pipe, he walked into the grove of palms fronting the hacienda. Two days more and the bulk of the sugar would be in the warehouses. He had decided to make the rounds of the guards during the two important nights, fearing to trust security of the mills and crop to the indifferent peons. If Ramsey attempted anything he would find Henley prepared. Fireflies were flitting through the gathering gloom like sparks. The air was heavy with fragrance of a thousand flowers. Henley became alert as something stirred in a clump of rank vegetation. Hand on revolver he moved closer. And then he smiled as the tinkle of a guitar and the soft singing of a girl came sweetly in the night to his straining ears.

He was turning away with a little sigh when a rope settled around his shoulders with a jerk that hurled him backward. Before he could cry out, a sack was over his head. The lariat pinned his arms tightly to his sides, and he felt himself picked up by strong arms, heaved atop a horse, and his struggling legs bound firmly. Henley was fighting savagely, but the harsh rope held him in bonds of steel. Voices sounded faintly and his horse broke into a gallop. Through the night the animal rushed, and

Henley felt other forms around him, a steadying hand on his back as he swayed, responses of the animal to stern commands. For hours it seemed they rode through the jungle depths, with branches brushing their faces, and the dank, fetid smell of rotting vegetation in their nostrils.

The horse halted with a sudden quiver. Henley felt himself being unbound and lifted to the ground. Firm hands on his arms urged him along a narrow trail. The prisoning rope was loosed, the smothering sack drawn from his head. Gasping for air, quivering with wild rage, Henley turned to meet the mocking glare of Ramsey—instead he looked into the smiling, beautiful, tantalizing face of La Jolla!

For an instant he stared stupidly, then flushed hotly as the girl trilled into silvery merriment. Two strapping Zacateco women, their golden bodies shimmering in the starlight, held his arms. A dozen paces away a squat peon fingered his machete suggestively. So it was this woman who had hampered him, brought his work to naught, despite his blind faith in her and his distrust of the man who would have aided him! Henley's lips set grimly.

"The *Señorita* has queer ideas of courtesy," he said stiffly.

Again she laughed. "The *Señor* would not come, so La Jolla must have him brought to her poor home. What would the *Señor*? He is so cold, like the snows of his own North, and in the tropics the blood runs hot."

"The *Señorita* has changed since our last meeting," he answered grimly, "men are not dogs to crawl to the feet that spurn them."

"How little the *Señor* knows," she mocked, "it is time he knew more of a woman's way. But," changing swiftly to seriousness, "we waste time, *Señor*. Have I the promise you will not try the flight if my girls loose you?"

"Do you think I will be a willing prisoner, *Señorita*?" he parried.

"Ah, *Señor*, we still misunderstand. Will you listen and not try to run away while I make the explanation?"

"I promise," dryly. After all, he was her prisoner, and he thrilled with curiosity. Her sharp command loosed the grip of hard fingers on his arms, and she led the way to a tiny jacale half-hidden in a tangle of creeping vines. The light of three candles illuminated the interior of a palm-leaf hut, gleamed on the ivory shoulders and glowing eyes of the girl. She motioned him to a seat. A swift glance convinced Henley they were alone.

"Many times I would have told the *Señor* many things," she commenced softly, "but La Jolla must know the *Señor* is a man. Enemies cluster about like flies at the sugar." Her words fairly tumbled over each other in her eagerness. The white snake, Ramsey, had spread the story the *Señor* was a spy, sent down by the Gringo millionaires to wrest from the small land-owners the few shreds of what yet remained to them. When the *Señor* had come to her home she was ashamed for what he had seen in the gross Pedro's place, but she was poor—and needed the pesos for her people. But first the *Señor* must know she was not of the peons. She was the daughter of a hidalgo of Spain—of blood Castilian. She was not native. And when he had come with words of friendship she was not sure he was the caballero; so many evil men were from the great nation of the North.

"But you would not listen—you scorned me when I only craved to kiss your hand," protested Henley.

"The *Señor* is noble," she replied softly, "but he knows not that always eyes watch in the jungle, eyes unseen, unknown. Had I greeted you as my heart prompted, the news would have been known to this Ramsey within the hour. An evil man! But soon I knew he plotted your destruction. He would lord it over all in Yucatan. I have the power with the poor peons. And now we are friends, is it not?"

Henley took the little hand she held out, touched it with his lips. "I shall always be at your command, *Señorita* La Jolla. Just one more question: Why did you have me brought to you in this shameful way?"

"I ask the *Señor's* pardon. But I must

see him, and feared he would not come. I am of the spirit passionate, *Señor*. To me it is known that this snake Ramsey rides tonight on a stern journey. *Señor*, if I had sent word that Ramsey was riding to attack your hacienda, to kill you, would you have come to La Jolla?"

Henley was on his feet, eyes flashing. "Has that hound dared—"

"You see," she interrupted with a little smile, "it was as I thought. The *Señor* would have fought—and died. Ramsey rides with twenty scourings of the gutter. Not finding the *Señor* he will spare the mills and crop—he thinks the *Señor* has the fear and runs away. But La Jolla has struck. Foes rode with him, the peons waylaid his trail. Soon he shall be brought to this jacale. The *Señor* shall see this vile one scourged by my women until he is less than dust."

White teeth gleamed between her coffee-berry lips, black eyes glowed with hate, and that touch of the cat that lies beneath the surface in all women. Her rounded arm flung out as though it already swung the lash on Ramsey's twitching back.

"I will deal with Ramsey," said Henley quietly. "I owe him the beating of his life for what he has done to me. But it will be a fair fight."

"I am mistress here," she flashed, and for a moment Henley expected the slap of her hard fingers on his face. Instead she ran her hand lightly over the bulging muscles of his arms. She swayed toward him, her full-breasted body touched his—her warm breath fanned his face. Henley's arms went out. Their lips met, clung.

"My wonder girl," he whispered, "little jungle mistress. All my life I've dreamed of a girl like you, a passion flower. Ever since that dance—"

"You must not think of that," she protested, fingers on his lips, "not for myself would I have done it. But Rosita and her little one—ah, my brave one must see them! Old Pedro swore only my shameful dance would hold the beasts he serves—and he paid well. But not again will I ever so shameful be."

"But to me it was very beautiful, little passion flower. You were like the Spirit—"

Their arms slipped apart, and she glided from him as snow slides gently from its mountain nest as the sound of galloping hoofs came on the breeze of the night. "Remember, dearest, it must be a fair fight. If Ramsey is the better man he must go in safety. Also if I beat him he is free."

The girl looked into his face with an enigmatical smile. "I hate the Gringo snake," she said quietly. "If he captured you he would have shown no mercy. If my plan fails and he captures me, think you he will be kind? I have spurned his sly advances—he would sell me into slavery to some black devil for a price. The horses are close."

She slipped a revolver into Henley's hand, picked up a machete. From without came confused sounds of clamor and excited voices. La Jolla extinguished all but one flickering candle, kissed Henley warmly, excitedly, then stood by his side with poised machete.

"If the white snake has won we die to-

gether, my loved one," she whispered. "Never will I be taken. Shoot straight and true if he comes."

The little door was flung open. A golden-skinned woman with gorgeous flowers in her black hair darted in, broke into a passionate flood of mingled Spanish and Zateco. La Jolla smiled, waved her from the jacale.

"God has spoken, my Ned, the white snake is no more. He was killed when he showed his fangs—killed by Pablo—Pablo, whose young wife he stole on the marriage night. You have won, my Ned, and not are your hands red with the evil blood."

"But it is you who have won, La Jolla," Henley protested.

But she stopped him with fingers on his lips. "No, my own, call me not by that name. For others, yes, but to my own I am Dolores. It means 'Sorrow' in our Castilian, my Ned, but the Virgin grant it will ever be 'Joy' to my tall one from the North."

She swayed into his arms like a wind-kissed flower.

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RAZORS

The Homeless Men



DVENTURE beckons over the hill
To him with a vision,
To him with a will.

He is not content with the loyalty
Of one woman's love. . . .
Sweet though it be!

Any face will suffice with soft, melting eyes;
Any waist for an evening
Of squeezable size;

Any heart that remembers after he's gone
Down the broad highway
Like a wraith in the dawn.

If sorrow, in passing, stir fleeting alarms,
It's forgotten, alas,
In a new lady's arms;

Or he drowns his regret in tankards of ale,
With his arms on a bar
And his feet on the rail.

He envies no honor a stay-at-home earned,
Never glancing behind
At the bridges he's burned.

Wealth is a burden—all he needs is a sack
O'er his shoulder
And a coat to his back.

Whether his name is his own, or his past is clear,
He's ever at heart
The buccaneer.

Under any flag of fluttering pride
He will toast the dead
On either side.

Soldier, sailor, or hawk of the air,
Where lonely men gather
You will find him there.

If the end be the gallows, or a morning begun
As he faces the rifles that glint in the sun. . . .

Whether he walks to his doom, or rides to his grave,
He'll have died like a man
And not like a slave.

*For adventure has beckoned time and again
To the carefree race
Of the homeless men!*

M. L. F.

Your editor apologizes to those intelligent readers who are well aware that a novel published in installments is nothing more than an effort to make you buy succeeding issues, for having to schedule Pat Casey's superb story as a serial beginning in this number. But if I included the entire novel it would have meant leaving out many yarns already set in type, equally worthy of your immediate attention—so long and yet so short is it, and so averse am I to cutting out a single word for space reasons. It is to be hoped that you will become a regular reader with this number, and if you dislike serials, save the issues until you have the whole story complete, then enjoy it all at once; otherwise, begin it here and now! In either case I can promise you many a blood-curdling moment of mystery and suspense!

The Editor.

THE ISLAND OF LOST ONES

A SERIAL NOVEL

By **PATRICK CASEY**

FIRST INSTALLMENT

BOOK ONE: TO THE RESCUE!

CHAPTER THE FIRST

HELOISE DELECLUSE

I



HE schooner nosed into the bay with sidelights shrouded and not a glimmer showing from her ports. The muffled chug of her auxiliary engine was lost in the louder rumbling from the stamp-mills and smelting works at Point Pilu; the silent watchful figures on her deck were barely discernible to one another in the glare from those blast furnaces that shook across the night. Leaving astern on the port quarter the light from telegraph office and station

of the *Corps Militaire des Surveillants*, the engine was shut down, and with the wheel jerking idly, Captain Kitts left it to make forward into the waist to supervise the lowering of the boat.

It was all done with quietude and dispatch. Even the blocks of the falls were greased against any betraying sound. As the four shadows in dungarees took their places in the boat, under command of the mate, Arne Freyling, the skipper turned toward the deck-house to get the passenger. But she had been waiting unseen in the dark companionway and at his move, came toward the rail.

Her long slender hands, holding the black silk cloak about her, looked startlingly white against their dull background; a radium-treated bracelet watch pulsed a smoky blue tracery on her wrist; but noth-

There was the music of rustling silken underskirts—a flash of handmade white lace as she gathered her dress in one hand, preparatory to stepping over the guard rail.



ing more was visible save the lower part of her face. There was a soft contour of chin, an indistinct small curve of mouth; the rest was shadowed by the deep mushroom-shaped dark hat. There was the music of rustling silken underskirts as she passed—a flash of handmade white lace around her knees as she gathered her dress in one hand, preparatory to stepping over the guard rail.

Captain Kitts met her with an inclination of his head in an awkward bow. This woman was one of the most alluring passengers he had ever had aboard, and the Captain had been responsible for many charming ladies in his time.

"Mr. Freyling's all ready to shove off with you, Miss Delecluse," he said.

"And you, captain?"

"Oh, I'm gonna stand out again through Balade Passage. I can't wait here, you know," with a grin and a knowing nod toward the light of the guard station, dim with distance.

"But you'll be back . . . surely?" hesitating at the rail.

"Sure; at this same hour Monday night," and taking her arm, he helped her up upon the bulwark and thence over upon the guard rail. "Now good-by and good luck, miss," he added as the mate helped her down in his arms into the sternsheets,

"Shove off, Mr. Freyling. The Bonde lies dead ahead."

II

HELOISE DELECLUSE would never forget that journey up the midnight river. It was not so hard to find, in the darkness, the wide muddy mouth of that largest stream in New Caledonia; but once they had entered it, she felt thankful to Mr. Freyling for his forethought in slipping the electric torch into his pocket. For the darkness here was opaque, as tangible as soot, as thick and impenetrable as in a tunnel. The river was in fact a tunnel, hedged by immense, crowded, indistinguishable black growths and stifling beneath a matted interlacing above.

Heloise Delecluse as she huddled in the stern, her white hands clasping the cloak about her, found herself indulging in unpleasant similes. A morbid turn, she knew; a reaction to this eery rowing into pitchy nowhere; yet she couldn't help it. She likened that ray of light to the one hope of her heart which had illumined for her a dreary world. It had brought her more than half way round the globe and guided her, at last, into this very land that had swallowed her father.

But she had never thought of this island as now she found it. His letters had been so meager of detail: a mention that he was living a healthy outdoor life as a woodsman in the forests of Baie du Sud; that he had been transferred to the easy berth of tally-clerk in the gold and copper mines of the North; that with the reopening of the Balade copper workings, he had been signally honored by being listed among the first to be sent there; and finally of his altogether unmerited good fortune in being farmed out to friends, the *libéré* Fougerat and his family, on their manioc plantation in the salubrious valley of the Diahot de Bonde.

And this was that healthful valley! This welter of black riotous jungle . . . this humid enervating air . . . those phosphorescent gleams that danced along the banks—the ferment of decay.

The truth was the lethal spell of the prison land was on her. For she was in the great sweltering forcing-house of New Caledonia, that purgatorial lime bath of France. And already, in her few short hours on the midnight river, she sensed it was wrong. The lime that whitened must also eat the heart and the soul of men. These men who were no longer called that, but *déportés*, *rélégés*, *recidivists*—just numbers, after all, in coarse canvas uniforms and convict straw hats.

Yet they were not all lost souls. Some of them had won to a place in this repellent land. There was her father's friend, for instance, the *libéré* Fougerat toward whose manioc plantation they were heading. What matter, as her poor father had written, that Fougerat had formerly been a thief and a garroter? He couldn't help being born poor, and when one is poor and young in Les Halles, one naturally learns the arts of the apache. Fougerat had since said his penance and was now an independent landowner, growing rich on the manufacture and export of tapioca.

III

THE twittering awakening of bird life warned of the approach of early tropic dawn; the blackness, which had served as a cover for their movements, was slowly brightening to a steamy gray. It was, the dimming tracery of her wristwatch told her, ten minutes to four. . . .

They first caught sight of the man in his reflection in the water, clinging upside down to a branch of a tree as though he were some aquatic acrobat. He seemed peering up at them through the crystal fluid; they could make out the points of light in his eyes and even the saffron color of his branding blouse and trousers; and for the moment it struck them as remarkable that his wide straw hat should stay on in that head-down posture, beneath all that weight of water!

A quick look upward verified the mirrored image, corrected its topsy-turviness. The fellow was sitting astraddle a topmost branch and staring directly down into the

boat. As he caught their eye, he motioned them in toward the bank and began a hurried, agile descent. . . . And Heloise Delecluse couldn't help it: she watched his reflection coming up through the water, up through the shaking greenery of the tree, feet over hands like a prehensile ape!

The nose of the boat slid through the rushes as he swung from a lower limb and dropped into the mud of the bank. Looking up from her seat in the sternsheets as she gripped the quivering gunwale, Heloise was surprised to see that he was not a bit the ape his inverted reflection had led her to believe. In fact, she suddenly realized, had he been less presentable, he might have scared them worse. For despite the crinkled shapelessness of those hideous yellow garments, he looked tall and well set up.

"*Bonjour, mademoiselle et messieurs,*" he greeted in throaty tone; and she noticed, as he doffed his hat in a bow, that his hair glinted with coppery filaments, apparently burnt by the sun for the roots were dark. The blue of his eyes seemed deepened in contrast. They were quite startling, those blue eyes, as they focused on her from out that tanned face.

"You are Monsieur Fougerat?" she asked in her soft singing French and, getting afoot, she stepped forward over the thwarts between the sailors. But it was no more than a polite remark, for already she knew he was not Fougerat. She had formed, unconsciously, a mental picture of the former apache and this man didn't at all agree with that conception. Therefore his shake of the head was no surprise.

"But I am one of his family," he qualified. "May I assist you?"—letting the straw hat fall in the mud to extend his hand to aid her over the bow.

"Thank you," and she set foot as daintily as she could upon the slushy ground—the ground of New Caledonia.

She looked up at him from under the mushroom hat.

"Then you are his son, is it not so?"

"You don't understand, I see," he explained. "I am one of his protégés, what is called a recidivist here, a backslider, because I committed a second offense and

was doomed to the chain gangs or worse, when Monsieur Fougerat took me up."

"Oh!" she murmured. But instead of repulsing her, his answer intrigued her; his cultured choice of words spoke of hidden possibilities, a strange come-down in the world. She wanted to press on, to learn more, but his attitude didn't seem to encourage the personal. He struck her, in fact, as oddly on the defensive and she began to perceive that she must ask the questions; he would do no more than intelligently answer them.

"But of course you expected us—me?"

"I expected a boat," he returned non-committally. "Monsieur Fougerat doesn't inform his family of all the details."

"You mean, monsieur, you didn't know I—a woman was coming?"

"Your appearance, mademoiselle, is my first knowledge of it. I am accordingly surprised and—should I say it?—pleasurably so!" His blue eyes gazed levelly, almost impudently, into hers.

The faintest trace of color stained her alabaster cheeks. This, she felt, was too much. Had she come over the rim of the earth only to be met with idle compliments and smiling ignorance? What was wrong with the man that he should keep her standing there, indulging in this devious catechism?—She could feel her thin suede shoes sinking deeper, each moment, into the mire. The night air stabbed at her silken-clad legs like a myriad tiny daggers—she drew her cloak more tightly about her to prevent the clammy dampness from reaching thighs protected only by her flimsy Parisian underwear. She had not prepared herself for the before-dawn coldness that is to be found in tropical countries.

"Monsieur!" she began indignantly, when she noticed he was not looking at her, but behind her at the men, his blue eyes darting from one to another in turn.

It was a tense moment!

"Yes, mademoiselle, you were saying?" But he didn't swing his gaze to her.

"I was merely about to inform you, sir, that I am Mademoiselle Delecluse and that I have come seeking my father. Surely

you know him, Monsieur Delecluse. He is here, yes, at this plantation?"

He looked full at her and actually he shook his head.

"You mean—" she stammered.

"That I know no one by that name!"

CHAPTER THE SECOND

THE RECIDIVIST

I

SHE stepped back from him, drew herself up before the shock.

"*Qu'avez-vous, monsieur?*" she asked in quick idiom, but coldly. "What is the matter with you? What is beneath your words? Are you trying to dishearten me, to turn me back when I have come so far?"

His blue eyes leaped to hers as though she had surprised him in some guilty secret. Then he shrugged his shoulders eloquently.

"It is simply that you don't understand *La Nouvelle Calédonie*," he said. "Here a name means so little, mademoiselle. Usually we change to a nickname; it makes it less—how should I say?—ah, yes, less awkward! This Monsieur Del . . ." he hesitated, then continued, "the man you ask for, now; your father, is it not? His description, mademoiselle . . . maybe I . . ."

She was instantly mollified. Of course! She didn't understand the customs of this strange brooding land . . . But what had he been about to tell her? What was this secret she had stumbled on and almost pried from him? While she wondered, she would give what information she could. Her poor father!

"A smallish man, with tiny feet and a pointed grizzled beard . . . But ah, you are rude, monsieur!" For his mouth had twisted into a poorly suppressed, cynical smile.

"Your pardon, please, mademoiselle; but none of us here are allowed beards. That is, none but the *libérés*, who are almost like free men, anyhow. To the rest of us that Gallic emblem of manhood is denied to mark us at sight as outcasts—so different, you appreciate, from the *militaire*! See,"

and he rubbed his own smooth-shaven brown chin regretfully, "I am as guiltless of hair as an Indian or—or a baboon! And mam'selle," looking ruefully down, "tiny feet soon become splayed and broad when one must go without shoes!"

She noticed, for the first time, he was barefooted. His toes were discolored and half submerged in the silt.

"Ah, forgive me!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know, I meant no harm; the hurt was unintentional! But I am so concerned to find my poor father I can think of naught else. Surely you must know him, my father. He was once a prominent man in *La Belle France* and no doubt the signs of it still linger—"

"To be sure! There you have described him! The poor old *régulé*, I recognize him now!" He spread wide his arms in an emotional gesture, while the shadow of a moving pity darkened the blue of his eyes.

"*Le Prince de Quelque Chose!*" he went on. "That's what we call him: The Prince of Something, because he has the grand manner, as though he were once great guns out in the world! But he's a *régulé*, mademoiselle—an exile sentenced to seven years at *travaux forcés*, and that's as good as to perpetuity here! He must serve as long a term again as a *libéré* before—"

"He is here, my father is here!" In her agitation she clutched his arm.

"Yes; back there!" he said, waving his other arm in a vague direction behind him.

"Oh!" she cried in a sudden fervency. "Oh, take me to him!"

He looked at her as though daunted, unbelieving, somehow dismayed. Then his eyes jerked toward Arne Freyling and his crew, still in the grounded boat. Then he bowed low as if to show compliance to her wish . . . and now she was startled by the tone of his voice; it was almost an unrecognizable whisper. She couldn't see his eyes or moving lips.

"God knows I have tried to dissuade you, mademoiselle! I can't do more. Your men don't understand what we say, but perhaps there are others close about who do!"

II

AGAIN she stepped back in the mud, back as far as she could until the rounded stakes of the boat brought her to a standstill. A slow shudder passed over her. The pulse leaped in her throat. Her startled glance once more took in the mysterious jungle about her. She could see nothing only green leafage, a crude, wet, darkish green.

She recovered somewhat; said almost apologetically:

"But I must! I must take him away from this intolerable land. I have come far, across half the globe; I can't turn back now. But I thank you, monsieur, sincerely!"

He was again shrugging his shoulders.

"If you must, you must," he said loudly as if that finished it. But his tone rang false, as though he were addressing other ears than hers. Then: "You will mention nothing of this to anyone?"

But only because she had been watching him was she sure he had spoken. She could detect no movement of mouth or jaw, and his voice was once again that thin thread of whisper. Had she but known it, he was speaking without lip-play in the manner of convicts the world over.

"I promise," she vowed, "if only you will lead me to my father."

He swung about.

"Follow me. But first," sluing round again and speaking directly to the sailors: "draw up that boat on the bank and hide it among the brush. Ah, they don't comprehend, mademoiselle. You will explain, yes?"

She did so in English and was distinctly thrilled to note, after all this hesitancy, the promptness with which they leaped to obey her.

"What's it all about, miss?" mumbled Freyling as, dragging the nose of the boat, he came close to her. "If this swab gets funny, you just let me know! I can't save a word of his lingo, but I'm telling you honest, ma'm, I don't like the cut of his jib. No, siree; not since I first spied him like a monkey up in that tree!"

"Thank you, Mr. Freyling." Yet she was oddly more distressed than grateful for his offer. "Everything's all right, though. This man is our friend!" As she uttered the sentiment, she was suddenly conscious she believed it.

III

NATURALLY, in speaking of the recidivist to Freyling, she had glanced toward the man and she noted that he was half turned away, busy splitting a rush into fibers with which to bind together his blouse which had become torn in his descent from the tree. It struck her, however, that his head was tilted in listening attitude. And she wondered.

Could it be that he was interested in overhearing their conversation; that he understood English? Or wasn't it rather that he was harkening to some movement in the brush, some stir of those invisible eavesdroppers he had said were all about? She couldn't tell, but decided to test him, later, in English. For the present, she would keep an eye on those wet green growths.

He led them by a faintly discernible path through the jungle. It was twilight dark here, although the sun was up outside. Even in this dry season, the path in places was little more than a succession of mud-holes; but these had been roughly floored over with felled and denuded trees, showing that the way was much used. Their passage aroused swarms of mosquitoes and tiny red flies, and once she had to stop on the logs across a mire to fight off the flaming gnats with her hands.

"I'm slipping!" she called as a log started to turn under her. The guide, some distance ahead, swung around at the sound of her voice, ran back and helped her across to firmer ground.

He was about to press on again when she caught his arm. She had cried out in English, she suddenly recalled, and he had been quick to answer.

"Ah, I have found you out!" she accused him in French. "You do understand the English!"

"It was the sound of your voice, mademoiselle." (She noted the lack of direct denial.) "I knew you were in trouble then; emotional inflections are much the same in any language. But look! See that?"

A number of birds, black as bats, had swooped over their heads. They appeared to have been startled out of the foliage to one side.

"Our escort invisible!" he whispered, his lips smiling but moveless. "They are paralleling our course."

"But who are they?" she breathed, and shivered slightly.

"Oh, some of the black boys, maybe; but who knows? Perhaps *Le Boucher* who understands the English," significantly, "or even the Monsieur himself!"

An impatient troop of questions poised on her tongue, sharpened the luster of her greenish-gray eyes; but ere she could speak, he went on, raising his voice to that loud false tone:

"I suppose you appreciate by this time, mademoiselle, why your father didn't come to meet you. It's this rough going; it would be too hard on a man of his years. But now you're rested a bit, let's continue our little walk."

She followed him, but more like one in the weird clutch of a dream, perceiving herself walking in this dark matted forest, spied upon by innumerable unseen eyes, and yet feeling leaden of faculties as in a spell, powerless to discern those shapes she believed must be there. To add to the uncanniness, their own feet made no sound; for the jungle, where it was not bogged with holes, was soft as a carpet underfoot with thick layers of leaf-mold. In the eery twilight, it glowed here and there with the phosphorescence of decay.

IV

AT last they found themselves entirely out of the forest and on the lower edge of a tilted savannah, shoulder-high with prairie grass and flooded with glinting sunlight. From both sides the tall grass grew out over the path, and they hadn't

gone far when the recidivist called a halt. The sharp edges cut at his bare feet like knives, he complained. They went more slowly then in a world of whispering withes. They disturbed nothing save a flock of lively birds, dun-colored as sparrows.

Below the curiously weather-rounded top of the hill, the grass dwindled into scattered tufts and they came out between a few gaunt, deformed trees, hedged about by spiny bushes. Looking back, Heloise could see, through a swimming haze, the vast blue jungle below with its mirroring river and mysterious recesses; nearer at hand, the last of her sailors still coming up the path; and then a secondary movement in the grass caught her eye.

To one side of the path was a distinct, oncoming ripple as though a wind, which hadn't reached her yet, were approaching and waving and pressing back the lithe stems before its slim breath. But the thinness of that ripple, the absolute immobility of all else, made her realize the peculiar narrow track taken by the wind, if it was a wind . . . and she thought of men running, stooped and hidden, beneath those bending, gleaming grass-tops!

She turned, mute question in her eyes, a pinch of frightened color beating into her marble cheeks, to find the recidivist watching her. He nodded as if in answer to her unspoken query and, beneath the flapping brim of his straw hat, she saw one eyelid quiver in a meaning wink.

"Come, mademoiselle," he said as though nothing had passed between them. "From the crest above we can look down upon the whole works." And he started scrambling up the remainder of the rise.

Heloise, closely pressed by Freyling and the men, followed. They all came to a huddled standstill on the summit, as the recidivist pointed ahead and below.

Opposite them, on a slightly lower hill-top, stood a number of whitewashed buildings, one two-storied and rambling, the rest mere long low sheds extending out in a semicircle to either side. Off from the left wing of sheds, with a space intervening, was a cluster of grass-thatched and rounded huts.

Between the two hills, down and then up the valley thus exposed, ran row upon hedge-row of tall, green, willowy bushes. Where the orderly thickets began, just below the crest, they stood over her head in height; but as they marched in apparently converging files down the declivity, they seemed to shorten until, on the opposite slope, they looked no more than squat shrubs, flattened against the ground.

"Manioc bushes," explained the recidivist as they started down the hillside through an alley between two hedge-rows. "See, mademoiselle, those stems coming out of the ground as knotty and numerous as bamboo shoots? Well, from their long tuberous roots we make tapioca, bread and that epicurean sauce called cassareep. Also," in a whisper, his mouth twisting into that now familiar smile—"also strong drink, when Fougerat isn't looking!"

His lowered tone reminded her unpleasantly, and she attempted to peer through the tall thicket to one side. But the many close-set stocks were woven together and thick with palmated leaves that clutched and gripped one another like tiny hands. She could see nothing but an impenetrable wall of green.

"They could be in the alleys to either side and we'd never know," he told her, beneath his breath, in that odd rigid-jawed way he had at times. "But let's forget them in talking of something harmless; these manioc plants, for instance."

She nodded her assent. She could see from his eyes that he welcomed this opportunity to remove the wraps and speak freely.

"There are more hedge-rows beyond the compound over there," pointing to the white buildings. "Oh, hundreds of them! They extend all the way down the other side of that hill and then up again, just like this."

"Monsieur Fougerat must be quite a rich man," she thought it polite to say.

"Ah, indeed, you may well say so!" he agreed with what sounded like too-hearty enthusiasm. "And that's why he can afford to live, practically alone, in that big white house—"

"But his family?" she interrupted.

"Oh, they are scattered about the vaults— Pardon, mademoiselle. It's not a nice name, I know, but that's what we call some of the sheds, the ones we sleep in. You'll understand once you see them!"

CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE FAMILY

I

SHE failed to respond, to give in utterly, to this man's gloomy mood. Perhaps it was the sun-flooded appearance of those civilized dwellings after her night of jungle and terror; perhaps merely the conscious feeling of nearness to her father and her journey's end; in any case, she said almost gaily:

"Which do you mean to intimate is the more remarkable — Monsieur Fougerat's family or the sleeping-shed?"

She was successful. For the first time since she had met him, the recidivist laughed outright as though happy himself for the change of mood.

"Oh, both for that matter! But truly I meant the sleeping-sheds. Monsieur Fougerat's family?" with a shoulder shrug. "Well, you can see a few of them from here, crowding the doorway into *le centre de ventes de toutes natures*—that's a sort of misnomer we give the general store because you can buy so few things there and at such a price!

"But you begin to perceive, eh, mademoiselle?" he hurried on, although it was plain she wanted to speak, to ask something. "You begin to perceive that everything must have its wry name here—"

"A moment, please, monsieur! Do you mean by family, those men in blue and yellow gathered up there before that shed to the right?"

"*Certainement!* Those in blue jeans, with the beards and brogans which you cannot discern from here, are *libérés*. Those in yellow canvas, without shoes or hair on the face like myself, are"—with another shrug—"well, just like myself!"

"I—I don't understand."

"It is simple, very, mademoiselle. This being Sunday and the one day of rest in seven, all of Monsieur Fougerat's little family are clustered for the weekly gossip after *déjeuner* in the banquet hall. See, they're even overflowing out through the store."

"But you don't grasp what I mean! How can they all be Monsieur Fougerat's family?"

"Your pardon, mademoiselle; did I say all? My mistake. I forgot the black, woolly-headed members of the family in those huts off to the left. But then the mistake is but natural because the Canaques don't mix with the rest of the family."

"There! That's just it! You are continually speaking of these poor men and cannibal Canaques as the family. And I always thought monsieur's family would consist of a wife and children. Has Fougerat none of these at all?"

They had reached the bottom of the valley by then and he stopped shortly as if to allow her to catch her breath before beginning the climb to the compound. But really it was for another purpose. He peered in wonder at her from under his wide straw brim.

What he saw in her shadowed pools of eyes showed him she was serious. Her delicate texture of skin, evenly pale like ivory, added to the effect. She looked deadly serious, too serious. He attempted to hedge the issue.

"Certainly we've never seen any wife and children; but who knows?" with a shoulder shrug.

"You mean—" she began, clutching his arm, squeezing it unconsciously in the shock of her dismay.

An electric response leaped through his veins; he felt suddenly sorry for her. He knew he couldn't keep this knowledge from her. He said:

"There is no such thing as a family! It's only a nickname!"

II

HER hand dropped from his arm. Both those white distinguished hands went to her side and she stood rigidly erect,

her eyes closed and her lashes pressed in distinct black tendrils upon the ivory of her cheeks.

"Ah, mademoiselle!" he exclaimed, moved beyond himself. "I sympathize with you! It's an alarming, daunting discovery! But I thought—my many hints about the family—my constant allusions to the men, even the blacks! I thought you knew all along. Why, I recall now I even pointed it out indirectly to you when we first met—when I introduced myself as one of the family!"

She opened her eyes to show a pitiful, wounded look.

"I remember you did," she admitted, her voice low and dispirited. "Only I didn't realize at the time what you meant, what you were driving at. No, not till now!" And a slow tremor shook through her.

"Ah, it's hard to understand things here," she went on quaveringly. "It's all so topsy-turvy and different from what one expects. There's the trouble more than all else: what I expected, my preconceived conceptions. Yet they were no more than reasonable. When my father wrote about his friend, the *libéré*, it was always Monsieur Fougerat and his family. So I naturally inferred he meant a wife and children, if not grown sons and daughters."

"Naturally," he repeated after her in agreement. "But that was before you knew this land of the tragic nickname, where one says white when one means red. This is the island of pathetic farce, mademoiselle," shaking his straw-hatted head. "And the saddest object of laughter is its fundamental plan and impulse: colonization by convicts, peopling by penal slaves!"

But she hardly heard him.

"What I never conceived," she went on in remote tone, as though more to herself than to him, "what I never dreamed of was this—this—" And in her helplessness, she indicated the men clustered in the sunlight before the door of the shed above.

"This brood of jailbirds, eh, mademoiselle!" he finished for her. "Oh, you might as well say it, call a spade black. You can't hurt us; we're beyond the harm

of mere words! But here are the marines"—meaning the five sailors trooping down the slope—"so let's be going on."

She started up the alley between the hedging thickets in mute compliance, for her thoughts were elsewhere. She was mulling over what he had told her about "the family," and her greenish disturbed eyes kept swinging, in the white mask of her face, from him to those men above and back again, as though unable to concatenate the idea in her head. Then she found herself studying by turns each loiterer up in that compound—scrutinizing one after another carefully, probingly, with repressed excitement!

She realized, all at once, for whom she was searching. She stopped stockstill.

"But my father!" she burst out. "If this is a day of rest, as you say, my father should be up there among those men. Surely by now he knows I'm coming . . . Then why isn't he here? Why doesn't he come to greet us? What's holding him back?"

"Nothing, mademoiselle," he assured her. "Don't get hysterical, please! It's all right. Just let me explain."

She made an impatient gesture.

"No more!" she flared back at him, agitated to distraction. "I've listened and listened! Words, words! I can't stand more! My head's in a whirl!" And as abruptly as she had halted, she started on again, eluding his detaining hand and rushing on at a panicky speed.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

A HINT OF THE PAST

I

H E had to take long strides to catch up with her, to keep at her elbow.

"I must hurry, hurry!" she was repeating to herself.

"But there is no need!" he expostulated. "Your father is attached to Monsieur Fougerat's household; his duties do not end on Sunday. It's a signal honor, mademoiselle, or so we judge it. He's the only white man besides Fougerat who lives in

the house. The rest are Canaques, a specially picked handful, all deaf and dumb!"

She slackened her pace and they pressed up the slope then in silence, the while the recidivist rolled and lighted a cigarette. She, for her part, fell to scrutinizing the central two-storied, white building above.

It was no easy task in the now blinding sunlight; even beneath the shadow of her black hat, she had to screw up her eyes; but in no time at all and with the same intentness she once had studied those convict idlers, she was studying every visible aspect of the structure up to the peaked roof, quivering red in the heat waves—studying doors and particularly the double series of windows, as though trying to pierce the dazzling panes and see what lay behind.

"Why!" she exclaimed—"it's just like a *château*, that big white house! Like a country-house set complete and intact down here from France! See, it has the driveway circling from each side up to the portico in front. And long shiny windows with bits of iron-grille above the sills. And it's painted white, with green flung-back shutters—not as I thought, lime-washed like the sheds!"

"And inside it's like a *château en Espagne*!" he removed the cigarette to say softly. "Like a castle in Spain, a dream castle, mademoiselle, with its balustrades of *niaoulé*, its wainscotings of other polished hardwoods of the island, its paintings and draperies, and its domed cobalt-blue ceilings. Oh, Monsieur Fougerat is a rich man, as you've said!" with irony.

"But paintings?" and beneath the concave brim of her hat, she turned a white knuckled forehead to him. "Does he then import pictures into this island all the way from Europe?"

He shook his head, took another long drag at the cigarette, and with the smoke wreathing his tanned face, explained:

"There have been others beside Gauguin down in the South Seas and particularly on this island. Many an artist or student has got into scrapes in the cafés of the Quartier Latin—some affair of woman, or

maybe only a drunken fight with Apaches; but someone was killed and our artist joined us out here, a poor Russian or Swedish or Boer *déporté*! Fougerat has made a policy of hiring these fellows. He's got quite a collection of the paintings they've produced between spells in the manioc fields."

II

SHE was thinking: Could it be the history of these exiled painters was but the story of his own life and fall? All along she had fairly itched to question this stalwart fellow with the chestnut hair scorched to copper; but she had refrained not alone through lack of encouragement, but more because of innate tact and a welling up of pity for him within herself. Why, she didn't know his name, come to think of it, nor even his nickname!

But now, in this little account, it seemed all constructed before her. He'd been a painter in Paris. But perhaps not a full-fledged painter; he looked too young; probably only a student at the Beaux Arts or Julien's. His choice of words and his manners were certainly those of an educated man; they had puzzled her from the start; and from the very start, also, his accent had struck her as a bit odd.

She had it now. With those blue eyes, that throaty accent, his undoubted knowledge of English, he must be—he was an American!

She turned to him, her brows lifted quizzically in the shadow of her hat.

"From North America, the United States, is it not so?"

Her words were in immediate pursuance of her thought; but had she been concerned to make them cryptic so those others, who might be about, wouldn't understand, she couldn't have succeeded better.

Yet he didn't start. The cigarette was pasted to his lower lip and he merely took a deep puff. Then removing the fag, he shot out the smoke through the round O of his lips and, as if he hadn't heard her, indicated something ahead with the flaming butt.

"The front door," he said quietly. "See, it is opening. Someone's coming out to greet us. Fougerat or perhaps your father."

That was all she needed to divert her attention—to triple the beat of her heart and cause her to strain her eyes. The slant rays of the morning sun struck between the white pillars of the portico, and the glass upper-half of the opening door was like a heliograph with the different refractions it gave off as it swung inward.

A man appeared. But instead of following around the driveway, he came out through the pillars and bounded down the dozen stairs. He was a small, woolly-headed and almost naked black man. So diminutively small in fact, crouched and running as he was, he looked like a ball of gutta-percha rolling down the steps and ricocheting across the shimmering white compound.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in shocked disappointment, for truly she had expected her father. As the recidivist didn't pause or even offer to explain, she edged a trifle closer to him as they continued on. This was her first sight of one of the cannibal deaf-mutes.

Arose a shout from the men clustered about the doorway of the general store and, as though spectators at a race, they laughed and nudged one another and flung ribald cries at the black. He barked some savage rejoinder over his shoulder and held on across the compound. It was plain by now he was making for the alley up which Heloise and her little party were progressing.

"It's Tui Manu-mita," gave out the recidivist, and he took a puff at the cigarette as though in relief. "See," he went on, "you can catch the glint of the spectacles in his kinky mop of hair. There's where he wears his specs most of the time—slung from his ears across the top of his head. And that is what's given him his name of Many Eyes, and a certain ascendancy over the rest of the blacks. He's hetman of that native village up there and chief of the house boys—"

"But he can speak! I heard him shout

something at those men. And I thought you said they were all deaf-mutes, the house boys."

"It's true," he nodded, "with him as the sole exception. That's another reason why he's the boss boy. But I wonder what he's up to, what's bringing him here."

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

MANY EYES

I

SHE could get a better look at the Canaque as, entering the alleyway, he came into the screened softer light between the tall bushes. He looked, she thought, like one of those charcoal caricatures of men which children draw, with round fat belly and sticks of limbs. Only he was an animated caricature.

A piece of bright calico was twisted about his middle and his left ear seemed abnormally large and misshapen, flapping visibly with his bobbing movements. As he padded swiftly nearer on his black feet, she saw that it was no part of his ear at all which was flapping like a broken wing, but a blackened clay pipe struck through the monstrously enlarged lobe!

Panting, he brought up to a standstill before them. He stared sullenly from under bulging brows and kinky mop of hair; he had no forehead. While he caught his breath sufficiently to speak, his round black belly went in and out like a bellows. The exposed and fluttering navel was a peculiar shock to Heloise; the small, bright eyes reminded her vividly of a wild animal's, as they darted from the guide to her and stopped, glowering at her with the steady, shuddersome beadiness of a snake's!

"Me got *kuroi*," he barked in a mixture of Canaque and atrocious French, and nodding at Heloise, he removed his quick eyes back to the recidivist. She sensed he had said something about her. "You belong along *mata-sabo mara*," indicating with one black hand the sailors coming up behind. "Belong along Le Boucher. Big white, tui, he tell along me."

"*Rai!*" said the recidivist in the same

guttural patois. He nodded as if in assent. Then he slued round to interpret the message to her:

"Manu-mita says you are to go with him, mademoiselle, and that I am to take the foreign men, meaning the marines, up to the Butcher who has charge of the sleeping-sheds—"

"But I don't like these arrangements, this separation," she objected weakly. "Do you trust his word?" with a slight, almost imperceptible nod toward the scowling Canaque. She saw, in that swift movement, that the little black man was gazing hungrily at the cigarette in the guide's hand, his black eyes glowing like polished buttons.

"He's only carrying out monsieur's orders," explained the recidivist. "Fougerat is the big white chief he speaks of. So I guess we can't do otherwise than obey."

He swung back to the Canaque. But before his gaze had left her, she had seen a shadow of suspicion flit across his blue eyes.

"What's the matter, Manu-mita!" he exclaimed in the dialect. "What are you puffing so hard about? Does a little run, like this stretch, wind you so much? Or is it, *sacrebleu*, that you have run much farther! Why, you're sweating all over!"

She would never have known it, had he not run his right hand quickly over the other's shoulder and snapped off a spray of moisture. For the Canaque was black in a different way than a negro. The perspiration lent no sheen to his skin. It was like soot, thick as though of many layers, as though extending right through, and blacker than ink or tar, dull black as charcoal.

"Me *kani-lam*," and the Canaque rubbed his round, puffing diaphragm in obvious pantomime: He had just eaten and was accordingly heavy and short of breath.

But the recidivist was not satisfied.

"Look here, tui," he persisted. "Your legs are all scratched up. How come?"

The scowl deepened on the simous black face. He fidgeted from one flat foot to the other, the wide-spread toes working nervously. They were long, those toes, as

a monkey's or the fingers of misplaced hands.

"Woman belong me!" he barked in native. "Alcool too much last night and she scratch!"

"Well, that's a nice reputation to give yourself and frau," chuckled the recidivist, but mirthlessly and more as if in explanation to Heloise. "So you were drunk last night and your wife turned on you, eh? Well, run along, tui, till we reach the head of this alley. Then I'll give mademoiselle over to your escort."

The diminutive fellow was not to be thus blarneyed. He stood his ground, his prognathous jaw shooting forward and up like a bull-dog's.

"Me got woman," he nodded toward the girl, speaking like a child that has learned some lesson by rote. "You belong along foreign men. Belong along the Butcher. Big white chief, Fooferat—"

"Oh, all right; that's enough!" And to hush him up, the recidivist lifted his left hand, with the cigarette still smoking between the fingers.

There was no mistaking the hungry following leap of those black buttons of eyes. It didn't elude the recidivist. It gave him a swift inspiration.

"Ah, you see, tui! Here I've been saving this cigarette all along for you!" And he offered him the butt.

The Canaque grabbed the cigarette like a monkey reaching for a peanut. Then puffing prodigiously and in imminent risk, Heloise thought, of burning his thick protruding lips on the short butt, he veered round on greased heels and walked on.

II

THE recidivist appeared to wait until 'Many Eyes was as far ahead as the sailors were behind, a good ten paces and beyond earshot. Then, following at slower gait, he asked quickly in bated voice:

"You perceive what has happened, mademoiselle? That excuse of his about just having eaten, of his wife scratching him, is mere camouflage! He got those cuts on the legs from the saw-edges of the grass in

paralleling us across the savannah! I said they were about us, you recall; now I'm sure. But they haven't been trailing us since we entered this manioc grove. *Dieu*, I wish I'd known that! I could have told you much—"

"But where did they go, monsieur, disappear to?" in similar low tone.

"Oh, they swung off just beyond the summit of the hill, I imagine, so the fellows up there in the compound wouldn't glimpse them trailing us. But Fougerat must have been with them, as I thought. He sent this Canaque running ahead to delay us a few minutes in order to allow himself time to circle round and enter the house from the rear. That black has loped quite a distance, or I miss my guess! Else, why should he pant like that and be so all-over sweaty!"

"But why?" she asked. "Why all this trailing and spying upon us? What more could you have told me? Monsieur," grabbing his arm, "there's no one near now! Tell me, quickly!"

Again that electric response shot through his veins and in a surprising tumult, he was aware only of a sharp recognized happiness at having her hand on his arm. He forgot what she had asked. He was in a swirl of unaccustomed feelings.

He looked at her under the veiling mushroom brim and the fine, white texture of her skin, the delicate contrast and aroma of her dark lustrous hair, combined in his mind to give her a flower-like quality. Swiftly his mind made lyric connotations. She was like a pale gardenia. Like, in this forbidding setting, a waxy cereus blooming in the threatening dark. If only he could aid her before she came to any harm!

He felt suddenly impotent against the tyranny of his own situation there, her evident and pitiable helplessness. For she was asking brokenly, shaking his arm, her pallid face wretched: "Monsieur, monsieur! Won't you tell me, won't you—"

His emotion disappeared before the significance of what he was about to reveal.

"There's only this to be said, mademoiselle. Since your father has become attached to the household staff, we've seen

little of him, but that little has worried us—he's changed so much! When he was working in the fields, he was healthy, robust. When he entered the house service, one short month ago, his hair was grizzled a strong iron-gray. Yesterday, when I saw him last, his hair was white—"

"White?"—icily.

"Snow-white, mademoiselle. And he walked with a cane like a doddering old man! Something's up! What it is, I can't tell, I don't know. Yet from the very first, on this account, I tried to dissuade you from coming. Now you're here, no matter what happens, remember I'm your friend. Call on me at your need. I'll do all possible for you, though I fear I can't accomplish much. For I, too, am under surveillance and restraint; I'm only a convict worker here. But there's one thing more—"

"Yes, yes; what is it? Quick, for here comes the Canaque back!"

"Get away as soon as you can! With your father, if you're able; without him, if absolutely necessary; but at all events—"

"Smoke him *mate*," interrupted the harsh gutturals of the Canaque. "Talk along you, him dead, too!"

He was facing them with all his old sullenness, calling quits to their brief moment of freedom. The cigarette was finished; therefore their talk must end as well. It was a primitive yet fair exchange.

Heloise looked at the recidivist out of misted, distressful eyes and he swept off his straw hat and bowed low. Then he motioned the black to lead her on, while he waited for the sailors to come up.

BOOK TWO: MANIOC MANOR

CHAPTER THE FIRST

MONSIEUR FOUGERAT

I

LONG before Heloise had realized that, already in her mind's eye, she had formed a picture of Monsieur Fougerat. But it wasn't that her subconscious had been bothered with how he might dress or really look. It was rather that some as-

sociation from his name, or his former pursuits as an apache, had made her conceive him as small, nervous, quick, excessively quick like—yes, that was it—like a rat!

Therefore as she stood in the huge vestibule with the domed cobalt-blue ceiling far above, the polished balustrades of the second story framing three sides next below and the wide, hardwood staircase sweeping down to her feet, she couldn't believe this was he—this great awkward bulk of a man, over six feet tall, coming toward her with ponderous slowness and scraping sound, out of some dim recess beneath the stairs. He looked like a country bumpkin, a huge and simple lout of a fellow!

There was the ruddy flush and swollen curve of apples in his cheeks, which seemed only the more to add to the depth in which his eyes were set—twinkling, little, washed-out, gray eyes. His arms were long and dangled down into hands that were as red and big, yes, and as clumsy as hams. And for a man built on such a large if disproportionate scale—his body seeming more obese than symmetrically muscular—he had an unusually small mouth. It looked indeed as if drawn tight through lack of teeth, or the poor fit of false plates: a thin, pale-lipped, crinkled, dry mouth which he continually wetted as he came toward her and kept set in the mold of a hypocritical smile.

His legs were so fat they appeared pressed together and, as he approached, there was that constant scraping sound from one blue-jean trouser rubbing against the other. For to cap it all, he was dressed like a farmhand—had she but known it, in the identical garb all *libérés* are given when their initial sentence is up: a suit of shoddy blue jeans, heavy brogans and a slouch felt hat which, apparently forgotten here indoors, he still wore atop his bulbous head.

But he hadn't forgotten. As he drew nearer with that frictional scrape-scape, he removed the clownish chapeau with his left hand, while with the other—as red as though scalded—he reached out to take her fingers in a gesture of friendliness.

She couldn't control the shudder that shook through her at the feel of his hand.

It was not alone that the palm was slightly and coldly moist, but more that the back, where the ends of her long fingers reached, seemed dry, parched and as coarse-grained as burlap or sandpaper; a pachydermatous covering like the hide of some thick beast, an elephant or rhinoceros, slow to feel, lowly sensitized, indifferent to most normal feelings. Yet the handshake was surprisingly weak.

"Ah, Mam'selle Delecluse, you've come at last; I'm so glad!"

His voice was a distinct shock: high-pitched, faint, almost squeaky. Whatever she replied, she could never recall afterward. For something was bothering her far back in her head: a dim recollection of a story or myth she once had read about a rat who had become an elephant in everything but voice and that was thin and squeally, just like Fougerat's!

The chances were she had mixed up the idea from some jumbled remembrance of La Fontaine's fables. But she didn't realize this. Her brains were whirling, thinking, thinking, in spurts and flashes. . . . Why didn't he wear a mustache to cover that false smiling mouth? . . . It was allowed *libérés*, the guide had said. . . . Oh, why hadn't he come in here with her! . . . An American, this recidivist, like Freyling. . . . Two good men. . . . She'd feel safer with either along. . . . They seemed to be so strong, so determined!

Who could have been the bungler of a dentist? . . . Yet it wasn't merely that; there was something else and unpleasant about Fougerat's mouth. . . . No, not the everlasting moistening by the red tongue. . . . Something feminine. . . . It was too small. . . . And there were many tiny wrinkles crinkling it still more . . . withering it . . . like an old woman's! . . . Cunning, crafty, sly as a cat's. . . . And he licked his lips like a cat! . . . Weak and yet cruel. . . . Weak as that handshake had been, cruel as those hands could be. . . . Hands of an apache. . . . Garroting hands! . . . She imagined what they would feel like about her neck . . . throttling her from behind. . . . It was as though liquid fire were being poured down her throat . . . stifling her. . . .

What a most queer sensation it was to faint!

II

WHEN she came to consciousness, Heloise found she was stretched out, sputtering and gasping, upon a *chaise longue* which appeared to have been dragged out of nowhere for her sudden requirement here in the vestibule. Fougerat was bending over her, a clownish concern stamped on his face, while Many Eyes stood at his elbow like a dwarfed shadow, holding a partially filled glass of water which, she realized, she must have been drinking from the drowning sensation still constricting her throat.

"You feel better now, mam'selle?"

She attempted to nod; but her head rolled weakly from side to side on the cushions, making her aware that her hat was gone.

"What happened?" she breathed. . . . Those were not cushions beneath her head, she swiftly realized. It was her own soft hair which had come undone and fallen about her neck. Black as ebony and as glossy, it framed her white face, could she have seen herself, like a cameo.

"Oh, mam'selle fainted and we put her here. Perhaps it is the weakness from hunger, what? Shall I tell Manu-mita to fetch you something?"

She lifted herself up.

"No, no, monsieur; I'm simply overcome with excitement, nervousness. My father, where is he? He should be here! Tell him—no, let me go to him!"

Fougerat backed away from her as, getting afoot, she smoothed out her black coat with nervous fingers. His tiny, washed-out, gray eyes appeared to study her craftily. Perhaps, however, his narrow look was but a judicious scrutinizing to determine whether she was strong enough to stand and walk. He replied hesitatingly and in that always surprising voice:

"The Ministre Delecluse is up in his room, mam'selle."

"Not sick?" with sudden fear.

"*Tiens*, no! This is but early morning, Sunday morning, mam'selle, and your

father is still sleeping."

She stopped in the act of tossing back her hair—both white arms lifted and crooked behind her—to stare at him in commingled amazement and unbelief.

"But yes," he returned to her skeptic expression; "it is true of true! Oh, he's not the Prince de Quelque Chose for nothing! He's got a soft berth and easy time with his good friend, Fougerat. But then, what would you, mam'selle?" leaning toward her in an awkward bow and spreading his huge red bloated hands. "He's an old man, and one would have little left him in this world if he forgot all respect for his elders!"

She passed over the ingratiating hypocrisy in that wheedling high voice, that smiling shriveled mouth.

"May I see him?" she asked and both the calmness of her tone and the nature of her request sounded strange to her. It seemed as though this elephantine man, like everyone else, was bent on keeping her from her father, blocking her with his mountain of flesh. He didn't appear to realize she had come over the rim of the globe just for this moment!

"Follow me, ma'm," he said in sudden capitulation. He turned on his heel and, exposing the drawn back of his blue blouse strained over the pudgy shoulders, led the way up the central staircase, his shoddy trousers scraping dully against one another.

III

AT the first landing where the staircase branched up to right and left against the wall, she faced the canvas of an immense mural painting. It depicted a riverscape with the palisading jungle standing out like cardboard scenery in the white sunlight, and a trio of blunt-nosed barges drifting down the placid stream laden with glinting gold ore and steered by men in yellow uniforms leaning on long sweeps.

On a spit of sand under a tree bulked the clumsy frame and humpkin face of Fougerat. Beside him stood a smaller man, pointing to the nearest of the oncoming barges. A thick, black, six-inch sole on

one shoe, like an attached box, lifted his shoulders to equal level. He was garbed like Fougerat in the Prussian-blue of jeans, but unlike monsieur he sported a black luxuriant mustache. This appeared attempting to hide a full mouth, but unsuccessfully; for the thick lips protruded in such wise as to remind her of Many Eyes and were as moist and red as a wound! Instinctively she experienced a dislike for that club-footed man.

They entered a wide corridor at the head of the staircase. It was dark here; there were no skylights in the roof, perhaps to sacrifice light for the sake of coolness. But she became aware of draperies softly gleaming at spaced intervals on either hand and serving, she surmised, as portières covering doorways.

The clink of metal rings being run back on a pole apprised her—for she couldn't see him—that Fougerat had halted and jerked back the tapestry screening one of these doorways. She walked in the direction of the sound.

"Ssh!" he whispered and so close to her ear, she started back in fright. "He's still sleeping, probably. So don't knock, just surprise him. The door's unlocked."

She followed his suggestion though she'd have much preferred to knock. It wasn't wise to startle her father; he was getting old, they all had said. But neither was it wise nor a bit pleasant to argue with that mastodon of a Fougerat in the pitchy dark of the hall.

She turned the knob, swung the door in. She found herself on the threshold of a large room, with a domed cobalt-blue ceiling like that of the vestibule only on a greatly diminished scale. There were more paintings about the walls, two cane chairs and, in the far end, a low four-poster bed beneath a small barred window.

She made out her father still in bed and fast asleep. The bedclothes shaped his body and his head was visible on the pillow. He wasn't turned toward her, however; he appeared to be lying on his back; but she couldn't be sure, she could hardly see for the tears that suddenly started in her eyes.

"Papa!" she breathed in the universal language of childhood, and she glided swiftly toward him. "It's Heloise!"

There was no movement, no turn of the head; and she paused in mid-room, she knew not why. Perhaps to lessen the surprise, to catch the note of his breathing. She heard, instead, the voice of Fougerat like a shrill whistling:

"Go on, mam'selle! Call him again. He's getting old and sleeps heavy."

Almost deliberately and for some reason deeper than her conscious self, she swung her head to look back at the vast bulk of man filling the doorway, his gimlet eyes twinkling on her narrowly. And abruptly, as she looked at him, her own eyes seemed to clear of their mist of tears. The diamond-drizzle fled, the filmy curtain lifted; and so, when she turned again to that immobile figure on the bed, she was startled to see, for the very first time, that his hair was black, black as her own!

Yet the guide had said it had whitened in a month, blanched to the color of snow! Just a moment gone, too, Fougerat had whispered he was old, so old he slept heavily!

She raced to the bed and still she knew, before she reached it, what she would find. Surely enough! His eyes were stark staring open. They were glazed in the unmistakable sleep of death!

IV

NOW that it faced her, she was suddenly aware she had feared this all along. She had hoped too high . . . and it was so like her poor little father to die just on the threshold of happiness. He had lived a tragedy; surely in dying he could not escape the pathos of his rôle. But after all her journeyings and efforts and hazards run! Yet it might be precisely that—the risks, the imagined dangers far worse than the real, and the long anxious wait which had proved too much for him. Ah, no! The very anxiety and anticipation, buoyed by sublime hope, would have kept him up, if for no longer than to witness her arrival.

But dead overnight! For hadn't the American said he had seen her father alive only yesterday? Then it was true: dead overnight! He had been killed, murdered in his bed!

"What's the matter?" came in that squeaky high voice from the doorway.

It brought her out of the semi-stupor. She swung about, drawn up to her full height, a tower of ivory, outraged, defiant.

"Oh, you know! You know what's the matter! You killed him! Yes, you, you mountain of flesh, you monstrous brute!" And she sprang toward him, aroused, revengeful, her white delicate hands out and working before her.

With astonishing agility for so huge a man, he leaped back into the darkness of the hall and jerked the tapestry across the doorway between them. He was a coward after all, was her impression; just as his tiny, falsely smiling mouth had proclaimed! And she tore at the drapery to pull it down from the rod, out of her way.

But he was holding onto the edges on either side, drawing it tight as a drum across the doorway. And he was pleading with her. But not in his former squeaky voice. He was whimpering like a creature strangely beset:

"Don't, mam'selle! Don't force me, don't start me, for I can't stop. Oh, you don't know what you do, calling me names, but there is something bad inside me and it'll come over me and then I can't, I can't stop! And I don't want to hurt you, mam'selle! You're soft and pretty—oh, so very soft and pretty! Please don't call me names! Please, don't, mam'selle, please, please!" The whimper broke on a sobbing note.

A fear such as she never before had felt in her life—a fear of the nameless and the insane—chilled her heart, turned her blood to ice. Only by hanging onto the inswung door did she manage to hold herself up. With heroic effort she started the door to closing and then her lax body, weighing against it, slammed it shut. Somehow she felt for the key; it was on her side in the lock; and she turned it with a click that sounded loud as a tocsin in her ears.

She was safe. Yes, safer in that room with her dead than she would have been out in the hall. She listened.

She heard the unnatural sobbing ebb to a moan. Then she caught the dull scrape-scraps of his blue-jean trousers as he walked off—softer, softer—gone! She slipped down against the door in a little broken huddle.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

A PARAGRAPH

I

IT was the afternoon sunlight stealing between the bars of the narrow window, perhaps, which aroused her. She came to consciousness slowly, as though from a vast depth and beneath a downpressing medium, like a swimmer breasting up through fathoms-deep of water. Ere she knew why she should be weeping, she found herself doing just that, softly but freely. Yet she felt better for the cry, clearer visioned and strangely relieved.

Shaken by repressed spasmodic gulps, she got to her feet. Now that she knew, she no longer wanted to stay in that room with the dead, in that house with the mad! She found the knob, turned it; but the door refused to budge. She recalled that she had locked it when Fougerat was whimpering and sobbing on the other side.

She listened. There was no sound. Stealthily, with a cunning that in itself was not quite normal, she pressed the key. The responding click struck so sharply in her ears, she leaped back, her hand jerking the knob.

But the door didn't open. It was barred, apparently, from the outside. Yet she couldn't remember hearing any slither of a bolt being shot. It had been done while she had been unconscious, no doubt.

And she wanted to get out of the room, clear of the whole house! She wanted to see the recidivist, the American, him of the coppery hair. He had warned her and so he would understand. He had told her to call on him at need and God knows, she needed him now!

She was rapidly vaulting into an overtaxed state. She raced from the door, past the sun-grilled bed, up to the narrow window. There was no pane of glass, only close-set bars, and the aperture was so deep on account of the unusual thickness of the wall, it was more like an embrasure. She had to get on tiptoe to press her head against the irons.

She could see out then. She looked down into a sun-flooded court, a semi-patio, enclosed on two sides by the jutting wings of the house but opened to the rear directly opposite her. She could gain a vista this way of a descending grove of manioc bushes, a silvery filament of brook down in the depression of valley and beyond, some softly rounded hills all streaked with more files of bushes.

The court itself was paved with stones of the shape and complexion of kidneys. Grass sprouted between and the afternoon sun steamed on the pavement, filling the ambient with a quivering visible haze. Discernible in this and seemingly enlarged by it, quivering himself like a huge jelly, was Fougerat!

He was sitting in the full beat of sun in a long cane chair. His soft felt hat was slouched over his face, hiding it from her but exposing a segment of colorless hair. His fat blue-trousered legs were asprawl on the extension of the steamer chair, and his bloated hands lay flabbily in his lap as if he were asleep.

II

HELOISE drew quickly back lest he might be feigning and see her. But the sight of him had rather calmed her. At least, he wasn't in the house with her. She ran back to the door, swung the key. She was doubly locked in now and she felt easier for that fact.

She found herself, thereupon, being drawn reluctantly toward the low white bed. As she perceived this, she nerved herself for the ordeal by accusing herself of filial forgetfulness. In her anxiety for her own self, she had forgotten her poor old father, so still there, but at peace!

She slumped rather than sat down upon the low stool beside the bed and in an icy passivity, due partially to exhaustion, she studied the sculptural head upon the pillow. How thin and worn he looked! The skin was stretched so tightly over the fine sensitive nose, it seemed as if the bridge must surely break through. But perhaps it was some strain which had drawn skin and face that way. Perhaps, right to the end, he had been bodily vigorous and had fought strenuously against his final extinguishment.

Then what could have killed him? She found herself studying her hands in her lap with downcast eyes. She knew the answer, and she couldn't bear to look at him with the gruesome thought in mind. It was Fougerat, of course; there could be no doubt of that! She didn't care, just then, to think of the means he had used.

But really her poor little father had died of a blind trust in men, the wrong men, just as his downfall and doom had been written through the same fundamental reason. It was his outstanding trait to seek and perceive only the best in men. And thus must he have done with Fougerat. He had overlooked his past as an apache, thought of him simply as a friend, the finest sort of friend—a friend in his need!

And why not? He himself had been guiltless of crime and therefore had he believed all other men in this fatal land to be as blameless, more the victims of circumstances than of any evil in themselves. True, he had helped negotiate as an associate of the Minister of Finance that last loan to the Imperial Russian Government; but then how could he have been expected to know, when all the world was ignorant, that the Czar was to be dethroned and killed, that the Soviets, who were to succeed to power, would refuse to pay or even acknowledge the debt?

The absurdity of the charges! That he was a radical linked, in the principles of Marx and Proudhon, with the communists of Russia. That, in other words, he had negotiated the loan expressly to give the Czar all the rope possible to hang himself, to show forth his extravagance and thus

rouse the people for the eventual triumph of the Third Internationale!

It wasn't enough that, by right of interpellation, both chambers of the French House had put her father's act to a vote which entailed, finally, the renouncing of his position. It wasn't even enough that the premier and his whole cabinet should go out, forced to resign as a result of that vote. The French peasants wanted a sacrifice in flesh and blood for their lost sous and francs, and the Ministre Delecluse had been made the scapegoat.

He had been sent to Nouméa, here in Nouvelle Calédonie, as a transporté. The sentence was for seven years at travaux forcés, but it might as well have been "to perpetuity." Minister Delecluse was, at the time, no longer a young man and should he stand the rigors of those seven years, there were as many more which he must serve as a *libéré* before he could earn, in that land of cheap life and cheaper labor, his own passage and permit home.

Indeed, had Heloise known what she had learned in this one day, she would have come sooner. But she had been young; she had never thought of her father as guilty; and therefore, high-heartedly, she had petitioned again and again for a new trial, finally appealing in person with entreaty and influence for a pardon.

At long last, her eyes had been opened and she had become aware of the cold-bloodedness of politics. The party in power had knowingly and wilfully sacrificed her father to quiet the clamorings of the robbed peasants, and that party didn't intend, at this late stage, to weaken its prestige by admitting the mistake and righting an old wrong.

When she had come of age, four months prior, she had inherited the dowry her mother had brought when she had married and which her father had secured to Heloise when she was born. For, despite all stories to the contrary, Minister Delecluse had been in his own right but a poor man. With this dowry, Heloise had sailed from France for Sydney and there, upon personal investigation, she had learned enough of Captain Kitts to judge him the

man for her purpose. At an excessive price, on account of the risk entailed, she had chartered his schooner to run the gantlet of New Caledonia.

III

SHE was startled to find that, in the midst of her musing, she was studying the white counterpane where it bordered on the neck. No, not the counterpane but the hollow neck itself. Looking for marks of discoloration, for signs of fingerprints, for the telltale evidence of those hands which had stifled the spark of life; garrotting hands, the hands of an apache—those great, red hams of hands of Fougerat!

But there was no sign, only that straining chiseled on the face. She gave a last lingering touch to the incongruous black hair, brushing it back softly. It was useless, she knew, to try to close the eyes; they were beginning to haunt her with their glassy stare. She rose up and lifted the sheet to cover them.

She became aware, as she did so, of two things simultaneously. One of her hands was discolored black and, in moving the coverlet, she had started a rustle as of paper. With the clean hand, she felt for and found the paper. It proved to be a Paris art journal of ancient date, creased open at a certain page as if her father had been in the act of reading it when death so suddenly had stalked upon him.

She dropped the magazine to the floor, after a cursory glance, and fell to examining her hand. She rubbed the blackened palm against her silk cloak and it came back almost cleaned of the maculation. But where had the stain come from in the first place? She remembered she had brushed her father's hair with that hand. And his hair, by all the evidences of age in his face, upon the word of the American, should have been white! She realized then. His hair had been dyed! Dyed so recently it hadn't yet dried and some of the lampblack had come off on her hand!

She sat suddenly down again upon the tabouret. Now, what did this mean? That after her father had succumbed, his hair

had been dyed? Why? For what reason?

Studying, puzzling it over, her greenish-gray eyes roved about and then down to the art journal at her feet. She picked this up, but listlessly. It was all too much for her! And then she found herself reading the page which had last been read by her father. There could be no doubt about this, for the opposite sheet was given over entirely to advertisements.

It was labeled "The Doings of Palette and Brush in New York." And she read with languid indifference for want of anything else to do:

"Perhaps the thrill that a visit to the Wildenstein Galleries always gives me is a danger sign that second childhood is upon me. Of this much I am sure—whenever my pulse ceases to be stimulated by argument with a traffic cop or jay-walking across Fifth Avenue, all that is necessary is for me to drop in Wildenstein's, enter the elevator and be raised gently to the gallery floor and then pass through that remarkable door which, when it swings noiselessly shut behind you, becomes a perfectly good and apparently solid wall once again—panel mouldings and all. Immediately I am transformed into a masculine 'Alice-through-the-looking-glass' craving romance and adventure" . . .

IV

SO much Heloise read without distinct impression, her mind a blank to any particular feature save a feeling of surprise that the stilted English hadn't incorporated the word "lift" for elevator. But perhaps she should have felt thankful to the insincere reviewer with his florid mannerisms, for *something other and beyond the printed words had impinged, through the reading, upon her brain.*

She found herself listening for a repetition of the sound. It came again, repeated dully, as though someone far off were approaching along the corridor. . . .

She darted round the bed to the embrasure, got a-tiptoe, peered down through the bars and shaking heat-waves upon the court. Fougerat was gone! Where he had been sitting was now in shadow. He must have returned into the manor-house, was even then advancing along the hall!

But as she made to turn away, she spied Monsieur Fougerat below in full sunlight and asprawl in the cane chair, apparently asleep. He had merely moved to keep in the changing play of the dropping sun.

If not Fougerat, then who could it be; and swiftly her mind enumerated the possibilities. The American? Freyling or one of his men? Perhaps; for with Fougerat sunning himself there on the kidney stones, some one of them might have stolen past Many Eyes on guard downstairs.

She drew close to the door. If it was the recidivist or one of the sailors, how would he know in which room she was? He might walk past unaware! She put her hand to the key, then recollected the door was bolted also from the outside. Well, when he came nearer, she would rattle the knob to attract attention.

But how, beforehand, could she make sure who it was? She pressed her knitted forehead against the panels and concentrated all her faculties on listening. The footfalls were growing louder, nearer, more distinct. And their very distinctness showed a subtle dissimilarity. They were not an even beat. They were irregular in sound, now loud, then so faint as to be barely heard: stump, pat, stump, pat!

She thought for a breath that the man might be running with a loping, uneven gait. But the tempo wasn't so fast; it was slow as a dragging walk. That was it, dragging. It was as if the someone approaching were crippled and walking on limbs of unequal weight, one heavy, one light: stump, pat, stump, pat!

She didn't know what to think, but quickly she realized this eliminated all hope of her desired possibilities. None of her friends, neither American nor one of the sailors, would make such a sound. Then who could it be? One of the blacks? Some limping deaf-mute she hadn't yet seen? But they went barefooted, she remembered; with soft flopping sound. This was a hard beat, as though made by legs of different length, one short, one long: stump, pat, stump, pat!

A vague notion was stirring and yeasting through the strata of her subconscious, a blurred visual imprint received and temporarily shelved. She sensed a dim unpleasantness associated with it, but remotely as though it were less than an experience, more the result of an impression.

Ah, she had it. The mural painting, the man with the clubfoot! It was he who was hopping and hitching along the hall!

V

SHE breathed a prayer that he might pass by. But no! The uneven sound halted; came the metallic clink of the portière-rings; and the door shook to a repeated thudding knock. It was as if he had kicked twice at the panels with his six-inch sole!

"Who's there?" was wrenched from her in English. Perhaps she thought thus to confound and thwart him; to gain time. More likely it was that, with her first hope of her friends, she had made up her mind to say these words and in the excitement of the moment, her brain forgot to translate and change.

She drew back at the response of his voice. An oily voice and so close, it seemed almost as if his moist red lips, which she recalled vividly, were pressed to the panel on the opposite side. Most upsetting, however, was the fact that he answered in English.

"The doctor," was what he returned. "Would you kindly open the door, Miss Delecluse?"

"What do you want?"

"Want? Nothing, Miss. I'm here at your service to examine your father and determine, if I can, the cause of his sudden demise. It was shockingly sudden—the poor Minister Delecluse—I sympathize with you, his daughter! But would you mind unlocking the door, Miss Delecluse, so we can get to some understanding of this deplorable business?"

"Eet is bolted on the outside, your side," she further temporized, with her peculiar accent of certain English words. She made no move to turn the key. She

hardly heard the slither of the bolt as he withdrew it, so engrossed was she in mental quest.

Who was it, she asked herself, whom the recidivist had said spoke English? The one he had been afraid might overhear, should he use that language? No, not the doctor. Yet it was something similar, a nickname linked with some profession or—or trade! That was it: *Le Boucher!* And to show how swiftly she was learning the paradoxical ways of the colony, she immediately perceived that this doctor of the clubfoot was none other than the one nicknamed the Butcher!

She turned the key.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE BUTCHER

I

HE was the clubfoot man of the mural painting, surely enough. He was bowing to her from the threshold with a dignity that seemed excessive in one so short and stout, his chest swelled like a bantam's and his right hand squelching his slouch hat beneath his heart in a theatric gesture. He was dressed in the blue jeans of the *libéré*.

Oddly he reminded her of certain French presidents; Poincaré, for one, and a remembered photograph of Thiers. But not that he looked so old a man. His hair and mustache were luxuriant and black, glossily black as though from the diligent application of pomades. It was rather that his squatness of stature lent an air of exaggeration, as if he felt himself to be quite an important personage in this world.

Which Heloise didn't doubt he was, being probably the sole doctor. But the only professional touch was in the small leather kit dangling from his left hand. Had he affected a boutonnière instead, she believed she would have surmised he was a doctor from his soft, white, pudgy hands. They were like an advertisement and sign-manual of his profession. Beneath their apparent softness, she felt intuitively, was a sinewy, tensile strength.

"A sorry trade, this of mine," he apologized in English, yet with a Gallic twist. And he stumped past her into the room, rigid as a soldier—a rigidity due to his effort to walk square upon both feet, bearing as heavily on the sound limb as the raised short one.

"Shall I wait outside?"

"In the corridor, if you please, Miss Delecluse." And he accompanied the reply with another low bow that showed the thin white line of part down the geometrical center of his peculiarly flat-topped head. "When I'm ready to report, I'll call you."

Heloise was like a prisoner willing to change cells for the mere sake of the change. So glad was she to leave the confinement of that ghastly room she felt no longer repelled by the gloom of the hall. Up and down near the door she paced, subtly aware that he would be harkening to her footsteps lest she might try to steal away.

She had detected the sharp, unmistakable odor of hair-tonic, as the doctor had brushed past her into the room, and out here in the corridor, the ambient darkness seemed permeated with the perfume. What a dandy he was, she thought, despite the shapelessness of those hideous, coarse blue jeans! She got a notion, based on this, that Fougerat had instructed him to make the post-mortem examination early that morning and this beau of a doctor-*libéré* had been dawdling in front of a mirror ever since, preparing his appearance with meticulous care ere presenting himself before her!

But why, she asked herself. To make a good impression on her? For what object? Well, she would soon learn, as already she could hear him hobbling to the door. His examination had been most swift; for there he stood, framed in the bright doorway, beckoning her in. It suddenly struck her then that the peculiar flat effect to the top of his head was caused by the fact that he wore a wig, a toupee!

"What is it?" she asked as she came swiftly toward him. "What did you learn?"

He backed before her into the room,

leaning a little forward and rubbing his soft, white, pudgy hands together in professional manner.

"I have found, Miss Delecluse, that your father died suddenly last night from paralysis of the heart and the respiratory centers."

She gave a quick, suspicious glance past him at the bed, and her doubt was confirmed. His leather kit was unopened and the bedding seemed to lie in much the same state as she had so hastily arranged it. He hadn't disturbed it. She could have sworn he hadn't even bothered to lift that counterpane off the chiseled head!

But she betrayed no hint of her conviction. While he patted the side of his head as though to make sure the toupee was in place, he eyed her narrowly. His eyes, she noted, were close-set.

"What you say, doctor, explains nothing to me. I could tell, from that strained look on my father's face, that he had died suddenly. What I want to know is what caused the death."

"I believe," he replied, "that his death was due to poison."

"Poison?"

"Yes; poisoning by hydrocyanic acid!"

II

SOMETHING in his manner stopped her from committing herself as she had done, that time, with Fougerat. He stood facing her, one hand lifted to the side of his head expectantly, as if waiting for her to speak; and she realized he had been so abruptly and brutally frank in an effort to shock out of her any suspicions she might entertain as to who had administered the poison. She knit her brows, therefore, and affected a sorely puzzled expression.

"Hydro . . . cyanic?" she repeated slowly. "But is that some acid in the blood which poisoned his system? Or was it, rather, the basic element of some medicine prescribed for him, of which he happened to take an overdose? You see, I don't know. But I trust you'll forgive me, doctor, if I can't believe it a poison knowingly and

wilfully given him! I'm sure my father's death was largely accidental—a sad accident, of course, but one wholly beyond any person's control or responsibility!"

"Thank you, Miss Delecluse," bowing exaggeratedly. "Thank you indeed for this overwhelming evidence of your belief in us, his poor friends! But your father's death was due to none of the causes you suspect. It merely resulted from his having eaten some manioc bread, faultily made!"

"No!" in genuine surprise.

A slight, sardonic smile came and went out the corners of his full sensual mouth. She wasn't so clever as she thought! He had outguessed her, after all; shocked an inkling of the distrust out of her! Elatedly he stroked the ends of his mustache.

"It's true, though," he vouched. "You see, in the manioc root are certain quantities of hydrocyanic acid. You will probably recognize this acid as a very common ingredient of many fruits when I tell you it is also called prussic acid. Usually, however, as the fruit ripens, it modifies if it doesn't entirely disappear. But with the manioc tuber, it's different. We have to press out the juice containing this acid, and the pulp that remains is then ground into flour and baked into thin round sheets of bread."

"Then you think?" she suggested, hastening his conclusion. "A poisoned pancake, perhaps?"

He nodded, but continued imperturbably to explain in scientific words.

"It is my sincere belief, Miss Delecluse, that your father must have gotten hold of a batch that hadn't been thoroughly pressed, a part of the acidiferous juice remaining, you understand, as a component ingredient of the bread."

"But surely," she objected, seeing a loophole, "surely living here as long as he had, working daily with manioc bushes and roots, my father must have learned its different properties. He must have been aware of the various processes through which manioc must go to be rendered edible!"

"Surely; quite true. But mistakes will

happen, especially when the cooks are black deaf-mutes. We have many cases of this here, though as a rule, I must confess, the poisoning is non-fatal. Usually it only causes the patient an upset stomach, general collapse and confinement to bed for a day or two."

"But," she persisted, "my father must have known some remedy, some certain preventive against the poisoning!"

He shook his toupéed head.

"There are no efficient antidotes," he said and he closed his moist red lips tightly, as though sealing them against further confession.

III

SHE said quietly: "But why is his hair black? My father was grizzled when he left France, the white just beginning to show. Surely his hair hasn't become darker with age! But is it that the acid, when introduced into the system, has this pigmenting effect?"—archly.

He started, looked sharply at her. But her gray-green eyes were twin pools of innocence. His gaze fled then to the bed, and he patted the side of his toupée in a characteristic gesture of cogitation. It was evident he was nonplused.

"Oh," he said presently, his aptitude for strategic invention coming to his aid, "that's merely some death custom of the Canaques! One of the deaf-mutes must have discovered your father dead, when he came to serve breakfast here this morning, and he took it upon himself to perform a native rite by dyeing his hair—"

"Without asking your permission, doctor?"

He nodded.

"What's more, without even notifying us of his decease. Oh, they're cunning as well as superstitious, these Canaques! However, it may be for the best, Miss Delecluse," arriving at a new conclusion. "You will probably want to convey the remains back to France with you, and the dyeing will help to enhance the embalmer's art!"

This had never entered her head and she felt a deal revolted by the suggestion. She

had come a long way, through many obstacles, to rescue her father alive. To find him dead was more than enough.

"I hadn't thought of that," she confessed in a real distress. "But I suppose it is the thing to do."

"It is the thing we expect of you, Miss Delecluse," with quiet stress. "You have come from another world as an angel of rescue. Let it not be for naught. Go back as an angel of rescue, robed though it be in the somber pall of mourning. Spare your father burial in an alien soil, save him from the infamy of a convict grave!"

IV

Heloise didn't stop to consider his motivation in thus forcing her to submit to his idea. She only heard his words—words that scorched her brain!

"Yes," she admitted in low voice. "It is the thing to do. I see that now. But will it be asking too much of you, as a doctor, to attend to the arrangements?"

He was all compliance.

"I have to be many things here, Miss Delecluse, so you can depend upon me in this matter. And now," hurrying on, his point achieved, "I have been instructed to conduct you to the quarters you will occupy while you're here."

"But I thought—" she began, then hesitated with growing discernment of his motivation. "Oh, I do want to leave here today!"

He shook his toupéed head.

"It is impossible, Miss Delecluse. The embalming process, the knocking together of a temporary casket—all that will take time. You must stay here overnight at least."

So that was it! It was out at last! He had gained her assent, committed her to his project, to furnish them with a good excuse for keeping her there!

"But surely I can go outside, leave the house?"

Again he shook his toupéed head, a peculiar smile playing about his too-red lips under the mustache.

"I don't think you'd care for that liberty, if you understood," he replied enig-

matically. "But please," he added hastily, "please don't ask me to explain!"

"Let us understand one another, doctor," she countered in desperation. "You mean I'm virtually a prisoner here?"

"In effect, but not in fact. Ah you force my hand, Miss Delecluse; drive me to a painful explanation. But consider: the men here are convicts; most of them haven't looked upon a woman in years; they might prove impolite, impertinent; they might become bestial and seek to touch you with their filthy hands; worse, they might even . . ." he hesitated. "Ah, you begin to appreciate how it is! It is best, you see, that you stay indoors! And now will you kindly accept my guidance and follow me?"

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

HEMMED IN

I

HE didn't turn toward the staircase as she had hoped he might. He started along the corridor, deeper into the house and, in spite of the dark, on account of the uneven beat of his footfalls, she found no difficulty in following him, the art journal hidden under the black cloak wrapped around her healthy young body.

That he was walking fast she could tell from the tempo of his footsteps and she sensed, for she couldn't discern him, that he was no longer carrying himself with ramrod stiffness. He was hobbling along with hitch and hop, bearing heavily down on his short limb, lifting up on the sound member, up and down, up and down like the walking-beam of a ferryboat.

They came upon a passage giving off the corridor at right angles and leading, she swiftly surmised, into one of those two wings she had seen jutting out of the rear. After penetrating this for a length, the *stump-pat* ceased and again she heard the metallic clink of portière-rings being run back. An oblong of abrupt brightness revealed the door he had opened.

Heloise entered a room precisely like the one she had left. There was the same

cobalt-blue, domed ceiling on a small scale, the same number of cane chairs and canvases about the walls, only of course, in the case of the paintings, of different treatment and subjects, the work of different men. But the same low four-poster bed with the same white coverlet stood under the same narrow, barred embrasure!

It was like a prison for sameness, this house; the rooms like identical cells!

And she was its star prisoner!

Said the doctor: "If there is anything you wish, Miss Delecluse, you have only to press this bell in the wall and one of the blacks will answer." He indicated the lowest of three white pushbuttons set in a metal plate in the wainscoting alongside the bed.

"But the other two?" she naturally asked.

"Oh, I thought you recognized their use! They're the buttons of the electric switch to turn on and off that globe in the center of the domed ceiling."

She was surprised and showed it.

"Ho! You didn't think we had such modern conveniences here, what?" he chuckled. "I don't blame you. One would hardly expect to find them in this convict settlement and yet, when you stop to consider it, here is really the logical place for them. Law is no respecter of persons, and hence we recruit many fine mechanics into our ranks. Besides that, electricity is the safest sort of lighting. You'll find it 'most everywhere in the tropics. What we're particularly proud of," he went on with growing, unaccountable enthusiasm, "is our telephone system—"

"Telephone?" She could say no more for the shock.

"But yes!" he chortled, his enthusiasm becoming explicable. "There's a line connecting with the station of the military corps at Pam and another with the offices of the Northern Mines. In this way, with a mere whispered word or two, we can cover quite a bit of territory. Something particularly handy when there's an attempt at escape!" He looked up at her slowly, a world of meaning and menace crowding his close-set eyes.

II

WHETHER it was because of the pointed significance of his words, or the veiled threat in his eyes, or both together as if he had read her mental intentions of flight, a thin suffusion of color beat into her waxy cheeks. She knew then. There was no escaping from manioc manor. Between cannibal blacks and this telephone system, she was hemmed in!

"You are faint!" he exclaimed as a slow shudder shook through her. He took a step toward her.

But she held him off with her hands. She couldn't speak.

"Then it is hunger," he concluded, professionally. "Forgive me, Miss Delecluse. Is there anything special you'd like? Don't bother with the call-button. Give me the order; I'll be only too glad to carry it to the cook."

"No, no; not hungry," finding tongue. "Only weary."

She went staggeringly to the bed and sank down upon it, the art journal held so tightly between her fingers the knuckles were blanched.

"It is better that you nap, then," he agreed, looking down at her, a slight smile playing about his moist red lips. "Yet I fear you're too distraught even to sleep, so I'll leave this mild opiate with you!" He produced a white capsule from his blouse pocket and laid it upon the tabouret beside her.

Heloise looked at it in a kind of dull horror.

"Oh, it's harmless," the smile broadening. "And so very weak, its effect will wear off in a few hours. If you're awake, therefore, at the dinner hour, six o'clock, monsieur has instructed me to tender you his cordial invitation that you dine with him downstairs!"

The way this fellow put it, one would imagine Fougerat an ultra-polished criminal instead of the uncouth, lumbering half-wit she had found him. She couldn't picture herself seated at table opposite that bloated ox. But she said nothing, only shook her head laxly.

"But I crave the honor, also," the Butcher added.

"You?" and her eyes widened on him; she failed to comprehend what connection he could have. "Do you mean—"

"That it's to be no tête-à-tête affair, Miss Delecluse. I am to be present, too."

"But I thought no one lived here except Monsieur Fougerat."

"True; yet that doesn't bar me from dining with monsieur once in a while. Especially when there's a lady present!" bowing with smirking gallantry.

The conscious insolence of that incensed her, infused her with a defiant sort of courage.

"You must excuse me this once, doctor," she said in steady voice, with a subtle ironic undernote. "And you will kindly convey to monsieur my sincere regrets. But please don't object, sir!" sharply, as he made to interpose. "This is no time for éclat, gala dinners. My bereavement, doctor—you appreciate—so good of you! I shall have my meal, all my meals, served here until I leave—tomorrow!"

It was a challenge.

"Certainly, miss," he ignored it, agreeing a bit too readily, she thought, in effort to hide his chagrin. "Just ring when you require dinner and the boy will take your order. Now I must go." And he thumped out, stiff as a poker—a stiffness due, this time, to anger.

She waited until the choleric *stump-pat* had faded to a thin echo down the hall. Then she got afoot, stumbled to the door and locked it. When she came back to the bed, she keeled over and lay out upon it, the silk cloak twisted about her, her legs, bare above the knees, dangling over the edge. A hidden onlooker, had there been one, could not have helped but notice that her stockings were typically Parisian, especially, the garter strap that lay flat against the slight bit of naked thigh beneath a fringe of billowy silken skirt. She was all in, but her mind, despite the utter weariness of her body, continued to flash and flare, to cast it all over in brief passages like the white sputter of a wire-less:

If only she could get away . . . But those telephone lines! . . . He had told her about them for a purpose . . . Yes, even to the mouth of the Diahot . . . Pam, he had said . . . No escape . . . A prisoner . . . Hemmed in! . . .

What would happen to her? . . . This Butcher more to be feared than his master . . . A maniac, Fougerat, of some kind . . . But this doctor . . . clever . . . suave . . . diabolical . . . More than Fougerat's chief lieutenant . . . The brains behind . . . Behind Fougerat . . . Behind it all! . . .

The poisoned bread . . . He had known as a doctor . . . He had killed him, her poor father! . . . Fougerat only a dupe . . . The Butcher planned and arranged . . . That dinner with Fougerat, for instance . . . Ugh! . . . But had Fougerat really known of it? . . . Not likely . . . Fougerat stupid, ox-like . . . In the doctor's clutches? . . .

Could it be! . . . That white capsule . . . drug . . . Fougerat an apache . . . Maybe an addict, like so many of them . . . Seemed crazed, certainly . . . Doped? . . . This doctor, of course! . . . Educated, but bad . . . It was he . . . the Butcher . . . fed drugs . . . to that mountain of flesh! . . .

Her heart sank within her!

But did *he* know? . . . Eyes blue as azurite, hair like molten copper! . . . She must see him, surely . . . But how? . . . Tomorrow . . . at any risk . . . in spite of all, everything! . . . And thus thinking futilely, Heloise, with sheer exhaustion, slumped into insensibility.

III

SHE didn't know why she had awakened, what had awakened her—if anything. She only sensed an oppressive feeling weighing her down like a perception of impending danger. She gazed about the dim room and her eyes were naturally attracted to the aperture of brighter gray that was the window. It looked to be starry night outside. She glanced down at the glowing spidery hands of her bracelet-watch. It

was seven o'clock. She had slept—yes, four hours!

But not soundly, she thereupon recalled; she felt little refreshed. She had been harassed by dreams. Weird, frightening dreams of elephants changing into tiny mice and being harnessed on long pink ribbons to an ornate coach which they dragged through tree-lined boulevards as though they were horses—dozens of them spanned out on the pink ribbons, creeping along!

Then, apparently, somebody had thrown a shower of rice at the coach. Only it seemed larger and whiter, like popped corn or—or white capsules! The mice had been flung into a panic. They had broken away from the ribbons and had swirled about her, myriads of them, squealing—and she had snapped awake.

But it was that squealing which had set up the pounding in her ears, she swiftly surmised. Those imagined squeals had been like pins sticking into her. Perhaps they hadn't been imagined. Perhaps some outside, real, and unmistakable sound had given her the grisly illusion; had appulsed on her ears and impinged through her sleep to her dormant brains.

Had the sound been in the room? She swept with her gaze the dim interior. She could discern the vague scheme of one painting, limned blackly in the feeble grayness as though done in charcoal. She got an impression of the polish of the wainscoting and of bulking shadows, unaccountable shadows. The ivory buttons in the shining plate on the wall next caught her eye. That reminded her. She reached out for the electric switch, fumbled for the topmost button, snapped on the light in the center of the domed ceiling. It was like day again, and she felt unutterably relieved.

Right on the heels of this, came once more that sound which she realized must have awakened her. She stiffened with fear. But it wasn't in the room. It was outside in the night, filling the night—a long-drawn wail that rose up to a thin piercing needle of sound, which stabbed the tympanum of her ears for a full minute,

then slowly quavered away. It was like the anguished cry of a jungle animal, yet it sounded, withal, strangely human, as unnaturally human as the caterwaul of a cat.

It may have been moments, it seemed hours, while she waited for that agonized note to be repeated. But all was quiet, a hushed expectancy that lay like a load on her lungs. Her pulse boomed like mighty combers in her ears! Something had rustled in the room! As though with an unfelt breeze through the embrasure. Or as if some bat, attracted by the abrupt light in all the darkness, had brushed its

wings against the bars in attempting to fly within.

But it came from the embrasure, surely. And her eyes drawn toward the aperture, her head jerked round as though pulled by an unseen hand. There on the wide sill inside the bars showed, in the grayness, a white ball of paper!

What is the message delivered to Heloise Delecluse in this mysterious manner? Who wrote it? Why? What happens in that room before the dawn? Finding her father dead—murdered; alone and friendless in a colony of convicts under the absolute control of a madman. . . . What is she to do? You will find the answers to these and many other questions in succeeding issues. Don't miss any of them!





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PROBAK JUNIOR

It startled John Brackett to see the whiteness of the lonely coral beach in the wash of moonlight



Outi of the Atolls

By P. and T. CONSIDINE



HE saw her, for the second time, upon the deck of the power schooner *Vaiopuna* which was loading passengers and freight from the grassy quay of Papeete. The usual crowd had collected, to kiss and weep and say farewell, but most of all to break the monotony of between-steamer days. Black-clad Tahitian women, whose bare arms glistened with ebony luster in the sun, embraced their buxom sisters, while tears made rivulets down either side of their brown flat noses. Small, saucily dressed native girls with flashing eyes and ruby-red mouths, escaping parental hands in the excitement, scampered aboard and sat about on the quarterdeck, pretending they were passengers; but they looked for

all the world like a flock of exotic tropical birds at roost on a roof. Amidship, a cluster of portly commission men, mustachioed like the usual middle-aged Frenchman, watched the lowering of two automobiles into the well-deck. A red-headed missionary of the Church of Latter Day Saints (Reformed) climbed up upon the deck-house and sat down beside John Brackett, sharing the shade of a large stalk of green bananas.

Opposite was this girl of about nineteen. Her skin was like a soft olive patina and her face, despite the severity of black, combed-back hair, was pretty, if petulant looking. She had a purposeful chin, generous full lips inclined to droop at the corners. What attracted and held Brackett's eyes was the majestic carriage of her head,

the magnificence of her uncorseted body—the Junoesque strength and shapeliness of her form, and the clean, healthy glow of her flesh.

She lived in Papeete, John recalled, in a winding tree-hedged lane beyond the Rue des Remparts. Once he had passed her home, with its congeries of ferns in tree-bark boxes and potted plants stuck in rusty kerosene cans, the brilliant red tiare contrasting with the white tahiti flower.

"Ooh-ooh!" she had cried in the fashion of island girls, and laughingly picked up a stone and threw it at him. He remembered distinctly the sweep of her arm—how he had passed as circumspectly as the moment allowed behind a mango tree, while she called after him in French in a voice pleasing yet trembling with a sudden, curious resentment. She tossed her head now as she spied him staring at her.

Yet she must know who he was. Papaas (whites) are of inordinate interest to the childlike natives—and he was a man often seen on the veranda of the Bougainville Club, charts of the *Établissements Française de l'Océanie* spread out on the table before him and calipers and parallel-rulers in his hands instead of the usual drink. There is no newspaper worthy the name in Papeete, only a monthly hand-bill of ads, but the talk goes round, as the Europeans say, "by the cocoanut radio."

Of late, however, this "radio" had developed a sour note, its talk tinged with doubt—so many whites had come who claimed to be writers, artists, scenarists and screen actors, but who proved to be bad actors, poseurs and deadbeats, cadging for drinks, chiseling off the natives. The authorities continually tired of their wine-bibbing and steadily mounting bills at the Chinaman's, their love adventures, and shipped them bundling home. Probably the girl opposite had known such whites and accordingly doubted the stories told about Brackett—that he was a travel writer, that he was a youngish sea captain who had lost his ticket, that he was after a trove of mysterious treasure buried fathoms under among the coral isles. John looked a sedate thirty-five.

The auxiliary engine rumbled, the cargo of filled kerosene cans and boxes of groceries rattled and groaned, an eery wail went up from the crowd on the Quai Gallinieni, and the schooner pulled away for its first port of call, the phosphate isle of Makatea.

The missionary resisted the quick camaraderie which springs up on inter-island ships; he munched chocolate bars and read his gilt-edged books. Brackett spoke to the girl and winning a stiff smile, later shared his lunch with her, producing from his knapsack to her evident surprise paté de nantaise, bread, cheese, sardines, ham and even a bottle of wine of Oporto. She was still characteristically withdrawn, petulant, easily teased into a temper, quite childish. That night, nonchalant as any child, she slept rolled in her blanket beside him on the deck-house under the stars. For there was nowhere else to go.

All about on the quarterdeck reclined brown girls in Papeete finery, silk stockings and high-heeled, pinching slippers; pickaninnies in skimpy one-piece diapers; whole families forever consuming oranges, bananas, cocoanut milk and meat from the small, hairy gourds. Also, a sprinkling of neat, gray-clad and easily seasick Chinese.

The night sky was a tremendous drop-curtain, studded with swollen, white-blazing stars, close as though hanging low on strings like burning candle-nuts. This incandescent stage effect fascinated John Brackett so that he could not sleep. He lay in his blanket and smoked many Rosettes. The gentle rolling of the power schooner as though it were the rocking of a cradle, the streaked immensity of phosphorescent sea, the wide and bright and mysterious night, awoke strange figments in his mind.

The girl beside him, sleeping light as an animal, aroused at his stirring, or perhaps it was irritation from the smoke of the cigarettes. He offered her one, and they sat up and smoked and talked, and seemed to grow together like brother and sister under the infinite sky.

Her name was Cassandre Doucet, she divulged, but her people called her Outi after the scarlet, sword-pointed flower of

the islands which resembles the ancient oriflamme of St. Denis. No, that was not her mother who had bade her farewell. Merely a friend with whom she lived while in Papeete attending the École Municipale. La, you should see her mother!

"I am tall for my age, but my mother," she said, "my mother is so tall—ooh, you would nevaire believe! The metua vahine of mine is what you call a giantess. She make Outi feel ver' leetle. Her head, it is seven feet off the ground!"

That mother, to account for her stature, was of the stock of chiefs in the islands to the west, the *Iles Tuamotu ou Lointaines*. She owned some cocoanut trees and pearl beds on Fakarava, that great atoll of the Paumotus. Outi was going there for her vacation; she was almost done with school and the good sisters—she was returning to the town of Rotoava where her mother had a huge house and many relatives.

"And where there is a long pier running out into the water," said John Brackett quietly.

"Oui, mais oui! But how did you know? Have you been there to Rotoava?"

"No." John shook his head, his lighted cigarette end streaking the night. The cigarette end poised and his eyes could be seen in its glow, studying the figure of the red-headed missionary lying on its side, back toward them, off to the left. The missionary had pulled the slicker over him that he always toted against sudden tropic rains. His none-too-clean white suit showed above it at the shoulders with a grayish tinge. He appeared to be asleep.

"All I know," John said, "is that a certain Scotch freighter almost burned that pier down, fire leaping from her hold to the wharf until they ran her out—"

"And she sank! Ooh, I have seen that wreck, leaning to one side like a dead fish, poor thing, on the colored coral. Outi has dived down and scrambled up its deck, often and often, with that water shaking about her like—like shaking glass. Ooh, such fun! I used to race the boys down and inside, and there is some black gleaming stuff in there—the boys said it was treasure, black gold, though it didn't shine

like gold, only a dull luster. Do you know what it is—is it gold?"

"Well, it might be called black gold," John said. "It's chromite, an iron ore from New Caledonia not nearly so valuable as gold, but worth a fair price, say \$25 a ton. It's the ore from which we get chromium to temper steel and to use, as a compound, in dyes and paints. You see, this Scotch freighter, carrying a mixed cargo, had put in there from New Caledonia to take aboard also a shipment of copra, perhaps from your own mother's plantation. A fire started, probably from as simple a cause as a cigarette burning the donkey breakfast in a bunk. The skipper was ashore arranging for the copra cargo and the first mate, in his absence, had swigged a few—too many; he was drunk. By the time he came to and got his wits to working, the freighter was blazing and his second was running her out to save the wharf and village. The pumps were sucking dry air, clogged with salt-water rust. There was nothing to do but let her burn to the water's edge and sink in the next island hurricane."

Outi nodded hesitantly. "I have heard that story. But were you the—le capitaine?" she managed to ask.

"No," John chuckled, "nor that drunken mate, either. I couldn't be because he drowned, missing his leap to the wharf when he found what was up. He must have struck his head against a pier before he hit the water, or else like so many of us who follow the sea, below and aloft, he couldn't swim. But I have all the details from the Scotch shipping company, and I guess most of all I'm in luck meeting you—"

"How you mean that?"

John looked at her steadily as if weighing how much to tell her; then with a shrug, said:

"Oh, you might as well know now, you will later. I'm a member of the grimy black gang, a marine engineer turned salvage gambler. I've come down from the States to see if that chromite can't be dug out with clamshell steam shovels and maybe the iron hull raised and re-ribbed—"

"Ooh, but we have divers, strong diving boys who go down for pearls in my own mother's oyster beds, many—ooh, so many feet! Voilà, I'll see they dive for you."

"Thank you," John said, "but that would be too slow work, the stuff's too heavy."

"But you will stay with us on Fakarava as our guest?"

"Thank you, Outi," again, but more softly.

"Oh, but you must!" she insisted in the open-handed way of the islands. "You must be the guest of Outi and the metua vahine of Outi while you work on the wreck. Our house at Rotoava is so-o beeg, and"—as an afterthought—"we'll turn all the relatives out!"

John smiled only with his eyes. He was motioning with a finger to his lips. The red-headed missionary had rolled over—John thought he could see his eyes open and gleaming like a cat's in the night. He was facing them as if the better to watch and listen.

THE precipitous limestone walls of Makatea arose from the blue plain of ocean like the white cliffs of Albion, and for a day, while Japanese workmen unloaded and loaded cargo, they lay at the wharf which is the end of the island railway of the *Compagnie Française Phosphates de l'Océanie*.

In the tedium of the sultry wait or perhaps motivated by a deeper reason, the red-headed missionary dropped his aloofness and joined their conversation. He had, it quickly developed, overheard Outi in the night saying her mother was a chiefess in the Iles Dangereuse. That had been divulged at the start of their tête-à-tête, John remembered; how much more the red-head had eavesdropped, he could only wonder, and regret. But Outi's mother, the missionary broadly hinted—that metua vahine would be a personage to know, helpful in the Cause.

John chanced a wink at Outi as the fellow rambled on. He was from Los Angeles, he said, and no ordinary missionary, he! He was, thanks to his patron angel Moroni, superintendent of all the missions

of the reformed Mormons in the French islands. This was his annual tour of inspection. . . . He was effusively grateful when Outi also invited him, despite John's covert winks, to make his headquarters at her mother's house while on Fakarava.

Brackett was surprised at his displeasure over the fellow's prattling and very evident cadging for shelter. He knew it was customary for papaas to seek and natives to offer hospitality. Wasn't this their homeland and hadn't he himself accepted Outi's bid? What if the missionary had overheard his salvage scheme; he was in a different game, salvaging souls instead of ships. He just didn't like the sly fellow!

But why? Was his feeling toward the girl clouding his reason, raising his resentment? He paused to analyze her attraction. He wondered if her obvious scorn of men, which amounted to an amazonian pugnacity, a constant and unconcealed battle of the sexes, had intrigued him—he who had resisted the wiles of the girls of the Hotel Tiare and the Ane-Pare when the himenes were being chanted on verandas and the bronze, half-naked, flower-wreathed and scented women were contorting themselves in the gymnastics of the hura-hura under a madness of moon.

If a white man could resist the lure of these gorgeous creatures with their eyes like sparkling diamonds, their luscious mouths waiting to be tasted like over-ripe tropical fruit, and their sinuous forms clothed in as little as the law allowed; if he could resist these sirens of the South Seas he could resist anything. . . . Brackett confessed to himself, thinking back over the immediate past—smiling, too, at his pleasant, human weakness—that the only reason he had not capitulated was due to the load of responsibilities he carried on his mind. Under other circumstances—well, Brackett was like the famous poet who said: "I can resist anything but temptation."

He was further disquieted, after they left Makatea and set a course southwest for Fakarava. He returned from a disappointing inspection of the primitive engine room to find the missionary conversing

rapidly with Outi. He was speaking now in Tahitian and Brackett caught the familiarity of his "vahine." This gave added annoyance because, John told himself, it seemed to stress his own lack of fluency in the island tongue—a barrier between Outi and himself, which the red-headed fellow was easily surmounting in his offensive way.

He did not attempt to interrupt. He walked away and took a turn below in the first-class cabin. Here were about two dozen bunks, tiered in pairs one above the other. Everything was white-painted and appeared quite neat, with linoleum runners in the aisles and huge kerosene lamps swinging overhead. But Brackett had had experience in these first-class quarters, and he knew that when night crept on and the smoke and smell of the burning oil fought with the human odors of the pent-in passengers, the white walls would be paraded by cockroaches and the linoleum overrun by rats, squeaking and pattering. As he returned on deck, the missionary sidled away into the dusk like a gray, uncertain ghost.

He did not return that night. But the next day he was back, chattering incessantly in Tahitian. John held a tight checkrein on his annoyance and watched Outi's expressions flitting across her mobile features and the graceful gestures she made as she spoke; he understood only a word here and there. The day seemed interminable. Toward evening he strolled amidship to engage the Chinese supercargo in conversation.

He was a blue-denim-clad fellow with mustaches like short pendulous tusks and the bony face of a Manchu. Of a sudden, as they talked, the fellow became violently seasick. These Chinese sicken easily, John thought as he made to windward. Then the wind slapped him, took him aback, and he noticed for the first time that the schooner was pitching.

He clung to the rail. The sea, blue-black in the twilight, was being chased across by unaccountable waves of silvery white spume. These looked for all the world like sharks, white bellies up in the

rush of the charge. They seemed to be pursuing the ship with fell intent, seeking to swallow her. One followed upon the other and all just barely missed the vibrating *Vaiopuna*.

The top-poles were bare, but the foresail was partially spread to steady her. Whenever the man at the wheel faltered or erred in his jockeying of the schooner through the deep-grooved ocean, she struck a watery bank and quaked in every joint, her propeller whirring free and the sea dashing over dipping prow, and abaft, her decks were washed in a flood. Brackett, Outi and all the other deck passengers became drenched and had to cling to the sides of the deck-house, to the skylights, shrouds and railing, to keep from being washed overboard.

To add to the confusion, native women carrying babies, and Chinese gray-faced with more than fear, with ghastly terror, stumbled out on deck and crawled about like animals on all-fours.

There were no stars now. The sky was black, opaque; the wind screamed beneath its funereal pall and the air was filled with stinging, aerated water as though the sky itself was part of the hissing, racing sea. The brown boys relieved one another at the groaning helm and, in no time at all, became arm-weary and hollow-eyed. Still the blow increased. It was a hurricane!

Brackett in time, as the ship continued to creak and shiver, pitch and roll endlessly, fell into the dull sensation of thinking the tortured night would never pass. In streaks of the lightning, he could see Outi breasting the blow, mouth open, an exhilarated, belligerent look in her wide eyes. He himself did not fear death; he had faced that lethal contingency too often. He was only sharply aware that, as he had said and like so surprisingly many who follow the sea, he could not swim a stroke.

He shouted to Outi. He had decided, he hollered, if the worst came to the worst and the schooner foundered, he would grab an oar, a piece of crating or yank a window out of the skylight, and attempt to float on it through the black and white fury of the storm.

At Makatea they had taken aboard a crate of long saplings, containing twenty bronze and highly burnished roosters. Also, several pigs in individual pens. The long crate of fowls went over first. Then the pigs went by ones and twos, shrieking eerily, shrieking as those brown babies were doing in their mothers' arms. And then the real trouble started.

One of the automobiles moored in the well-deck broke loose and could be heard pounding against the heavy timbers of the port side. Cursing in French, English and native, the barefooted captain leaped among the seamen amidship and sought to lash it. But the machine ripped through and went toppling overside, leaving a great wound in the flank of the ship through which the water poured in a foaming cascade.

They worked the hand-pumps desperately, sailors on either end of the long iron bars. The schooner was listed sheerly to starboard, due to the weight of the heavy automobile still moored on that side, but at each roll she shipped an avalanche of sea through the gap amidship.

About the hour of a dawn that never showed, the *Vaiopuna* received her death blow. It was a lunge of black water into her wounded side as vicious as a matador's sword-thrust. She went down as a fighting bull goes down, in mid charge, in full career.

Brckett found himself sliding down a long slope of sea. Clinging on for dear life as he had been, he hadn't been able to risk securing the precautionary crate, oar or window. Yet he floated. He floated because he was clasped about the waist by the arms of someone who buoyed him up as only an expert swimmer can.

Already he felt half drowned. There was nothing but breathless chutes of water, slow ascents of uneven, viscous promontories, flying white spray above him, thick writhing black water below and all about. Still Cassandre Doucet, called Outi by the Tahitians, struggled on with him in her strong, young arms.

In spite of the danger, his embarrassment over not being able to swim and his

utter dependence upon this woman, Brckett enjoyed the touch of her hand and the close proximity of her cool body. It was certainly different from any experience he had ever had with a woman. Usually they became suddenly girlish and fluttery in an emergency, fainting dead away, having hysterics, or completely stunned and glossy-eyed with fear. Not Outi! This was her element—the sea. She had learned to breast the waves almost as soon as she had walked. Her reserves of energy were inexhaustible. He was like a child to her.

She swam mostly with her long legs, tireless as a frog's. She relieved her arms, now and then, by gripping his garments at the nape of the neck with her firm, hard teeth. They left behind all débris from the gored *Vaiopuna*. No Chinese, red-headed interloper or islanders floated, drowned or swimming, near them.

An hour passed; the day was night and the sky so black it was like a continuation of the plumbago sea. Another hour and he sank into a coma, became an utter weight. Yet she battled on through the watery profounds, the lashing wind, the angrily chanting chaos. She was indomitable. She was superb. She was a shark woman!

FINALLY, Outi grounded on a coral sand beach and lay gasping, half submerged in the tidewater. She gave her unconscious burden a last shove ahead of her. She had done the impossible.

They still tell of her feat through all the *Établissements Française de l'Océanie*. These water people talk of it as something past human ability; certainly it is incredible to read and subscribe to—it is unthinkable, too tremendous. She had been in the ocean, swimming against a hurricane, burdened with an unconscious man, three hours!

Yet some dim remembrance of more than duty, of a grim necessity, flickered in her head, prodded her exhausted frame. She staggered afoot like one drunken or dizzy with sickness. Somehow she managed to lift Brckett by the waist, his face dragging in the sand and mouth spewing water

as she pressed and emptied his stomach. He slipped from her hands and she stumbled over him, picked herself up and began feebly to pump his arms in an arc from his thighs to behind his head. She rubbed, in an infinite weariness, his exposed chest toward the heart. Often she lay as dead for minutes.

But he began to breathe. She felt the heated air on her cheeks. She gathered together the remnants of her strength and heroically finished her labors. He breathed naturally, slowly; he was asleep. Higher on the cold coral sand she dragged him and fell down beside him and slept, as though bludgeoned, for hours.

About midnight John Brackett awoke. The beach, he saw, was about a mile long and curved like a crescent. The hurricane had passed; the night was clear and glowing; there was a full moon. It startled him, at first, the whiteness of that coral strand in the wash of moonlight, white as sugar or snow, a marble whiteness.

He could see the lagoon clearly out to the silver line of reef. He could even detect color in the lagoon, jade-green and blue. In that still, enchanted, incandescent night, everything was lighted up, tinted. What a nocturne for a painter! It was like an artistically colored cinema—and he was reminded of a writer's cleverism that nature imitates art.

Only the trees behind were shadows, black feathers of coco-palms, inky giant fronds. To his right, cutting off that bend of beach, was a high cape. He could perceive gradations of hues in the abrupt eminence, the dark brown of gullies like streaks of tobacco juice down a bony chin.

He looked at the girl sleeping profoundly beside him, outstretched in the sand. He realized he would have drowned but for her, and his heart welled. She had rid herself naturally, in her herculean swim, of her single garment; she was stark naked. He tore off his tatters of shirt and partially covered her.

Still was he aware of her round, firm breasts like the twin halves of an orange; of her strong, proud throat undulating with slow breathing as might a bird's. The

beauty of her left him breathless. It was only complete exhaustion that permitted him to turn on his side and fall asleep again on the hard-packed sand. When he awoke in a short while, with the growing discomfort of his bed, she was gone.

HE rushed up and down the beach and back through the selvage of palms in frantic and futile search of her. He came to a bit, to find himself shouting her name, both her names. He became aware also, on retracing his course, of an abandoned human habitation. He explored within in the vain hope of finding her there.

It consisted of a hut of plaited coco-palm fronds or niau, and a cook-shed which was just a grass roof on four poles. Where the coastal promontory began to lift from under the shoreline fringe of trees and a tiny fresh-water creek tinkled down from the moon-drenched uplands, he came upon the structures. The hut had a clean board flooring but was empty of aught else. The eating-shed had no floor save the white coral sand, but in the center and partially covered were round, small stones of a sunken South Seas fireplace, smoke-blackened kerosene cans for cooking, empty bottles, a thick china cup and a pewter knife.

For breakfast, he had cocoanuts by the mere shaking of a nearby palm. He split the outer husk on the stones, drank the milk and ate the meat. A step away he found a grove of wild bananas, purple flowered and green, and yellow with fruit.

He began, in the first streak of daylight, a serious search for Outi. He climbed the bluff and saw beyond it a second beach, half-moon in shape and almost identical with the first. Rolling down into the look-out precipice were mossy green hills. He kept, however, to the coast.

At places where the mangroves overhung in an interlaced jungle, he had to wade through the tepid water. The coral rocks cut his bare feet; he remembered, then, that his last conscious move as the *Vaio-puna* sank was to loosen and kick off his white-clay oxfords. Yet the island was not basically a coral formation, but an upthrust of some mountainous ridge beneath the ocean,

surrounded by a ring of coral reef similar, on a miniature scale, to Tahiti, Huahiné, Raiatéa and other isles of the *Sous le Vent*.

That puzzled him. He knew he was miles to the west of the Societies; the island was, he felt sure, part of the Dangerous Archipelago; and yet was it unlike the thousand other specks in being solid mountainous land instead of a coral atoll, with a lagoon in the center. It was, he determined, about five miles in circumference. He saw no one.

He got back to the niau hut while the sun was still well below meridian. He drank more cocoanut milk, ate a few bananas, then cut directly over the hills. Even in this up-and-down way, it was only about two miles across the island. Cocopalms, he could see from the high places, girded it completely like a wreath, thinning for stretches to a scant hundred yards, but in the valleys among the hills mustering thousands of masts.

In these ravines, also, he found orange and banana trees, lots of breadfruit or maori, and on the long sunny slopes, perfect plantations of rosy and green mummy-apples. One could not starve on this ocean oasis, that was everywhere evident. But nowhere evident was sign of Outi, neither on the rocky combs of the highest hills nor in the deep, mossy, jungled glens. The place was weirdly forsaken. Other than the niau hut he had first discovered, there was no mark or print of man. He was alone, apparently, on this Pacific island.

He wondered if she had swum off to some nearby atoll. But from the tip of the rise he could see nothing but blue water quivering out to a heat-dancing horizon, an all-girding horizon. Save for the creaminess of the outer reef, there wasn't a white cap or ripple breaking that plastic sheet of blue.

He sharpened his pewter knife on a stone and cut wood for a small bow. This he strung with palm fiber. He made a wooden arrow and winding the fiber of the bow about its center, whirled the point deep in a husk of old, dry, hairy cocoanut until, after an hour's gruelling work, its friction produced smoke, then sparks. The

fire he kept burning atop the look-out cape that day and night, with palm fronds causing smoke to volute thickly up in the sunlight and cocoanut shells blazing like coal and cleaving the darkness with red tongues of flame. But no Outi appeared at his signal.

Next morning, leaving the fire smouldering, he fashioned a net of the same fiber of the pandanus palm and went fishing in the lagoon off his beach of home. He was fed up on fruit. He waded back in a half hour laden with trowe and raw-fish, the latter dyed the same hues as the lagoons: ultramarine, azure, deep purple, smoky white as pearl. He had secured, in that half hour, a good week's supply. Wild limes he had seen in the jungled uplands. With those small, acidulous greens, he could concoct a juice sauce that would make the raw-fish not only tasty but delicious.

The third day came and his niau shack was stocked with great stalks of ripening bananas, red feis (cooking bananas), sweet buttery mummy-apples, cocoanuts, oranges, limes, yams and hanging strings of fish. He had worked incessantly, madly, to keep his mind off Outi, where she had gone, what he had done or failed to do to drive her away. He had even found bushy trees, with white fragrant flowers, and recognizing the berries for wild coffee berries, he had hulled the pods, and roasted and ground the twin grains therein for beverage.

In his explorations and unending hunt, he had run upon some wild pigs. So he cut a second bow, a five-foot-long bow, fashioned plenty of heavy arrows with sharp points, and went hunting the succulent porkers among the high crests. Here, in an amphitheater formed by great baulks of black rock and looking like an ancient marai (fort) he killed one with repeated shots of his bow. He shouldered the small squealer and started down the slope.

He was winding and bobbing under the giant, outreaching, unkempt leaves of banana trees, in a mossy dell that was as soft carpet underfoot, when he spied Outi ahead, plucking some of the fruit. She was wearing a skirt of sere yellow grass,

which made a loud rustling with her movement, and so did not hear him approach. His tatters of shirt draped her shoulders and were tucked in at the waist of the skirt. He dropped the pig in glad surprise and leaped toward her, calling her name. She fled.

Along the dell, down through a sloping plantation of mummy-apples, knocking off the pink and green bunched fruit as she passed, weaving in and out among the low trees, crackling over the crisp, fallen leaves, she fled and he pursued, calling beseechingly. He had a sudden conception of how he looked—bearded, his naked torso smeared with blood from shouldering the pig, altogether a frightening spectacle like a wild man of the wilds—but his voice, he hoped, would tell her who he was.

He trapped her, finally, in a blind gully at the foot of a steep-to cliff. She had crawled into the darkness of a little rude hut of green made with newly plaited niau. He took her by both hands and dragged her into the open. Then, Juno though she was, he carried her, like a captured bride, to his house and a feast of fruit, fish and savory roasted pork. She kicked and struggled all the way.

WHEN they stood together on the beach, she was as tall as he and under the smooth, olive patina of her skin, she was rounded and strong, stronger perhaps than he. Why then did she fear him? he asked. Why had she run away and established her own camp? They were two alone on this tropic isle; he was obligated to her for saving his life; he was no ingrate to attempt to deceive or harm her; he was a social animal craving human companionship.

They fished in the lagoon with nets on moonlit nights. They raided the wild orchards for mummy-apples and oranges. Outi proved an adept cook. From cocoa-nut meat, white and grated, with bananas added, she mixed a delectable poi, the starchy pudding of the islands. From the milk, she made a sauce for the boiled feis and creamed raw-fish. She also made fritters of the bananas. They feasted on wild

pig, and talked in a hodgepodge of French, Tahitian and English.

And in time John understood. She made no claim or boast, but she evidenced pride in her independence. Had she not fought all the youths of her acquaintance like a tigress? Her camaraderie was without guile or coyness. The mere word "love" deepened the wry expression of her habitually petulant mouth. Rather would she become a nun, she swore, than give way to any man!

Brackett couldn't help smiling, a bit ironically. He knew this mood, a sudden consciousness and revulsion of passion in girls of adolescent age. But with a Tahitian, with any South Seas vahine, it would not be long before she grew to love him. The instinct of desire was as ardent and riotous as the tropics in which they flowered.

He adopted a big brother attitude. Yet, in scaling heights for tidbits to vary their diet, he couldn't do less than aid her with a hand under her arm or against her spine. He could feel quivers go through her; he noticed the swift pallor erasing the olive in her cheeks; but he strove to hide his perceptions from her suddenly fearful eyes.

Lying on the sand beside their evening fire, she would beg for more stories of the ports he had visited, the women he had seen—how they "did" their hair, what sort of pareaus they wore—what ships he had wrestled from the powerful arms of Old Father Neptune. It was idyllic life, the Garden of Eden without the serpent. When once he mentioned the red-headed interloper she bowed her head, crossed herself and mumbled a prayer for the repose of his soul that the good sisters had taught her.

They climbed the promontory, that day, to gaze out beyond the reef at the white-capped ocean. A wind was up and his arm went round her waist to steady himself as much as her. The next instant, all a-tremble, she was about in his arms, was cuddling close. He could feel the warm pressure of her breasts and, before he knew it, was kissing her passionately. She struggled, she struggled furiously and finally won free.

That night they lay down to sleep on the clean bare boards of their niau shack, side by side as if nothing had happened. But John got up after a little and walked through the night alone and arduously, up and down the moonlit hills. Finally exhaustion drove him back to the hut when dawn was streaking the sky. Outi was still sleeping, blissful as a babe.

THEN it came on a slap of wind—music going like a chant and the booming of a tom-tom as an undernote: hollow, echoing, weirdly barbaric.

"Do you hear?" John asked. He looked over their evening fire in the direction from whence the music had come, up the brown gullies of the cape.

Again on the night breeze rippled the himene singing. They could make out, before the gust failed and the sounds faded, a long run of plaintively syncopated notes, a high falsetto refrain, the tum-tum of a drum.

The sounds seemed to have birth upon the beach beyond the promontory. A light was shaking across the sky above its shoulder. They scrambled up the gullies and stood on the top hand in hand gazing down the other side.

There on the crescent beach blazed a bonfire. They could see in its light a dozen men seated in a wide circle about it. A long outrigger canoe was drawn up on the sand and a huge iron pot hung from a tripod to one side. Three men stood near the pot, the shortest in white trousers and shirt, the fat of his arms gripped by the two on either side, his hands tied behind his back.

He was a white man and to all appearances, a prisoner. For the others were Polynesians in tall grass headdresses which exaggerated their height, and grass capes and skirts dyed purple, red and parti-colored. Festoons of colorful cowrie shells wreathed their necks and ankles. Evidently this was some gala occasion. The cone-shaped headgears were topped with pompons or tassels of brightly pigmented hair, which waved with the movement of the wearers as they rocked like men row-

ing, back and forth on their hams, in time to the weird dissonances of the drums. They gesticulated with knob-headed war clubs, stone axes and knives of obsidian.

"They are tupapau," said Outi in a tense whisper—"eaters of *la âme d'un mort*, the body as well as the spirit of the dead! They are members of a secret order of magicians and cannibals, relics of the old Arioi which the French believe they have stamped out. They come in the night to this desert isle to eat long-pig, the kai-kai that makes men brave and wise. He is to be kai-kaid!"

"He? That white man?"

"He is their captive."

"But all foreigners are registered with the French, just as in Paris. If he is missed, the gunboat *Cassiope* will take up his trail."

"The bottle-ship will nevaire find him. Before dawn these devil-doctors will be gone, all trace of them wiped out. They will hide on Vanavana, Nukutavaké, or some other atoll far from the marins and black gendarmes of Nouméa."

Brackett had heard rumors of the cannibal practices of witch-doctors throughout the French establishments in the Pacific. He had read about the Arioi, that caste of native minstrels whose stoic law had been to slay their offspring. He realized now why the French maintained a fast cruiser and force of police in these latitudes. The gendarmes, often hailing from the penal colony on New Caledonia, were barefoot and sooty black—Melanesians—but extremely faithful and veritable bloodhounds for tracking through jungle and swamp.

Cannibalism among the tupapau, he gathered from Outi's words, was not the desperate recourse of famished men. It was a superstitious rite, a way to augment their courage and warlike powers. The victim's heart added his bravery to that of the consumers, his kidneys stamina, and had he in this modern day, scholastic training and an astute mind, his devourers would partake of an intensive cultural development by the mere stomaching of a sauté composed of his brains. Swifter in promised result, thought Brackett wryly, than a home correspondence course!

"But what is the song they sing?" he asked as the chanting progressed through verse after verse.

"It is an ancient himene of the Isle Hikuéru and it praises long-pig eating," said Outi, who had been giving attentive ear. "These are Hikuéru men, I think, and tonight is an old, old feast night. Ooh, look! They are drinking ava, that brew of Satan!"

A polished gourd that gleamed in the firelight was being passed from hand to mouth among the swaying, singing men. It appeared to be in the shape of a peafowl—another pagan symbol—and according to Outi, contained ava, the strongest and most maddening liquor of the islands, a ferment from the ti plant forbidden by French colonial law. As it addled their brains and heated their bodies, the tempo of the drums and the swaying quickened. Then the chanters doffed headdresses and capes and appeared in their glistening brown skins; all except one who seemed to be the leader and who wore a white pith helmet, evidently once a part of the costume of the papaa prisoner.

"Quick! They'll go crazy soon!" from Outi fearfully. "Show yourself! Dance! Do something, anything. Cry out in English so they won't understand. They're scared to death of ghosts and taboos!"

"Play on their superstitions, outwit these priests with their own priestcraft?" It was an inspiration. Brackett dropped his long-bow and arrows—weapons too familiar to those below—and picked up a stone big as a breadfruit. Down into the lifting and bowing ring of chanters, plunk into the fire he hurled it, scattering embers and sparks.

The himene ended in mid-verse. Like men exercising in rowing machines and halting at signal, the group remained transfixed in various grotesque postures. Brackett howled in English and executed a dervish dance there on the brow of the cape. "Run for it, papaa!" was the gist of his shouts. "Now's your chance for a getaway!"

Alone of those below, the prisoner seemed alive. He tripped up the Paumotan

on his left, butted with his head the one on the right in the stomach so that he doubled up with pain like a jackknife, and knocked over the pot, as he leaped away, by kicking out a leg of the tripod. With hands bound behind his back, yet desperately sprinting, he came scrambling up the slope on the crest of which Outi and Brackett continued to howl and dance and hurl down stones in showers.

Like a piece of magic, they saw a stone go sailing away with the pith helmet off the head of the rigid leader. Red coals were flying from the fire under the barrage, and alighting on the bare skins of the brown statues. The pain from these broke the paralysis of fear. Seared and squealing, the men leaped afoot.

By that time the fugitive was well up the slope. Brackett started down to him and Outi covered their meeting with a hail of rocks.

"Steady, boy!" cried John, and whipping out his pewter knife, he cut the lacings on the hands of the gasping man. "You're safe for the while. We'll make our stand above and roll down boulders upon them."

The cliff platform was, of the immediate line of beach, the most strategic place from which to put up a defense. But there proved no need of that—no need to hurl more stones, no need for Brackett to use his long-bow and arrows, or to turn those arrows into spears at close quarters. The islanders were fleeing to the huge outrigger canoe.

"Tiaporo! Demons!" they wailed. They believed the girl and man some materialization spirited up by inimical gods of the jungles and hills. Had not the twain shouted in a language they did not understand? And was not the stew-pot upset as if the gods frowned on the proposed sacrifice? Frantically they paddled out into the lagoon, while some in the excitement and haste swam beside the craft, waiting their chance to clamber aboard.

The three on the eminence saw the scurrying outrigger make a passe in the reef known to the paddlers, shoot through the silver wall of fretted water, and vanish in the night and open sea. Left behind

on the crescent beach were a dimming bonfire, an overturned stew-pot, war clubs, stone axes and knives, lots of breadfruit balls, some welcome roots of taro, and much gaudily colored dancing regalia woven of the inner bark of the pureau tree. Also, an ancient gourd, carved in the semblance of a pea-hen and half full of fiery liquor, and one papaa long-pig or white man saved from the kai-kai that makes men brave and wise.

HE was, he said, an assistant in the department of anthropology at the University of Southern California who had been vacationing on the atoll of Hikuéru, where he had lived among the natives, studying their language, folk-lore, customs and dances. Yes, these twelve were Hikuéru men. They were members of a secret society of magicians called the Brotherhood of Marama, a fraternity under the special protection of the god, Pai.

Lawrence Plunkett, as he called himself, had come to the atoll with a carefully packed medicine kit and a better than general knowledge of how to use its tiny bottles and compresses. He had started war on the devil-doctors over the death of a year-old pickaninny from colic, and their brutal treatment of a girl in her 'teens, who had fallen from a mango tree while picking fruit, and ruptured herself. When rugeol, that mixture of fever and measles, had attacked the children in an epidemic, with heavy mortality, he had worked day and night, bathing the youngsters in hot water, administering febrifuges and stimulants from his kit, saving one out of three.

But instead of gratitude from the warlocks, which he certainly received from the distracted mothers and fathers, these fanatics had taken him prisoner and conveyed him in the night to this island, there to avenge their outraged lore and to secure for themselves, by cannibalism, the gusto and intelligence of the white man.

Plunkett was a slender, medium-statured fellow with wavy brown hair, gray-green eyes and even white teeth which he showed often in smiles and laughter. Despite his story, he did not appear the student type;

approaching thirty, he looked no more than twenty-five; and Outi seemed to incline toward the laughing, debonair Californian. Was it youth calling to youth in joke and story and rippling mirth, or merely the coquetry of the girl to fire the flames of adoration?

Brackett naturally believed it was the first, a fundamental affinity. His move was, next evening, to change their sleeping quarters.

"Now there are two men here," he told Outi, "we can't bunk all three together, under the same roof."

It was the reverse of sound reasoning; the uneven number broke the spell of intimacy. Outi, as a woman, sensed this fallacy and made no objection. So the two men slept that night under the lean-to on the sand, while she had the niau hut to herself.

Next morning John divulged his plan. He was upset, he admitted; he had not been able to sleep; he had been harassed by their need to get away from the island, come of that run-in with the Hikuéru cannibals. Those tupapau might return for Plunkett at any time, he insisted, and should they discover then how Outi and he had deluded them, they would exact frightful penalty. He planned therefore to fashion a dugout canoe from a tree, and set out to sea.

The truth was Brackett missed the old idyllic life, now there were three of them, and felt fear of his own emotions over the change—annoyance at the girl and a growing jealousy of the younger man. The work would divert his mind a bit from the two and their laughing love-play. Alone he stalked off into the woods in search of a tree suitable to his purpose.

They felled the selected hardwood by making fires about the base of its tall trunk. As it stretched its length in the undergrowth, they strewed red coals upon its upper surface. For days they tended and replenished the smouldering ribbon of flame as it ate slowly down, like a crimson snake, into the trunk.

They lived in a world of smoke. The dry odor of burning wood got into their

eyes and hair, pores and lungs, and even tasted in their food. But, at long last, the tree was hollowed into an uneven, oblong cavity and they had only to smooth off the seared inequalities with the stone axes and knives left by the Hikuéru men.

They were swinging away lustily, Outi singing a song in time to their strokes, when the stone ax in the hands of Brackett glanced off the hardwood and caught him on the inside of the right thigh. Blood gushed forth.

Outi darted to him as he toppled, her face ivory with fear and distress; but John in his harbored resentment of her, held her off, saying Plunkett would know what to do. The scientist examined the nasty cut, then seemed at a loss. Brackett instructed him, out of his own first-aid experience, how to bathe and bandage the wound. Outi hastily tore off some tatters of the shirt about her shoulders and rinsed the strips in the sea. But Plunkett made a bungle of the bandage, and John had to finish wrapping himself.

He dragged himself up the beach under the lean-to out of the sun. Plunkett pressed upon him a drink of ava from the pea-hen gourd, and he felt too weak to refuse.

"I've seen," said the fellow nervously, as if seeking to make amends—"I've seen an herb up in the hills which I know is good for healing wounds, taking the poison out of cuts. Outi and I will go after it, she to guide and I to detect the herb. We'll be back soon."

Whether it was the effect of the fiery liquor or from fever induced by the wound, Brackett's head buzzed with fears, like a hive with bees, after the two had gone. The day swam in a drenching of sun; there was no sound save the thud of the sea breaking on the reef and vibrating the air and the tympanum of his ears like thunder. Why, he asked himself, had Plunkett proved such a bungler? It could not be that the youth thought to let him bleed to death and thus get rid of him. That would never do, with Outi looking on and anxious to help.

Besides, he had said he was something

of a doctor, had cured the children in that epidemic of rugeol on Hikuéru. Why, then, had he been so palpably at a loss in this emergency, even to the tying of the bandage? Was he no scientist at all, all his story a fake? Brackett thought of the many poseurs and cheats that had followed the motion picture companies into these islands.

He knew fear for Outi. Was the grinning man planning some move against her, now he was laid out, hors de combat? Why otherwise had he enticed her into the trackless jungles of the withdrawn hills? John felt suddenly sure that the story of the herb was but a subterfuge to get the girl away.

He started to crawl on all-fours in the direction they had gone. He broke through dangling lianas and underbrush. He felt his leg moist and examining it, found the bandage dyed with fresh blood. But he pressed on, little knowing where he was, his head in a whirl from loss of blood. He fainted.

When he came to, he discovered himself at the foot of a steep-to cliff. Off to one side he saw the green bower which Outi had built when first they had reached the island and she had fled from him in maidenly distrust. The sound of voices came again. He had thought he had dreamed about these voices. But they dropped down to him as from the top of the cliff.

"So that's what you're up to!" he heard in the tones of Outi, bitter tones. "You think because M'sieu' Brackett is hurt—ooh, you peeg!"

Came indistinctly Plunkett's voice, low, pleading.

"Sacré, no! Take your hands off me!" cried Outi.

Brackett tried to shout, to let her know he was near, but could utter no more than a husky note. He caught sounds of a struggle; pebbles and sand chuted down; and looking up, he saw Outi and Plunkett wrestling desperately upon the lip of the precipice.

She was a foot taller than the slight boyish fellow. She was an amazon then, outraged, berserker—the superb shark-

woman again, who had swum with Brackett seven hours against a hurricane! She pressed Plunkett's head back with a hand against his chin, bent him over like a reed; and suddenly he let go, teetered wildly on the brink, then with a cry came somersaulting head over heels down the sheer drop.

He landed not ten feet from Brackett. John crawled to him. But he did not move. He had broken his neck in the fall, and was dead.

"*Sic semper traditors!*" breathed John and, in excitement and weakness, again passed out.

When he came once more to conscious-

ness, he was back in the shack on the beach and Outi was bending solicitously over him.

"We will finish the canoe," she said, a sob in her throat, "and then we will sail away—away from this island of sorcery and death to an inhabited island where there is a priest who . . . who . . ." She hesitated, then: ". . . who . . ."

"Will marry us," whispered Brackett as he took her in his arms and she clung to him, shivering but sheltered. No longer was she the shark-girl, no longer the amazon; only a woman craving protection and love.

He held her close.



What's in a Name?

Since your editor took over MYSTERY ADVENTURES he's been asked by more people than you can shake a stick at—and there's some folks I wouldn't mind whacking over the head with it!—just what is meant by the title of the magazine. Noah Webster's not a bad guy to go to in a case like this. Let's see what he says.

He defines mystery as "something wholly unknown, or something kept cautiously concealed and therefore exciting curiosity or wonder." Adventures, says Old Man Webster, are those things "which happen without design; chance; hazard; risk; danger; peril; remarkable occurrences; striking events; stirring incidents; the encountering of risks; hazardous and striking enterprises; bold undertakings in which hazards are to be met and the issue hangs upon unforeseen events." Well, so far as I'm concerned that about answers all the questions in two foul swoops. Seems to me that every writer in this issue has provided the mystery of the unknown, something cautiously concealed until the last page, and that they offer the reader many a yarn packed full of hazards, risks, dangers, perils, remarkable occurrences, striking events and stirring incidents; at least, that's the way they struck yours truly when he read them for the first time in manuscript form, and I didn't find any reason to make me change my mind after they were in print.

And while I'm on the job answering foolish questions I might as well use it as an excuse to do a little asking on my own. Where is there a magazine that lives up to its title any better than MYSTERY ADVENTURES? Strike me pink, if I know of one. I'm not saying that there aren't a lot of other periodicals that do live up to their titles; in fact, I'm not saying anything at the moment—I'm asking a question; merely trying to find out if they do it any better, that's all. Perhaps it's like eating olives—a matter of cultivating a taste. You think that what you eat fits your appetite (appetite is as good as any other name for being downright hungry) much closer than the same grub cooked by somebody else. What's the difference so long as we're both satisfied?

Add MYSTERY ADVENTURES to your bill-of-fare as a regular course in your magazine diet. Maybe Doctor Pocketbook has ordered you to go easy—though I hope not; if he has, just keep in mind that MYSTERY ADVENTURES is an inexpensive item and it will rest easy on your mental stomach. Might keep you awake at night, come to think of it—I can't help my writers being so darned good their stories haunt you in the dark. But if you're healthy and not afraid of your shadow, you'll find MYSTERY ADVENTURES as good as any course of your fiction meal.

THE EDITOR.

Dazedly Lynn's eyes wandered over her flowerlike face, her dusky eyes, her crown of curling raven hair . . .



GREED

By MARTIN AL RENO



HE glowing eyes inched nearer. Lynn Morris lashed reeling senses to final effort. The weaving rifle steadied in his shaking hands; his burning eyes peered along the gleaming rifle barrel to the twin balls of flame

staring from the star-sprayed jungle. All through the dreadful night the jaguar had stalked his tottering steps; now the driving will that had spurred the man's last flight urged a last desperate blow before the grim cat struck.

The horrible eyes blinked, came nearer,

vanished. Morris shivered in the clutch of an icy chill. The weapon almost slid from his hands, to be snatched back wildly. Acutely he was conscious of the steady drip, drip, of water from rotting vegetation.

Again the orbs glowed like yellowish lamps. Morris fought to hold his rifle steady. He wondered dully as twin jets of orange fire lashed out from the gloom and savage barking of rifles mingled with a fiendish scream. The hot reek of a huge furred body was smothering him; the rifle was brushed from his hands by a rushing force. Waves of deadly sickness. Blackness.

Lynn Morris waked to find himself wrapped in blankets and the slim form of a woman bending over him. Dazedly his gray eyes wandered over her flowerlike face, her dusky eyes, her crown of curling raven hair.

"What's happened? How did I—"

She pressed him back gently as he would have sat up. "The *señor* must be still. He has been most sick. The Holy Virgin smiled upon him."

She spoke in soft Spanish, and Morris dimly wondered how such a face and form happened in this land of broad-faced, tawny, heavy-hipped women. His wandering thoughts halted as seating herself on the low bed the girl began to feed him sparingly with a spoon. He tried to raise his arm and wondered to find its strength gone. The girl smiled, and it seemed to the American that Venus stooped from high Olympus.

"The *señor* has been ill with the jungle sickness," she explained gently, "but soon he will be strong. But Miguel say he must be most quiet and talk not."

"There was a jaguar, the brute trailed me for hours. Then rifles sounded and—"

She stilled him with fingers on his lips. "Luis Pacheco and Juan—my brother—killed the great tiger. They brought the *señor* to our poor jacale. At first we think the *señor* die—but he is of strength, and the medicine of Miguel is good. Now the *señor* sleeps."

She patted his shoulder gently, drew the

blankets closer around him, spread the netting over his head to fend off the cloud of winged pests. Slumber plucked down his eyelids, muffled the thoughts flitting through his fevered brain like grinning phantoms. It was the beginning of a parade of indolent days in which he gathered strength, watched his thin fingers put on roundness, felt new vigor course into his fever-scourged body. Golden days with the girl of long-forgotten dreams, days filled with the magic of new friendships which mellowed his calloused soul. And he grew to know the simple hearts of the peons as he had never known them in the hard years of dangerous strife and toil.

"The saints must guard the *señor*," cackled old Miguel Juarez the first day he aided Morris to walk in the cool shade of mighty trees clustering without the jacale. "Juan tells me their bullets stopped the tiger as he gaped for the *señor's* throat. And only the hand of God led the *señor* from the fever."

"You have all been wonderfully kind to me, a stranger of whom you know nothing," answered Morris quietly, "and I shall not forget. I shall show my gratitude some day. Black Jose and his thieves cleaned me out, but I am not one to stay licked."

"A good deed rewards itself," said the old Zacateco; "we found pleasure in saving the *señor* from the jungle and the great tiger. We would not accept reward were the *señor* the president himself. Here the *señor* is welcome. There is much food for all, and life is not harsh. And Rosita, I think she likes much the *señor* from the North."

"She is the flower that cheers the soul," smiled Morris, relapsing into the poetic expression of the people. And as the golden days passed he realized with growing concern that the little village looked upon Rosita and himself as brought together by the hand of God. He learned that the girl had been brought in her infancy to the wild jungle by a tall Spaniard with sad eyes, who had soon winged his way to Paradise.

"It was the wish of Don Pablo the little one should be raised in the ways of vir-

tue," confided old Miguel, "so he fetched her from among his own people. Sorrow had struck him hard, in his last moments he spoke of the fair wife who fled with another. Always his eyes were hard when he heard of one of his own race. But the *señor* has lived—he has the wisdom."

Morris found himself wondering if the village would have accepted him so readily had they known. He had come from the States to garner gold—he had ruled over toiling peons on broad plantations with heavy hand, he had led fierce-eyed, bloody-hearted bandits in ruthless raids on weak-



er people, and in his moment of triumph he had seen the harvest of the years wither under the treacherous assault of the black-souled killer he had helped to make strong.

All these and other things he told Rosita as they sat under the huge canopy of palms below the jacale. His mouth was grim as he told how he must soon return to his blasted hacienda, build anew his power, and crush Black Jose. He could not ask the love of woman until wealth and power were regained.

Rosita looked up with troubled eyes. "But this gold, my friend, is it then so desirable? Does it not bring days of trouble, nights of fear? Is it not better to enjoy life while the blood is hot and God is good? Does not this yellow greed bring also much of evil?"

"Without gold a man is but a dog," answered the American grimly; "it is the royal metal turning the worm into the king. It is sought by all men, no man can be great without its abundance. It may bring care, but greater is the care without it."

"And if Don Lynn had much gold he would not go back to the place where the men of evil ravish and kill?" Her slim fingers tightened on his arm, her great dusky eyes gleamed with strange fire.

"I would return to my people, the great race of the North," he replied.

"And would Don Lynn take the little Rosita?"

He raised her soft fingers to his lips. "Rosita, mia, would the cursed refuse Paradise?"

She reached up and drew his head close to hers. "I know where is gold, much gold," she whispered; "but it is death to touch. Long ago the old Miguel, and the older Arturo, great headman, show me the place of riches and make me swear not to speak. They said were it known the mad Gringo would come like the ants. They—Ah! hold not so tight, my beloved, you crush me."

"You're sure, Rosita, sure there is gold?"

The girl shrunk from the fierce hunger in his eyes. "It is as I say, Lynn mio, but you scare me. I like you not like this. I will show you, for then we will be always together, and Rosita loves her great Gringo till it hurts her poor heart. But we must be careful, Mother of God! We must be careful. The terrible death in the jungle—"

"I can hold off the whole village," he gritted. "I have my rifle and plenty of shells. Tell me where this gold lies and I'll carve my road through blood. I'll—" He checked his outburst at the look in Rosita's dusky eyes and tightened his arms around her slender body. "I don't mean that, my Rosita, I know what I owe Miguel and the rest. There must be no trouble unless to save ourselves from their rage."

"I could not love even my blond one

if the gold turned him to blood. I am a wicked woman, Lynn mio, to betray the secret of the ones who have been good to me, but just a little of the gold will not harm them. You will not bring the fierce Gringo miners, my Lynn?"

"Enough will we take for our needs, Rosita mia. Why should others know?"

He spoke carelessly, throttling down the lust consuming him with a strain of his iron will. He had been too long in Yucatan to care for the feelings of the Indians, his hard philosophy had taught the power of the strong, he despised men who lacked strength to guard their own because he had fought his way up from the ranks. But he must not let this girl know the dark thoughts scourging his hot brain, else even her love would shrink back appalled from the black gulf spread at her trusting feet. He would protect the village from the ravening wolves of his own kind, not because his innate sense of gratitude alone prompted, but because he would be a fool to share the gold with others.

His plans were made when next morning he followed the girl on a tortuous trail through the steaming jungle. It would be easy to secure a mule from the trusting natives—he had already told them he must return to his ravaged hacienda and start life anew. One mule, well laden, would mean wealth if the gold was as rich as Rosita believed. Then he would return for Rosita at the head of a band of seasoned fighters—fierce Yacquis who delighted in the wild clash of battle. The harvesting of the treasure would be easy, and the natives would dare not resist. He would play fair with the girl—she deserved that. He would leave the village in the night when none suspected. The rest would be easy. The girl must not suspect his plans or she would insist on accompanying him on his flight, and he would have no place for her on the gold-laden mule.

The simplicity of the scheme brought a grim smile to his hard lips as he drove his gleaming machete through the dense vegetation barring their way. Green parrots protested the invasion, monkeys scolded angrily, swarms of venomous black flies

and stinging pests pursued them, but Morris even smiled when a huge snake slid from the overhanging limb of a mighty tree and rustled into the undergrowth. The hidden gold lured like an imperious mistress.

"Look!" cried Rosita suddenly, and stripped away the crawling jungle from a mass of yellowish-white rocks with a sweep of her machete. Morris darted to her side, fell on his knees by the ledge, shivered convulsively as he caught up gleaming bits of quartz. White rock ribboned and splashed with gleaming yellow, tiny nuggets, quartz bound together with the precious metal dazzled his eyes.

"My God, my God, my God!" He mumbled the words hysterically.

"Did I not say it was much gold?" questioned Rosita's golden voice; "is it not enough, Lynn mio?"

"It's greater than even you said," gasped the American; "never have I seen its like, and I have known the riches of California's Mother Lode, and the treasures of Chihuahua." He tossed back the specimens he had gathered, caught the girl to his breast and breathed like a man throwing a weight off his chest.

"And you will not tell the Gringo miners?" she asked, tearing her lips from his hot kisses and searching his face with her dusky eyes as though she would read his soul.

"Never, my own. Why should we tell others what we know? But, listen, my dearest. I must get two mules so we can ride back to the hacienda. We can carry some gold, but not much, or they will suspect. I don't suppose it is possible to get horses in this God-forgotten place."

Rosita shook her mass of curls. Bandits had struck the region hard. It might be Miguel could tell her great one where mules could be purchased. She was not sure. But it would take American gold. The people were poor. No, there was no way through the jungle but with the machete excepting on the main road. And always one had to cut down the new growth assailing the cleared spaces. There were no horses, the few owned by the sim-

ple natives had long ago been carried off by the rurales.

"And none must know I have told the secret," she warned, "for to speak of it is death. The gold must not be touched, else Miguel may know. May the Virgin grant they do not find our trail."

It needed not the girl's reiterations to convince Morris they both stood in deadly danger. He knew the character of the Indians too well to doubt they would take horrible vengeance if they discovered Rosita had betrayed them. And the menace spurred him to quick action. He still had the few pieces of gold he had saved from the rape of Las Prietas, and old Miguel listened with sparkling eyes as Morris told of his love for the girl and his desire to secure two mules and take his bride to her new home.

"But yes," cackled the old warrior delightedly, "there is one at the place of Bartolo with some mules. You need but two. Juan Ravera and Segundo Nachez are fleet of foot and know the jungle as their own women. Don Lynn will give them so much gold—in three days they will be back with the long-eared devils."

The mission was joyously accepted by the two youths, and shortly after the hour of siesta on the third day they were back with the wicked-eyed animals. Morris breathed deeply as he inspected the mules. The three days had been freighted with dread and suspense—every moment he had feared the visit of Rosita and himself to the hidden gold had been discovered, but he had forced himself to patience and assured the fearful girl nothing could happen to mar their plans. But he had abandoned the hope of fleeing in the night. It would be impossible in the jungle blackness to locate the gold, select the richest ore, and make his escape. He must stake all on his daring during the hours of the siesta, with far greater chances of success. And Rosita sleeping like the rest in the hot afternoon would be easily eluded, with suspicion unlikely to attach to her when the Zacatecos found him gone.

The grilling heat of the next afternoon found Morris at the ledge, loading his

mules with the golden treasure. He worked like a madman, cursing the swarms of stinging pests settling on his hot face, damning the mules as they moved restlessly under their burden. He dared not pile too much weight on their broad backs, he had a long way to go before reaching safety, and he knew the fleet natives could move almost as swiftly as his laden animals in the hampering sea of vegetation. The yellow lust held him in its clutches like some monstrous serpent, urging him to add more to the gleaming treasure already garnered, whispering he might find the source vanished when he returned.

Only with a thrust of his iron will was he able to master the fever consuming his vitals and turn away from the glittering siren. He glanced hastily at the sun, looked at his watch. Two precious hours had gone. Swinging himself to the back of the strongest mule he urged the animal into the one avenue of escape—the narrow trail hewed out by the machetes of the Zacatecos. Near the village he turned aside and entered the path he had laboriously cleared while waiting for the mules to arrive from Bartolo.

It avoided the village but entered the main trail a scant quarter-mile farther on. Morris halted the mules and listened with straining ears. From the village came no sound, save the occasional yap of a drowsy dog. The man's lips twisted in a grim smile. The fools still slept. Ahead he could hear the chatter of monkeys and shrieks of parrots. Doubtless some jungle feud. He urged the mules into a gallop. He wondered why the monkeys and parrots were chattering and screaming so steadily above the drowsy hum of the swarming insect life. His keen eyes picked out three vultures circling high in the brazen sky.

The trail fanned out into the main jungle road, twisted around the base of a mighty mahogany. Morris jerked up his mule with a muffled yell.

Twenty paces in front the jungle had been slashed away to form a little clearing. And standing near its center, her creamy arms bound to branches of an

overhanging tree, was a nude woman. Even as Morris gasped he knew it was Rosita!

Myriads of voracious black flies, whose bite draws blood, swarmed over her tender flesh. Clouds of mosquitoes and stinging pests settled on her. With a convulsive shudder she shook off the crawling horrors. One of the circling vultures settled lower with a thread-like scream, and the monkeys and parrots crowding the trees shrieked and chattered in curious excitement.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" gritted Morris, and with a leap from the saddle reached the girl's side. Wildly he slashed through the vines binding her arms, fought off the whirring insects and caught her in his arms. Jerking off his shirt he wrapped it around her tortured form, laid her tenderly in the soft grass, and began to fling the sacks of golden ore from the back of the nearest mule.

"Curse you, curse you, curse you," he was babbling insanely; "blast you, you yellow fiend." He kicked a sack frantically, leaping away as though from a fatal

serpent as the bursting cotton disgorged its gleaming store. "All my life you've ridden me, spurred me, lashed me. God curse the day I first thought of you."

With frantic strength he flung the sacks crashingly into the smothering undergrowth, raised the half-fainting girl to the saddle, placed the bridle in her weak fingers with cheering words. Need was there for desperate haste; the ones who had doomed the girl to hideous jungle justice must be even now almost at his back. Seeking him at the golden ledge they would not tarry in the chase. His hand flashed to the rifle at the saddle as a circle of grim Zacatecos rose as though by magic from the ground, weapons leveled. He heard the girl gasp as old Miguel strode sternly forward.

"Had you fled with the gold you would have died—also the girl," said the old warrior sternly; "but you have shown you both love greatly. Go, Gringo, with her, in peace; but return not or death strikes. Take the gold you stole, you who lost all but honor and the love of the girl who was our daughter. Go—with God!"



This Month's Cover

To those cash customers who like to have the cover of a periodical illustrate some story in the issue, your editor offers his sincere regrets. After all, this is the first issue under our new management. In the haste of preparing copy there was little or no time to ask the artist, Alvin Pearson, who painted the original picture, to use a thrilling incident from one of the mysterious adventures in this number. Though, it would be obvious to a wooden Indian that the situation we have chosen is exciting and mysterious enough as it is all by itself!

I didn't make the selection of stories until the last moment—not until the printer was becoming peevish over my delays; I wanted to have a large assortment of yarns to choose from. Thus, uncertain which ones would be among the few to be published, I was equally uncertain about the cover. Finally, with the deadline getting closer and closer, the artist and I decided to use a picture that expressed the general idea of the magazine, rather than some part of it. Our hero is the soldier of fortune, the wanderer, the mysterious adventurer. Our heroine is the gracious lady in distress. What could be more appropriate than showing him rescuing her from their enemies on the rooftops of the strange city of Cairo? He and she typify the heroes and heroines of all the stories I intend to include in this and coming issues.

Then, too, the result of our artist's work proved to be so ably, inspiringly executed, that all my doubts disappeared. I feel sure the readers agree that Mr. Pearson has painted a superb picture. Nevertheless, having received hundreds of manuscripts after the announcement that I had taken over MYSTERY ADVENTURES (they are still coming in!) I can decide well in advance of schedule upon one story from which the artist can choose a special idea for his cover. Watch for the next issue on the newsstands. It will be as much of a pleasant surprise for me when I see the original, as it will be for you when you see the reproduction, because, as I hastily write these lines, I haven't the slightest conception of what its subject will be. There is one yarn, for instance . . . but there might be a better one in tomorrow's mail, so I'm going to delay until the printer's patience is worn ragged once more.

So, keep your eye peeled for our second number—on the newsstands around November 25th—and check for yourself whether I'm boasting or really know what I'm talking about. The chances are all on my side—Mr. Pearson couldn't do a poor picture if he tried.

THE EDITOR.

Wings Over Hell

A Complete Novelette

By **MALCOLM Z. AVERY**

CHAPTER I

FROWNING CLOUDS



BUZZ TRAVERS sensed the tense atmosphere of the cantina as he found a table at the outer edge of the roaring crowd and ordered Pueblo beer. Evil, furtive eyes flickered over him as he took his seat with back to the adobe wall, eyes that fell uneasily before his staring challenge. The flyer had spent five years in the tropics—five hectic, flaming years around the fringes of civilization—and had learned the best way to avoid trouble is to dare it. He had carefully chosen his seat to avoid any possibility of a knife-thrust from behind—now he faced the scowling crowd of breeds and earth-scourings with reckless eyes and grim-lipped mouth.

Touching fire to a cigarette with left hand he glanced around the long room with its narrow, leaded windows, sanded floor, and thick walls. A string orchestra wailed *La Paloma*; swarthy, low-browed peons whirled bare-shouldered, drink-flushed women of the underworld with drunken yells. There was an atmosphere in the place of decayed beings whose moral fibre was made more evident by their filthy language and obscene manners. At the long line of gambling tables, ranged along the farther wall, men bent over cards and whirling roulette wheels. Clouds of tobacco smoke floated over the half-naked dancers, partly veiling the garish light from three swinging brass lamps. And yet it was one of the few night spots in town where one could obtain a decent drink of liquor.

The American's gray eyes narrowed as a man moved toward his table through the mob of dancers, looked down on him with

a faint smile touching his lips. He was a tall man, past forty, with the broad high forehead of a thinker, large, brown eyes, and thin, aristocratic face. The thin upper lip was partly veiled by a black, clipped mustache; the lower was thick, full, with a hint of craft, quick passion and sensuous desire. It was the face of a man capable of conceiving daring plots, and equally competent of executing them.

"The Señor will pardon me," the man smiled, "but he is the Señor Travers, the gallant American flyer, is he not?"

"The Señor has good eyes," Buzz admitted.

"I have heard much of him," the other continued. "There was the little affair at Port-au-Prince. The rout of the diamond-smugglers at Cartagena; the saving of the treasure-train at Barquisimeto; the battle in the air over Campo Marte. I have heard the Señor arrived but a few moments ago at Palermo in his silver ship. The Señor has heard that war-clouds gather in this unhappy country of Artigas—this fair land crushed by a tyrant—he would fight for liberty, yes?"

"The Señor takes much for granted," the aviator said coldly. "One must rest—and it is many hours to Cartagena."

"Ah! The Señor Travers is ever prudent. But, pardon, I am Don Fausto Campos. The Señor has heard of me, yes?"

Buzz nodded. "Many times, Don Fausto. You have something to say. Sit down and have a drink."

Don Fausto sank gracefully into a chair, gave his order as a waiter glided to the table, glanced swiftly around, began to talk earnestly. "You are in deadly danger here, my friend," he began in excellent English, "terrible danger. The poor people are stirred against the Americans, and they hate all flyers. It may not be known to you

that men you have crossed many times are here, thirsting for your blood. War looms in Artigas—and vultures gather.”

“Uh-huh. Well, what’s your game? Want me to join up with you and fly my crate against the people you don’t like?”

Don Fausto gave a little grimace of impatience. “Your countrymen are of such bluntness. Even trees hear and talk in this unhappy land, my friend. But all know that the tyrant—this dictator of a Luis Viera called the president—oppresses his people with the airplane. Also he secretly plans to seize the rubber and coffee plantations—the banana concessions—of the Americans, yes. The while he pretends the so great friendship for your people. His flying devils have raided the people—”

“Yeah?” Buzz Travers dropped the cigarette butt onto the sanded floor, returned the glare of a hooked nose brigand with a savage scowl, and stared straight into Don Fausto’s soft eyes. “A lot you care for those poor devils of peons, Don Fausto, a helluva lot. You’re planning on being el presidente yourself, and you’re mighty tender of the peon until you’ve got a good chance to kick him in the face. Just like the rest of your kind. But I reckon you know what you’re doing. Seems like those fools don’t sabe anything but a smash in the jaw. You’re wanting me to fight for the army of liberation—is that it?”

“Ah! This that I would offer is of a difference. I have the little hacienda in the hills. A few acres, but it is the home of my so beautiful cousin and the few poor ones who look to me as their father. It will be the first place attacked by the flying devils of the tyrant when war bursts over this unhappy country. You understand, my friend, I fear not for myself—Don Fausto Campos is ready to sacrifice all that our beloved Artigas may know liberty. But if the brave American would guard this little hacienda from the planes of the tyrant—”

“The brave American would be deviled into fighting for Don Fausto,” Buzz finished grimly. “Why don’t you ship the lady to San Salvador before the vultures start their feast?”

“But she will not go, Don Buzz. She is first a patriot; she places her country above her own safety. Also she has for me the great loyalty. I have urged her to seek safety before war scourges this so beautiful land, but, caramba, she will not listen. And she must be protected against the devil planes. Alas! My poor people.”

The flyer’s cold eyes flickered from Don Fausto to the scowling man watching him from the long bar, glanced back again. “You were saying a few minutes ago, Don Fausto, that I was in great danger here. Now you talk about me protecting your hacienda. Those hellions, then, are taking the gold of Don Fausto Campos.”

The man smiled thinly. His eyes were the hooded eyes of a tiger. Cold lights flickered in their tawny depths.

“But for my protection the Señor would be already dead. The two soldiers guarding your plane are of the army of liberation. It was known, my friend, you must stop at Palermo before you reached Cartagena. Even the moment you left Tegucigalpa was known, and the trap spread by your enemies. But the American is too valuable to Don Fausto Campos to die in this poor place like a dog. Yet all I ask is your protection for my hacienda and the lovely Carolina Vasquez.”

Buzz Travers lit a fresh cigarette and smiled coldly. “You made just one little mistake, hombre, but a bad one. Any time I want to side-slip out of this trap I’m taking you with me, sabe? Yeah, your killers might get me, but they won’t be quick enough to save you. And I’ll sure send plenty of your skunks after you to kick in hell’s front doors. Now that we maybe understand each other what are you paying for the guarding of this little hangout of yours?”

“This place is surrounded by men quick with the gun and knife, my friend,” Don Fausto countered softly. “Do not think I pondered this foolishly before approaching you. But why should we quarrel, Don Buzz? It would be so foolish. So useless. Would three hundred dollars, gold, each month please the brave American?”

Before Buzz could reply a heavy-shoul-

was like Buzz to carry a fight to an aggressor, and he was on his feet with a catlike movement as the fellow came close.

"Been lookin' fer you, hombre," the man growled thickly. "Swore I'd get you when you bored Scar Findley, damn yore stink-

She was the perfect type of mysterious adventuress met with along the frontiers of civilization . . .



*Here was a woman—
quick to love—and hate!*

dered, ferret-eyed man lurched toward the table. Hate gleamed in his bloodshot eyes, and his hands brushed the butts of the ivory-handled guns swinging at his hips. Buzz had already recognized the man for an American renegade with whom he had clashed in a brawl at Port-au-Prince. It

in' hide. Draw, you lousy polecat!"

The fellow dropped into a crouch, hands curving over the butts of his guns, red-rimmed eyes watching Buzz like a ferret watching a rat. But instead of moving a hand to his automatic the aviator struck out viciously with a flashing fist. The hard knuckles, backed by one hundred and seventy pounds of solid weight and iron muscles, caught the crouching gunman squarely on the point of the chin. The fellow straightened suddenly, staggered back, crashed to the floor. Buzz whirled, whipping out his automatic with the same motion. A beady-eyed breed dropped the knife he had plucked from his sash and shrieked as a bullet smashed into his arm. Two hard-faced men checked hands leaping to holsters as the deadly automatic covered them.

"Better not, hombres," the flyer stated coldly. "I'm boring the first man acting foolish."

Don Fausto was shrieking commands and threats, waving arms wildly. The muttering crowd subsided as several soldiers with gleaming rifles rushed into the cantina. Don Fausto gave a curt command, and the man who had started the brawl was jerked roughly to his feet and rushed outside.

"You see, amigo," Don Fausto said softly. "The trap would have closed but for my orders."

"Yeah, and it would have had more than one victim," Buzz grinned. "I wasn't sure you wasn't talking to give them the chance to crash me until you showed your hand, either, and I was sure watching you, compadre. You were talking about three hundred, gold."

"With more if the revolution succeeds, amigo. And a hundred more if you induce the Señorita to fly with you to San Salvador. This will be no place for women. To me the Señorita will not listen—but it may be another could persuade her, yes."

"Uh-huh. All right, I'll take the job. From what I've heard of Don Luis Viera he isn't the sort to war on women, even to make it interesting for his enemies. That's a helluva lot more than you can

say for most of the breed down here in the tropics, Don Fausto. But guarding your hacienda doesn't mean I'm cracking down on the government forces, sabe?"

Don Fausto smothered a smile. "Of a surety, Señor. You will honor my poor house this night, Don Buzz, it will be safer for us both. There are many men in Artigas who would chance much to slide a knife between your bones. And the plane will be well guarded, yes."

"All right, get going. But don't forget I'm watching you close, even if you are all right. I've run across too many dirty plays down here to trust anybody overfar."

Keeping close to Don Fausto, hand resting on the automatic in the pocket of his flying-coat, Buzz began to move warily toward the door, his keen eyes never shifting from the scowling men standing by the bar. At the entrance he stepped closer to the revolutionary leader, keeping him as a shield between himself and a treacherous attack from the rear, and faced the outside. He wasn't trusting Don Fausto Campos an inch, and he gave a little sigh of relief as he reached the room his host had prepared for him in the guarded house.

CHAPTER II

THE WINGED HELLION

BANKING the ship mildly Buzz looked down on the lush jungle, gleaming gray-green through the shimmering heat-mist. Ringed about by crowding vegetation a tiny lake glowed and sparkled in the blazing sunlight like a diamond set in emerald. Far in the east the pale-green Caribbean rolled its restless waters, lonely as the silent jungle, without hint of sail or wisp of smoke. Above stretched the illimitable tropical sky, blue and dazzling as flawless sapphire.

Leveling off Buzz pushed the throttle ahead and swung around to the northwest. He was thinking deeply over the events of the past night as he winged toward the timber-crowned hills sheltering the hacienda he had been hired to protect. He knew there was no danger of the planta-

tions being bombed by a government plane, and he felt certain Don Fausto Campos had engaged him for some reason decidedly different from the purpose he had stated.

"That bird's so crooked he could hide behind a gimlet," the flyer mused as he eased through a gentle trade wind. "Wonder if he figured I might join up with the government forces, and hired me just to keep me quiet. Hell, when a fellow's got a rep like you, Buzz Travers, he's sure going to find plenty trouble every way he turns. Well, no use fretting over a landing 'til your gear's wiped off."

The sweet little ship was making close to a hundred miles an hour, and Buzz cut her down to half-speed. He had left Palermo shortly after dawn, after a thorough inspection of the plane. He had been too long in the tropics to trust either native mechanics or uniformed soldiers, but he had found no indication of any tampering with the ship. Evidently Don Fausto was playing fair, and sincere in his desire to have the flyer on his payroll—for a time at least.

Slipping the ship down to three thousand feet Buzz reached for his binoculars and focused the glasses on a tiny speck in the dazzling sky. Instantly a huge biplane, black as ebony, seemed to leap toward him. The ship circled slowly, dropped lower. Buzz caught a burst of smoke, followed by a swirling cloud of dust.

"The dirty skunk's layin' eggs," Buzz gritted. "Cracking down on some helpless village. Can you beat it?"

The silver plane zoomed as Buzz pulled back the stick and gave her the gun. Climbing in tight spirals she gained altitude fast, leveled off at five thousand feet, and drove toward the distant biplane. Looking down Buzz saw a bomb flower out in lurid bursts of red, orange and gold in the midst of a small Indian village. His racketing motor drowned out the report, but he could see the fragile huts toppling into flaming ruin as he stared through his lens. The black biplane zoomed, straightened out, circled widely. Buzz swore softly as he focused the glasses on the killer. From the tiny pole sticking up at the front edge of the

wing two small flags fluttered in the driving wind—the red, blue and green banner of Artigas and the Stars and Stripes!

"The dirty, murderin' skunk!" came through the flyer's grim lips. "Pretendin' he's an American pilot with a Federal ship. If that dirty outlaw isn't flying for the rebels I'm a horned toad. It's just like those treacherous rats down here to pull a stunt like that."

Pushing the throttle to the last notch Buzz drove his ship at top speed for the biplane. But the big boat was now in full flight. It was a good two miles away when it dropped its eggs; now it was putting distance between itself and the stricken village with the speed of a comet. Buzz lost it in the blazing sun, picked it up a few moments later, a mere speck in the sapphire vault. It was climbing fast, gaining steadily on the pursuer.

Twenty minutes later Buzz quit the chase in disgust, kicked the ship around and headed for a forest-crested peak towering high above a cluster of lofty ridges. It would be useless to wing back to the little village; his appearance would only further terrorize the primitive inhabitants. The hellish work had been done—and the killer had escaped.

"Maybe I just happened to wing in when that skunk was doing his dirty work, but I'm bettin' both ways from the ace I was intended to see the whole show. That bird was watching for me, sure as hell's hot. Now, they'll try and make me believe that dirty work was pulled by a Federal flyer. Maybe try and blame me for it."

Tiny wrinkles showed between the flyer's gray eyes as he narrowed his brows in thought. The people still alive in the bombed village would be certain the biplane was flown by a Gringo, and their story would fan the smouldering resentment against the American plantations into open flame. Also it would convince them their own government aimed at their extermination.

"Pretty slick," Buzz mused grimly. "That hombre is flying for Don Fausto and his bunch of snakes, but the other fellows

will get the blame for that killing. You can't make a peon believe anything else. Wonder if that Fausto hombre figures to throw the same dust in my eyes?"

He circled widely, watching the sky closely for any sign of the biplane. He was taking no chance of a sudden attack from the rear. But the killer had vanished like a wraith. Diving the ship mildly as he neared the green-mantled peak Buzz studied the terrain spreading beneath him, marked where the hungry jungle retreated sullenly from a broad acreage where the machete had hewn out a plantation. Above a grove of lofty cedars, upthrusting above the crowding vegetation near the top of a hill, floated bluish wisps of smoke.

"Reckon this is the place," Buzz grinned. "I'll be late at Fausto's hacienda, but reckon he'll figure I spent considerable time sizing up the work of that killer. Yeah, there's a car nosing out from the trees."

Buzz glanced at the altimeter. It registered four thousand feet. Banking the plane vertically he cut the engine and let her slip. When she came out with a rush she had lost two thousand. Pulling back on the stick, keeping equal foot pressure on rudder pedals, Buzz sent her up in a wire-shrilling zoom, flashed into a loop, straightened out and looked down.

He grinned as a man, standing beside the car, waved his cork helmet wildly. He had given the specified signal with his plane, and was receiving his answer. Buzz leaned over the curve of the fuselage, waved an arm, then slipped the ship down a few hundred feet. The ground was level as a floor for some distance, providing excellent landing. Buzz nosed her down and cut the engine. The ship landed neatly about thirty yards from the car, rolled slowly to a stop. Snapping off the ignition Buzz unbuckled the belt, and climbed down from the cockpit. Mechanically he lit a cigarette.

The man with the automobile was walking toward him, hand outstretched, a grin on his freckled, good-humored face. He was about medium build, bronzed like an Indian by the fierce Artigas sun, with firm mouth and dark-blue eyes.

"Knew you'd be here, Buzz," he grinned his delight. "Figured those knife-slingers in that wolf town wouldn't eat you. But it sure was one damn fool stunt just the same. What happened?"

Buzz shrugged as he gripped the other's hard fingers. "Nothin' much. That Campos hombre hired me to guard his hacienda—howling he's leery of his hideout being bombed. Sure, he's up to some dirty game just as we figured. Fact is, Breck, I just came across a dirty buzzard layin' eggs on a village back a piece."

Breck Kendrick listened frowningly as Buzz told briefly of the events of the past few hours. "Looks mighty funny to me, Buzz," he commented slowly, "damned funny. Course that Campos skunk is playing in with Mose Drake and his bunch of hellions. Looks to me like they're reading your cards, Buzz, and first thing you know you'll have a knife slipped into your hide. If that bunch finds out what you're doing you'll be buzzard meat pronto."

"Yeah—if they find out I'm flying for Don Luis and the government. But I'm taking that chance, Breck. One thing sure, that gang has a killer flying a black biplane, and posing as a government bird. Drake and his gang have stirred up the peons against us, Breck, and we've got to spoil their game before it goes much farther. Another thing—why is that Fausto hombre hiring me to protect his hideout? Seems like he's more interested in getting this Señorita away than in protecting the hacienda. You knowin' anything about her?"

Breck shook his red head. "That pelican keeps his tracks mighty well covered, Buzz. Been hangin' 'round here for weeks, tryin' to show Doris how good he ain't. You know how it is, Buzz. She's fresh from the States and this hombre with his fine ways and fancy make-up has sure got her interested. I'd kick him off the plantation, but Doris thinks he's a real hero. Blast his skin!"

Buzz nodded. "She's young, Breck. Mistakes the glitter for the gold. But she'll get wise after a bit. Course even if this teapot revolution won out; which it

won't, Fausto would be just Drake's pup. That hombre is scheming to grab off those rubber plantations and kick the rest of the boys out. And we've got to spoil his game. How's your bus?"

"Fine, Buzz, fine. A sweet little Boeing that handles like a witch. I'm betting those whelps will be some surprised when they run into two real Yankee flyers."

"Uh-huh. Well, got to be movin'. I'm not tippin' my hand to those buzzards before I'm ready to lead trumps. Get that smoke-signal going when I'm wanted. I'll be watching."

"All right. But I sure wish you weren't playing that game, Buzz. We're surrounded by spies, you know that. The fellow playing straight down here is the guy getting the most money from his boss. When the pay gets bad he's patriotic for the other side. And watch that Señorita, pal. Maybe she's the one slated to have you stood against a 'dobe wall at dawn."

"Seems to me this Fausto wants to lose her, Breck. Offered me an extra hundred, gold, to get her to San Salvador. Yeah, maybe it's a scheme to fog me, but I'm sure watchin' everybody close. I'll be slidin' along before some hombre noses in."

"All right, Buzz. I'll spin the prop."

"Thanks, but she's got a self-starter. And the engine's warm. I'm not taking any chances of being washed out on the ground because a propclimber isn't handy. You'd better be ready to take-off any minute, too. Hell's sure going to pop. When the news of a killer bombing that village gets out you boys are sure going to be mighty unpopular. But el presidente will have something to say before this dance gets very far."

Buzz was turning toward the plane when a girl rode out from among the trees. Halting the superb chestnut near the automobile she swung down lightly, and ran toward the two men, careless of the smothering heat. Buzz heard Breck smother an exclamation of vexation; then he was being introduced to his friend's sister.

"I heard your plane, and I was sure it must be you," she smiled, giving him her small, firm hand. "I've heard Breck talk

about you so much I've been wild to meet you."

Buzz was noting her slim figure, her clear pearly complexion, her crown of red-gold hair. Small teeth gleamed through red lips, and the dark-blue eyes met his cool glance with a hint of merriment. There was something wilful and reckless about these steady eyes and the firm mouth and chin. He could understand how she had fascinated Don Fausto Campos, and why she was drawn toward the picturesque leader of the rebels.

CHAPTER III

INSIDE THE LINES

"I'M mighty glad to meet you, Miss Kendrick," Buzz smiled. "I'm afraid, though, you'll find me like the rest of the men you'll meet down here. Breck's a good pal, but you don't want to believe all the nice things he says about a fellow."

"Breck doesn't say things unless he means it," she laughed. "But, really I've been just wild to meet you. I've heard so much of what you've done in the tropics, and of how you've called The Hawk, and—"

"Sorry, Doris, but Buzz is in a hurry," Breck cut in hastily. "And, by the way, don't let anyone know he's been here. As I've told you before we can't trust anyone, not even some folks you think are all right. This isn't God's country."

"So I've heard you say," she shrugged, "but I think it's wonderful down here. So you've got to go, Mr. Travers? I was hoping you'd take me up in your plane. But you've got to come and visit us soon, mind now, I insist on it. Just as soon as you possibly can."

"I'll remember, Miss Kendrick," Buzz assured gravely. "Right now I'm supposed to be guarding a hacienda, but I'll sure wing over first chance. Pronto. Thanks for the invitation."

With a smile to the girl and a nod to Breck the flyer climbed into the cockpit, started the engine, took off in a flashing zoom. Banking around Buzz headed for the timber-crested hills in the northwest,

As the ship roared over the jungle, with the motor humming its song of security and the cool backwash of churned air cooling his brow, Buzz found plenty food for thought. At times he frowned over the problem confronting him, and as he thought of the oily Fausto Campos and the wilful-eyed girl his mouth set in straight, hard lines.

"That greasy buzzard is temporarily attracted by her blond beauty," he mused. "Something different from most of the women he's known. And she figures him for a romantic prince she's probably dreamed about fifty times. And she's just bent on having her way enough to play right into that hombre's hands. A girl like that isn't going to believe a fire's hot until she sings her fingers. But she isn't any fool. Trouble is, she's liable to wake up from her dream when it's too late. Reckon it's kind of up to me to watch that buzzard, and try and spoil his little scheme. Ought to know more after I'm at his hideout a few days."

He was easing along three thousand feet above the western fringe of the sparkling lake, enjoying the wild beauty of the scene. Diving the ship mildly he looked down on the inviting water, noted where a creek, looking like a silver ribbon, shimmered through the vine-laced branches of a mighty saber tree. He jerked the stick back instinctively as he felt the breeze of a bullet fan his cheek! Again a slug winged past, buried itself in the frail wall of the cockpit.

The silver ship went up in a wire-shrilling zoom as Buzz gave her the gun. Circling warily he made out a slight bluish haze rising in the stagnant air over the matted vegetation. A moment later sunlight shot back from polished barrels of rifles as several men pushed into a clearing to get better shots at the plane.

Kicking the ship around in a wide spiral Buzz shot off at a sharp angle. He had no time to waste on jungle-snipers, although he felt a savage urge to teach the cowardly riflemen a stern lesson.

"Reckon there's something down there I'm not supposed to see," he mused as he

sent the ship up in short, tight spirals. "Maybe some of those Indians figured I was the bird layin' eggs on that village, but that doesn't seem reasonable. Those fellows were shooting pretty accurate for Indians. I'm bettin' they're soldiers. Near got me, too. Well, they didn't, so why bother?"

The timber-crowned hills were commencing to loom up. From the southeast, swooping in from the sea, a black spot was spreading on the horizon. It meant a savage storm would soon be lashing the jungle. Buzz pulled the ship around sharply and shot her ahead with throttle shoved to the last notch. He had rode too many tropical storms to have any liking for them. Already gusty winds were plucking at the plane, tossing her up, dropping her into vacuums with wrenching jolts.

Buzz reached the hacienda just ahead of the storm's snapping teeth. A two-storied adobe house crowned a knoll, with a cluster of palm-leaf jacales stretching away toward the jungle in the rear. A grove of royal palms dominated the knoll, their fronds tossing wildly on the wings of the roaring wind. Around the clearing, several acres in extent, the interminable jungle crept like some mottled green monster. Great drops of rain smote the wings of the silver plane as Buzz nosed her down, blinded his goggles, lashed his face stingingly. Unerring instinct guided flying skill as he fought the plucking, shrieking wind and landed with a slight jar.

From the doorways of the fragile huts he saw black, wondering eyes peering as he taxied under a palm-thatched shelter. Don Fausto had minutely described the hacienda and the hastily improvised hangar, and despite the storm Buzz had located the landmarks with little difficulty. The hangar was on the fringe of a dense growth of vegetation, some fifty yards from the house. Buzz shut off the purring engine, dropped the belt, and climbed down. A heavy-shouldered, fiercely-mustached peon greeted him effusively, then led the way to the house.

Buzz was conscious of a strange thrill as a woman came toward him with the

lithe, swaying grace of a tigress. He was beholding a woman of surpassing loveliness; a rich olive complexion with flush of blooming roses; full red lips; flashing, lustrous eyes; great masses of silky black hair piled high on a shapely head. She bowed, smiled, murmured a greeting in faultless Spanish.

The beauty of the woman fascinated him; yet he was conscious of something diamond-hard under her appealing charm; the hint of a sword swathed in silk. Here was a woman quick to love—and hate. Relentless in avenging real or fancied wrongs. Don Fausto had said she was his cousin, and had called her *Señorita*. Buzz shrewdly suspected she was much closer than that to the wily Artigan.

Carolina waved with the sinuous grace of some wild creature tamed by circumstance and not by her own free will. She was the perfect type of adventuress met with along the frontiers of civilization—her exotic mouth was red as a poppy, its lips the lush, curled petals. Buzz, had he been free and irresponsible and not engaged in this mysterious adventure, would have liked nothing better than to have enjoyed a brief, torrid affair with Carolina. Nor would she have been averse to this, he reasoned, provided she ran no risk of discovery. She was that sort.

"Don Fausto telephoned from Palermo of the gallant American's coming," she was saying in a rich contralto. "But much I feared for the *Señor* when came the storm. He must indeed be the Hawk of which I have heard so much. Our poor house is greatly honored by his coming."

"The honor is mine, *Señorita*," Buzz responded easily. "One would fly far to behold such beauty. Don Fausto has explained why I am here?"

She shrugged her exquisite shoulders. "Don Fausto has needless fears, *Señor*. Am I then a child?"

"War flames, *Señorita*," Buzz said gravely, "and Don Fausto fears an air raid on the hacienda. He prays the lovely *Señorita* to seek safety with friends in San Salvador."

For an instant her dusky eyes glowed;

her ripe red lips tightened. "Don Fausto knows what I have chosen. What is one little life to the welfare of a nation? Can a woman not risk as much, sacrifice as much, give as much as a man? I have told Don Fausto my place is here—with my people. I will not go to this San Salvador, *Madre Dios*, no!"

"It is not for me to dispute the *Señorita*'s will," Buzz said quietly. "She should know what will best help the cause and Don Fausto. But a little time ago and not far from here a ship struck an Indian village with flaming death. It is not war, no, but it's done."

She listened unmoved as he told briefly of the black plane's raid. The house was quivering under the driving assault of the hurricane, reverberating to the hammer of rain on roof and walls and crashing thunder. The woman was as indifferent to the fury of the elements as to war's red threat.

A barefooted girl, clad in a shapeless dress of white cotton, came from an adjoining room at her call, and showed the flyer to a room prepared for him.

Buzz was puzzling over the situation when the girl left him and he lit a cigarette. He was still wrapped in thought two hours later, when the storm had passed and the sun struck down savagely from a cloud-flecked sky. Don Fausto Campos wished to rid himself of this woman, who was devoted to him. And he was courting Doris Kendrick. *Did* the woman know? Buzz wondered. Was the crafty Artigan afraid that Carolina's suspicions might become realities? Was Don Fausto secretly hoping she would transfer her affection to the American? What the devil was the fellow planning anyway?

"That buzzard's stirrin' the peons against the American planters to have a good excuse for this scrap," Buzz mused. "He's just Mose Drake's jackal, but he's hangin' around Breck's sister like he was a game cock. He's wantin' to get rid of the *Señorita* bad. Wonder if he really wants Doris Kendrick, or just playing her to get something on us fellows? You never can sabe a snake. I'm bettin' if the *Señorita* flew with me to San Salvador that

Fausto hombre would swear I'd stolen her from the hacienda. It would go over big with those damned fool peons, too. Double-crossed by the Gringo he trusted. Damned if I know—"

The deep hum of a plane broke into his thoughts with startling suddenness. The hum grew and deepened into a thunderous roar, mingling with high-pitched screams from the women in the house. The structure shook and rocked to its foundations with the reverberating roar of a bomb!

Darting from his room Buzz sped to the wide doorway in time to see the black biplane zoom into the cloud-flecked sky like a soaring hawk. It circled slowly, shot down, its motor racketing viciously. A wide gush of golden flame bloomed against the edge of the jungle behind the house. The place was shivering as though smote by a Titan's axe. Clouds of acrid smoke mingled with choking dust, fogged the atmosphere. Lurid billows of flame rolled from the stricken brushwood huts.

The black plane soared up, climbing in a steep spiral, circled the plantation; then, as though fearing a counter-attack, raced away to the east. Muttering curses Buzz started for his ship, but a cool little hand slid into his, checked his rush.

"See, Señor, it is vain," Carolina said quietly. "The coward flees. He is gone."

Flying at a low altitude the black ship had vanished behind the tops of the crowding trees. Buzz glanced down at the woman. She was pale, but no sign of fear showed in her dusky eyes.

"Don Fausto feared it," she whispered, "feared the tyrant would strike the hacienda. Madre Dios! Did you not see it, Señor—the flags? The tyrant's plane flown by a Gringo! Madre Dios!"

Buzz choked back the hot retort on his lips. Why tell her what he suspected and have his suspicions relayed to Don Fausto? But his face was grim as he raced for the flaming jacales, closely followed by the woman. Huts and brushwood still flamed, but no groans of wounded men came to his ears. No sign of twisted, mangled bodies.

"It was most fortunate," Carolina was murmuring. "With the passing of the

storm the men returned to their work. The women and little ones were in the house. The saints guarded us, Señor."

"Yeah—that killer was the saint," Buzz grunted. "Couldn't have missed the house unless he tried. Looks to me like this is a straight warning to you to leave the hacienda before that bird starts layin' eggs in earnest. I'm ready to take off whenever you say the word."

"But I will not go," she cried passionately. "Am I a Vasquez, a coward to be thus frightened? I tell you I will not go. I have the reason for staying here, yes. The Señor—he has the great plane. He is here to guard the hacienda—is it not? Madre Dios, I will not be driven from my home by a Gringo dog. It is my will, my command, Señor, that you kill this dog!"

CHAPTER IV

THE GREASE MONKEY

BUZZ smiled bitterly. "Yeah, sounds easy, doesn't it? But how are you going to wash out a buzzard who won't fight? I chased him this morning, and all he did was fly like a bat out of hades. That buzzard won't fight fair; he's a dirty, yellow killer, and I'm advising you to take off while you've the chance. Next time that skunk might lay his eggs on the house."

She shook her head determinedly, brushed back the curling tresses from her brow. "But I say I will not go. I have the reason, yes. Is the Hawk, then, afraid of this killer? Is he so-so discreet?"

Buzz shrugged, refusing to be angered into saying something he might later regret. "One plane can't guard the hacienda day and night, Señorita. I've got to land for rest and to look after my ship. But I'll do my best. The ship will be ready whenever the Señorita wishes."

Cursing, muttering peons were running in from the rubber and coffee plantations, attracted by the flaming jacales. Their raging eyes flickered to the American, scanned the cloud-spangled heavens fearfully. The moaning women ceased their clamor as the mistress whirled on them with scorching words. Evidently they

feared her worse than even the black plane. Turning away Buzz ran over to the hangar.

It was composed of a big piece of canvas stretched over poles at the base of a high cliff. The hangar had been in plain view of the killer, but he had made no effort at its destruction. Several peons followed the flyer, muttering evilly, hands hovering near their fearsome machetes.

"I am the grand mechanic, Señor, caramba, yes. The Señor needs one to spin the propeller, yes?"

Buzz's gray eyes narrowed as a grinning man sauntered toward him. The fellow was taller than the others, with cool, brown eyes, bristling mustache, and a general air of reckless daring about him. His left eyelid lowered in a warning wink as he continued to approach.

"Yeah—you sure look like one," Buzz drawled in the slow Spanish of the Caribbean. "Reckon you're the hombre that invented crowbars."

"And the two-legged contraptions to dance on the business end," the other flashed with a gleam of yellow teeth. "Man, I invented those planes and the jugheads tryin' to work 'em. That's me, Miguel Oleta. Padre Dios! You want one grand mechanic, yes."

"Seems like you're talkin' sense, Miguel," the American allowed quietly. "All right, climb the prop and hop in."

It had come to Buzz that it would be a good idea to make the peons believe he was unable to start the ship without the prop being spun by one of their number. Might as well keep them in ignorance of his self-starter. Miguel swung the prop over—the powerful motor barked into life. Miguel grinned widely as he hopped into the rear cockpit, yelling warnings to the staring peons standing in the blazing sunlight.

They scattered like frightened pigeons as the silver plane taxied out of the hangar, gathered speed, and zoomed into the wind. Buzz was praying for a sight of the black killer as he climbed in short, tight circles, straightened out at six thousand feet, pushed the throttle ahead. He had adjusted the phone head set before taking off,

and a quick glance over his shoulder showed the mechanic had lost no time in slipping on the contrivance. A throaty chuckle came over the wire.

"Figured you'd shove in, you old dynamiter," sounded the rich Irish voice. "Sure, I've been waitin' for ye, praying for ye. 'Tis the devil hisself is ridin' the wind, Buzz Travers."

"Yeah, but that's not explaining what you're doing here, Mike O'Hara," Buzz chuckled through the mouthpiece. "Thought you'd be at Cardenas."

"Sure, man, when Don Luis wants a good job done right he sends Mike O'Hara to do that same. Thought maybe the name av Miguel Oleta might mean somethin' to ye, belike you're forgettin' the handsome face of a handsome man. 'Twas as near Mike O'Hara as I could get. Sure I've got many things ye'd like to know, Buzz, me lad, and do you be landin' this crate out in that sand I'll be tellin' ye 'nough to make your tongue play La Golondrina between your teeth."

"Yeah, you were always a good man with your mouth, Mike, but it'll take more than that to wash out this fog. First thing I want is a nice little place to camouflage this ship. That hangar back there don't appeal to me, not for a minute. Know what I mean?"

"Sure I know, me lad. And I know the place. I've been figurin' you'd be shovin' in here from the day that Campos hellion, may the devil bite him, fixed up that canvas trap. And I've hand-picked the place for ye. Kick that old crate around to the south a mite. Foine. Now d'ye see them trees over yonder stickin' up in the air? Ye do? Well, me lad, on t'other side av them trees is a bit av level ground, with a ledge pushin' out from a hill like a don shinin' up to a bunch av señoritas. I picked it 'cause there'll be no danger av them mule-eared peons hearkenin' to something that 'twould only do them harm."

Gliding the plane mildly over a group of timber-crowned hills Buzz dived her gently until she was hidden from the hacienda by the jungle screen. Then nosed her down; looked over the wide strip of

level ground spreading away from a mighty cliff. Still mindful of the black plane Buzz scanned the sky with his glasses before landing. It would be a poor end of the adventure to be washed out on the ground. Save for a fringe on the western horizon the clouds had vanished, and the sun swung like a huge ball of molten copper in the flawless blue dome. Laying aside the binoculars Buzz nosed the plane down, cut the engine, and landed in a neat three-pointer.

"Foine, me lad," approved Mike O'Hara. "Now just walk her under that shelf. Plenty room, and to spare. Sure, we'll be snug as a don in the arms av his querida."

Some fifty feet above the ground a granite ledge shelved out from the hillside like a canopy, effectively concealing the shelter from the sky. Buzz taxied the ship into the haven, stopped the engine, and climbed down over the fuselage. Mike followed like an agile monkey, and fished out cigarettes.

"Well, me lad, it's fair bustin' with questions ye are, and Mike O'Hara's not a bit bashful. First thing—you're in one hell av a jam. Don Fausto Campos is figurin' on you persuadin' Carolina Vasquez this is no place for the lady. Ye see, me lad, he's sweet on a wilful-eyed girl over at Breck Kendrick's ranch, and it's meself figures Carolina knows all about it. And when a woman gets her affections tangled in this part av the world, Buzz, the devil digs in and thanks the saints he ain't affectionate."

"Yeah. But howcome you're playing in with those peons, Mike? One little slip and you'll be vulture-meat."

Mike grinned and twisted bristling mustache. "Sure, they figure I'm one av their own, Buzz. Me mother was half-Spanish, and I look like one and talk better. But first off—who's that winged devil in that black coffin?"

Buzz shook his head. "That's what I'm trying to find out, Mike. My guess is that it's some hombre with a record the rebels have hired to raise hell and damnation. Probably some killer Mose Drake picked up on that last trip of his to Mexico City.

But you won't be able to make those peons believe he isn't some American flying a government plane. The dirty buzzard washed out a village this morning. Ran like a rabbit when he spotted me. That crate is a fast one, believe me."

The Irishman pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette. "I'm figurin' that devil'll wash out the shanty for good if the Señorita ain't movin' pronto. And I'll bet me last peso he's actin' under Don Fausto's orders. Course they'll blame it all on the government and the American planters. It's not the peons that want war, Buzz, they never do. But they ain't got the brains of a mosquito. I've been here a month now, dancin' with th' women and drinkin' pulque with th' men, and I'm tellin' ye hell's a rest cure to what Artigas'll be if Mose Drake an' his devils ain't cut off from their pockets."

"I'm figuring you know I'm flying for the government and the planters," Buzz stated quietly. "Dropped into Palermo casual-like just to find out what was going on. Of course Don Fausto was waiting there for me just as I figured, but I wasn't expectin' to be hired to look after a lady. Took the job because I figured it'd give me a slant on what's going on behind the lines. Maybe you don't know, Mike, that Breck Kendrick has a new ship and is ready to crack down on those skunks minute they start their dirty work."

"Don Luis and the planters'll be needin' it," Mike grunted. "Now, you listen here, Buzz. I've heard 'nough from them peons to know that Campos hombre is shovin' in tonight. Maybe aimin' to have a show-down with you. And he'll most likely be kicked along by Drake hisself. And that ain't all I knows."

"No?"

"Nope. Me an' Andreas Soto—that's the left-handed cussedness of Fausto Campos—got howlin' drunk th' other night on some tequila I'd had th' good sense to have. Loved me like a brother, that greaser did, and drunk as he figures I am but ain't, he jabbered 'til he ran out of information. Seems like them scorpions are aimin' to slide a knife atween your ribs

when you reach San Salvador with the lady. You can't steal a man's querida you sabe, Buzz, not when that man's the great liberator of a people that ain't knowin' they're oppressed an' walked on with steel boots. Sabe?"

"Yeah, reckon so." Buzz smiled grimly and reached for a fresh smoke. "I've been kind of wonderin' if there wasn't something like that in the wind, Mike. It would be just the sort of a game a skunk like Fausto would play. A gringo stealin' his sweet-heart! He'd be the original gold-plated, halo-crowned martyr with those fools. That'd be enough to make any patriot of Artigas chew his ears. Huh-huh, sure sounds good. Say, Mike, know anything about what's going on by that little lake over to the southwest?"

The Irishman shook his mop of black, wavy hair. "Devil a thing, Buzz."

"Some buzzards gave me a burst when I'm flying over," the aviator explained. "Shows there's somethin' there that's worth lookin' over. I'm thinking maybe that black plane roosts down there. Reckon we'd better be circling back. Those peons are sure a suspicious bunch, and the Señorita may have changed her mind."

"What you doin' with th' crate?"

"I'll keep her in that hangar until I'm ready to show my wings, Mike. No sense tippin' our hands 'til we're ready to talk turkey. But I'll have a good excuse to stay with the ship, now that black devil is holding the air. Keep close to the place, Mike, and be ready for a quick take-off. When we move it'll be sure prompt and sudden."

Five minutes later the silver plane was winging back toward the hacienda. A strong wind plucked hungrily at wings and fuselage as the propeller slashed its way through the warm air, requiring more than usual attention from the pilot. The ship rocked in an air-pocket, dropped sharply, straightened out as Buzz pulled her out of the wind-thrust. He sent her up in a wire-shrilling zoom, looked down on the hacienda. With a muttered word to Mike he slipped the ship down a thousand feet, scrutinized the terrain with narrowed eyes.

A little cavalcade of horsemen was emerging from the jungle-edge, heading for the house. The foremost rider halted his horse, waved an arm. Leaning over the curve of the fuselage Buzz answered the signal, then banked the ship and circled.

"Reckon we're going to learn somethin' pronto, Mike," he said through the mouth-piece of the head phone set. "That bunch with Don Fausto is sure a tough-looking assembly of hombres. I'm bettin' that buzzard is planning to talk turkey to the Señorita—and then some."

CHAPTER V

GATHERING VULTURES

SUNSET bathed the hacienda in crimson and gold when Buzz Travers, completing a thorough inspection of the silver plane, sauntered carelessly from the improvised hangar. Behind the house Mike O'Hara, playing the part of the indolent peon flawlessly, was listlessly aiding the chattering men and women to rear new jacales of palm-thatched brushwood. Buzz grinned as a massive Indian girl, shapely as a bronze statue, slipped a rounded arm around the Irishman's thick shoulders. Four cold-eyed, hard-bitten men sat their patient horses a short distance from the hangar, their rifles across saddles.

Bronzed and whiskered, clad in the cheap cotton garments of peons, Buzz knew they were not what they seemed, but hardened renegades from the States, ruthless and dangerous as watching rattlesnakes. These men were ready to shoot him down whenever Don Fausto gave the word. Buzz met their cold glances with assumed nonchalance as he lit a cigarette and moved toward the jacales.

He marked six men guarding the house, with three more standing near a corral. Their horses had evidently been selected more for endurance than speed, and all the men were heavily armed.

"A choice bunch of buzzards," Buzz mused as he glanced over the killers. "Fausto has learned something—he isn't trusting any of his own breed over-far. Picked up every killer and skunk he could

hire. Must have plenty gold. That's where Mose Drake shines."

He turned toward the house as his name was called. Don Fausto Campos was coming toward him, moving with puma-like grace despite his highheeled riding-boots.

"Como la va, amigo?" the Artigan called gayly. "It is done. To save her people from the black killer the Señorita goes with the brave American. She has consented, yes."

"That's good," Buzz said easily. "Glad to hear it, Fausto. This isn't any place for a girl with that black hellion circling around. Reckon you know all about that dirty killer and what he's been pulling."

"Socorro! But for the saints, my friend, the hacienda would be ashes and blood. Caramba! We must haste, amigo. The Señor has heard, in the war perhaps, of a devil flyer called von Schlecter? Of the army of Austria? Yes?"

Buzz nodded slowly and his lips set in hard lines. "Yeah. A lousy buzzard kicked out by his own gang. Bombing villages and farms just because he liked to kill. Yeah, I've sure heard of that skunk, plenty."

"This devil, this fiend with a puma's soul, flies for the tyrant of Artigas, my friend. He is a great flyer, yes?"

"Damned good, and then some more," Buzz grunted.

Don Fausto smothered a smile of satisfaction. "It is terrible, amigo. This devil has struck my poor country, murdered the patriot whose only crime was dreams of freedom. The little jacale flames, Don Buzz, and the women and little ones die. Padre Dios! But it is the price one pays for liberty, yes. Yet this tyrant of a Luis Viera, this blood-lapping puma of an el presidente, will weep tears of blood for this day. Socorro!"

Buzz conquered a hot urge to fling the Artigan's treacherous lies into his teeth. He would fight this serpent with his own venom, pretend to be the fool he was being played for. The men guarding the house had moved nearer. Buzz shrugged, lit a fresh smoke.

"If the bird flying that black crate is

Franz von Schlecter you can't expect anything but plain, unadulterated hell, amigo," the American informed dryly. "Next time he'll wash the whole hacienda out. When is the Señorita ready for the flight to San Salvador?"

"Not San Salvador, amigo; Baracoa. There she will be both safe from this devil killer and closer to me. There are the great hills at Baracoa, and the hidden caves. There are good reasons, amigo, why you must not go to this San Salvador."

"Yeah? Meaning?"

Don Fausto looked around apprehensively, lowered his voice. "I am beset with treachery, my friend. Everywhere there is treachery; my people corrupted by the gold of the tyrant. It has come to me, Don Buzz, that enemies of the patriots know my plans. At San Salvador the Señor would be killed—Carolina Vasquez held as a hostage to break the revolt. Ah, amigo, we fight not men, but devils."

"The Señorita will be ready to start at dawn?" Buzz was thinking fast as he asked the question. Baracoa was a small town in the lofty fastnesses of the Sierra Madre mountains, isolated, evil, the hotbed of the revolt. The stronghold of the sinister Mose Drake, it would prove a veritable hell for anyone refusing to obey the orders of the American renegade.

"At dawn, amigo, yes." Don Fausto smiled gently. "May the saints protect you and Carolina from this black killer. I must go now, my friend, but I leave a few of my brave ones to fight for liberty if the black plane comes back. I can't spare them, but she must be guarded like the precious jewel, yes. Adios, my friend."

The American's eyes were cold as he watched the Artigan ride off with nine men, leaving the four hard-faced gunmen stationed outside the hangar. Don Fausto had paused to exchange a few words with them as he turned his horse down the mountain trail, and the men were dismounting and turning their weary mounts into a corral. Presently they mingled with the peons building the jacales.

"Guarding the hacienda like blazes," Buzz muttered under his breath. "Those

hombres are figurin' on some deviltry. Probably aiming to bore me first chance. That Fausto rattler's just looping to throw me off my guard and crack down the minute his gang rides my tail. Wonder if that hellion of a von Schlechter figures on washing me out on the ground? It'd be just like that skunk."

Buzz scanned the glowing sky, glanced back to the chattering men and women. A fire had been started, and several women, naked to the waist, were grinding corn and making tortillas. The smack, smack of their hands as they slapped the cakes into shape came distinctly through the stagnant, heated air. Coughing, rasping sounds drifted from the waking jungle. The clear, commanding voice of the Señorita sounded from the house. Barefooted women hurried in and out. A girl glided up with an invitation from the Señorita to dine with her.

For a moment Buzz hesitated. There was something about the woman that drew him as a magnet draws steel, but the dread of Franz von Schlechter menaced like a grinning phantom. Besides the woman might be playing a deep game with Don Fausto to encompass his ruin.

"Tell the lovely Señorita Don Buzz kisses her hands," he instructed the girl, "but that he must stay with his plane. The black killer may come with the night. Also tell the Señorita lights must not be shown, or they will show the killer where to strike."

The girl smiled, murmured a few words in limpid Spanish, slipped away like a shadow. She was back in a few moments with a tray of exquisite food and a bottle of wine. The Señorita was sorry the brave American must be on guard, the girl murmured, but she was a soldier's daughter and understood. Also there would be no lights. The peons would be ordered to sit in darkness with the ending of their meal.

Buzz carried the tray and bottle into the hangar, set them down in a far corner. He hated to distrust the beautiful Carolina, but poison could easily accomplish when lead or steel might fail. Menace was in the very air. Climbing into the cockpit

he made a frugal meal of the food he had brought from Tegucigalpa. He had barely finished the repast and slid down over the fuselage when the sound of heavy boots on the stony ground came to him. A moment later a bulky form loomed up in the twilight, moved into the hangar.

"Howdy, Yank," the fellow greeted with what he intended as a friendly grin. "Don't want a mechanic, do you?"

The fellow was tall, thick, with a hawk-like expression around his close-set eyes, and something suggestive of the high reaches of the air about his pose. Instinctively Buzz knew him for a flyer. The ranger of the far realm of the heavens has something about him that another pilot detects by sheer intuition.

"Nope," Buzz drawled, every nerve alert for a treacherous play. "I don't trust my neck to every stranger claiming to know a crate. I'm my own mechanic as far as it goes."

"Don't blame you, buddy, when you've got to rely on this scum down here. But I'm stating facts. Served in France with D flight, Twenty-Second squadron. A real grease monkey, that's me. Always figured I'd like to pilot a crate, but never got the chance. Nice looking boat you got there, pilot."

He walked around the silver plane, studying her lines critically, mumbling his admiration of the ship. "Sure diff'rent from th' crates we had over there," he concluded warmly. "Hell, if I'd half a chance I'd be flying one of them things myself 'stead of bein' a roughneck in a greaser gang. My name's Sam Girton—sure you can't use me?"

Buzz shook his head. "Sorry, Sam, but I'm winging off in the morning. Was on my way to Cartagena when I stopped to do Don Fausto a good turn. Why don't you try for a job at San Salvador? Ought to be a good chance for a real mechanic there."

"I'm tryin' to catch on with some white hombre and learn this flying game. Been takin' orders from them greasers 'til I'm sure fed up with 'em. Well, sorry you can't use a good man, amigo."

Lighting a long cigar he slouched out and headed for the jacales. Buzz watched him go, stepped back behind one of the posts. He wasn't taking any chance of a treacherous shot from the gloom. He watched the fellow move behind a jacale, standing out darkly in the fading glow of the dying fire.

"So that's the hombre Fausto figures to fly my crate," Buzz grunted. "I'm commencin' to see somethin' through the fog, and it's about time I did. That hombre's after my boat, and he's just waiting a good chance to climb into the cockpit. Don't know nothin' about flying—no, like hell he doesn't, the lying coyote! Buzz Travers, it sure looks like that Fausto snake's got you about where he wanted. He's been after this boat all the time, and was waiting 'til he got hold of a flyer. There's Mose Drake again, blast his hide! Well, maybe, I'm in a trap, hombres—and then again, maybe I'm not."

Slipping back to the cliff forming the back of the hangar Buzz sat down on a rock, hand resting on the automatic in the pocket of his flying-coat. He had selected a position which gave him a clear view of the front and sides of the open hangar. He dared not light a cigarette, for he knew he was dealing with men hardened in the crucible of war; peons as silent and treacherous as their Indian ancestors. The night dragged wearily. Now and then Buzz warily shifted his position, always keeping his back to the rocky wall. Any moment he expected to hear the hiss of a flung knife from the outer darkness. It was past midnight when his straining eyes made out a shadowy outline at the far end of the hangar. Came a hoarse whisper in English.

"Easy, lad, easy. I know you're p'intin' that gun at me. Hist, lad, they's hell an' hallelujah. The Señorita has slid out with some av her creatures. Are ye listenin'?"

"Yeah. I'm here at the back. Slide in."

"I'm comin'."

Moving with the silent tread of the hunting puma the Irishman inched along the face of the cliff. "Easy, lad," he muttered as he reached the flyer, "they've eyes like owls. Most av them's drunk as I'd be but

for the foine trainin' av me early youth, but ye never can figger what a snake'll do. The Señorita slipped out th' back way not twenty minutes since, with her followers."

"So that's the game. Fausto used her to get me in here so he could grab my ship. Figured on having me drilled when I went for that girl. They've got a flyer here, Mike, a skunk wanting to be my mechanic. A flyer or I don't know one. And that girl playing the dirty—"

"I'm not so sure av that, lad," Mike interrupted. "I'm hearin' from my girl that Fausto and she had it hot and heavy, and she agreed to go with you. But she's all the time plannin' to fool him. Yes, I'm bettin' those gunmen plan to give you lead poison first chance."

"They're holding off for fear of damaging the ship," Buzz mused. "Figuring to get me nice and easy when I'm in the house. Well, I wasn't going to leave the old boat anyway."

"Them four guards are camped around th' hangar," Mike whispered. "What ye gointa do?"

"Wait for the dawn, then take off," Buzz informed dryly. "Have to chance a few slugs being loosed at us, but I'm counting on surprising those polecats. I've been staying down here because I figured they'd throw lead at the cockpit if they planned a night attack, and intended to cross them up. They'd naturally figure I was in the ship."

"Looks that way, lad. It'll be dawn inside an hour. Comes early now."

"Might's well get into the pit and be ready. When we move it'll have to be fast and sudden."

Climbing into the cockpits the two friends slipped on safety belts, adjusted the phone head set, settled back for the long wait. Forty minutes crawled like forty ages. Gray streaks began to show in the east.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEATH-TRAP

"TEN minutes more," Buzz breathed, "and it'll be light enough. Those dirty killers figure I'll have to get some one

to climb the prop, and won't be watching very close. Listen, they're startin' to stir."

To the straining ears of the friends came the wary sounds of booted feet trampling brush, subdued voices. The shrill nicker of a horse sounded in the hush like a trumpet's blast.

"The peon's bugle," Mike O'Hara chuckled. "Sure it'll take more'n one whistle to—"

A woman's frantic shrieks rang out from the dark house, high-pitched, terrifying, rose and fell in a wailing frenzy. Like an echo other voices joined in the wild screaming. Hoarse shouts and yells answered from the jacales, as the drink-flushed peons stirred from sleep.

"Mother av Mary," Mike rasped, standing up in the safety belt. "A woman's bein' mishandled, Buzz. Th' dirty—"

"Don Buzz, Don Buzz," shrieked a woman's frantic voice. "Don Buzz. They're killing me. Don Buzz!"

"Get down," Buzz rasped as Mike began fumbling with the belt, "it's a trap. That's not the Señorita's voice. Just tryin' to get me into that damned house. I'm taking off."

He pressed the self-starter button, gave the plane the gun as the motor barked into roaring life. He heard wild yells mingling with the racket of the engine as the ship thundered out of the hangar, skidded slightly, soared into the gray sky. Jagged streaks of flame tore toward him as he ducked low in the cockpit; bullets drummed against the fuselage and landing-gear. Ugly red tongues of slashing fire ripped at the zooming plane from tree-tops and the windows of the dark house. The savage barking of a machine gun joined the clamor.

Buzz was climbing fast in wide spirals, ever mindful that a lucky or well-aimed bullet might cripple the engine and bring him crashing to earth. The ship shot away at a sharp angle as slugs continued to find the fuselage, resumed the climb.

"Give 'em a burst," Mike yowled wildly. "What th' hell you packin' that gun for? Give 'em a burst!"

"Always hated to crack down on poor devils on the ground," Buzz stated through

the mouthpiece. "Seems like shooting setting hens."

Mike snorted his disgust. "Mother av Mary, they're trying to wash you out, ain't they? If you don't care about yourself think av a poor Irishman that's lovin' hisself. Give 'em a burst. I can hear th' bugles av hell blowin' this minute."

The ship was climbing like a bat. Buzz leveled her off as the altimeter jumped to five thousand feet, scanned the brightening sky. He circled widely as his keen eyes spotted a white biplane racing toward him with the speed of a condor. As she came nearer, and the first rays of the sun shimmered over her glowing body, Buzz made out the red, blue and green of Artigas on her glistening wings.

The white plane slowed down as she neared the silver ship, waggled her wings, appeared to swoop down on the men still firing from the hacienda. Like a darting rocket she zoomed, Immelmanned, stood on her nose and spurted flaming death over her gleaming cowl.

But even as green and orange flames licked out at him Buzz had flung his ship into a swift roll. He dived, shot off at a wide tangent. Back came the stick and to the left, and Buzz swept upward to his left in a wire-screaming zoom. He pulled out of the climb to find the other circling above him.

Slipping into a right glide Buzz glanced up and back to see the white plane thundering down on him, her gun smoking. A quick drop, a sharp bank, and he escaped with a few slugs in wings and fuselage. Growling curses Buzz soared, Immelmanned recklessly, and gave the white ship a savage burst.

The biplane dropped swiftly, swerved to the right, flashed upward like a soaring eagle. Buzz's jaws tightened and his teeth clicked. That clever maneuver convinced him, if he had not guessed it before, that he was up against a master pilot. The fellow had flown a combat plane before.

"Th' dirty rat's runnin', Buzz," Mike O'Hara yelled frantically. "You winged him."

"Yeah, like hell," Buzz grated. "He

dodged the whole burst, damn him! It's that damned von Schlechter, Mike, and he's changed his black ship to white. Figured on catching me napping, the dirty skunk!"

"But he's runnin' like he owed you money," Mike persisted. "Kick his pants, lad. Kick him straight through hell!"

Wheeling his ship around Buzz gave her the gun. The white plane was racing eastward, apparently anxious to avoid further trouble. Her quick start had given her all the advantage of the race, and she was tearing through the air like a terrified witch. Buzz pushed the throttle to the last notch, grinned mirthlessly as he saw he was gaining slightly. The chase led out over the heart of the rank jungle, turned toward the little lake where the riflemen had fired on Buzz yesterday.

The white plane seemed to be faltering as she neared the lake. She was losing speed and began to settle down toward the water like a wounded hawk. Something rang a warning-bell in the American's brain as he was pushing the stick forward. Frenziedly he pulled out of the dive, jerked the stick close to stomach and shot up in a wind-shrieking zoom. Shells ripped the air around him as he drove the silver plane upward in wide zigzagging swerves. Shrapnel ripped through wings, hammered hellish tattoos on fuselage, struts and empennage.

Working the stick desperately Buzz dragged her out of the line of fire, shot away at full gun. He breathed a sigh of thankfulness as the motor continued its deep song of security, and the sweet little ship pulled away steadily from the death-trap. Straightening out Buzz ranged the sky in wide circles, searching for the white biplane he felt sure would return to the attack. But no sign of the ship of treachery rewarded his tense scrutiny.

"That polecat was sure aiming to wash us out, and he came damned near doing it," Buzz commented coolly as Mike broke into a torrent of curses. "They've got an antiaircraft gun down there, Mike, and that skunk led us right into it. The dirty rat. I got a hunch just in time to slide out. Are we lucky? I'll tell the universe we are."

"That's why they took a few shots at you afore," Mike grunted. "They wasn't going to have you nosin' in while they were riggin' that gun. But howcome that plane's hangin' around thataway? Must been scared somethin' would slip up I reckon."

"Trust Mose Drake not to take a chance," Buzz gritted. "That hombre figured I'd be washed out on the ground, but he wasn't taking any chance of a slip-up. If that fellow had grabbed my plane when I'm looking for the Señorita he'd given that other skunk some signal. Damn it, Mike, this fog's gettin' worse all the time."

Mike groaned dismally. "We're up ag'in' a man with brains, Buzz, and it's dizzy we are. It's like fightin' a ghost—we're hittin' him where he ain't. I never liked that Drake scorpion, and I'm likin' him less ev'ry minute. It's a shame to his color he is."

"Well, we'll hand him some of his own hell. Best way to win a fight in the tropics is to start it. First I've got to land—"

"Buzz, I'm thinkin' and it makes me head ache," Mike interrupted. "Did that scorpion act like von Schlechter, now?"

"No, he didn't," Buzz informed dryly. "I never heard of that killer ducking a fight. He's got nerve, always did. No, that rat doesn't act like von Schlechter in running away. But Fausto must have known he was here. And I'm betting that shifty polecat didn't think I'd be able to slip the info to the loyal forces. He told me because he knew I'd connect up von Schlechter with those raids, and figured I'd be some nervous. And he was figuring all the time I'd be washed out before I could get word to the other flyers."

"Then you figure von Schlechter's actin' under orders not to risk his crate?" Mike queried.

"Looks like it, Mike. And I'm also bettin' the charming Señorita pulled an Immelmann on Don Fausto. Told him she would go to Baracoa and all the time figurin' somethin' else. Or maybe he got rough and she just wanted to show him you can't loop without plenty of room."

"That woman's dangerous—dangerous as dynamite," Mike asserted grimly. "Most

of 'em are, but that dona's hell an' greased lightnin' in one bundle. I'd sure hate to be the mouse when she starts clawin'. Well, what you gointa do now?"

"I've got to land and look the old boat over, Mike. We got nicked up some, I don't know how bad. Then I'm winging on to Baracoa."

"Baracoa? What th' hell you goin' in that trap for?"

"To settle Mr. Mose Drake. With him out of the way this revolution will crack up pronto. He'll be expecting this plane to show, Mike, and I'm hoping to get a chance at him before he finds out his mistake."

"But what'll happen if he knows you wasn't washed out? S'pose that white-winged hellion slips over there first and puts him wise? Then where in hell are you? I'll tell you, me lad, vulture meat, that's what."

Buzz smiled grimly as he kicked the silver plane around to the northeast and pulled back the stick. Steadily he climbed in short spirals until the altimeter registered above eight thousand feet, then straightened out and headed for the natural hangar to which Mike had guided him the day before. As he neared the timber-crested hills he drove the plane higher, then circled widely. With his glasses he searched the dazzling blue dome for any sign of the white plane, scrutinized the dense jungle, studied the dark, silent forest crowning the lofty hills.

"Funny that crate doesn't show," he mused. "She wasn't hurt; that killer was just pretending to crash. Wonder if he's got a hidden field down by that lake. Reckon so, and a nice little gun to keep him covered."

Satisfied that no enemy plane lurked around, Buzz banked the ship vertically, cut the throttle and let her slip. She came out of the slide with a rush, losing nearly three thousand feet. Again Buzz slipped her down, leveled off, studied the terrain cautiously; then nosed her down gently and landed neatly.

Two hours later he was again in the air. The silver plane had escaped with

slight damage from the white plane and the antiaircraft gun, and the skillful, resourceful Mike had speedily effected the few needed repairs.

"But you're one plain damn fool just the same," Mike was grumbling as the plane soared with the grace of a falcon. "If you was gointa lay eggs on that damned Baracoa 'twould be sense; but you ain't got no eggs, and wouldn't use 'em if you did. What you wanta loop right into hell for I dunno."

"Got to take the chance, Mike," Buzz grinned as he continued to climb. "Mose Drake has sure tried his best to wash me out; now I'm going to return his compliments. First he wanted my ship, wanted it bad. But he figured to get me anyway. I'm hoping to crack down on him just when he's shaking hands with himself."

"Huh. And him waiting for you like a spider waits for a fool fly. I can see him licking his fat chops this minute, and him knowin' you ain't got the sense of a lop-eared mule. Fat chance you got to surprise that grinnin' coyote."

Buzz kicked the plane around sharply, snatched up his glasses as he caught sight of smoke rising in the clear air. It was coming from Breck Kendrick's hacienda. For a long moment Buzz stared, then shot forward at full gun. It was the signal calling to the plantation.

CHAPTER VII

WINGS OF COURAGE

DORIS KENDRICK came running from the direction of the smoke as the silver plane drifted down gracefully, landed in a perfect three-pointer. Under the big straw hat the girl's wonderful red-gold hair cascaded to her shoulders, gleamed like burnished copper in the brilliant sunlight. Excitement added to the rosy flags of health in her cheeks.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came, Buzz," she exclaimed as the flyer swung down over the fuselage. "I thought you'd never be here. I've kept that signal going for hours."

"What's happened? Where's Breck?"

"Breck got word last night that a black plane had swooped down on Santa Lucia, bombed the airdrome, destroyed two planes, and killed people on the field and the streets. And two planes were stolen yesterday from the field at Mercedes. Breck took off at dawn. Bandits are raiding the ranches beyond Puerto Planta, burning and killing. Breck knew you were at Don Fausto's place last night, but he feared to fly over because it might make more trouble for you. He told me to signal as soon as he took off. He said you'd know what to do."

"But this unguarded rancho isn't any place for a girl," Buzz protested sharply. "Those peons are liable to crack down on any place. I don't understand Breck taking off and leaving you here this way."

"But I'm all right, Buzz, really I am. And the hacienda is perfectly safe. Don Fausto Campos drove in here last night. Breck was very rude, as he always is, but the Don said he had taken this rancho under his protection, and that not a peon would raise his hand against us."

"And you believe that scorpion," Mike O'Hara broke in disgustedly. "Sure, and he's a snake in the grass, Miss. Ask Buzz if he'd be alive this minute if Fausto Campos had his way—the sneakin' rat!"

The girl's face flushed hotly, and she bit her lips to repress a sharp retort. Turning her pretty shoulders deliberately on the Irishman, she studied Buzz gravely.

"I know you are like Breck, Mr. Travers," she said quietly, "you don't like Don Fausto. But I've always found him the perfect gentleman. Have you any reason for fancying he is your enemy?"

"I don't fancy, Miss Kendrick, I know," Buzz stated grimly. "He had it fixed to wash me out at his hacienda and grab my plane. Another thing—the Señorita Carolina Vasquez slipped away from the hacienda in the night. I happen to know she's pretty fond of this Fausto, and a Latin woman is always dangerous when her affections are concerned. I'm telling you this because you ought to know there's something mighty mysterious about Don Fausto and the Doña."

"I am fully capable of taking care of myself," the girl stated icily. "I didn't call you here, Mr. Travers, to abuse a friend, or for your protection. I just did it because Breck wanted you to know what's going on. I might add, Mr. Travers, that Don Fausto always has spoken in the highest terms of you."

"Tell the Don, please, that I appreciate his interest," Buzz said ironically, "and hope to prove it to him before long. I want to be your friend, Miss Kendrick, and so does Mike, and what we've said has been for your own guidance. I hope you'll let us take you to some safe place—"

"I'm staying right here," Doris informed coldly. "I told you there isn't the slightest danger. Anyway, I wouldn't run off after Breck left me in charge of the plantations. Breck said something about you being in the Federal service."

Buzz smiled slightly. "He said right, Miss Kendrick. And I'm taking off pronto. Thanks for the information. But don't forget that Don Fausto isn't here now, and those peons are a bad bunch when they're stirred up. They're blaming the Americans for those air raids—"

"So would anybody," the girl cut in crisply. "The peons are only using their eyes and heads, Mr. Travers. I don't suppose the Federals are all saints, either. But—but—oh, Buzz, I don't mean to be catty and nasty. Honestly I don't. But—I—I—"

"Sure, Doris, that's all right," Buzz grinned. "This thing's got us all loopin'. I'll pick up Breck, and here's hoping for happy landings."

He took her extended hand, raised it to his lips; then with a smile and nod turned back to the rumbling plane. He got into the cockpit, opened the motor. The plane picked up speed fast, took off in a sweeping zoom. As the ship banked around and roared back over the watching Doris Buzz leaned out over the fuselage curve, waved to the smiling girl.

Buzz glanced at his compass, headed the ship in the general direction of Puerto Planta. He had refueled the plane at the hacienda of Don Fausto, and knew he had enough gas for a long flight and a fight

with any enemy plane that might show. A smile touched his lips as the propeller slashed its way through the atmosphere.

"Some girl, Mike, what? Full of fire and grit. But I'd have sure liked to take her to some safe place."

"She's willful and full of spirit like a dancing colt," Mike grunted, "but she'll handle. Ye mind, lad, she ain't hatin' ye none as she first pretended. Not her. But it's no place on that rancho for a girl like her with that Fausto skunk and that dona hoverin' around. Not at all. But there ain't no reasonin' with a woman that knows she's wrong."

"I'm winging back first chance," Buzz said quietly. "Fausto has smoke-screened her good, but I'm seeing right through his fog. He's up to some deviltry, Mike, but the Señorita Carolina's got me more worried than that slick snake. Well, we've got to do our work first."

It was an hour later when they picked up a smudge of smoke on the northern horizon. In the far distance the pink, yellow and green buildings of Puerto Planta shot back the dazzling sunlight like a miniature painted city. As the silver plane swept onward at full gun the smoke haze deepened, and a lurid glow gradually veiled the dense jungle beyond a cluster of low hills. A gray plane glided down from the top of a smoke-cloud, approached Buzz cautiously.

"It's Breck!" the flyer exclaimed after a long look through his glasses. "Thought I knew that Boeing. The old bird isn't taking any chances at that." He waved an arm as he caught the glint of sunlight on the binoculars leveled at his plane by Breck Kendrick.

The other answered the greeting, brought his plane closer, dived mildly. Buzz kicked his ship into a wide spiral, looked down. A gray arm of the eternal desert pushed back the jungle near the low hills, providing a fairly good landing. Breck was already nosing down. A moment later he had brought his ship to earth, taxied under the overhanging boughs of a huge mahogany tree. Buzz slipped his ship down, snapped off the ignition as he straightened her out. Back came the stick,

the tail went down, the skid struck the uneven ground with a light thud. For a moment the wheels skidded, then Buzz pushed the ship gently into the shade of welcoming branches.

Breck had climbed down from his cockpit, and now walked over to the silver plane. He was smoking a cigarette, and he looked out strangely from a smoke-blackened face.

"God, I'm glad you showed, Buzz," he burst out fervently. "There's hell and damnation to pay. Who's that hombre up there with you?"

"Mike O'Hara, a damned tough bird," Buzz grinned. "Working inside the lines, Breck. Used to spoil my crates on the Argonne. What's happened, Breck? We saw Doris for a minute."

"That black devil cracked down on Mercedes about dusk, after laying eggs on Santa Lucia. Shot down two planes before they had a chance to fight. That devil was flying what they all thought was a government ship. Bombed the hangars and plaza. Before he showed two snakes got away with ships from the 'drome. That hellion dropped a warning to el presidente to give up and surrender the city within forty-eight hours, or be blown to hell."

"Doris said that bird cracked up two planes at Santa Lucia."

"Yes, the only ones there. And laid a dozen eggs on the town. Fact is, Buzz, the rebels command the air, excepting for our ships. Looks like it's up to us."

"Uh-huh. Then they've got at least three planes, maybe more. The bird flying that black plane, Breck, is Franz von Schlechter, that killer we tangled with over the Carpathians. And he's turned his black ship into a white crate. Tried to wash me out this mornin'."

"Von Schlechter! God, Buzz, they kicked him out of the Austrian army because they couldn't stomach his murdering helpless peasants. Nothing is safe with that devil in the air."

"Don Fausto told me about him when he figured I wouldn't be able to tell anyone," Buzz commented grimly. "Well, Breck, seems like it's up to us to win this fight. And the only way to wash those

fellows out is to crack down on them where they're not looking for you. I'm heading for Baracoa to show Mose Drake something."

"He's got that hole guarded with a battery of antiaircraft guns, Buzz. Most likely he'll have those ships in the air, too. There isn't a chance, Buzz, unless at night."

Buzz smiled grimly. "That's what Mose thinks, Breck. And the way to crack down on a polecat is to do what he knows you won't try. He and his hellions rigged up a neat little scheme to wash me out and grab my crate. Well, he wants this ship so bad I'm showing it to him. But I want you to hide in the sun in case their crates swoop on me while I'm telling Mr. Drake a few things. Sabe?"

"Yes, but it's a damn fool play, Buzz. Even if you can dive down on them you'll never get away from all those guns. If we had a few Mills bombs we might—"

"Which we haven't," Buzz cut in dryly. "Those buzzards'll be expectin' my crate to land on their tarmac, and that's my chance to give 'em some of the hell they've been handing out. Hell, boys, it's our only chance to save the day. Old Don Luis hired us to smash up that revolt, and looks like we're the only things standin' between Drake, Campos and their hellions, and the planters. Got to do it."

The silver plane moved out from under the friendly branches, roared into the warm air. Buzz climbed steadily until the altimeter registered eight thousand feet, then straightened out and drove the ship ahead at full throttle. The rank jungle was sullenly making way for wide areas of bare desert, crowding, timber-crowned hills, and lofty, bluish peaks. Buzz looked back and upward. The Boeing was flying a thousand feet above him, shimmering in the blinding sunlight like some great strange bird.

As they neared their objective the Boeing climbed higher, vanished in the dazzling sun. The silver plane was thundering along at a hundred miles an hour, and Buzz smiled grimly as he listened to the deep, steady roar of the powerful motor.

He fired a burst from the machine gun to warm the mechanism, began to slip the ship down. Through his glasses he surveyed the distant town perched in a small valley at the base of the mighty hills, scanned the bright sky for enemy planes.

Baracoa spread out suddenly beneath him. His lips hard, his fingers twitching slightly, Buzz sent the plane down in a falling-leaf dive. He could see men grouped around the antiaircraft guns, marked the crude hangars and two black planes being tuned up. A wild impulse to cut loose with his gun swept over him, but he fought the urge down. He had passed the outer fringe of brushwood, palm-thatched huts, his Whirlwind motor cut to idling speed. Gradually, steadily, he settled down toward the field. Gently the stick came back; he fed gas to the suddenly barking motor, cut loose with the racking gun.

CHAPTER VIII

THUNDERING WINGS

MOSE DRAKE leaned back in the chair at his desk and mopped his fat, wet face with a red bandanna. Sweat trickled into his small, deep-set, greenish eyes, ran in rivulets down his beefy jowls and thick neck. The white cotton shirt sagged around his thick, damp shoulders, clung to his hot, broad back. He scowled as he looked across the desk at the amused face of Don Fausto Campos.

"I'll be sure glad when this dance is over," Drake growled thickly. "Every day's worse than the other. Don't it bother you a-t-all?"

"The Señor forgets this is my country," Don Fausto smiled. "No, the heat worries me not, amigo. But I confess I would feel easier if that plane was here. It is more than an hour late. Yet it cannot be anything is wrong. By this time that dog of a Travers must be food for the vultures. Caramba, yes."

"If you weren't so anxious to get rid of the Señorita we'd have settled Buzz Travers yesterday," Drake grunted. "But you had to have your little theatricals. That hombre should have been rubbed out at Pa-

lermo, but no, you must place your own little affair before the good of Artigas. Damned foolishness, that's what I call it."

"So you have said," Don Fausto shrugged. "But you will see, amigo, my way is best. When it is known to my people that this Gringo dog dared raise eyes to the Señorita Carolina Vasquez—"

"What do we care what your people think, Fausto? There isn't one of them but what'd turn on you for a 'dobe dollar. I picked you for president because I figured you'd the nerve to face the devil himself, and then I find you shivering because of a woman. What do you care if this Señorita does find out you're buzzing around that Kendrick skirt? She'll take it out of that girl's skin, not yours."

The Artigan stirred uneasily, lit a cigar with slightly unsteady fingers. "But it is not that you comprehend. Carolina has much pride, and she dreams of being the wife of the president of Artigas. When this dream is shattered—caramba! Hell and its furies are tame beside the scorned woman, Señor."

"But she is nothing but your mistress."

Don Fausto shrugged impatiently. "But she dreams of being the wife of el presidente. It would have been well had she and this dog of a Yankee flyer been killed when the bombs were dropped, yes."

Drake mopped his face impatiently with the red bandanna, crashed a reddish hand down on his desk. "Sure, and wreck that plane. You had it in your claws at Palermo and let it slip. If that woman wasn't killed with Travers this morning what are you doing?"

"I have the hope the saints smile on me. But if the Señorita escaped—and is brought here, there is the calabosa, Señor. In the dungeon one is soon forgotten. And the people will believe the story she died from wounds when she would have fled with this Gringo."

Drake grunted contemptuously. "You're not telling me you're really stuck on that red-haired Kendrick skirt?"

The Artigan shrugged, and a sneer twisted his flexible mouth. "She is of a beauty, yes. But el presidente must mate

with one high among the people of Artigas. But this little one—she amuses me. Yes."

"Well, reckon it doesn't make much difference now. This war is over before it started, Fausto. We hold the air, and Don Luis must surrender. After that stunt we pulled yesterday he hasn't the chance of a rat in a ring of terriers. Inside a week you'll be president of this country. Then we'll tax those Gringo planters out of everything they own; confiscate their plantations for opposing the revolution. There's millions in it, Fausto. That's one thing I like about the damned tropics—a smart man can clean up the dollars right easy."

"You northerners are a terrible people," the Artigan commented with grudging admiration. "You would turn hell inside out for a dollar, yes. Madre Dios! Ruthless as your own Eagle—"

"And mighty handy when a Don Fausto Campos dreams of power," Drake sneered. "Trouble with you fellows, amigo, is you dream, while Mose Drake acts. Dreams aren't worth a whoop unless—"

"I hear a plane," the Artigan broke in excitedly. "And coming from the south. Madre Dios!"

"Well, it's about time it showed up," Drake said coolly as Fausto sped across to the high window facing the field. "That hombre has sure taken plenty time about it."

"Aee, it is floating down, like the feather of the flamingo. Madre Dios! The man is the great flyer like he swore. See he comes close, amigo. He comes down—Madre Dios!"

His voice rose in a wild scream as flames leapt from the menacing steel snout pointing over the silver cowl. Men were running wildly on the tarmac, abandoning their posts, frantically seeking shelter from that storm of hissing death. Forgetting that his roaring voice was drowned out by the thundering motor Mose Drake was leaning through the window, babbling curses, yowling to the soldiers to man the guns.

Straight for the nearest plane Buzz Travers drove his silver ship. Explosive tracers ripped into the black Fokker's gas-

tank, sprayed the crude hangars. Sheets of lurid flame leapt high from the doomed plane. In a wide, jerking ground loop the silver plane half-circled the field, spewed tracers into the second machine, a trim De Haviland. Bullets were screaming around him, ripping into the fuselage and wings, ricocheting from struts and cowling. Rifles were spitting their savage hate from behind posts and frowning anti-aircraft guns.

Buzz opened spark and throttle to limits, zoomed splendidly into the bright beckoning sky, where life and escape lured. Shells were crashing around him from the anti-aircraft guns as he tore upward, stick between his knees. Impatiently he wiped away a trickle of blood from his face, flicked a bit of splintered glass from his taut jaw. Tracers were hissing by him like sparks from hell, whispering their death-hate. But the motor still sung its song of savage triumph. The war-gods love their sons of courage.

Buzz glanced at the dancing needle of his altimeter. Five thousand feet. The needle jumped a hundred feet higher. Two hundred. Buzz laughed aloud as he shot off in a sweeping curve to the left and looked down. Ships, wooden shacks, petrol cans were blazing furiously. Dense clouds of pitch-black smoke rolled and swirled over the tarmac.

Buzz was still climbing. The altimeter needle was moving past the seven thousand foot mark. Buzz looked up, snatched up a fresh belt for his gun. Two black ships were hurtling toward him, their exhausts glowing, golden bursts of fire tearing at him from their belching guns.

Buzz laughed crazily. "Only two, Mike," he yowled in the mouthpiece of the phone head set, "only two. Easy for us, eh?"

"Go to it, ye crazy fool," Mike yelled. "I've been in hell so long I ain't scared uh nothin' no more. But it's the last trip I'm takin' with the likes av a lunatic."

Buzz laughed again as he kicked the silver plane out of the line of fire, cut loose with his gun. The Boeing roared down on the tail of the highest plane, death jetting from her flame-tipped gun. The ship stag-

gered, went into a sharp dive. Its mate Immelmanned, gave the little Boeing a savage burst. But Buzz was after her like a hound chasing a hare. The first ship zoomed, rolled desperately away from the Boeing as Breck Kendrick swooped down on her, executed a quick wing-over. Buzz caught a view of the black Fokker through his sights, poured a stream of hissing lead into her. She took part of the burst, but slipped away and swerved widely.

Buzz drove at her like a raging hawk. The Fokker was climbing madly, gaining altitude in short, tight spirals. But she was no match in climbing for the silver plane. Buzz shot up and past her, got on her tail, gave her a savage burst. The Fokker pitched drunkenly, plunged in blazing death toward the smoking field.

Buzz straightened out, scanned the sky. The other ship was drifting down, with the Boeing following close. Suddenly the enemy went into a tail spin, struck on the edge of the jungle with a spurt of dust and wide burst of red and gold flame. The Boeing climbed away, then began drifting toward the jungle.

"Looks like Breck got hurt, Mike," Buzz spoke into the mouthpiece. "Reckon that burst shook him up bad. Damned good thing that von Schlechter wasn't around here. Wonder what happened to that polecat, anyhow? He couldn't have been hurt bad this morning."

"Must been smashed some," rejoined the practical Mike. "You'd never catch that scorpion missin' a chance to crack down on us. Well, I'm yellin' out loud we put an awful crimp in Mose Drake. How you done it I dunno, but you sure busted his snags afore he got a good chew."

"Yeah, but we haven't settled von Schlechter. And that bird isn't going to be so easy to down as those birds we just crashed. They didn't have much of a chance with those old crates."

He circled widely, kicked the plane around, and headed after the limping Boeing. The little ship was gradually settling down, but Breck was jockeying her skillfully, evidently trying to gain the leafy haven they had left a bare hour before.

Buzz drove his plane close to the faltering ship, waved an arm. Breck grinned at him, shook his head, manipulated stick and rudder-bar. Satisfied that Breck could land the Boeing Buzz zoomed, scanned the heavens for some sight of the ruthless von Schlechter. Far behind him billows of smoke swirled high over Baracoa, but there was no sign of the killer or other pursuing planes. Diving the plane mildly Buzz watched the Boeing make a rough landing, jerk sideways, then skid to a stop.

Buzz nosed his ship down, side-slipped, and landed neatly. Breck was already on the ground, examining the left aileron. Buzz noted the bullet-riddled upper wing of the Boeing, and a section of splintered fuselage. Several instruments were also missing.

"Nearly got you, Breck," the flyer commented dryly. "Reckon I was a mite late in picking up that second crate. They came down right sudden. Must have been waiting for us."

"They zoomed up behind that big ridge," Breck informed. "I was figuring that second boat to tear after you instead of picking on me. My aileron started catching, and I had to handle her pretty careful. Well, Buzz, you sure raised hell. Got nicked, too."

"Just a scratch," Buzz grunted, patting his blood-smeared face with his handkerchief. "Yeah, reckon Mose Drake is sure feelin' sick. I wasn't aiming to mow down those poor devils, but had to get those crates and the hangars. Yeah, we're both sure lucky."

With Mike's help Breck was repairing the damaged aileron as best he could. Finally the Irishman straightened his broad back, brushed the perspiration from his whiskered face with shirt-sleeve.

"She'll hold 'til we get where we got more time," he croaked. "Pervided you don't manhandle her. Well, where we goin' from here?"

"I was figuring this'd be a damned good time to slide back to Baracoa and grab Mose Drake or Fausto," Buzz drawled. "It's not likely those polecats will be expectin' us now. They're bad bent—might's

well break 'em and end this racket."

"Yes, and get washed out when we've got everything coming our way," Breck Kendrick growled. "Buzz, you're clean loco. Don't forget that damned killer hasn't showed yet. And that means hell ain't over—not by a long mile."

"More reason why we've got to get one of those buzzards," Buzz said coolly. "Von Schlechter is a crack-brained devil, boys, we all know that. And I'm aiming to find out where he's hiding."

CHAPTER IX

DANGER'S TRAIL

BRECK flung away his cigarette impatiently. "Cripes, Buzz, all we've gotta do now is play them safe. Sooner or later we'll run down that Jerry—why risk a dose of lead poison? That damned town must be like a nest of fighting hornets."

"Sure thing, Breck, and the last thing they'll figure is for somebody to crack them again. Either Drake or Campos will squeal to save himself. You know the breed. And they'll tell us where this flying hellion is, pronto. Anyway, it'll be some easy to slide down there in that smoke-screen. I've been figurin' this for some time—and luck's with us."

"It's meself knows you're crazy as a coot," Mike O'Hara snorted, "but there's a crazy Irishman that's goin' with ye."

"Well, I'm drawing cards in this game," Breck stated.

But Buzz shook his head. "Breck, I haven't said anything before because I didn't want to get you worried. Our first work was to crack down on those planes. But you'd better wing back to your rancho—damned pronto. That Señorita slid out from the hacienda last night, and I'm not sure she mightn't have a grudge against your sister, 'count of this Campos hombre. You know what those half Latin Central American women are when they start to rave. And that Campos is playing some dirty game."

"I begged Doris to ride with me this morning, Buzz, but she wouldn't listen to it. I thought of taking her to San Salvador,

but she insisted my first duty was to Artigas. She's got nerve, boys, too much. But if that Vasquez woman is skulkin' around I'd better be going. But I sure hate like hell to fly off and leave you boys—"

"You wanta be thinkin' of yourself," Mike cut in dryly. "You'll be duck soup with that sick crate for von Schlechter, lad, comes he glimpses ye. That bum aileron's gointa bother you plenty, and you wanta handle her like a smart man handles the woman av him."

"Maybe you'd better lay low 'til we spot that killer," Buzz suggested. "You wouldn't have a ghost of a show with that devil, Breck. Besides the rebels may have more planes. Better keep down."

"I'll have to chance it, Buzz. If anything happened to Doris I'd never forgive myself for listening to her. Campos swore he had the rancho under his protection, and she believes him, but I wouldn't trust that skunk with himself. And I've seen enough of those women down here to know they'd shame fiends once they get started."

Five minutes later both planes had taken the air. The silver ship was uninjured, save for a few holes in the wings, two clusters of white stars with rounded corners in a section of the non-shatterable windshield, and a bit of splintered fuselage. Ailerons, motor and instruments functioned perfectly, and the plane handled like a witch. The gauge showed plenty of gasoline still in the tanks.

She climbed steadily until the altimeter registered ten thousand feet, then straightened out and sped toward Baracoa. As he banked around Buzz watched Breck Kendrick flying toward the northwest, and the flyer felt a glow of relief surge over him. Winging away from the unguarded girl that morning had tugged at his heart-strings, and the picture of her standing on the vine-wreathed veranda, calm, unafraid but pitifully alone, had been with him ever since. Vainly he had told himself Doris would be in no danger before the coming of the night; apprehension rode him with ripping spurs.

Keeping the plane within the sun's blind-

ing shield Buzz drove her onward at full gun. Before long drifting smoke-clouds, hovering over Baracoa like a dense pall, showed on the horizon. Keenly alert for a sudden swoop of enemy planes from the smoke-screen, Buzz pushed the silver ship into the smudge, slipped her down five thousand feet. Warily he studied sky and haze-veiled terrain through his powerful glasses.

Red lances of flame shot up here and there through the rolling smoke, and at one end of the town a section of wooded terrain blazed luridly. Still hugging the smoke-screen Buzz located a belt of rough country fringing a high ridge dotted with towering trees, just behind the town. Steering into the wind he idled the motor, began to glide down. Most of the ground appeared very bumpy, and covered with scrubby trees and dense shrubbery, but a sloping bit of cleared land, apparently hewed from the jungle by the machete, promised a fair landing.

Gently Buzz sideslipped the ship down, brought her to earth in a neat landing. The clearing was encompassed by the yawning sea of vegetation, and in a corner the ruins of a few huts nestled in the shadow of a vast saber tree.

"A damn fine place for snakes and th' devil's own," Mike complained as he climbed down over the fuselage. "I'm mistrustful av them huts, Buzz. 'Twould be like some av them darned peons to be hidin' there. And a fine place for boas—damn 'em."

"Looks to me like the place has been deserted for some time," Buzz answered. "Look at that trail. Almost choked. No sign of recent use."

"Just keep that gun trained on them huts, will ye?" from the cautious Mike. "I'll tickle them a mite."

"All right. Go ahead."

Securing his machete from the cockpit the Irishman walked over to the huts, prodded them gingerly with the keen-edged blade. With a sudden dexterous twist of the big knife he killed a strange ratlike creature darting from the rubbish, ripped a hut apart with a few deft strokes. Con-

vinced that no human foe lurked near the Irishman walked over to the trail and began to slash at the smothering growth. Mosquitos, vicious black flies, and myriads of other insect pests were already settling down.

"This trail comes out in that wooded belt, Mike," Buzz explained as he examined his automatic, then picked up his machete. "It's short, and not choked badly. I studied it mighty careful before nosing down. You stay with the crate, and take off damned sudden if anything happens. If I'm not showing inside three-four hours—well, mark me off. Keep that opening covered with the gun. They can't attack you anywhere else—but from the air. Keep her under that saber 'til you're ready to take off."

"Sure, and I hates to see ye go, lad."

Buzz gripped the outstretched hand silently, turned away and entered the trail. On each side the jungle raised its impassable, mottled-green barriers, with interlacing branches and ropelike vines shutting out all but suggestion of the blazing sunlight. It was hot—a sticky, maddening, damp heat. Things long dead crunched under the flyer's boots as he pushed his way along the old trail. Every few feet he was forced to pause and hack his way through the nauseating growth with the machete. A stench, horrible, almost physical in its intensity, came from the clotted depths of grisly vegetation.

Presently the jungle began to thin out. Buzz gulped down great draughts of the pure, clean air as he emerged into a wooded opening. Tossing away the now useless machete he walked swiftly, yet warily, toward the winding brown road he had studied from the plane, paused at the edge of the thoroughfare, surveyed it cautiously. Not a thing of life moved on its rocky surface.

Ten minutes later Buzz had entered a narrow, twisting street of Baracoa, and was moving with unerring instinct toward the landing field. Dense clouds of acrid smoke twisted and swirled around him, turned the sunlight into a reddish haze. Men were shouting hoarsely from the di-

rection of the stricken field, and mournful wailings of women came from the seething plaza. Red tongues of fire licked through the pall overhanging the field like monstrous, lurid serpents.

Buzz had rubbed elbows with death so long that he knew the bold often win where the timid are crushed into the dust. But his heart was throbbing fast as he strode into the crowded plaza and pushed his way to a side street, leading to the field. He knew a hundred knives would be ready to drink his blood should his identity be discovered, and that hideous torture would wrench out his life if he was taken alive. But he knew that the capture of either Drake or Fausto Campos would end the revolt. Campos could not carry on the fight without Mose Drake's gold, and the ruthless Drake would be helpless without the influence of Campos with his followers.

Destruction of the planes did not necessarily mean the loss of the revolution; Drake with his gold could easily secure more planes and flyers if given the time and opportunity. But he could not hope to hold the fickle Artigans in line with Fausto Campos out of the picture. Buzz had coolly considered all angles of his problem before entering the evil town, and he had counted on the smoke-filled streets and his resemblance to the white gunmen hired by Drake to cloak his identity.

Near the field he moved swiftly into an alley behind a row of smoldering shacks, slipped through a bit of ground covered with high grass and scrubby brush, and gained the rear of the house he knew for Drake's headquarters. The gate of the high wall was open, and making sure he was unobserved by any chance sentinel he eased inside. There was no sign of life about the place; evidently any guards that might have been stationed around the house had rushed to the landing field. From the shelter of a huge palm tree Buzz studied the house cautiously.

Suddenly he stiffened. The hum of an approaching plane broke on the silence of the place, deepened into a drumming roar. The ship passed high over the enclosure, a mere shadow in the haze of drifting

smoke. Wild yells burst out from the thronged field, hushed quickly.

"Something tells me that's von Schlechter," Buzz mused. "He's going down behind those trees. Can hardly be anyone else. Well, I've got to get hold of one of those hombres right pronto."

A thickset soldier poked his head from a front window, stared toward the field, glanced over the enclosure. He stepped back, to appear a few moments later in the doorway. Then, overcome by curiosity, he slipped through the open gate and ran toward the muttering crowd thronging the tarmac. As the fellow disappeared Buzz walked boldly into the house.

Inside a long, wide hall he paused to listen with straining ears. The sound of voices came faintly from the rear of the structure. Buzz glided past several rooms to pause in front of a closed door. Through the open transom sounded the voices of men furiously angry.

"—all your fault," came clearly to the listening flyer in Mose Drake's harsh bass. "We'd have rubbed that damned Travers out at Palermo but for your woman-baiting, blast you! Of course we're sunk. Von Schlechter can't hold the air against those two devils—and God knows how many more."

"The Señor takes too much for granted," Don Fausto Campos answered sneeringly. "There is still hope. With the girl in my hands I can dictate terms with those Gringo pigs. The Señor can hire more flyers, yes. Has he not the gold? Together—"

"I'm through I tell you," Drake cut in bitterly. "I'm leaving this place with von Schlechter. Once in Costa Rica I'll see what can be done, Campos. Those winged devils—"

"And Don Fausto Campos will be left to skulk in the hills while the Señor seeks safety in Costa Rica? I am to be hunted like the rabbit by the dogs of Luis Viera! Always have you played behind my name, always if things went wrong I am the one—"

"As you'd been el presidente had we won," Drake interrupted savagely. "This dance isn't over yet, Campos, not by a

long way. But I can't start a new play in this hole. I told you I'm going with von Schlechter—and that's final. Save yourself, best you can, but—

His snarling voice rose in a muffled shriek, followed by a queer, choking groan. There was the sound of a heavy body falling to the floor.

CHAPTER X

PINIONS OF HATE

BUZZ caught up a heavy chair, placed it against the door, mounted it and looked through the open transom. He was just in time to see Campos slip through one of the wide windows into the yard. A thick form was huddled on the floor at one side of the heavy desk, looking much like a suit of old clothes carelessly flung aside.

Buzz leaped down from the chair. To force the massive door without a crowbar or some other instrument was virtually impossible. The thick panels might be shattered by the heavy chair, but the noise would surely attract the attention of soldiers in the street. Buzz whirled, sped down the hall, darted outside. Two minutes later he had rounded the house and entered the room through the open window.

Mose Drake rolled up glassy eyes as Buzz turned him over. The haft of a slender dagger projected from his chest, just above the heart. The man's lips writhed back from broken teeth as he recognized the aviator.

"Campos . . . knifed me," came gaspingly from his pale lips. "Had it . . . in . . . his . . . sleeve. . . . He's after that Kendrick . . . girl. . . . Get him . . . I . . . I . . . God! . . . I . . . can't . . ."

His head dropped back, his jaw sagged, a glassy dullness filmed his staring eyes. He quivered convulsively, slid to the floor from the flyer's supporting arm.

Buzz was through the window in three jumps, and running toward the gate, his hand gripping his automatic. Gaining the alley he slackened his pace, strode into the side street, and entered the crowded plaza.

Here he was forced to move slowly to avoid attracting any attention from the furious throng. Uneasy eyes scanned the sky, apparently waiting for the return of the plane which had flown over Baracoa a few moments before. The shrill, wailing notes of a bugle sounded from the landing field, and the crowd surged toward the smoke-wreathed tarmac.

"Reckon they're manning the guns," Buzz muttered as he gained the twisting street leading from the plaza to the jungle. "Not sure whether that ship is friendly or not. And taking no chances. That bugle sounded when it done me most good."

He had gained the jungle and was running lightly along the trail when the roar of an airplane's engine pulled his eyes skyward. An instant later a white ship zoomed into the garish sunlight like a soaring hawk, circled over the town; then banked around and headed for the northeast. Buzz redoubled his speed. He knew von Schlechter piloted that flashing ship, and that Fausto Campos rode with the Austrian killer.

Breck Kendrick with his crippled boat would barely have time to reach the plantation before the white plane, and he would have no chance in a sky battle with the dreaded von Schlechter. Holding the air Don Fausto could work his will on the helpless people of the rancho; carry out his plan to seize Doris and hold her as a hostage; dictate terms and save his own worthless hide.

A projecting vine caught the flyer's foot as he raced along the thorn-banked trail, flung him headlong. Briers tore at hands and face as he slid through the brush, but he was up and running in an instant. His breath was coming in great whistling gasps, and his heart was threatening to break through his chest, but he doggedly drove himself onward. A sigh of thanksgiving burst from his parted lips as rounding a turn in the treacherous trail he caught the gleam of the silver plane's wings.

Mike O'Hara caught his arm as he stumbled forward, helped him into the cockpit. For a few moments Buzz crouched down panting heavily, then straightened his

shoulders, forced new strength into his tired body by sheer will-power, and pushed the plane out into the clearing. An instant later the silver ship zoomed into the clear, cooling atmosphere. Holding the stick close to stomach Buzz climbed swiftly, leveled off at five thousand feet, and thundered ahead at full gun.

The breath of the propeller cooled him as he tore through the bracing atmosphere, and the wild thumping of his heart gradually stilled. Through the phone set he told Mike what he had learned, and of his hope of overhauling the white plane before she reached the Kendrick rancho.

"I was fair jumpin' through me skin when that devil ship roared over me," the Irishman grunted. "I'm fearin' they mayhap spotted ye, lad, and I'm preparin' to put in some good words for ye with Saint Peter. So that scorpion knifed Mose Drake? Well, he could have done worse. Are me eyes mockin' me, lad, or do I see somethin'?"

"It's that killer," Buzz cried, snatching up the binoculars and staring at a tiny speck in the dazzling blue dome. "We're gaining on him, must be."

Mike shook his bushy head. "He's got a helluva start on us, lad, an' goin' like th' devil chasin' sinners. It's hopin' I am that he ain't catchin' Breck and his limp-in' crate."

"If it's the old von Schlechter, Mike, he'll turn and fight. That bird never ducked a scrap when we knew him, but he's sure been acting funny down here. Reckon he's been held down by Drake's orders not to risk anything. We've got to catch him."

Using every scintilla of his hard-won flying skill Buzz was pushing the ship to the utmost limits of her speed. A strong wind was blowing, and struts and flying-wires hummed and shrilled as the plane swept onward with throttle wide open. Flying was instinctive with the American, and he could tell on a split-second's warning when she would dip or roll. At the end of twenty minutes Buzz was sure they had gained slightly on the white-winged quarry. Ten minutes later he was positive of the fact.

They were flying over the heart of the

rank jungle, with an interminable ocean of verdure stretching to the horizon to meet a limitless vault of dazzling blue. Everywhere it was a universe of green and blue. Not even a ranging condor disturbed Nature's terrible solitude.

The white plane imperceptibly became more distinct, her wings and fuselage shimmering in the blistering sun like snow or molten silver. If her pilot knew he was being followed he gave no sign, but held her steady to her course, handling her beautifully in the howling wind. For the fiftieth time Buzz glanced at the speed indicator. His ship was making slightly better than a hundred and five miles an hour, with the throbbing motor singing a deep note of efficiency. His lips were set in a grim line of satisfaction as he watched the chased plane seemingly creep nearer.

"It's funny," he called to Mike over the head phone. "Yesterday that skunk simply flew away from me. Now we're gaining on him. Wonder if we did hurt him some this morning."

"Maybe he's playing foxy," the Irishman warned. "That scorpion's trickier'n an alley cat. Maybe tryin' to make you think he's logy just to crack down on you with hell and brimstone when he's ready. Don't you go to trustin' of him, lad."

"I won't," Buzz promised grimly. "I'll be watchin' every minute for some dirty trick. Hills startin' to show."

In the far distance faint outlines of tree-crested mountains were commencing to dance through the heat-mist. Ten minutes more, and they had moved imperceptibly closer. The glowing sun was slanting toward the western horizon; the howling wind gathered new strength. A few miles farther on the jungle began to gradually thin out, and the frowning hills gathered form and substance. Gradually the chase swerved away from the matted vegetation and swung toward the Kendrick rancho. And inch by inch the silver plane slowly reduced the distance between herself and the speeding biplane. They roared over the last green, twisting arm of the sullen jungle, shot over the rancho with its coffee and rubber plantations and clearings.

The biplane dived suddenly. Side-slipping his ship Buzz looked down.

Something leapt from the biplane—then a parachute flowered gracefully in the strong wind, began to drift down like a falling leaf. From a grove of lofty trees swept out a little cloud of horsemen. They thundered across the ground toward the floating parachute, one of the riders leading a spare horse.

"Look out, lad," Mike O'Hara yowled wildly, "he's comin'."

Buzz growled curses as he banked the ship around, and started to climb. The white biplane was fairly hurtling toward him through the blue heaven. Savage fury and baffled hope spurred the American to wild frenzy as he swooped toward the on-rushing killer. Don Fausto Campos had jumped from the biplane and joined the gang of mounted gunmen he had hidden on the Kendrick plantations. And Franz von Schlechter was going to crash up the silver plane while the Artigan secured Doris and effected his escape. In the very jaws of defeat the evil twain planned to snatch the laurels of victory.

The white biplane rolled and dived away from the silver ship, zoomed, and began maneuvering to get on the other's tail. Buzz's jaws were taut as he soared past the killer and began to climb fast. The biplane shot away, circled, and zoomed under and past the American, spitting ugly jets of flame as she raced by. But Buzz had been anticipating that maneuver, and rolling out of the stream of hissing lead he gave the biplane a savage burst. A quick roll and drop, and the white plane was gone. Buzz glanced over his shoulder to see her climbing madly.

"She's fast, but she isn't handling as sweet as she did," Buzz mused as he maneuvered to outclimb the killer. "But he's maybe aiming to fool me. He's a lousy skunk, but he sure knows how to fight his ship. And tricky as hell."

Both planes were now fighting madly for altitude, striving desperately to gain a position from which to rake the other's unprotected cockpit with screaming lead. At nine thousand feet the biplane darted upon

Von Schlecter was apparently determined to crash the silver plane, careless of his own safety. Buzz banked so sharply to dodge the onrushing plane that he went into a barrel roll, received a savage burst in the upper part of the cockpit before he could level off. The biplane had shot into half an outside loop as Buzz rolled away. She swerved away, pushed up her nose and began to climb.

Buzz pulled back the stick, climbed with the white ship. Eight, nine, ten, eleven thousand feet. The biplane was still going up. Twelve, thirteen. Smiling grimly Buzz leveled off, glided earthward. Von Schlecter's ship had a higher ceiling than the silver plane, and he was luring the American to his sky limit. Then he would zoom above the quivering ship and send her down in flames.

"Damned tricky," Buzz thought. "Must figure I'm loco. Only a buzzard would fall for a trick like that."

He looked down for a fleeting moment as his ship side-slipped, snatched up his glasses. A man was dragging a woman by her arms down the wide steps of the veranda. Buzz could see she was fighting wildly, caught a glimpse of white flesh and red-gold hair. A man ran to aid her captor. Buzz glanced up and behind. The biplane was dropping on him like a charging condor. Muttering curses, driven to desperation by the sight of Doris struggling in the clutches of Fausto Campos, Buzz never for an instant lost his grip on himself!

As the biplane thundered down and strove to gain the deadly rear position Buzz slid sideways, shook her off. He shot up, snapped into a sharp Immelmann, poured smoking lead into the biplane. Buzz grinned wolfishly as he watched the slugs rip into the killer's right flank. The biplane soared. Shooting into a bank and turn Buzz followed her up the brilliant air trail. Mechanically he snapped the empty drum of cartridges from its carriage with a twirl of wrist and thumb, shot another into place. The biplane had turned and was hurtling down at him.

Orange flames leapt over her cowl, and

Buzz ducked down as screaming bullets hissed viciously overhead, ricocheted from the after section of the fuselage. Buzz looked over as the biplane flashed past, recognized the dark, heavy, sneering face of Franz von Schlecter. The man's glowing eyes shot him a glare of venomous hate. Buzz zoomed, banked around, and shot away at full gun as though determined to give the horsemen a deadly burst. Abruptly he banked, caught the pursuing biplane with a broadside. Von Schlecter's windshield flew to fragments, but he dipped and rolled safely away from the stream of fire.

Instantly he had banked around and was driving straight for the silver plane. He shot under and past the silver ship, but Buzz rolled away from the hissing tracers. Almost the American was momentarily blinded by the blazing flare, but he slipped through the fiery zone without damage, save to an upper wing. Buzz smiled mirthlessly as he beheld a section of the slashed fabric snapping in the strong wind like a woman's skirt.

"A few more like that and we'll be look-in' for a soft landing," he grunted. "That bird is sure taking chances."

A quick glance showed the biplane was climbing fast. Then it leveled off and shot eastward at full gun. Tentatively Buzz dived toward the earth, and the biplane whirled back like a roaring dragon. It was plain that von Schlecter intended to guard the escape of Don Fausto and his gang at any cost. There was no time to look down now.

The biplane circled, dipped, zoomed, maneuvering for that deadly position from which to rake the other's cockpit with a storm of lead. The planes circled each other as wolves circle a deer, anticipating and checking each swift maneuver. Suddenly von Schlecter kicked the right rudder bar, twisted off at a dangerous curve. The silver plane skidded when Buzz met the turn, and as he struggled to level her off received a vicious burst from the rear. Bullets whizzed over his; compass and altimeter vanished from the instrument board as though swept off by a ghostly hand.

CHAPTER XI

CHARRED WRECKAGE

WITH death jibbering in his ears Buzz opened the throttle wide, fish-tailed, shoved his stick to the left and hurled his ship away from that flaming path of disaster. The silver plane was staggering and shuddering, but handling perfectly. The biplane flashed past the other's tail, and with a lightning-fast maneuver Buzz was behind her. Von Schlechter pulled out, swerved sharply, started climbing madly. But Buzz had been anticipating that desperate play.

His gun burst into a savage song of hate. Flaming lead scourged the biplane from nose to tail, lashed the cockpit murderously. Von Schlechter leapt upright in his safety belt, flung out his arms. The belt jerked him down, and he collapsed over the joystick. The biplane lurched, staggered. Flames licked out from the shattered fuselage. Fabric and false paint fed the creeping fire. The ship rolled over, went into an aimless spin, turned over on her back. Then she was hurtling earthward, a blazing torch. Buzz followed her down, held by a horrible fascination. The white plane crashed into a dense growth of shrubbery with a swirl of smoke.

Buzz pulled his eyes away from the flaming wreck as Mike O'Hara yowled something, straightened out, looked down. Horses were racing wildly over the ground. Buzz caught the gleam of rifles in the ruddy sunset glow, saw vicious bursts of flame gush from a thicket. Men and horses were crumpling under the invisible hail of death. Riders spurred their frantic mounts toward shelter on the far side of the clearing.

Buzz swept down to a bumping landing, flung off the belt with feverish haste, and leapt down from the cockpit, automatic in hand. Against a post of the veranda Doris Kendrick leaned, holding her tattered dress to her white breasts. The red-gold glory of her hair cascaded about her like a veil of spun copper. Near the steps a huddled form lay in the gray dust, wrapped in the glittering uniform of an Artigan general.

Farther out a wounded horse thrashed about near a tangled heap of still bodies.

From the thicket where the rifles had blazed rode a lone rider. Buzz blinked as he recognized the Señorita Carolina Vasquez.

"That devil stole my youth and trust," she said steadily. "He planned my death because he feared the vengeance of a Latin woman."

"He would have played with that girl just as he played with me. For hours I waited his coming; waited with the men he vainly tried to corrupt with his rotten gold. Had this girl gone willingly they would have both died. And not easily. Adios, Señor."

Tight-lipped, hard-eyed, without a backward glance, she whirled her horse, raked its heaving sides with cruel spurs, flashed into the dense thicket. They could hear the drumming of galloping hooves on the hard ground as Buzz reached Doris, slipped an arm around her shoulders. The girl nestled close.

They came back to the world as the vibrant hum of a plane sounded from the darkening sky. A few moments later Breck Kendrick glided down to a landing, scanned the scene with wide eyes. In a few words he explained that the damaged aileron had forced him to land and make repairs. He had watched the wild chase through the heavens, cursed the luck that kept him helpless while the ships fought above the hacienda.

"Hey, Buzz," called Mike O'Hara, striding up from an inspection of the wrecked biplane, "ye was sayin' that ship ain't so fast as when ye first cursed her comin'. It's right ye was, me lad. Sure, that hellion was sneakin' off with enough gold an' silver to choke a cow. Must have weighed three hundred pound."

Buzz nodded soberly. "Washed out by their own dirty flying. Strange wings sometime ride the air, Mike."

Going over to the silver plane he stilled her throbbing motor. Tenderly, reverently, he caressed her torn wings with gentle fingers like a man paying silent homage to the grace of the high gods.

Boomerang!

By

ROY DE LA MARTELL



SPURRED by the trade wind whipping in from the east the two-masted vessel was running briskly across the green waters of the Arafura sea, her canvas taut and her stays thrumming like giant harpstrings plucked by phantom fingers. Drifts of weed dotted the waves, flying fish occasionally flashed through the sweltering air like silvery arrows. Bradford Ives leaned on the rail of the trading schooner Kenyon and stared at the bluish blur marking Australia's bleak, lonely northern coast.

Heat! It blanketed the universe, a brazen, smothering pall. The sky was brass, the copperish sun a ball of molten metal. Even the wind dripped heat. Sickly sweet smell of copra swathed the ship like an obscene aura. Amidships the sweating Samoan crew toiled languidly, crooning in dreary monotone.

Halting his restless pacing of the poop, Captain Mason walked over to the rail, plucked the chewed cigar from his sun-blackened lips and spat forcibly. Ives glanced at him with an amused smile.

"You can talk all you please about a man being responsible for his ups and downs," Captain Nason rumbled, "but I'm telling you that luck is a mighty big thing in any man's life. I've sailed the archipelagoes for nigh on forty years, fighting storms and fever, seas the charts ain't sure about, savages and white men worse than savages, and I've seen good men dragged down through no fault of their own, and damned sharks coming out on top just because good luck was with 'em."

"There isn't such a thing as luck," Bradford Ives' voice was harsh. "A man wins in this life because he watches for opportunities and takes advantage of them."

Ives was stumbling, falling, staggering He's got brains and uses them."

Captain Nason snorted. "Brains be damned! Things happen to people, mister, things that can't be dodged."

"It's a man's own fault if he's a failure," the other insisted. "The average man is a fool. He's too lazy to think. Just because he happens to be prospering he thinks it will always be that way, and he never safeguards his future. You never hear anyone but fools and weaklings whining about bad or good luck. The successful man is where he is because he has brains and knows how to—"

"Poppycock!" erupted the captain, who was known from Honolulu to Singapore as a waspish and impatient man. "Show me the man that sings big about how great he is, and I'll show you a lucky fool that's got everything breaking his way. You can figure and plan and work your head off, but if luck's against you—"

"A brainy man makes what you call luck." The stocky passenger held a match to his cigar, puffed. "He foresees things and shapes his plans accordingly. He doesn't trust anyone but himself and he always knows what he's doing and how to do it. Take your own case, captain. You wouldn't be where you are today if you hadn't mastered your business and looked out for yourself. It hasn't been luck, but good judgment. You know that."

"I know I'd be the owner of a fleet of trading ships right now if I hadn't run into a streak of dirty luck in the Marshalls five years back," Captain Nason said bitterly. "And I'd have gone down with my ship in a typhoon off Kaewieng last year but for good luck."

"You mean your foresight and knowledge."

"A hell of a lot you know about it," the skipper exploded. He flung away along the rail, glared at the sweating crew, pitched his cigar into the rippling water. He hadn't liked Bradford Ives when the man came aboard at Port Moresby, and his dislike of the stocky, tight-lipped, alert-eyed man was growing fast. Hang a man who believed he could twist the beard of the great god Chance and get away with it. Captain Nason swore vindictively.

Ives strolled over to a cane chair beneath the poop awning, sat down and busied himself with a fan of split banana leaf. He was the Kenyon's lone passenger, bound for Batavia. His hard mouth wore a cynical smile as he stared after the irritable old captain. No wonder the old fool was wasting his years in this hellish climate, living on whisky and quinine.

If the man had brains he would have made his pile years ago and gone home to civilization. But no, he was one of those weak fools who worshipped at the shrine of a mythical deity called Luck. Ives laughed softly, his brown eyes growing hard as polished stone. A man always got what he deserved in this world.

Where would he be now, he reflected, if he hadn't used his brains? He might be a little man physically, but he considered himself a mental giant. He'd have been worse than a fool if he hadn't protected himself when he knew his bank was doomed. Now the financial institution he had ruled so long was in the hands of a receiver, but banks in Batavia, Singapore, Hongkong, Calcutta held gold worth two hundred thousand dollars and credited to Bradford Ives. He was a careful man.

What did he care that his depositors were howling, that certain authorities were eager to question him? A man had to protect himself, look out for his own future. It was everyone for himself in this world. He had simply used his brains. They couldn't reach him out here in the Orient, and with his gold Bradford Ives would soon be almost a king in this part of the world.

It wouldn't be long before he would be a financial power in the Far East, perhaps a white prince or rajah in some ancient land, lord of a beauteous harem, feared and courted and respected, shaper of a nation's destiny. Bradford Ives felt very pleased with himself. A man deserved what he got in this world.

Next day the Kenyon ran into a torrid calm, rolled sickeningly upon a sullen sea under a brassy sky that fairly rained heat. Captain Nason paced the decks like a caged panther, cursing the weather, the

crew, the dirty luck, sniffing at every whisper of air for some faint hint of a waking breeze.

Even the cheerful Samoans, accustomed as they were to heat and the scowls of Fate, became sullen as the hours dragged. They lounged the time away, muttering among themselves, obeying sluggishly the occasional orders roared at them by the captain and the two half-caste mates.

"Here I figured on a quick trip and had to run into this," Captain Nason rasped as Ives came up the companion from the main cabin. It was the second afternoon of the hellish calm, and heat hung over the ship like a steam canopy. "Here's a sample of the dirty luck you're always yammering don't exist. I should have foreseen this damned calm, of course," he added in bitter irony.

"Calms wouldn't bother you, captain, if you had provided your ship with an engine," Ives snapped. His smug complacency was turning to itching irritation under the damnable heat.

"Engine!" roared Captain Nason. "What the devil would I be doing with an engine on the Kenyon? This is a sailing ship, mister, not a tug. Engine? You make me sick."

"Well, you wouldn't be stuck here if you had one," the American grated.

"A lot you know about it," the captain flared.

He swung wrathfully on his heel and went aft for a drink from the bottle he kept near the wheel. Ives stared after him, eyes contemptuous, lips twisted in a sneer.

"Can't tell an old fool like him anything," he muttered, biting viciously into his cigar. "Knows it all, and hasn't the foresight of a cat. No wonder he's tied down to this damned climate. Drink and curses and howls about luck—that's all he knows. Such a simple thing as installing an engine in this old tub never entered that thick head of his. And he's been through this sort of weather scores of times."

Dropping into a chair under the poop awning, he scowled. If he hadn't been a

fool he'd have waited at Port Moresby for the next steamer, then he wouldn't be panting in this heat. But he had expected the Kenyon to make a quick run to Batavia; everybody had spoken highly of the ship's sailing qualities and Captain Nason's seamanship. Well, he deserved this for listening to a pack of fools. Might have known—

THERE was a muffled explosion which shook the ship, a gush of grayish smoke from the hold. "Jehovah!" roared Captain Nason, his hoarse bellow blending with startled yells from the crew. Wild rush of bare feet, sharp commands by the two half-caste mates.

Standing under an awning, conscious of a helpless sensation of hovering panic, Ives watched with narrowed eyes as the nearly naked Samoans, lashed to frenzied activity by the captain's roaring voice and their own primitive terror of fire, stormed the hold with water-gushing hoses. Billows of thick, greasy smoke were rolling from below, flowing along the decks, the acrid tang blending with the nauseatingly sweet odor of dried coconut.

Clank of pumps, hiss of water, animal-like yells of the Samoans, Captain Nason's deep-chested roars; the sounds mingled and echoed back from the shivering ship, beat on Bradford Ives' brain like blows of a devil's hammer. For the first time in a coldly ordered life he knew a numbing dependence on other men and was furious because of his own helplessness.

Another dull explosion rocked the Kenyon. The men manning the hoses surged back with frightened yells, to be hoarsely cursed and driven back to the hold by the bellowing captain.

"That old fool will stay with the ship till she blows up," Ives gritted, and his hands balled to knobby fists. Cold fingers of fear spidered up and down his spine. "He'll keep on fighting that fire until we're all lost. Why doesn't the fool lower the boats?"

His eyes darted from the sweating crew to the distant bluish blur on the southern horizon. If only he could reach that call-

ing land! He visioned leafy shelter, rippling water, luscious fruit. Ashore he'd be safe and able to signal the first ship that passed. In the money-belt claspings his ample waist were coins of gold and silver and traveler's checks. Those half-savage sailors must know the power of money, Bradford Ives' teeth clicked. Somehow, somehow, he would bribe some of the men to row him ashore; he'd be damned if he'd stay with a burning ship.

Three sailors reeled away from the smoke-choked hold, crumpled to the deck, coughing rackingly. Ives saw their wild eyes go to the boats, then the cursing first mate was kicking them to their feet and back to the pulsing hoses.

"They're ready to run," Bradford Ives muttered. "He won't be able to hold 'em down much longer. The fool, risking all our lives this way. . . . I'm going to look out for myself."

Racing down to his cabin he snatched up a traveling-bag, spewed its contents on his berth. Picked up a revolver and box of cartridges, stuffed them in his pocket. Reaching the galley he peered around warily, listened with straining ears. Finally convinced that the cook had gone, he hurriedly crammed the bag with provisions. It might be days before another ship passed this way, and he was a careful man.

Smoke eddied around him in choking clouds when he reached the main deck, weighed down by the heavy bag and two suitcases. The heat was smothering, the dead air like the breath of a glowing furnace. Ives dropped his burden, jerked out a handkerchief and mopped his dripping face, smarting eyes ranging the deck. Then his heart leaped with delight.

Two dark forms crouched at the rail a few feet away, panting hoarsely, almost hidden by the swirling smoke. Somehow they had eluded the watchful mates and were watching for a chance to seize a boat and desert the Kenyon. They eyed Ives with the grim intensity of hunting tigers, teeth gleaming oddly white in their dark faces. They jerked up as the American approached, snarling like cornered beasts. One fingered his knife.

"No can stay here. All burn—all die." Ives was shrilling it. "Ship maybe blow up. Go to land. Look! Me pay you." He showed gold coins, pointed to the boats, himself, the distant shore. "Me make you rich. Gold. - Much gold."

The Samoans stared with glowing, glistening eyes. They knew enough English to understand his urgings; also they comprehended these queer pieces of yellow metal could be exchanged for many things. And they feared the fire and those terrifying explosions with the deathly fear of the primitive man.

Owlishly they eyed the stocky passenger, glanced fearfully toward the smoke-spitting hold and the sound of Captain Nason's bellowing voice. Chattering together in their own dialect, they glared again at the black smoke uprushing from below.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Ives cried frantically, fairly dancing with impatience. "The boat! Quick!" He forced money into their calloused hands. "They can't chase us. They can't leave the ship. Hurry!" He was gesturing wildly toward the boats.

The Samoans stared up at the boats, shifted their gaze to the swirling smoke; then, as the Kenyon rocked with the force of another muffled blast, leaped into flashing action. Ives almost sobbed with relief as a boat hit the water. Frantically he dropped over into the rocking dinghy, dragging heavy bag and suitcases after him.

He felt a wild urge to scream his triumph as the boat was shoved clear and lifted across the green sea. "That old fool will stick till the damned ship blows up," he mumbled, "and curse his luck with his last breath. Luck! The crazy fool!"

Driven by the brawny Samoans with all their strength, the boat was fairly leaping across the oily swells. Heat dripped from the brassy sky and the sea was a dead expanse. No birds winged through the stagnant air; no flying-fish showed now. It was as though weary Nature slumbered—or had died.

Ives looked back over his shoulder. The Kenyon was swathed in smoke. Faintly,

softened by distance, the hoarse voice of Captain Nason came to his ears. Bradford Ives scowled with impatience. Such stupidity was past all understanding. The Kenyon was doomed; any man could see that. Yet that fool of a captain would not order his men to the boats. Bradford Ives thanked God that he had been born with brains.

The afternoon wore away. Occasionally the Samoans rested on their oars, brushing dripping sweat from their faces with sinewy hands. The blazing sun crept toward the steel-hard western horizon. At last dusk reached shadowy fingers for sea and sky, but it brought no relief from the sweltering heat. And the shore was still far away. . . .

Occasionally Ives twisted around to stare at the Kenyon, fast becoming a blur of smudge to his questing eyes. Every moment he expected to see flames shoot through the smoke, to hear the reverberating roar that would proclaim the ship's doom.

Moonlight was now silvering the sea. Suddenly the wind awoke, sweeping in from the east. . . . Ives straightened in his seat and jerked around as exclamations burst from the staring sailors. And a wild cry of wonder tore from his own parched throat.

Sails gleaming silvery in the moonlight, a ship was speeding westward across the rippling water. The Kenyon! Ives blinked, brushed his eyes with a trembling hand, stared incredulously. Captain Nason had conquered the fire and saved his ship.

And Bradford Ives, who had prided himself on his brains, was in this rocking boat with two men little more than savages! Panic whipped through him. That distant shore which had seemed a refuge now took unto itself grim foreboding. It might be days before a ship passed—and he would be alone with those opaque-eyed, brawny, dark-skinned sailors who could break him to bits with their bare hands. He shivered, jerked around to face them, his hand instinctively dropping to the revolver in his pocket.

The moon rode high in the black velvet

of the heavens when the crunching of sand under the boat's keel told Bradford Ives the shore was gained. There was a spicy fragrance in the air, blending with the sea's salty tang. Thunder of the surf waging eternal war with rocky ramparts beat on the night.

Stiffly, all his muscles aching drearily, the American followed the Samoans out of the boat, plowed across sand and into a sparse growth of low-growing brush. From the blackness ahead drifted strange, furtive sounds—night voices of the jungle.

Ives halted. "Make camp near sea," he told the Samoans firmly. "Watch for ship. In morning find much wood, make big fire when see ship."

"Make fire high-up," grunted a sailor, pointing inland. "Him show long way."

Ives peered through the moonlight, following the Samoan's pointing finger. Dimly, he sensed a sudden movement behind, jerked around with a startled cry, clumsily dragging out his revolver as he turned. An oar thudded against his head. Bradford Ives crumpled down into an unconscious heap.

HE wakened to the sound of weird merriment. It seemed to come from the graying heavens, to mock him with hysterical mirth. He sat up dazedly, shuddering as one gripped by an ague. His head was throbbing and whirling sickeningly, his body aching in every joint. That hellish laughter grew and deepened, eerie as the glee of gloating devils. For a terrifying moment the man thought he listened to mocking savages.

His head lifted in the gray dawn and he peered up at the tree above him. Two shadowy birds perched on a dead limb, the weird laughter dripping from their beaks. Ives shook his head. It couldn't be. He knew not that he stared at a pair of kookaburras, the winged laughing hyenas of the Australian bush.

Strange, awesome forms were flitting through the dawn, huge fruit bats winging their silent way to daylight shelter. Cockatoos, parrots and other dwellers of the air began screeching welcome to the new

day. Scampering sounds of tiny feet came from the brush and afar a dingo—the wild dog of Australia—sounded its wolfish, wailing call.

Consumed by a fear which choked him and laid icy talons on his pounding heart, Ives stumbled to unsteady feet, leaned weakly against a massive eucalyptus tree. The air was redolent with myriad odors. Before him the gray sea heaved in long swells, rumped by a soft wind. There was no sign of the boat; his traveling-bag with its store of food and his suitcases had vanished. He cursed weakly when he discovered the treacherous Samoans had taken his money-belt, his watch and chain, the diamond ring from his finger, his revolver and cartridges. He was alone on this savage coast, without food or shelter—and unarmed.

Panic shook him as the wind shakes a reed. . . . Day marched swiftly across the bush. . . . Ives roused from the terror clutching him. Burning thirst was gnawing at his vitals, adding its horror to the torture tearing heart and mind, body and soul. He turned from the sea and stumbled inland, spurred by the craving for water. Lurched through patches of guava scrub and stiff stems of dry grass, dotted by occasional clumps of brilliant-flowered lantana, staggering and kicking wildly when creeping vines clutched his feet snakily.

Doggedly he toiled up a long slope, peering through the bush for water, listening avidly for its murmur. His heart was pounding madly, his breath coming in great laboring gasps. Sweat plastered the thin garments to his body. Out of the east the sun was racing like a redhot ball.

Ives suddenly halted, a strangled cry tearing from his throat, his heart leaping like a snared bird. Before him loomed two fearsome, incredibly tall forms, seemingly materializing out of the solid ground. Black, coarse-bearded men with short bodies and stiltlike legs, naked save for meagre G strings, with diamond-bright eyes, keen as a falcon's, relieving the dullness of their broad, flat faces. In their sinewy hands were slender spears.

Like a man gripped by a hideous dream,

Bradford Ives stared at the menacing figures for a long moment; then, blind terror whipping through him, whirled to run. Wiry hands clamped on his arms and shoulders. He was surrounded by the towering natives. Struggling frenziedly, Ives was roughly dragged through the scrub and into the nearby camp of the nomadic blacks.

At a smoldering fire sprawled all but naked men and women with nude children gamboling around like restless sprites. Guttural cries of delight and surprise broke from the group at the fire as the white captive was half-shoved, half-dragged to the camp, shrieks and gusts of wild laughter.

A towering black, the leader of the small band, faced Ives and broke into a harsh gabble. Ives shook his head, answered with English words. The other stared blankly. Ives strained vainly at the sinewy hands holding him as the score of men and women left the fire and clustered close. A woman whose naked body gleamed like gold, her sensuous mouth framed by a savage leer, reached for his green silk necktie, pulled it off with a shriek of glee.

Other hungry hands clutched at his garments. He fought wildly as he was stripped down to his undershirt amid wild laughter of women and prancing children. Shoved against a lofty eucalyptus, he was tightly bound to the tree by wiry pieces of vine. Ives was sure now that the blacks meant to torture, perhaps kill, him.

Through his fear-racked mind flitted things Captain Nason had told of the Australian bushmen—their marvelous skill with boomerang and spear, their primitive savagery, their amazing strength. Usually peaceful, they were yet little more than beasts in mental development. What mercy could he expect from this barbarous band? Their shrieks of wild laughter as they stared at him, their brutish faces and towering bodies, their filth and nakedness filled Ives with horror and dread. Stories he had heard of fiendish torture inflicted on captives by savages crowded his fevered brain, bathed quaking body in the cold sweat of terror.

Watching the older men divide his garments and proudly don them, he cursed

them thickly. The blacks drifted back to the smoldering fire, broke into guttural jabberings, at times gesturing toward the prisoner.

Ives strained at his bonds, desisted with a whimper of pain. His struggles only drove the wirelike vines deeper into cringing flesh. Thirst was consuming him like a raging fever. Bitterly he cursed himself for deserting the ship. Cursed the treacherous Samoans with sudden frenzy.

"And I thought I was doing the right thing," he groaned. "My God! Is there such a thing as luck after all?"

Slumping down against the tree, he closed his burning eyes. . . . Something touched his face. He straightened with a jerk. A massive woman was holding a gourd of water to his parched lips. He drank greedily, thanking her with his eyes. Setting down the gourd, she stuffed half-raw dingo flesh in his mouth. Hungry as he was, the rank, coarse meat was loathsome to him. But she, shrieking laughter over his contorted face, crammed more between his lips.

Suddenly her mirth changed to the quick, unreasonable petulance of the savage. Gibbering throatily, she slapped his face viciously with calloused palms, pinched arms and sides and thighs. Roll-

ing his wincing flesh between biting fingers and thumbs, laughing crazily, gloating with the joy of the savage in infliction of pain. Abruptly she leaped away and darted to the group of bearded men by the fire. Ives watched wretchedly as she squatted on her heels and began chattering eagerly.

The sprawled men stared from her to the prisoner, shifted their gaze to her. The leader jabbered with his fellows, proudly patting the shirt he had filched from the white man, barked something at the huge female. She answered shrilly, gestured with head and broad hands. Again the bearded leader consulted with the others, then spoke to the woman.

Shrieking wild delight she leaped up and bounded back to the shivering Ives. He shrank away with a gasp and closed his eyes as she plucked a crudely-fashioned knife from her short grass skirt, her lone garment. He blinked wondering surprise and relief as she commenced to cut the viny fetters. Wrenching away the severed bonds, she gripped his arm and started to drag him through the bush. Shrinking from rocks and thorny scrub gouging his tender feet, Ives stumbled over a projecting root, fell to his knees. The woman cried out angrily.

Stooping, she struck him with the palm



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of her own heavy hand. He staggered to his feet, wincing away from the thudding blow. Fury whipping through him, he tried to tear away from her grasp. But she, tiger-quick and incredibly strong, clutched his neck with steel fingers and jerked him around as a giantess might fling a child.

From the watching blacks burst mocking laughter. Again she was dragging him through the bush. A wallaby, miniature image of a kangaroo, broke from cover under their feet and leaped away in great bounds. Ives was panting in great gasps, sweat streaming down his face and body, stumbling, falling, staggering up again as he was half dragged, half driven onward.

Breaking through a dense patch of scrub the woman halted before a low opening in a brush-mantled hillside. Forcing the man to his knees, she pushed him ahead of her into a roomy cave. Ives stood up, shakily, blinking with the sudden change from blazing sunlight to semi-gloom. The woman was on her feet in a flashing twist of her lithe body. Gibberish flowing from her thick lips, she swept him into her moist, noisome embrace. . . .

Hours later Bradford Ives crept from the cave. Standing in the shade of a lofty

eucalyptus, he stared at the limitless sweep of bush, baking in the blistering sunlight of mid-afternoon. On the surface of his dazed mind rippled bewildered thoughts like shifting fragments of glass in a child's kaleidoscope. Was he the husband or the slave of this loathsome, savage black creature? He, the man of brains, scoffed at luck, owner of a fortune in gold in the banks of Calcutta, Batavia, Singapore. Was he in truth but the puppet of a black, flat-faced savage woman? His limbs twitched with the extreme horror of this thing.

Had his own foolishness brought him to this, or was he but a victim of the great god Chance?

Was old Captain Nason really right when he insisted that luck was the main thing in the lives of all men? He visioned the sun-dried old captain pacing the Kenyon's poopdeck, and wriggled as though a knife had pierced him. He might have been lolling comfortably on that deck this very minute if—

"Brains!" he cried out wildly, and laughed like a maniac. "Oh, my God! I thought I had brains! I—"

Slap! went the black woman's heavy hand on his mouth, and he was dragged back to the cave.

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They had shot Angelica . . . and she was a woman—to be protected .



HARD BLACK

By WILLIAM BRANDON



NOW I ain't one to talk much about myself. Ain't often I go on about what I've seen and done during the last twenty years since I've been kickin' around where kickin' around is a full time job.

I know that every time you hear a guy

say that, and then start in to blow, you put him down as a lamagabbin liar just layin' an alibi; you get ready to hear him talk a full load about himself, just after he's told you he ain't one to do that.

That ain't so now. This is Hard Black's story; not mine. It's Angelica's story too, but—well, I'll tell you about Hard.

Hard was a man who'd earned his name. No far-seein' mother tacked that first name on him; he didn't get it as a gift. He paid for it. And when he got done payin' for it he was a young guy but he looked old already. His hair was bleached to pale straw by the sun and he was burned as brown as your dining-room table. There was a scar that started in front of his left ear and came around, under his jawbone, and ended at the point of his chin.

That had been carved there by one of those little knives that the Taureg Arabs are so handy with.

And his nose had been broken, once—or maybe twice—and had been shoved over towards the starboard side of his face and had been stubborn about moving back.

But even with all this, he wasn't a bad looking guy; wouldn't scare babies, that is, or do for a sideshow. He was big, and easy going, and his light blue eyes, always squinted from the sun, laughed a lot.

He looked human enough, anyhow, to have the women always looking at him more than once; and he knew this and didn't mind it.

Hard had been too young for the big war, so he'd gone to Africa and joined the French Foreign Legion, to see if all the books were right. That had started him.

After the Legion he'd hit the high spots. And he'd hit them hard. He left a reputation from Morocco to Tampico, and that's what got him his name. For about ten years he kept himself busy hopping over the world, trying to see all the military action that was happening, or was even going to happen, and he'd probably be at the same trick yet, if it hadn't been for Angelica.

He met Angelica in Metaxa. That's a town in Mexico, only it almost straddles the Texas border. Hard Black's home town was fifty miles east of the border, in Hardin County, and he'd come home for a month or two for some reason. Not for a rest, what other folks come home for; Hard never rested. But maybe just because he wanted to hear a coyote howl.

And then, after gettin' home, and movin' in on his married sister for his meals—she

didn't kick, though, because he paid regal board—he started spendin' all his time along the border.

So he met Angelica.

Angelica wasn't her real name, but everyone—all the Americans that knew her—called her that. You see, she'd earned her name too. No, she wasn't a nurse, or anything like that. I don't know that she did anything to help her fellow man, except use common sense and kindness.

Angelica's father had been the old Barcelona grandee brand, with pointed chin whiskers and pure Spanish that made him need a translator to talk with the greasers along the line. He was rich, and had owned about half the border state, so it seemed. He'd about run the place, too, and he'd run it tough.

But he died, and Angelica stepped in. Now she was Spanish, and not Mexican, but she didn't make a point of it the way her old man had. She spoke Mexican, and she was nice to everyone. But the biggest difference was her treatment of Americans across the line. Where her papa had been hell on wheels for them, she was a big sight better and more useful than a consul would have been.

There wasn't a man in the border country that didn't have something to thank her for. And not many but had tried to marry her, sometime or another—forgetting all they usually cracked about Mexican women.

But Angelica didn't fall. She was still plenty young, and plenty rich, and more than plenty good looking . . . besides seeming all the time to get even better.

And so she was, until Hard Black came along. Trouble came with him—I mean, we found out later it'd been there all the time, and Hard had just poked it up the way you can walk past a sidewinder forty times and never know it's there until you happen to tromp on it your forty-first trip—but it seemed then like he packed the ruckus right into Metaxa on his back.

HE was seen around Metaxa for a week or so, just loafing, and then early one night, things happened.

Hard Black killed a man, a Mexican—shot him once and dropped him clean. He'd been chasing the man, run him clear to the banks of the river, and shot him just as he jumped for a boat.

He never turned for another look after the scrawny devil splashed into the water. Half a dozen people came running, and there was Hard, walking back toward the town, just shoving his pistol into his pocket.

He didn't speak to a soul. And no one spoke to him. The so-called constabulary couldn't see any body yet—it was in the Rio Grande—and so didn't have any excuse for cuffing the big American. And didn't want any.

He pushed through the running people, kept on walking back to the town, bombasted right through the middle of it, right down the middle of the street, and kept on going. He walked the mile past it to Angelica's ritzy hacienda, and there other things happened.

Hard Black walked around to the side of her house, and shoved through the gate in the patio wall. That was a pretty place in there—fountain, flowers and all the trimmings. Angelica was sitting there in the early moonlight, by herself. A servant was carrying some dishes or something out.

Hard slammed up to that servant, with never a syllable to either one, and grabbed the man by the neck.

The dishes fell with a crash to the floor of flagged stone. The servant squealed, and Angelica stood up in a hurry.

Hard was manhandling that peon to who tied the knot. He ended up by throwing him halfway across the little park.

The servant lay there, mumbling and moaning Latin cusswords.

Angelica stepped up to Hard, reached up and slapped his face so hard it sounded like a bull whip.

"Now," she said, and her clear voice was enough to make a man want to crawl under a rock, "tell me what you are doing, before you go to jail. You are just drunk? You are crazy? Talk, you dog."

Angelica never lost her temper so much that her voice rose; but her eyes sparkled and snapped in the moonlight and her

thick black hair clouded as she shook and tossed her head a little.

Hard grinned at her. It was the kind of a sight to make a man like Hard laugh. She looked so little, and he looked so big, and she was so mad, while he didn't have to be—

"I know all about you, chicken," he said. "How you're such a sweet little onion to everyone in the precinct. Well, I knew your old man, too, and I knew there must be somethin' wrong with his daughter. There is. I'll give you time to get a comb and a toothbrush, and then you're comin' along."



His eyes squinted a little more, and he added:

"To jail."

Naturally she couldn't understand what he was talking about. She just stood and stared at a man with so much brass. So he explained, like he'd explain to a kid he didn't like, and at last had a chance to lick.

"I gave your servant there a little of that to show him what was comin'. I'm going to make him talk. He knows things I want to hear. And after he tells 'em, it'll be curtains for you and your whole bunch of playmates." He grinned again at her, still as sour as desert bacon.

She wasn't saying a word all this time, just standing looking at him. Took some looking up, too, since he was a foot and a half higher, anyhow.

"Then I'll go clean through it. You've been usin' your nice convenient little ranch here, with a lot of miles of river frontage, for other purposes than ranchin'. Sabe yet?" Hard's voice suddenly snapped: "You've been smugglin'. Runnin' dope across the border. No wonder you wanted everyone to like you. That helped. No one suspected you.

"The biggest gang that's ever worked this territory uses your place as its base. Gonna tell me you don't know about it? They use your funds to work with—I know the whole story.

"An hour ago I got the business, from end to end. I burned one of your little *diablitos* to do it. And time enough, after I take you and your right-hand whelp over here, to go through your place and pick off the rest of your crew.

"Now, get it?"

She was staring at him, now, really excited. "I get it. I've been thinking, for some time—but it can't be true! Pedro, Juan—my men are to be trusted!"

Hard was laughing at her. "Try that line on someone else. You didn't know it?" He laughed out loud.

She burned him up again with a look. "No, I didn't, you—"

She suddenly yelled. Now when Angelica, always a calm little girl, yelled, there was something pretty bad about to happen.

Hard spun around, his hand moving out with a gun in something under a half second.

The servant, who had been layin', half beat up, across the patio, had come back to life. He was on his feet, now, and there was a knife in his hand.

And ten yards to his left, at the door that led to the interior of the house, there were two or three other Mexicans, and they were coming with death in their eyes. They'd heard all that Hard had said. They didn't aim to be taken—for they knew this guy would take 'em, even if he was on the wrong side of the river.

Hard shot once, and his slug kicked the servant back a yard and slammed him against the wall.

One of the lads in the doorway fired,

Angelica screamed and grabbed Hard, and started to fall.

You could see that he couldn't figure it out, for a split second or so. But his mind was trained to work quick, and it did.

They had shot Angelica. And since they had, therefore, she hadn't had part nor parcel of their scheme. And since she hadn't, she was a woman to be protected.

And moreover, she was a woman that Hard had wrongly blessed out, and accused of rotten dirt, and with a man like him that meant a lot.

He stooped over to let Angelica slip to the moss-grown flagging. And he never straightened up. He rushed that doorway, weaving from side to side, moving like an eel.

His gun was quiet. That's what you're taught, in the Legion, to conserve ammunition. Use it when it hurts.

Hard did.

There were other men crowding into the patio by that time—they made five altogether, the five who had been carrying on that racket from Angelica's house—and they were desperate.

But—they were bunched in the door.

Hard came to within twenty feet of them while they were shooting five or six times and missing every try, due to Hard's smooth action.

And then, Hard cut loose.

His gun roared four times, the shots so close together they sounded about like a single blast. He did that trick by letting the first shot go, and then pressing trigger for the second as he levelled the gun from the kick, and so on for the others. Hard could draw and empty a gun in less than a second. And hit what he aimed at.

Three of the just found out smugglers made a flopping pile in that doorway. Two of them died in a couple of seconds or so. The other didn't. He laid and screamed loud enough to split the heavens.

The others tried to break.

Hard yelled once for them to stop, but he didn't yell very loud. They didn't, and he shoved up to the door that was jammed with the birds he'd shot, and threw down on the other two.

He fired once, missed, as the guy jumped just at that time, and then clicked trigger on an empty chamber, something that he started cussing about at that minute. A good soldier never let that happen.

Something told those two birds he was out. They both turned, at that instant, and were on the edge of crossing fire at Hard, a pretty target there in the door, when—

Another gun let go, from a side door of the room they were in.

One took a back flip and a double somersault, and the other sprawled for a minute, scrambled to his feet and ran, yelling with pain from the wound in his shoulder.

Hard stood there, for a heartbeat, staring around and trying to see the guy that had saved his skin. He could see the smoke, from where the gun had spoke, but he couldn't see life.

He went and looked, and saw that the hombre had taken out, without waiting to be thanked.

But as the men in the room, and the one just gone, accounted for the bunch he wanted, Hard passed the mystery up. . . . A man sees a lot of funny things in ten years of fighting around. . . .

He went back to Angelica.

NOW it was all finally explained to Hard Black, and Angelica did most of the explaining, and it took her a couple of long weeks, while she was getting over the bullet scratch on her arm that she'd drawn, to do it.

This gang had worked through a little general store and combination cantina and gambling hall that sat smack on the Mexican side of the river. An old dried up American devil ran the place, so Angelica said, and she'd put nothing past him.

Since he did a lot of business for her, and even helped keep her finances straight—he knew about stuff like that—he'd have a chance to fake the books. He'd have a chance to help the gang, which was made up of Angelica's own men, work right from her place, and without suspicion.

"But of course," she said, with her all-fired feeling for kindness, "this American

storekeeper may have been fooled by Pedro, who was the *jefe*, the captain of the group. That would have been easy for Pedro to do. He could have convinced the storekeeper that it was all honest and above board business for me, and the storekeeper may have been innocent. After all, while he is undoubtedly one of the leatheriest old tramps I have ever known, and while he has undoubtedly been in every sort of trouble there is known to hot countries, I have never known anything against him. So, 'Ard, I would not trouble the old man. . . ."

But Hard didn't take her advice there. It was his opinion, and the opinion of his friend, local captain of the Border Patrol, the guy that had asked for Hard's help in the thing, that the storekeeper was the real leader of the outfit.

But they couldn't find him. He'd cleared out, which further convinced them that he was as guilty as black sin.

All of which shows that there ain't no justice.

For me, I was that storekeeper there in Metaxa, and I'd never known anything wrong with Pedro's business dealin's, until I stood at the door of that patio that night, havin' chanced that way, and heard Hard Black talkin'.

And what he said had made me so mad that I'd hauled out and shot those two devils just as they were ready to finish Hard.

After which, knowin' what chance I'd have to look innocent in that setup, I'd cleared out. After twenty years of kickin' around, it's easy to be free footed. . . .

It was a month or two after that, and I was still campin' around near, dodgin' rurales, which are native cops, Hard had put on me, when I seen a couple ridin' close durin' the night, and got set to jump again.

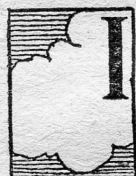
But there wasn't no need to. That couple wouldn't have seen me if I'd stood up and bellered.

It was Hard and Angelica, and about the only thing in that night they was seein' was the moon.

Unless, maybe, it was each other.

A Dead Ship in a Windless Night

By GARRETT EVERS
MARSHALL



It was one of the secret places of the earth—a sheltered bight in the Lower California coast—and all the long, hot, stirless day, the schooner had reflected hull and naked masts and slant of listless rigging in the glassy mirror of the strait. On either board lifted an island, forested completely and so close to the water-marge that the dark columns of trunks, interwoven with crude green creepers, stood inverted in a gloomy fidelity in the smooth water. There was not a wisp of wind; no splash or ripple, no murmur or quiver of leaf; not a sound of any kind. Only an unbroken and vast immobility.

But after the abrupt drop of night, there was, aboard the becalmed schooner, a stirring in the cabin; the rustling of female garments and the fragrance of some faint mimosa perfume could be sensed, at the one time, issuing from under the open slide of the companionway. A dim figure in pallid white was attached to the sound and subtle scent—apparently a woman in yachting costume for all one could see of her in the inky blackness. As she moved, however, there was an atmosphere of feminine charm about her that she never lost, even through the amazing series of events that were to follow.

She stepped up upon the awninged half-poop and, with a thin clatter of sandals, glided from one side to the other, and looked out over each rail and sniffed the air.

"Not a breath!" she sighed. "She hasn't



Then she stepped into the baggy trousers . . .

even drifted," meaning the schooner and peering toward one smudge of island, blacker than the palpable night. "Not a fathom. Only swung a bit, that's all."

There was a metallic snap, raw in the soundlessness, as she opened the binnacle hood. A match scratched against sandpaper like a file on the teeth and a pinch of pale luminosity picked itself out of the impenetrableness and, like the ghost of a comet, etched a slim filament of curve as the woman, stooping, passed its fire to the wick of one of the compass lamps.

The radiance from the moon of binnacle, a quick and harsh yellow in the thicker blackness under the awnings, lighted and made her lowered face visible as though it had suddenly dropped into the object-glass of some illumined binoculars. There was evident, as she ignited the second lamp, a pair of goodly spaced and crisp blue eyes under brows and lashes whitened as with dust by sunburn. Perhaps due to the harshness of those highlights and shadows, the contour of her face looked angular and her skin, in the saffron glow, duskily tanned like a man's. One recalled at this that her voice, even when she had suspired softly into the night, had held in it something virile and resonant, also like a man's.

Framing her face was a thick mop of bobbed hair, yellow and rippling as ripened corn, fluent as honey and, like honey, catching and holding the lemon light in burnished amber glints. It was in startling contrast to her browned complexion and crisp blue eyes. She added in those quiet yet bell-like tones, with a longing but purposeless glance at the motionless compass-card:

"No use, old quicksilver! We're a dead ship in a windless night!"

She lifted up, and the diagonal stream of light from the binnacle projected a disc, citron yellow, upon the thin silken man's shirt she wore over her full bust, with the soft collar rolled back and exposing a sunburnt V of neck. Fastening the shirt together below the wedge of opening was a bar of platinum of curious design which scintillated and struck off silvery splinters as she filled her lungs with a bulging breath.

"Ho, for'rd!" she called in sailor fashion, the bell notes swelling in her voice. "Show a leg! Mac, Kahea, Scipio—you hear there?"

Her tones carried afar and then faded thinly away. There was no answer, no movement forward. And the thick black strata of moveless air seemed to flow back on her with an intolerable weight of silence.

The spectral whiteness of her could be seen slipping through the night like a will-o'-the-wisp, as she pressed forward in a shrinking agony of apprehension. Her long familiarity with the deck heartened and stood her in good stead; but still she couldn't refrain from detecting mysterious movements where nothing stirred, from throbbing with wretched fright at encountering the piled-up boughs of unripe bananas, bulking higher than the bulwarks and darker than the dark. She reached, at last, the fo'c's'le-head.

"Below there!" she called, the resonance of her voice quavering uncontrollably with foreboding. "Bundle out of it and on deck, all of you! Set the sidelights! Let's have a watch on the wheel, Mac. You hear there, Scipio? Stir your dark pins and dish up some chow!"

The words were spoken boldly enough, with a fine show of masculinity, but it was as if she had tossed them down an abysmal well of blackness. Nothing answered but echoes, rounded reverberating echoes as from an empty space . . . They were gone!

She knew why. It is a sailor theory that a gale always succeeds a death at sea and, as will sometimes happen, the superstition had been borne out following the death of Captain Newbolt, her father. They had been making passage from Honolulu to San Pedro, laden with crates of canned pineapples in the hold and ricks of green bananas on deck, and when the norther had blown them fully five hundred miles off their course, they had run in here to seek shelter between the two islets until it should abate.

But still, moodily, the men had remained superstitiously overwrought. It was indeed uncanny, they had argued, how quickly that storm had made up. One moment, chuting

the body of the skipper off the hatch-cover, the Pacific had been as placid as a lake, the sky above clear and blue as a delft bowl. The next, and the agitated frothing waves were banging their bows and the sky was becoming smeared over with racing plum-bago clouds. The schooner was, they concluded, unlucky.

Wherefore, in the deadness of the ensuing calm, while Nancy Newbolt was asleep after the long watches caused by the gale and trusting to them to keep a vigilant guard on deck, turn and turn about, they had deserted her and the hard-luck craft. They must have stolen the only boat from the midship davits and sneaked off in it to one or the other island, or else had sculled away for those sorry *pueblos* along the distant sunbaked mainland.

Well, they were gone; and Nancy caught hold of the invisible jamb of the fo'c's'le doorway and her throat suddenly dry and constricted, breathed a sharp anguished breath of dismay. The echo came back to her distinctly out of the yawning dark well like the breathing of some voice from a phonograph horn.

But it was more disturbing than that, and she felt herself giving way to irresistible terrors. The swift taking off of her father had laid upon her an abrupt sense of her aloneness and now, as if to prove the impossible, the stealthy desertion of the meager crew had left her in a most complete and utter loneliness aboard this schooner transfixed in an exotic setting of opaque night and sable sea.

That breathing, she told herself, was like the restrained respiration of some threatening presence, lurking crouched there in the impenetrable fo'c's'le! She passed, with the morbid and chill excess of her fright, into insensibility. She had a dim sensation of sinking into a hollow of the banana boughs, of hearing, like crinkling paper, the remote rustling of the long dry leaves. Then she no longer heard nor felt nor saw. It was divine surcease.

WHEN Nancy next opened her eyes it was just in time to note, languidly and without surprise, a shooting star rush-

ing smoothly and noiselessly up from behind the vaguely blacker patch of starboard island. There was no other glimmer in the nocturnal canopy and it limned itself against the tremendous darkness, white and dazzling as a star of the first magnitude—then, inexplicably, went out! She caught, in the appalling down-swoop of the night, the swish of its ascent, thus slowly reaching her through the impassive stagnancy.

"A rocket!" she surmised, and in a pulsating revival of her faculties, found herself watching for others. Some ragged leaves of the banana heap brushed her face and she pressed them quickly aside. She knew one flare would mean, in nautical language, a ship in distress beyond the islet, while more than one in rapid succession would convey a warning of some order. And she wasn't certain if the rocket had come from behind the isle and out to sea, or from the withdrawn hilly heart of it.

She became sure when a second star appeared, soaring straight up from the lofty crest of the islet. Another followed, achieving an elevation almost directly overhead; she could see, with the tail of her eye, its reflection like a phosphorescent gleam in the leaping shimmer of the strait. Then it, too, winked into nothingness and the night flowed out from the black smudge of forest, more opaque than ever.

It was all like a half dream, as if she hadn't quite come to, and Nancy hardly knew what to think. But those rockets were signals of some sort and she couldn't help feeling they had something to do with her sooty shadow of schooner, so moveless there, a captive of the calm. Her instinct linked the rockets with the ship as a matter of sensitized emotion rather than tempered thought, and yet nothing could have astonished her more than what immediately followed.

From the awninged half-poop of her own schooner came a fierce zipping whirr and a single stream of rocket spired up and exploded into a solitary brilliant star with a report, feeble as from wet gunpowder, and a slow shower of descending dull-red sparks. She imagined she could hear them hissing and quenching in the dying shimmer of the

strait and she huddled back, with a papery rustling of leaves, her mouth opened to utter a cry. For she had seen in the sudden sliver of light a massy group of men under the awnings, their faces shining in the weird brightness and their eyeballs glittering!

The schooner was already boarded! Yet what struck Nancy as strange and altogether unaccountable was the fact that she believed she had spied, among the invaders, the weather-seamed face of McClenahan, who had acted as mate, and the gleaming darker countenance of Kahea, the Kanaka foremast hand, and Scipio, the negro cook!

To add certitude to her fleet glimpse of them, as the darkness poured back she heard one of the deserters say:

"I've soiched up for'd in the fo'c's'le, sor, and there's nary a sign of the gurril. Belave me or belave me not, sor, this ship is a Jonah—bad cess to ut!—and some divilment has betaken thet colleen. Here, Scip, you dhirty-faced spalpeen, did you foind her below in the cabeen?"

It was the voice of McClenahan, rich with brogue and snailing in slow phrases to her through the blanketing dark. Nancy realized that, before the glare of the rockets had snapped her to, they must have been searching high and low for her through the schooner; but concealed by the impenetrable night and the ambushade of banana leafage, the pallid whiteness of her garments had successfully eluded them.

McClenahan had addressed, in the end, the cook who also acted as steward and now drawling laboredly to her ears, she heard Scipio reply:

"No indeedy, Mac and suh. That gal beant below a-tall. 'Pears to me, suh," his tones diminishing as if he had turned away toward some other person—" 'pears to me, suh, this bumbleboat is a whole cargo of Jinxes as Mister Mac done says. And tha's jist why we-uns wah a-tryin' to git away, suh, when you-all ketched us and toted us back heah."

"Well, no matter!" clipped a new voice which leaped dynamically through the dead air as though endowed with greater energy than the others and a certain authoritative force. "If she's gone, she's gone and there's

an end to it. This gamming of Jinxes and Jonahs is all poppycock. Get busy, every last mother's son of you! Light the lanterns! I've signaled the island all's Jake here and now the boats and barges will soon be knocking alongside with the stuff.

"Bear-a-hand on the main hatch, every man jack of you, and shoulder up some of those cases of canned pineapples! We'll have to stow the boxes of booze down there, with a layer of the original cargo atop, to fool the prohis when we run the Golden Gate!"

So that was it! Rum-runners! And they were about to fill her ship with contraband liquor and risk the gantlet of Coast Guard cutters to get it into San Francisco, seven hundred miles away!

Nancy sat appalled. She had stumbled with her schooner into a stronghold of this most recent prototype of pirates who still flourished after the repeal of prohibition. She could fairly visualize how they worked. That seaward island was the way station, in Mexican territory, for steamers laden with pisco from Peru and whiskies and standard gins from Australia. Here the contraband was transferred to the island and thence to smaller and less valuable ships, like her own for instance, to minimize the loss in case of discovery and eventual confiscation of the craft, and to camouflage the boxes of illicit liquor among the contents of the declared cargo.

SPARKS glimmered in the dark. Nancy heard the grating snap of the globes closing down over the ignited wicks, saw the steadying and brightening of the tiny pinches of flame. The awnings above the afterdeck burst into bleached whiteness and shadows amassed and leaped about with the up-and-down bobbing of the lanterns, as the men crowded hastily forward toward the main hatch amidship.

There were fully half a dozen lanterns and twice as many moving shadows of men. She caught glimpses of them, muffled about the neck, with amorphous heads and faces bluntly lighted, and wild and changing of aspect in the tossing of the beams. One who seemed to stride with authority among

them had a head like a luminous pumpkin with the spraying of the flickers on his unkempt red hair and rufous face and erubescant nose.

"Strap a hatch-tackle on the end of that main boom," sang out this fellow, hoarsely. "And heave her up and outboard like a cargo boom."

"Aye, aye, Reddy," chorused the others.

Nancy, however, was no longer interested in that tumultuous quarter. The fierce expressions on the faces of the men, made doubly so by the slight sway of the flames, had filled her with a chilling sense of her own position there, and a shuddering dread. She was a girl alone among ruffianly men engaged in an outlawed and deadly business. She couldn't depend on those three hands who had deserted her so treacherously, unfeelingly. And yet she felt the need of protection, of defence of some kind. She bethought herself suddenly of her father's revolver left hanging in his former stateroom.

Up and over the boughs of bananas she crawled, with unexpected saggings and a fearsome crackling of the papery-dry leaves.

The main hatch gaped black and open, and there were men down there shouldering the pineapple boxes up upon the coaming and others, on deck, shoving them off to one side. In the circle of lantern motes at its foot, the nearby mainmast ran up in a polished column into the overhanging night, the canvas gaskets on the outswung boom appeared like a wrapped-up body and at its high end, the hatch-tackle of white ash gleamed starkly, as though poised unattached in a buoyant blackness. Nancy went down again on her hands and continued aft.

The gimbal-lamp was lighted in the cabin and the place looked heartwarming, with the sudden sleek pillar of mizzen piercing the center, the easy wicker furniture, carpets and large beveled mirrors set, like panels, in the white-enameled wainscoting. Nancy had to go through this lounging saloon to get to her father's room on the starboard side; her own was on the other. She turned out the swing-lamp, as she passed beneath it, in the event that any one should happen unexpectedly below.

She entered, in a blackness thick and solid as wool, the stateroom formerly occupied by her father. She was fumbling along the bulkhead at the back of the berth, where the holstered revolver was usually slung by a strap from a peg, when there came a resounding thump, the deck shook underfoot, and she fell in upon the bed. She heard voices above, an angry bellow and an apologetic reply:

"It's the ground swell, Red. Haven't you felt it aboard there yet? It drove the barge plumb into you."

She lifted up and her hands, with helping her, came in contact with the clothes she had laid out, following her father's death, to divide among the crew as customary, but which in the upsetment and enforced watches of the storm, she hadn't been able to get around to. And, like a flash of light in the woolly gloom, the inspiration impinged on her brain.

Still, it was but natural. She was a woman alone among many men and her dress was not only a disadvantage, but a betrayal of her weaker sex. Almost without conscious thought, she slipped off the skirt, standing there, for a moment, like a ghost clad only in a shirt and white cambric drawers whose handmade lace edges hung suspended over flashing thighs and silk stockinged legs. Then she stepped into the baggy trousers, shrugged into the over-large coat and bundled up her bobbed amber hair under the peaked black cap of a merchant sailor. She was garbed, then, very like the men on deck and about her waist, under the coat, she strapped the loaded revolver.

She was closing the door of the stateroom when she caught the thud of heavy footsteps approaching. Quickly as possible, she leaped within a wardrobe let into the saloon wall behind a plate-glass paneling. She overheard some one striking a match, climbing upon a chair, saying "drat it!" as if the flame had burned his fingers and blinked into futile darkness.

"'Tain't fo' nuthin' I've pu'sisted this barky's ha'nted, suh," came in the shivering drawl of Scipio, the cook. "I suttinly reck-erlects turnin' on this light when I wah

down heah befo' lookin' fo' that gal, and now it's done gone out! It suah beats me, suh! I cayn tell yo' this scooter ain't nary the fondest thing I is of!"

"Shure and he's right, sor, this spalpeen with the dhirty face what won't wash off," corroborated the brogue of Mac. "It wouldn't be like the likes of himself to be a-soichin' in the dark at all, at all. And be the same token, if he lighted the gimbal-lamp thin, it oughter be lighted now. Ah, pritind all you will, sor, there's some unholy doin's goin' on aboard— Be all the saints, what's this!" as the gleam from the suddenly fired lamp came through the crack between panel and jamb.

Nancy knew what it was by the note of stupefaction in his voice. Her white yacht-ing skirt which, when surprised by the foot-falls, she had dropped on the saloon carpet upon springing in behind the panel.

"Gosh a'mighty!" breathed the negro; and "It's *aitu* work," slipped to her ears in the throaty tones of the more taciturn Kan-aka. "*Tiapolo*, the beeg chief of all the *aitus*, is walkin' plenty much about this *ekipi*!"

"Oh, come, you fellows! Belay that tommyrot!" cut in the now familiar and rather harsh voice of the man she knew as Red. "It's only the girl's skirt which she probably took off before jumping overside and striking out for San Benito or Cerros Island. When the crew of the barge finish transshipping their load and return to Little Ben, I'll have them make a search for her along its shore.

"But just now you listen to me, you three," he broke off. "That's what I've called you below for. I want to find out where we stand. You're dead certain her father was sole owner of this schooner and had no other heir but this missing girl?"

"Shure as shure kin be, sor. For 'tis menny the times I've heard the ould bye himself say as how he had no other chick nor childer in this wurruld!"

"Well, then, here's what I propose to do for you fellows. If you'll stick along on this venture and not try to double-cross me—"

Nancy heard the three tramping out, wordlessly, and the other padding softly

about the saloon and humming as though pleased with himself and what he saw there. Then he, too, was gone and she could hear his voice chiseling through the dark up on deck.

She stepped out from behind the panel, fired with a new impulse. The plan had sprung, fully formed, from the conversation. If those deserters were so positive of the ship being ill-fortuned and haunted, why not play on their superstitious surety! They would be the three rotten apples to contaminate and finally stampede the whole crew! Ere she left the cabin therefore, Nancy took down from the polished shaft of mizzen the mercurial barometer.

Coming out of the companionway under the half-poop, she noted that all the men were clustered in the lighted space amid-ship, stowing away the boxes of booze slung inboard from the nosing lighter. She darted up upon the half-poop and in the thicker blackness there under the awnings, feared discovery not at all.

Crouching below the moon of binnacle, she extracted from the hollow case beneath the compass chamber a long bar of iron, like a window weight, which corrected the magnetic needle for deviation. With this burdening one coat pocket, she made aft, no longer fearing detection because she was accoutered like the men. But before joining the working group in the lighted mid-ships, she cast the iron corrector up into a dark pile of banana boughs where she could find it, she knew, when she was once again in possession of her schooner and rid, at last, of the piratical rum-runners.

WITH the ground swell, a faint feathering had disturbed the atmospheric pressure and by the time the illegal cargo was aboard and camouflaged among the cases of pineapple cans below, it had reached the propulsive proportions of a bit of a breeze. With the tide running out and the wind just barely filling her three great sails and gaffs and jibs, the schooner stood smoothly south through the strait.

Nancy, leaning over the bow, could hardly tell whether they were moving or not. She was afraid that the error in devia-

tion of the compass, caused by the removal of the iron corrector, might mislead them to run aground. And she didn't want her schooner to walk aboard the land and get stranded, high and dry. She was prepared, at the first sound of rollers on the shoals, to give the alarm. All she desired was for the mate and helmsman to become aware that something had happened to the compass, something erratic and unaccountable, in line with their superstitious sense of the mysterious.

Where the charcoal smudge of seaward island shot downward in a sheer swoop, she believed she spied, like a chalk-ring about its invisible base, a wavering of whiteness and the next moment felt, through the air, a dull shock as of something huge and distant falling into smithereens.

"Breakers!" she cried, as the threatening murmur seemed to shake through the depths of the strait.

The wheel was eased down; the schooner's head came up into the wind with a slatting of canvas; and on a long board sailed very close, with Mac himself on lookout, the treacherous ledge was skirted to the thundering detonation of the crumbling rollers. Beyond, the schooner wore round and paying off on the starboard tack, started nor'nor'west up the Pacific for San Francisco, seven hundred miles away.

But presently, out here in the slow lift and send of the Pacific, the land breeze lessened, veered round to a head wind and then relapsed into casual puffs, with long lulls between. Nancy, lurking as near the after-deck as was permissible, could feel the air balls blowing about her head and expiring, could hear the wan sails filling out audibly and shivering. There was a prickling as of electric needles in the chill puffs and she felt certain another norther was brewing like the one which had driven her this far south.

"What's it say be the glass, sor?" she heard Mac call down the companionway.

"Where is it, the barometer?" requested the voice of Red from the cabin.

"Hangin' on that mizzen post and same's bye, if it was a dorg, it 'ud bite your honor!"

There was a minute's waiting, the drum of rushing feet and Red himself appeared under the slide in a recognizable yet invisible perturbation.

"I found the peg, Mac, but it isn't there!"

"Gone! Oh, Lord save us, sor, it's thim shades ha'ntin' us ag'in!"

Nancy knew that in the impending storm she could handle herself as well as any man; she was an able sailor; and in the resultant and natural excitement there would be little need, she thought, to fear discovery. Wherefore, when Mac gave the belated order to furl the spanker as there was too much after sail, Nancy anticipated his second command by going out on the gaff to pass the gaskets before the brails were well hauled up.

In a violent assault of wind, the gale boarded them and immediately as they listed over, from every prominent point of the schooner leaped up a livid trembling of flames! It was incandescent, fantastic and terrifying, as if the wind had torn some brilliant constellation out of the howling inky void and impaled it, in separated blazing stars, upon the projecting trio of trucks and all the gaffs.

The ring of sea around lighted up like a tremendous batch of dough; the figures of men became visible along the stark deck, their faces ghastly; and at the tail of the swaying scintillation, out on the mizzen spar, Nancy could be seen in her father's clothes, her hooked fingers emitting saffron sparks and the cap, pulled low over her eyes, agleam with bodiless flames in a spectral halo.

"Oh, Lord a'mercy, 'tis ould man Newbolt hisself, God rist his sowl!" shouted the impressionable Mac, and he stuck out two forked fingers to ward off the evil vision. "O musha! musha!" he wailed. "The ship is shure a goner with the glass h'isted, the compass faulty, and now this ghost of the dead!" And he made for one of the two new boats slung in the midship davits.

Red intercepted him.

"You blasted fool, it's *only* the corporants!" he bellowed, and catching Mac by the shoulders, he swung him round. "A fine

sailor you are! Didn't you ever meet up on a ship with an electric storm before!"

"A foine saylor, you say! And an electric starrm, is it? Well, thin, where is thet smolderin' shape!"

But Nancy, having luckily created such an unearthly impression, had slid down the mizzen-shrouds to escape just this questioning and suspicion. As Mac, recovering but still distressed, swore at the men for a "passel of sogers" and failing thus to urge them up, ordered the haunted gaff lowered down, she got hold of the sounding-rod and plunging it into the water of a scuttle-butt, came running aft with it to where she had last spied Scipio, cowering down in abject fright.

"Looket!" she cried in her throaty, most masculine voice. And she exhibited the dripping measuring stick. "Two feet and a half, and makin' fast! Show Mac!"

The negro, his face never so nearly white before, took the rod and raced aft, with Nancy a poor second at his heels.

"She's stahted a leak!" he fairly screeched in falsetto tones. "She's sinkin', Mac! T'ree feet and fillin' like all-git-out!"

"O murra, 'tis all-git-out, it is! 'Tis the end of us all!" from Mac and swept along by the Kanaka and the cook, the rest trooping after, he made once again for the boat amidship on the port side.

Red met them, this time, with rufous face inflamed like a harvest moon and a revolver leveled steadily in his hand. But Nancy, expecting just such a contingency from his previous interposition, dived precipitantly down into the cabin, rescued the skirt from the back of the chair where she had last seen it and, stripping off coat and trousers, got into it. Flinging the cap to one side, she mussed her hair, picked up her father's revolver for a final coercion and then her wild figure, brandishing the other hand, bounded out on deck.

Dismayed shouts greeted her:

"Oh, Lorry me, 'tis Nephune's darter!"

"In the name of all the saints and angels, the ghost of the gurl herself!"

"Drap it, will yuh, Red!"

"A second ha'nt, God he'p a pore cullud boy!"

"Aw, Red, let us git!"

"A she *aitu!* Lookit her greeny hair!"

"Quit y'r shovin' and pile in, cawn't yer!"

As though she hadn't heard, Nancy paced steadily toward the scrambling mass of men, held swayingly in check by the now trembling revolver of Red. She gestured appropriately with her free hand, tore madly at her hair and in a bell-toned voice that carried loudly in the wind, chanted in lugubrious accents a fragment of Shakespeare remembered from her school-day studying of "The Tempest":

"Full fathom five *my* father lies;

Of his bones are coral made;

These are pearls that were his eyes.

Nothing of him that doth fade,

But doth suffer a sea change

Into something rich and strange.

Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell;

Ding-dong.

Hark! now I hear them—ding-dong bell."

It was too much even for Red. No sooner had she reached the first wailing "ding-dong," than he turned tail and incontinently joined the pell-mell rush for the second boat and overside.

DAYS later, fanned by a spanking breeze, the schooner *Nancy N* put into San Diego harbor and the single hand, who acted as skipper and crew and, of all things, was a girl, there declared her cargo to the customs officials and told how she had come by the illegal part of it. As an immediate reward, the Coast Guard captain in command of the rum-chaser fleet in the bay, put aboard a natty lieutenant and several men to see her safe to her destination—San Pedro, the port of Los Angeles—and promised her, further, a share of the liquor valuation for turning it in as contraband and divulging the location of the rum-runners' stronghold.

The newspapers reported, in the accounts of Nancy's arrival at San Pedro, that she had become, during the short journey, engaged to the lieutenant. But that, as some one somewhere said, was *their* story!

Then I could feel my skin crawl . . . for I was looking at a human hand . . .



Hacienda of Horror!

By JOHN COMPTON

LONG and low-pitched, like the cry of some unearthly soul in the clutches of an insufferable agony, the wail rose eerily into the night, died slowly away. I drew Elaine close to me and for a moment we just sat there, staring fearfully through the closed windows of our coupé into the blackness that enveloped us.

Then again the cry came, swelling above the whining of the wind. Involuntarily I shuddered; and I could feel Elaine's soft, warm body become suddenly tense.

"Jack—what is it?"

"Nothing, dear. Nothing."

I strove to keep my voice casual, forced a smile to my lips. But even as I spoke

I could feel perspiration gathering in the ridges of my forehead; could feel the cold fingers of fear clutching at my heart.

We had arrived at the hacienda about nine that night, dog tired but happy. The trip from Nícaray had been made over a typical Mexican road—a rough, narrow, berutted cowpath that wandered aimlessly over the desolate landscape, eventually winding southwest toward the foothills of the gloomy *Sierra del Nazarens*.

There was no moon, no stars. Huge gray clouds, like a horde of frightened rats, scurried across the darkened heavens; and a shifting wind that howled past the closed windows of our coupé screamed at times like a forlorn banshee, purred again like some sated, evil cat.

It was no night for honeymooners. But Elaine and I were too happy, too much wrapped up in each other to heed those ominous manifestations of nature. Certainly in the subtle hints of the elements I did not see even the vaguest warning of the mysterious events that were to come.

We were parked in the rear of the hacienda, in the east courtyard, when we first heard the cry. Now we sat there, silent, thoughtful, staring at the white beams of the headlights, waiting, waiting, waiting. . . .

And once more it came, rising softly into the night, like the compassionate plea of an abandoned soul. My throat became suddenly dry. Elaine trembled, pressed closer.

"Jack— That story about the peons. Could it—"

I laughed, essaying to put her at ease.

"No. No, dear. It's just the wind."

Though I spoke lightly enough, I certainly did not feel at ease. I remembered dimly the story of the peons as told to us by the shopkeeper back in Nicaray. And, though I thought it absurd at the time, I was in no condition to laugh at it now.

It dated back to the Villa revolution. As we heard it, there had been a massacre of peon labor—the labor employed by Jose Queretaro who owned the hacienda at that time. Queretaro, one of the leaders of Huerta's army, had been killed, too, and for years after the hacienda had been deserted, had slowly gone to seed.

No one would live in it. The superstitious natives swore it was haunted by the ghosts of the dead peons, and avoided it as they would a black plague. And to give credence to the tale, the shopkeeper told of a wealthy American who had bought the place and rebuilt it, but who soon left it for other less imaginative souls.

Ten years had gone by since that day. No one bought the hacienda, no one wanted it. Then one day we saw the ad in a Los Angeles paper, offering it at a bargain, and we had bought it.

And, on learning of the superstition, we had smiled wisely to ourselves.

"Perhaps," Elaine said huskily, "there is something to that story. Perhaps—"

"Nonsense, darling. Pure rot. You're just tired, that's all. You're—"

"Tired? Yes." She shuddered slightly and her voice sounded weary. "Yes, dear. It's been a big day. Let's go in."

I went first, carrying the bags, and lit one of the huge kerosene lamps. Though the rooms had been thoroughly renovated for our arrival, there was an air of ghostliness, of barren emptiness about the place that caused a chill to dance up my spine. And the hollow echo of my footsteps in the flagstone courtyard drummed against my consciousness.

Then I reasoned I was being a fool, that I was letting my imagination run riot. We were both tired, and our nerves were jumpy. A good night's rest would put us both at ease, banish all thoughts of childish superstitions.

And so, with a confidence I certainly didn't feel, I escorted my bride into the house of our dreams.

But there was to be no sleep for me that night.

For perhaps an hour after getting into bed I lay there, cradling Elaine's soft, silken clad body in my arms. The rhythmic rise and fall of her breasts; her soft, easy breathing; the warmth of her body close to mine I was aware of only indefinitely. For something preyed on my mind, tormented me with vague, haunting thoughts. It was as though some ghostly voice was whispering a warning—a warning that my mortal brain could not comprehend.

And it was then, as I fought desperately for the sleep my weary body demanded, that the weird, unearthly moan drilled once again into my consciousness.

I snapped alert immediately, my body bathed in a cold sweat. My first thought, naturally, was of Elaine; and I breathed a prayer of thanks that she had not been disturbed. Then quietly I got out of bed and lit the kerosene lamp.

Sleep now was impossible, and would be until I located the source of that ghostly cry, until I convinced myself that there

was a natural explanation. It was entirely possible that it was some trick of the wind, for these old houses were built with many winding passageways and so afforded ample opportunity for some peculiar acoustical layout.

And so, with the flickering yellow glow of the lamp casting distorted wavering shadows on the barren walls, I started on a tour of inspection.

Through the numerous deserted hallways of that single storied structure I went, conducting the search, exploring every room of the house. Finally I came to the south wing and went through it and down into a sort of semi-cellar that had once been used for storing vegetables.

The cellar at first appeared deserted. Then my nostrils caught a faint, bestial odor. I stared quickly about the room but could see nothing. Then, across the cellar by the southern wall—near the spot where I was having a wine cache dug—I saw a pale brown object lying on the floor.

For a moment I stared fixedly at what I saw, but the flickering light of the lamp was not bright enough to reveal its identity. And so crossing the room I bent and directed the dim glow to the damp, sandy ground.

It was fully three seconds before the full implication of that object on the ground became impressed on my stunned mind. Fully three seconds before I could convince myself I was not imagining things. Then I could feel my skin crawl, could feel the very blood in my veins turn to ice. For I was looking at a hand—a human hand! *And caught between its clutching fingers were many long, curly, black hairs!*

How long I knelt there examining that grisly object I'll never know. It may have been a minute, it may have been an hour. I had no conception of time, no thought of anything at the moment but my utter horror.

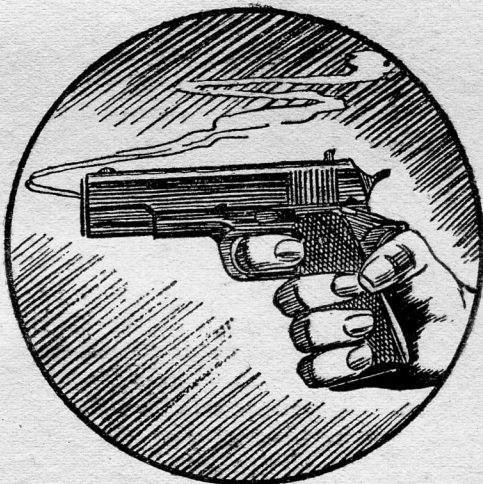
Repressing a shudder as I picked it up, I saw that the hand had been chopped off the arm from a spot just above the wrist. Chopped off cleanly by some amazingly sharp instrument.

My first thought was to phone Hayes,

the architect, in Nicaray; to phone the police; to get help. Then I realized that our phone had not yet been connected, and that there wasn't a neighbor within two miles.

I shivered suddenly, and replaced the hand. Time enough tomorrow to investigate the mystery. Hayes would arrive early and I could let him handle it as he saw fit. In the meantime I had an investigation of my own to make.

But even as I rose to my feet, all such thoughts were dashed from my mind. For suddenly I heard a scream—Elaine's scream. And close on its heels came that terrible, moaning cry. Like the anguished wail of one damned to an immortal hell it rose through the house, to die away in the



darkened corners. But its echo, and Elaine's terror-ridden shriek remained to tear at the very roots of my soul.

I raced from the cellar, pounded up the rickety steps, and back through the barren halls. Cold panic drove me on, fear for the safety of my wife. As I neared the bedroom I saw her white figure dappled with the flickering light of the fireplace, then heard her sudden, half-hysterical voice.

"Jack! Jack!"

I hurried into the room, set the lamp quickly on the table, and gathered her trembling body in my arms.

"Elaine, dear. What's wrong? What—"

She laughed weirdly, unnaturally.

"Oh, God, Jack! It—it grabbed me. It—"

"What?"

My own heart hammered a terrified tattoo inside my breast. I waited for Elaine's answer—waited, fearing God only knew what! But it was not from Elaine's quivering lips that I heard the reply. Her face had become suddenly bloodless. A strange sound caught in her throat. She was staring—staring over my shoulder.

"Elaine—Elaine!"

Her eyes sought mine, and in their depths I saw a terror that could be caused by no human agency. And then, even as her soft body sagged limply into my arms, I heard again that ghastly, inhuman cry.

And the thing from whose lips it came was in that very room.

Quickly I lowered Elaine's inert body to the bed. Then, fighting off the sudden paralysis that gripped me, I whirled about. And in a thrall of utter terror I stared at the huge monster that stood in the doorway.

Almost six feet high it was, with a body covered by matted, black curly hair. The hair fell down over its face in heavy braids, covering its eyes entirely, and giving it the appearance of some huge, shaggy missing link. As it opened its mouth to emit again that ghastly cry, I saw two sharp black fangs curving down outside its nether lip.

And now it raised its head, and stilled the cry in its throat, sniffing at the air much in the manner of some beast scenting its prey. And as I stood there, gripped in a horrified trance, the thing let out a series of guttural grunts and started toward me.

Abruptly I thought of Elaine, sprawled unconscious on the bed by my side, and whipped my numbed senses into action. Leaping forward I met the shaggy brute as it swaggered across the room, and swung my fist full into its hairy face.

In my favor was the suddenness of my attack. I don't think the beast knew I existed. I don't think he could see me. But, though I caught the hairy thing off balance, and though I threw every ounce of my weight into the blow, I gained nothing.

Staggering slightly under the impact of my body, the creature backed away, flinging up a hairy arm for protection. And as my fist smashed again into its bristly chin, it let out a reverberating roar of terrible rage.

I set myself for a third blow, sidestepping slightly as the brute charged toward me, and again hammered my fist into its face with every bit of power I could muster. But, as before, my blow had no effect; and before I could make a single move in my own defense, the awful creature was upon me.

Two hairy arms reached out, circled my body. I felt the breath of life crushed from me as I was drawn to the thing's matted bosom. Desperately I fought against the inhuman strength in those arms; desperately I strove to release myself from that hirsute vise. Again and again and again I hammered my bleeding fists against that thing's hard face. But my blows were futile, powerless. The beast's vise-like grip became tighter and tighter. Slowly, relentlessly those shaggy arms were forcing the last bit of air out of my aching lungs.

The room began to sway before my vision. The monster's fetid breath caressed my cheek. Guttural cackles of sadistic delight rumbled in the depths of its throat. Then I could feel my ribs giving under the terrific pressure.

A black veil of oblivion was beginning to cloak my eyes; a cacophonous roar battered at my eardrums. I was becoming insensible to pain, insensible to anything. Yet it was then, when I was most powerless to act, that I heard that which struck terror at the roots of my senses—Elaine's voice.

I don't know what she said. I was conscious only of a scream, the sudden touch of her hand. And then a wave of impenetrable blackness surged over me, and the roaring din in my ears was stilled.

But I remembered her voice, remembered hearing it, even as unconsciousness claimed me, and the pressure of the beast's arms was suddenly released. Then I knew only that I was rushing into the blackness of some bottomless Lethe.

HOW long I was unconscious I'll never know. When I first came to I was aware of only a terrific pounding in my head—a pounding that soon evolved into the steady throbbing of my pulses. I opened my eyes slowly, strained to see through the distorted wave of flickering light that danced before me. After a moment my vision became adjusted, the nausea that had gripped me slackened, and I raised myself slowly to one elbow.

I had forgotten at the moment what had taken place. But as I stared about the room, the sight that greeted me served to bring everything back with a sickening rush. For the thing was still there. And now it was standing over Elaine's inert form, firmly grasping her wrist in one of its hairy hands.

The nightgown had been ripped from Elaine's body. And now she lay there, nearly nude, exposed to the pig-like sadistic eyes of that loathsome monster.

Then, as I struggled to rise, the creature stooped over, lifted Elaine to its hairy chest as a gorilla would lift a babe and just stood there, uttering strange, pleasure-laden noises, fondling her round, firm breasts; caressing the softness of her skin.

As I staggered to my feet my own utter helplessness struck me forcibly. Though the creature hadn't seen me rise; and though every decent thing within me cried out for me to rescue Elaine from its repulsive arms, I realized the futility of physical attack.

I was no match for the brute in straight encounter. Yet I knew I had to act and act quickly. For only God alone knew what moment the beast might turn and flee with Elaine in his grasp; and only God alone knew what moment those gibberish squeals of delight in the monster's throat might evolve into something more horrible, more material.

Desperately I searched through the semi-darkness of the room for some weapon. And then I saw something lying over near the door through which the beast had first entered.

It gleamed dully in the flickering illumination cast by the flames in the fireplace.

With my heart hammering, with fear driving me on, I raced across the room and snatched it up.

It was a mattock. Whirling now, with the sharp ax clutched in my hands, I sped back across the room to Elaine's rescue.

And none too soon. Already the monster had turned and was bearing Elaine's inert, white body out of the room. His black fangs shone evilly, his wet lips were glistening arcs of slavering horror. And as he swayed across the room, one of his foul, hairy hands caressed the delicate smoothness of her nude body.

I believe honestly that I went completely insane at that moment. I know that I barely heard the bellow of rage the beast emitted as I charged across the room. I knew only that I must free Elaine from the repugnant creature who now held her.

Strength born of desperation flowed through my veins. I raised the mattock over my head, dodged quickly to one side. The monster cast Elaine out of his arms, turned and charged. And then, swinging the mattock as one would a huge baseball bat, I crashed its razor-sharp edge into the beast's head.

For the space of a pair of heart beats the monster just stood there, swaying back and forth on his ape-like legs. Then, with a horrible gurgle emanating from the depths of its throat, it sank to the floor. And with a sob of relief I dropped to the side of my unconscious bride.

"Elaine! Elaine, darling!"

She stirred in my arms. Her eyelids fluttered open. For a few moments she stared blankly, uncomprehendingly at me. Then, once again, the tentacles of that horrible fear clutched her again.

"Jack! Oh, Jack! What—"

I drew her close to me, ran my trembling fingers through her silken hair.

"Don't worry, dear. It's gone—gone for good. You'll never see it again. Never."

BUT it was not until late the next day that Hayes, the architect, and the police officials of Nicaray pieced together the solution of the hairy thing. And not until then was the hand identified!

The story dated back to the Villa revolution. At that time the hacienda had belonged to Jose Queretaro, one of the leaders of Huerta's army. And Queretaro's principal source of income was from the copper mine on the property.

For this mine—which had a branch directly under the hacienda—there was only one exit; a square shaft barred over by a heavy iron grating. And it was through this, by means of a winch, that the daily product of the mine was removed. And it was also through this that his peon laborers—men drawn from the ranks of radical military prisoners—were brought up for a daily hour of sun.

When the news of the Villa insurrection seeped through, the peon laborers revolted. And the soldiers, at Queretaro's command, poured a withering hail of death into the mouth of the mine, shooting down the defenseless peons as though they were infested vermin.

Then Villa and his raiders had swept over the land, leaving in their wake the dead and dying of the Huerta regulars, and, hanging by a rope from an archway, the swaying, lifeless body of Queretaro himself.

The country after that was in a stage of turmoil. Villa turned on Carranza whom he had first aided, and sporadic revolts were common. Consequently the massacred miners were entirely forgotten, and their bones, with the bones of the regulars, were left to rot.

For years after, the hacienda had gone to seed. No one would live in it.

But in the mine there was one peon who had not been killed, one who was left alive with the dead bodies of his comrades.

There was no way for him to get out, no one to call to for aid. And so he lived there, existing at first off the supplies that were in the storeroom, then off the rotting flesh of his dead friends, and finally off the rats that abounded.

And so for over twenty years he lived there, getting his water from the drainage in the earth, and his food from the rats!

Naturally his appearance changed. Shut out without sunlight, a wealth of matted hair soon grew out to protect his body.

Forced to forage for his food, his incisors soon became short, curved, animal-like fangs. And with this physical change came a mental one. He became crazy, devoid of all sane, civilized reasoning.

And then, after we had bought the place and ordered it remodelled, the mine was broken into for the first time. Broken into when the man who was digging my wine cellar, Antonio, went down too deeply.

What happened to Antonio is mere conjecture. He was working by himself at the time, and when the other laborers came in from Nicaray he was gone. In the darkness they had failed to see the hand, and had instituted a search which was still on when we arrived.

But it is easy to see what happened.

The mad peon must have found Antonio while investigating the new entrance the laborer had dug. And Antonio meant only one thing to him—food. In the struggle the laborer's hand was hacked off with the mattock, and his lifeless body dragged back into the depths of the earth, there to be devoured.

But coming out into the house that night, with the mattock still grasped in his hairy hand, the madman had become aware of another hunger—the hunger for a mate. And he was undoubtedly roaming through the winding hallways even as I went down into the cellar looking for him. And, had I not found that mattock when I did, it might well have been the last I would have seen of Elaine.

That's all there is to the story. We found what little was left of Antonio's body in the dank corridors of the mine. And we found there, too, sufficient other evidence to support the tale.

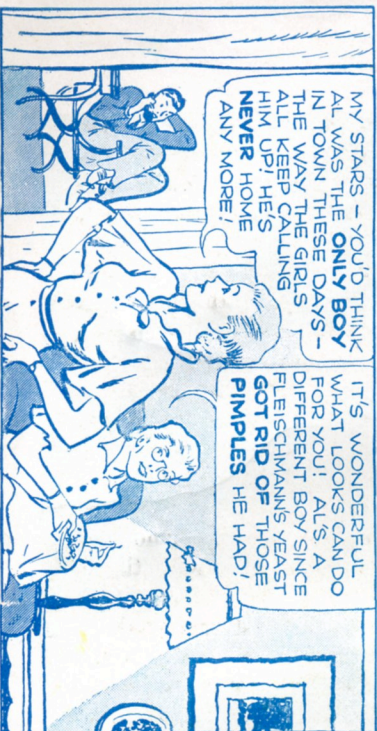
Yet had we found nothing at all I would still have clung to that theory. Would have clung to it for the sake of sanity. But I am certain now that the truth was discovered that day, for over a year has passed and never have we heard the dreaded cry of that beast-like creature since.

Yet even today, when I tell the story of our haunted hacienda, I tremble with the terrible remembrance of that ghastly monster of the earth.



**I'M FED UP
WITH ALL THIS
SOCIAL STUFF**

**- BUT
PIMPLES
WERE THE
REAL REASON
AL SAID
"NO" TO
PARTIES**



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