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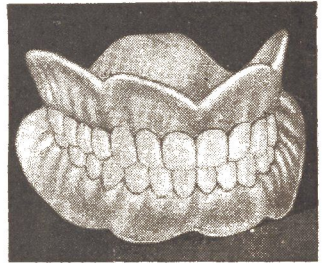


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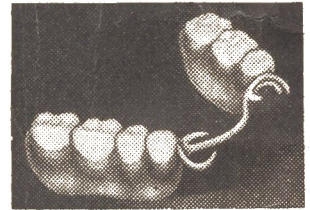
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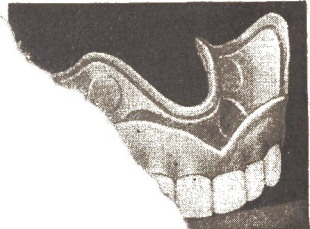
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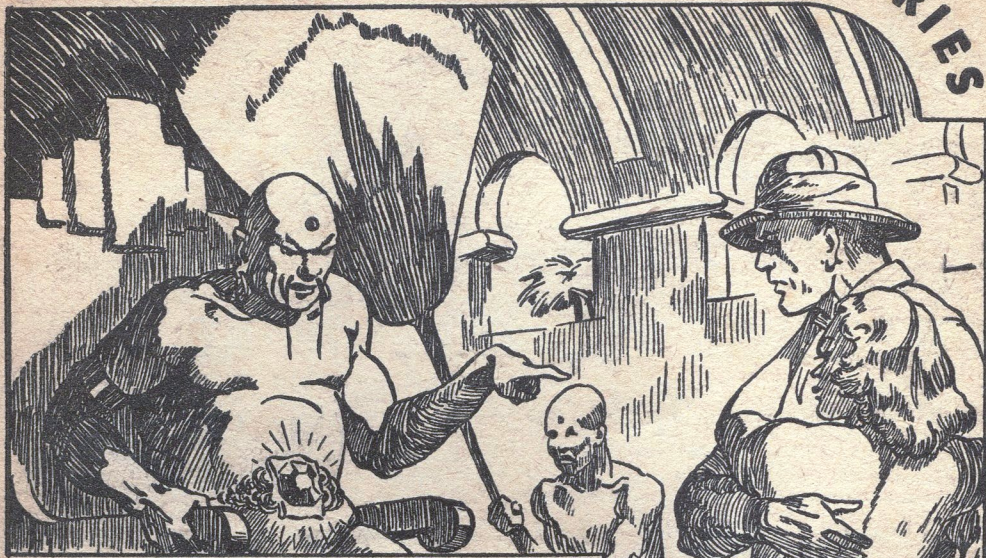
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SPICY 'ADVENTURE' STORIES



AUGUST, 1941

Vol. 14, No. 2

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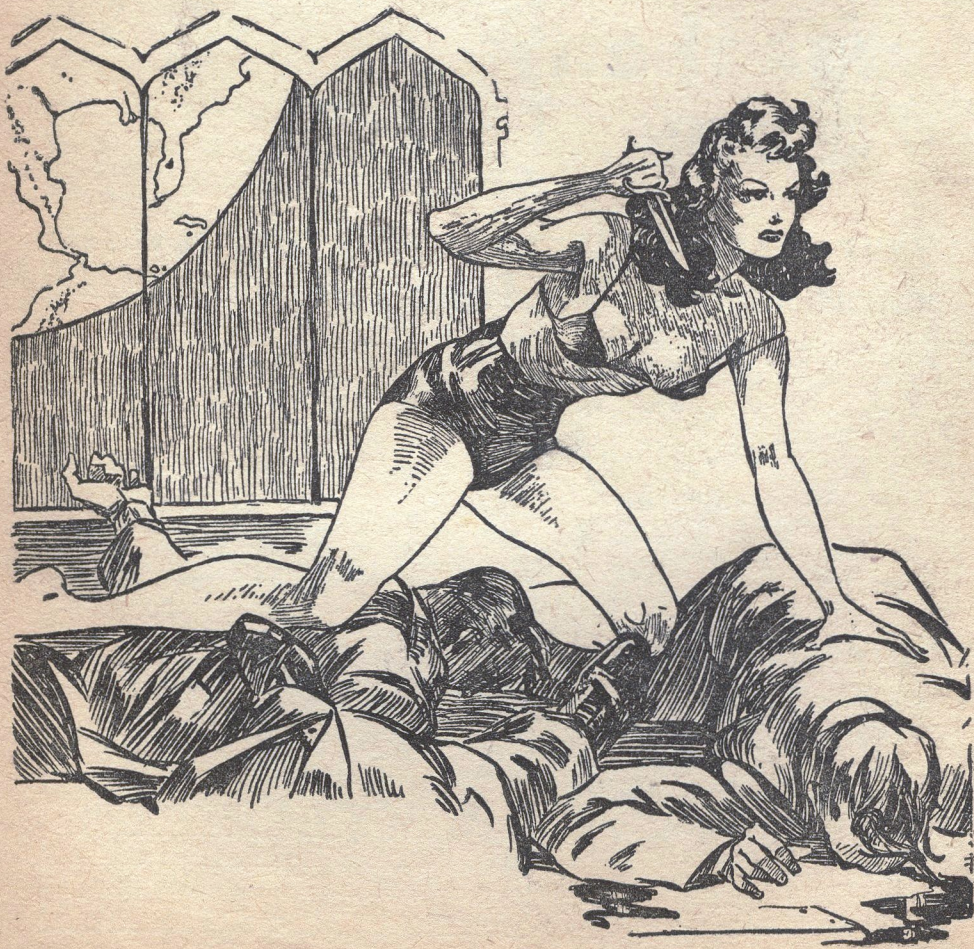
THE LAST

“GITTUP, Adam! We’re moving you to a new Eden. And git a move on, if you don’t want to become fish-bait. River’s risen twelve feet since yesterday.”

Adam—Adamowicz by parental inheritance—rose from his cell cot, scowling at Jailer Benn. They were always wise-cracking about his name. A hulk of a man he was, four inches over six feet in height, and built like Paul Bunyan. A

shock of straw-colored hair, cheeks covered with the stubble of a three-days’ beard, blue eyes glaring under a penthouse of shaggy brows. Twenty-five, perhaps. Nineteen and a half years still to serve, out of a twenty years’ sentence.

Adam could hear the clank of hobnailed shoes upon the flags. The other prisoners were being removed. But Adam had been left until the last. His great strength and ferocity made him dangerous.



ADAM

By LEW
MERRILL

They had broken off from the earth, and now the old order was ended. The best man—and that was Adam—was king! But what would he do with two queens?



He was poised there, about to go out, when she crept forward with the bloody knife.

Besides, he had assaulted a jailer once—not Benn.

Just a great hulk of an American-born Pole. Common-school education, which had meant very little. Some mechanical ability though. He had had a job on Judge Foster's country estate, as general utility man and laborer. He had filled in as substitute chauffeur when Jennings was taken sick. That had been the beginning of his troubles. He saw Malda Foster's face again, and swore.

Adam knew, of course, why the prisoners were being removed to the county jail. The river was higher than it had ever been known to be before. The country was all under water. The port was inundated. Thousands had been caught in the walls of water sweeping inland and had perished.

Adam had heard two men talking about it the day before, when they were exercising. One was Professor Lomax, who had gone nuts and killed his wife. The other was Banker Roberts, who had worked the bond investment swindle. The professor was explaining that it was the fault of the moon. She had got into a position that wouldn't happen again for millions of years, with nearly all the planets at her back, all pulling at the Earth. It was like a team of lightweights, playing tug-of-war against one three-hundred-pounder.

"I shouldn't be surprised if she pulled the whole continent up by the roots," said Professor Lomax.

"Something like the Red Sea standing up in two walls to let the Children of Israel through," said the banker. "Only we're not mov-

ing into any Promised Land."

Adam laughed at that. He thought it was funny.

JUDGE FOSTER and the Reverend Broughal took their drivers from their caddies and swung them tentatively. It was a beautiful morning, the long driveway sparkled green in the sun, and the red flag above the first hole fluttered invitingly three hundred fifty yards away. The judge drove, and the reverend drove. Two white balls lay side by side at the very edge of the green.

Three apiece—par. Four each on the second hole—par again. Judge Foster was a happy man that morning. But the Reverend Broughal was vaguely disturbed. It was when they paused at the seventh hole, and surveyed the inundated eighth and ninth, that the judge remarked:

"Might as well cross to the tenth, Fred. That water's six feet deep. I hear they're moving the prisoners to the county jail, to save them from drowning like rats. I'd let them drown. It would save the State considerable money and there's not one of them who wouldn't leave the world better off if he died. I ought to know. I sentenced a good half of them."

Fred Broughal knew the judge was thinking of Adam. He wouldn't speak of him, of course. The man who had assaulted his daughter, and escaped a first degree murder sentence owing to an imperfect law. The judge had never spoken of him, but Broughal knew he would gladly have thrown the switch himself. The judge's

happy mood had been disrupted by that memory.

The clergyman had gone to Adam with spiritual consolation after the verdict. Adam had cursed him, jeered at him, and threatened him with violence. Broughal had beaten a hurried retreat. The man was like a dangerous wild beast. Yet the thought of his twenty year sentence horrified the clergyman. Besides—was the crime all that it seemed to be? Broughal knew Malda Foster.

Judge Foster shook off the burden of his vindictive hate and humiliation. "Well, let's strike across to the tenth tee," he said.

BENN and another jailer walked with Adam. They carried their pistols, although Adam was handcuffed. Adam, slouching along, was seeing Malda Foster's face again. He had known from the first that he hadn't a chance. Malda Foster had framed him.

He'd known what sort of girl she was when she had wanted him to drive her after Jennings took sick. She had lost her own driving license on account of that drunken smash-up. Five feet two of deviltry and undisciplined emotion—but Malda could get away with almost anything, because she was the daughter of millionaire Judge Foster. She had smashed up three cars, and she wouldn't even have lost her license, save for the old man she had nearly killed. That had cost the judge twenty thousand dollars.

No, Adam hadn't liked driving Malda, hadn't liked those looks she shot at him beneath her long lashes. He had been glad when

Jennings got well and took over the job again.

The judge was away when it happened. It was after dark when Malda came up the wooden steps to Adam's room over the garage, and asked him to explain the new gearless car that her father had bought her. For of course she expected to get back her driving license very soon. She was slightly intoxicated, and stood in the room, looking at Adam.

"Oh never mind the car," she said. "That's not what I came for. What's the matter with you? Are you just a dumb Polak?"

Adam was a man, and he had to fight himself as well as her. She was clinging to him, trying to overcome him. To keep his head clear, he called her a foul name. Then suddenly she was tearing her blouse to ribbons, and screaming. The blouse was in tatters, so that she was practically nude to the waist. When Jennings and the head gardener came running up the stairs. Adam was too stupefied to resist. The mob had tried to lynch him when he was taken away to jail. Malda had testified that the assault had been—well, successful.

Adam had thought constantly of Malda, of her dark, wicked beauty, and the perfect contours of her rounded bosom. But he'd get out in about seventeen years, and then he meant to make good on the charge—and then kill her.

THE whole of the lowlands seemed flooded. Cars were stalled, only their tops showing above the level of the flood-water. In a long line, prisoners and

guards ascended the road, knee-deep in water, moving up toward the county jail, on the hill, where they were to be housed. Nobody knew why the eighty-years old building had been set on top of the hill, but it was the only structure likely to withstand the rush of the rising river. All about, boats were plying among houses, submerged to their second stories.

Black rage was growing in Adam's heart. He thought of Judge Foster and his mansion, the servants who came hurrying to obey his summons, and of himself, railroaded for twenty years because he had turned down Malda.

His childhood memories were dim. He had been a tough guy, growing up in the streets, passing in and out of the reform school. Hard knocks and kicks, and sweethearts when he had had money enough to buy them. Malda might have let him alone. She had plenty of others. Now—if he could only make that rowboat tied to the tree, pull to those woods, standing up in the distance out of the water . . .

But it wasn't a matter of calculation. It was the blind instinct of the trapped animal to escape. Adam sprang snarling at Benn, the jailer, sent him sprawling into the water with a sweep of his arm, and snatched his pistol from its holster. As the other guard leaped back, and started to draw, Adam let him have it through the face.

That face, no longer a face, was the last Adam saw of him, for the dead man was swept away by a swirl of reddened water. Adam plunged—and his head struck a great boulder lying a few inches beneath the surface of the flood.

Striking blindly upward with handcuffed hands, Adam groped through a gathering cloud of darkness. He felt a stunning blow upon the head, and felt himself being dragged up, kicked, pummeled and flung down again. A vicious kick caught him in the groin.

Then a girl's voice cried, "Let him alone, you beasts! You're killing him!"

Curses answered her. "He killed Brook. Git out of here, you little tramp! Kick the guts out of the swine! Git a rope and let's finish him here!"

ADAM opened his eyes. He was lying on his side, doubled up, with darts of pain shooting through his head and abdomen. They had dragged him to the entrance of the county jail. The old sheriff was trying to restrain the vengeance of the penitentiary jailers. The inmates of the county jail, men and women, were clustered in the entrance, and the women were screaming.

The girl who had run forward to protect Adam was what they had called her, a little tramp girl picked up on the road. She was about Malda's height, but fair where Malda was dark. Her full breasts were completely outlined beneath the flimsy frock. Her shoes were scuffed and worn, her cotton stockings hanging threadbare about her legs, showing white rounds of knees.

"Let him alone!" she screamed, as more kicks were rained upon Adam. She flung herself down upon him, to protect him. Adam could see her face close beside his own. Gray eyes, wide with fear,

a white face on which despair of life had already set its stamp, at twenty. Adam knew that her life had been like his.

Jailer Benn, straddling the prostrate man, caught the girl with his left hand and tried to drag her away. In his right was the pistol he had recovered. The jailer, infuriated by the killing of his companion, was aiming at Adam's head.

For an instant Adam waited to hear the roar of Benn's pistol. That would be the last sound he



She fought there to protect him, but Adam saw no chance of her success.

would hear, and he might not hear that.

The girl was struggling furious-

ly. The upper part of her flimsy clothing had been wrenched away, disclosing the rise and all of her

breasts. She was like Malda, Adam was thinking. The white of her thighs showed as she still kicked and fought. The moon had swollen till it filled half the sky, shedding an intolerable glare, though it was a little short of noon.

But the county jail had vanished. So had the penitentiary in the valley below. Only Benn and the girl, Banker Roberts, and the nut professor, Lomax, remained. And Adam was lying at the edge of a precipice that had suddenly come into being. The whole country was somehow changed, though in the distance Judge Foster's mansion was visible through the trees.

Adam knew he was delirious, but he hurled himself through the air and with one fettered hand, snatched away Benn's pistol again. Benn grappled with him, and the two went rolling and bouncing over the grass like a football.

JUDGE FOSTER never knew where that ball went. He had taken his stance for a two hundred and fifty yard drive onto the eighteenth green. He struck—and the ball flew into the air like a bullet, and was lost to sight in a moment. He turned—and went pivoting round and round like a teetotum. His eyes were blinded by an intolerable glare. The moon filled half the heavens.

He heard the Reverend Broughal shouting, and saw him coming toward him, covering the ground with great leaps like a kangaroo. He moved, and went sprawling, as if projected from a sling. He got

up, and rocked unsteadily upon his feet.

The Reverend Broughal was at his side. Foster flung out one hand and caught him, and the two went dancing around in a crazy whirl.

"Look! Look at the moon!" screamed Broughal. "I've gone crazy, Foster. Something's happened to me. I'm going blind! Or else it's the end of the world!"

"Keep still. Let's think this out! The floods maybe—" The judge was exercising his judicial faculties. The floods, of course. The pull of the moon—he'd read all about that in the papers. But something had happened . . .

A little group of five people was moving toward them. One was a girl, four were men, and the man in the rear was flourishing a pistol in his hand. Broughal's shouts had attracted their attention evidently, for they were moving toward him.

He stood still, gripping the frantic clergyman. "Shut up, Fred," he bellowed. "If it's the end of the world, that's your particular province, isn't it?"

He noticed the peculiar gait of the approaching five. They were covering the ground with incredible speed, in strides of about twenty feet, and swaying and staggering as if trying to secure their balance. And then he shouted in consternation and amazement. For, behind the man in a warden's uniform, prodding him on with his pistol, was Adam, unhandcuffed now.

"What's that man doing here?" he shouted. "Take him back to the jail."

"What are we all doing here?"

cried Banker Roberts. "He's kidnaped us, and everythin's disappeared—everything."

"The moon—the moon—the moon!" screamed the girl.

ADAM flung out his arm, and the pistol shot upward with the speed of a comet, vanishing instantly in that awful silvery light that dimmed the sun. In Adam's mind was only the impulse to get his hands about Judge Foster's throat. He crouched, ready to spring. It was Professor Lomax who intervened.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'll tell you where we are. That's not the moon. It's earth, shining in reflected sunlight."

"What's that?" cried Broughal. "How can the earth be in the sky?"

"We're both in the sky. Roughly, I should estimate that we are about fifty thousand miles away from earth, and we've already begun to circle her as a very minor satellite.

"Listen to me," he went on, as Roberts and Broughal cried out questioningly. "It's the tertiary fault, that runs for about five miles across this State. The lunar attraction that whipped up the waters, whipped up the earth as well. She cracked under the strain, as I'd suspected—hoped she might. She cracked along that fault, and a solid chunk of some five cubic miles has become a satellite, a planetoid. We'll never see the earth we knew again, save as our nearest neighbor in the heavens."

"Damned nonsense!" shouted the Reverend Broughal, in a most unclerical manner.

"Look at what you imagine to be the moon, then. Shade your eyes and look!" said the professor.

Involuntarily they obeyed. Against the dazzling lustre of reflected sunlight they could discern, as on a map, the perfect outlines of the continents. Even Adam understood and, momentarily appalled, he forgot his homicidal intentions.

"We've got to adjust ourselves to our new conditions, until—well, never mind that," Lomax continued. "We've food and water here, all the means of continuing to exist a normal life, except that we have to adapt our movements to the greatly lessened gravity. Our period of rotation I don't know, but there is every reason to suppose that we shall continue to have a twenty-four hours' rotation like earth, with day and night exactly as before."

"What did you mean by saying you hoped that this would happen?" asked Banker Roberts.

"Because the old order's ended," cried Lomax. "The best man here is king, the man whose brains can master conditions and establish a new order."

HE BROKE off. Across the links a crowd came streaming toward them. They were from the village, a mile away, the only settlement within the limits of the "fault," except for a few scattered homesteads. The town, the penitentiary—all else had remained on earth when those five miles broke free.

Adam could see stalled cars, overturned cars, and one car moving, leaping crazily, like a hobbled

eagle, as its owner tried to steer it along the road. It crashed into a tree and broke into a score of flying fragments.

Out of the heap a woman sprang, uninjured, and came leaping toward them, heading the procession, like a great kangaroo, her short skirts clinging to her shapely legs and fluttering about her. It was Malda.

She ran up to her father. "Dad, what's happened? There's been an earthquake or a landslide, and the moon's gone crazy. And I've smashed up my new car, and turned into a jumping-jack—"

She recognized Adam, and froze suddenly. Her eyes flashed between narrowed lids.

"What's that creature doing here?" she screamed. "He's broken loose. Take him away!" she cried to Jailer Benn. "Has everyone on earth gone crazy?"

"But we're not on earth," cried the mad professor. "That's earth, up there. We've broken away from earth."

Benn said doggedly, "I don't know where we are, and I don't care, but the law's the law. I'm calling on you folks to help me put this man under arrest again. He's committed murder."

Adam roared with laughter. "I'm the law," he chuckled. "I'm king of the world. And you're going to obey my law!"

He caught Malda, bellowing as she dug her nails into his face, and with one swoop of his great hands he tore her blouse from her, leaving her nude to the waist. That was as she had been the night she framed him. He felt his pulses

quicken with gusty passion and the delight of battle.

They were all at him, screeching like madmen, and Adam, towering over them, battered their faces and sent them crashing to the ground. He knocked Benn senseless; he caught a man up in his mighty hands and swung him about him like a club, till all resistance ceased, and the mob was a crowd of flying fugitives.

He glared about him, panting. Benn was still unconscious. The judge, with the blood welling from his nose and mouth, was sitting on the ground, his palms pressed against it, horror and madness on his face.

Only Malda and the tramp girl remained. The little tramp was standing, staring in fascination at Adam. And Malda was still screaming defiance, her breasts quivering, her whole body heaving.

Adam leaped twenty feet and caught her again. He swung her across his shoulder and went bounding toward the judge's house, while she screeched and hammered his great body with her little heels.

HE LEAPED the whole of the wooden stairway with a single bound. He flung her into the room that had been his, turned and shot the door-bolt. She was still screaming, cursing him, and he tore at her skirt, enveloped her head with it, and wrenched it away. He roared again, taking in avidly the smooth contours of her white body as she stood up in her little panties and brassiere.

"You—! You framed me! I

nails again. White limbs went into furious turmoil. But Adam had become primeval man. The girl's wild struggles, the scent and warmth and whiteness of her, and the roar of distant voices, coming nearer, growing louder, all com-



"Take her away, professor, and good luck to you!" Adam roared.

swore I'd make you pay for it. You're paying now."

"Not to you!" she shrieked, and began raking his face with her

bined to arouse him to the height of frenzy. This was the meaning

of life, this was life as he had always envisaged it—love, combat.

She was quiet at last. Her arms were clasped about his neck, her lips burning on his own, and yet Adam couldn't have told precisely when her love became hate, or what the difference was. She was clinging to him as if they two could never be two again, but always one. The wildness of his nature had found an answering wildness in her own, and love and hate for the white, clinging form had become the same thing.

She was whispering words of love to him, and holding him as if she would never let him go. "I always loved you. That's why I framed you, because, if I couldn't get you, nobody else ever should. The judge will understand. I'll tell him, and he'll set you free."

"Free? I'm free now!" shouted Adam. "I'm king of this world!" And then came the stamp of feet up the staircase without, and the roar of voices.

"Adam, they'll kill you! I'll go out and talk to them!"

He heard his voice chanted—in mockery, as he supposed. He flung the girl from him, and leaped across the room with a single bound. He shot the bolt back, confronting the massed crowd, piled up on the stairs and in the garage below. Standing there, a huge bulk in the light of the enormous earth, he was so menacing an object that there was a hurrying surge backward.

Then a man pushed to the top stair. It was Professor Lomax.

"We're with you, Adam," he cried. "We're all with you. We want you for our boss. We've got

old Foster here. We'll string him up if you give the word!"

Below, in the garage, Adam saw Foster, a rope around his neck, standing in the midst of the throng. Malda ran to Adam's side, white and columnar, bare breasts and curving waist ethereal in the earthlight.

"Let him go, Adam! It's the only thing I'll ever ask of you," she pleaded.

IT WAS all madness, and it would have been disastrous madness, save for the mad professor. Lomax had constituted himself as Adam's chief adviser. It was under his directions that the two hundred odd inhabitants of the tiny planetoid had reconstituted their lives.

Cattle and food stores had been tabulated, work apportioned. A communistic society had been instituted. Adam and Malda were installed in the judge's house, and Adam, love-crazed over Malda, had permitted the Reverend Broughal to perform a marriage service.

With the same contemptuous good nature, Adam had permitted Judge Foster to remain free. He occupied a cottage some distance from his home, at the edge of the stupendous precipice that dropped abruptly into space. Jennings and Benn lived with him and worked for him.

It was all madness. If moonlight had once produced madness, the eternal silvery glare of earthlight keyed everyone to an intolerable tension. Only in the daytime, when the light of the sun softened the intensity of earthlight, did men

find a slight surcease from that floodlight that seemed to burn into their brains.

Roberts was mad. "Lomax thinks we can get back to earth somehow," he kept insisting to Adam. "Look! We'll buy up all this land for a song, you and I. We'll form a company, and become billionaires when we're reunited with the earth. Lomax thinks we'll slip back when the planets change their courses."

Lomax thought nothing of the kind. He was humoring Roberts. The professor who had killed his wife for no discoverable reason, had become transformed. At fifty, he still considered himself a youth, and because he knew—mad though he was—the fate that awaited all, he worked with furious energy.

There was some sort of committee at first—a half-dozen sober men, small farmers in the vicinity of Judge Foster's house. They had tried to maintain order and decency, but all restraint was swept away. Judge Foster was well stocked with liquors, and a liquor store had remained on the little fragment of earth floating in space. Enough to keep all men drunk for weeks—until the final cataclysm that only Lomax could foresee.

Lomax's master-stroke was when he proclaimed all women common property, in Adam's name. The few who protested were brushed aside. A reeling, shouting mob went scouring the village, dragging out wives and daughters Eight men were killed that day. By nightfall there was a saturnalia.

When the last of the shouting

mob had left the long hall in which Adam held sway, Lomax turned suddenly to the tramp girl, who served Malda as her personal attendant.

"I'll take this one to start with," he leered, seizing her by the shoulders, and groping with obscene hands inside the tattered blouse. She screamed and leaped toward Adam.

"I don't want him. Tell him to leave me alone!" she pleaded.

Adam roared with laughter. "Take her away, professor," he said. "Good luck to you!" And, as Lomax pulled her out of the hall, no longer resistant, Adam drew Malda down beside him.

For an instant some sensation akin to pity had stirred in Adam's heart; but he forgot it in the torrential force of Malda's passion.

SAVE for the Reverend Broughal, who wandered to and fro like a lost soul, everybody was insane. Even Judge Foster was insane. Benn's affliction had taken the form of a monomania. The two forgotten men, jailer and judge, sat together.

Judge Foster had shrunken into the shadow of himself in the few days that had passed. He breathed asthmatically, he huddled into his chair, listening:

"The law's the law. You've got to swear in a *posse comitatus*, judge, and put that feller under arrest. Now look! Roberts is ready to give himself up and take his chance of a pardon, once we get back to earth again."

"We'll never get back," wheezed Judge Foster. "If we do, I'll kill

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BLIND

By SAM DRAKE

THE girl was neat and trim and so was the shotgun she was holding . . . but I didn't like the looks of either of them. Because the girl was glaring at me and the shotgun was pointing at me, and it looked as big as a cannon, even if it was only twenty gauge.

"Go away," she said.

I was already within about ten feet of her and she hadn't shot me yet. If she *did* decide to shoot I knew I couldn't outrun a charge of shot, anyway.

So I said: "Look, lady! Point it the other way. Or take your finger off the trigger."

"I—I'll shoot," she told me then.



By the time he shot again, I was in the water. Fortunately Jean wasn't in the line of fire.

DEATH

She was a cute little trick, even if she was all primed for man-slaughter. It took a little time to convince her that not every man who passed was necessarily her enemy, and then she became positively human!



"Why?"

She said: "You can't ch-chase us away, Mister Hillis. You might as well know it. We—we paid our rent and we're going to st-stay."

"I'm in favor of it," I said. "And my name's not Hillis. My name's Joe Clancy. And I've got permission to hunt her. What's the idea?"

She waved the gun and I ducked. She said: "This is part of our land. We . . . my sister and I . . . leased it. You've got no right here."

SHE pointed out a ragged fence and explained her boundary line ran along there, and I explained how I'd stopped and asked for permission to hunt at the last farm house, and how the man there had given it to me but hadn't gone into enough detail about property lines and so on. By that time she had swung the shotgun muzzle out of line and peace was in the air. She was a little dark girl and she'd have been as pretty as she could be, if it hadn't been for having a dirty face.

She was even pretty enough to get away with the outfit she was wearing, and that was a honey in any language. A pair of flannel shorts that were too big for her. And one leg torn up the side. A turtle neck sweater, also too big. And a canvas hunting coat that draped her like a wall tent. She must have fallen on her face to get it as dirty as it was, and her hair had straggled down from under the man's hat she wore, as if trying to cover the dirt, and didn't add to the general effect a bit. She looked a mess, and must have

known it because she got a little red in the face.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. "I—I don't usually look like this. It was some old clothes I found in the house. I guess some hunter left them."

I said I didn't blame the hunter for leaving them, and that made her sore. She said she hadn't planned on meeting anybody . . . that her idea was to walk around on her own private property by herself.

That was that. I said I was sorry for trespassing and said goodby and went back to my own side of the fence. I was half sore because it wasn't my fault . . . I hadn't known I was on the wrong ground and I didn't see why so much fuss should be made of it. I figured I'd stop at the farm house where I'd got my permission to hunt and tell the man there a few things about his neighbors and their desire for solitude.

And then I started jumping ducks out of pot holes and forgot all about it.

BY DUSK I had three mallards, two teal, and the start of a bad cold. I'd gone in over the tops of my boots in chasing a cripple, and it's cold that time in the afternoon in November. And I was at least three miles from the farm house where I'd left my car. I cut across to where I knew there had to be a road . . . and I'd maybe trudged a mile up it when I met the car.

It came around a bend in front of me, with no lights and coming fast . . . and I jumped to the side of the road and got out of the way

just in time. The car teetered a little bit and went off the road and into the ditch not over fifty feet back of me . . . and it was burning before it finished tipping. It was an old-fashioned roadster, and it was as though the tank had burst and sprayed the entire car with gasoline.

It had gone clear over and half again, and was on its side. The driver was under the door, half in and half out, with the top of the door cutting him in two. I found this out by putting my coat over my head and holding my breath and ducking through the flame . . . and I knew he was dead the instant I touched him. I felt the bones in his broken back grate when I caught him and tried to pull him out . . . and he'd have died anyway if he'd taken one breath of that flaming air.

I got out and beat the fire from my coat and trousers and watched it burn for a second while I tried to figure out some way of helping. Of course there was none . . . the only thing I could do was get to a phone and get hold of somebody in authority. I left my gun and coat and ducks by the road, so I wouldn't be weighted down . . . and I took off my boots not over a hundred yards down the road and went on from there in stocking feet.

It wasn't too comfortable, but I'd found that I couldn't run in rubber boots and keep any kind of pace. And about a quarter of a mile farther on I saw a light off the road and took a chance on a phone being there and turned in.

I knocked and the same girl I'd met on the marsh opened the

door. I started to say something, and she screamed: "Sarah!" and started to slam the door in my face . . . and I forgot any manners I ever had. I shoved the door open and walked in and said:

"You got a phone?"

She looked as if she was going to scream and I said, before she could: "There's been a bad accident down the road. I've got to get to a phone."

"We haven't one," she said.

THEN Sarah came from the other room. Sarah was a big horse-faced wench that looked as if she should have been teaching physical training in some girl's school. She was built like an Amazon. She was about thirty and homely as all get out, but she had a little bit of a baby voice and acted as if she was scared to death.

"Oh, Jean!" she cried out.

"What . . . what is it?"

Jean was the pretty one. She snapped out of the foolishness and said: "What kind of an accident, mister?"

"A car tipped over and pinned the driver."

"Maybe if I helped, we could tip the car and free him. Sarah could help, too."

"The car's on fire," I said.

She got white in the face, and the one named Sarah said: "You mean the man's burning?"

I said that was right . . . then managed to get to her and keep her from falling to the floor when she fainted. It was a trick at that . . . she was as big as all outdoors. I put her down on a couch that was in the front room; then Jean said:

"I'm afraid the nearest phone would be at the Hillis place. That was where you stopped this afternoon, I guess. Is your car there?"

I said it was . . . and she said that as soon as she got her sister up and on her feet she'd drive me up there. I noticed her looking at my stockinged feet and explained why I'd left my boots by the car, along with the rest of my stuff, and that seemed to make her feel better.

Apparently she felt that any man who'd go for help in his stockinged feet wasn't all bad, because she got half way friendly on the way to the Hillis place.

I DIDN'T pay much attention to the Hillis household until I got the telephone operator and the sheriff, in turn. Then I put the phone down and turned and said:

"The sheriff is coming right out. He's going to bring the coroner."

"Was the man dead?" Hillis asked. He was a big raw-boned man, and one eye was a little crossed. Just enough to make a person nervous; it was hard to tell whether he was looking at you or at a corner of the room. His wife was a dull looking woman that looked as though hard work had the best of her . . . and there were three kids of assorted sizes in sight. Ranging from about five to twelve, I thought.

I said: "The car was burning up and he'd have died from that. But he was dead before then."

"How?" asked Hillis.

"His neck and back were broken when he tipped over. At least that's what I think."

Hillis thought this over, then said: "I suppose I ought to go down there and look at him. You want to ride back with me."

"One of the girls from the house down the road drove me up. She's waiting for me."

He thought this over before he said: "Oh! One of the girls, hunh?"

Then I heard a car pull up in front and stop . . . and I got the surprise of my life. In came one of the swellest looking wenches I ever saw . . . and with her a man who looked as though he'd just been walking down Park Avenue. The gal was dressed up just about as well. She came in saying:

"Hey, dad! There's a car parked outside. Did you know it?"

Hillis said: "Yeah!" And to the man: "Hello, Vic! There's been a wreck down the road. This man came looking for a phone."

"Bad one?" asked the man called Vic.

"Man dead," I said.

"He's called the sheriff," Hillis said, talking as if I wasn't there. "The car was burning, when he left it."

I said: "I think I'd better go back there. Thanks for the use of the phone."

The girl said: "Aren't you the man that dad let hunt this afternoon?"

"That's right."

She looked at the man called Vic and said: "There! You see?"

Vic said he saw . . . and I went outside to Jean.

I SAID: "That's a screwball family if I ever saw one. The old

man acts like he's dopey and the mother never even spoke to me. The kids stand around with their fingers in their mouths, staring at me like I was an exhibit in a freak show. It looks like something out of Tobacco Road."

Jean said: "That man Hillis is trying to make us go away."



"Why?"

She put the car in gear and we got started. Then she said: "He asked me how much we paid for the season's rent and then offered me more money for the place. I told him I wouldn't give up the lease. My sister and I both have



She waved the gun and said, "You've got no right here."

planned on coming down here for years and we won't give our place up for anybody."

"What did he want it for?"

"That's it. It isn't good for anything except pasture and duck hunting, that I can see. I guess maybe he just don't like people around. I mean strangers. Neither my sister or I will be scared out like that."

I said: "He'd better lock that daughter of his up then. She'd bring men around if they had to crawl there on their hands and knees. She's got one there now. One named Vic."

"Victor Moroni?"

I said I didn't know Victor's last name.

And by that time we were past her house and by the car wreck.

IT WAS just about burned out by then and I made the girl stop before she got to it. I was afraid of what she'd see . . . and I was right. Even worse than what you could see was what you could smell . . . a man burned in a wreck like that is a sickening thing. You can smell burned gas and charred wood and hot metal . . . and you can smell burned clothes and burned flesh right through the other. I didn't go near . . . I couldn't. It was still too hot. I went back to the car, picking up my boots on the way, and I said to Jean:

"You might as well go back to your house, kid. I'll stay here and wait for the sheriff."

"I'll wait with you."

"Then I'll get my gun and coat," I told her, and went back toward the wreck where I'd left them. And couldn't find them. I knew exactly where I'd put them . . . there was a stump by the road and I'd draped the coat over this and stood the gun against it.

I finally went back to the car and said: "Now that's funny! I left them right there, and now they're gone."

We didn't have time to look for them, though, because the sheriff and the coroner came up then, driving an old Ford that had high wheels that took it over the high centers in the back roads. The sheriff asked me what had happened, and I was telling him about

it while the coroner and a deputy that was along worked around the burned car. By and by they called us to give them a hand, and we pried around with fence rails until we'd got the car lifted. The coroner started looking at the body of the man then . . . and I went back and talked to Jean . . . I didn't want to see any part of what they were doing.

Then the sheriff came back to me and said: "Look, Mr. Clancy! You say the man was coming toward you and driving fast. That right?"

"That's right."

"Would you say his car was out of control?"

It was the first I'd thought of that angle. I said: "Well, he was coming like billy hell and he didn't have any lights on. I never wondered just what was the matter with him, if anything. Why?"

The sheriff said: "Where you stopping at?"

I told him the name of the hotel in the town fifteen miles over, and that I was just trying to get in three or four days hunting before going back to the job.

He said: "Well, don't go away. What kind of hunting were you doing?"

"Why, ducks."

"Shotgun?"

I said it was a twelve gauge pump I was using.

"Where is it?"

I said: "That's what I'm wondering. I put it and my hunting coat, right by that stump up the road. I couldn't find it just now."

"Sure it wasn't a rifle? Say a .22?"

"It was a twelve gauge pump. Why?"

The sheriff said: "Because Doc Summers just stripped off what was left of this man's shirt. He's got a hole in him that looks like it was made with a .22."

I STAYED at Jean Thomas' house that night . . . though I'd intended on going back to the Hillis place and picking up my car and going into town. We came by where the girls lived and Jean said:

"Would you like to stop and have a drink? You need it, after all that."

I said a drink would be just what was needed . . . and I wasn't lying. Seeing a man burned in a car and trotting all over the country after help is tough, when you're not expecting anything like that. And I was worried about the way the sheriff acted; he sounded as if he didn't believe my story about my gun being taken from where I'd left it.

We went inside, after waiting while the horse-faced sister unbolted the door, and the minute we were inside, Jean said:

"Did anything more happen?"

Sarah said: "No!" and looked at me as if she were trying to make up her mind whether to jump out the window or just be brave and bear the sight of me.

I said: "What's all the mystery?"

Jean said: "Well, people have been shooting at us, Mr. Clancy. That is, they've been shooting at the house."

"You're sure?"

She took me out to the kitchen

and showed me the back door. There was duck shot patterned all over it. She showed me a broken window in a sort of pantry by it, and said: "The door was shot at night before last. Last night it was the window. It happened about midnight or a little later."

That made it no mistake. People aren't going around shooting shotguns at that hour of night without meaning it.

I said: "But why?"

"Well, we had the chance to sell our lease," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "I think it's Mr. Hillis. Though I don't see why he should want us gone."

I didn't either. And said so. I said: "The guy acted stupid and all that, but not as if he was the kind of guy to go out shooting shotguns at women."

"Well, somebody did."

We left it at that . . . and she dug up a bottle and some glasses and we went back in the front room. Sarah said she didn't drink . . . and looked at me as if I should say the same . . . and I took a slug that made her eyes pop and said I really needed it.

AND then I wasted it. I had it half down when the shotgun boomed outside the house . . . and I gagged and strangled and spilled what was left in the glass down my shirt front. Glass crashed in the kitchen . . . and Jean said, calmly enough:

"That will be the kitchen window. I guess they don't know you're here, Mr. Clancy."

By that time I'd grabbed her little twenty from the corner and found there was a shell in the

chamber and more in the magazine. I went out the front door and to the side by the kitchen, keeping close to the shadow of the house . . . and I was in time to see flame blossom out from a spot about forty yards away—and to hear what was left of the glass in the kitchen window tinkle down. And to hear some wild shot patter against the wall between me and the window.

I emptied the twenty gauge that direction and as fast as I could work the action. I heard underbrush crash and started to go over there . . . and then remembered I had an empty gun and might be running into a full one.

So I went back in the house and told them what had happened, and Sarah started to cry. Jean said to me:

“Do you have to go back to your hotel tonight?”

I said there was no particular reason why I should, and she said: “Can’t you stay here? My sister and I are here alone, and, well . . . you just saw what’s been happening.”

I said I’d be glad to stay . . . and we two went out in the kitchen and started getting a bite to eat. I looked ahead to an interesting evening . . . if and when Sarah ever got out of the way. At that, it was almost twelve before she decided she should get her rest and that she’d be safe enough with a man in the house.

WE HEARD the noise just as it started getting daylight. Just about the time there was light enough to see a few feet ahead. I shoved Jean away and said:

“What was that, sweetheart?”

She said: “Nothing, Joe honey! We hear it every now and then. Always in the morning; always early.”

It sounded like a cannon shot . . . or one hell of a big shotgun. And nobody had any right to be shooting that early in the morning; hunting is illegal until sunrise every place in the country. It was none of my business, but it made me think of guns instead of Jean, and I said:

“Sweetheart, I’m going out to look around where I shot at that man last night. I’ve got a notion I stung him with some duck shot.”

She said: “You be careful. I don’t want anything to happen to you. Not now, honey.”

I told her nothing would happen to me and I made sure nothing would. I took her little twenty, all filled up with fresh shells . . . and I eased out through the front door and into the bushes at the side, keeping as much out of sight as I could. I went through the underbrush that same way, until I could see there was nobody around the house, and then I went over to where the man was standing when he’d shot out the window the night before.

And found my own shotgun, where somebody had dropped it in such a hurry they’d even stepped on the stock while getting away. There was no mistake about it being my own gun . . . I’d had a special job of checking done on the stock and I could have picked it out of a thousand guns the same model. I took it back to the house, doing a lot of thinking, and there I said to Jean:



Her father didn't want to lend me the gun, but she urged him.

"Tell me, lover! Did you tell the sheriff about somebody shooting at your house?"

"Certainly," she said. "But all he did was act as if he thought it was funny. He said there was no reason for anybody to shoot at us."

"What about this man that's giving the Hillis girl, up the road, a play?"

"If he's the one I think, his name is Victor Moroni. He runs a

night club in New York. I was in his place once and he was pointed out to me. I saw him down here and thought I remembered him."

THAT tied in with my thought . . . but I didn't tell her what it was. Instead I went up to the Hillis place, after giving them time to get over their breakfast, and picked up my car. I told them I was going back to town and didn't say anything about where

I'd spent the night . . . and I asked if the sheriff had any line on who the dead man in the wrecked car had been.

Hillis said he hadn't heard a thing . . . that the sheriff hadn't stopped . . . but the Hillis girl gave me a look that meant something and said: "Why don't you stick around until they find out something about the man? The hunting's good, isn't it?"

I said the hunting was fine, but that I'd lost my shotgun. She looked at her father and he offered, grudgingly, to loan me one. I took it from the kind of look it was there'd been some early talk about the same thing . . . and that the father was going against his own ideas.

I said, making it off-hand: "Did Mr. Moroni go back to town?"

Father Hillis said: "Ugh—ah . . . yes. Oh yes."

Daughter Hillis gave him a look that really was one and he went in another room to get the shotgun he was going to lend me.

She came close to me then, and said: "I'm glad you're going to stay. It gets lonesome down here. The town's too small to have fun . . . I get just about crazy down here."

"There's Vic," I said.

The old man came back with the shotgun then, just as the girl said: "Oh yes! There's Vic!"

I DROVE past the Hillis place that afternoon and into town, but I missed the sheriff. He was out at a clam-bake or campaigning or something; nobody in his office seemed to know anything about it. I asked about the man who'd been

killed in the wrecked car and nobody in his office seemed to know anything about him, either, but there seemed to be some secret about both him and where the sheriff was.

But I had nothing definite to tell him; nothing but an idea . . . and an idea that I'd have to work out more before I'd mention it. So I let it go and waited until that night.

Or rather I waited until the next morning about three . . . I kept Jean and Sarah company until that time, though Sarah was in bed and asleep and snoring like a man. I wouldn't have left when I did, but I had places to go and the job of poling a duck boat through a marsh I didn't know too well to a place I wasn't sure of when I got there required a time allowance.

I'd borrowed the duck boat from Jean and she walked down to the shed where it was kept with me. I slid it into the water and put my shotgun and shell bag in, and she put her arms around me and said:

"Joe, you'll be careful, won't you? I'm afraid about this."

I was afraid, myself, but I wouldn't admit it to her. I said: "Oh, I'll be all right. They won't be tough. The thing isn't worth murder, after all, Jean honey."

"If you're right about what's happened, it's already been worth murder," she said. "Oh Joe! Don't let anything happen to you. Please, Joe, be careful."

I told her I'd be as careful as I could and started poling out through the marsh . . . not noticing until it was too late that she'd jumped into the boat after me. I

didn't get where I was heading for until it was almost daylight, and I hadn't spoken to Jean all the way.

Now a duck blind is a cold and miserable place anyway, unless the ducks are flying and there's fair shooting. And when you're in a blind, waiting for a murderer or murderers there's still less cheer. As a matter of fact, I was getting grateful for Jean's presence—though I wouldn't mention it to her. I had my little low boat jammed into the reeds on the edge of the only sizeable bit of open water in the marsh for miles around . . . and I had more shrubbery scattered over and around it. As far as I could see it looked all right . . . I made sure by getting out and looking it over from all angles. I put number four shot in the gun, which was the largest I had with me . . . and I pulled the plug out of the magazine so I could stuff five shells in there instead of the three that's allowed by law.

At that, it was a hell of a weak gun for man hunting . . . and I started thinking about that while waiting for it to get light enough to see. And I swear if daylight had been delayed another half hour, I'd have given up the whole thing and really devoted myself to letting Jean keep me warm.

But the first thing I saw, when it was light enough to see anything at all, was just what I was looking for. A flat low punt, bigger than the usual one, and with what looked like a small cannon set in a sort of frame at the front end, which was squared off just like the stern of the thing. Two men were in it, one sitting in the middle

and back of the cannon arrangement and the other standing up poling. They weren't over a hundred yards from me when I saw them and they were coming down the same side of the pond I was on . . . right towards me.

IT WAS then I prayed my blind was good, and that it would fool even anybody who was used to that stretch of water. I motioned Jean to silence, got as low as I could, ducking my head low and not even trying to see . . . and it seemed an hour before I heard the swish of water dripping from the pole. Then I heard somebody whisper, though it sounded very clear over the water. Somebody said:

"There's a raft of them over to the left. Touch her off when I say the word, eh."

The other man just grunted.

From the sound they were just about in front of me and I stood up, swinging my gun so it covered them.

"Hold it," I said.

I made two mistakes. The first in standing like that and the second in thinking they'd do as they were told.

A duck boat is a skittish cranky little craft and they're not made to be stood in fast as I did. And two men who're looking what would be at the least a long jail term are liable to act up. The boat skidded out from under me and I lost my balance and started to wave my shotgun to steady myself . . . and the man who was sitting in the middle of the punt yanked out a pistol and fired at me. He

(Continued on page 90)

TROPIC

His hand caught her wrist and the dagger twisted.



SOMETHING was moving on the water of the lagoon. It was a small outrigger, and it kept away from the moonlight as

much as possible, all the while working its way toward the tramp steamer *Quest*, riding at anchor

HELL

By HENRY
KUTTNER



Dawson was sure that something was wrong on the island. It was none of his business, but he remembered how nice Loretta had been to him. The thought of her at the mercy of the giant Storm was not pleasant. . . .

outside the barrier reef that guarded Marava Island. Second Mate Joe Dawson, leaning on the rail, chewed the bit of his pipe and

tried to fight down his mounting excitement.

Was Loretta Kent returning? Had she finally discovered the

truth of Dawson's words—that a South Pacific island was no place for a raw kid fresh out of Frisco? The second mate hunched his big shoulders, remembering uncomfortably how the girl's eyes had blazed at him.

"I know my way around, Mr. Dawson," she had cried. "'And I can take care of myself. Please let go of my arm!"

Which Dawson had done, flushing under his deep tan as he watched the girl go overside, slim and lovely in her white dress, to leap lightly into the motor-boat that waited to take her to Marava.

Well, he couldn't blame her, knowing her story as he did. She was alone in the world, except for her brother, Tim Kent, who owned a plantation in lonely little Marava. She hadn't seen him for years. And now, just out of college, she'd hopped a boat to Tahiti and made connections with the *Queen*.

At dawn the tramp freighter would lift anchor and head for Pa-peete. So. Maybe it was the blood-tingling power of the tropics, but Dawson couldn't get the picture of Loretta out of his mind—the way her auburn hair tossed in the wind, the provocative thrusts of her tilted young breasts, the excitingly lithe movements of her legs and hips under thin cotton cloth—and the brief flash of her tapering thighs as she had swung down to the motor-boat.

Nor could he forget the way Rudy Storm, Kent's overseer, had looked at the girl. But—what the hell! *Ka*—it was finished.

It was finished unless the outrigger now grating against the hull held Loretta.

TWO slim figures swiftly mounted the ladder then, hung overside. Native girls. Disappointment lanced through Dawson. They were very frightened, he guessed by the glances they cast back at the shore. He went to meet them.

"*Aloha!* What's up?" he greeted.

The foremost *vahine* was pretty, in a childlike way. But her body wasn't childlike. Under her gay *pareu* the flowing, graceful curves were—interesting. There was a *hau*-blossom in her dark hair, and her full lower lip was quivering. She said, "Take me to your captain. Quickly!"

Dawson shook his head. "He's asleep—and he doesn't like to be waked up. You can talk to me."

The girl hesitated, exchanged looks with her companion. "Oh—I see. Take us to a cabin, then, please. We—we can't talk here. We might be seen."

Might be seen . . . what was wrong? Dawson said, "*Ka*," and led the way to a cabin. Not till the door was shut did the girl relax at all. Then she went swiftly to a table and gestured to her companion, who took a cloth bag from her red *pareu*. She emptied it; pearls spilled on the table-top. Dawson's eyes went wide.

"I thought there weren't any pearls on Marava!"

"I am Utota—a princess of our tribe. And there are pearls here. They are all yours—all of these—if you will take me away from this terrible island."

Lamplight made blue shadows on her young, frightened face.

Dawson's jaw tightened. "Wait a minute. Have you stolen these

from the *malihini*—Tim Kent?"

"*Aie*, no! You do not know—" She broke off, whirling toward the door as it was flung open.

A tall, big-boned giant, with flaming red hair and icy gray eyes, stood on the threshold. He wore stained tropical whites, and his hairy, freckled hand was very close to the revolver at his belt. It was Rudy Storm, Kent's overseer.

He stepped forward; native policemen crowded after him into the low-ceilinged cabin. The two girls cried out, but made no move. Dawson saw hopeless desperation in their faces.

Utota whispered, "Don't let him take me back!"

The mate's lips thinned. He said, "What do you want, Storm?"

The giant was deftly scooping up the pearls and restoring them to their bag. "These are stolen," he explained. "From Mr. Kent. These girls are thieves."

"He is lying," Utota said, and flinched at the cold, deadly glance Storm gave her from his icy eyes.

"They will come back with me, Mr. Dawson, and be suitably punished." He turned to his natives. "Arrest them."

Abruptly Utota moved, lithe as a tigress. From her *pareu* a knife lifted, glittering icily in the lamp-light. She sprang at Storm, the blade driving toward his barrel chest, her eyes ablaze.

The giant grunted with surprise. He swung his big torso aside with unexpected agility, and seized the girl's wrist as it flashed past. The knife dropped clattering to the floor.

Utota fought like a wild thing, as though for her very life. The *pareu*

ripped and tore. Bronze, smooth skin gleamed through the rents; the satin of her breasts rippled as she clawed and struck vainly at Storm. Then his huge hand smashed down viciously against the girl's head, and, with a choked little cry, she went down.

The other *vahine* crouched in a corner, sobbing with hopeless fear. Abruptly she moved to seek protection behind Dawson, whose lips were thinned and white at what he had seen. Yet, he realized, Utota had attacked Storm—tried to kill him.

He heard the *vahine's* soft voice whispering.

"*Kent is dead—*"

STORM snapped an order. The natives moved swiftly, seizing both girls and dragging them on deck. But as the red-haired giant turned to follow, Dawson stopped him.

"Wait a bit, mister."

"Yeah?" The ice-gray eyes bored coldly into the other.

"Did you hear what that *vahine* said?"

"I heard nothing," Storm clipped, and waited.

"She said Kent was dead."

"Well, she lied."

Dawson nodded. "Maybe. But why didn't Kent come out to meet his sister?"

"I told you," the giant grunted. "He's sick. Touch of fever. A native chopped him up a bit—went *amok*—and he's in no condition to go traveling."

Storm went out. Dawson heard his voice on deck shouting orders. Presently there came the splash of paddles.

Now what? There was something wrong—plenty wrong. The second mate sensed it. Yet what could he do? Dekker, the first mate, was drunk below decks, as usual, and the old man thought of nothing but picking up cargoes and selling them for as much as he could get. No use to talk to them. Loretta Kent had paid her passage to Marava—that was all they cared about.

But, one moonlit night not long out of Tahiti, Dawson had found Loretta standing by the rail—and her lips had been sweet. It was only tropic glamor affecting a raw kid, he knew. Afterward she had ignored that hour. But Dawson had not forgotten, and now the thought of Loretta perhaps at the mercy of the huge Storm was not pleasant. He remembered how the giant had looked at her. . . .

Kent dead? Scarcely logical. Unless he had died within the last week or two. His letters had been regular, according to Loretta.

On an impulse, Dawson called the bos'n, a husky Lasear-boy. "I'm going ashore," he said. "Be back in an hour or so."

Betel-stained teeth flashed. "*Ae ae.*"

The second mate made sure his revolver was loaded, stowed it under his shirt, and dropped into the ship's dinghy, floating astern. He cast off the rope and, with muffled oars, began to row as silently as possible. Foam flashed silver under the moon. The lagoon lay still and flat, like a facet of an immense diamond. Palm-fronds waved gently against the purple sky. The Southern Cross hung low on the horizon.

Well, this wouldn't take long,

Dawson thought. He'd just check up, and be back aboard the *Quest* before anyone but the bos'n knew he was gone.

The dinghy grated on yellow sand. Dawson sprang out, dragged the boat up a bit, and headed for the village. There were no natives about. A heavy, strangely ominous silence seemed to hang low over Marava. Once a parrakeet fluttered up under his feet, croaking sleepily, but that was all. The scent of hibiscus was sickeningly strong.

AT THE edge of the village clearing, Dawson hesitated, staring around. In the bright moonlight he could see several dozen huts, crudely built of bamboo and *pandanus*-leaves. Some distance away there were lights in the window of a big *godown* . . . a white man's house.

Stealthily Dawson made his way to it.

He moved from window to window till he found the one he sought. He looked into a dimly-lit room where a heavily-bandaged figure lay on a cot, silent and motionless. Kent?

Fair enough. Like a shadow he slipped on. In the *godown's* big room he saw Storm and Loretta seated on rattan chairs, sipping drinks and sweating despite the breeze from the *punkah* that swung slowly overhead. Their voices came to him.

"... a doctor?" That was Loretta. She had changed her dress, and wore a light linen frock that clung closely to her in the oppressive heat. Her breasts swayed a little as she leaned forward, and Dawson saw the direction of Storm's gaze.

"He doesn't need it. He'll be okay in a day or so."

"But—he's bandaged like a mummy! He could hardly talk—"



She struggled vainly, but she was like a baby against his strength.

Dawson caught his breath in a little gasp. He turned hurriedly back to the first window. The still figure was still lying there. It hadn't moved. Yet—was it Kent?

Silently the second mate got in through the window. The "in-

valid" didn't hear his approach till it was too late. Then one hard hand was about a soft throat, squeezing purposefully, while Dawson plucked off bandages. . . .

The brown, frightened face of a native stared up at him, eyes wide and bulging. "*Auwe!*" the boy gasped—and was silent as Dawson's fingers tightened.

"Where's Kent?"

"*Auwe!* I—"

The grip did not relax. "Talk!"

"Dead! Dead! Do not kill me! Do not—"

Dawson nodded, satisfied. With desperate speed he bound and gagged the native. It didn't take long, and the sound of voices came faintly from the next room, undisturbed.

Dawson pushed open the door and went in. His gun snouted forward, menacing and deadly.

"Don't move, Storm," he said. "Keep your hands on the table."

There was a soft little cry from Loretta. She sat staring at the second mate, her red lips parted. Storm's face twitched once; then he obeyed, placing his palms flat on the table-top before him.

His eyes were gray ice.

"Loretta," Dawson said, not looking at her, "your brother's dead. I mean—Storm killed him."

She didn't understand. "But—no!"

"Stop me if I'm wrong, Storm," Dawson said. "You killed Kent quite a while ago and took over his plantation here. You're the only white man on Marava, so it wasn't hard to do. You forged his name, wrote letters to his sister—and cleaned up. Right?"

Storm didn't answer. His red hair flamed in the lamplight.

"You didn't expect his sister to come on, but you were ready for her. You had a native bandaged up so Loretta would think he was her brother. Just for a while—till the *Quest* pulled anchor. Then you were going to kill her, too, weren't you?"

Loretta glanced from one man to the other.

Dawson said, "Go in and take a look, if you don't believe me."

She got up hesitantly, slipped around behind Dawson, and vanished into the dimness of the next room. Storm sat motionless, his hands flat on the table, cold murder blazing in his gray eye.

Then Loretta screamed.

INVOLUNTARILY Dawson turned. From the corner of his eye he caught the flashing movement Storm made, and sprang aside, but too late. The giant's gun came out blasting. A shock of agony tingled through Dawson's hand, and his pistol went flying up toward the *punkah*.

He dived aside, whirled, saw Storm rising from the table, grinning triumphantly.

Again the gun blasted.

Dawson wasn't there. He went into the adjoining room in a hurry. A bullet clipped hair from his scalp. He heard a table go over, and Storm's heavy feet thumping forward.

Two figures were struggling in the dimness—Loretta and the native. Moonlight made a patch on the floor, and glistened on the girl's auburn hair, and on trailing bandages. The native boy had been stronger than Dawson thought. Strong enough to free himself from the bonds. . . .

Dawson sent his fist jabbing out in a hard, straight-arm blow. It *thunked* against flesh and bone, and the native went down without a sound. Storm's shadow loomed on the threshold.

Then he drew back suddenly, realizing, apparently, what an easy target he made. He was hid-

den from sight now, and his voice rose in an angry shout.

Dawson groped out through the gloom, felt the soft warmth of the girl's body, and dragged her closer. He whispered, "He'll rouse the village. We won't have a chance then. Got a gun?"

"N-no—"

"We'll get back to the ship." He pushed her toward the open window. "Scram. Don't make any noise. I'll be right with you."

Loretta obeyed. Her feet thumped softly on the ground outside. Dawson hesitated, listening to Storm's hoarse breathing beyond the threshold. He felt an inclination to plant his fist on the red-haired giant's jaw, but realized the futility of the gesture. Storm was armed; he wasn't. And the first thing was to get Loretta safely back to the ship.

So he went out the window, and a bullet skimmed along his ribs. Another shot went wild. The girl was a half-seen wraith in the moonlight, and he ran toward her, his back crawling with the expectation of a bullet better aimed.

Behind him he heard Storm cursing, and the *thud-thud* of racing naked feet.

He found Loretta's arm, gripped it, dragged her forward. She gasped, "This—this isn't the way—"

"We'll circle. Storm will try to cut us off."

The jungle swallowed them. The rustle of palm-fronds whispered above their heads. Distantly came the low booming of waves on the barrier reef. Under the trees it was dark, and they avoided the moonlit clearings as they ran.

Thorns and branches tore at them, ripping viciously at Loretta's thin dress, rustling with sardonic goblin laughter. The sounds of pursuit grew louder. The girl's breath came in gasps.

"Wait!" Dawson halted her. He bent low, forced aside a screen of palmetto fronds, and peered out. The purple darkness of the lagoon was before him.

But nearer—on the beach—were natives, slipping about like shadows across the white sands. Storm's bull voice cried a command.

The riding lights of the *Quest* were visible beyond the reef. But no hail could reach it. It was too far out.

"Damn," Dawson said softly. "They've cut us off. They'll be guarding the boats—"

"Can't we swim?"

He shook his head. "Sharks. We'll have to wait."

"Wait? But the *Quest* won't wait!"

Dawson pulled the girl back. "The excitement will die down pretty soon. We'll watch our chance, grab a boat, and head out."

"Won't there be guards? You said—"

For answer Dawson only smiled grimly, his fists balling into hard knots. "We'll get a boat," he said at last. "But right now we've got to hole up. This'll do." They halted some distance back from the beach, where the jungle grew thick. Dawson helped the girl wriggle under concealing bushes. "They won't find us here. But talk low."

(Continued on page 92)

Diana Daw

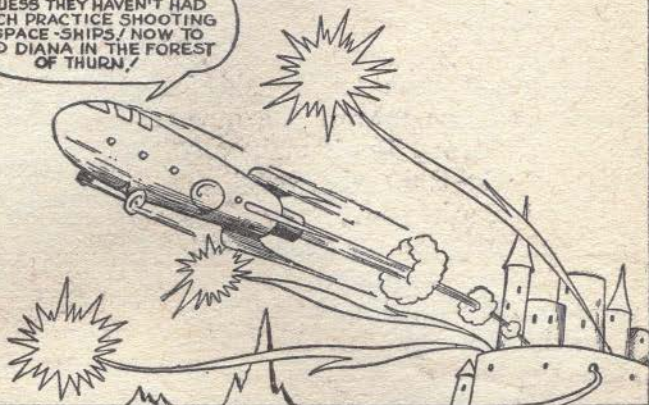
CAST ADRIPT IN A SPACE-SHIP DIANA AND TED EXPERIENCE A NUMBER OF ASTOUNDING ADVENTURES ON THE PLANET MERCURY

By Clayton Maxwell

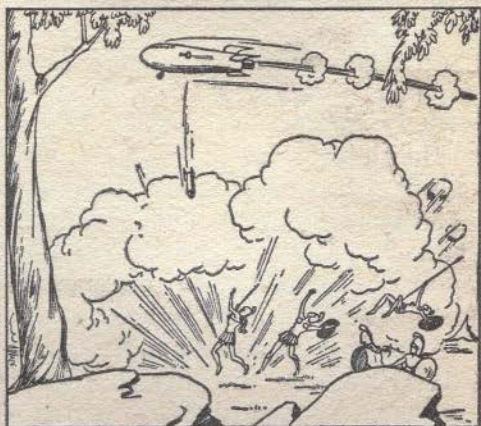
DIANA HAS SUCCESSFULLY ESCAPED FROM THE HORRIBLE REPTILE-MEN OF MERCURY ONLY TO BE HUNTED DOWN BY QUEEN VARTA OF THE AMAZONS, WHO SEES IN DIANA A RIVAL CLAIMANT TO HER THRONE.

DIANA IS BESEIGED IN THE FOREST OF THURN BY AN AMAZON SCOUTING PARTY, LEARNING OF HER FLIGHT, TED HAS DISGUISED HIMSELF AS QUEEN VARTA AND STOLEN THE SPACESHIP.

I GUESS THEY HAVEN'T HAD MUCH PRACTICE SHOOTING AT SPACE-SHIPS! NOW TO FIND DIANA IN THE FOREST OF THURN!



THERE SHE IS... STILL ALIVE! NOW TO SURPRISE THESE LADY WARRIORS!



TED!
TED!



TED DROPS A ROPE LADDER

HANG ON TIGHT, DIANA!





TED, WE'VE GOT TO INFORM THE AMAZONS, SO THE REPTILE-MEN CAN'T SET UP NEW HATCHERIES. IF THE AMAZONS KEEP THEM AWAY FROM THE WARM DESERT, THE REPTILE-MEN WILL FINALLY DIE OUT--- OR THEIR NUMBERS WILL REMAIN SO SMALL AS TO NEVER AGAIN BE A MENACE!

YOU'RE RIGHT-- BUT I CAN'T SEE RETURNING TO THE AMAZON CAPITAL!



LOOK, BELOW! THERE'S THE QUEEN'S PRIVATE MONORAIL CAR!

QUEEN VARTA HAS RECOVERED FROM THE PUNCH I GAVE HER, AND IS HASTENING TO THE FOREST OF THORN TO WITNESS YOUR DEATH. I'LL BLOW HER TO KINGDOM COME!

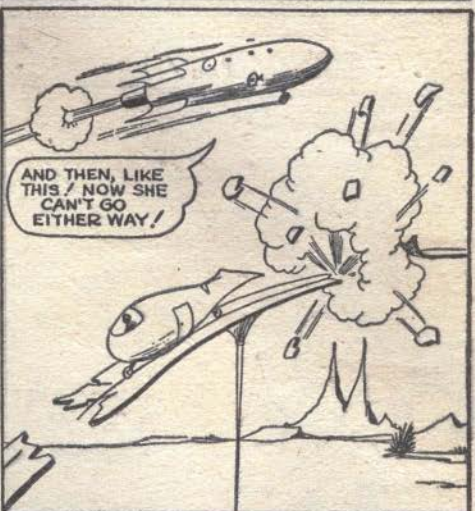


IF THERE WAS ONLY SOME WAY TO CAPTURE HER AND EXPLAIN EVERYTHING!

THERE IS A WAY--- LIKE THIS!



AND THEN, LIKE THIS! NOW SHE CAN'T GO EITHER WAY!



THE REPTILE-MEN HATCH THEIR EGGS IN THE WARM SANDS OF THE DESERT. HERE THEY HATCH TEN TIMES FASTER THAN IN THEIR COLD LANDS. THEY TAKE THE INFANTS BACK TO THEIR LAND BY ARMED CONVOYS. KEEP THEM AWAY FROM THE DESERT, AND YOU WILL SOON BE THE DOMINANT RACE OF MERCURY!



SPARE MY LIFE --OH, QUEEN DIANA, I ABDICATE-- YOU CAN BE QUEEN OF ALL THE AMAZONS!

I HAVE NO DESIRE TO BE QUEEN, I AM LEAVING FOR EARTH IMMEDIATELY!





I WONDER IF THE WORLD IS STILL AT WAR, DIANA?

RIGHT NOW I DON'T CARE... I JUST WANT TO GET INTO SOME KIND OF CLOTHES!



DAYS LATER --- OUT IN SPACE

WOW! WE ALMOST COLLIDED WITH THAT PLANETOID!



IT'S DRAGGING US ALONG WITH IT!

AND OUR POWER ISN'T ENOUGH TO PULL US AWAY FROM IT!



THERE'S MARS AHEAD... WITH ITS TWO MOONS, DEIMOS AND PHOBOS!

WHEN WE GET INTO THEIR GRAVITATIONAL PULL, PERHAPS WE CAN SWING AWAY FROM THIS PLANETOID.



UMPF! I THOUGHT WE WERE FURTHER FROM THE GROUND!



LUCKILY, THE SPACE-SHIP IS UNDAMAGED

NO WONDER YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE SO FAR FROM THE GROUND... EVERYTHING HERE IS IN MINIATURE. IF ANYONE LIVES HERE, IT MUST BE A RACE OF DWARFS!

FOLLOW THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF DIANA AND TED IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF SPICY ADVENTURE STORIES

Devil's Fire

By
ALBERT SNOW

THE storm had knocked my instruments all to the devil; had thrown me hundreds of miles off my course and run me almost out of gas. I was glad enough to see that little green island ahead. Tropical dawn was just breaking. I circled the island, saw human beings on the beach, including a white man; and that was enough for me. I touched down the floats of my amphibian and taxied across the little sheltered bay toward a tiny dock. I saw now that there was even a tin roofed warehouse and a huge oil tank. Farther back was a neat looking white cottage.

Maybe I shouldn't have tried that flight solo anyway, across the Pacific. But the war was causing hell to pop in the orient. All I had was a plane and what skill I had picked up along with my reputation. I wanted to get back to the States and offer my plane and services to the government. A hell of a job I'd made, so far.

The native women were good looking but large and muscular, I saw as I came toward the dock. The white man was effeminate in appearance. Being pretty muscular and heavily built myself, maybe I looked good to the women. Anyway, I got a pretty good wel-



She had changed her masculine clothes for something more feminine.

come. I stepped up on the dock. The women chattered and giggled. Over my shoulder I noted the approach of a white-clad figure, a figure that came forward with



Out of the whole Pacific he had to pick The Island of the Amazons to make his landing! At first, it seemed like a tremendous joke, before he realized that he was a prisoner on a hell on earth!

dainty, mincing steps. The man, if man he was, clapped his hands indignantly at the curious women, made a noise that sounded exactly like a child's boo! The women drew aside at his approach, and the little man turned to me, hand

on hip, lips puckered in disapproval.

"What are you doing here, my good man?"

I had to laugh at the figure so indignant before me, lips puckered in even keener disapproval and

two widely spaced blue eyes swept over my figure and out to the moored plane, and back again.

While this went on I was taking unconscious note of the strange scene about me. The women had resumed work sullenly. Some trundled queer copra-laden carts into the warehouse, to emerge shortly as wonder-struck as ever. Others bore unbelievably huge loads on sinewy backs; search as I might in the few allotted seconds, I discovered never a man among them!

The little man seemed to grow more cordial. He said, "We were not expecting visitors today, sir! You must forgive my appearance—I know I look a sight!"

A hand adorned by many rings pushed back an imaginary lock of straying hair. His expression was almost coy. "I'm Forest," he simpered, extending jeweled fingers.

"I'm Dick Raines."

While I explained my misfortune, the loss of my route and the exhaustion of my gas supply, Forest hustled me into the cottage beside the oil tank.

A GOLDEN-SKINNED native girl was setting a table, and at Forest's command hurried for another plate, dark eyes lingering over her shoulder at me. Nervous and excited, Forest led me to a lavatory where I washed the stains of three thousand miles of air travel from my swarthy face and hands. At a word of command from Forest a clean towel appeared.

Connoisseur of beauty, ever appreciative, I eyed the glowing fig-

ure of perfection with plain approval, my mouth splitting in a smile.

In spite of Forest's evident distaste I placed my hand on her bare shoulder. She was clad only in a sarong, flowers in her hair. At the touch of my fingers her eyes blazed, her breath drew in in a sharp hiss, her whole body, from alluring, pear-shaped breasts to quivering thighs seemed to pulse and tremble.

In the twinkling of an eye she swayed toward me, her sloe eyes blazing, and only a sharp word of command from Forest prevented her from pressing exotic loveliness to me!

I laughed as he took the towel, but he was puzzled.

"So unnecessary!" exclaimed Forest testily, arising. "But forgive her. She's been starved for two years!" His voice was a simper. The remark only added to my bewilderment; later I was to learn all too well the meaning behind the man's words.

At breakfast the same native girl served us, but kept her eyes obediently on the stone-flagged floor. However, she lost no opportunity to hover behind me, to brush against me with her rounded arms, and once when she leaned over to replenish my glass a round breast throbbed against my shoulder. Forest spoke in reprimand again, but she merely tossed her head defiantly and flashed a white-toothed smile.

I admitted that most of all I needed sleep, after which I was anxious to report my safety by radio. To my surprise Forest hastened to explain that there was a

wireless at the plantation — that although steamers called but twice yearly at Tenefu they managed to keep in touch with the world. Gasoline also was available in any quantity whenever I was ready to resume my flight!

"Tenefu! Tenefu!" I mused. "Where have I heard that name?"

"Tenefu, the Island of Women!" said Forest softly.

In spite of my weariness I threw back my head and roared with laughter. "Tenefu, by gad! The Island of the Amazons! And out of the whole Pacific I pick this spot to land! No wonder all the gals give me that come hither look!

"I've heard about this island for years, but always thought it was more or less of a myth! So this is Tenefu! Now show me the master-mind, the old warhorse behind it all, and I'll be satisfied. I'd like to see this Madame — what's her name? Madame Rigaud!"

"Well, turn around and look!"

Forest dropped his glass with an effeminate little shriek; even I leaped to my feet. There in the doorway with a leering smile on her face stood the owner and absolute ruler of Tenefu, Madame Rigaud herself, automatic strapped to one hip, heavy quirt dangling from her wrist. She wore a man's white shirt, open at the throat; her long legs were thrust into riding breeches, encased in high boots. She was without a feminine curve in her elongated body! Hair, slightly gray, was shingled like that of a man; her nose was bold, curved, and predatory like the beak of a hawk, and the arro-

gant, flashing eyes spoke further of power! She swung the heavy quirt lovingly, suggestively, grinned wolfishly when Forest cringed away.

"Dick Raines, the world famous flyer!" she mocked. "Now you have seen Madame Rigaud, what do you think of her?" Forest started to interpose, but she stopped him with a gesture of contempt. "Welcome to Tenefu, my dear Raines! It's been a long time since we've had such distinguished company!"

Again I laughed. I thrust out my hand and was surprised at the strength in the woman's fingers. A few minutes more found us drinking together, toasting Tenefu and Happy Landings, Forest hovering anxiously in the background.

I EXPLAINED the situation again, requested her to radio my whereabouts as soon as convenient and asked permission to rest a few hours at the cottage. She assented readily, then sat silent for a short space, green eyes glowing and narrowed in peculiar fashion.

"Perhaps you'd like to come up to the chateau," she asked slowly, evenly, "as we have better facilities there. At least you wouldn't have this noise of work to bother you!"

Forest started in surprise, opened red lips to protest. She silenced him with a wave of the quirt.

"Sure!" I said, still grinning. "I was hoping you'd ask me. I'm mighty anxious to see your place. I've heard so much about it!"

Suddenly the tall woman turned, lashed out with the heavy quirt, seemingly at the doorjamb. A muffled scream. A bony arm shot out, dragged the culprit into the room. "Never slip up behind me!" she grated, throwing the golden-skinned girl toward the littered table. An angry welt stretched below the native's smooth breast, extended downward.

Astonished and repulsed by the sudden and unjust display of temper, I entered Madame Rigaud's car with misgivings and pity in my heart for the native girl. Madame Rigaud offered no word of explanation. She spoke only after fields and forests had swept by.

"I suppose you've noticed my lack of man power, Mr. Raines?"

"Yes," I admitted. "Aren't there any men on Tenefu but Forest?"

"There are a few others, but very few. Haven't your tales told you about the ogre of Tenefu?" There was sarcasm in her deep voice. Sarcasm and bitterness. I wisely chose to disregard the latter part of her remark.

"You seem to have gotten along very well without men!"

"In every way, my friend—almost every way!"

She stopped the car on the very top of the low hill. Before us in all its glory arose the plantation house of Tenefu, flanked and enhanced in beauty by tropical trees, flowers and shrubs.

Green eyes burned into mine. "In every way but one!" she repeated, her voice low, vibrant. Bony fingers, long and strong, gripped my knee—I heard breath whistling through her teeth, dared not look at her.

"Forgive me," I spoke gently, feeling almost sorry for the ridiculous woman, "I am very tired!"

For a space she sat there silently, fighting to control herself. The gears clanked, and the car leaped forward. I sat silent, wondering just what in hell I had got into this time!

AT THE house I wrote out the radio message I wished sent, and gravely she assented, after which she led me up a long flight of stairs, down cool hallways to a shadowy bedroom in a separate wing of the house.

"This will be yours for as long as you care to stay," she said meaningly. Though her face was as graven as stone, her eyes blazed. Again I chose to disregard the meaning behind the words, the innuendoes and hints. I shrugged as the door closed, looked about me with wonderment.

How in the world did she manage this setting so far away from the jumping off place itself? A low bed hung with a canopy of mosquito netting was along one wall. The floors were of cool tile, the walls frescoed and decorated in the old French manner, painted in a way that spoke of enormous expenditure. The furniture was equally luxurious. A far door disclosed a bathroom with sunken tub that more than invited.

With very few wasted movements I slipped from my travel-stained garments and soon reveled in the cooling water. Later I made for the privacy of my bedroom. In the doorway I paused in surprise, for standing over that bed, rear-



She was native, but the lightest native I had ever seen.

ranging it, was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen!

"Who—who—" I began, glad for the large towel I had wrapped around me. She turned from her task to encompass me with startled eyes. She was native, but the lightest native I could have imagined in my wildest dreams—almost white! Her brilliant sarong

was even scantier than that of the other.

"I am Wana! She spoke with a quaver. Regaining my wits I stepped into the room.

"Well, well! Wana! Think of that, now! How come you walk in on me like this?"

She stopped my advance with a cautioning hand, finger against

pursed lips in a gesture of silence. She glanced toward the door, as if warning me of hidden danger. I noted with a suppressed chuckle that, in spite of her caution, her brown eyes devoured me, were lit with what I termed the well known "Tenefu flame!"

Swept away by the pulsing beauty before me, oblivious of danger or anything else, I placed a hand on her trembling shoulder, but she jerked away looking anxiously toward the door.

"Don't! Don't!" she implored, and, "For God's sake, go! Leave this hell of Tenefu before it is too late!"

"Aw, the devil with it!" I said thickly. "C'mere, baby. You're beautiful!" To me the whole thing was still a joke.

"Pardon me," said a deep voice. Madame Rigaud stood in the doorway.

Eyes blazing with wrath, she motioned the girl from the room. As the slender body half wheeled by her on frightened feet she gestured with the quirt as if to lash at the beautiful back, thought better of it, and smiled grimly at me.

"You wish to sleep, no doubt, Mr. Raines! Again pardon the intrusion; I did not mean to interrupt your pleasure!"

"Not at all," I muttered, and as the door closed, "Boy, what have I stuck my nose into now?"

DINNER that night was something to marvel at. Madame Rigaud outdid herself. She had changed her masculine clothes for those of her own sex, wearing a low cut evening gown which revealed the flat boniness of her

breast. Her fingers fairly glittered with rings; a great diamond crowning a tiara winked and blinked high up on her forehead. Rouge and lipstick seemed foreign on her ugly features.

In spite of her efforts, this great show of wealth and beauty elicited no response from me, whom she so evidently hoped to enthrall.

"You live like a queen," I finally remarked, dryly, merely for the sake of conversation. In my heart I laughed.

"I *am* a queen," she replied, pleased. "A queen on Tenefu, at least!"

Great was my astonishment at the garb of the golden-skinned girls who served us in the huge dining hall. Their incongruous appearance was the final factor in convincing me that my hostess was undoubtedly mad, for impossible as it might seem, they wore nothing more nor less than lingerie, daring in cut, daring in brevity, and alluring in its very scent and hue!

Those dusky skins, contrasting with scanty stepins and inadequate bandeaus, were doubly enticing. Madame Rigaud threw back her head and roared at my evident astonishment.

"You see, my friend," she explained, bony hands again on my arm, "years ago, in my youth, I loved such things! I enjoy them yet—on others, and it surely appears that you, too, are charmed!"

I laughed sheepishly, winced as she poked me jocosely in the ribs.

Champagne and other heady wines loosened the woman's tongue as the meal progressed. Presently she leaned back, and

spoke again of the rumors I might have heard concerning the ogre of Tenufu. I admitted that I had heard much, and not all good.

Slowly she unfolded a peculiar tale, the detailed story of a love affair of the past that had been entirely one-sided. Laughed at and jeered for her affair, she had vowed to hate all men, to revenge herself on the whole sex. And, she explained with narrowed eyes, well had she fulfilled that vow.

I paid little attention other than wondering just why she should trouble herself to tell me all this. I was much more interested in those charming figures flitting about the room, particularly my little friend Wana, who was a picture of enticement in orchid!

I looked again at the garrulous old woman beside me, noted the quirt on the back of her chair, the three huge iron keys dangling from a ring at her waist. She leaned toward me as she spoke, her voice higher now, eyes sparkling and gleaming.

"He looked exactly as you do now; young, virile, manly! Perhaps that is why I brought you here, cheri!" Her hand was closing over mine. "Do you know," she continued dreamily, "you are the first man I have dined with in twelve years! You do something to me here!" She tapped her bony chest.

I GOT to my feet—nauseated, revolted. "Let's take a walk," I requested quickly, indicating the moonlit garden. As we walked toward the French doors I noted Wana in the shadows shaking her head frantically in warning. Help-

lessly, not knowing whether to laugh or to be angry, I stepped into the tropical garden with the woman close to my side:

Try as I might I could not silence her as she confessed every horrid detail of her past life to me. She went so far as to describe her means to power, her hopes and dreams, emphasizing her wealth and boundless resources. Finally, disgusted, I could stand it no longer.

"Why do you tell me these things?"

Two hands were on my shoulders; two eyes gazed into mine. "Because you, too, may have them! I will share a kingdom with you, Dick Raines. I offer you wealth, and power, and—love!"

An arm slid around my neck; I felt the thin, muscular sharpness of bony form against my own; hungry, questing lips, parched and hard, were on my cheek even as I pulled away. Strident breath whistled in my ear.

I laughed. That laugh was the biggest mistake I ever made during my adventurous career, for the neurotic woman sprang away from me as if I had slapped her face!

"So! You laugh! Laugh! Laugh at me, you fool! Just as the other, you laugh! I offer you a kingdom, a paradise on earth, and you laugh! Fool! Moron! Imbecile! I too, I, Theresa Rigaud, laugh!"

Her screams of rage trailed off into hysterical laughter, high-pitched, terrible to hear.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't mean—" but that laughter cut me off. She slapped her thin hands together with a report like the shot of a gun. Out of the semi-

darkness materialized two formidable women like genii of the lamp, women as large as I myself. Each wore an automatic; each carried a gleaming Malay kris'.

"Bring him along!" grated Madame Rigaud, and stalked ahead.

They shoved me roughly after the retreating figure, and still half inclined to laugh at the absurdity of the whole thing, I followed obediently.

Along the dark pathway I thought fast. Evidently the woman was crazy. There was no doubt of that! I wondered a little vaguely if temporary safety lay in playing up to her, but the thought of that bony, masculine body nauseated and repulsed me. I sighed a little at the comic injustice of it all. Why couldn't she have been someone like little Wana?

The strange procession did not halt in the living room but marched silently through, traversing darkened hallways, back, back to the very rear of the house. Before a huge black door I was brought to a halt.

"I will be fair with you, my young friend," spoke Madame Rigaud. "I am about to show you—men. You asked me if we had men on Tenefu and I told you yes. Now, you shall see for yourself! First, you must understand that all of these creatures have attempted to cross me in one way or another. I need hardly explain—after you have seen them—that all were unsuccessful. Remember that they, too, came to Tenefu, just as you came—unasked."

She thrust one of the three great keys into the lock. "I show you this simply to prove what it means

to oppose me, my arrogant friend. Come!" She thrust the heavy door open, flipped a switch, and life stirred in the room.

I SICKENED, drew back in amazement at the sight that met my eyes. Sprawled and huddled on pallets on the bare floor were fully thirty native men—or what had been men!

"This man," she indicated an unfortunate who groveled and cringed away from her, "attempted to nose into my affairs too often!" She cracked the whip and, abject in terror, the wretch extended the stumps of two withered arms. The hands had been hacked off above the wrists!

She threw back her head and laughed. "This one," she continued, "is my prize beauty!" The man she pointed out covered his face with his hands. "He is Wanala, blood brother of Wana, your favorite!" The woman smirked.

"He came after his sister; he nosed around; he talked! Look at him now!" Again she swung the whip with a sharp report! Wanala dropped his hands sullenly, his eyes blazed at his tormentor. I stood nauseated, but fascinated.

Two great holes indicated where the boy's nose had once been and the terrible gibbering emitted from colorless lips proved that a blackened stump alone remained of his tongue!

"Well," said Madame Rigaud, the Queen of Tenefu, in a harsh, dry voice, "have you seen enough?"

Shrieking with laughter she prodded me with her quirt.

"You!" Her voice sobered, be-



Without a word she sprang forward, whip raised to strike.

came less harsh, "I give you a choice!" Those deep tones were almost a caress. "You can be a king, can rule beside me! Together we will seek and find happiness, or else—" She gestured wordlessly toward the wrecks at her feet.

"I'm internationally known," I said as my voice choked with emotion, "and you've already given news of my arrival. A disappearance would be hard for you to explain!"

"Fool! Do you think I radioed Papeete? Certainly not! Should you choose this way," again a wave of the quirt, "I simply tow your plane a few miles to sea and break it up. In a few weeks, when parts of the wreckage are found—pfft! Simply a sorrowful headline in the papers announcing the death of another aviator."

"You wouldn't—you—" I stepped toward her. An Amazon shoved me back roughly, tapping the holstered automatic at her hip.

"Tonight I give you to prepare your answer, to make your decision," the woman spoke coldly. "I have been spurned for the last time, and if you will not have me, you shall never have another woman! You'll never want another woman to look at you!"

She giggled and the bodyguard giggled in response.

LOCKED in my room I paced the floor far into the night. The thought of the mutilated wretches in the basement room sickened me, brought me back to reality with a bang. The woman was undoubtedly crazed! How in the world could I extract myself from such a mess?

Eventually, long after midnight, I cast myself fully clothed on the bed, half determined to accede to her wishes and watch future opportunities for escape.

The guarded sound of a key in the lock brought me to alertness. Carefully I arose, tiptoed to the door, seizing a heavy chair for a weapon. Into the moonlit room stole the white body of Wana.

Seeing me, she leaned against the door breathlessly, finger against her lips in warning gesture. She was clad as I had last seen her, in thin chiffon. In spite of the terrible danger, it required an effort on my part to keep my hands off her.

Her entire being was a challenge. Uplifted breasts, impudent, beneath the sheer lace of the bandeau! Rounded hips, turned to perfection! I gulped, trembled, and followed eagerly when she led me away from the door.

Against the bed she paused, thrust something at me. My fingers found and recognized the three keys last seen at Madame Rigaud's girdle!

"Go," she breathed, very close to me, "go before that devil kills you! Before she mutilates you as she has my brother!"

I tossed the keys to the bed, seized her in my arms. Her body quivered against mine. For a long moment of ecstasy she strained to me there in the moonlight, lips pressed to mine.

"We'll go together," I whispered hoarsely. "You must come with me! We'll make Forest give us gasoline and be away before she misses us!"

"I can't," she moaned. "I can't!"

I must not leave my brother! I must stay until I free him, too, from the clutches of this devil!"

"I won't go without you!" I said tersely, and sought her lips again. My arms pressed her sinuous body closer and closer to me, felt the svelte curve of her arched back. Her lips seemed to drain life itself from me.

Light flooded the room!

There in the doorway, white with anger, was Madame Rigaud. Her lips were a thin cruel line, her eyes demoniac, glittering as those of a deadly snake. Without a word she sprang toward us, whip raised to strike. Wana, knowing too well that whip, dodged away, stumbled over a stool and sprawled on the floor.

The quirt flashed in the light, rose and descended, rose and fell again, leaving crimson welts in its vicious wake—angry welts across rounded back and shoulders, horribly discernible even through taut chiffon. Wana moaned, rolling to escape the blows. The whip hissed again, leaving claw-like marks across the proud shoulders.

By this time I sprang into action. I seized the mad woman from behind, held the whip with my right hand, the other encompassing her bony chest. Wana, freed from her torturer, seized the three keys from the bed, ran sobbing from the room.

I WAS far too busy even to note her departure, for the strength of Madame Rigaud was the strength of the possessed. Her gown ripped in my fingers. She sprang free, leaving it in my hands.

Open-mouthed at the shock of a nearly nude Amazon before me, I hesitated. That moment of inaction was all she needed. With a single flick of her wrist she quickly unscrewed the top of the heavy quirt. A short, evil-appearing knife was in her hand! She neither screamed for help nor expected it.

Crouched low like a professional brawler, knife cradled close to her breast, insanity burning in her eyes, she came slowly toward me. I braced myself to meet her, sick and nauseated by her appearance.

Her entire body was scabrous, skin splotched and spotted, but there was a tremendous amount of muscle evident in that thin body. Further, here was the double strength of the mad!

The gleaming knife whistled through the air as she sprang, and in spite of my quickness, buried itself in my forearm. I leaped back, tripped over the same stool, staggered and crashed to the floor! Like a tigress she was upon me, bony shoulders hitting me with a terrific whack, driving the breath from me, pinning me to the floor.

The sharp blade scratched down across my abdomen, cut half through the thick leather belt before I could force it aside.

Struggling erect I gripped her knife wrist firmly, but her strength was equal to mine, and the wounded forearm weakened me rapidly. Step by step she pushed me back, back, saliva drooling from cruel lips, yellow teeth snapping like fangs at my flesh! Down, down came the glittering blade.

(Continued on page 96)

CARGO of

THE anchor hawser tightened on the *Mary Ann's* bitts and the sixty-foot diving tender came up short. She swung, marching swells making her blunt bows nod to the clean-cut line between the bright blue sky and sun-washed sea; and directly along her lubber-line, about a mile astern, frothy white petticoats of surf ringed a tiny, sand-beached island.

Standing at the *Mary Ann's* starboard rail were four figures—three men and Mary Ann Brooks, the girl for whom the tender was named.

"I'm sure this is the place, Randolph! The *Shagar* must be almost directly under us!" Roy Sharp's bony knuckles showed white as he gripped the rail. He pushed his lanky body erect, swung beady eyes to Bob Randolph, owner of the tender. "You can dive right away, get the things I and Earl want, and we can get away from here within the hour." And Sharp's eyes matched the hard glint of the sea as he stared at the wind-moulded perfection of Mary Ann Brooks' body.

Whipped by the fresh sea wind, her light blue dress caressingly followed each curve of her trim figure. Every stirring detail of her pouting breasts was revealed by the tight-drawn fabric, twin

mounds of lush beauty that complemented the dainty roundness of her torso, the clean sweep of her full-thighed legs, which tapered to utterly feminine ankles and feet.

Her hair formed a wind-whipped halo of fine-spun gold about her oval face, and her large blue eyes farily sparkled with the sheer joy of living. Spray-kissed, her cheeks were tinged with the same healthy flush that painted her soft lips.

She caught Sharp's probing stare, and flooding crimson stained her throat, spread to lose itself beneath the ruffled neck of her dress.


"LISTEN, Mr. Sharp," Bob Randolph's angular jaw jutted forward and every muscle in his lithe young body tightened. His eyes were twin bits of brown ice as he stared at Sharp and the latter's stocky companion, "You chartered the *Mary Ann* for a diving job. I'm to select the time for—"

"Now, now, Randolph," hastily Sharp soothed, dropping a bony hand on Randolph's hard shoulder and reluctantly dragging his beady eyes from Mary Ann Brooks. "I didn't mean any harm. Me and Mr. Emmett are just anxious to get the job done and get away from here." His harsh voice dropped secretively and his rounded shoulders drooped as he bent lower to bring

Dead men under the sea! But these are dead men who can still tell tales! Randolph discovered that when he went below and left his sweetheart on the diving-tender with a pair of human sharks

TROUBLE

By WALTON GREY



The girl screamed and the crook went mad there on the ship's deck.

his thin lips nearer Randolph's ear.

"Me and Earl's the only survivors of the *Shagar*. We've already answered a lot of questions about

how she piled on a reef and went down, how we swam to that island. All we want now is our property off the *Shagar*, without any more fuss or questions, see? That's so, ain't it, Earl?"

"Sure thing, Roy!" lipped Sharp's stocky companion. His bright eyes flicked over Bob Randolph, Mary Ann. "All we want now is our property—nothing else." And Earl Emmett's close-set eyes started roaming again, over the clean-scrubbed decks of

the tender, the sun-splashed, heaving sea, the distant line of the horizon.

"All right," Bob Randolph fought a wild desire to fling Sharp's bony hand from his shoulder, smash a hard-knuckled fist into his thin-lipped, drooping mouth, blacken both of his beady eyes, but—Sharp and Emmett were paying a good price for the job, and diving was Randolph's work. The *Mary Ann* wasn't fully paid for yet.

After he owned the tender, he and Mary Ann could—"All right, Sharp," Randolph kept his voice steady, even, "You'll get your property off the *Shagar* in record time. We'll—"

"There's a hundred dollar bonus in it for you if we get away from here before another boat comes snooping around!" Sharp licked thin lips, and his bony fingers dug into Randolph's muscular shoulder.

"Done!" Randolph's wide mouth tightened. A hundred dollars would go a long way toward more diving equipment. "I'll just call you on the bonus."

He turned and raised his voice to a shout, "Heine!"

A squat, red-cheeked man in dirty overalls popped up the engine room hatch, grinned toothily at Mary Ann and Randolph.

"Start the compressors, Heine," directed Randolph, and an answering grin wiped the anger from his tanned, angular face, "I'll break out the suit. I'm going down in ten minutes."

"But—the lines—" A worried frown dug creases in Heine's fat forehead. Pudgy fingers laced in

front of his huge body. "The lines—who iss going to—?"

"Mary Ann will handle my air and life-line. She persuaded me she'd make a good diving tender," Randolph grinned at the girl. "Lord knows she's worried us here on the scow enough to take Hank and Ed's place. If Hank and Ed don't get well before the bells ring, I think I'll make her take their places permanently!" And Randolph's even white teeth flashed in a broader grin as Mary Ann stuck out a taunting red tongue.

HEINE lumbered down the hatchway, muttering under his breath. Randolph caught Mary Ann's arm, and gulped as the feel of her warm, pulsing flesh sent electric tingles through his hard-muscled body. They started aft, toward the deck shelter that housed the diving gear. Sharp and Emmett followed.

"I got to tell you what me and Earl is after, Randolph," started Sharp. "We—"

I'll get the details before I dive," broke in Randolph shortly. He urged Mary Ann into the deck shelter, closed the door. "Listen, kid," he went on banteringly, squeezing her arm, "it sounded like kidding—that about you taking Hank and Ed's place—but you might really have to live on this tub after we get married. Diving don't pay enough to—"

"Bob, I'd live anywhere with you!" Mary Ann lifted moist red lips, and Randolph's pulse quickened. Her slim fingers touched his wrist. Bob wetted dry lips. "Just so we will be together," went on the girl, "I don't care what hap-

pens!" Her pouting breasts danced with her rapid breathing, and the heady perfume of her slim body rose to Randolph's quivering nostrils. "We can remodel this deck shelter, make it into a tiny floating apartment. I'll do anything, Bob—anything!"

She swayed closer, large eyes gleaming with adoration. Randolph pushed hungry arms toward her, drew her quivering body to his hard-muscled figure, and hot blood pumped in his ears as her breasts flattened against his chest. Her warm breath beat against his cheek, and his mouth sought her lips. The searing flame of her tongue rippled a passionate tattoo against his lips. Her arms circled his neck in an almost savage embrace.

Randolph pushed a muscular hand up between their straining bodies, cupped the throbbing warmth of her breast, and his fingers tightened as the soft flesh seemed to sear his skin.

Mary Ann moaned, pressed her quivering body to him in a fierce gesture of surrender, then abruptly she sagged, panting, as his questing fingers sought the velvety softness of her back. Mary Ann gasped, thrust herself away from him.

"Please, Bob! Not—now! I—I—We—can't—" Her frantic hands caught his wrists.

"All right, kid," Randolph said hoarsely, "some other time. We—Well, anyway, I've got to clear the spit-cock on my helmet. It's stopped up, and if my bib gets full of water I can't blow it. May have to stoop or lie down on the *Shagar*, and you know how water leaks past the exhaust." He picked up the big

tinned copper helmet, and his laugh was a bit strained. Mary Ann was straightening her rumpled clothing, her soft cheeks flaming. . . .

"ALL right, Sharp. I'll have the details." Bob Randolph sat on a heavy dressing bench near the starboard rail, fully dressed to dive. The face port of his big helmet was still open.

"Well, I—" Sharp hesitated, eyed Heine, standing at Randolph's elbow. The big Dutch engine and compressor man glared back. Mary Ann was some distance astern, checking the air hose that led to Randolph's helmet.

Earl Emmett caught Sharp's questioning gaze, and the stockier man shifted big feet, spat over the rail; and his bright eyes flicked over the glinting sea, the island astern.

"Listen, Sharp," Bob Randolph's lips were tight, his angular face stone-hard. "I'm short-handed on this job, but if my other two men were here they'd be in on everything just as Miss Brooks and Heine must be. If things are so secret—"

"Now, now, Randolph," broke in Sharp soothingly, dropping a bony hand on Randolph's shoulder. Heine knocked it off, grumbling deep German maledictions as he elaborately inspected the breast-plate studs on Randolph's suit. "We—er—that is—"

"Shoot it!" Earl Emmett snapped. "Stall around, and—" His bright eyes stopped roaming long enough to glare a warning to Sharp.

"We—we're interested, as I said before," Sharp licked thin lips, "in

getting a small bag—er—valise—from the small cabin opposite the captain's quarters." He was talking slowly, carefully, and his beady eyes probed Randolph's helmet-shadowed face. "You're to enter this room—it was our stateroom—and you are to bring up all luggage you find there—unopened. If the job's right, me and Earl will pay like we promised and we can head for the big town as fast as this tub can make it. The room me and Earl had is the second one from the stairs."

Randolph nodded slowly. The plan of the *Shagar* was clear in his mind. He'd contacted the owners before taking the job. They'd given him a blue-print, and had laughingly given permission for him to raise the whole ship, if he wanted it. The cargo was worthless the moment the rusty freighter dipped beneath the water. Its hulk wouldn't be worth the job of scrapping.

"Second door from the companionway on the port side, facing forward, that's it?" A tiny frown pulled Randolph's thick brown brows closer together. The job hadn't appealed to him at first. Somehow, there was something about it that—

"Yeah, that's it." Sharp's beak-like nose was almost in the face port opening. "No use for you to waste time looking about the *Shagar*. There's nothing worth—"

"I know," cut in Randolph coolly. "The cargo is a total loss. I knew the *Shagar's* skipper, and I'm still wondering how he managed to get lost so badly in the fog that he rammed the reef about this island. I—Well, beat it to your compressors, Heine. Sharp, you and Em-

mett stand clear. Mary Ann, come here. I've got a few final instructions."

"Listen, kid," he said softly as the girl rested slim fingers on the port door, leaned near the opening. "I'll be cutting my air off every minute or so to listen to things topside, see?" He tapped the battery-less telephone set she held in her other hand. It was connected through his lifeline to a similar set in his helmet. "If anything goes wrong, just sing out. I'll hear you. I've got a hunch that—Well, I shouldn't have let you talk me into letting you come on this—"

"I'll be all right, Bob," Mary Ann's perfumed breath filled the helmet as she leaned closer. "I'm so anxious for you—us to get the tender paid for, then we can—" Randolph felt her warm fingers squeeze his hand.

"All right. Just handle me like Hank and Ed taught you. If anything—goes wrong, just yell for Heine. Yell loud, because he's deaf—remember. If he doesn't hear you, I'll hear you in the 'phones." Randolph closed his face port as Sharp and Emmett started back toward him.

SAND crunched beneath Randolph's sixteen pound lead shoes as he stood on the bottom sixty feet below the *Mary Ann's* keel. The descending line showed beside him as a weaving hempen snake tethered to the rippled bottom with a stout weight. Unconsciously, his eyes followed it up, but its swaying thread was lost in furry darkness beyond the scope of his underwater light.

At the top of the line, Mary Ann

was on the bobbing tender, handling his air hose and life-line. He could almost smell the stirring fragrance of her slim body in his helmet, almost feel the warmth of her velvety flesh against his fingers. She—

Randolph stopped, lips tight.

Mary Ann was on the tender with Heine, Sharp, and Emmett. Heine, already deaf, would be hovering over the air compressors and wouldn't hear her if—and he was ten fathoms down.

He grunted derisively. Everything would be all right. Sharp and Emmett were queer birds. This was a queer diving job. Nothing but a touch of imagination.

He bent a light distance line to the descending line, payed out a few feet as he leaned against the current and peered intently about him. His underwater light made a ghostly glow in the greenish water. Moving slowly and letting the distance line slide through his fingers, he walked in the direction he knew the *Shagar* to be.

A dozen steps and a swarm of tiny fish sped through the glow of his light, flashing javelins of cold flesh. They were gone in an instant. The line payed out. A murky shape loomed ahead, spread to infinity on either side of him. He walked closer. The murky shape became a ship, the *Shagar*.

Her sunken wreck was slicked over with a thin coating of some underwater growth. A hatch-cover bobbed loggily above her slanting decks. Black portholes stared from her rusty sides, inky, sightless eyes peering from a dead hulk.

She lay headed almost directly toward the island, listed to port a

few degrees. Randolph could see her bottom had been practically torn out. The rust-eaten plates looked much as if a giant had thrust steely fingers through them and playfully ripped the vessel from stem to stern. She must, as Sharp had said, gone to the bottom like a stone.

THERE was no sign of the reef she had struck. It was, Randolph knew, a hundred or more feet from her stern. Her momentum had carried her over it and into the deeper water. She—

"Bob!"

Randolph cut his air. That was Mary Ann's voice in the 'phones.

"Yes, kid?" His voice boomed hollowly in the helmet.

"Everything all right?" Concern had sharpened her voice.

Randolph grinned as he pictured her leaning over the rail, her breasts swaying with each movement of her body as she payed out the air hose and life-line.

"I'll tell you all about it—in the deck shelter, kid." He cut his air back on, walked on the *Shagar*.

Lightening himself with suit-pent air, he scrambled to the freighter's submerged deck, headed forward to the port companion-way. He reached it, and the water-filled corridor of the sunken *Shagar* stretched out before him. Carefully clearing his lines, he descended, and his underwater light seemed but a dim glow except where it reflected from the scaly white walls of the ship's passage.

Second door.

He reached it, swung about, the light moving with his body. The word "Captain" showed in black

paint above the door across the passage. Randolph turned back to the door of Sharp's and Emmett's stateroom.

He twisted the knob, grunted as the door resisted—either locked or swollen shut. A swing with his lead-weighted shoe moved it a fraction. He kicked it again, caught the door jamb to steady himself as the door opened. A moment, and he stepped back instinctively, a sudden fear shooting through his mind.

A huge, bloated shape floated toward him, terrifying in its ghastly proportions. Involuntarily, Randolph's muscular fingers moved toward the knife thrust in the belt about his diving suit—then he grunted, laughed shortly. The bloated shape was a mattress. They always did swell up like a balloon under water.

He put the light down on the floor, dragged the mattress through the door. It rose slowly toward the ceiling, seemed to creep away from him, toward the darker section of the ship. Randolph swung about, started through the door.

The currents started by his movements swept a bloated pillow and a bobbing chair toward him. A couple of shoves and they joined the mattress. A dozen, frantic silver spots darted past him—little fish started by his clumsy movements.

"How's everything now, Bob?" Mary Ann's voice was still sharp with worry.

Randolph cut his air.

"Fine, kid. Going into the stateroom right now. Be up in a few minutes." He cut his air back on

for a moment, then shut it off. "Just ran into a swelled mattress. Thought a booger had me at first. I'll have the bags in a few minutes." He cut his air back on.

THE light showed the cabin to be small, and the one port-hole made a spot of dim, soft color against the black wall as Randolph cut his light off. He cut it back on as he got inside the room.

Pawing aside water-soaked bedding, he searched the cabin thoroughly, found a gladstone bag and a smaller valise. He gripped the bags, cleared his lines and stepped back into the corridor. The job was done—all but going up and collecting the hundred dollar bonus.

Swinging about, he started for the deck, and his light swept the door of the captain's stateroom across the passage. Randolph stopped irresolutely for a moment.

Skipper Barr of the *Shagar* had been aboard the *Mary Ann* several times, gruff, steeped in the lore of the sea. He'd brought Mary Ann a mandarin robe from China, growled at her when she tried to thank him. Randolph gulped, tried the door. It opened easily.

Moving slowly, carefully, Randolph stepped into the captain's cabin, swung his light.

A vague shape rubbed against him gently, and he almost dropped the light as its glow fell upon the contorted features of a floating corpse. In the dim light, he saw that the body was clothed in a captain's uniform, and a ghastly feeling of horror gripped at his chilled body. The body was that of Captain Barr's!

Cold chills prickling his spine,

Randolph started to back out of the cabin, fervently wishing he had not opened the door. The current set up by his movements caused the captain's body to float toward him as though following him, and as it bobbed loggily, Randolph got a glimpse of water-washed bone. The back of Captain Barr's head was crushed. He'd been—God! Captain Barr had been murdered! The wreck would hardly—

Randolph stumbled toward the door, dragged it shut behind him, and his rasping breath was harsh in the domed space of his helmet.

"Bob!" It was Mary Ann again. Randolph cut his air. "I thought I heard you say something. Is everything all right?"

Randolph leaned against the wall to steady jerky nerves. He could feel the chill crawl of sweat on his forehead.

"Yes, Mary, I'm all right." He pushed erect. "I've got the bags from Sharp's and Emmett's stateroom. I've just been in the captain's stateroom. I—" He heard Mary Ann speak to someone, knew she was talking to Sharp.

"**BOB!**" Mary Ann's shrill scream knifed his eardrums, sent horror-chilled blood pounding his head. The whole significance of the captain's floating body flashed into his mind with sudden stunning force. With lead-soled feet skidding on the passage floor, he started for the companionway, stopped as a harsh voice sounded in his 'phones.

"Randolph!" It was Sharp. "I told you not to wander around on the *Shagar*. Now you know too much. Emmett is handling your

blonde line-tender, and *I'm handling your air-hose and life-line!* You'll do everything I say, or I'm cutting your air hose!"

Emmett handling Mary Ann! The freezing thought beat maddeningly at Randolph's mind, then the ghastly threat of Sharp's words reached his stunned reason.

Cut the air hose! Flood the suit! The dropping pressure would put him in a squeeze. He'd seen divers brought up dead, broken; seen one dug like jelly from his big copper helmet. God! Dead, he couldn't help Mary Ann! He'd have to—

"All right, Sharp," he managed, "you've got me." Yet while he was surrendering, his mind was busily planning.

Heine usually dropped ladders on both sides of the *Mary Ann* when she was moored for a dive. If the big Dutchman had dropped the ladder on the port side today—

"You will bring the two bags and tie them to a line. I'll tell you what else to do—after the bags are on the boat." Sharp's rasping voice came again, and Randolph sensed a deeper, horrible meaning in his words.

After the bags were on the tender—Sharp would cut the air hose the moment he got his skinny hands on the bags! Randolph's lifeless, broken body would be left up on the sandy bottom near the wrecked *Shagar*, weighted down by a flooded suit. Mary Ann's ravished—

"You'll send the bags up," rasped Sharp, "or I'll send the girl down to keep you company! Make it snappy!"

"All right, Sharp, I—I'll do it."

(Continued on page 98)

MIDNIGHT

THE crags of Tanjong Merah jutted out into the savagely pounding China Sea. A red sunset was following the typhoon that had just subsided; and red jets of rifle fire poured from the parapet of the half ruined fortress that crowned the long, narrow cape.

Tsang Wu, the Chinese pirate, was bottled up; and Glenn Farrell, the American beach-comber who had become commander of Sultan Iskander's vest pocket army, could not pull the cork.

The short, stocky Malay *askaris* could digest just so much lead from Tsang Wu's rifles. Farrell, grimy and tattered, his rugged face raked by splinters of flying rock and his long, lean body creased with scorching slugs, scrambled to his feet. His blue eyes blazed wrathfully, but he had only one move.

"Datu Hamid," he shouted to the second in command, as he deliberately turned his back to the blistering fire of the enemy, "keep those yellow ——s ducking for cover while our right retreats to the barricade! Throw dust in their eyes!"

The wiry, squinted-eyed *datu* in the green *sarong* relayed the order. A volley rippled down the left of the skirmish line, chewing chips from the parapet and blinding the Chinese snipers as the right drew back.

And by repeating the maneuver, the American soldier of fortune was able to withdraw his forces with little loss.

THE Malay troops were muttering wrathfully. Datu Hamid, whom Farrell had displaced as commander of the sultan's army, made no move to quiet them. Their resentment ignored the fact that to continue the charge would have wiped out two-thirds of the attackers.

Farrell's binoculars swept the foothills far to the west. He cursed.

If the two field guns the sultan had borrowed from a neighboring prince didn't arrive soon, the water would calm down enough to let Tsang Wu return to the armored yacht which lay aground on a sand bar, far off shore. By some freak of the typhoon, the pirate's miniature warship had not been battered to pieces. All he had to do was put out in the launch in which he'd escaped, and tow the yacht into deeper water.

If Tsang Wu escaped, Farrell would be discredited. Worse than that, he hated to fall down on the job. Sultan Iskander had given him a lift when the whites of Malaya had kicked him on the chin.

Too many gin *pahits* one night, and an unfortunate tangle with a woman notorious from Singapore to Siam, the news spread like wild fire, and lovely Irma Stanley gave him the air. Then more gin *pahits* and Farrell landed on the beach.

For a moment Irma's ivory and golden beauty, and the kisses they had exchanged by moonlight were a painful, mocking memory. Damn that gin-inspired bit of playfulness, just when Irma's reserve was

PATROL

By CLARK
NELSON

It was the devil's own choice. For to rescue his girl he had to betray the man who had saved his life. Treason and loyalty clash; piracy and love mingle in this drama of the China Seas



"I tried to use my knife on him, but—"

at the melting point! He grimaced wryly, scanned the horizon, and resumed methodically cursing the artillery.

And then, just before the swift fall of night, he saw a gun car-

riage drawn across the distant crest by a pair of water buffaloes. A caisson lumbered after it.

Farrell turned to his tent to wolf the pot of curry his orderly had prepared. As he ate, he cast about

for ways of salving Datu Hamid's grouch. He didn't blame the old fellow for getting his nose out of joint at the sultan's favor to a foreigner.

But before he devised an approach, Pa'dullah, his orderly, stepped into the kerosene lantern glow of the tent.

"*Tuan*, a messenger from Tsang Wu," he announced, thrusting ahead of him a slender Chinese girl.

And what a girl! Her vermilion tunic and black silk pyjamas were tattered, and her sleek black hair was disordered, but her exotic loveliness left him scarcely aware of her disarray. Small, firm breasts modeled in amber-shadowed ivory peeped coyly from the rents in the high necked tunic, and its severe lines could not quite hide the suave flare of her hips. And the gracious curve sweeping upward from her left knee was a charming hint at the fascination she still kept in reserve.

Her dark, slanted eyes, reflecting her crimson smile, made him think of several things he'd like to do when the siege was over.

"If you're a sample of what prizes carry around, I'm getting in that business myself—but what's up now?"

"I'm Chan Li. One of Tsang Wu's prisoners," she said in Mandarin. "Just before typhoon he captured the *Semiramis*, bound from Hong Kong to Singapore."

"What's all that to me?" His smile faded. She might be a spy.

"Tsang Wu," she explained, "demands that you let him escape to his stranded yacht. He saw your artillery coming up. To save your

face, you can take the fuses out of the shells so they will not do any great damage."

The effrontery of it was almost as striking as Chan Li's alluring loveliness.

"And if you do not," she resumed, "Tsang Wu will—"

She paused, and a slender hand probed her tattered silks. Whatever she was hunting, it'd be uncommonly pleasant helping her. Then she found it: a silver vanity case.

THE initials engraved on it were I. S. Farrell's expression changed. He opened the case. Inside the cover was a snapshot, somewhat frayed and stained: his own face, and next to it, the smiling sweetness of Irma Stanley. Taken that day at Tanjong Rhu, when Irma almost forgot she was a nice girl . . .

The sudden rumbling in his ears was not artillery fire.

Irma was Tsang Wu's prisoner. The pirate, recognizing the familiar face of Sultan Iskander's field marshal, was making the most of it.

"He will release her unharmed if you let him escape. Otherwise," explained Chan Li, "Tsang Wu and his lieutenants will make their doom at bit more pleasant. The yellow-haired girl will not like it.

"She came to Singapore to find you. But when the siege is over, you won't want to see her. Not after having refused to save her."

Farrell's shoulders slumped and his face became gray. He planted himself in a folding chair. He could now hear the curses and shouts of the Malays, and the

grunts of the water buffalos dragging the three inch field guns to blast Tsang Wu into dripping shreds.

But first there was plenty of time for the execution of Tsang Wu's Mongolian vengeance.

Farrell raked his blazing brain for some saving device. Let Tsang Wu escape. Suppose the British did depose the Sultan for not maintaining order? They were looking for some pretext against that gray-haired man of iron. If they missed this one, they'd find another.

But that wouldn't go down straight. To hell with Irma and her narrow-mindedness! Sultan Iskander had picked him from the beach.

And then desperation whispered an answer.

"Go back and tell Tsang Wu he wins!" he said.

For a long moment those black, inscrutable eyes regarded him from a cream-colored mask. Then Chan Li's fingers closed on his wrist and a slow, sorrowful little smile took the sting from her words: "It is hard to be a traitor, isn't it?"

"Go and tell Tsang Wu!" he rasped.

SHE had scarcely slipped into the shadows between the tent and the guard fires when brisk footsteps and a tinkle of steel startled Farrell. He turned and saw that Sultan Iskander had come from the capital to watch the finish. He wore a white turban that accented the leathery color of his stern face; and his eyes were grim as sword points for just an

instant before he greeted his protégé.

During that moment of deadly uncertainty Farrell wondered if his chief had overheard the bargain; and then old Datu Hamid broke in, salaamed to the sultan, and dashed on ahead to the halted artillery.

Farrell's strategy was blown up by his patron's arrival. He had planned to delay the bombardment, slip single-handed to the fortress, and liberate Irma before blasting the pirate off the map. One man could make it where a detachment could not. But to misdirect the artillery fire, right under the shrewd old sultan's nose, was impossible. The troops would miss the trick; but he would not.

Shells, unpacked and fused, were waiting. Men were filling sandbags to make a protective wing a dozen feet from each gun. Shrapnel is safe enough, but if a high explosive shell in spite of its safety fuse-lock prematurely burst in the gun barrel, an unsheltered crew would be blotted out.

Sultan Iskander watched the *askaris* awkwardly going about their unfamiliar business. A fused shell was slipped home. The breech swung shut. Farrell laid the gun. Make every shot count—keep Tsang Wu busy—if possible! The lanyard was attached. The crew took cover; but Sultan Iskander stood his ground.

"Better take cover, your highness!" Farrell warned. His face was drawn.

"At my age?" snorted the grim old fellow.

You wouldn't argue with him. The gunner was watching Far-

rell's upraised hand, waiting for it to drop. He shivered, and not from thinking of Irma Stanley. He felt the presence of something dark and deadly. A blind hunch warned him of peril.

His right hand shot out. As he jerked the sultan sprawling behind the breastworks, the gunner yanked the lanyard.

A vast blot of flame enveloped the gloom. A terrific blast smote the gun crew like a hammer. The impact tore the sandbags to shreds. Metal screeched far into the night. And as blinded eyes finally recovered from the deadly glare, they saw what remained of a three inch gun; a warped, grotesque tangle of steel.

When they finally regained their feet, Sultan Iskander and Datu Hamid and Farrell exchanged long glances unbroken by words. Somehow, Farrell felt those iron eye-thrusts. Odd . . . though he had not expected that gruff old sultan to thank him for a saving hunch.

"Try number two!" commanded Sultan Iskander.

This time he did not have to be jerked behind the sand bags.

Farrell signaled.

The lanyard yank destroyed a second gun. *Two muzzle bursts in succession!* Though obsolete, the guns were in good condition. Farrell's head was ringing; and then he realized that Irma was saved. There would be no bombardment. Tsang Wu could escape to his boat.

He felt limp but happy—for an instant. Then the world smashed to fragments across his head.

"So this is the way you ransom

Tsang Wu's prisoners, is it?" The sultan's voice was iron. "I heard just enough. But I could not believe. So I refused to take cover. You knew, so you acted to save me.

"And since you would not let me blow up with the plugged gun, I will spare you your life. But not if I ever see you again!"

"The gun was not plugged!" declared Farrell. "You saw me inspect it when the tompion was removed!"

SULTAN ISKANDER did not argue. He plucked Farrell's pistol from its holster, flung it to the ground, drew Farrell's curved sword, dashed it against the smoking stump of a gun barrel. Then his outflung arm pointed to the farther darkness.

"And on your life, do not return!"

Farrell stalked like a walking corpse toward the mainland. But as he stumbled across a wagon trail leading eastward, his numbed brain began to ache.

He was hoodooed. First Irma and his own people had disowned him . . . now the sultan whose life he had saved. Suddenly he straightened, and his laugh was a sword caressing a whetstone.

Go empty-handed to Tsang Wu's fortress and go out in a big blaze. Let Irma see what kind of man she'd rejected. Following his original plan, and moved by the courage of a man who amounts to something, he might have saved her. But now—!

He turned to head for the narrow beach and toward the jutting headland, unseen either by the pi-

rates or his former troops; but a stirring at the edge of a clump of causerina trees checked him.

In the dimness of the half risen

It happened, then, swift as a striking serpent. Steel gleamed—



it was the voice he recognized.

"I heard," said Chen Li. "So I waited. Naturally I'd not return to Tsang Wu, and lingering around your former camp would have been as bad."

They eyed each other the half light. She sensed the purpose that made his face a gray, grim mask; and his direction had told her the rest.

moon he saw a slender spindle of silken luster, and the blurred whiteness of a woman's face; but

Don't be a fool. You're unarmed. That's not valor. It's insanity. You can't save her."

"Well, what the hell am I to do?" he demanded. In weariness he yielded the initiative.

Chan Li's smile became a crimson blossom.

"You are a man among men. Even though some traitor has ruined you. Come with me to Penang. Though Tsang Wu does not know it, my father is a wealthy trader, with ships and plantations, and—"

"Nuts for your father!" he growled, rebelling at Chan Li's honeyed bribe.

"He will be grateful." She drew closer and murmured in his ear: "And so will I—if you help me back to Penang. Alone, I have no chance."

SHE was soft and lovely and silken. Prowling outlaws would grab her. That was none of Farrell's affair; but it restored some of his courage to know that this woman could still regard him as one to be sought in the face of peril.

Her plea whipped to life his wavering self-esteem and beaten pride. She was very close now, fragrant and clinging. The cream-colored flesh that smiled through the torn tunic and pyjamas became golden in the rising moon, and Farrell's pulse responded to the strange lure of that exotic creature. Those piquant glimpses of sleek, slender loveliness were just enough to remind him that so much more was concealed. This was no sing-song girl whose supple curves clung insistently to him, whose caressing hands seconded the supplication of her voice.

Irma had condemned him with

the rest. She'd forgotten to discard that snapshot. Down in his heart he knew now that she hadn't, but Chan Li's silken sweetness made anything plausible.

Someone had told him that the Chinese know nothing about kissing, but Chan Li's torrid lips disproved that slander. Her eyes had become black opals mysteriously veiled by long drooping lashes. Her breath quickened, and the ripples of desire that pulsed through that slim, cream-colored body were pointed by roundness Farrell had thus far unsuspected.

"Even if we should fall into the hands of bandits before we get to Penang," whispered Chan Li, "I'll have at least this to remember. I'd rather you were first . . ."

That struck his weak spot: regardless of what was ahead of him, he would have at least a short memory of one person who believed in him.

"This little hour will cheat death." But as her arms closed about him, her voice became inarticulate and her lips an insistent, consuming fire . . .

FINALLY the moonglow invaded the clearing and silvered Chan Li's languid loveliness. She stirred drowsily, snuggled closer, but Farrell withdrew from her possessive arm.

Her seeking him had dispelled the blank uselessness that had oppressed him; and with its departure came the renewal of responsibility.

"I can't leave her there. Tsang Wu is still waiting. Both guns were destroyed. Sultan Iskander

can't carry on the bombardment."

Chan Li knew that her caresses had put iron into his soul; but she smiled at his defiant anticipation of her outburst.

"I lose," she said. "You'll surely be killed. But I might have expected this of a man among men. If you'd been less than what you are, my hour would have been a mockery."

"I'll be damned," he muttered as he noted the misty softness of her eyes.

"I'll show you a way," Chan Li continued, "to slip past a sentry. If that succeeds, you'll have a chance."

Did she mean it, or was this subtle Chinese vengeance in the bud? Steel blue glance clashed with black. And then, as he always did when things were at the worst, Farrell decided to shoot the works.

"Let's go." He did not add that if they succeeded, he'd put Irma on a train to Singapore and accompany Chan Li to Penang.

They crept along the beach. When they reached the shadow of the ruin, they scaled the crags of Tanjong Merah. Just before they cleared the crest, he listened to Chan Li's description of the fortress, and watched her lengthening the rents in her ruffled tunic and pyjamas. The display was as dazzling as it was frank.

Farrell, flattened to the ground, now watched Chan Li advance. From a narrow gateway came a challenge in Chinese.

"Tell Tsang Wu I have returned," she answered. "The white captain has agreed."

The sentry hailed the guard.

The commander emerged from the ruin. Chan Li went to meet him. The sentry craned his neck to refresh his eyes with another glimpse of her moon-kissed flesh as she glided toward the commander of the guard.

Chan Li's rear elevation was worth anyone's eye; but the sentry's vision was blotted out by a blaze of shooting lights. He never knew that Farrell, silently slipping up from the rear, had cracked him across the head with a rock the size of a coconut.

FARRELL dressed himself in the sentry's salt-caked jacket and trousers. He rolled him into outer shadows, and took his rifle and dagger.

He strode boldly into the court and toward a blot of light that marked a barred window in an angle of the wall. Peeping over the sill, he saw a short, square-shouldered Chinese with long, trailing mustaches and a grim, handsome face: Tsang Wu, the terror of the south China Sea.

Chan Li stood facing him; and at her side was a burly Manchu nearly as tall as Farrell. Judging from his richly brocaded jacket and embroidered felt boots, this must be the pirate's lieutenant.

"Wang Ho," said Tsang Wu at the completion of the girl's report, "how soon will you be able to pull the ship off the sandbar?"

"The sea will calm down enough in three or four hours, honorable captain," answered the Manchu. "But as soon as we return the yellow-haired girl, the troops will bombard us. And if we don't re-

(Continued on page 104)

MATTER OF

By STAN WARNER

DURRANT tossed restlessly on his bed in the bamboo bungalow behind the British Residency. The humid Malay night seemed like an enormous blanket, pressing upon him, smothering him. Despite the brilliance of the stars, a velvet blackness hid the jungle, the huts of the natives, and the great thicket of immense bamboo trees that creaked and rustled, though not a breath of air was stirring.

The clump of huge bamboos that overtopped all the rest, creaked and groaned incessantly. That was because it was the habitation of a Nat, a tree spirit, according to Durrant's head boy, Ali. He was complaining because he had no woman Nat.

But Durrant knew why the clump was creaking. It was because it was growing with incredible rapidity. A foot a night was being added to every branch, an entire new joint to each limb of this species of giant grass that had forsaken its earth-bound origin in order to become a tree. For this was the year of the flowering.

Once in a dozen, fifteen, twenty years, all the bamboos of a species would burst into flower everywhere throughout the jungle—flower and die, leaving only the razor-hard brown skeleton behind.

DURRANT was young, and he was thinking of the girl he had seen that morning when old Colo-

nel Bayle, the British Resident, had brought him to present him to the local Sultan, Raj Hussein.

Hussein had sent for the colonel, and begged that Durrant would rest for fifteen minutes in the garden. Durrant had wandered among the fragrant, flowering shrubs, and then sauntered through a half-open doorway almost hidden in a mass of foliage. And then he saw her.

She was rising like a Naiad from the center of a lily pond. Skin of palest golden ivory, black hair massed heavily upon the shapely head, two small and almost child-like breasts that pointed away from each other—"pouting," as the great painters loved to picture them; but a woman's hips, and the gleam of white legs cut off, below the knee, by the surface of the pool.

As the girl saw him she seemed to remain motionless, as if petrified with fear. Then a slow smile, as if of recognition, had appeared upon her face.

Durrant stood rooted to the spot for long seconds, hearing the heavy drumming of his heart. Then, realizing that he was in the women's quarters, he turned and hurried back—to encounter Colonel Bayle and Prince Hussein almost at the entrance to the enclosure.

Durrant, who had learned Malay pretty well, began stammering his apologies, but Hussein cut him short.

"That's quite all right," he said, clapping him on the shoulder.

PERCENTAGE

To the Asiatic mind, treachery was the most natural thing in the world; so thought Durrant when the Malay girl offered him her love. . . .



It was pure accident, but Durrant knew that for a white man to look into the harem was unpardonable.

“That door ought to have been kept closed. It’s a beastly bore,” he added to the colonel, “having to keep

up the ancestral traditions of the harem, but public opinion demands it. I'm going to give you a trimming at golf today, colonel. I've been practising that mashie stroke of mine."

But Durant knew enough of the Malays to guess that Prince Hussein was vexed—though Colonel Bayle passed it off lightly afterward. To enter the *haremlük*, the quarters of the women, is an unpardonable offense wherever the Moslem customs and traditions rule.

AT twenty-eight, Durrant had been expatriated from his native America eight years. An opportunity to join a rubber plantation in Malaysia had started him on his career; a certain talent for diplomacy and adroitness in handling natives had brought him into the British service. He had known Colonel Bayle and his daughter, Marian, in Singapore, and between Marian and himself there had developed something that might become more than friendship.

That was why Bayle had sent for him at Hussein's court, where he was Resident, the only white man within a radius of two hundred square miles. But before he went, a Government official at Singapore had explained to Durrant what was wanted.

"We think Hussein's intriguing with an Oriental Power to sell them land that can be used as a submarine base," he said. "If they get that, the Singapore fortifications will be menaced. You're going to the court as a sort of secretary to Colonel Bayle. Actually,

you'll keep your eyes and ears open. You may have to do things that the Resident can't do. Savvy? Bayle will tell you more."

Colonel Bayle told Durrant much more after dinner that first evening.

"Hussein's up to the neck in intrigue," he said, "but we haven't got the proof. We want the copy of that concession he's signed with the Yoshitoro Rubber Company. Once we get it, we'll throw our weight to Prince Mohammed, the elder brother's son, whom he deposed. You've heard about that?"

"Hussein kept him in a dungeon for ten years, didn't he?"

"Yes. Chained to a wall, from the age of ten to twenty-one. Prince Mohammed escaped two months ago, and is hiding in the forests, gathering adherents. There's a good deal of discontent with Hussein, but the British Government doesn't want to depose him till it has the positive proofs of treachery to our rule. Understand?"

"I do, sir."

"There's a pretty brew boiling. I'm glad I left Marian in Singapore. I've got just eight Sikh soldiers to uphold the British Raj, and Hussein, though he was educated at Cambridge, has forgotten our potential power. The fact is, he's fallen under the thumb of the most famous courtesan in the Peninsula, Maya Muna, and she's getting her rake-off from a certain Power. Oh, it's a devil of a mess, Durrant."

"It looks like it, sir."

"You're an unofficial secretary here. You'll occupy the bungalow at the back of the Residency, under the bamboos. You've handled some

tough situations. Try to find out about that concession. Make friends with Hussein. Let him think you're an American and purchasable. He'll fall for that. He's just a blockhead. It's Maya Muna you've got to be careful of. She's got the clearest head in the State, and the prettiest body, they say. I've never seen her, of course."

DURRANT had been thinking of Marian, with her gray eyes and brown hair and frank simplicity. When he left her, there was an implied arrangement that they were to meet again. But since that morning the thought of the girl in the lily pond had conflicted with those memories of Marian. The appeal to the senses, lower, and yet overwhelming in its strength, kept him from sleeping, though midnight was long past.

He lay there, listening to the creak of the bamboos, till a faint footfall on the veranda brought him up in bed, peering out intently into the moonlight.

He heard the soft pressure of bare feet upon the floor of the bungalow. And then he saw her standing at his bedside, clad in her silk *sarong*, warm, human feminine—her figure silhouetted against the moonlight outside. She leaned over him, and a strand of hair, musk-scented, brushed his cheek. And, being a man, Durrant forgot everything but her presence.

"Not here, beloved."

"Where, then?"

She glided like a shadow out of the bungalow, into the heart of the bamboo thicket. Under the huge clump she halted. Through every limb of it there ran the fires of cre-

ation. Incredibly, out of nothing, new shoots were sprouting, flower buds opening. Life was making the pattern of its will in shoots and flowers, beating back the pursuer, death.

LONG after, when he held her in complete tranquility, he asked her her name.

"I am called Bamboo Flower," she answered.

"You will come back tomorrow?"

"I do not know. It is death if Raj Hussein discovers that I have left the *haremlik*. But I will go away with you. Beloved, I have heard of you. You are of the American race, who once fought and beat the English tyrants—is that not so?"

"It is so," admitted Durrant.

She nestled closer to him. "What do you think the English could do if all Malaysia united against them? But, alas, we have so few wise counsellors." She hesitated.

"Who would protect you, if England were driven away?" asked Durrant.

"We have no fear."

"Prove to me that you have no fear, Bamboo Flower. Bring me the papers showing that there is another protector."

"Beloved, I do not understand."

"Yes, you understand well, Bamboo Flower."

"No! Let us cease this talk. Kiss me!"

"I must go," said Durrant. "And you too, Bamboo Flower. You are in danger."

He held her for a long minute, her soft young body trembling in his arms; then went back softly to his bungalow.

IT HAD been no accident, that door ajar, that sight of the girl in the lily pond. Of that Durrant was sure. And he was sure that Bamboo Flower was the notorious Maya Muna, sent to entrap him into treachery to Britain.

He could see how, to the Asiatic mind, such an act of treachery would appear the most reasonable thing in the world.

He was glad he hadn't taken the girl in the hopes of gaining political ends. It was she who had taken him. And the thought of Marian filled him with humiliation.

Well, he wasn't likely to see her again, unless she fell for the bait he had flung out, about the papers. Knowing something of the workings of the Malay mind, he saw it as a possibility, but only a dim one.

The Sikhs were stirring in the compound. Ali, Durrant's head boy, came in, carrying his breakfast tray. He set it down upon the table, and turned toward Durrant, hesitating.

"*Tuan*, beware," he blurted out. "I am very much afraid, *tuan*." . . .

"Of what are you afraid, Ali?" Durrant asked.

"I am afraid of Raj Hussein. It is not well to make a prince lose face, *tuan*."

Durrant looked at him without answering. He knew that Ali must have been aware of his nocturnal visitor. He was surprised, nevertheless, at Ali's words, for a Malay servant is not expected to advise his master.

He studied the young fellow. Ali was white for a Malay, no darker than an Italian, and he carried himself with all the proud bearing

of his race. He had a dagger in his girdle, and a red bamboo flower over one ear.

Ali took the flower from his ear and held it aloft. "Beware of the flowering of the bamboos, *tuan*," he said cryptically, then salaamed and went out.

Durrant ate his breakfast, lost in thought. He was ashamed of the episode of the night before. And he guessed that, if Ali knew about it, the other natives did. It wasn't going to help his standing at the Residency.

He had just finished his breakfast when he heard the sound of wheels, and, going to his veranda, saw a two-wheeled *ekka* dashing past. A girl was seated in it. He couldn't see her face, but his heart suddenly leaped. Suppose that it was Marian!

He hastened up the path to the Residency. The *ekka* was standing outside, and, when the bearded Sikh doorman bowed him inside, and he heard that rippling laughter, he knew that it was Marian.

SHE was standing with her father in the long room, and now came forward with hand outstretched, her face wreathed with a happy smile. Marian—the girl he loved, had always loved, despite the adventure of the night before. Marian with her boyish figure and the little breasts barely apparent through her thin blouse.

"Well, you didn't expect to see me, did you, Mr. Durrant?" she asked. "I've been telling dad, he can't park me as easily as he thinks he can. I got so lonely in Singapore that I—well, I took the next boat after you. And here I am.

And you and dad will have to make the best of it. But I'm not saying whom I got lonely for."

There was mockery on her lips, but there was a questioning look in the girl's gray eyes as she looked at Durrant. More than that—tenderness and affection that might ripen into love if he bade it. And Durrant felt the burden of his secret of the night before.

That was something from the knowledge of which he must protect her. He didn't excuse himself, because they too were not betrothed, but again he felt that sense of humiliation at having yielded to a lower impulse than that spiritual fire that Marian kindled in him.

"I've been scolding her," said her father, "but I've learned when Marian makes up her mind you've just got to make up yours the same way."

But his face was grave as he watched the girl go out.

"It's a deuce of a situation, Durrant," said Colonel Bayle, when the two men were alone. "I let Hussein beat me at golf yesterday, to inflate his ego, and he grew darkly communicative over our whisky-pegs. I think that little devil guesses that we're wise to his game. If he decides to strike, while Marian's here, God help her!"

He looked at Durrant with a gesture of helplessness. "I can't ask the Government to send soldiers on suspicion," he continued. "And Prince Mohammed's somewhere in the jungle. I haven't been able to get in touch with him through anybody. Well, let's hope for the best."

Durrant said nothing to the colonel about Bamboo Flower. He was

pretty sure she had been sent by Hussein to try him out, and wasn't likely to return.

STILL sleepless that night, Durrant lay awake, listening to the creaking of the bamboos as they labored in the age-old battle of the one generation to bring the next into being. Each creak and rattle of the great hollow joints of the giant grasses was a birth-throe.

Then suddenly Durrant became aware of a figure standing at the entrance of his room. He started up, his heart beginning to pound. But this wasn't Bamboo Flower. It was a Malay girl of about fifteen, her child's figure showing under the *sarong*, one small child's breast half-exposed, a little mound of cream-brown flesh.

"You come now, *tuan*," whispered the girl. "Bamboo Flower send me for you. She show you what you want."

The memories of the night before ran riot in Durrant, as he heard the girl's low-spoken words. Those memories were not lightly to be dismissed.

But stronger was the thought of Marian. Durrant didn't want to see Bamboo Flower again. But, if she had those papers, that meant so much—well, that was different.

"*Tuan*, come with me," the girl repeated. "She says that you must come."

"Wait for me outside," said Durrant.

He got up, slipped into his clothes, and followed the little fleeting figure along the jungle trail, past the tall bamboos where he had been with Bamboo Flower the night before, and up the hill to-

ward the long, ramshackle palace, black against the starlight. It stood on the hill amid the flowering shrubs, which were already yielding to the encroaching jungle, black, ominous, and without a single light.

Durrant followed the girl along paths between dense masses of shrubbery, to a little door set into the rear of the building. She opened it.

"It is straight ahead, *tuan*," she whispered. "Walk straight ahead and have no fear."

She vanished, and Durrant found himself alone in a narrow corridor. A single, tiny lamp, burning at the end of the long hallway, showed him closed doors on either side of him. Underfoot was a rug of heavy texture that ran the entire length of the passage.

Durrant walked forward to the end of the hall. In front of him he saw a heavy curtain, above which the little light was burning. He pushed it aside, and saw an open door before him. He found himself in a small and dimly lighted room, perfumed with musk. A tiny lamp was burning on a table of carven teak, and on a divan beside it Bamboo Flower was seated.

She rose and faced Durrant, and he saw her slender body quiver. A low cry broke from her lips.

"Beloved, you have come!" she whispered.

SHE was clad from throat to ankles in a yellow *sarong*, under which were visible the tiny feet, the soles and insteps reddened with henna. Her lips were carmined, and her eyes darkened with *kohl*.

Beautiful as she was, these adventitious aids gave her a certain air of artificiality. Durrant saw a vision of Marian, in her sweet simplicity, and he looked at Bamboo Flower, dumbfounded to think that he could have forgotten Marian for her the night before.

Yet he felt the allure, the wonderful allure of the girl's beauty. The allure that sweeps a man from his moorings, because Nature ordained that this should be so. Yet for the moment, balanced between Bamboo Flower and Marian, he seemed to stand poised, like a diver, before he plunges.

Suddenly, with a quick movement of her hand, Bamboo Flower slipped the yellow *sarong* from her body, yards and yards of it, in piles upon the floor. She stood before Durrant, nude, save for a gauzy wisp about her loins. So slight, so small, so alluring! He saw the little breasts, which had entranced him so much the night before, under the flowering bamboos, the lithe curves of her flanks and thighs. Yet still he remained poised, cold as ice because of the memory of the girl he loved.

Bamboo Flower seemed to sense his feeling. She looked at him with a slight smile. She raised her arms above her head and bent her sinuous body, still smiling.

Durrant breathed heavily. The warmth of her, the fragrance of her, the beauty of her were shaking him again.

Suddenly the girl stooped and drew an envelope from the folds of the fallen *sarong*. She held it out,

"This for thee, *tuan*, as a pledge of our love," she whispered. "Read it, and you shall see that we have

no fear of England. Read it quickly by the light of this lamp, for I must replace it where I got it."

Durrant opened the envelope and read with something like stupefaction. It was the document whose existence Colonel Bayle had suspected. It was ample justification for the deposition of Raj Hussein.

He was stunned for the moment. Why had the girl shown it to him? Did she really believe that he would betray England, just because he was an American?

He looked up. She was holding out her arms to him. And this was no feigned emotion on her face, this smile of childish happiness and welcome. The famous courtesan was but a child in love, as many of them are.

Durrant put the envelope in his coat pocket. He meant to take it away. But that would mean Bamboo Flower's death. He must take her away too.

She was sincere. She had made this sacrifice for love of him. He must explain to her, take her away. He must keep his head, for his senses were reeling, and her hand was on his arm, and she was looking up, leaning back. He wondered quickly—

There was no need to wonder. Of a sudden what Durrant had thought the rear wall of the room vanished, like a curtain that is torn down, and armed men came rushing into the room.

BAMBOO Flower uttered a terrible cry, leaped backward, snatched a long, wavy *kris* that Durrant hadn't seen, from a wall, and thrust it into his hand.

The foremost man leaped at him,

brandishing a dagger. Durrant swung the *kris* and the man staggered and dropped, blood streaming from a hideous gash in his shoulder.

Durrant swung again, and saw the crowd of palace guards recoil. In the narrow room, they were unable to spread out in order to attack him. He caught Bamboo Flower by the arm. "Come!" he cried. "Come!"

He leaped backward through the entrance, dragging the girl with him. There followed a stampede, but swords were entangled in the heavy curtains, and Durrant had won free to the entrance before the guards could disentangle themselves. He was between the banks of shrubbery now, still clutching the girl by the arm.

"To the Residency!" he cried. "We shall protect you!"

But another band was running along one of the garden paths. Shrill cries of rage ululated through the air. A man with sword and buckler leaped at Durrant. Durrant received the singing blade upon his *kris*, and saw it leap from the other's hand and fly through the air. He struck in answer, and the whine of the sidewise slice was cut off with a dull thud as steel met flesh.

"Come! Come!"

"No, *tuan*, no! It is useless!"

"Come!" he insisted.

And Durrant was never to know what held the girl back, why she had become a dead weight in his arms, making capture and death for him inevitable. He only knew he had documents in his pocket that were of priceless value, and

(Continued on page 112)

No Magic

DON CRAGSTON leveled a frozen, gray glance at the drilling rig which rose from a knoll like an exaggerated windmill tower overlooking White Horse creek. If he failed to strike oil within twenty-one hours, the lease would be forfeited; and he needed at least five days to drill through the final stratum of shale and limestone that capped the petroleum sands.

The racing of a motor distracted his attention from the rise and fall of the walking beam. Glancing towards the narrow dirt road that crossed the creek, Cragston saw an ancient Pierce Arrow touring car plowing through the shallow water. The girl at the wheel was as lovely as she was reckless. Cragston shouted a warning. The ford was treacherous. He watched the car tensely, shouted again.

Wasted breath. Just as the Pierce reached the nearer bank, it wallowed, sank to the hub caps, and thundered wrathfully as it dug in deeper.

He glanced again at the drilling rig, and the broad-shouldered, red-faced driller, who, hand on the cable, was following the up and down motion of the ponderous steel bit. Cragston for several days had suspected his crew of being part of the hoodoo which had impeded operations from the beginning; but with twenty-one hours in which to drill an impossible distance, they would have no further motive to stage another tailor made accident.

Only stubbornness had kept Cragston on the hopeless job.

HE STRODE down the slope. Getting that Pierce out of the mud would be just as hopeless, but the more Cragston saw of its driver, the more he was convinced that it would be fun trying.

Her smile was a strand of matched pearls, and her face was something you'd like to have looking up at you on a moonlight evening. Her dark eyes, and olive skin, and the piquant irregularity of her features made Cragston forget oil wells. Her cheek bones were just prominent enough to lend an exotic touch; but her trace of Indian blood was not enough to keep her black hair from twining in ringlets as it peeped from her rakish red hat.

She slid from the wheel to the running board, apparently too shaken by her mishap to realize that she was about to step into knee-deep mud.

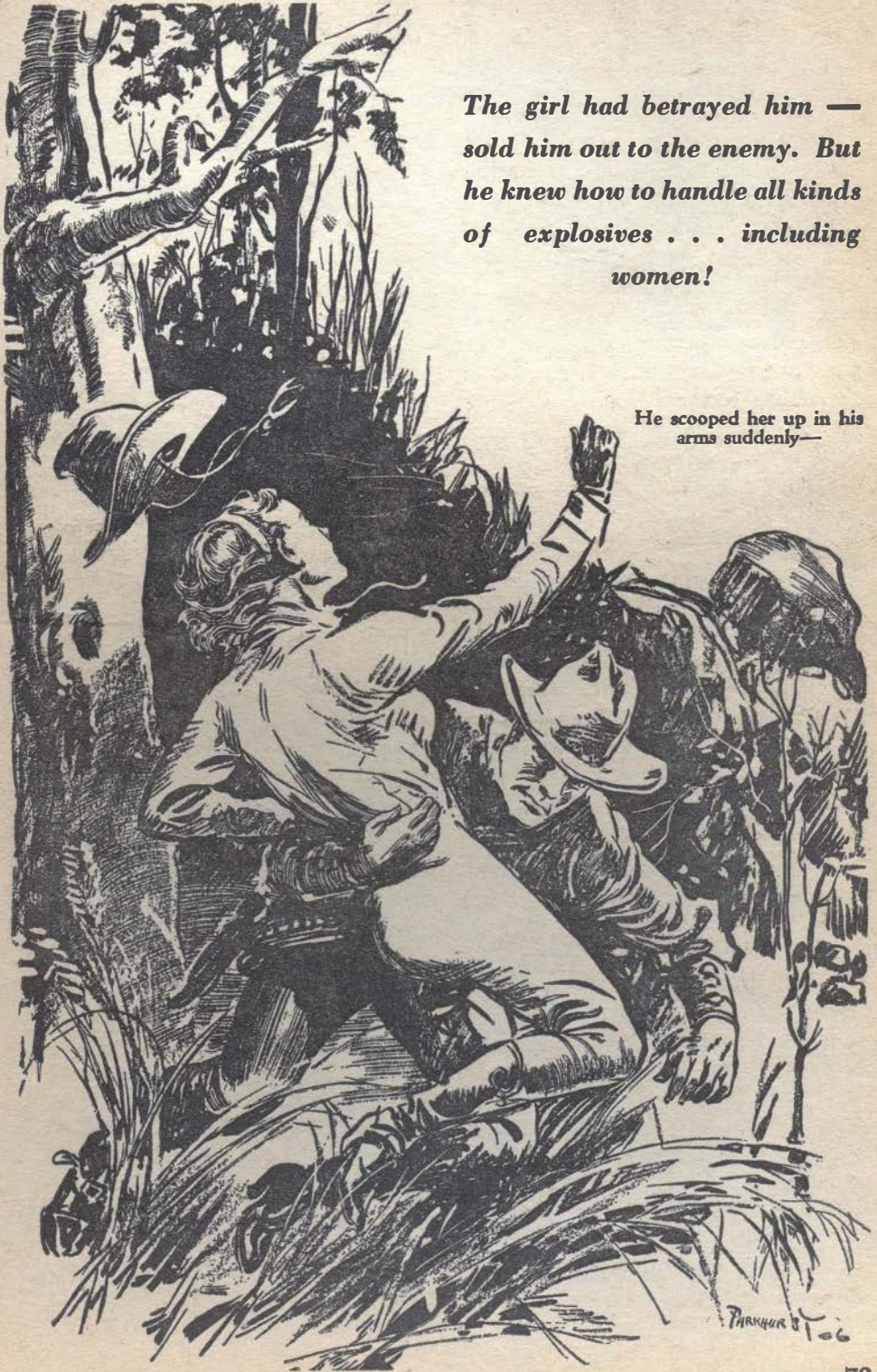
Cragston's warning checked her just in time. Her legs were slender symphonies in silk, and despite her efforts to thwart the breeze that came swooping down from the Osage Hills, he caught a fascinating glimpse of dimpled knees and the old ivory softness of flesh that flirted with a frivolous froth of silk and lace.

As the edge of her skirt finally surrendered and blotted out the visions, he ploughed into the mud to the tops of his laced boots, and

By ARTHUR CUTLER

*The girl had betrayed him —
sold him out to the enemy. But
he knew how to handle all kinds
of explosives . . . including
women!*

*He scooped her up in his
arms suddenly—*



scooped that fragrant, clinging armful from the running board.

"Aren't we stupid," she laughed, as he reached firm ground. "I could have gotten out on the other side—"

"I'll haul you back," grinned Cragston, "and you can try it if you want to."

"Mmmm—well, that would be rather nice. But don't bother!" She slid from his arms, but forgot to step away or remove the shapely sun tanned arm from Cragston's neck. The firm pressure of breasts curved like tea cups were snuggled close to his shirt front.

Only, glancing down, he reminded himself that he'd never seen tea cups nestled in such a frivolous camouflage of lace and ribbons.

In that pulse quickening moment she explained that she was Marietta Forrest, bound for Broken Axe; but somehow, she wasn't in half as much a hurry as her reckless dash had indicated.

Dragging that locomotive out of the mud did require an engineer, and Cragston's boots, whip-cord breeches, and rugged, sun-tanned face seemed to qualify him.

"Got any chains?"

She shook her head. Cragston, glancing up the hill toward the trio of flivvers parked near the drilling rig, decided that none of them could budge the mired Pierce.

"But I've got a blanket," said Marietta. That took Cragston's breath, until she added that what she had meant was that it could be wrapped about one wheel to give traction.

"Maybe it could," agreed Cragston; but he was thinking fast as he turned to get it. It seemed a

shame to ruin a blanket in that fashion. He spread it on the shaded side of an oak, and they sat down to devise a handier approach.

"I'll go back to the highway and hitch a ride to town," said Marietta, "and get a wrecker to pull me out of the ditch."

Cragston caught her hand as she rose. "Maybe I can sneak my flivver past your locomotive and you can drive it back to town," he suggested.

"You're a darling," smiled Marietta. As she seated herself, the refractory skirt again hitched well over her knees. Her legs were a brunette temptation, the dimples of her knees were an invitation, and the resplendent vista beyond urged Cragston to lend a helping hand.

And then things began happening simultaneously.

Marietta's concealing gesture threw her sufficiently off balance to require the support of Cragston's free arm. One hand discovered that it wasn't tea cups that rounded out Marietta's brassiere, and the other—

Marietta didn't know which hand to seize first. She tried to wriggle away, but only succeeded in snuggling closer.

"Don't," said her lips, but her eyes contradicted them. So also did the quick gasp of breath and the tremor that rippled down her body and made her breasts revel against their lacy camouflage. Cragston's lips found hers before she could utter further protests. And between pressure applied to every curve—of which she had a mad-

dening collection—Marietta's only move was toward Cragston.

She clung like a wet handkerchief on a window pane. Finally, as she broke away for breath, she whispered, "Those drillers might see us."

"Not those birds! They can't even find oil in these hills!" whispered Cragston, kissing her until she quivered and returned his embrace.

Her lips were now half parted, and her dark eyes gleamed mistily through lowered lashes. . . .

BUT when Marietta finally withdrew from Cragston's embrace, and smoothed out her disarranged skirt, he wondered at the odd, contradictory look in her dark eyes. She seemed on the verge of tears.

A terrific hissing and roaring broke into his unspoken query. The base of the derrick and the engine house were enveloped by a cloud of steam. A boiler tube must have let go.

Cragston dashed up the grade, but it was not until he penetrated the dense white fog that he realized what had happened. The drillers had bailed out. The four tires of his car had been slashed; and the water injector of the boiler was battered to junk.

The White Horse lease was totally washed up. Twenty hours to go, minus the time needed for repairs; but Cragston was stubborn.

Cursing wrathfully, he stepped to his car, determined to drive to town on the rims and get a new crew. And then he heard the racing of a powerful motor.

Marietta was again at the wheel

of the Pierce. The heavy car was lurching and plunging, but bit by bit emerging from the mire.

Cragston ran headlong down the slope. Seeing him approach, Marietta tramped on the gas. The sudden surge of power jerked the heavy car athwart the road, nosing it into the bank. Stalled again. But now there were chains on the hind wheel!

Marietta had tricked him to give his bribed crew a chance to put the drilling rig out of action!

Cragston bounded to the running board, snapped off the ignition, and snarled, "No damn' wonder you're in such a hurry to get away."

For a moment she defiantly eyed him.

Cragston decided not to slap her from the wheel. Just a bum, he thought. Too bad, though; she was *nice*.

He turned to step back to the road, but Marietta caught his arm. Her face was the color of a Boukhara rug.

"Honest, Don," she finally gasped, "I didn't ever imagine—I didn't expect I'd really care for you—"

"Nuts!" snarled Cragston.

"Don, I'm awfully sorry," she sobbed, sliding from the wheel and slipping an arm about him. "I admit I was put up to this job. But—well—"

"Only you put out more than you figured, eh?" he growled.

"No. What I mean is, I'm sorry I ever listened to Duval."

THAT explained a lot. Duval was trying to get control of unproved properties adjoining White

Horse. If Cragston brought in his well, the prices of nearby leases would increase tenfold. He regarded the tear-gleaming dark eyes. Maybe she hadn't really realized how ruinous her play had been.

"So Duval's behind all this?"

She nodded. Her ensuing explanation confirmed his suspicions.

Cragston's glance shifted from the mud-caked shoes and splattered skirt, ruined during her hasty attachment of the chains, and then traveled upward, reminiscently caressing her slender, supple curves. Despite the wrath that still smoldered, he began to wish that he could believe her penitence was sincere. After all, even if the drilling had continued, he couldn't possibly have brought in the White Horse well in the time that remained.

"Don," she murmured. "I'm truly sorry. I'll try to make it up someday or other."

"Just where—and how?" he ironically countered.

She smiled. "Let's go over to the drilling rig. I'll tell you a few things I overheard."

Cragston was skeptical.

"Eleven thousand bucks shot to hell! Take a long time to trade that out," he grumbled, as he assisted her up the slope.

"Oh, you're terrible!" he protested. "If I'd only known I was going to like you this much—"

A reminiscent light gleamed in her eyes as she flashed a backward glance toward White Horse Creek.

Once inside the drill house, Marietta stepped to the "ouija board" which recorded the depth of the bore. One indicator pointed to

twenty-four, and the other one to seventy-five.

"It's really two hundred feet deeper."

Cragston's heart skipped a beat. If Marietta was right, then the oil sand was almost within reaching distance.

"The tape line was doctored," she explained. "A two hundred foot piece was cut out and the break spliced. You'd never notice it."

The sound of an approaching motor interrupted her remarks. Marietta ducked into the dog house. A short, white-haired man wearing a nondescript black felt hat was emerging from a Packard Coupe: Clinton Duval, whose slate gray eyes seemed utterly out of place in that smile wrinkled, cordial face.

"Hello, Cragston! You'll never drill in by noon tomorrow. But I'll buy it out as it stands. For salvage."

He produced a wallet and began peeling off hundred dollar bills.

"Ten thousand bucks, cash on the barrel head."

As he dangled the bait before Cragston's eyes, his glance shifted from the boiler toward the Pierce that was athwart the dirt road. His lurking smile confirmed Marietta's story.

"Get the hell out of here before I forget you're an old man."

"Twelve thousand?" persisted Duval.

Sock!

Cragston's memory failed him, but his fist did not. Duval landed in a sitting position on the running board of his car. Muttering wrath-

fully, he gained his feet and took the wheel.

CRAGSTON now understood why Duval wanted to buy the so called salvage. With the log falsified by two hundred feet, there still was a chance to drill in.

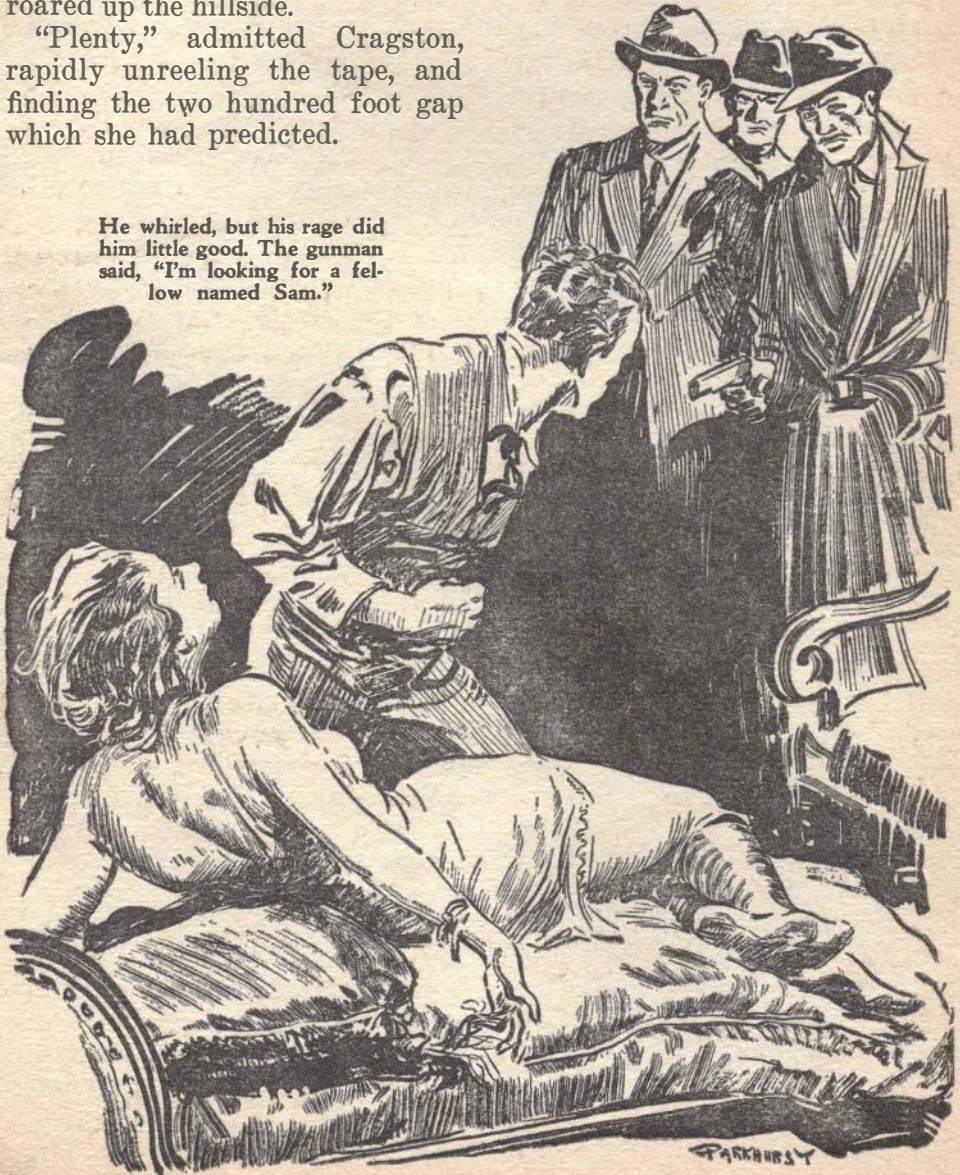
"Now do you believe me?" wondered Marietta as Duval's car roared up the hillside.

"Plenty," admitted Cragston, rapidly unreeling the tape, and finding the two hundred foot gap which she had predicted.

He whirled, but his rage did him little good. The gunman said, "I'm looking for a fellow named Sam."

"Give me a hand with my car," she resumed, "and I'll drive to Arradonda and get you another crew of drillers, and a repair man to fix that boiler. And some tires for your bus."

Presently Marietta was on the highway, headed for Arradonda, eighteen miles away, leaving Cragston to inspect the rig for further



traces of sabotage. He found none; and as the sun dipped behind the hills, he saw the familiar Pierce again approaching the ford, loaded with a fresh drilling crew and a repairman.

Several hours later the rig was again in action, but Marietta lingered.

"Too late for me to go home," she explained, smiling wryly. "Duvall must be wise—so I'm keeping within arms reach of you."

"See if I care," grinned Cragston, following her to his parked car. Oil drilling wasn't so bad, after all. . . .

But at times he listened to the whirr of the bailer as it dropped down the twenty-seven hundred foot bore to scoop up the freshly puddled limestone.

"Drill coming up greasy!" the tool dresser shouted from the pipe rack.

The first sign of petroleum! Cragston found new thrills in Marietta's dark eyes, and in the silken legs cocked up on the dash, but that pleasant pastime was presently interrupted. Headlights pierced the gloom, and a car labored up the steep ascent. Cragston advanced to meet the approaching machine. Flicking his flashlight at the driver, he saw a ruddy, moon-faced man whose hat sloped over one eye: Jim Watson, sheriff of El Dorado County.

As he stepped to the hillside, Watson fumbled in his coat and produced a sheaf of papers.

"I sure hate this job, but I got to shut you down until you pay that drilling crew you fired this afternoon."

"What?" Cragston's voice was

explosive. He advanced a pace, eyes desperate. Watson recoiled, gesturing reassuringly.

"Don't take it thataway, Cragston, Hell, I can't help it! Those rats got the law on their side. Anyway you can pay them off in the morning and then get to work again."

"Nuts!" flared Cragston. "You know damn' well I wouldn't be able to find them if I did try to pay them off. And losing that much time will bust me flat."

"You should have paid them," Watson stubbornly maintained. "That's the law, and I got to execute it."

Cragston reached for his gun. But before it cleared the holster, he was looking into the muzzle of a forty-five.

"Hoist 'em up, Cragston!" commanded Watson. "And take a ride with me. Resistin' an officer—"

Cragston was thinking fast. The sheriff, though armed, was alone. And something had to be done about it, quickly. With an oil smudge on the drill, there still was a chance.

"All right, Watson," he growled, "but you'd better take my gun before I get notions."

Watson's hand closed on the butt of Cragston's pistol. That gave him his chance. Flinging himself inside Watson's guard, his elevated right arm flashed down, pinning the sheriff's wrist at his left, snapped aside the menacing revolver. Watson jerked a shot, but Cragston's fist popped home.

In the scuffle, both weapons clattered to the hillside. Ducking a sizzling swing, he ploughed in. The

sheriff piled up in a heap, but Cragston tripped on a strand of unserviceable drill cable, and measured his length. Before he could clamber to his knees, Watson took a nose dive for the revolver that lay in the short grass. That checked Cragston's rush.

Steel gleamed in Watson's hand as he commanded from behind his leveled weapon, "Let 'em down easy—or you get the works."

Cursing through clenched teeth, Cragston advanced, wrists extended toward the handcuffs. He heard a soft rustling at his left. He saw the sheriff's expression change. The sharp blue eyes for a moment widened, and wavered. Something was fascinating Watson.

Another pace. Watson's eyes snapped back into line, but again strayed to a point somewhere behind and to the left of Cragston.

Cragston's next move was insane desperation, but it connected. His lunge brushed aside the menacing weapon, and his fist flashed home like a sledge hammer. And that try was good! Watson was out before his revolver followed him to the hillside. Cragston seized the handcuffs and used them to secure their owner.

And then he saw why Watson's gaze had faltered at that crucial moment. Marietta was standing in the moonlight, peeled down to sunflower yellow scanties and a brassiere that in the moonlight was next to nothing at all. From her ankles to her shoulders she was an armful of radiance gleaming in the moonlight. The incurve of her waist, and the mellow roundness of her hips, and the lotus bud con-

tours of her moon-kissed breasts were more than enough to account for an instant's distraction.

"I was afraid I couldn't get close enough to throw anything at him," she smiled, "but I thought that if I startled him—"

"If I'd not socked him when I did," chuckled Cragston, "he'd have died of high blood pressure."

HIS problem for the moment was solved; but a second thought told him that if Watson failed to report to Duval, that slippery intriguer would devise another trick. He crossed glances with Marietta as she slipped into her ensemble and saw that she had sensed his apprehension.

"If the drillers are right," she said, "that well's likely to come in almost anytime. And if you got some nitro glycerine, you could kick it through."

That was a thought.

"Not so bad," conceded Cragston. "At the last minute I can either blow the bottom out of it, or else fill it so damn' full of debris that no one else can profit by my forfeiting the lease. And in the meanwhile, I'll stuff the sheriff in the back seat, so there won't be any deputies gumming things up while I'm going for the nitro."

"I'm going along," declared Marietta, taking the wheel of her own car. "Those drillers of yours saw entirely too much of me—they might get notions."

"Fair enough," agreed Cragston. "But you'd better duck for cover in Arradonda. And have your suitcase packed. Unless this well comes in roaring, you and me will

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The Last Adam

[Continued from page 17]

that beast with my own hands. My own daughter, Benn, as sweet and innocent and unspoiled as any girl in the world, until that terrible thing happened to her. And living with that Polak beast! She's crazy. Sometimes I think everybody's crazy, except you and me."

"We'll git back," answered Benn. "Lomax told Roberts he was sure we'd sink back to earth again, as soon as the planets shift. Then we'll send that Polak to the chair for murdering Brook. Damn this air; I'm getting bronchitis!"

"Speak louder, I can't hear you," said Judge Foster testily.

Benn shouted, "I said we'd send that Polak to the chair. I've been talking to Roberts. He says that all this land will be worth millions when we get back, because maybe the earth's all ruined for hundreds of miles around. And Lomax is tired of being bossed by that dumb beast. I dunno what Lomax has done, but he's worked on the folks so they've come around to his way of thinking. They'll take your orders, judge, but they're tired of being bossed by a dumb Pole, who ain't done nothing to earn his keep."

The two elderly men looked at each other, wheezing. They had to raise their voices, for the air seemed to be growing more oppressive every moment. And each of them had his fixed idea. Foster's, to be king of his little domain again, and destroy the human beast who had taken his daughter.

Benn is to jail Adam and send him to the chair.

As Benn was working on Judge Foster, so Roberts had been working on him. But, behind Roberts, Lomax, who knew that there was no hope for any of them, and only wanted to rule this tiny satellite before he died.

The madness that had induced him to kill his wife in his sleep was driving him on. Death facing all of them, but lordship before he died. And Malda, the sight of whom had aroused in him all the yearnings of youth.

Behind Lomax, the mad, drunken crowd, whose world had already dissolved in lust and liquor.

ADAM stirred out of a drunken slumber. He was wheezing too, for the gross body needed an abundance of dry air to fulfill its functions properly. Malda was no longer at his side, but he had got used to her disappearance while he slept. Slowly he rose and stretched himself. Periodically, when Malda had ceased to be necessary to him, strange remembrances would flit through his brain.

He remembered the mother who had died when he was a kid. He hadn't been tough then. He remembered her love for him, and how he had grown tough because he couldn't bear to think about her. He remembered the sweethearts he'd had, who had always fooled and betrayed him, before

he discovered that all women were like that. And he thought of the tramp girl who had saved his life outside the county jail, and the hunted, harassed look in her eyes, that seemed to mirror his own secret soul.

He recalled that he had given her to Lomax. It wasn't jealousy that stirred in him; it was some new feeling, a medley of remorse and pity.

It was night, but the earthlight, streaming in through the window, made the room hideously bright. Adam rose and went up the stairway of Judge Foster's mansion. Except for the servants, only Lomax lived there with Adam and Malda. As he ascended, wheezing, Adam had a feeling of desolation, like that which he had felt in his prison cell. He seemed strangely alone now; it was as if everybody had departed from the great house. He went to the door of Lomax's room, and stopped outside as he heard Malda's low laughter within.

Noiselessly he opened it. He saw Lomax and Malda together. She was wearing only her underthings, and she was clinging to Lomax, her arms about his neck, just as she had clung to Adam. She was speaking to him, but Adam couldn't hear what she said, because there was a queer roaring in his ears.

Noiselessly he withdrew. It wasn't jealousy. It was the cave-man's feeling of outraged mastery that burned in him. By God, he'd kill them, make a clean sweep of all except the rabble. Lomax, Roberts, Benn and the old judge. He'd been too soft, too easy.

Then why had he withdrawn? He didn't quite know, but of a sudden it had come to him that the little tramp girl, of whom he had hardly thought, was the clue to the enigma of his soul.

HIS room was at the end of the hall, the great chamber that Judge Foster had occupied. It was filled with heavy, ornate furniture that the judge had brought from France, and against the main wall was the great canopied bed in which French kings had slept.

He heard the sound of sobbing. The little tramp girl was crouched on the bed, her face ghastly white in the rays of the earthshine, and wet with tears. She started up with a suppressed sob as Adam entered. The strips of the tattered blouse and skirt were lying on the floor, and the few shreds of underwear about her showed all the beauty of her, the rounded bosom, full for such a child, the curving thighs.

Adam stood looking at her, stirred only to pity. Yes, this little tramp girl held the clue to his being. Only Adam didn't think of it that way. He was groping in his mind as he stood there—and then she was at his feet, clinging to him, and chattering.

"Speak louder! I can't hear you!"

Her voice came to him faintly through the increasing roaring in his ears. He listened, struggling for breath:

"They're going to kill you tonight. He—Lomax told me. I'd guessed some plot was being made against you. That's why I—went with him."

A look of terror overspread her features. "They're all in it, Lomax, Roberts, Benn. And Judge Foster behind them. Lomax has told them that we're going back to earth, and they've stirred up everybody against you. I—I made Lomax think that I'd try to help them. I'm to give them warning when you're asleep here. They're waiting for me."

"Where are they?"

"Some in the garage, some hiding in the hedges. You've got to make your getaway."

"There's two of them I'll settle with first," snarled Adam, all wild beast again. He looked about him, and saw the heavy wooden bar connecting two of the corner pillars of the four-poster. He leaped ten feet, caught it, and wrenched it away, bringing the curtains down upon the little figure at his feet. And, shouting like a madman, he ran back to Lomax's room.

LOMAX and Malda were gone.

But, as if in answer to his shout, yells came from below. Yells, and yet somehow faint and muffled, as if he were hearing them through water. And that thudding of feet upon the stairs was curiously muffled too.

He felt the old lust of fighting stir in him. As the girl crawled from beneath the curtains, clinging to his knees, he thrust her from him, and retreated toward the window. God, to fight in the open, instead of here, like a trapped rat! But that window was thirty feet above the tiles in the courtyard, now filled with men. They saw him, and their howls

came curiously faint to Adam's ears.

He gripped the iron-hard bar of wood and waited, his great chest heaving, the thunder of Niagara in his ears. They were running along the hall. At the open doorway they halted for an instant, and then came stumbling in. One, who had a revolver, fired, and the slug hissed past Adam's ear and buried itself in the fifteenth century paneling behind him.

A second shot went wild, for Adam was upon him, and the wooden bar, dropped with all the power of his mighty arm, crushed the man's head like an eggshell.

Adam balanced himself upon his balled feet and looked at the snarling, drunken crew. Lomax and Roberts and Benn, and Malda in the rear among the ruck of the villagers, her breasts rising and falling as she panted for breath. Benn's voice, raised above the yells, yet sounded reedy and curiously far away:

"You're under arrest for murder, Adam. Put out your hands!"

Then Benn was among them. Another man emptied a revolver at him, and it was as if two bees stung Adam in the throat and above the heart. Then the great club descended mercilessly, and Adam was laughing, roaring out his challenge, though his voice was only a whisper in his ears. But that was crazy Lomax, lying at his feet, with his head dented in. And Roberts, with his brains spilled over the antique carpet.

Then Benn sprang forward, slashing at Adam with a garden hoe, and yelling to his supporters in a voice that sounded no louder

than the shriek of a flittermouse. The iron edge of the implement dropped on Adam's forehead, tearing away a triangle of flesh and almost blinding him with the blood.

Adam's club dropped again, and Benn fell, paralyzed, his spine smashed by the impact of the weapon upon the back of his neck. Then, raising his voice, with a mighty effort, into a roar, Adam sprang, wielding the bar with fearful impact, shattering skulls, and wading over a pile of dead and dying men until the room was clear.

It was quiet again. The villagers had had enough. They were streaming out of the house in panic flight. Adam poised himself upon balled feet, and raised his hand to wipe the blood out of his eyes.

That was the moment when Malda, creeping over the writhing bodies upon the carpet, plunged her knife to the hilt in Adam's body.

And shrieking curses, the woman fled in the wake of the rest, her bare breasts billowing in the earthlight.

SUDDENLY, after the turmoil, a great peace had descended upon Adam. He knew the treacherous stab-wound had been mortal. He knew that he was dying—there on his few feet of carpet among the writhing bodies.

His past life flashed before his eyes in a succession of pictures. His mother—then the tough guy, the fighter, the lover, the framed and thwarted man. Nothing had been as he would have willed it—and this was the end. Here, on the carpet of Judge's Foster's bed-

room, gasping out his life among those he had struck down.

A soft hand passed over his face. Two soft lips made contact with his own. Adam recalled his mental faculties from the borderland of delirium. He knew whose those lips were. Those of the girl he had been seeking all his life and had never found.

For a moment he thought he was at the county jail—and then he remembered. He felt the warm pressure of the tramp girl's bosom against him, without emotion, conscious only of the gracious calm that had descended on him.

Lomax still lived, though he, too, knew he was dying. And, dying, he laughed. There was nobody with intelligence enough to understand what he had known from the beginning, that all of them were doomed. That was why he had wanted to recapture a little of life before he died.

With this purpose, he had told them that they would float back to earth, which a child might have known to be impossible. For uncounted aeons the tiny satellite would continue to circle earth as a second moon. A dead satellite, because already the little modicum of air that had been carried with it when it broke from its mother planet was nearly gone. Within a day or two, would be as dead and airless as moon herself.

It was the end, and Lomax couldn't have wanted a better end.

The little tramp girl and Adam lay clasped in each other's arms. She didn't know why she was dying, but she knew that life had finished its sorry jest with her. And she crept closer, and found peace.

Blind Death

{Continued from page 29}

only shot once . . . because by the time he was ready for the second try I was in the water up to my waist and trying to keep my shotgun dry. Fortunately, all this action had tumbled Jean flat on the bottom of the duck boat, out of the line of fire. The man in the middle shouted:

"It's the law!"

At the same time I thought I heard a shout from the other side of the open water, but I didn't have time to stop and think of whether it was or not.

I swung the shotgun around and said: "Drop that gun!" The man in the middle of the punt shot again, though he couldn't see me where I was hidden by the reeds . . . and I shot back. But, just as I shot, my left foot sunk down at least six inches in the mucky bottom . . . and it swung me and the shotgun. The man in the back of the punt shouted and went over the side of it . . . into about ten feet of water.

And he took the pole he was pushing the punt with along.

It must have been the only one they had because I saw the one who'd been doing the shooting looking the boat over for something to paddle with. He was trying to find something to use to get away with and trying to watch me at the same time. He wasn't more than thirty feet away from me . . . and I could see he was the one I'd heard called Vic . . . the one Jean

thought was Vic Moroni, the night club man.

I said: "It's no use! Drop that gun in the water."

HE PROBABLY figured I hadn't seen him plain enough to identify him . . . and that there was nothing in the boat that could lead to him. Because he went over the side into the water and started splashing away from me, toward the same bank I was on but at an angle that would put him ashore quite a ways down from me.

I could have potted him with the shotgun. There wasn't a chance of missing at that distance. But it would have been sheer murder . . . and I still wasn't positive I was right in what I'd figured out. So I waited until he was well away from the boat, put my shotgun in my duck boat and kicked off my boots . . . and went out for the punt.

That was another mistake. The water was like ice and the thirty feet I had to half swim, half wade, was like a mile.

I finally got to the boat, out of breath, and pulled myself up and into it over the stern. It was already half full of dead ducks . . . the floor was covered with them. There must have been at least a hundred and fifty of them. I scrambled over them toward the front and got there just as Moroni got to the shore . . . and the punt had just happened to swing so the cannon arrangement on the front

bore full on him as he waded into where it was shallower. By that time he was at least a hundred yards away and only in water up to his ankles and I took a chance.

I looked down the barrel of the cannon and saw it was pointed low and I yanked back the hammer. It was a flint lock, no less. It had a hammer on it that stood up at least four inches above the gun barrel. I pulled the trigger and had to really yank to get it off . . . and then I had to wait for a second while the powder in the pan fizzed and sputtered.

And then it went *BOOM* and the punt went back in the water for at least six feet from the recoil and there was such a cloud of smoke I couldn't see past the front of the boat.

Getting to the boat had taken some time and I hadn't been watching anything but it and Moroni. I'd even forgotten the first man, the one who'd gone over the side when I'd first shot. So it was a surprise when the sheriff said, almost in my ear:

"Get 'em up, guy! You fellas fighting among yourselves?"

IT TOOK me a little time to get things straightened out, even with Jean to add her story. I had to wire my office to prove I worked there and was just away on a vacation, and then I had to listen to the sheriff tell me how smart he was. He'd figured out the thing just about the way I had . . . but there were some things I knew that he didn't. I proved this when I told him to pick up Moroni's chauffeur, in his room in the hotel, and we found him there with a

dozen bird shots in his back side. That was where I'd blasted at him with Jean's twenty gauge, when he'd shot out the kitchen window when I was keeping the girls company.

I told Jean: "It was easy, as soon as you told me Moroni ran a hot shot night club. I knew he'd probably go for bootlegged ducks in a place like that, and that was about the only thing that could bring him down to a place like this."

"Then that's why Hillis was trying to chase Sarah and me away," Jean said. "He was the one that was getting the birds for Moroni."

"He was getting the birds for Moroni, all right, but Moroni's chauffeur was the one doing the shooting at your house. Hillis didn't want any part of that. Moroni came down to make his deal with Hillis for the ducks, and he stayed down playing around with the Hillis girl. His chauffeur got the job of scaring you away . . . but you didn't scare."

"I would have been scared if you hadn't come along, Joe."

I told her to stop saying nice things she didn't mean, and went on with: "The chauffeur was the one that shot the man I found in the wrecked car. He was a game warden, down on the track of the poached ducks. He caught the chauffeur with a load of ducks and the chauffeur got panicky and shot him with a .22 target pistol he just happened to have in the car. The warden had left his gun in his car, and by the time he got back to it, he knew he'd better get to a doctor. He must have passed out and

went off the road . . . that's what they think, anyway."

"It was just the same as if the chauffeur killed him, Joe."

"Sure. That's what the law will think. Anyway, Moroni saw me down here and thought maybe I was another game warden. He tried to get the Hillis girl to vamp me, just to find out who I was for sure, but I didn't go for it."

"I don't know whether to believe that or not," Jean said.

I told her: "It was because I was busy with you, honey . . ." And after a while got her to believing me.

She even got to be enough of a believer to make me spend the rest of my vacation there . . . and I didn't spend all my time hunting ducks, either.

Tropic Hell

{Continued from page 37}

THEY waited, while the distant shouts grew fainter. But they did not die. All about them, hidden by the night and the jungle, were men searching. . . .

"The natives don't like Storm," Dawson murmured at last, half to himself. "That *vahine* girl who came aboard the *Quest*—she was scared to death of him. So are the others, I'll bet. But they'll obey him—they don't dare do anything else."

He glanced at Loretta, lying beside him. Her white shoulders, scarcely concealed by the tatters of her dress, were shaking. Dawson's lips tightened. It was tough on the kid—running into this, just out of a college in the States. Her brother dead—

He looked at her sharply. Her sobs were growing louder, edged with hysteria. With soft urgency he said, "Pipe down! They'll hear you—"

"I—I can't help it!" She was shuddering with reaction. Her voice rose. "H-hit me before I scream!"

Her pale face turned, dimly visible in the gloom, eyes wide. She was hysterical, Dawson realized. Her lips parted, and he clapped his hand over her mouth.

She started to struggle, shaking all over. Short of knocking her cold, there wasn't much Dawson could do. She bit him, and he jerked his hand away, grunting with pain.

She had just started to scream when Dawson kissed her. It was one way of giving her something else to think about. An unusual sort of gag—but it effectively stopped her from yelling.

His mouth was tight against hers. She tried to pull free, but Dawson held her. And, suddenly, she responded. Her lips were warm, sweet—demanding!

Rather shakily, Dawson drew back, not wanting to. His eyes strained through the gloom. He could see the girl's body, scarcely concealed by her tattered dress, the long, tapering curve of her thighs, the rounded cups of her breasts. . . .

She started to shiver again. Dawson saw her lips part, her lashes a dark shadow on her pale cheeks. A white arm crept about his neck, drawing him down.

Subconsciously he realized why Loretta wanted his kisses. She was afraid—afraid of thinking and remembering. In Dawson's arms was a brief illusion of safety, and so she clung to him, trying to blot out the menace that shrouded them by drowning herself emotionally. . . .

But her lips were sweet. The intoxicating odor of *hau*-blossoms mounted within Dawson's nostrils. He forgot everything but the white, tender body he held so close.

At last she pulled free, the fear gone from her eyes. "C-can't we—get back to the *Quest* now?" Her voice was shaky.

Dawson swallowed with difficulty. Without a word he rose and slipped into the darkness. When he returned, a grim smile quirked his lips.

"Yeah. We can make a run for it now. There's a boat not far away—and only a couple of guards."

They moved like shadows to the jungle's edge. Dawson said, "Wait here. I'll draw the guards away. You run for the boat—and I'll join you. If I don't, paddle for the *Quest*."

He skirted the forest, moving along the beach. Then he slipped out into plain view—and, as he had expected, the natives bit.

They came racing toward him. He waited, seeing they were armed with *newas*—war clubs.

There was a piece of driftwood near by, and he picked it up. Then he waited. Beyond the racing fig-

ures he saw Loretta fleeing toward the outrigger.

Footsteps crunched on the sand behind him. He whirled too late. There was a flashing glimpse of dark, shadowy bodies that seemed to rise up out of the beach itself—and something whirled through the gloom toward his head.

A trap! He had time for only that thought before blinding pain crashed into his brain, and he went down into unfathomable darkness. . . .

HE WOKE up in Storm's *go-down*, his head splitting, and lamplight hurting his eyes. Fiber ropes bound him hand and foot. He lay against the wall in a dim corner, tied to one of the vertical beams, and Storm himself was relaxed in a rattan chair, one brawny arm imprisoning Loretta.

The thin dress had been ripped completely off her body, and what she wore under it wasn't enough to matter. There were dark, angry bruises on her arms and shoulders. Her auburn hair was disarranged, and she was struggling vainly to escape Storm's grip.

The giant ignored her. He was drinking gin, and set the bottle back on the table with a grunt. Then he turned back to the girl.

It wasn't pleasant to watch. Dawson's jaw muscles bunched, and he strained at his fetters till they dug into his flesh. But the ropes had been knotted tightly, and didn't give. He had to watch as Storm, half drunk and inflamed with passion, caressed the struggling girl.

But he didn't cry out. Instead, he worked at the ropes.

Storm said thickly, "Listen, I haven't seen a white woman for months. Why don't you be good to me? I—"

She bit him, and he cuffed her savagely across the face and called her something unprintable, even in Tahitian.

Then the door opened and Utota, the *vahine* girl, came in. She did it quietly, and there was a *pahoa*—a vicious little dagger—glittering in her hand. Above the top of her *pareu* Dawson could see angry welts criss-crossing the bronze skin. So she had been punished for trying to escape!

Storm didn't see her. He was too engrossed with Loretta. And Dawson waited, praying that the dagger would slide home into the giant's muscular back before he sensed danger.

The blade ripped skin and flesh as it lanced down—but it missed its mark. Storm's arm swept around, and there was a confused tangle of arms and legs. Loretta seemed to be flung out of the *melée*. The giant reached for her, but changed his mind as Utota's *pahoa* drove at his chest. He belled with pain and rage. Blood spurted.

Loretta's tapering legs gleamed as she raced across the room. Utota struck again. But Storm's big hand found her wrist. The dagger twisted in midair—and sheathed itself in the *vahine's* breast.

She gave a soft little cry, and went limp.

Storm sprang up. Loretta evaded his blundering rush and fled out the open door into the night. Cursing, the giant plunged after her.

Dawson felt sweat trickling

down his cheeks. He wrenched frantically at the prisoning ropes. In a few moments Storm would return—

THERE was movement in the shadows. Utota dragged herself to her hands and knees. The *pareu* slipped from her body as she lurched forward, blood trickling down her swaying breasts.

She dragged herself toward Dawson, her glazed eyes fixed on him.

And fell, with a whisper that faded into silence.

"The *pahoa*—"

Her weight was light on Dawson's knees. The *pahoa!* The dagger's hilt still protruded from the *vahine's* chest. And its blade was sharp.

"Thanks, Utota," Dawson said softly, though she couldn't hear him. He strained to reach the knife. And succeeded.

The ropes bit into his flesh. The *vahine's* blood was slippery and warm against his wrists as he sawed the strands apart against the knife's edge. It did not take long. Once his hands were free, he was able to use the *pahoa* more easily.

Feet thudded on the steps outside. Dawson sliced down at the last of the ropes, and, as they fell free, sprang up, his legs buckling from lack of circulation. But there was no time to massage them back to life. Storm stood on the threshold, Loretta struggling in the crook of his arm. Storm's jaw dropped with amazement.

His hand dived down, came up with the pistol.

Loretta's swift blow struck it

aside. The bullet whanged against the tin wall of the *godown*. Then Dawson was across the room, the knife gleaming, and a savage grin on his blood-stained face.

Storm made an error. He tried to swing Loretta before him as a shield. But Dawson hurtled forward, diving low, and his shoulder drove hard against the giant's legs.

The three of them went backward down the steps, a confused tangle. The gun exploded.

Dawson felt his left arm go limp, afire with blazing agony. He was flat on his back, held down by Storm's great weight, and the giant's furious gray eyes were glaring into his own. The pistol lifted, its muzzle swinging till it was a black hole into which Dawson looked.

With all his strength he struck up at Storm's jaw. At the same time he rolled his head aside. The bullet thumped into the ground, throwing up a spray of dirt.

Storm had jerked up his jaw to avoid the blow. But Dawson's fist drove against the giant's throat. Not hard—no. But the keen-bladed little knife was still gripped in it!

Blood spurted out into Dawson's eyes. Storm gave a choked, bubbling scream and threw himself back. The pistol went off as a trigger finger convulsed in a death agony. And then Storm lay motion-

less, staring up blindly into the moonlight, the *pahoa's* hilt red-stained, and the blade sunk deep in human flesh.

RATHER shakily, Dawson stood up, wondering how badly he was hurt. His side hurt, and his left arm was throbbing. Well—he wouldn't die of those wounds.

He turned to Loretta, who was rising to her feet, and his good arm went about her as she swayed.

"I—I'm not hurt," she whispered. "No—"

The pad-pad of running feet came. Dawson rescued the revolver and stood waiting. But he anticipated no trouble from the natives. They would be only too glad to be released from Storm's brutal tyranny.

Meantime—

He shoved Loretta toward the *godown's* door. "Beat it. Wait for me inside."

Then he turned to meet the natives. Would there be any difficulty?

There wasn't. Ten minutes later Dawson was inside the *godown*, and Loretta was bandaging his arm.

She looked very pretty in the lamplight. And, as she said, the *Quest* wouldn't pull anchor till dawn.

There wasn't any hurry — till dawn!



Devil's Fire

[Continued from page 53]

The wall was at my back; with a quick twist I deflected the descending blade, sinking the point into the wall. With all of the remaining strength in her mad body she flung up her knee.

Flame danced before my eyes. My hold on her wrist relaxed. I sank to the floor fighting nausea, unconsciousness. Through half closed eyes I saw her pull the knife from the wall with a convulsive effort; through ears that roared and rang, I heard her shrill laugh of triumph. Weakly I raised my hand to fend off the horror I knew was coming.

THE patter of bare feet sounded like the approach of a storm. Through the door, like a pack of wolves scenting a kill, surged the freed prisoners, relieved of their shackles by Wana, who urged them on from the hallway. Strange sounds, gibbering, wails, laughter, hysterical and high-pitched, emanated from emaciated bodies as they bore their former tyrant to the floor under sheer weight of numbers, the tongueless Wanala in the van.

I saw the handless one in the midst of the fray, heard the sickening crunch of bony stumps

against the woman's body, saw teeth, spaced like fangs, tear and gnaw at the dying woman's throat. Once only she screamed, and that scream ended in her throat as a death rattle while the men who were no longer men chortled and howled like demons at their terrible task of vengeance.

Wana eventually stopped the horror from the doorway.

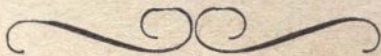
"Stop it! Stop it!" she commanded. "There are still the four bodyguards to reckon with!"

One by one, reluctantly, the men arose from the bloody mess on the floor, to trot off down the hall on eager feet in search of their appointed kill.

Racked with pain and horror I drew the trembling Wana into the protective circle of my arms.

Early that morning the giant amphibian roared into life on the bay.

I, who had found happiness in hell, smiled down on the beautiful face beside me and waved to the natives on the shore as the plane glided over the water in a perfect take-off. A little white figure in the foreground, Forest, sang as loudly as any of the natives, "Tofa Me Felini," the farewell song of the natives.



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Cargo of Trouble

[Continued from page 61]

Randolph dragged lead-soled feet toward the companionway, the two bags gripped in his fist, and seething thoughts matched the roar of air in his helmet.

HEINE, the big Dutchman, already half-deaf, was hovering over the pounding compressors. He hadn't heard. Even if he had, Sharp or Emmett would blast him down the moment he stepped from the engine room hatch. God! If he'd only refused the job, refused to bring Mary Ann, waited until Hank and Ed— But it was too late now. His only chance was to get aboard the *Mary Ann*.

Sending the bags up would mean death to Mary Ann, Heine, and himself. Sharp and Emmett wouldn't leave living witnesses. The tender would be sunk. Randolph gulped, stopped.

What did the bags contain? Why—

Swiftly, he dropped the bags to the *Shagar's* flooded deck, and his muscular fingers tore at the fastenings. He had them open in a moment. The gleam of his light seemed to create a brighter, almost blinding sparkle within the valise, and he cursed softly as he saw what the bag contained. Diamonds. A hinged leather case filled with dozens of the unset stones. They winked like cold, expressionless eyes in the glow of his light.

Sharp and Emmett had—murdered Captain Barr, knew he'd discovered the crime when Mary Ann

told Sharp he'd gone into the captain's cabin.

Bob Randolph straightened, a big, metal-headed monster in a cold, swaying world of water-logged death, and through the barred glass of his face port, his angular features were pale under the tan.

Sharp and Emmett wouldn't dare cut the hose until the diamonds were aboard the tender. They wouldn't harm Mary Ann and Heine, until they had the bags, were certain of success. If he could just—

Moving slowly, deliberately, despite the mad churning of thoughts in his head, he walked toward the descending line, taut body leaned forward as he bucked the slight current—and he carried the bags gripped in his right fist.

He reached the descending line, set the bags down upon the sandy bottom, then walked straight ahead, frantically hoping that Sharp wouldn't notice the surface bubbles and interpret his intentions. Randolph stopped, and his hand sought the handle of his exhaust valve.

Suit-pent air lightened his body. He rose slowly, breathing through set teeth. Too much air and he'd reach the surface traveling like a bullet. If he came up under the *Mary Ann*, the tender's keel would bash in his helmet. His angular jaw pushed forward to the chin-valve. One jab on the buttoned rod and the air would rush from his

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suit, bring him to an abrupt stop. The bottom fell away. He rose faster, gliding upward through greenish darkness.

BOB RANDOLPH broke surface ten feet out from the *Mary Ann's* port side, and his brown eyes frantically sought the ladder Heine usually dropped at a diving mooring. A moan of relief welled to his stiff lips. The ladder was in place. He paddled quietly toward it, gripped its rungs with white-knuckled fists.

Moving as quietly as possible, he dragged himself to the tender's port rail, grinding his teeth as the full weight of the diving rig impeded his movements. He got both lead-soled feet on the tender's deck, stared through the barred glass of his face port.

Roy Sharp was hanging over the starboard rail, an automatic gripped in his right fist, the air hose and life-line held in his left. He had the telephone rig clamped about his bony head, was staring down at the water.

Heine wasn't in sight. The partly deaf compressor man was still below, hovering over his pounding compressors, pumping life-giving air to Randolph's suit.

At first, Randolph didn't see Mary Ann and Emmett, then they came into sight around the corner of the after deck shelter. The girl was struggling wildly to break from the stocky crook's arms. His pawing hands were plucking at her dress. Even as Randolph stared with hot eyes, Emmett's thick fingers caught the ruffled neck of Mary Ann's dress, and the thin

fabric ripped under his savage jerk.

A firm, pouting breast spilled from the jagged rent, an alluring mound of feminine loveliness that drew Emmett's pawing hands like a magnet, made him mouth incoherent words. He caught the pulsing white flesh in a bruising grip. Mary Ann screamed. Emmett went mad, ripped at her clothing, baring her white torso, gleaming thighs, and his drooling mouth planted slobbery kisses over her bare shoulders and throat.

A roar of sheer fury ripped from Bob Randolph's throat. He tried to leap toward the struggling man and girl. The dead weight of the diving rig held him back, forced him to move at a maddeningly slow shuffle. His sixteen pound lead shoes dragged over the deck.

SHARP caught the angry cry in the phones, leaned farther over the rail, then the engine room hatch burst open and Heine came charging on deck, his fat body moving surprisingly fast. He'd heard Mary Ann's shrill scream over the pound of the compressors. He dived toward Emmett and the girl. Sharp pumped a shot at the charging Dutchman, clipped his shoulder, but didn't slow him. Sharp saw Randolph.

He spun, pumping slugs as fast as he could trigger the weapon, and his beady eyes were wide with sudden terror.

Smashing weights banged into Randolph's helmet and breastplate, making him stagger, yet not piercing the metal. He gritted his teeth, pushed the leaden shoes for-

ward, museles jerking as he fought to reach the skinny crook.

Heine was almost upon Emmett and the girl. The stocky crook flung Mary Ann aside to sprawl on the deck, and he clawed at the gun in his hip pocket. Heine hit him before he could drag the weapon free, and Emmett went down under two hundred and eighty pounds of enraged bellowing Dutchman.

Mary Ann scrambled to her feet, her dress practically torn from her. Brassiere-less, her rounded breasts danced with her labored breath. Thin wisps of torn panties hung miraculously to her hips. A dark bruise showed on the smooth whiteness of her left thigh. She started toward Randolph. Screaming a warning before he realized she couldn't hear him because of the helmet, he motioned her back, drove his weight-dragged body on toward Sharp.

Unnerved by the sight of Randolph stalking toward him like an inexorable metal-headed robot, Sharp pumped his gun empty, still shooting at the big helmet, bouncing slugs off its rounded surface. Randolph's leaden feet thumped on the deck.

Sharp dug frantically for another automatic clip in his pocket. Randolph reached him, swept his skinny, struggling body into rubber-cased arms. Sharp exploded into a flurry of terror-stricken blows, pounded Randolph's helmet with the empty gun. Savagely, Randolph tore the gun from his hand, jerked him clear of the floor, and started toward the port rail.

Heine was sitting on Emmett's chest, methodically banging the stocky crook's head on the deck



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planking. Randolph could see the big Dutchman's fat lips moving, but didn't catch the words. Mary Ann was sagged against the deck shelter, so paralyzed with terror that she didn't realize she was practically nude. Her breasts were still bare, jerking with her labored breath.

Randolph's lips tightened into a grim smile, and he walked on to the port rail, holding the wildly struggling Sharp free of the deck. The tall crook sensed his purpose, screamed wildly for Emmett. Randolph reached the rail, glanced to see that his lines were clear, then stepped overside, dragging the struggling Sharp down into the sea.

AN HOUR later, Bob Randolph, Mary Ann Brooks and Heine stood near the afterdeck shelter. Randolph had half-drowned Sharp, had recovered the diamonds, and had shed his diving rig. Mary Ann, her stirring blonde perfection barely covered by her ruined dress, was clinging to Randolph's arm, and he could feel every quiver of her slim body.

Sharp and Emmett were lying on the deck, trussed like furled sails. Sharp was coughing water from his lungs. Emmett was glaring at Heine, whose fat face was split by a huge, satisfied grin.

"All right, Sharp, we'll have all the details now. I know some of the facts." Randolph's voice was cold, grim. "You and Emmett stole the diamonds from someone, shipped on the *Shagar* because she carried no radio and you thought you'd be safer on a freighter. Captain Barr discovered you were dia-

mond thieves. You murdered him, killed the *Shagar* helmsman, and wrecked the *Shagar* to cover your crimes. The *Shagar's* crew were caught unawares."

"I—I guess me and Emmett was the only ones to get off." Sharp coughed weakly, broken by his terrifying experience. "We had to kill Barr. He was the only one that knew. He hadn't told the crew yet. I got a glimpse of the island through the fog, knew we were near the reef. Emmett and me have been on the island before. I knew Barr's body would be discovered any minute, so I went up to the wheel-house, then—" He gulped, coughed. "When the *Shagar* went down, me and Emmett struck out for the island. I thought he had the diamonds. He thought I had them, so—"

"You killed Barr and that diamond guy in Amsterdam!" whimpered Emmett. "I didn't have nothing to do with—"

"Heine," Bob Randolph slid a muscular arm about Mary Ann's trim waist, "let's head for port—and the police. There should be a fair reward for the recovery of the diamonds. You get your share, then Mary Ann and I will finish paying for the tender—and we're remodeling the deck shelter into a sea-going apartment." He urged the girl toward the shelter, grinned as she looked up with eager, sparkling eyes. "We've got to—uh—look things over—see—uh—what changes—"

And Heine's fat, red-cheeked face spread in an understanding grin as he watched Bob Randolph close the deck shelter door behind him.

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Midnight Patrol

[Continued from page 69]

turn her, they'll do the same. Our bargain is useless."

"You are stupid, Wang Ho!" snapped the chief. "Leave her on the sand bar. He'll know enough then not to shell our boat. We'll be able to pick her off with a rifle until we're out of range of his guns, way back there on the mainland."

"The sun of wisdom sets behind your head," admitted Wang Ho. "Now, about this Chan Li? She is going to waste, and that would be a shame."

"Don't touch her!" warned Tsang Wu. "I'm saving her for a customer in Java. He'll pay enough to buy us girls all around."

Then, to one of his crew: "Lock her up!"

Farrell followed Chan Li and her captor down a gloomy tunnel leading toward the northern wall of the fort. As they approached the entrance of a casemate illuminated by moonlight filtering in through a gun port, he drove home with the salvaged rifle. The butt splintered, crushing the Chinaman's skull.

JUST ahead of Farrell, ankle shackled to a ring-bolt sunk in the masonry, was Irma Stanley. One glimpse of her lovely face and the shapely whiteness of breasts that half evaded the remnants of her tattered bodice justified his recklessness; but he had not counted on iron fetters.

"Get out!" he said, catching

Chan Li's arm. "I'll tend to this. It's going to take time."

"I'll take my chances with you," she persisted, following him into the cell.

Irma recognized him, despite his disguise.

"Glenn—my God—are they gone—?"

"Pipe down!" he warned, breaking clear of her arms. "Get out of my way so I can dig into this mortar."

As he set to work, Chan Li joined him. She was armed with a knife taken from her late guard. Together they gouged and chipped, but the task seemed hopeless.

"Shear off the shackle!" As that thought cropped up, Farrell picked up a loose block of stone and struck the back of the knife against the soft iron pin.

Sping! The blade snapped half way between point and guard. Still gripping the useless weapon, he reached for Chan Li's knife.

"Now get out! You can't help!"

He did not hear her answer, or get the knife. A thunderous rumbling had drowned the angry roar of the lashing waves far below. An unseen hand flung him backward; and as he recovered, he saw a sullen glow, far out on the water. It rose, a column of flame reaching skyward.

Tsang Wu's armored yacht had been destroyed. Somehow, Sultan Iskander had managed to strike. And Tsang Wu, thinking that Far-

rell had mocked him, would pause for Chinese vengeance that would endure after the pirate's head was grinning from a lance head.

To liberate Irma was now impossible. Regardless of how the yacht had been destroyed, the troops could not take the place by assault—not until long after Tsang Wu's vengeance.

One slim chance, however, remained. Slip up in the confusion, knife Tsang Wu and his lieutenant. Break for the sultan's camp, risk his wrath, lead his troops up the slope while the pirates were demoralized. Insane, but it might work.

THE court was already crowded with raging pirates. Darkness and excitement protected Farrell as he followed the wave to Tsang Wu's quarters. There he saw the chief, grim but cool, curbing the panic.

"We can hold out," he roared. "His guns blew up, I told you! Those two explosions. He can't attack. Wang Ho, take the launch and go to Pulau Gajah for a boat big enough—"

A shout drowned his instructions. The jabbering crowd parted. Someone was leading a prisoner: Datu Hamid!

But a moment later, Farrell knew that his rival was a traitor.

"I have the answer for you, Tsang Wu," said the datu. "I will go back and dispose of the sultan. Then you attack in force and scatter his men before they recover from their panic. That done, we all march back to the capital. I will be sultan—I have powerful friends—you will be rewarded—"

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"How did he blow up our boat if he had no guns?" interrupted Tsang Wu.

"He sent out two *prahus*. One was loaded with shells. The crew of the other touched off a time fuse. Simple. Now will you follow my plan?"

"Very well," agreed Tsang Wu. "And to be sure it is not a trap—"

"Make sure any way you want!" snapped Hamid. "Do you think I'd have come here if I couldn't stand any test?"

"We'll see," said Tsang Wu. A craftly light gleamed in his eyes, and he beckoned to Wang Ho. A whispered exchange, then he again addressed the traitor: "Go, and hurry. We will wait."

Farrell now had time to release Irma; but the life of Sultan Iskander was at stake. That stern old man who had spared Farrell even though convinced of his treason was still the American's benefactor.

Whatever might happen to Irma, it wouldn't kill her!

The crowd parted to make way as Datu Hamid strode swiftly to the gate. Farrell wormed his way among the pirates. He had to hug the wall, move with the crowd, avoid detection at all cost.

WHEN he finally reached the exit, Datu Hamid was far below in the darkness. No chance of overtaking him short of the camp.

Farrell now knew why the two guns had exploded. Datu Hamid's treachery explained it. The trick was easy. A high explosive shell fuse has a safety lock that is flung off by the rotation of the flying projectile. Its purpose is to pre-

vent accidental discharge during the handling of the shell. Its removal would permit the fuse plunger to strike home the instant the gun was fired, causing the shell to burst before it left the muzzle.

Farrell lost precious minutes worming his way past the sentries. With infinite caution he worked his way toward a cluster of shrubbery that commanded a view of the sultan's pavilion. He heard Hamid's voice. They were conferring. A sound from the rear distracted Farrell. Another section of artillery was on the way. The sultan was receiving reinforcements.

That would goad Hamid to faster action. The traitor had to strike before the bombardment robbed him of his Chinese ally; yet Farrell, discredited, dared not reveal himself.

The sultan and Hamid emerged from the pavilion.

"Your Highness, those guns should be placed at the north—"

"No, by Allah!" snapped Sultan Iskander. "I said—"

"But be pleased to look over the ground," persisted the traitor. He gestured toward the spot where he proposed placing the artillery.

Farrell flanked them as they paralleled the camp. Bit by bit Hamid drew the sultan out of ear-shot of his troops.

And then it happened, swift as a striking serpent. As the conspirator gestured, his hand flashed to his belt. Steel now gleamed.

FARRELL'S warning yell startled the sultan. He whirled, still unsuspecting. The blade

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raked him. For an instant he was dazed by the unexpected attack by his trusted follower. Then as he leaped aside, jerking his pistol, Hamid lunged. He snatched the weapon before it rose into line. A premature alarm would be fatal.

They grappled, crashed to the ground, flailed and threshed about, both stabbing and slashing.

Farrell's last leap carried him home. His half-blade slashed as they rolled into the shrubbery. Spurting blood drenched him. The ragged steel ripped flesh. But as he struggled to his feet, a man in Chinese brocade came ploughing through the underbrush. He caught Farrell off balance. His knife flashed down. Though Farrell writhed clear, his arm was wrenched and numb. He drove up with his knee, but missed—

And then a muffled pistol blast sent a backlash of blinding flame across his face. The enemy collapsed, the top of his head blasted away.

Farrell kicked clear. He saw the wounded sultan, smoking pistol still in hand, struggle to his feet. Hamid's ally was Wang Ho, sent to check up on the conspirator.

"This has been an instructive moment," said Sultan Iskander, eyeing Hamid's Mongolian ally.

The sultan's jacket was slashed and red, but he kept his feet. And then an officer, followed by a squad of *askaris*, came charging from camp.

"They came to take your head and toss it into camp to demoralize your men," explained Farrell. "Wang Ho followed Hamid to be sure of his good faith.

"They expect him to return.

And I'm taking his place. Surprise is our only chance. You can't get the artillery into action in time. I'll put on Wang Ho's coat. That will fool the sentry. Once a few of us get in, the rest can charge up the slope, the quick way."

He dashed to the beach. His heart pounded like a riveting hammer. Tsang Wu having arranged for a counter attack against the murdered sultan's camp, would seek Irma to celebrate in anticipation.

As he scaled the ragged cliff, he heard the singsong chatter of the exultant pirates. And then, as he reached the crest, a woman cried out from the northern casemate. It was clear through the gun port, and the confusion of voices in the courtyard did not drown that scream.

Irma's voice. Tsang Wu's savage laugh. A curse, a slap. Her nails were raking deep, but her agonized gasp all too plainly marked the end of her resistance

. . . .

FARRELL'S blood froze—but he did not dare to hurry. He popped out into the open moonlight. His face was shadowed, and he wore Wang Ho's brocaded silks.

"Quick, pig!" he growled in Cantonese, mimicking the Manchu's curt voice. "Where's the chief? Tell him—"

The startled sentry, listening to the sounds that made him envy Tsang Wu, whirled as that commanding voice broke in. A short flash of steel blotted out his second-hand thrills.

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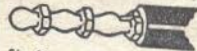
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rifle. And as his handful of Malays cleared the narrow, unguarded gate, he bounded into the court.

A swift glance. A cluster of pirates squatted in front of Tsang Wu's empty quarters.

Farrell's rifle, suddenly jerked to his hip, poured fire and lead into them as they clambered to their feet, off balance and without a chance to act.

A ripping volley from his right and left seconded his surprise attack. The Malays mowed them down, but reinforcements came from the further end of the court. Yet for a moment Farrell and his handful had the advantage. Hot lead and cold *krisses* swept the enemy back in confusion.

He could no longer hear the voice from the casemate. They were pocketed now, and the angle of the wall became a red nightmare.

Tsang Wu was not leading the counter-attack. . . .

Three of Farrell's men were down, bullet-riddled and slashed, but they still crawled on, stabbing upward with their red blades, as though hoping to drown in enemy blood before they died of their wounds.

And then a familiar voice rang above the mad confusion: Sultan Iskander. Farrell caught a glimpse of him from the corner of his eye as he discarded his rifle and snatched a curved sword.

A wrathful howl, a savage ripple of musketry, and the Malay charged.

Farrell pressed on, and as the battle surged past the entrance of the passageway, he bounded toward the casemate.

WHAT he saw confirmed the outcry he had heard. Irma, still shackled by one ankle, lay sprawled on the floor. She stirred feebly. One arm was still bent in a repulsing gesture. Only a few shreds of her gown were left. Tsang Wu concealed most of her bare body. His head was a gory pulp, and his blood spattered Irma's drawn face and her breasts. Near him lay the block of stone that had crushed the back of his head.

Farrell had arrived too late even for vengeance. Something silken crouched in a corner. A woman—

"Chan Li! What the devil—!"

She recognized his voice, and explained, "I tried to use my knife, but he knocked me against the wall. And later, I picked up that rock."

Farrell dragged Tsang Wu aside. Irma stirred feebly, cried out, then recognized him.

"God . . ." Her voice was low and trembling. "Why didn't you stay away altogether? . . . you're lucky . . . they didn't get around to your yellow sweetheart—"

She was hysterical, but Farrell's nerves were wire-edged.

"Listen, damn it!" he snapped. "I went back to save a Malay who took me from the beach when you and the white colony threw rocks at me.

"And what's happened tonight'd be nothing to what would have happened if Chan Li hadn't showed me the way to slip in here. Your having kept that picture all these months sort of made me hope I might stage a comeback—"

Her defiance cracked.

"I'm sorry, Glenn . . ." She ques-

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tioningly eyed him through her tears, saw the grimness leave his face. Then her glance shifted to Chan Li. "Do you really care for her?"

"Of course he doesn't," said Chan Li. "He was betrayed and beaten. I had my hour and I helped him. Send me to Penang, and we will forget this, the three

of us. He was mad enough to try to release you single-handed. I knew from the beginning that I couldn't have him."

Farrell and Irma eyed each other. Then he said, "It'd been a lot worse if you'd been killed, darling. You and I both have a lot to forget. So we can start out even."

Matter of Percentage

[Continued from page 77]

that he must deliver them to Colonel Bayle at any cost.

His delay in trying to save the girl seemed likely to be fatal, for they were all about him, ringing him, baying at him, though, after seeing the efficacy of that swing of his blade, none of the guards was anxious to be the first to close.

"Come!" Durrant made a last appeal to Bamboo Flower.

She was snatched from him. He dodged a swinging saber, thrust the hilt of his *kris* into the man's mouth and saw it widen into a ghastly wound, leaped back and swung the weapon about his head.

"*Tuan! Tuan!*"

Ali, Durrant's head boy, was at his side, swinging a *kris* of his own with marvelous effect, and with him were two others of the Residency natives, each armed with a shorter but quite efficacious stabbing weapon.

"Here, *tuan!*"

It was Durrant's revolver that Ali thrust into his hands. Durrant had gone unarmed to the Palace in his eagerness, not thinking Raj

Hussein would dare to attack him, whatever happened there.

Durrant fired five times, and the crowd of shrieking guards fell back, leaving three wounded men gasping and cursing on the path.

But Bamboo Flower was gone! Whether she had fled or had been dragged away, there was no knowing.

Durrant called her name, he raged like a madman, brandishing his blade. The guards answered him with curses from behind the hedges.

"*Tuan*, it is no use! Come quickly! They are attacking the Residency!"

THE thought of Marian's danger drove all thought of the Malay girl from Durrant's head. He turned and ran beside Ali, the two others following. He had hardly left the precincts of the Palace before he saw a spire of flame shoot up from the Residency.

A little later, and the crackle of firing grew distinct. The four men labored on, panting. And now the

yells of the attackers came clearly to their ears. The spire of flame was veiled in a shroud of dense smoke, out of which appeared a myriad points of fire.

At the lowest level of the valley, when they were still a half-mile from the burning building, Ali stopped.

"*Tuan*, take these two," he said. "I go, but I shall return. Trust me, *tuan*."

Stupefied with amazement, Durrant saw Ali dart into the bamboo thicket. Instantly he was lost to sight. But amazement was a luxury that Durrant couldn't afford. He raced on, hearing the savage yells of the attacking natives, and the drumming rifle fire that told that the tiny Sikh guard was still holding out.

And now the three were approaching the Residency. In front of it a mob of a hundred Malays were swarming, keeping up a pandemonium of yelling, firing from archaic blunderbusses and waving *krises* and daggers.

In the light of the burning building Durrant could see a score of white-clad bodies littering the front drive, and three or four of the Sikhs, kneeling and firing steadily. Behind them stood Colonel Bayle.

A hundred yards to go. Fifty yards—and then the end came. A sudden furious clamor, and the Malays swarmed over the defenders, butchering them as they fought about the colonel. Durrant saw Colonel Bayle go down, slashed to pieces by the blades of the fanatics.

Others were bursting out of the house. They were dragging Mari-

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an with them. They had torn the clothing half off her body, revealing her boyish form, with the small breasts and narrow hips; she was fighting, dashing her little fists into the faces of her captors as they dragged her from the building.

And what her fate would be, among those infuriated natives, Durrant, knowing the Malay, knew only too well.

He glanced back for an instant, and saw his two boys behind him. Then he leaped straight into the midst of the throng, which, eyes intent upon the girl, had not noticed his approach.

They had flung her to the ground, a dozen of them as Durrant leaped, *kris* in hand, and clove a bloody path toward her.

A man's head rocked upon his shoulders as Durrant sliced through the shoulder ligaments. An arm went flying through the air. A Malay, cleft from shoulder to waist, screamed hideously as he toppled. Then Durrant had caught Marian in his arms.

Beside him, his boys were plying their weapons vigorously. The astounded mob fell back, stumbling over the bodies of the murdered Sikhs.

DURRANT caught up Marian, holding her trembling body close to his. He glanced about him. One wing of the Residency was a blazing mass, but the other one was intact, and the fire was only just beginning to spread to the central portion.

He had no choice. He could gain a minute's respite within the wing that was intact. He could die, de-

fending the girl he loved, and he could take her with him, rather than let her become a victim of these maddened natives.

Before they could adjust themselves to the situation, Durrant had darted inside with Marian, followed by the two natives. He found himself in a long room, with a door at either end, and four French windows. A more difficult place to defend was hardly conceivable.

His revolver was empty, and he had no cartridges. It was just a case of selling their lives as dearly as possible.

And he would have to kill Marian with the kris! The realization of that broke him down. He caught the girl's warm body to him in a frenzy of passion that knew nothing of desire. In that moment of emotion, they two had become more than man and woman, more than sex—they had become soul and soul.

Then, with a roar, the maddened natives were rushing at the windows, which, already broken, shivered to pieces under the impetus of the pressure.

Durrant pushed Marian away, planted himself behind the broken window-frame, and swung his *kris* into the mass of struggling bodies. Beside him he was conscious of the two boys playing their part, but for him consciousness was centered in that mass of howling, writhing, struggling, blood-spattered forms, and the girl behind him.

They had broken through, carrying the shattered window-frame before them, trampling over the dead that littered the floor. They

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were bearing Durrant back. He swung his *kris* in an arc that carried death or mutilation with every blow, so that even the madened Malays hesitated to rush in and close with the white madman who had run *amok* even as they.

But they were closing in. Durrant's two boys were down, under a pile of corpses, and from the windows that they had defended another swarm was approaching.

The yells were demoniac. The faces, alight with blood-lust, looked like those of leering demons in the pale light of the arisen moon.

Durrant drew Marian into his arm. The moment had come. He must draw out her life with a single sweep of his weapon, and then seek death.

He felt her warm body against his own, and suddenly death didn't seem to matter. Whatever it meant, they two would face it side by side.

Then suddenly such a ferocity of cries outside that the Malays drew back. And into the room a new army came rushing, and, at its head, Ali, Durrant's head boy.

Revolvers cracked, swords struck; in a few seconds the tide was turned, and the attackers were scurrying in wild panic up and down the long room, and trying to gain refuge outside.

DURRANT, breathless, stood holding Marian, thinking it was all a dream—perhaps a dream beyond the borderland of death. Bleeding from a slash across the cheek, he stood, watching his former assailants cut down.

Then somehow the pandemonium had died away, and Ali was standing before Durrant, no longer salaaming, but speaking as one equal to another:

"I was too late to save the Colonel *tuan*, but I have saved my *tuan* and the lady. The Palace is ours." A grim smile creased his cheeks. "*Tuan*, I am Prince Mohammed!"

"RAJ Ali Mohammed, I know that you can tell me what happened to Bamboo Flower," said Durrant, three weeks later.

"I wonder," said Raj Ali Mohammed, "whether my *tuan*"—he smiled—"would wish to know."

They were standing almost beneath the giant bamboos, now mere dead stalks that rattled with every breeze. For, after the flowering, death had come.

"You wish to know, *tuan*?" cried the Prince suddenly. "Look up, then, *tuan*, look up!"

Durrant looked up through the white skeletons of the dead bamboos. At first he could see nothing. Then he perceived what looked like the skeleton of a human being, so enlaced with the dead tendrils that it was hardly distinguishable.

Forgetful of etiquette, Durrant caught the Prince by the shoulder. "You mean—you mean—?" he cried.

"They placed her there even while the attack on the Residency was in progress, *tuan*. They tied her fast and gagged her. It is an old custom when women betray. The bamboos are very hungry when they flower, *tuan*."

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[Continued from page 85]

both have to check out in a hurry."

He nosed his car toward White Horse Creek. Marietta followed.

HALF an hour later, Cragston was on the main stem of Arradonda, where he phoned the Union Glycerine Products Company in Bartlesville. The night man on duty after a moment's delay connected Cragston with the residence of Ben Simpson, the manager.

"That's right," said Cragston, "four quarts—yeah, I'm going to drink it with a dash of bitters and a sprig of mint. All right, when will you rush it out—what's that? Got a long distance call on another wire. Well, what the hell's this but a long distance!"

The delay was brief. Presently Simpson was on the wire again.

"Rush it out as fast as God and the speed laws allow," resumed Cragston. "To the White Horse lease—"

"Oh . . . ah . . . you're Don Cragston?" wondered Simpson. Then came a moment of mumbling which finally cleared into: "I'm sorry, Cragston, but I just got a previous order. The entire supply has been contracted for—we can take care of you day after tomorrow—"

Cragston's reply sounded like the eruption of Krakatoa, only it was louder and dirtier. He slammed the receiver and took a running jump at the wheel of his car. No need to ask who had sent in the "*previous*" order for nitro. That Duval had taken the trouble

to corner the means of shooting the well convinced Cragston that his desperate device was reasonable; but though he could not buy nitro, he could hi-jack the warehouse in Bartlesville.

It was now more than a matter of saving his lease; it had settled down to a question of making Duval pull in his horns.

Forty minutes of desperate driving brought Cragston to Bartlesville. There he paused long enough to thumb a telephone book, and then set out to execute his hastily formed plan. He wondered how the captive sheriff would enjoy riding with four quarts of nitro; but Cragston preferred not to think of the return. His attack was indirect. Parking a block from the residence of the manager, he set out on foot.

The manager's neat white bungalow was set well back from the street. A hedge screened it from the adjoining houses. Cragston looped the block, ducked down a driveway, and approached from the rear.

"I'll plaster that liver-faced louse until he'll be tickled to death to give me the whole damned outfit," Cragston muttered to himself as he began his reconnaissance.

THE house was dark. Evidently Simpson had resumed his interrupted sleep. Perfect: sap him and take his keys, then handle the watchman.

The bungalows in that block had

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all been poured from the same mould. Thus, having observed the feminine curves silhouetted against the drawn shades of the house next door, Cragston was fairly certain where the bedroom of Ben Simpson's bungalow was. A moment of listening at a half raised window confirmed his hunch. Somnolent breathing—

"Wait till I sound reveille, big boy," Cragston muttered through clenched teeth as he edged towards the window.

A vagrant gust of feminine fragrance tickled his nostrils. That made it awkward. You never could tell what women might do. Cragston stealthily chinned himself to the sill.

His approach was shadow silent, but as he cleared the sill, a woman's voice murmured, "Is that you, Sam?"

Cragston froze. Sam certainly was not Simpson's name! But it was too late to retreat.

Something was wrong. Drops of sweat as big as ten carat diamonds cropped out on Cragston's forehead, and his lips went dry; then he improvised, "Who do you suppose it is, anyhow?"

The husky whisper was noncommittal. Someone in the darkness sighed, and stirred, "Oh, I thought he'd *never* leave."

The lady in the shadows knew where Simpson was. The situation had possibilities!

As Cragston edged toward the voice, a blurred whiteness emerged from nowhere, and leaned toward him.

"Darling, I was so afraid you might get here before Ben left," she murmured.

At that range, even a whisper that was off key might betray him, and if she took a notion that it was a burglar and not Sam—! Cragston let gestures take the place of words.

The dim sky glow filtering through the window left his face in shadow, but he could see enough to know that Sam was a lucky poacher!

HER figure was more mature than Marietta's, and her hair reflected golden glints in the gloom. The arms that closed about Cragston's shoulders were shapely and the full blown breasts that rounded out the gown were like the domes of a mosque swathed in low hanging mists. She was a length of white, voluptuous glamour, a vibrant, alluring succession of curved invitation, warm, and soft, and yielding, yet firm fleshed enough to make Cragston forget all about nitro glycerine. Her breath sighed in his ear, and silky, bronze glinting tendrils caressed his cheeks as he kissed her throat and shoulders, letting his hands slip along the clinging silk that enhanced the luxury of her hips . . .

He knew without looking that her legs tapered in long, gracious lines . . .

For a moment he drew her closer, always keeping his face shadowed, plying her with caresses that avoided her lips; and it was not until he felt the sudden, possessive closing of her arms, the clinging, trembling pressure of her body and her inarticulate sighing murmurs that he dared seek her hungry mouth. . . .

NEITHER heard the furtive, stealthy stirring behind the bedroom door. But her languorous murmured endearments suddenly froze, and her terrified outcry blended with the click of a latch, and the snap of a switch. A blaze of light flooded the room.

Cragston was on his feet at a bound. The man whose broad shoulders blocked the doorway seemed as tall as an oil derrick, and as amiable as a meat axe. Behind him were two burly oil drillers.

Ben Simpson had not only picked an awkward moment to return, but had on the road picked up a revolver that yawned like a siege gun.

The golden-haired Mrs. Simpson was wrathful, defiant, and horrified. The last emotion registered when she saw that a total stranger had impersonated Sam. Mr. Simpson's expression likewise changed. His pistol wavered. Cragston hurled a pillow, and closed in before the amazed manager could realine his gun. But that rash charge was wasted. Simpson flung himself aside, dropped his weapon, and clipped Cragston a staggering punch.

"Steady, there," he barked. "I'm looking for a fellow by the name of Sam."

Cragston, recoiling from the impact, saw the sour smile and grim twinkle in Simpson's eyes.

"But you'll do just as well," he continued. Then turning to the doorway behind him, "All right, fellows, get an eyeful."

The two oil drillers appeared, cast a hungry glance at the blonde



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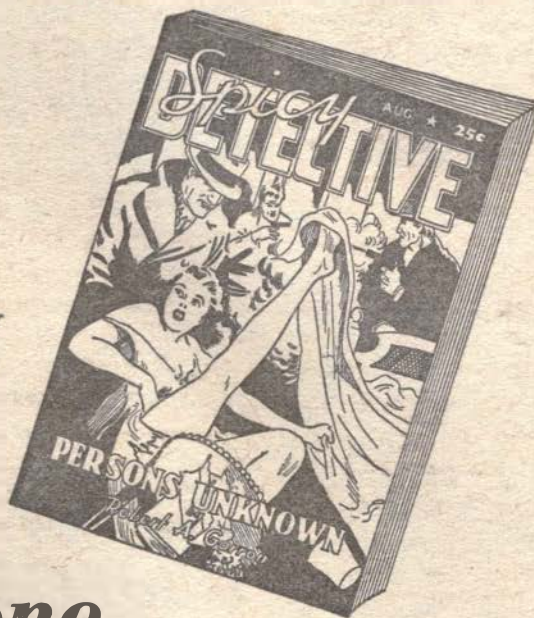
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beauty, and an envious one at Cragston.

"Give me your name, and then get the hell out," resumed Simpson. "You'll do just as well as the guy I expected to find here. I finally got the goods on her, and that's what I wanted. I brought a gun just in case the guy was tough."

"Cragston is the name, and believe it or not, I was looking for nitro glycerine."

The manager laughed sourly, but became more amiable.

"By God! You do look like that fellow Cragston I heard about tonight." For a long moment he eyed the intruder, frowning and twisting his tobacco stained mustache. Finally he said, "Young man, one good turn deserves another. You appear in court if I need you, and you can have all the damn' glycerine I've got in the plant. Is it a deal?"

"Sold!"

Neither Cragston nor Simpson lingered to listen to the lady's outraged outburst.

"Fact is," said the manager as they stepped into his car, "I was about to send a load out to Pawnee City, but they're not in such a hurry. The truck is at the plant, ready to ride. But you'll have to drive it. If Duval is on your trail, I'm damned if I'll have any of my men at the wheel. But if you want to take a chance, I'll gamble. The

truck's insured, so gimme your check."

And that settled that. All, except the sheriff who was still imprisoned in Cragston's car.

"Don't let him loose, until you've cashed my check," requested Cragston as he took the wheel of the red enameled car.

THE return took four hours, and shortly before dawn, Cragston cautiously nosed the nitro wagon up the steep ascent to the White Horse lease. As he pulled up, he heard the slap of the cable: they were hoisting the drill.

"What's the chances?" he demanded as he approached the derrick.

"She's gassing," was the reply, "but not a Chinaman's chance of bringing her in before the time's up. If you've got the soup, we might as well shoot the works. Probably ruin the well, but if she spouts a bucket of oil on the platform, you've done your stuff—and the lease is good."

Desperate logic; but the driller was right. Cragston turned to the nitro car. But as the engineer gripped the controls to swing the ponderous eight inch bit clear of the bore, a brusque voice from the graying shadows commanded, "Stick 'em up, Cragston. You, there, shut that engine down."

No chance to dive for his gun. The voice came from behind a

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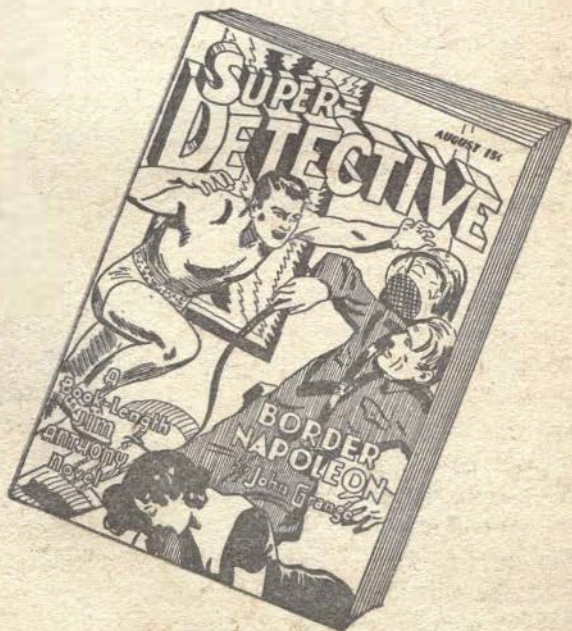
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sawed off shot gun that would blow the trio loose from their eye teeth. Cragston's teeth gritted and his face turned gray as the masked leader resumed, "Corey, grab that broad axe off the runway—steady there! Keep your hands up—don't ask for it!"

Cragston saw a flash of steel, and heard the chunk of the axe as it bit into the flexible drill cable. The enemy's play was sound; drop that heavy stem of steel to the bottom of the bore, and then let Cragstone spend his remaining hours fishing for it. And once the lease was forfeited, Duval could complete the fishing, and then bring the well in. No use pouring nitro into a bore blocked by that long bludgeon of metal.

Again the axe thudded home. Corey leaped back. The cable parted, free end twisting savagely upward, whistling to the crown block. Several tons of drill and stem pounded, crashed, and rattled in its half mile drop down a steel lined bore.

Cragston's lean face was haggard. His wrath had burned him out. He dropped his hands, but the masked leader ignored him. They knew that he was harmless. And as the gunners backed from the derrick, Cragston followed, staring into the graying dawn, dully wondering at the long sedan that was painfully edging over the hillcrest, as though it carried a load of eggs. He recognized the headlights. A Pierce. Marietta was returning to the White Horse lease; but why at that hour? Had she sold him out?

The query was interrupted by a subterranean bellowing which surged and thundered like a

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wrathful sea. For an instant raiders and crew stood like posts. Then they bolted. *White Horse Discovery Well Number One had been brought in by the terrific impact of drill and stem dropping twenty-seven hundred feet!* The men scattered like leaves in a whirlwind; but the driller, true to type, raced to the boiler and released jets of steam to drown the flames before the roaring gases caught fire.

And then Cragston remembered the deadly menace of the nitro wagon standing close to the derrick. A flying fragment of metal—

He bounced to the wheel, but a feminine voice checked him.

“Don’t bother”—it was Marietta, who was running from the Pierce parked fifty yards from the derrick. “That red car is empty.”

“What?”

“Yes. My brother and I followed you to Bartlesville, and while I played a few tricks on the watchman, he unloaded the nitro wagon, and put the stuff in our machine. Just as we were leaving, we saw you take the red car, but figured that we’d better let you carry on—some of Duval’s men might try to stop you, and your driving the empty nitro bus would throw them off the track.”

Cragston watched the driller tearing down the hill to get a crew to cap the roaring well.

“Do you mean you’ve got four quarts of nitro in that rattle trap?”

“I told you, I’d do my best to square things up,” Marietta said.

“You’ll have to spend the rest of your life,” declared Cragston, “squaring up a damn’ fool trick like that!”

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