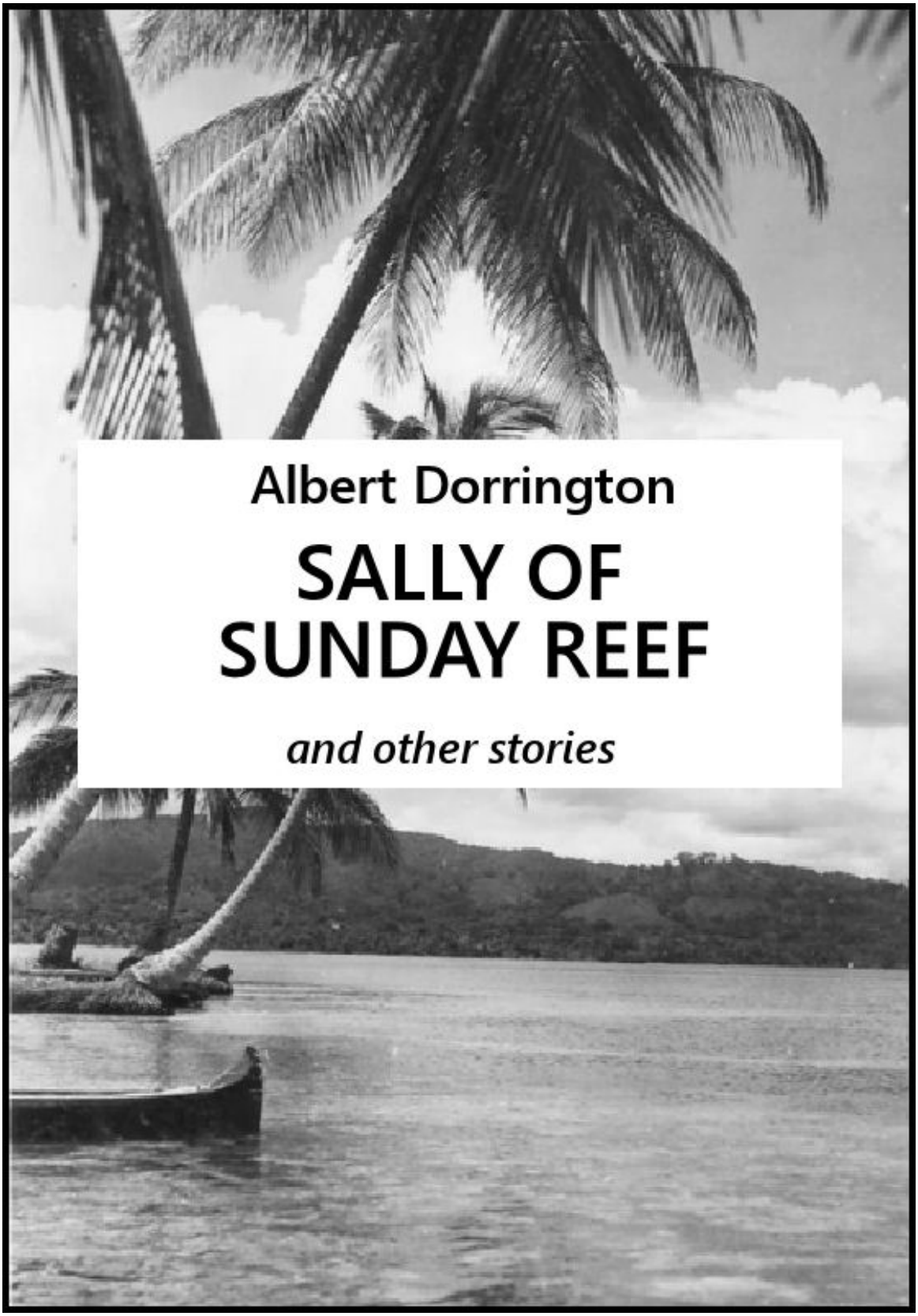

Albert Dorrington

SALLY OF SUNDAY REEF

and other stories

SALLY OF SUNDAY REEF

And Other Stories

Albert Dorrington

An original collection, produced and Edited by Terry Walker,
January 2024, from stories published in newspapers and magazines.

This volume contains 36 stories amounting to 151,000 words

Albert Dorrington

1874 - 1953

London-born Albert Dorrington adventured to Australia at about the age of 16, and held numerous jobs, travelling extensively as far north as the Torres Strait and the islands. He began writing for publication in the mid-1890s, mostly in the *Bulletin*. In 1907 he and his family moved to the UK where his literary career flourished. He produced a number of novels and many short stories, most of which are set in the more exotic parts of north Australia and the Islands.

Contents

1: An Outback Tableau

Sunday Times (Sydney, NSW) 11 Dec 1904

THE big drought played havoc with Barnsly's Combined Circus and Dramatic show. The animals experienced hard times when travelling from Bourke to Narangee. Waggon and ring horses may pick up a little feed when travelling an unfrequented stock route, but the performing wolf and lion must have meat. A clown may go unpaid for weeks, the ringmaster suffer acutely from beer-thirst, yet in the hot Australian noon it is not good that a caged tiger should call for half a sheep in vain. Even a bear becomes unsociable and impolite if his rations are interfered with.

When times were bad Barnsley was not particular about paying for his animals' food. If a sheep strayed near a wire fence he was not the man to let it stay there long— in fact, he had a mania for sheep that wandered near a fence, especially if his half-grown tiger showed signs of impatience or his performing dogs fell over each other when food was being served to the men in the waggons.

Probably a circus is the hungriest thing that can pass over a drought-stricken land, for it demands its grass and water, its beef and money. If a circus proprietor cannot pay his way his creditors have a doubtful remedy in seizing a bear or a wolf as part payment.

From a financial standpoint the most disastrous member of Barnsley's company was Jimmy Pierrot, the clown. It was said that he had never raised a laugh among the audience. There was a tremendous sorrow in his voice, a tragic mournfulness which Barnsley, shaking his finger, said: 'They're threatening to throw rabbits at you. If they start that game we'll have to send you on in a birdcage.'

That night a large crowd filled the tent, it was a silent, ominous crowd, shearers, cattlemen, and drovers filled the orchestra stalls, and each man carried an ominous looking bundle under his coat. Barnsley stroked his chin-reflectively. He foresaw trouble. His bush experience taught him that when a show filled under such melancholy circumstances disaster was at hand. He had heard of shows being wrecked in the back-blocks by disappointed patrons, and he saw by the look in the cattlemen's eyes that it would require judgment and discretion to save his property and his face all along the line.

Barnsley's posters depicted thrilling scenes from the life of Ned Kelly and Capt. Starlight, which, owing to the smallness of his company, he was unable to produce. But Barnsley hoped for the best, and counted the piled-up shillings with great fortitude; hoping for the best was the keynote of his philosophy.

A red-bearded man entered the tent, carrying a villainous-looking bag. He pushed his way into the centre of the crowd, and addressed it in a loud voice:

'Good evenin', byes,' he said. There was a lonely look in his eyes as though he had been gazing at bad shows and dead sheep for ages. 'Byes,' he repeated. 'Good evenin'.'

At 8 o'clock a curtain wriggled across an elevated platform, revealing an Australian camp-fire scene, with gullies and gum trees 'painted in the background. A florid gentleman in satin shorts— he bore a striking resemblance to Barnsley— sang nine verses about 'The Rocking Horse that Stole the Summer Cup'. The audience listened coldly. A sudden draught of air blew the paper moon across the gully into the orchestra; the redbearded man picked it up and passed it over the footlights with marked politeness.

He turned to the crowd and folded his arms as if to conceal something he was holding under his coat. 'Byes, ye all know me. Oi'm Rafferty that sthruck the roof off a thravellin' dispinsary. Oi'm Rafferty that sewed buttons on the corn dochtor's cheek, leavin' him widout a shelther savin' three testimonials an' some bunnion exthract. Look ut here, byes, Oi're here to dale wutthe circus-man this noight !'

'Ear, 'ear, Raff !' A large hand waved encouragingly from the stalls. Rafferty nodded and his chest heaved. At that moment Barnsley appeared in purple tights, carrying a huge club in his right hand.

'Gentlemen,' he began, severely, 'you have mistaken this palace of refinement for a dog-show. If the person with the voice and the decayed vegetables under his coat will step up here I will endeavor to smooth him over I will return him to you within fifty seconds.'

Barnsley waved the club convincingly and with science. Rafferty passed his hand over his bulging coat and drew himself up regally.

'Circus-man, this enloightened assimbly has been thradjuced under misriprisentations. 'Twas printed that your clown wud make a cat laff. Bring out your clown, circus-man, an' make me laff.'

Barnsey paced the stage in deep abstraction. Good-tempered remarks had become savagely critical. The crowd resented the show as an imposition. They wanted to see Ned Kelly fighting against great odds; they yearned to see his immortal saucepan.

'Turn on the clown!' shouted a man from Bourke. 'We'll make him laugh.'

'The clown!' thundered Rafferty. 'Tis years since I laffed.'

Barnsley advanced to the footlights.

'Gentlemen, I must appeal to your sympathies. My star is out. My principal lady deserted me at Cobar, and, married the fat man belonging to another show. They are now on their miserable way to Melbourne. Mr. Jimmy Pierrot

and his charming wife are at present suffering a bereavement, and I am left to face the music. Napoleon crossed the Alps and got Moscowed, Barnsley came to Bourke and got euchred. Gentlemen,' he repeated, pathetically. 'I'm fairly euchred.'

A favorable tremor passed through the crowd.

'Go on with yer speech,' said a shearer, sullenly. 'Spit it out.'

'I will if that long-bodied Hibernian will keep his dead vegetables under his coat.' Barnsley crossed the stage and shook his finger at Rafferty.

'Bring out the clown; I'll rayson no more wut you. I'll be made to laff.'

Rafferty rolled forward with the air of a vandal; he glared at the stage front as though about to tear it asunder.

'Bring out the clown.'

Barnsley retreated to the wings. A whisper followed, then a jam tin struck him on the mouth. He held up his hand p'rotestingly; blood trickled over his fingers. Someone said, 'Give him a chance, boys.'

Barnsley retreated to the painted backscene which screened the large housewaggon behind.

'Bring out the clown !' thundered Rafferty.

Barnsley reached forward suddenly and snatched aside the calico scene and disclosed the open house-waggon in the rear. A smoking lamp swung from the roof; a girl half-clothed in spangled gossamer was crouching on a truckle bed. In her outstretched arms lay the figure of a lifeless child. In a corner of the waggon sat Jimmy Pierrot, the clown, sullen-lipped and brooding. The scarred lines under his whitened cheeks might have been the furrows of tears. Shells were scattered about the waggon floor; some silken togs of better days draped the woodwork. There was a gilt-topped enchanter's wand and a broken mandolin. The girl dancer moved uneasily, the 'Sh, s'h, s'h' of the crowd made her look up. Someone had extinguished the tent lamps, and she craned forward until her ear caught the sound of laboring breaths. 'Oh!' She leaped aside with the tiny figure locked in her arms. Then, limned against the darkness beyond the footlights, she saw the figure of Rafferty with his right hand uplifted.

'You coward ' She flung herself sobbing upon the bed. Barnsley whipped back the curtain and faced the crowd.

'Gentlemen, you've seen the clown and his little wife. They're both young, they're only nippers, and they're facing their first bit of trouble. The same thing might have happened to me or you.'

He paused to wipe the blood from his lips. 'Say the word, gentlemen, and I'll send them both on to do their turns. Say the word.'

Within two minutes, the show was empty. It was known soon after that Rafferty fought nine rounds with Constable Hogan at the back of the Shearers' Arms. Rafferty had to fight someone, and Hogan, on or off duty, looked upon fighting as one of his perquisites.

Next day Jimmy Pierrot and his little wife were billed for a benefit. It was New Year's eve, and the house was packed— men paid a shilling extra for the privilege of standing on each other's feet.' Rafferty was observed in a far corner with meat on his eye.

After the performance Barnsley withdrew to the house-waggon, accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Pierrot. He handed the little lady a bottle of wine.

'We'll knock the funny business out of our programme in future,' he said, cheerfully. 'Great Scott ! That big doll of yours knocked 'em off their feet. They mistook it for a dead baby. And the chumps never inquired about the funeral. Pass the bottle, Jimmy. A happy New Year, my boy!'

Two days later Barnsley's show moved along the line. A drover passing with a mob of cattle heard Mrs. Pierrot singing in the waggon.

_____

2: The Log of a Bullhead Shark

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser 13 Dec 1905

TO begin with, my people are a sour-tempered lot; if it wasn't for old Uncle Jack and his jokes, the family smile would have a hard time keeping its teeth wet. Since my earliest recollections I have always been a young bull-head shark. I first saw water and sky near Twofold Bay, where the 'whale-busters' help to fatten a lot of my brothers.

I have met the big herds 'blasting' off Cape Dromedary; I have raced under their mottled jaws, swum and frolicked within their ten-knot thrash, and played the giddy sea-urchin from Port Jackson to Cape Howe.

I wouldn't like to be a whale; I'd sooner I be a prawn or a black bream. The whale is the deep water fool, all blow and no bite. Uncle Jack— he is known from the Bomberoo to the Hawkesbury— cultivated a taste for whale beef when quite a youngster. He could scent the blood from a harpoon-flange, and make a feast before the 'buster's' flenching knives and 'cutting- tackle' got to work on the wide ribbons of blubber. He was generally in at the death of a bull whale; round and round the big thrashing mass he would fly, flashing under the oil-drip, I guzzling and gorging, his eye always fixed I on the 'buster's' terrible flenching knives.

'Rocko,' a Coogee gray nurse, got stranded last season, playing the goat at a kill off Eden. 'Rocko' never would wait until the harpooner had sighted his gun. Behind the gun is a well or bucket from which the rope comes tearing as soon as the gun is fired. 'Rocko' didn't know this, and the rope slacked and buckled, tearing him to pieces.

Whale fat makes us lazy. Prawns are good appetisers after you have been rolling all night in the glare of the South Head light. My sister and I used to make it lively for the whale calves. They are silly, inoffensive splodgers. Uncle Jack taught us the trick of baiting calves. It's good sport in deep water, but you want a wise old stager behind, like Uncle, to plan the attack.

'I'll look after the old woman,' he'd say, 'while you youngsters skirmish under her lee flipper. If she hits you with her tail, my son, you'll require a poultice as big as a hen-coop to straighten you.'

I would begin the attack by ducking under mamma whale, but in a flash she'd drop 50 feet to the sea floor. The calf would sink by her side; then my sister would play shark-poker and raise the old lady with a sharp nip under the port fluke. Uncle Jack would be on top, his shadow standing sharp as a knife in the sunlight. All of a sudden he would skim down with m a savage whirr, and as

he bit and tore, right and left, blood and oil would rise to the surface, so would the bitten calf. Ask mother if you don't believe me.

Uncle Jack got very rusty whenever the Green Cape sharks walked into the fun. They are the laziest, hungriest lot of mud loafers this side of Norfolk Island. When the weather was hot, and the dry westerlies scalded the face of the water, the young sharks, pointers, hammer noses, and bullheads, would make for old Bluey's Bower, about a mile from the Spit Punt. Bluey is an old, blind shark, full of yarns about Sydney Harbour. He is almost as old as a full-grown whale, and as savage as a sword fish. He remembers the *Dunbar*,* and the night she broke up. He was scouting off the Gap until the heavy seas smashed open the loose barrels of pork and beef.

**1857; 121 of the 122 on board the three-masted cargo and passenger clipper-ship died when it crashed into the rocks at Sydney's South Head. It is still the worst peace-time marine distaster in NSW history. (Terry Walker)*

Although Bluey is quite blind, he follows the young sharks around Middle Head. He will sand-root, and play possum if he hears a young dog barking on the beach. A lot of nice young dogs have never been registered on account of old Bluey.

The trainers at Randwick used to send racehorses to the Coogee Beach for swimming exercise. They were delicate creatures with tender legs and hoofs. Bluey rushed through the surf one morning, and dragged a beautiful stallion into deep water. Its skin was soft as the throat of a seal, and it fought and plunged until a big wave rolled it over.

Bluey prefers a fat, comfortable, brewer's horse. Thoroughbreds are hard eating— all the flavour has been galloped out of them, he says. I was never much of a sand scraper myself. I hadn't the courage to sneak around the piers or surf at Bondi, nipping children's legs. The beach always frightens me. Some of the shoals on this coast would shave the skin off an ironclad.

Sydney Harbour is all right when you've earned your navigator's certificate. I've been hit with a dredge bucket, flogged almost to ribbons by the propeller of an outgoing tramp. If you put a Papuan or Torres Strait shark into Port Jackson, he'd be like a wild nigger dropped in the middle of George-street. The traffic would break his heart. If he dodged the punts and paddle steamers he'd break his dorsal gaff tops against a bridge trestle or a gun-boat.

The Dago fishermen are a bad-tempered lot from a bullhead's point of view. They put a lot of simple faith in their iron hooks, pork baits, and old clothes-lines. You'd think the sea was made for them if you saw them at work trawling. Uncle Jack, thank goodness, knows how 10 deal with trawling nets.

He waits until they're hauling in the catch and then he takes a stroll through the net and winds it round the North Head; ask mother.

Uncle Jack knows every fish in the harbour. I have seen him round up a shoal of wandering mullet, like a sheep dog, and turn them back to their spawning ground. He will follow a derelict schnapper or jew fish until he satisfies himself that it doesn't intend to leave the Australian coast for good. Uncle keeps tally of the mullet steals; he likes to know how the youngsters are coming on.

No one could induce Uncle to visit the Glebe Island abattoirs. He liked the taste of the water, but the butchers are turbulent fellows. One day, he was lying off the island getting ready for a bullock's head to go astray. Somebody threw a rock at him, and— oh cuttlefish and prawn: a half-naked slaughterman took a running jump off the pier and landed feet first on his back. Uncle got a terrible scare; he never outgrew the nail marks the slaughterman's boots left on his shoulder.

Next to butchers and working dredges Uncle hates naval manoeuvres; things are always going off and disturbing his nerves. Big gun practice gives him neuralgia if he doesn't take a 30 foot dive and go to sleep until the noise abates.

Last year Uncle Jack and mother were scouting off South Head, inquiring after a shoal of mullet that had gone astray from Balmoral the night before. Uncle was poking round a pile of drift weed when the Thing floated past and out to sea like a lost launch. Mother followed it suspiciously.

'Bite it and see if it's nice,' said Uncle sorrowfully.

'All right, Jack,' answered mother. 'But if it starts to pull my fin, I hope you won't forget that I'm a poor widow with a large family.'

Mother sailed in quietly and said 'Good evening, sir,' to the Thing.

The Thing didn't answer.

'Looks like a whale, Jack!' shouted mother. She rushed in and bit it somewhere in the middle. Then she rolled over with tears in her eyes.

'What's the matter?' demanded Uncle huskily. 'Cramps ?'

'No, my teeth slipped,' cried mother. 'It's like biting a grindstone. I've got a pain in the jaw.'

Uncle side-stroked towards the Thing, then backed away suspiciously. 'Looks like one of those new racing sausages that bustle about on Saturdays,' he said. 'I don't like the look of it.'

Suddenly the water grew white near Uncle; an old cat-shark swept by, then swirled away violently, making a jump that almost upset mother.

'Hulloa!' shouted Uncle, 'what's the matter, Mrs. Cat? Have you seen the new sausage-fish over there? Go and get your teeth into it.'

'Sausage-fish!' screamed the cat-shark, 'what do you call yourself, Jack Bullhead! If that thing happens to bump a rock— Oh my goodness!' She stood off about two hundred yards spluttering and blowing. 'Hoosht! It's the missing torpedo!'

Uncle Jack and mother took soundings at ten fathoms.

'I've heard a lot about torpedoes,' panted mother. 'I hope those naval lieutenants won't allow it to go fooling round the coast. It's disgraceful.'

Uncle and mother slipped away towards Port Hacking.

'Speaking of food,' said Uncle, 'I've swallowed pebbled and pieces of sea-horse, but I haven't quite recovered from the last Christmas pudding I picked up. A woman dropped it from a picnic boat at Clontarf. "Good gracious!" she said, "What shall I do?"

'I wasn't in a hurry to take it; you never know where a big, fat hook is hiding. But when the woman began to wring her hands, I took it as a guarantee that she wasn't an ordinary fisherman; so I closed on her pudding with a gulp.'

'Serve you right if it had been full of dynamite!' cried mother. 'A bullhead shark ought to know better than eat Christmas pudding.'

'Don't know about dynamite,' gurgled Uncle Jack. 'I felt for hours after as if I'd swallowed a gasworks. You could have hauled me ashore with a schnapper line. It was as bad as when I swallowed the tin of kerosene. The oil wasn't so disagreeable, but I fell into a kind of kerosene delirium. I fancied I was a champion motor-launch. I raced a police-boat from Watson's Bay to Pinchgut, and walked in.'

'Kerosene is a fine stimulant,' said Uncle, sorrowfully. A shoal of mullet sped by like an army of silver leaves. They swirled southward in half-moon formation. As the left-wing raced round, a couple of Bondi 'Tiger' sharks rose inside the hollow, and drove then back toward Watson's Bay.

'Those Bondi brutes are always shepherding the mullet!' cried mother. 'When they are not mud-scraping they are interfering with other people's food.'

'Come away,' whispered Uncle. 'The tide is shifting. I could do with a bit of garfish for supper.'

Mother sulked in the wake of an outgoing steamer. 'I can't get over that mullet-drive,' she said, angrily. 'If I could work that torpedo, I'd give those two Bondi tigers a lift.'

A dog-fish came into sight, crossed the steamer's bows, and winked boldly at mother as he slipped past.

'Whaling season on at Eden?' inquired Uncle Jack.

'Don't go in for whales now,' answered the dog-fish drily. 'I don't mind bumping a crayfish or a handful of prawns, but just now I'm off whales. Ugh!'

'Tastes differ,' sneered Uncle. 'Perhaps you'd like a bit of sausage-fish. There's one lying off the South Head.'

The dog-fish dived and circled for a moment.

'If you could spare a bit of salt, I'd be very glad,' he said after a while.

'What do you want with salt?' demanded Uncle, sternly.

'Oh, it's always safe to drop a bit on a torpedo's tail!' he shouted, pleasantly. 'I've seen sausage-fish before to-day. So long.'

And he was gone like a flash before mother could give him a wipe with her tail.

'These dog-fish get up pretty early,' snorted Uncle Jack. 'I often wonder how they manage to keep themselves wet.'

3: The Wild Pig's Story.

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser 7 Feb 1906

THE FIRST MONTHS of my life were full of hardships and strange terrors. I had four sisters, small and wiry, and fleet as horses. My mother was greatly harassed at times. She would drag us from our sleep near the creek-bed, and skelter along the banks until she found deeper mud and softer rooting ground.

My mother hated to be called a wild pig. She claimed descent from a Berkshire prize-winner. She was not like the comfortable looking farm pigs that live in sties, and are fed on milk and fruit. Her face was gaunt and eager, and her feet were hard as iron through racing over treeless ridges and rock-strewn gullies.

Our first trouble was with the dingoes. Two of my little sisters were snatched away when they were but a month old. There were other wild pigs roaming the black soil flats. Old Furris the boar, with the terrible tusks, was supposed to protect us. My grandmother had run wild, and put a tarnish on our Berkshire name.

Running wild had made my mother bad tempered. The hard bush, the fibrous roots, and the scurrying from place to place make pigs tough and savage; they learn to gallop like horses, and grow tusks. My father had tusks a foot long. He was a great fighter. He would keep us awake at night telling how he had settled a couple of dingoes that came after my little sisters. The dingoes were cowards, he said, backstair fighters, heel breakers, and baby-stealers.

The wild sow with the large family has a hard life on the ranges and flats The Moree farmers hunted us from the water; they trapped and killed us until Furris the boar clashed his tusks and swore he would get a man on the ground and level up old scores some day.

We were not afraid of the brumbies that grazed on the razorbacks, and thundered through the gullies. They never stayed to look at mother or her five little children. Neither were the rock wallabies afraid of us, although one of them made off in a desperate hurry when mother asked him one day what he was laughing at.

Nothing that jumps in the Australian bush dare look at an old wild boar. He is the best fighter and greatest warrior south of the Dividing Range. We have never met the Cape York buffaloes, but Furris could look after us if we did. I have seen him go through a pack of dingoes like a knife through cheese. Men are not always near when these fights happen. The dingo is too sly, and the wallaby and brumby are too timid to allow a man to get close.

The wild dogs are deceitful fighters. While the boar was chasing the pack one day, half a dozen loping mongrels ran down the young suckers and killed them in a few seconds.

My mother is proud of her Berkshire descent. She is often overcome by a desire to live in a comfortable sty where the food is placed in troughs ready, to eat. Whenever she sees her reflection in a creek she sighs and runs away. Her bones have grown large, her snout long and vicious, her teeth sharp as nails, her legs bony as a dog's.

She said her grandmother weighed half a ton, and could hardly walk. Furris the boar laughs at the description of her grandmother. He tells her that a pig of that kind would die in the ranges. The dingoes would harass her, and she would die of thirst. Still, my mother longs for a comfortable sty and a cosy corner for her children. She yearns for a drink of sour milk, or a bucket of overripe peaches, or a bit of corn. She has heard of pineapple and clotted cream— her grandmother put on ten stone in a dairy sty once, and it makes our mouths water when we hear of potatoes and meal.

We have an everlasting enemy known as the Wild Pig man. The rabbit trappers leave us alone, but he is always trying to create a market for us. In one week he caught thirty pigs, chopped off their tusks, and trucked thein to the city.

There was a commotion at the auction yard when they were put up. One pork butcher asked if they belonged to the ancient family of rhinoceroses. Another said they might make good bacon if they were fed carefully on dynamite or a little shrapnel, something that would break up the hard sinews and other obstructions. The consignment was a failure. They were sent to the Zoo, but even, the lions sulked when they were presented with an old bush tusker. It was like biting through an ironclad, they said.

Furris the boar advised my mother not to let the dingoes bustle her and steal her suckers. One day a whole pack followed us. They gambolled along the creek, pretending they were playful and innocent. One of them, a stiff-eared pig-stealer, trotted up and asked mother if she would like to play a game of hide and seek among the boulders. He offered to mind her four little pigs while she played. Just then Furris the boar dashed up and lifted Jack dingo into the middle of the creek. The others yapped round to see what was the matter, but the boar broke them

When we were two months old my mother declared that she was tired of her aimless, wandering life. She could never thrive and put on weight in the bush. The last straw came when a fire swept across the country, driving the wallabies, dingoes, pigs, and brumbies over the creek.

My mother lay in the mud, and we crept beside her. The fire swept over us in red crackling sheets; and the bristles on my back curled with the heat, and the sheep— the silly grey-faced sheep— ran into corners and were frizzled up.

'The sheep are sillier than rabbits,' I said.

'Keep your head in the mud,' grunted my mother. 'You'd be roast pork in two minutes if it wasn't for me.'

The dingoes escaped; they always do. Not a wild pig of our acquaintance was injured in any way.

One night, about a week after the bush fire, my mother took us to a pig-farm owned by a man. There was an American log fence around the place, but we climbed over. Some of my brothers were lean enough to have won a steeplechase. We trotted in a body until we came to an elegant sty. My mother thrilled.

'Look!' she whispered, 'at the ladies and gentlemen inside.'

We peeped through the logs and saw several large white pigs asleep. One of them, a portly fellow with a short curly tail, got up and looked at us.

'Who are you?' he asked in a loud voice. 'What is your business?'

'We are bush pigs, sir,' answered my mother tremulously. 'I have come a long way. I have a number of small children, and we are tired and hungry.'

The fat pig examined us through the logs. His left ear flicked once or twice; he appeared to be very sorry for us.

'Your case interests me,' he said huskily. 'But we really don't care for wild pigs about here. We are owned by a gentleman named Bill Adams. 'If he hears your voice he'll make bacon of you in a jiffy.'

My mother protested that she was not up to bacon mark just then. She asked if there was a vacant sty to sleep in. The other pigs rose in a body and urged us to go away. But my mother was determined not to return to the bush and the dingoes and the hard indigestible roots that buckle and twine under the earth.

'Think of the bleak ranges and the wild dogs,' she said to us. 'The frost-covered boulders and the spear grass that gave me indigestion,' she whimpered. 'Oh, why did my grandmother run wild!'

'My good lady,' snorted an elderly white pig, 'for the sake of your family return to your pleasant haunts in the bush. Bill Adams bought, a gun last month, and he simply can't stand wild pigs!'

My mother shook her ears with great determination and walked, across the yard, looking for a vacant sty. One after another the farm pigs rose and made cutting remarks about our starved appearance. Each pig referred to his own weight and points, and then advised us to go.

'I hope you ain't a relation of mine,' grunted a young imported American hog. 'And if you dare to say that I'm your nephew, old lady I'll send for the police.'

'Nephew of mine!' All my mother's Berkshire blood rose within her. She glared at the young American through the logs. 'You! Why, my people were taking prizes all over the world when your father and mother were squeaking in a Chicago pork factory.'

With a cry of satisfaction she suddenly ran into an unoccupied sty and gathered us around her. It was a nice cool place with a trough of water at one end, and a bed of clean straw at the other. At daybreak a red-faced man wheeling a barrow across the yard stopped suddenly and stared at us open mouthed. Then another man ran up and looked at us,' and laughed.

'More grunters,' he said in a terrible voice. 'Bones on 'em like racehorses.'

'Bit of the Berkshire about the old woman,' said the man with the barrow. 'Funny how they put on bone and snout running wild. There's enough hoof and hair on 'em to start a brush and glue factory!'

'Feed 'em, and they'll cure and smoke all right.'

'Bit tough,' laughed the other. 'They'd break un a steel sausage machine. Still, they might blow out and soften on a milk diet,' he said reflectively.

'Hear that?' whispered my mother to us. 'A milk diet!'

Later in the morning a boy threw a bucket of turnips and pumpkins into our trough, mixed with a little corn. Mother spoke to me confidentially with a turnip in her mouth.

'They've decided to keep us,' she said. 'Wait till the milk comes, and you'll see me fill out. I'll show them what the real Berkshire strain is like!' When the first bucket of sour milk did come, mother lay down with tears in her eyes.

'My children,' she said, 'this is the turning points of your careers. Your future is assured. Thrive and let the scales speak for me and yourselves.'

The other white pigs never speak to us. They call us wild hogs and racehorses.

'Keep your temper,' says my mother. 'Your time is coming. In three months you won't be able to walk across the yard!'

Mother slightly underrated us. Within eight weeks a man came and took our photographs.

_____

4: The Little Zoo Rat

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser 14 March 1906

NOW, a waterside rat is never certain what a seagull will do. On a wet reef or shoal end they will fight and thrash us to pieces— if a piece of meat is in question. We avoid the squawking gulls, and hug the piers and sniff the disc-rigged shore lines leading to the big, fat grain ships.

To succeed outside the sewers a rat must be a judge of ships and their probable destination, or he may get left in a cold-water port. Two or three years ago Jaka, a grey faced Sydney rat, stowed away on a cosy-looking boat that smelt of flour and cheese, and it landed him among the drift ice at the South Pole. It was an expedition ship, and when it arrived at the first ice barrier the expedition cat chased Jaka out of the warm bold on to a naked, wind-bitten berg. It was very unpleasant for the little Sydney rat sitting on the floe with the Pole wind stiffening his whiskers. I want to see a ship's papers before settling among the cheeses in the forehold.

One day I fell asleep in a load of hay, and it landed me at the Zoo. I found comfortable quarters at the back of the elephant shed. The clink-clinkerty of the picket chain was very soothing.

The Zoo rats are lazy. They sprawl and loaf about, trying to imitate the fat tiger and leopards. The big animals make better comrades than the cunning house pussies.

The large cat-headed tigers dozing in their cages are not half so dangerous as they look. I lived with a young Bengal for nine months. One wet, hungry night I crept into his cage after a morsel of bone that clung between the floor boards. He was asleep, and I ran in under the iron gate and snatched it away. I noticed that the Bengal's ears twitched slightly. There was another crumb of meat . almost under his big, front paw. His eyes were closed, but I measured him ear and lip and claw. Then, with my little heart rap, rap, rapping, I slipped in and mouthed the morsel from under his brindled jaw. Then— he opened his eyes and looked at me. It was like a pair of arc-lamps burning me through and through. I dared not move; a long, hook-like claw flashed out.

'Please, sir,' I squeaked, 'Oh, please, sir— I — '

The young Bengal winked, and as I stared into his big, green eyes, I felt that the claws would slice me in halves.

'What do you want, little fellow?' He yawned over me; it was like a red volcano with the top broken off. His tongue was covered with ridges, sharp as bayonets. 'What did you scratch my toe for?' he asked.

'Please, Mr. Tiger,' I whimpered, 'I mistook your house for the pumas.'

'Don't puma me,' he snarled. 'Don't start mistaking me for a South American animal. The puma is a nice, warm fellow in his way, but there's a slight difference in our biting power.' Then the young Bengal rose slowly and stood over his drinking-trough. The cold water splashed over me as he lapped'. He yawned and smote the bars idly, until the cage front hummed. 'I like the ring of iron bars,' he growled; 'It sings of the strength within me.'

I passed out to the elephant's quarters where the hay is sweet and the fresh-cut grass lies deep in the far corner. Sally, the drab coloured elephant, pretends she isn't afraid of me. Whenever I dash in under the hay she will flick her ears and start rocking like a ship at anchor. Then she will fuss like an old lady, and fill the shed with strange sighs. And wait till I tell you. She blew a bucketful of dust over me one day. I thought I'd been hit by a sandspout and a torpedo. I'm only five inches long, but I was very angry with that elephant. She was staring, down at me with her big head all over flies.

'Don't play that tune twice, Mrs. Leatherface!' I said hotly. 'A smaller rat than me bit through a beam once, and it let down the show on a bigger elephant than you.'

Funk! She was trembling all over.

'I meant to blow it over the camel,' she said. 'He likes dust baths. I have to give him one every night. It makes him think he's at home in the desert again.'

I ran out and hid myself until the keeper had gone to bed. Then I scampered over to where she was lying, and pinched the tender lip of her trunk. I pinched it hard, too hard, and before I could let go I was swinging up and down like a straw in a cyclone. You never heard such a trumpeting. If I'd been inside her trunk instead of outside she'd have blown me over the Randwick Racecourse.

'If you bump me against that beam, Sally, you'll be sorry,' I squeaked. 'My blood will be on your fat head. Stop the circus, and I'll come down.'

You've got to burn feathers under some of these lady elephants before you can cool their hysterics. I took a flying, leap over her brow, bit her umbrellas— she calls them ears— and skipped into the hay. 'There's a rat worrying Sally,' said the head keeper next morning. 'Look at her toes and the lip of her trunk. I'll put a cheese trap under the bran box to-night.' 'Cheese under the bran box,' I said to myself. 'Why doesn't he plant a gas works in the collection box?'

I ran off to the dingo house. They are sour, unlikeable fellows those dingoes, always plotting, and whining, and licking the cage bars. Still, it doesn't do for a small rat, like me to run into a dingo-house looking for scraps. Their appetites keep them busy, and they never go to sleep. Some wild dogs are good ratters, but I don't want to get into the habit of being killed— not by a stiff-eared, yellow-headed, blackguard, anyway. And aren't they cunning!

'Good morning, Sheep Fat,' I said, peeping into their house. They pretended not to see me.

'Good day, Dingbats,' I squealed. Didn't they flare up! Yellow Jack, a narrow-hipped ruffian from the Baloo River, jumped at the bars.

'Look here little fellow,' he whined, 'I'll grease the padlock with you if—'

'Yes,' yapped the others. 'The insolent little biscuit thief.'

'It's a long time between sheep drives,' I said pleasantly. 'Scalps are going up. Good day! I'll telephone for the dog trapper.' And off I scampered to the Wonga pigeons' quarters. Common hen eggs are all very well, but give me the yolk of a pigeon egg. I'd sooner be hit with the lion's tail than miss the Wonga's nest at laying time. Birds' nest are very safe things to handle. It takes a smart fellow to lay poison inside an egg. And a little rat has to watch the bread and butter these times.

Those kangaroo rats put on side when I go by. They're just off the grass, you know. One of them asked me yesterday if I liked cheese. The dear little gumsucker! I promised to send him a pound of ice for his birthday.

There's a lot of lip about the camel. If I could borrow his thirst I'd use it for washing clothes. Camels don't like rats. I've watched a big oont hoof the hay and kneel on it just to see if I was asleep underneath. Camel hair makes a pretty nest, so does scarlet parrot feathers, stiffened with a bit of lion's mane. Horse hair tickles the nose, and makes me sneeze violently— that gives me away to the Zoo cat.

I have said 'Good day' to the tiger, and the lion often keeps his tail still while I clean up the bone-crumbs from his floor. I can wash my face or drink at the puma's trough, and say 'Hullo!' to the stork— I've heard, that his bill is like a pair of scissors. Wish they'd ask him to cut the lion's hair.

But I am really afraid of the white Gulf owl with the moon eyes and the terrible beak. They brought it from Queensland, a mourn ago, and put it next to a lazy, yelping, cuckoo. I nearly ordered my funeral the night I rushed through its cage on my way to the swamp quails. I thought a steamboat was hooting I names after me. Hoot! hoot! I saw it tear a mouse to bits and go to sleep again.

I ran past the chained eagle the other day. I told him his claws would. make good harrows . and I asked him why he didn't go on the land. He ruffled his feathers and blinked at me like an old poet.

'Land!' he cried, 'it's years since I saw any. They've got me in the dust now.' He jumped and reached upwards with his terrible pinions. 'I'd give something to stretch myself under this grey sky. My wings ache for a draught of wet, cloud air. I've seen the sunrays spill over the mountain edge and light up the sea. The eagle of all birds knows the joys of loneliness. I have watched this bit

of a world spinning like a big blood-drop in space in the dark of morning. I have vaulted beyond the black cloud drifts to see the sun's rim pluming the Pacific. Forest and range are crossed in the beating of a wing. Down, down, in a world of grass the lambs rolled like grey wind-blown scarfs. Hukihuk! Shrrr! a sweep, a downward snatch, and a lamb is swinging upward while the blood drops leaped from my claw. Falcon, hawk, and crow steer away at sound of my voice.'

The old eagle preened himself, and his leg chain clanked wearily.

'I was stricken with a charge of gunshot and brought here,' he said hoarsely. 'No more sky, no more the lonely drinking pool in the hollow of the highest peak. All day I must listen to the yapping of those dingoes opposite and the squawking of parrots. They mean well, but a little well-placed poison would be a noble thing. The bush was the abode of peace and silence until the dogs and parrots came.'

I felt sorry for the lonely eagle. I can't understand a sensible bird wanting to rush through the clouds wetting his feathers. And there's no fun in flying to the top of a mountain to get a drink. Isn't the creek good enough?

I never play jokes on the monkeys. I can give Sally the elephant points, and teach her how to open a bag of chaff, but I have never arrived at the blind side of a monkey. Talk about brains! I've seen three of them surround an old, blind rat and call the keeper. A lot of us remember Jacob, the Orang Utan. He used to help the keepers set rat and mouse traps. I've seen him open a gate, with a key, and whitewash the porcupines' house— I wonder the trades-unions didn't complain.

Yesterday, a little dingo pup asked me to share a bone. The others were asleep at the far end of the cage. But you never know these wild dogs. The moment I accepted the pup's invitation, the crowd was up in a flash.

'Gentlemen,' I said, 'your legs are too long for the rat-killing business.'

They bit and fell over each other trying to get me. I was out of the cage in a jiffy.

These white owls and dingoes are a bad lot. But not so bad as the cat. You never know where she will turn up. She has a broad, wicked head and needle claws. She traps sparrows in the grass and climbs like a monkey. I wish they'd hang a bell round her neck. She's always doing the right thing at the right moment. When a pigeon dies she follows the attendant the moment he takes it from the cage. I used to get a lot of dead birds once.

About a month ago I ran in the cage after a plumed coquette from the Murrumbidgee River; it was lying in a corner, its wings spread out. I dragged it to the bars, but, before I could pull it out, an old man cuckoo nearly scalped me.

'You little monster!' he yelped, 'get out.'

'Don't lose your feathers, Cooky,' I said. 'Keep a few for Sunday.'

That cuckoo had a beak like a tin-opener.

The keepers have been telling the Zoo cat about me. She pounced on me the other night in the elephant's hay. Sally was watching with her big, blanket ears thrown back, and every time I dodged back into the hay she would lift the whole bundle with her trunk and scatter it, while the cat skirmished round. Given a fair chance. I can beat the best cat that ever walked. But an elephant and cat take a lot of crowding out. As fast as I covered myself with hay Sally would spill the whole lot in front of Puss.

'You big coward,' I screamed. 'Why don't you give me a chance?'

'Hoosht!' trumpeted Sally. 'We've got you this time. I've been afraid to eat a mouthful of hay the last three months for fear of swallowing you. Hoosht! Now's your chance, my pretty Puss,' she said to the cat.

I wasn't to be beat. With the cat almost on my tail, I skipped to Sally's trunk, and ran over her forehead squeaking. The cat mewed round and round the elephant's feet, but she wasn't game to follow me.

'Whoof! Hoosht!' screamed Sally. 'If you dare run inside my ear, I'll blow you out with a bucket of water.'

'Mew!' said the cat. I sprang to an overhead beam, slipped under the roof, and scooted.

Puss cornered me next night at the back of the camel shed. It was a race for life across the yard.

'I've got you now, you bragging squeaker,' she said. 'All the king's elephants and all the king's hay won't save you this time.'

'If I could only change myself into a porcupine or a bear,' I gasped, 'I know who'd do the running.'

I was out of breath, overfed, and fat; she was lean, and nimble, through chasing sparrows in the grass. The puma stared at me through the bars of his house, as I galloped past.

'Poor little fellow,' he sighed. 'It's any odds on Puss.'

'M-r-r-r,' said the cat. 'I've got you.'

I jumped for the Tiger's cage, and rolled, almost fainting under, the bars—just in time. The cat came after me, clawing and screaming, she couldn't stop herself.

'It's death or glory this time,' I said; 'and whoever bites first had better bite hard.'

The Tiger was up in a clap; his snarl would have broken a glass window.

'Eh?' he rasped. 'What's this? M-yaw.' I edged behind him. You couldn't see me for stripes.

'Eh?' he repeated, glaring at the cat. 'M-f, m-r-yaw.'

You should have heard the tiger cough. The cat sprang six feet in the air to express her feelings, and in moments of tribulation and suffering a cat always jumps the right way.

'She's gone,' I said. 'What a blessing!'

'Eh?' He turned with a snarl and looked at me, suddenly.

'I didn't see you. Get out of my house!' he roared. 'And don't disturb my sleep again.'

These tigers are unsociable fellows. I'll run into the snake department next time.

5: What the Alligators Did

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser, 16 May 1906

HO, and here's plenty of snap in me! From jaw to tail I'm full of possibilities. I live in the blue mud, where the grey backed eels twist and squirm whenever I begin to thrash about for my dinner. From the low hills to the gulf the creek bank is black with mangrove shade. The creek is wide and deep at mouth; the north wind and tide bring whiffs from the pearling grounds, and the black luggers straddling across the oyster banks.

I like the hot sun; there's nothing better for my health than a steady swim against the incoming tide, or to play possum and let the current strand you at the mouth of a nice inlet. There's a knack in lying slantways like a bit of charred driftwood. Short-sighted people and dogs are apt to fall over you. I like the fat wild geese that come squalling over the back lagoons; and spying about the long reeds. People think I'm a sluggard, a gross overfed reptile without brains. Let me tell you I have picked up a duck the moment it dropped from the sky to river. That's as smart as a man with a gun, eh?

Speaking about guns. Last year a Chinaman with a 25 shilling pea-rifle fired at me point blank. Opening my mouth I kicked violently, and then lay quite still. The Chinaman hugged his pea-thrower and chuckled.

'You welly dead, my friend,' he said, looking at me. 'You no killee my lille pig any more.' He came closer and closer, and— Well, I did, and nobody ever inquired after him. But the Gulf Chinaman who offers you his best dog is not to be trusted.

I remember a young Batavia River alligator who came upon a fat little dog asleep on the bank. Being inexperienced, he waddled over and lifted the dog in his mouth. Then a jam tin full of dynamite ripped the air, and my poor young friend was blown through a ten-foot mud bank with the dog in his mouth. In future I want a reference with stray dogs lying about creek beds.

If sick cattle go missing in the Gulf they mention my name, and send out search parties. A search party with guns walked over me one night. My word they got a fright— so did I.

I am fond of a deep-water swim; the scouring tides tone a fellow up. Besides, you never know what you may pick up, a cask of beef from a wreck, a dead sheep, or a Queensland bullock. A coop of drowned turkeys hit me on the nose one morning; must have got washed overboard from a China-bound steamer. If an alligator goes pig catching he must rise early and walk fast.

The full-grown 'gator makes no sound when he takes the water. He is hard to track and harden to kill. The way to catch a pig is to get him in the middle of

his squeak and scrape his whiskers in the mud. That settles him— that and a half-mile swim under water. I've carried a pig across country with, the whole district chasing me with axes and guns; and the pig in my mouth calling on his friends to hurry up, to hurry up. A pig in your mouth is like a comic opera with all the fiddlers in full swing.

I rolled the little beggar in three feet of mud, but his squeak grew louder and longer, until a nasty rifle bullet ripped my back and made by head ache. I dived with piggy in my mouth, and stopped the squeaking, but you could have played golf with the bubbles he sent up. Those bubbles were almost the death of me. Gun and rifle shots fairly spilled into the water. I took a back seat between two mangrove roots until the footsteps and the banging died away.

I didn't tell you about the buffalo-hunters. It's a great story, but the hunters didn't think so. The old blue bull led the herd over the sand drift; behind them thundered the horses and guns, working in a half-circle to drive the mob into a boulder-packed gully. Then a ti-tree swamp got in the way, and before the herd could swing clear they were up to their girths in slush and mud thick enough to hold a herd of elephants. The hunters fumed and raced along the sand ridge, but a buffalo in five feet of mud is worse than a ship on a reef. The hunters left them. After dark the alligators looked in. I haven't tasted buffalo since.

King Margooline was the biggest bull alligator on the Australian coast. I've heard of the Ganges mugger, with a body like a thousand-gallon tank. King Margooline was as thick across the barrel as an ordinary steam launch. He wasn't satisfied with the rich food to be found in the creeks; he took his two sons, Jag and Guz, towards the Great Barrier inlets once in quest of new dinners and sensations.

The ravenous Cape York sharks got wind of their movements, and it doesn't take a Cape Yorker long to scoot from Hannibal Island to Cook's Passage. An alligator is at home in the mud flats, where the slime holds and blinds his prey. A half stranded Jack shark could be torn asunder by a baby 'gator, but in deep, clear sea water things are different. A small shark can follow and bite an alligator to death by striking at him under the throat.

Well, the Cape York sharks came down in a great flutter to see King Margooline and his two fat sons. They sighted the three alligators just below the Lizard and made a splendid rush to cut them off from the beach. Guz and Jag and the old King got in front of the enemy by two lengths. But they were afraid to move an inch towards deep water. Behind them stretched the Barrier Reef, with its sun-rotted grass and naked rocks— a hungry, cheerless place. Opposite was the rich coast of Queensland, with its creeks brimming with food.

The Cape York sharks had blocked the return passage. They cruised in watchful lines beyond the surf. The King was puzzled at his position; he was unable to move forward without being caught by the hungry watchers flitting here and there like torpedoes The skin under our throat is soft as velvet and once a 'gator allows seven feet of water to pass under him he leaves himself open to attack.

Crawling inland the King noticed a wide lagoon in the steep hollow of the Barrier. It was fringed with palms and the floor was of dazzling whiteness— not a good place for an alligator, but very inviting to a shark. The face of the lagoon was alive with strange sea fowl; large and small fish streamed in flashing shoals across the sandy floor. Guz and Jag licked their jaws suddenly.

The King grew, thoughtful. The entrance to the lagoon must be on the Pacific side of the Barrier, he argued. The lagoon formed the centre of an atoll, and he wondered if the sharks. could effect an entrance at high tide. He waddled through the long Barrier grass, and over the loose stones, where the sun stayed like a hot plate on his back.

Trundling across the small white beach he slipped with a great noise into the lagoon, and followed the outgoing tide towards the entrance. The opening was deep and wide, just the place for a hungry shark to go through on a hot day.

The Cape Yorkers had grown uneasy at the sudden disappearance of the King and his two sons. But a shark can follow the scent of a bull 'gator as easily as be can follow a dying man on a ship. Within an hour they had manoeuvred through the reef strewn channels, and were swimming in a line towards the lagoon entrance. For a long time they waited outside, suspiciously, until a fresh scent of blood drifted towards them, and they knew that the King and his sons were at work somewhere inside the lagoon.

Slowly, like a fleet of ghost ships, they stole through the opening, led by a ferocious tiger shark with the teeth of a band saw. The shoals of Barrier mullet scattered in quick flashes as the squadron of sea-hunters moved across the lagoon. The gulls wailed and beat inshore; a strange. bird-cry went up from the distant lagoons that was heard by the spying quail and ducks on the mainland. The blacks at Emu Gully heard it. and stared seaward, knowing that something was happening in one of the big fish-packed lagoons.

The old King watched, the sharks moving towards him; he signalled to his sons to keep inshore, as he swam from the entrance with his enemies close behind. He knew the worth and courage of each monster that swirled in his wake.

When an ocean-going shark is hungry, he will follow his prey into corners where a 'couta or salmon wouldn't be seen. Looking behind suddenly, the King

saw the villainous admiral shark at his heels. Swerving noiselessly, and without effort, he flashed into shallow water suddenly; then turned his big snout towards the fleet of hungry sharks.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' he said, politely. 'I fancy we have met before.'

The slow-swimming sharks turned and eye him sullenly.

The King lay beside his sons in a shallow pool within three yards of their pointed jaws. A slim tiger shark, a born shallow-water fighter, turned suddenly, and flashed forward his teeth, striking the King's armour above the left shoulder. Guz and Jag shook with laughter; but the King lay still as a log, until the young tiger turned to join his comrades; then his black snout ripped through the sand and caught the shark by the middle, tearing him almost in halves. The squadron of Cape-Yorkers splashed and rolled in their futile rage, as the King rose with the young tiger in his mouth, and walked to where the black mud lay deepest. Then, with terrible strength, he bruised his enemy's body into the slime, and covered it, doglike, with sand and stones. With a merry twinkle, in .his eye, he returned to the waiting enemy, and lay beside his sons, while the sun slapped them pleasantly between their armour-plates. The full-fed wind-driven birds hovered about in clouds. Far down the Barrier, they heard the low beat of the out-going tide.

Rising with a mighty, yawn, the King waddled along the beach, and viewed the mob of sharks now huddled in one shallow pool. The tide had receded stealthfully, leaving a line of wet sand hills between them and the lagoon entrance. It would be hours before the tide returned.

Guz and Jag walked near, and stared at the writhing monsters, trapped in the shallow bed of the lagoon. There was no outlet, and they crowded and flapped over each other, striving to reach greater depths. Here and there the hot sun scalded their exposed bodies, and set them gasping for breath.

'It will go lower yet,' laughed the King, 'until they are almost nigh and dry.'

The slow-receding tide drained the lagoon bed gradually, until the mass of ocean-bred monsters lay in a vast huddle of flashing fins and jaws.

'Now, my sons,' bellowed the King suddenly. 'Let us begin our work.'

He stooped nearer, and the beach trembled under his thrashing body. His great snout stabbed in and dragged the admiral shark from the hole. The brute was hard to kill; be fought and slashed with his enormous tail, his jaws moved like trip-hammers, but the King beat his body against the rocks, and squeezed him like a sponge. Guz and Jag flung themselves into the shark-filled hole, dragging monster after monster ashore.

The air was soon alive with screaming gulls and fowl.

'You fellows know how to command the sea,' chuckled the King; 'but when it comes to a plain mud-fight, you aren't worth your salt.'

His big snout slashed right and left among the squirming mob; some of them fought and thrashed, but they were as helpless as a herd of caged geese.

The sun went down hot as the mouth of a fiery crater. When the moon stole over the distant cape the blacks crawled to a near headland, and listened to the sounds of slaughter.

'It is the Bunyip,' they whispered. 'The debil-debil.'

Ho, what a sight was there when the tide raced through the lagoon entrance. Dead sharks, grey giants with gaping jaws and mangled ribs lay half buried in the black -belts of mud. The tide uncovered them at dawn, and the big blue fish-flies hummed over the beach, darkening the bodies and feeding like carrion.

The King and his sons slept long and deep. When they awoke their eyes wandered over the scene, and their laughter was heard by the crabs scudding over the distant reefs and pools. Thousands of small fish crowded in through the entrance. The news of the big kill flashed from Hannibal Island to Pera Head.

'Good work,' guffawed the King, 'to clear the water of such vermin.'

Putting their heads north the three ad, venturers sailed home to their native creeks among the swamp quail and the haunts of the pigmy geese. Glad enough were they to hear the wind thrashing through their beloved mangroves. The tropic darkness shut out the world of jungle around them as they stole from inlet to inlet.

'Hush!' whispered Margooline. 'Something is sliding towards us.'

Out of the blackness of the creek bed came a huge Queen alligator, her eyes burning with rage and vexation. King Margooline trembled from tip to tail.

'It's your mother, boys,' he gasped. 'Now for it.'

The three adventurers slunk along the creek bank until the angry Queen spied them out.

'Where have you been?'

The words seemed to come from her throat like bullets. 'Must I hunt alone all the days of my life?' she demanded.

King Margooline trembled in the creek mud.

'We've been fishing,' he answered, querulously. 'I asked the boys to come with me.'

'Fish, Foodleum!' bellowed the Queen. 'You've been for a deep sea drink. Don't come here with fishing tales. Isn't there enough to drink at home?'

'It tastes a bit different down the Barrier,' said the King, humbly. 'Don't lose your temper, my dear.'

But the Queen's bitter tongue followed him along the,, creek. All night it was beard lashing him to fury.

A pair of rock pythons basking in the sun heard him say that he would never go shark hunting again.

_____

6: The Sacrifice: A Dingo's Story.

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser 8 Aug 1906

IT was Jim Haskett who trapped me and my brother, Nia-nia. Nia-nia was killed with a stirrup-iron.

A dingo doesn't go into mourning over his dead brother, but long afterwards, when they broke my heart with a stockwhip, I used to dream of the nights spent playing in the kangaroo-grass with my mother. I was too sly and sullen to make a good cattle-dog. Jim would never trust me alone with a mob of ewes. I was always watched, and shepherded by a half-bred collie. If I bit a sheep too hard I was flogged, and If I loafed in the shade when the dust blinded and choked, the whips found me out; and the squatters hated me.

'Shoot him!' said a big Monaro man to Jim one day. 'He'll spoil your good dogs, and make loafers of them. There's only one idea in his wicked head.'

'What's that?' asked Jim quietly.

'Kidney fat,' growled the man of sheep. 'And there's a bullet for him first time he crosses my land.'

'Thank you,' said Jim politely. 'I've promised to give him a chance, and—' Jim grinned at me. 'I want him for a bit of special work.'

'Special work for a dingo!' snapped the Monaro man. 'Ye'd better see a special commissioner for rats!'

There wasn't much loose wool about that Monaro man. He'd have given his boots to have had a shot at me. Jim was a Queensland drover. He would bring score mobs from the Gulf, and deliver them to another drover anywhere between Cloncurry and the Maranoa. Punching big mobs from the north would be easy work if the wild things would let a drover travel in peace.

First, the blacks send up smoke-signals, telling each other of the mighty herd of beef travelling south. And when the warrigals start to spear your flanks, the wounded steers may work up a ten-hour stampede. The wild dogs swarm through the gullies fluting all night, fretting the cattle, and keeping them awake. Sometimes a swamp alligator or a rock python livens up things. A bull leader, nosing for a drink among wet boulders, may find himself looking at the big, flat head of Australia's king snake. The rest is delirium tremens— for the bull.

But nothing that yelps or crawls will turn a drover bald sooner than the beef-killing warrigal. I have heard swagmen's dogs speak of drunken cattle camps. I have run with the best and worst men on the Queensland stock routes, and I never saw a drover drunk at his work. He couldn't do it. The cattle and dogs know a drunken drover, especially the dogs.

I never saw Jim the worse for liquor. He was young, and full of work; he knew that one sober head was worth a paddock full of muddled cattle busters. He taught me not to hustle the dogs at meal times. Although, when it came to a fight, I found my shoulders as stiff and strong as the others. Tiger, a Barwon sheepdog, gave me trouble. There Mere five of them, and they showed me no quarter even after our work was done. They bided their time, and I knew they would kill me if Jim fell sick.

Crossing a river, one morning, they closed around me savagely. A dingo doesn't like water, but when the long stockwhips are speaking behind, he takes it with his tongue out. Jim's cattle dogs were cunning water fighters. They knew that the river was the best place to handle me. The whole five were heavy, hard-living dogs, capable of pulling down a bullock. They took me by the throat and paw, and rolled me in deep water. They danced on me while the cattle broke for the scrub in all directions. Then, through the booming water that choked and blinded, I heard Jim's voice and the pistolling of his whips.

'Yah, you curs! Hooshta!'

Bang went the whip, splitting the water like a gunshot, and, as it curled, wet and dripping, from the stream, I saw my enemy Tiger swimming away with a blood-gash across his face. No more fight that week.

Tiger waited his chance to end my career. He followed me, one night, into the ranges, his throat-hair bristling with rage, as the terrible loneliness enveloped us. He hung on my flanks, sullenly, like one choosing his time and ground before coming to death grips. Something in the ranges was calling me. It may have been the smoke and scent of a blacks' camp or the fluting of my brothers across the pine-clad spur.

A dingo knows the difference between a black and a white man's camp. The cunning myalls burn everything before leaving, lest an enemy pick up something belonging to them, and work a hoodoo. Their brush gunyahs told me they were not buccaneers or station blacks. Their bodies were daubed with red and white boomerang stripes. They were cattle spearers, untamed warrigals from the Jardine country.

The myalls were sprawling in the grass watching the mob of cattle on the flat. A smell of fish bones hung around; scraps of half -cooked barramundi were thrown here and there. I was homesick, not hungry, and after all a blackfellow was nearer to me than a white. The smell of fish was more than Tiger could stand. He sneaked in closer and—

A pack of half-tamed dingoes had watched our coming. They are always with the blacks when cattle-killing is on hand. Tiger swung round like a wolf in a trap. A dozen hulking, big-shouldered dogs were upon him in a flash, filling the night air with horrible snarling yelps. The blacks were up, too, and I heard

the dull thump, thump, of waddies as they drove the dingoes from Tiger's body.

These half-tamed dingoes are bolder than the wild packs. Their hatred of the white men's dogs is like a madness in them; they fought and hurled themselves at the blacks, striving to get near the stiff-haired Tiger, until a gigantic young warrior seized the cattle dog by the tail and throat, and bore him to the camp. The blacks love a good dog, and when the shadows of the gunyahs closed on Tiger I knew they would keep him for ever. The cattle camp never saw him again.

Years later, an old dingo told me that he saw him in the Gulf, running with the warrigals, showing them the cattle routes where travelling stock could be easily speared.

Well, after Jim had landed the last big mob near the New South Wales border, he found, after his receipts were fixed up, that he had earned and saved over £300. I remember how be whistled that morning as he flung me a bit of clean beef on the grass.

'Time I thought about getting married, eh?' he said pleasantly. 'Too much dog and cattle and tobacco isn't good for a man.'

Then he took out a bundle of letters and sat down to read them again and again, until the sun lay deep in the west. He held up the photograph of a young girl and kissed it twice. Then he looked hard at me.

'All this comes of being too much alone,' he said loudly. 'I can't ask her to be a drover's wife. She knows the business too well. A man's life runs out on the plains between mobs without end. And.... because I love her better than anything, better than my work, the stars, mountains, and tablelands, river and sea, I'll be something better. But—' he looked around eagerly, 'I'll have to play possum to get her from the old man. Of all the men I know, he's the hardest and worst to manage.'

That's how the drover talks when no one but the dogs are around. I didn't want Jim to get married. Once he settled down to farming he would hand me over to big Sandy M'lver, the rager of the Queensland cattle tracks. I didn't want to work for a rager. I was not anxious either to settle down with Jim. I would have to make friends with his cat, and sit like a white man's dog in the front garden.

Jim started East suddenly. There was a peculiar light in his eyes. His head went up, and he began to sing. We left the cattle routes far behind, and struck into farming country, where the wheat grew high as the fence, and the milk cows wandered around the settlers' homesteads. He paused suddenly one afternoon, at the end of a small sheep farm, and whistled to me.

I approached sullenly, watching him hand and foot, knowing that something peculiar was going to happen. He looked me between the eyes steadily, and I flinched and whimpered as though he were flogging me.

'Come here, you little savage,' he whispered. 'Did I ever hit you for nothing?'

I licked his hand wildly.

'That's all right,' he said hoarsely. 'Now,' he pinched my ear and held up a finger, 'I want you to run inside this fence and find the prize Shropshire ewes in the home-paddock over there! See!'

He pinched my ear again. I waited, stiff-eared, for the final word to go. I wanted to howl, but his strong hand was near my throat.

'Inside the homestead paddock,' he repeated sharply. 'Kill a couple and come back.'

I sprang out. He held up his fingers. 'A couple; no more,' he said. 'I'm watching you, you — devil. No more than two. You'll find the break in the wire.'

Killing sheep wasn't new to me, but I was puzzled to know why Jim should set me to work. In training me, his voice and whips were always against sheep-killing. And now he was undoing his work. What did it mean? I was certain that it was his sweetheart's father who owned the sheep.

It was quite dark now. Inside the fence the grass swished against my shoulders. In the distance was the homestead, flanked by a row of young silky oaks. Across a cultivated hillside, nestling in a well-grassed hollow, was the paddock where the prize Shropshire ewes were kept. I had often heard Jim speak of old Bob Clinton's prize sheep.

I slouched over the ploughed land, keeping well in a deep furrow that led like a track to the Shropshires. Then a taste of sheep came like a scalding breath into my throat. I crawled under a patch of torn netting into the paddock with a bloodstorm swirling before my eyes.

'Two!' I choked. 'Only two!'

There were twenty big Shropshires inside the fence. One of them looked at me with his silly grey face and baa'ed. The bleating voice filled me with rage.

'One!' I snapped. 'Two!'

How easy it was flinging down those foolish woolly monsters, and worrying them to death. Geese would have fought harder for their lives, even the hard-pressed kangaroos will make a last stand.

'Only two,' I repeated as the sheep-blood spurted into my eyes, and the grey fleeces turned scarlet. Everything was scarlet to me, the trees and grass and the half-risen moon seemed to peep like a frightened face through the scurrying clouds.

A sharp whistle caught my ears, followed by the barking of a farm dog. I thought of Jim's whip as I went under the wire. He was waiting for me with a white, savage face, and flashing eyes.

'Two I said, not seven!' he cried. His stockwhip cut me like a knife; it thundered and cracked about my ribs until I rolled sick and faint in the dust. I did not hide myself as cattle dogs do. I looked at him with ears flattened, and my teeth points showing.

'You devil,' he whispered. 'Why didn't you stop at two?'

I followed him sulkily to his camp in the bush.

In the early morning be dressed carefully and rode towards Bob Clinton's farm. I followed stealthily, hiding in the scrub whenever he looked back. I did not like the look of things. Why had he asked me to kill Bob Clinton's ewes? I was almost beside him in the long grass as he pulled up at the homestead gate. Then I saw a wild-eyed man coming towards him from the sheep paddock. His face was livid with anger, his eyes wandered over the hill; he shook his fist at the sky.

'Good morning!' shouted Jim amiably. 'Lovely weather, Mr. Clinton.'

Bob Clinton looked as though he had swallowed a thunderbolt. 'Lovely ruination!' he snarled. 'Have ye seen a dingo this morning?' he demanded. 'I'd give my right hand to be even with the skulking hell-brute that came here last night.' Jim looked sympathetic while the old man stormed about the Shropshires I had killed the night before.

'I've just come in from the Gulf,' said Jim apologetically. 'I hope Bessie is well.'

The old man was silent; his angry eyes wandered over Jim and across the paddock almost to where I was crouching. The house curtains moved stealthily. I say a woman's face peeping between them. Her eyes grew white as she saw Jim standing near the old man. Then Jim looked up and the young blood leaped like a flag to his cheeks. The curtains fell back gently.

'Eh?' rasped the old man. 'What did ye say, lad?'

'Nothing,' answered Jim placidly. 'I've had my share of trouble with dingoes. They shepherded me day and night from the Roper to the Towers. Good bye,' he said springing into the saddle. 'I'll put in the day looking for your dingo— they're not so hard to find at times.'

'Ye'll find the dingo more than your match, my lad,' snapped the old man. 'The country is full of young men who swear to bring home a dingo.'

Jim cantered through the gate and again I saw the woman's face at the window. He turned in the saddle and they looked at each other as though endless dry tracks of country had separated them for years. Love sat like a

great drought in their eyes. I thought of the lonely cattle drives and the bundle of letters he used to hide in his tent.

I sneaked ahead of Jim and when he arrived at the camp I was stretched in the sun about twenty yards from the tent with my nose to the ranges. He did not boil the billy that night, but paced feverishly up and down, up and down.

'It's mean to turn dog on the cattle pup,' I heard him say. 'But the old man won't let me see Bessie unless there's a sacrifice. If I could show him a pup's scalp he'd light his pipe and talk things over. And what's a dingo pup, anyway?'

Next morning he suddenly called me. His revolver was hanging inside the tent. I had seen him shoot wild dogs before, and my hair bristled with suspicion and fear.

'Come here,' he said gently, 'you poor little fool.' I had always answered his call, but now I ran to the edge of the scrub whining uneasily. Then I saw him fling the bridle over the camp-horse and as I turned he stooped for his old rifle and cartridges. I started for the ranges at a swinging gallop.

Day was breaking, the bush was brindling with the strange fires of the sun. He rode straight in my tracks and I knew there was small hope of outstripping his camp horse in open country. It occurred to me that Jim was playing a deep game, and that I was to be the scape-goat. My scalp was to be the price of Bob Clinton's good will. I wanted to see Jim happy. I would have killed a hundred sheep to see Bessie in het new wedding dress standing beside Jim. Still, if my scalp was to be the price of it all, I thought I'd give him a run for his money, just to steady him a bit.

He gained on me as we scampered towards the hills. I wondered why he didn't shoot instead of trying to get close to me. A sudden lift in the wind turned me thoughts in another direction. As we drew nearer the clump of brigalow, on our left, I picked up the scent of a fresh dingo-pad running dead across the range.

Jim must have heard my voice; he must have understood that something strange was in the wind. He turned in the saddle, shading his eyes; then I heard him slow down and creep after me, rifle in hand. He was too keen a dog-trapper to make mistakes. He followed me cleverly without throwing himself in the way of the wind.

A line of sand-hills appeared in the north. The fresh dingo-pad was in a straight line with them; Jim nodded and looked at me. I made a flank movement across the sand hills. Jim nursed his rifle., and waited behind some boulders. Running slowly along the ridge, I halted suddenly, my heart thumping, my ears stiff as shear-blades.

A couple of dingo-pups peeped at me over the sand hummock— it takes a lot of sand to hide a dingo's ears at times. Then I saw a head and a pair of

flaming eyes watching me. It was old Ma Dingo. I shall never forget her face and her crafty movements, as she half-crouched from the burrow. She made a little mumbling noise, and the pups ran to her, and sat on their haunches watching me.

'Good-day,' I said, brightly, 'I'm looking for water. Two nice pups, ma'am,' I ventured, admiringly.

She snarled and lifted her forepaw like an old wolf. I saw she didn't believe me.

'Liar,' she whined. 'You have been running with men and horses lately. I can see where the station-dogs have mauled your right shoulder. Who killed the sheep the other night?'

There was no guess work about Mrs. Dingo. She crept nearer and nearer, and, with a yell, she sprang at my throat. Fighting cattle-dogs had made me skilful in the matter of dodging an angry mother. I gave her my big right shoulder, and she rolled back biting the air. Then I ran and she followed snarling at my heels. The pups floundered after her. I felt her teeth on my flanks as we raced down hill. She was a vixen. Down we ran, biting an snapping at each other. I saw a jet of fire leap from a boulder suddenly, then came the heart-shaking clap of Jim's rifle. Mrs. Dingo go pitched over me and lay still, a bullet I through her chest. The pups swerved uncertainly for a moment, and galloped back. A couple of shots dropped them on the crest I of the hill.

'Ah,' said Jim, looking at me. 'You brought the old lady up to the music in good style.'

I felt safe when I saw the three scalps hanging from his saddle, and I followed leisurely as he rode towards Bessie's homestead. I don't know what happened when he showed the scalps to old Clinton. Peeping through m the high grass an hour later, I saw Jim smoking beside the old man on the homestead verandah. Then, towards evening, the voices of Bessie and Jim came from the garden.

'How did you manage dad?' she asked softly.

Jim laughed. 'I played my pet dingo against a few sheep, and he killed four too many.'

'Jim, you are mean,' she whispered.

'Something had to be sacrificed, dear,' he said. 'And my little dingo played the game, and brought three yellow ruffians to my gun that might have slaughtered dozens of your Shropshires later on. The end has justified the means, hasn't it, dear?'

I couldn't hear Bessie's answer, but I know that the loneliness of their lives had departed when he kissed her in the shadows.

I passed a very bad night. Towards dawn a great loneliness came upon me. Glancing towards the hills, I caught a breath from the inland lagoons. I saw the tiny swamp quail, the white shiel drakes, and the pigmy geese rising from the wet, blue grass. I heard the cry of the warrigals, and it was more than I could stand. When Jim whistled for me next morning, I was running towards the inside tracks where my people were calling.

_____

7: The Trooper's Daughter.

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser 13 Oct 1906

THE white gum tree might have told the story, for it overlooked the valley when the virgin forest sprawled from spur to river flat. Then came the pioneers, and the trees fell like murdered giants until the earth's bosom lay brown and naked in the moonlight.

It was here, on this rocky spur, under the gum tree that the gold thieves planned the attack on the escort. There were five in number— and the Boy.

His sunburnt face, his dancing eyes, revealed the schoolboy with a heart full of romance. His companions were middle-aged men, lean, and eager for blackguard work, and they plotted like hunted dingoes, while the Boy warmed his soft hands over the smoky camp fire, nodding joyously when the ringleader, Sinclair, outlined the plan of attack.

At his word they scattered themselves over the hillside within call of each other, and waited. A moonlit cloud hung in the west; the long mountain ferns brushed the Boy's face as he lay with his rifle in the bend of the track. The song of lead bars was heard in the hollow, the jingle of harness, and the sharp note of steel. A trooper ambles into sight, then another and another, as the coach lumbers into view.

The Boy listens to the beating of his own heart, and Romance leaps aside as the white-haired sergeant canters into the bend. His rifle peeps over the boulder, but his fingers are numb; the face of a girl comes to him, lifelike and pitiful, and he cowers from his post as the sergeant swings by. A rifle shot jars the mountain silence ; then a doublebarred flame leaps from the escort ; the troopers close in, firing craftily at every pinch of light that cracks from bush and boulder. And no word is spoken among these uniformed men as they canter through the bend. A ripple of flame meets them from five points; a trooper with blood on his brow clutches his saddle for a moment, while his carbine clashes to earth.

The coach moves on. Gold, more precious than human life, is at stake. And out of the snarling shade springs flash on flash. A coach horse flounders, and with a final plunge turns its bullet-torn side to the sky. Traces are cut— how quickly it is done!— and the escort clatters over the fall bridge to the open road.

Far down the mountain side a riderless horse stumbles from boulder to boulder, its stirrup irons clanking as it descends. A rock wallaby steals under a fern-draped ledge and listens. The wind shakes the dew-drenched leaves until they flash and sing in the moonlight. Then.... from the darkness overhead

creeps the Boy; blood drops mark his track— ruddy drops that will startle the eagle at dawn and fill the air with strange cries from questing hawks.

Sinclair and Creegan follow, limping like men who had fallen upon sharp stones. They came with vulture faces to where the Boy crouched at the gumtree foot, his rifle gone, pain in his eyes, and blood on his shoulder. Creegan stood over him and raised his gun butt ; the other pushed him aside.

'Let the cub speak first. Ask him why he let the sergeant go by.'

The Boy crawled to his elbow, his eyes flashed.

'I— I couldn't shoot— that was all. The old man's head was down. Why, it would have been murder,' he stammered.

Sinclair and Creegan made no answer; they were thinking of their three dead comrades lying beyond the fallen logs in the bed. Their attack on the escort had failed miserably. The Boy's indecision had spoilt their plans. If he had only shot the white-haired sergeant things might have gone differently. They blamed him for their defeat, because he was wounded and useless. With the spleen of men whose bullets had gone wide, they ached to be at his young throat.

'Why did ye spare the sergeant?'

'Aye, why did ye?'

Creegan bent forward suddenly, his thick hair hanging mask-like over his wicked eyes. And as he listened he heard the beat of hoofs far down the mountain side. Drawing his companion behind a boulder, they waited until the rider came near. The moonlight showed them the figure of a girl in the saddle. Sinclair and his companion recognised her as the daughter of Sergeant Cummins, the trooper in charge of the gold escort. Creegan whipped round, his face alive with interest.

'Let her come up,' he said hoarsely. 'The blame is hers if she plays the policeman's daughter on us to-night.'

She approached at a swift canter like one on urgent business, riding with a bush girl's recklessness up the steep boulder-strewn slope until she came within a yard or so of the Boy crouching in the tree shade.

'Who's there?' She was out of the saddle with a half cry, peering at the white face and the bloodstained collar.

'Leonard Vale! What have you been doing?'

Holding the horse's bridle in her left hand, she tried to raise his head from the ground.

'Go away,' he said, thickly. 'Go as fast as you can.'

'Wait a bit, young lady.'

Sinclair, his fire-blackened hands gripping his rifle, stepped into the path suddenly. 'No one goes past here to-night.'

'My father rode past, George Sinclair.' She looked up slowly, with the Boy's head in her lap. 'I heard the firing. That's why I came.'

Creegan and Sinclair drew aside with the air of desperate men. The shadow of the rope lay about them, and the coming of the trooper's daughter had not bettered their chances of escape. They might have disclaimed all knowledge of the attack on the escort, but her evidence would send them to the gallows.'

Creegan came forward sulkily; an old bullet scar on his cheek seemed to grow livid as his sharp eyes wandered from the girl to the Boy lying in the grass.

'That cub you call Leonard Vale has led us into a trap, Miss Cummins. I see now why his rifle baulked at your father. Eh, God, we've been played with!' he said bitterly.

'Another lie!' the girl answered, with a white indignant face. 'He has been misled by older men. You don't know him as I do.'

She looked at Sinclair with kindling eyes. 'He wouldn't shoot a pigeon or hurt a mouse. And.... you put him in the bend to kill my father— you fools.'

Her words seemed to fill the two men with unutterable rage. They saw in her a girl not to be idly threatened or intimidated, and Creegan's wits grew sharp as he glanced at the Boy.

'Seems to me,' he began huskily, 'that its my life and yours, Sinclair, against Miss Cummins' and Vale's.'

'Leave me out.' The Boy moaned and twisted on his side.

'We are coming to you,' snapped the bushranger, 'in a way that the young lady won't like.'

He turned upon her with tigerish malice, his eyes glinting wickedly. ''You are going to become one of us to-night, Miss. My brother was shot by your father, half an hour ago, and this Boy— he might be your sweetheart for all I know— could have prevented all that if he had played his part. Sinclair and myself were about to shoot him when you appeared. It occurs to us now that you can do the shooting instead. It will mix things nicely when your father begins to work up the case. D'ye savvy, Miss Cummins?— you shall shoot him instead.'

Sinclair balanced his rifle dexterously for a moment, then handed it to her, while the alert Creegan covered her with his own.

'I'll count thirty, and if you refuse to obey, my friend here will take up the argument.' Sinclair indicated the bristling face of Creegan peering over the rifle-barrel.

Grace Cummins took the well-cleaned rifle while her heart seemed to leap into her throat. Then she looked up suddenly with a calm face and unwavering

eyes. 'My father was a soldier once, and I know the meaning of a drum-head court-martial,' she began.

'Ye do, I'll be bound,' grinned Creegan along the barrel of his rifle.

'You are asking me to do what is considered platoon work,' she went on hurriedly. 'If you will kindly blindfold the prisoner it will be better for his nerves and my shooting.'

Sinclair gaped, then smiled at her frigid manner. Taking a dirty cloth from his pocket he tied it firmly over Vale's eyes.

'Glad to accommodate the daughter of an old soldier,' he said sneeringly. 'Glad to hear they do things so nicely in the army, Miss.'

Leonard Vale was dragged into a kneeling position and propped against a boulder. Sinclair slipped aside and nodded sharply to the girl. She stooped in the thick shadow for a moment to recover her handkerchief that had slipped to the ground.

'Be smart,' thundered Creegan. 'Up with your rifle. We don't want any tears.'

The handkerchief seemed to bother her for a moment, then she thrust it aside with a lightning movement of her fingers. With a set face she raised the rifle to the level of the Boy's breast.

'Fire!' shouted Sinclair.

The hammers snapped twice, but there was no report. A look of inexpressible disgust came into her eyes.

'It isn't loaded. You are evidently not the sons of soldiers,' she said, jeeringly.

'Not loaded?' Creegan glanced savagely at his companion, 'Why did ye give her an unloaded weapon, eh? What's the fooling about?'

'I swear it was loaded, half an hour ago.'

Sinclair slouched forward as though to take the rifle from her.

'It was a cruel joke to play, if it was a joke.'

The trooper's daughter approached Creegan fearlessly. 'I want to have done with this business. Take this rifle and load it, please. I will use yours.'

Without a moment's thought, the unthinking gold-robber took the unloaded weapon and gave her his own.

In a flash she leaped back, and the two electrified blackguards found themselves gaping along the barrel of her rifle. She stood rigid and immovable, in the shadow; a touch of anger that was swift and terrible crossed her face; the two ruffians tasted death in the sudden shift of her eye.

'The thing is easy enough when you have been in the army,' she said slowly. 'Put down your rifle, Mr. Creegan, and please don't finger your cartridge pocket.'

Creegan obeyed sullenly, but Sinclair, with an inborn disregard for feminine valour, leaped in, snatching at the rifle barrel with his big right hand. The trooper's daughter remained motionless as stone; then a blinding flash quivered between her and the man as he pitched face down almost at her feet. She did not look at him; her eyes were on Creegan. '

'You had better go,' she said quietly. 'No, not that way,' as he attempted to climb the heights immediately above. 'I don't want a boulder on my head. Step down the road and allow me to see you all the way. March.'

Creegan walked swiftly down the road without a glance at the wounded Sinclair lying in the path. The boy had pulled the bandage from his eyes, and saw Grace Cummins standing near.

'Let me help you into the saddle,' she said kindly. 'We may reach the hospital at Tranbar before dawn. Sinclair can wait,' she added bitterly, 'until the troopers arrive; they won't be long.'

The old military horse she had ridden remained quiet as she assisted the Boy into the saddle. Holding the bridle firmly, she led him towards Tranbar.

NO ONE knows the rest of the story. The attack on the gold escort was soon forgotten. Creegan disappeared, and Sinclair was discovered by his friends, lying on the mountain side. He, too, disappeared. The mining camp vanished and new settlers flooded the valley and the flats beyond the ranges.

One day a woman and a man drove with their children down the mountain path, and sat in the shade of the white gum overlooking the valley. The children played hide and seek among the boulders, while the mother looked on and laughed.

'This was the spot,' she said suddenly.

The husband looked up while the blood leaped from his heart.

'Grace,' he said gently, 'we promised each other to forget—'

'After to-day.'

She glanced towards him mischievously. 'Even now I almost laugh when I think how I drew the cartridges from Sinclair's rifle. Creegan was so busy watching my handkerchief.'

Her husband whistled softly. ' How did you do it ?' he asked. 'You have never said.'

'Silly boy.' She touched his hair lightly with her fingers. 'You forget that I was born in the army.'

8: The Man in the Barn.

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser 12 Dec 1906

THERE was silver grass in the paddock, and the saplings grew in the unfilled hollows, where the giant gums had been fallen many years before. Beneath the pine-clad spur, within reach of the river, stood the homestead, where the bullock-proof fences flanked the Nyngan-road.

From Regan's Crossing to Woolombi, people wondered how Jane Alliday lived alone with her young daughter. The little cottage, known as the Gray Homestead, had been their home for thirteen years. There were no relations in the district, no sons or nephews to replace their broken fences, or drive out the longhorned cattle, that came like ghosts from the ranges beyond the Castlereagh. Few people could remember how long it was since Jane Alliday's husband had deserted her.

One report said, that he had got into trouble with Queensland blacks, and had not been seen afterwards. Others believed that Jane's nimble tongue and acidulous temper had driven him to the west, where the henpecked husbands go.

No one denied that Jane Alliday had a sharp tongue, but the district admired her pluck and her honesty. She had managed to keep out of debt, and her daughter Nellie was the prettiest and best-dressed girl on the river. Despite Jane's acidulous temper it was well known that her love for her only daughter bordered on the fanatical. And when Nellie reached her eighteenth year the district began to wonder whether she would marry the red-haired bank clerk at Woolombi, or succumb to the glitter of Squatter Hastings' money-bags. Hastings was a bachelor, and whenever she passed him on her pony he would pull up his four-in-hand and inquire after her mother's health.

'A lot he cared about Jane Alliday's health,' said everyone.

In some country places a pretty girl is of more importance than a golf committee or a Tattersall's sweep. And Woolombi was noted for its well-to-do young men, sons of pastoralists and cattle kings, who found small time to look beyond the Castlereagh for the woman of their heart. Nellie's chances in life were alive with possibilities.

One day a deputation of enthusiastic young men asked her to sign an affidavit that she would abstain from marrying a man over thirty. Nellie refused to sign the document. It flattered her a little, but she told the deputation, with a laugh, that there was many a bright and kindly eye shining on the other side of the thirties.

It was whispered later that Frank Doyle, a young trooper, at Woolombi, had put handcuffs on her affections. The rumour fell flat, however, when it was heard that she had never spoken to the young fellow in her life.

It was young Doyle who had tracked the Henty children across the sandstone ranges during one terrible summer of drought and fire. They had wandered from their homestead, and for three days no sight or trace of them was seen. When all hope seemed dead, and the distracted mother ran moaning along the river bank, Frank Doyle appeared suddenly on the crest of the ridge, carrying two travel-numbed children across his saddle. He had found them at the bottom of a gully asleep in each other's arms; a crowd of strong-beaked crows hovering near. He never spoke of his experience afterwards, but day after day he visited the little bush hospital, cap in hand, peering into the cots where the feverish little hands plucked at the coverings, and their thirst-bitten voices cried through the hot room. And so... when the children grew strong again the district forgot the incident, and Trooper Frank Doyle's name was scarcely ever mentioned.

Another summer passed, bush fires devastated the country-side; and then came the floods, heaping despair on disaster's head. Big men spoke in pitiful voices of sheep and horses perishing in thousands. What the fires had overlooked the flood took in hand. Dozens of small settlers were ruined. Jane Alliday and her daughter fought hard to pull through the bitter winter. And people still wondered how they kept clear of the mortgagee.

The river was running a banker, and the bellying rain-clouds drifted up and up from the relentless east. Dead cattle and sheep were borne under the flood-wrapped bridge piles; here and there a derelict homestead swirled madly in mid-stream to break, like matchwood, in the grinding chaos of logs and down-rushing timber. A couple of troopers rode into Woolombi, accompanied by a blacktracker.

The news had spread through the township that the bank at Tringanbar had bean stuck up by a single bushranger, whose name was as yet unknown. The troopers were silent as they rode through the crowd standing near the lock-up. A dozen voices asked if the bank manager had been hurt. 'Shot through the heart, where he sat at his desk.'

Young Trooper Doyle handed his horse to the tracker, and followed the sergeant into the lockup.

Jane Alliday was driving home from the store at Woolombi; her face was white and drawn; her eyes moved restlessly up and down the swollen river as she entered the homestead gate. It was almost dark. A light burned in the front room. Tho door opened suddenly, and in the lamp-glow she beheld her

daughter staring, dry-lipped, across the yard. Mrs. Alliday slammed the gate, and glanced sharply about her.

'What's the matter child ? Speak out,' she half-whispered. Nellie Alliday made lightning signals with her hand, and, without speaking, drew her mother into the house, closing the door swiftly.

'There's a man in the barn, mother. I saw him slip in half-an-hour ago. He doesn't look like a swagman. I've been afraid to move or breathe since he crept in,' gasped the young girl.

Mrs. Alliday was a hard-featured woman, courageous as a man, and not given to hysterics when the unexpected happened. She threw off her rain-soaked coat, her lips slightly indrawn. The long drive home seemed to have numbed her intelligence.

'What— what kind of a man was he?' Her voice was flat and dull as a sick woman's. 'Did you see his face, child?'

'Only his big black beard,' whispered Nellie, 'and his sorrowful eyes. Oh, mother!' she cried, 'he looked like a hunted animal. I wanted to scream when he crawled into the barn. But I remembered that women and girls had been strangled for calling out too soon. I kept quiet, mother!'

The girl wrung her hands despairingly. 'What does he want?'

Mrs. Alliday stamped her foot angrily on the hearth; then she took a lantern from a shelf and lit it slowly. Nellie caught her arm suddenly.

'Mother, don't go in yet. Wait until morning. He will go away then. The rain has driven him here. It's only rest he wants.'

"Wait, wait, wait!' snapped Jane Alliday. 'That's the cry of the young people, even though disgrace and the gallows are at the end. T'sh!'

She picked up the lantern and strode towards the barn. t It was a dark, windowless place, packed with empty wheat sacks and farming tools. The wind and rain roared about the shingle roof as she opened the door, the water ran in streams about her feet. There was no sound inside the barn as her eyes moved from corner to corner, but through the loud hammering of her heart she caught the sound of heavy breathing; then a pair of eyes looked at her steadily over the pile of wheat sacks.

'Come out!' She spoke sharply; there was no heart-flutter in her voice, she stood her ground like one who had fought her battle in life single-handed. Her dark eyes glittered strangely.

'Come out,' she repealed steadily.

Something moved heavily behind the sacks, then a big black beard seemed to fill the near perspective, a pair of large, sorrowful eyes looked into hers.

'Jim!' she said without moving. 'Jim Alliday!'

'It's me, Jane; all the way from Nevertire.' He heaved himself with baresark strength into the centre of the barn, and there was rain in his. hair and mud on his clothes. A sharp silence followed as though speech had fallen dead; the distant mutter of the flood-wrapped river reached them; a cattle- j boll wandered through the bush, and the faint clanging seemed to beat time with the woman's heart. The big eyes and the black beard regarded her sadly; his hands hung limply at his side; then he moistened his lips with his tongue like one about to speak. A thought nimble as pointed steel flashed through the woman's mind. She caught his arm fiercely, and dragged him across the dripping yard into the house. 'Nellie,' she addressed the white-faced girl like one appealing to a comrade.

'Get your scissors and the old razor from my drawer. Quick, for your life!'

Once inside the house Jim Alliday seemed to collapse; he stared in dumb astonishment and submission as though he were under arrest. Her sharp voice failed to rouse him.

'Do you hear, Jim? We'll cut off that beard. You understand?'

Thrusting his huge form into a chair, she snatched the scissors from her daughter's hand and sliced the big wet beard in four-inch lengths from his face. He made no protest as she cut and cut closer and closer; then his damp hair began to fall in heaps around the chair. A kettle simmered on the fire.

In a flash a big white lather spread itself over his blinking, bewildered face; it grew and grew until it heaved in billows at his lightest breath.

'Remember when I used to shave you, Jim?' she said, bitterly. 'D'ye remember?'

And the razor moved down his left cheek with unerring precision.

'Y' never cut me, either, Jane,' he gurgled through the lather. 'Y' never wanted the tar, my lass.'

Her hand seemed to grow steady as she shaved him, for behind her thoughts loomed a high-walled prison and the shadow of a scaffold. She did not speak again, but deep, deep in her withered heart the past was crying like a little child. Through her blinding tears she saw no comedy in her actions—only a tragedy, black and sinister, stalking into her life. In a few breathless minutes he sat back in the chair, clean-faced as a boy, somewhat hollow-cheeked, but grinning feebly.

A faint hoof beat reached them, then the unmistakable jingle of bridle and bit as two troopers ambled towards the homestead in the wake of a sleuth-like black tracker.

'Nellie,' again she spoke to her daughter. 'Get that clean white shirt from the box in my room. Hurry, oh hurry!'

Nellie Alliday asked no questions; she flew to her mother's room and tore back the lid of the box. She began to understand that this wild-eyed man was her father.

What were the troopers coming to the house for? She dared not allow herself to think further. Slipping the shirt over his head and shoulders half fiercely, Jane Alliday assisted him to pull himself together, and in a fraction of time had the tablecloth laid and the tea-pot at hand as the knock happened at the door.

She opened it leisurely and glanced at the waiting horses, the two silent troopers nodding in the rain.

'Good-night, Mrs. Alliday.' The sergeant touched his cap respectfully and shook the water from his cape briskly. 'Sorry to trouble you, but the fact is we've tracked a man to your barn and we want him badly. Very glad if you'll allow us to go in,' he said quietly.

Jane Alliday lit the lantern carefully and handed it to him silently. With a cry the tracker was inside the barn like a hound off the leash. The lantern glare followed him as his alert eyes flashed here and there. Grunting savagely he returned to the yard scrutinising the wet pools and rivulets with a bewildered face.

'Him gone alonga bit more, mine think it,' he said thickly.

A shade of annoyance crossed the sergeant's eyes. Behind him, in the shadow of the barn, stood Trooper Frank Doyle, motionless and thoughtful. The door of the homestead opened suddenly; Jim Alliday appeared framed in the lamp glow, his big eyes watching the troopers.

'What's the matter?' he demanded huskily. 'Y' seem to be havin' the run o' my place, sergeant.'

The elder trooper drew back sharply as though a rifle-barrel had peeped at him from the shade. The tracker grinned silently.

Mrs. Alliday turned quickly. 'It's my husband, James Alliday.' She looked into the sergeant's eyes steadily and then at the big, shambling figure in the doorway. 'He's just returned from Melbourne, sergeant.'

Her voice was as steady as a child's. Then with a laugh that had a savage touch in it she added, 'He always comes home in wet weather.'

Frank Doyle moved in the deep shadow until his eye caught a glance from the young girl standing behind her father. He did not speak. Walking to his horse he went and tightened the saddle-girth, mechanically. He glanced over the sergeant's shoulders casually, and again the young girl's eyes caught his. Returning to his post near the barn, he seemed to bury himself in the shadows.

The sergeant scratched his head dubiously as he regarded the figure in the doorway.

'Come home in wet weather, eh?' His glances wandered in and out the room, and, during that moment of sharp scrutiny, Jane Alliday felt glad that she had burned the tell-tale heaps of hair. A fresh gust of wind drove the rain in their faces; the horses stamped, and their bits jangled harshly in the silence. The sergeant fingered his grizzled beard as he again measured the figure in the doorway.

'Suppose you found business pretty slow in Melbourne, Mr. Alliday. Did you come by steamer or train?' he asked.

'Came just how it durned well suited me,' answered Jim Alliday briefly. 'If there'd been a balloon excursion, I'd have come through the air, but there wasn't so I simply arrived.'

The sergeant felt his chin and looked around the yard undecidedly. Then slowly, very slowly, he made a sign to the young trooper in the shadow and they rode away towards the track loading to the river.

Mrs. Alliday entered the house and flung herself into a chair, covering her face. Nellie stooped over her tenderly.

'Mother,' she whispered, 'is— is that my father?''

'Yes.' Jane Alliday answered through her shut teeth, and the bitterness of years lay in the single word. The girl drew back and looked into the man's white face. Then something in his big soft eyes seemed to call her. She stole towards him softly, and caught his hand.

'Father, why did the troopers come here tonight?'

James Alliday straightened himself like a lashed steer, his face glowed strangely as he gripped her small hand. 'Troopers!' he said, hoarsely. 'I couldn't tell my girl why they came.'

'Jim!' Jane Alliday was on her feet, fury in her eyes. 'Don't lie, don't lie to your child. Be honest. It was you they were after.... bushranging, robbing the bank at Tringanbar,' she broke out disjointedly. 'You might have spared us the final scene,' she added, bitterly. 'Bushranging!'

He headed his bulk nearer and caught her clenched hand, while his eyes grew luminous with anger.

'Me a bushranger, Jane: me?' There was a note of passion in his voice that she had not heard before. She had heckled and bullied him not a little in the past, and his present defiant attitude sharpened her astonishment.

'Aren't you the man that broke into the bank at Tringanbar?'

'No!' His voice thundered in her ear. 'I'm not the man, Jane Alliday.'

Turning to his daughter, he spoke with sudden dignity and kindling eyes. 'I came here to-night to look at the old place, thinkin' I'd get a peep at you both afore I ventured in. So I slipped into the barn an' waited. Was there anything wrong in that, Jane Alliday?'

There was no answer.

'I came here,' he continued, 'because I'm homesick, an' want to be a good husband and father for the rest of my life. I let you haul me out o' the barn,' he went on, 'I allowed you to spile me beard an' monkey shave me, thinkin' you'd soften a bit towards me. But when those troopers came I dropped to the game. They're after somebody, an', woman like, you thought it was me. No!'

Again, he shouted the word until it rang through the homestead.

'Never took a penny from man or woman in my life.'

'You have been sending us money for the last eight years,' broke in his wife. 'I never asked myself how you were earning it.'

'Earning it, Jane? My pockets are full of stock receipts from the best Sydney and Melbourne buyers. I've been overlanding the last six years. Just passed my last mob from Queensland to a drover at Nyngan. My dogs are at Shelly's Hotel, Woolombi. I don't know what all the fuss is about.'

He paused, feeling his chin, sorrowfully.

'You might have left a bit of me whiskers; Jane, just to keep the wind off me waistcoat,' he said, finally.

The township was in an excited state next day. Sergeant Thompson and Trooper Frank Doyle had arrested the real bushranger at the back of the sawmills near Conroy's Flat. He was a dark, evil-eyed outcast, and had fired on the troopers the moment they approached his hiding-place. They carried him to the lock-up at Woolombi.

NELLIE did not marry a squatter or a bank clerk. She was always away from home when the young men rode over to chat with her father on the verandah. The mystery of her aloofness was explained one wintry night when the rain was thrashing the window and the river raced and sobbed under the bridge piles.

Young Trooper Doyle rode up to the sliprail and found his way to the verandah, when a white shape seemed to steal from the darkness as he came forward.

'Have you come to arrest me, Frank Doyle?'

Nellie Alliday touched his dripping waterproof as he stepped to the verandah.

'I would like to imprison your affections for life, dear,' he said, earnestly. 'Will you let me?'

They sat for a while sheltered from the driving rain until she broke the silence. 'Do you remember the night you came to arrest the bushranger?' she asked, suddenly.

He nodded without smiling.

'You thought then that it was father who shot the bank manager.'

'I was almost certain,' he answered, slowly.

'You didn't suggest it to the sergeant?'

The young trooper grew crimson at the temples. 'I looked into your eyes,' he said, nervously, 'and then into your father's, and somehow I thought it would be better to postpone the arrest.'

At that moment the big shape of Jim Alliday appeared in the doorway, feeling his chin disconsolately.

'Next time I hide in a barn,' he said dismally, 'I'll hire a trooper to look after my whiskers.'

The following month Nellie Alliday became Mrs. Frank Doyle— his prisoner for life, as the young trooper put it.

9: A Yellow Tragedy

Worker (Wagga NSW), 16 Dec 1907

"Bully" Hayes was a notorious American-born "blackbirder" who flourished in the 1860 and 1870s, and was murdered in 1877. He arrived in Australia in 1857 as a ships' captain, where he began a career as a fraudster and opportunist. Bankrupted in Western Australia after a "long firm" fraud, he joined the gold rush to Otago, NZ. He seems to have married four times without the formality of a divorce from any of his wives.

He was soon back in another ship, whose co-owner mysteriously vanished at sea, leaving Hayes sole owner; and he joined the "blackbirding" trade, where Pacific islanders were coerced, or bribed, and then shipped to the Queensland canefields as indentured labourers. After number of wild escapades, and several arrests and imprisonments, he was shot and killed by his ship's cook, Peter Radek.

So notorious was "Bully" Hayes, and so apt his nickname, (he was a big, violent, overbearing and brutal man) that Radek was not charged; he was indeed hailed a hero.

Dorrington wrote a number of amusing and entirely fictitious short stories about Hayes. Australian author Louis Becke, who had sailed with Hayes, also wrote about him.

— Terry Walker

THE far-off beating of gongs, and the sharp cracking of fireworks, was heard beyond the outer reefs of Fanuti Island. Captain Hayes, leaning over the schooner's tail, listened curiously. Experience warned him that no mere kanaka festival was proceeding. The flashing of lights on the distant trade-house verandah suggested that a marriage feast or funeral was in progress at Tung War's, the rich island trader.

The schooner was anchored in 20 fathoms of reef-locked bay, awaiting her cargo of copra and shell. The trade and fortunes of Fanuti Island were controlled by Tung War, a native of Canton. His pearling schooners swarmed East and West, scouring the remotest lagoons for a mere bagful of shell, buying golden-edge and black-lip pearl at £50 a ton from impoverished native divers, and soiling at £300 whenever the market was favourable. In the matter of screwing the last dollar from an investment, few American oil magnates could approach the big-brained Chinaman.

Glancing shoreward Hayes saw a boat put off from the trade-house pier. Ten minutes later a white-coated kanaka scrambled over tho schooner's rail and passed a note to the buccaneer. The writing was crooked, almost childish. Hayes held it to the binnacle light curiously, the scent of the paper amused him.

'Captain Haye,— I very sorry to inform you I that my illustris master, Tung War, is dead to-day. I shall be glad for you to bear witness at once. There is other business. Me not very well. — King Lee.'

Hayes threw a dollar to the bearer, slipped into the boat, and shoved off.

'This Tung War very rich, eh, Tommy?' he said to the kanaka.

The islander's black face seemed to open; the white teeth flashed in the darkness. 'Him worth one, two million dollars, Cap'n Hayes. He rich feller; by gar!'

Hayes looked depressed. 'This hoarding of wealth is wicked, Tommy. It poisons a man's mind, and burns holes in his nerves. And, by the way, Tommy, try and reduce that smile of yours; it's derned hard to see the shore-line while it's moving round your face.'

They landed at the narrow trade-house pier. Hayes sprang up the stops jauntily, J and drove his boot at a kanaka in the act of igniting a snake-like coil of fireworks.

'Nuff to give a dead man jaw-ache,' said, sharply. 'Get out of my way, you gibbering man-ape.'

The figure of a small Chinaman appeared on the trade-house verandah, and as Hayes advanced he extended his hand cordially. The buccaneer nodded, and permitted his two fingers, to rest for a moment in the celestial's palm.

'Boss end up, eh, Mr. Lee? Die on his feet, or just in the old horizontal style?'

King Lee shrugged his small shoulders, and led the way to a large room furnished after the manner of an Eastern potentate. In the centre stood a richly-upholstered bier, covered with hibiscus and jungle flowers. Stretched on it was the body of Tung War. His face was concealed by a veil of yellow gauze. There was small ceremony about Hayes. Nodding briskly, as though the dead man deserved recognition, he turned to the placid little Chinaman at his side. M,

'Gone at last, Mr. Lee. A fine, big thief of a man, too,' sighed Hayes. 'Still it's a poor world that can't jig along without a fat-fisted tyrant who ground a million Polynesians to dust.'

'You no likee Tung War?' King Lee spoke without looking up.

'Guess he never spared me when I came into his net.' Hayes turned a smile about a green cigar. 'Reckon if you ballasted his coffin with gold you couldn't get him into Heaven. Who's official assignee in the matter of his property?'

King Lee glanced swiftly at his questioner. 'I look after his money until his people come here.'

'Oh, a gunboat might fix it up,' laughed Hayes. 'I guess the island belongs to John. Bull; the flag's over the missun-house! Watch yourself, Mr. Lee. Don't play shinty with the dead man's dollars.'

The little Chinaman smiled. 'I sent for you, Captain Haye, on a matter of bizness. Tung War, my master, has a cousin at the Manhiki Island.'

Hayes nodded briefly; there was small fuel for his ambition schemes in the Chinaman's announcement.

'I would ask you to takee Tung War to his cousin in Manhiki, Captain Haye. His name is Sing War. He will prepare the body for the long China voyage.'

'I savvy.' Hayes was aware of the value that every celestial sets upon his ancestor's bones. Year in, year out, big cargo tramps circled the earth claiming their dead from forgotten goldfields and mining centres. The Chinaman's veneration for his bones was a subject which caused Hayes infinite laughter.

'I don't want to make a hearse of my schooner, Mr. Lee,' he said, after a while. 'There's small profit in humping a dead Chow from one island to another. How much will you give?'

'Two hundred dollars.'

'I've been paid more for shifting empty bottles,' grunted Hayes. 'I deserve a squeeze from Tung's estate. He scraped me clean once or twice.'

'Two hundred an' fifty.' The little Chinaman bared his teeth slightly. 'The kanakas will do it for nothin'.

'The job's mine,' answered Hayes, sulkily. 'Put him aboard soon, as you're ready. Tung War wasn't too fresh in life; guess he'll make himself heard before we reach Manhiki.'

An hour later six kanaka boatmen heaved a lightly-made coffin aboard the schooner, and departed hurriedly. The natives had a secret fear of the big, white captain. The stories of his recent black birding exploits were fresh in their minds, and as the schooner headed for the wide, coral-strewn passage they gave a shout that reached Hayes at the wheel.

'To fa!' he thundered, in response. 'Guess I'm the man you club to death in your dreams every night.'

Clearing the passage, he stood away for Manhiki, with a clear conscience and two hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket.

The setting moon died away over tho horizon. A mist of stars trailed like a woven garment across the eastern sky. The schooner whined and creaked as the wind shrilled musically through the halyards. Calling to the mate to relieve him at the wheel, Hayes passed below and turned in immediately.

The first mate, Bill Howe, had accompanied Hayes through many a soul-raising tea fight. Bill was without a single ambition; his one desire was to accompany his captain into some new adventure that savoured of hard blows

and perilous seamanship. But when he saw the coffin holding the body of Tung War being brought aboard his disgust was tragic.

'I've steered pigs through cyclones,' he said to the deck hands; 'and took on more fighting than I could swaller— for the Cap'n's sake, an' now he's turned the schooner into a body-snatchin' hulk.'

'Why don't 'e supply us with some crêpe, sir?' said one of the hands. 'I thought Cap'n Hayes was 'igh-class sailor; didn't think 'e'd go into the funeral business. Cats an' dead chows is poisonous.'

The mate eyed the speaker sharply.

'I don't want any free opinions aboard this schooner. If I express myself about the Cap'n's loose behaviour, I don't want the crew to encore.'

Howe strolled below moodily, glancing at his watch occasionally, and keeping an ear on the captain's loud breathing. The mate was not a superstitious man; but as he prowled from the cabin to where Tung War lay he caught, from time to time, the sound of muffled blows, as though a fist were hammering at a loosely-nailed board. Then a voice that was almost a cry broke from the open hatch where Tung lay coffined on a pile of shell-bags. The mate felt his hair wildly, as though a voice had hailed him from the underworld.

In a few breathless moments he was beside Hayes' bunk, quivering, white-lipped.

'Cap'n, old Tung War's a-movin' in the hold. D'ye hear, cap'n?'

'What's that?'

Hayes was on his feet in an instant. Following the trembling mate upstairs, his roused ear caught the muffled sounds coming from the. open hatch. Taking a lantern from the galley, he descended into the hold. The long, kanaka-built box was racking violently on the shell bags. The voice of Tung War was faintly heard within.

'Wha' fo' you shut me in here, King Lee? You lemme out. You lemme out, quick!'

The mate handed a hammer and chisel to Hayes; in a flash the buccaneer had wrenched away the box lid, and had lifted tho Chinaman into a sitting position on the shell-bags. .

'Now,' said Hayes, sullenly; 'what's the meaning of this guyver, Tung War? Didn't you enjoy being dead, or was the climate below a bit too sultry?'

'Me forget.' The big Chinaman wiped his face wearily with his silk-sleeved coat. 'Me want to get up an' go home,' 'he said, thickly. 'I soon get well.'

'Guess there's no getting well about it.' Hayes lit a cigar cheerfully, and braced his big shoulders. 'You're on my books as one dead Chinaman, and dead you've got to be. I've no time to start forging new certificates. Just lie

down again in your nice soft box. You'll have plenty of time to die between hero and Manhiki. You're much better company dead, Tung War.'

A flat, weary smile stole over the big Chinaman's face. 'I know you, Cap'n Hayes,' he said, feebly. 'You likee lille joke, eh? Me an' you be welly goo' flens bymby.'

'My word, we won't,' snapped the buccaneer. 'I guess you ain't forgot the time you squeezed me of my last dime down in Samoa, seven years ago. You put the British gunboat Thespis on my heels, too, after I burned the coffin-ship you asked me to sail in.'

Hayes stalked the narrow length of the hold jubilantly; the livid bullet-scar on his left check expanded grimly. Tung War looked dazed as he sat rigid on the shell-bags. Then he turned slowly to Hayes, and smiled weakly.

'My servant, King Lee, drug me, I think. He put poison into my coffee. Him wantee my money. I give you one hundred pounds, English money, Hayes, to take me home. What say, eh?'

Hayes stopped suddenly, and brought his eyes level with the Chinaman's.

'See here, old dry-as-hell; one hundred pounds won't buy me a week's champagne when I hit Noumea, it won't wet the beginnings of my thirst— you and your hundred pounds!' He snapped his fingers in Tung War's face, and climbed on deck cheerfully. Turning to the mate he addressed him sharply.

'Take old fireworks a bottle of brandy, and as much tucker as he can eat. Don't say I sent it. I suppose he's feeling a bit squiffy. Fancy little King Lee playing a game like this— with me in it, too!'

The mate hurried away to carry out the order. The deck hands gaped as he passed into the hold with food and brandy. A feeling of uneasiness and superstitious awe pervaded the schooner. The voice of the captain awoke the crew from a fit of brooding.

'Now, my lads, no whispering aboard this schooner. Deck hose to the right, and smarten ship. You there, with the camel hump and the squint, stand by the main sheet, or I'll stiffen your spine with the butt end of an oar !'

Captain Hayes was a strong man, quick of speech, big-voiced, and fearless. In 1872, when the British and American gunboats surrounded him in Apia Harbor, his genial effrontery, his superb knack of holding men in check, won for him the admiration of both commanders. His affability and his dare-devil tricks made him a favourite with the assembled blue-jackets of both nations. But there were occasions....

The mate returned from the hold with a kindling eye; winking at the captain he pointed below.

'Says he'll buy out, Cap'n. He's feelin' as cheap as a bunch o' bananas.'

Hayes made no answer; he prowled across the narrow poop like a tiger about to lick its kill. 'He'll buy out, will he? By the holy fist I'll make him beg, too! These islands make a man pappy. Heat and Square-face keep him on a level with the flies. But, now—' He shook himself savagely. 'This is my shot, and the bell is going to ring.'

Strolling forward to dropped into the hold casually, and found Tung War reclining on the shell-bags, a hurricane lamp swinging from the beam overhead. The uncertain light cast a Dante-esque halo across the Chinaman's high cheek-bones and hanging jaw. In the shift of an eye Hayes saw that the bottle of brandy was more than half-consumed.

'How much, Cap'n Hayes?' The question left the Chinaman's lips like a drop of oil. 'You no play poker with my feelings, Hayes. I wantee go home. How much?'

'My dear friend,' said Hayes, gently. 'We must really make it £2000 English money. Anything above that would be risky; anything below, childish. Savyy?'

The Chinaman's lips moved. He did not speak.

'Understand me, Tung War,' continued the buccaneer; 'I use no threat, offer no violence, but—' He stooped and .touched the mogul-like brow with his thumb; 'I'll carry you across the naked seas, between port and port, holding you fast until you whiten like old Vanderdecken, and cry for respite, and by God! I won't lay a finger on you!''

The Chinaman looked up and nodded.

'I pay.' His voice was husky, thick as though naked steel had touched his spine.

The buccaneer regarded him keenly. 'My officer will go ashore when we return to Fanuti. You will give him an order for the cash to be paid before we put ashore.' The Chinaman nodded again, sipped , a glass of brandy, and fell into a heavy sleep.

Hayes sprang on deck and took the wheel.

'Ready about there!' he shouted. 'Stand by the main sheet, you there, with the camel hump. Boom tackle, Johnny Sands, and attend head sails?'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

'All clear forward?'

'All clear, sir.'

'Hard a lee!' thundered Hayes.

A few minutes later the schooner was racing before a seven-knot breeze on her way back to Fanuti. They entered the reef-strewn channel in the early dawn.

It was high tide when Hayes dropped anchor within hailing distance of the narrow pier. The trade-house showed no signs of life. Tung War stood beside Hayes on the bridge, an ugly crease on his brow.

'Guess your understrapper, Mr. King Lee, will rejoice to see you again,' laughed the buccaneer. 'Bet he's put in the last ten hours counting your dollars, and preparing to scoot.'

'Yah!' The Chinaman seemed to hug his wrath. 'You wait.' His voice was brittle as glass.

'If a man drugged me,' said Hayes, cheerfully, 'I'd bend a gun barrel across his face. But you chinkies are a queer lot. King Lee will apologise, and you'll ask him to tea.'

'Tsh.' The Chinaman's face grew suddenly calm; there was no shadow of anger in his eyes, but Hayes, accustomed as he was to the workings of the celestial mind, felt that within Tung War lived a torrent of pent-up wrath.

Leaving the schooner in charge of the mate, Hayes went ashore in the dinghy, a note from Tung War in his pocket . He returned two hours later calm and unruffled, a satchel in his right hand bulging with American and English bank-notes. The big Chinaman awaited his return with cat-like patience.

'I must admit,' began Hayes, genially, 'that your understrapper, King Lee, faced the music like a gentleman. I told him that you were alive and putting on flesh as fast as a publican. You are at liberty to go ashore, sir,' he continued, politely. 'Just sign your magnificent name to this bit of paper, stating that William Henry Hayes, Esquire, of the South Seas, had nothing to do with the drugging and kidnapping of one Tung War, resident of Fanuti.'

After he had gone Hayes prowled about the schooner aimlessly, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. There would be no more trade at Fanuti; yet even with his money chest filled he revolted against leaving port without a cargo. Secondly, he felt that he might meet Tung War later in the day to his own advantage. Also, King Lee might be eager to transfer himself and belongings to another island after his interview with his employer.

The morning grew hot. A flock of man-o-war hawks drowsed over the schooner's -stern. The deck hands loafed under a hastily-rigged awning, and yarned leisurely. There was no sound of life about the trade-house; a terrible stillness brooded over the palm-clad slopes; here and there a solitary native passed through the distant guava-patches near the mission-house. Throughout the hot noon the surf plunged over the white reefs with the sound of gun wheels. Lounging aft, Hayes beheld a thin line of smoke shoot suddenly from the trade-house compound. He watched it curiously until the mate joined him.

'Funny-coloured smoke, Mr. Howe,' he said, suddenly. 'Got a greenery-yallery Grosvenor-gallery look about it.'

'Streaks to windward like acid-fumes.' The mate sniffed suspiciously. 'You never know what Tung War is messing with. These chows experiment with everything under the sun. P'raps he's in the whisky trade.'

'It doesn't smell like whisky,' 'growled Hayes. 'Seems to me as if he was boiling a lightning-rod in a pot of vitriol.''

The coppery fumes drifted seaward, and blew in streaks, over , the schooner's rail. Hayes darted below, coughing violently; for one moment he felt as though a streak of hot poison had entered his throat.

At moonrise a lamp appeared on the trade-house verandah. Through his night-glasses Hayes beheld the figure of Tung War gazing seaward. A few minutes later a boat put off from the jetty. It was manned by four natives, and steered by the smiling white-coated kanaka. In the stern was a long, dark object, covered with a grass-woven mat.

Hayes stood by the gangway as they pulled alongside. A sling was lowered, and with a short heave the mat-covered object was drawn on deck. Hayes shrugged his shoulders as he eyed the funeral-like box underneath. A message in Chinese was pencilled on the lid. The mate scrutinised it closely.

'Blamed if I can make it out,' he said, hoarsely. 'What is it?'

'It's a Chinese legend.' Hayes spoke thickly, his face averted. 'It means that the man inside, according to his religious beliefs, is damned for all eternity.'

The mate replaced the grass mat over the box, half-reverently. 'King Lee, eh, Cap'n?'

'Guess so. Don't want to look either'.

Tung War didn't sleep on his wrath. There was no speech that night in forecastle or cabin.

Hayes sulked, while the crew glanced aft in the direction of the mat-covered box. 'Tung War is paying me off with one of his jokes.'

Hayes went to his cabin and helped himself to a stiff glass of rum.

'I'll give him an hour to explain matters. Guess I don't want King Lee for keeps.'

Half an' hour later the mate entered the cabin; his face was pale, his knees moved as though a frost had bitten them.

'The Chinaman , King Lee is dead, Cap'n,' he said, hoarsely.

'I'm aware of the fact,' grunted the buccaneer, impatiently. 'King Lee isn't the sort of man to pretend anything, and being dead he'll know how to make the best of things when he's born again.'

'But, Cap'n,' whimpered the mate. 'The face of King Lee is calm as a child's; his hands are over his breast like a man in a deep sleep. And—'

Hayes looked at him sharply. 'And what?'

'Every bone has been taken from his body, sir.'

The buccaneer turned; his tongue clicked between his teeth. 'Bury him at eight bells,' he said.

_____

10: The Mouth of the Moon-God.

Australian Town and Country Journal 25 Dec 1907

CAPTAIN HAYES told the story inside Chung War's little opium-shop overlooking the pier at Port Darwin. A crowd of shellers and beche-de-mer men were gathered within, and the voice of "Bully" sounded like a typhoon at times when the story climbed to an interesting point.

"You see, boys, I've had a chequered career, as the magistrates say, trading about the islands and dodging Yankee gunboats, also fighting policemen. I must say that fighting policemen and tearing valuable uniforms is a healthier occupation than playing hide and seek in Hindu temples and Chinese Joss-houses.

"I always had a notion that India was the place for me," continued Hayes somewhat thoughtfully. "I'd read a lot, when a boy, about the golden palaces along the Ganges, and the beautiful silver idols and peacock thrones. I always wanted to steal a peacock throne. I used to dream that I was tearing down Macquarie-street with a peacock throne on my head, and a black-tracker following on his hands and knees. Still, everybody admits there's boodle in India-gold vaults and bullion rooms under the palaces. Wait till I tell you about the dead city of Meeraj.

"It was Harrison Blake who sent me on the idol-stealing track. Big thief of a man was Blake; everything on his schooner was stolen from poor little trading ships and hard-up tramps. Anyway, I didn't leave him much to thieve when I come to think of it.

"Blake went through India, and he reckoned there was more gold hidden under the temples than was ever taken out of Australia. And I guess he wasn't the first thief who proved the fact. I met Blake a year after Ross Lewin put me away to the gunboats, and he showed me a chest of Indian gold coins that would have filled a barrow. A Sydney broker melted the lot down, and Harrison started a sugar mill in Queensland out of the proceeds.

"Two years afterwards I met an old P. and O. serang in Calcutta, who offered to pilot me to Meeraj, one of the dead cities of the Upper Ganges. The serang— Keddah Singh was his name— told me of a palace among the ruins, where the old rajputs had hidden about two tons of silver and gold seven centuries before.

"Guess I don't know Hindoo history from a gasometer, but I'm always fresh and willing when the fittings aren't screwed down or bolted to the floor. I talked things over with Keddah Singh; I made him draw up a plan of the dead

city of Meeraj, and explain all he knew about the police and the fighting strength of the surrounding district.

"Keddah explained that the palace of the rajputs and the city of Meeraj had been decimated by plague half a century before. It was situated in a valley, about nine miles from the river, but that everything about it was as dead as Jonah's family.

"We had drinks— that is, I had them, because Keddah was a non-drinking thief who hated the sight of gin.

"It was after tho monsoon holidays that we got round to the Ganges, where the little red temples bulge in the skyline, and business hums in ghats whore the funeral pyres deal with the dead men in hundreds.

"Two days after we entered the river I strolled ashore with my first mate, Bill Howe, and Keddah Singh, to find the city of Meeraj and the palace of the dead rajputs. We struck west through the fields, where the buffaloes wallowed In mud and tho women ground corn just as they'd done 2000 years before.

"We passed dozens of native camel-drivers, their jaws bound up like mummies, travelling north with their loads. Sometimes a potter came from his wheel and stared at us as we passed; nobody spoke, it was too blamed hot, and the pariah dogs kept 365 yards in my rear. Some of 'em had smelt a gun before, I reckoned.

"Keddah showed us a valley in the distance, with an old red fort at the entrance. We pushed on down a cactus-choked street, where the squirrels ran in and out of the grass-grown ruins, and the sand had piled itself waist high in front of the old marble columns.

"The palace stood in the centre of the valley, and it looked deader than a churchyard full of undertakers. There were gaping dripstones under the turrets and smooth-walled passages scoured by the wind and rain and sand.

" 'Into this place we must go,' said Keddah, pointing to the grass-covered courtyard. "The captain sahib will find many things in the vaults, but none to match the great diamond tooth fixed in the mouth of the Moon-god.'

" 'We'll see everything first, and choose afterwards,' says I. 'There's no harm, anyway, in looking under the palace.'

" 'No harm,' says Keddah solemnly, 'If the captain sahib wills it.'

"It was a dusty walk under tho winding passages of the dead palace. There had been plague all along the Ganges that year, and you've got to go into a dead Indian city to see what the plague can do when it gets to work. The carrion birds had cleaned up the open spaces, but on the palace steps we saw the bones of the priests lying in the dark archways of the shrines. You could see where the robbers had run in to carry off jewels and trinkets, and you saw

their bones lying where the disease had caught them by the throat, so to speak, and flung them to the ground.

"Some lay in the open courtyard, others sprawled in front of the altars, with silver and gold gee-gaws clutched in their skeleton hands. We could see, too, where the jackals had been and stripped them bare, leaving nothing but the bones and the jewels.

"Well, we worked our way below until we hit a big black door, with more bones piled in front, showing where plague had trapped the looters. We worked for three hours with a crowbar before we smashed in the highly decorated fastenings and plates.

"Once inside, we saw what old Warren Hastings must have seen in dozens of rajahs' palaces. The room was about 40 feet square; in the centre was a copper sarcophagus, bolted and clamped with iron and brass. Smashing it asunder, we found it bulging with ancient coins, silver, bronze, and gold. There were piles of vases underneath, and broken .sword, hilts covered with rubies and gems.

"Bill Howe sat on the floor, and rubbed his eyes. 'No more sailorisin' for me,' says he. 'There's enough money here to sink a mud barge."

"Bill had been used to stealing empty bottles and gas fittings all his life, and it staggered him to see the real stuff lying in barrowfuls around him. You could have loaded a dray with the metal trinkets, armlets and plaques, scattered around. We filled the sack we'd brought, and started upstairs, whistling as we stepped over the bones of tho dead robbers who'd been before us.

"Bill carried the sack, while I pushed from behind. At the top of the steps stood Keddah Singh, stomping around impatiently. He looked a bit nettled when he saw what we had in the sack.

" 'You cannot leave the palace with this load, captain sahib,' says he. 'The Indian police or the natives will stop you before you reach the schooner.'

" 'I'll chance it,' says I, looking at the bag. 'I'll shed quarts of blood before I part with an ounce of the boodle.'

" 'Captain,' says he, 'your eyes are greater than your legs. This load of rubbish will be your destruction. Be sure that someone has seen us enter the palace. We shall be followed the moment we appear in the open; we shall be mobbed or strangled probably by the infuriated villagers.'

" 'What do you want?' says I. 'A sackful of gold ornaments is worth fighting for.'

" 'There are things within the palace more precious than gold ornaments. The diamond tooth of the Moon-god is worth 300,000 dollars of American money. And it is no heavier than a spoon,' says he. 'It was stolen from the rajputs 800 years ago.'

" 'Where is it?' says I.

" 'Within the holy shrine, where the Moon-god has sat for centuries. If the captain sahib will follow, I will show him the way.'

" 'Put down that sack, Bill,' says I. 'There's reason in what Keddah says. I've heard of the Moon-god. Maybe he's got a few other ornaments about his person beside the tooth. I guess if he isn't screwed down we'll take him, pedestal and all.'

" 'There is no pedestal, Captain Sahib,' says Keddah Singh. 'And the god is made of granite and ebony, and weighs many tons.'

Leaving the sack in the courtyard, we followed Keddah down a long colonnade past more bones and scattered ornaments, until we arrived at the foot of some winding stone stairs. Up went Keddah with Bill and me at his heels, while overhead we could hear the hoarse voices of the vultures as they flew in and out of the barred turret windows. The air was alive with these carrion birds, and as I peeped through a grass-covered embrasure I saw a jackal scampering across the courtyard into tho open country.

" 'Keep your hands ready, captain sahib,' says Keddah. 'All may not be dead within the Palace of Ramidar the Great.'

"At the top of the stairs we came to a long black gallery flanked with elephant images and big stone monkeys. The statue of a marble tiger filled the archway, Its great snarling head looking down at us as though the blamed thing was alive.

" 'Pass under the belly of the tiger, captain sahib,' says Keddah. 'The shrine of the Moongod is a little way beyond.

"Bill Howe didn't like crawling under the marble tiger,, so I sent him back to keep guard over the sack of gold ornaments in the court-yard..

"I followed Keddah to the end of the black stone arch, until we saw a stream of light pouring through a thousand tiny holes in the lacquered ceiling overhead.

"In the full glare of the afternoon light sat the Moon-god, its body filling the whole apartment. It had the paws and shoulders of a mammoth bear, and its great lamp-like face stood ten feet from the floor, the eyes staring full at an open window that faced the west.

"The face was made of carved crystal; its huge mouth gaped as though it was grinning at the reddening sky. You could see into the great black throat and the crystal-fretted gums. One thing struck us as we crouched under its paws, looking into its horrible face— the long knife-shaped diamond tooth that hung like a spike from the roof of its mouth.

" 'There isn't a forceps in the world big enough to drag out that tooth,' says I to Keddah Singh.

" 'Pressure will drag it out, captain sahib,' says he, peeping up into the mouth of the god. 'There is a spring somewhere within the throat; it was known to the old priests of the shrine; one touch and the diamond tooth will slip into your hand.'

" 'Be good enough to show me,' says I, looking hard at him. 'Stick your hand into the Moon-god's mouth, and let me see how It is done, Keddah Singh.'

"The fellow's knees fairly trembled as I looked at him and pointed to the god.

" 'Spare me that, sahib,' says he. 'Although I am a thief, and the son of a caste-breaker, yet I must not touch the face of the Moon-god. The hell of the Christian is nothing to the Jehannum of the caste-breaker!'

" 'Stand aside!' says I. 'I've no time for your empty-brained scruples!' Placing my toe on the knee of the Moon-god, I hauled myself to its big shoulders until my chin was level with its shining crystal face.

" 'Now,' says I, looking down at Keddah Singh, 'stand by when I came down with the tooth!' Resting my body against the great stone shoulder, I looked into the gaping tunnel of a mouth, and breathed a space. It seemed to me that I could hear strange noises deep down in the throat of the god— whispering voices and the breathing of some great beast. I put it down to the draught that blew into the large ears and mouth. And the dazzling crystal face glowed like the front of a furnace, as I touched the wide burning eyes.

" 'Quick, sahib, there is no time to waste!' whispered Keddah Singh. 'We know not who may come to this plague-deserted palace: other robbers, maybe, or a troop of native cavalry.'

" 'Rot!' says I, getting a fresh grip of the Moon-God.

"The knife-shaped molar was set firm as a rock in the crystal gums. Gripping it, I hauled and twisted until the sweat ran down my face.

" 'No good,' says I, looking down at Keddah Singh. 'It will take a charge of dynamite to loosen the tooth.'

"Keddah was standing in the centre of the shrine, watching me closely. I could see that he was choking back his excitement, and it occurred to mo that he mightn't know so much about the Moon-god as he supposed.

" 'There is a spring inside the throat,' says he. 'Press hard and the tooth will fall into your hand, captain sahib.'

"Pushing my fist into the dark throat, I touched a small metal knob that fell back as I pressed it. 'Then something happened that made my hair stiffen and my blood turn to ice. The jaw of the Moon-god closed with a snap before I had time to snatch out my hand, and the huge lips held my arm fast as an octopus or a shark.

" 'The blamed thing's got me!' says I, looking down, but Keddah had gone; I could hear the patter of his feet as he ran down the dark corridor.

"The silence of the shrine was worse than the pressure of the god's lips on my wrist and forearm.. The carrion birds flew in and out of the barred windows, screaming and fluttering wildly at sight of me hanging from the mouth of the god.

"A jackal yelped somewhere under the palace wall; then came a troop of tiny, grey faced monkeys, chattering as they skipped over me towards the marble dome and the open window at top, where the sunlight poured in.

"I began to wonder why Bill Howe didn't come, and the pain of my arm began shooting like gun-flashes through my body. I could almost feel the eyes of the god looking into mine, and the beamed horrors of it almost made me faint.

"I saw, too, that the great diamond tooth had just missed spiking my arm when the mouth closed down. Once or twice I called out; but my voice was drowned by the screams of the carrion birds: in the tower overhead. It was getting dark, too, and the face of the god grew, bright as a volcano as the sun set.

"Guess a devil couldn't have held me tighter than the Moon-god. No power of mine could move those crystal jaws that seemed to flatten out the bones of my wrist and arm.

"I must have fainted, for when I woke the shrine, was as dark as the pit. Someone was calling me from the corridor end. Then I saw the face of Bill Howe staring up at me from the blackness, a small lantern in his hand.

" 'Up here, Bill,' says I, hoarsely. 'The god has me fast as an old man alligator.'

"Bill crawled closer, and looked up at me, his hair stiffening as the light from the Moon-god's-face fell on him.

" 'Steady, Bill,' says I. 'If I fall my arm will be wrenched away.'

"Bill was a man of few words; but I noticed, that he had the crowbar in his hands; it was a most valuable crowbar in the hands of Bill Howe. I'd seen him move a two-ton steel girder with it when he was in a hurry.

" 'Easy does it,' says I, as he stood by the knee of the god. 'Easy, Bill, and hit it on the starboard side of the dial!'

"Bill hit the crystal face a bang that shook the shrine from floor to roof. Then he drew back, and hit it again, and the big moon face seemed to split in halves, as it fell with a horrible crash to the floor.

" 'If anybody's got any objection to the god being hit,' said Bill, In a loud voice, 'he'd better come out an' say so.'

Bill waved the crowbar, and stood on his toes.

" 'Pick up that diamond tooth,' says I, 'an' don't stand blatherskitin' to an empty palace.'

"Bill muttered something about my ingratitude, and started to look for the big diamond tooth. The Moon-god's face had been smashed into a dozen pieces, and the crystal lay about the floor in jagged lumps. We turned over the pieces, and examined them carefully; but the tooth seemed to have vanished into space.

" 'P'r'aps the god swallowed it,' said Bill groping on his hands and knees. 'Most grown-up people swallow their teeth when their face meets a crowbar.'

"After what I'd suffered I wasn't game to start groping inside the god to see whether it had swallowed tho diamond tooth. We left the shrine, and hurried down to the courtyard, to where Bill had stood guard over the sack of trinkets and gold coins.

"It was gone! Bill felt his hair and looked at the sky, and I saw in a flash what had happened.

" 'Keddah Singh!' says I. 'Too smart for you and me, Bill. He's cleared off with the loot.'

"We crossed the courtyard in the direction of the underground passage. Bill stopped suddenly, with his nose in the air. 'Listen, cap'n,' says he.

"From the darkness of the sand hills came the faint jingle of arms, and the clink, clink, of scabbards.

"Native cavalry on the prowl," said I. "Guess we'd bettor move, or there'll be two brand-new skeletons in the courtyard to-morrow. I don't like the way those vultures get to business."

"We ran into the darkness towards the river, Bill raced me and I raced Bill until we'd left the dead city of Meeraj miles behind.

" 'Yes, there's lots of gold and silver lying about those Indian temples,' said Hayes finally. "I'm going back to get some more one of these days.' "

11: The Professor's Tulip.

Northern Miner 2 Oct 1908

"I'M GLAD to hear that you are a single man, Professor," said Mr. Bulger, the owner of Bulger's Variety Theatre. "And if you'll take an old showman's advice, you'll keep single long as you're with me."

"I will," said the Professor, with an earnestness that impressed the veteran showman. "My professional skills and my nerve power would suffer, I feel sure, were I unfortunate enough to marry a lady with a temper." He added thoughtfully, "Many a career in the world of legerdemain has been ruined through an unhappy alliance. A man of my occupation must preserve his will power, Mr Bulger."

"Quite so," answered the show proprietor. "It doesn't pay to appear before big audiences with your nerve out of joint. My lost conjuror, Signor Mephistopheles, was married to a virago, and his stage career, from the day he left the altar, was a perfect sermon in the way of failures."

"Poor Meph. I knew him in London!" sighed the Professor. "His experiences were truly awful."

"He was a great illusionist," continued Mr. Bulger, "and an unrivalled exponent in the art of balancing furniture on his nose. His popularity was at its height when his evil star prompted him to marry. I did my best to prevent the miserable affair coming to a head, but the woman was too smart for me, sir. She led him to the altar before I could even reduce his salary."

"You think that would have had an effect?" queried the Professor anxiously.

"It might have," growled Mr. Bulger. "Anyway she beat me at the altar, so to speak. But she beat the man who could pull rabbits out of the lining of his hat."

"I know the trick," interrupted the Professor, sadly.

"The altar-trick or the rabbit illusion?" questioned Mr. Bulger severely. "Allow me to finish my statement, sir!'

The Professor muttered a confused apology: his pale face coloured slightly. 'I merely referred to the rabbit and hat trick," he said meekly.

"Quite so." Mr. Bulger breathed hard and wiped his hot brow pensively. "Signor Mephistopheles soon came a cropper," he went on. "His nerves got so bad that he used to drop the eggs all over the stage when be was jugging with them eight at a time. I have discovered," added Mr. Bulger coldly, "that to juggle eggs properly a man wants a free mind and a light head or his eggs begin to hit the ground."

Bulger's Variety Theatre was a thing of joy to the summer visitors at Iffleton-on-Sea. If the artistes engaged were not always up to date, the people of Iffleton rarely grumbled. Their organs of appreciation had not been spoiled by overdoses of vaudeville and theatrical entertainments. The faded star, whose business had grown wearisome to the London public, was sure of a welcome at Iffleton -on-Sea.

Professor Lamper, the sleight-of-hand entertainer, had been engaged for a season at a salary of seven guineas a week. Mr. Bulger had gone over his theatrical references and Press Notices before retaining him to satisfy himself that Lamper was an artist who might be relied upon to grace an evening's performance or fashionable matinee.

The week-end excursion trains had brought the usual throng of visitors to Iffleton, and Mr. Bulger looked forward to a crowded house when the curtain rose at eight o'clock.

Throughout the day Professor Lamper appeared to be suffering from a slight nervous attack accompanied by sudden feverish desires to visit the railway station and secretly watch the incoming trains from London. Twice during the afternoon a scene shifter employed at the theatre had observed him standing behind the door of the waiting-room scrutinising the lady passengers as they hurried from the station.

The scene-shifter, being inquisitive, mentioned the matter to Mr. Bulger on his return to the theatre.

"Tut, tut." The proprietor waved his hand impatiently. "Professor Lamper is no doubt interested in the numbers of people who pour into Iffleton at the week-ends. They help to swell our returns."

Sleight-of-hand entertainments were appreciated by visitors to Bulger's Variety Theatre, and the management had gone to some expense in placarding the town with posters depicting Professor Lamper's marvellous stage Illusions. The Iffleton "Daily Gazette" described his London successes as a series of astonishing feats which raised the art of modern wizardry to the pinnacles of evolutionary science.

Mr. Bulger was not quite sure of the meaning of "evolutionary science," but he felt that it sounded nice and scholarly, and he told himself for the fiftieth time that the services or Professor Lamper were dirt cheap at seven guineas n week.

The night came up with a biting east wind that drove the people from the chilly esplanade, to the warm theatre in the centre of the town. Every seat was occupied long before eight o'clock. A small crowd, unable to obtain admission, loitered near the entrance while Mr. Bulger, in a frock coat and silk hat, strolled round offering to sell tickets for the next evening's performance.

A minstrel troupe occupied the stage for the first part of the evening; they were followed by a family of trick cyclists, and a Frenchman with a number of performing dogs. At 9.30 the curtain rose revealing the Wizard's Cave, a mysterious looking apartment overhung with tropic foliage and ferns. In the background stood an small table with several screens, at the sides and rear to assist the Professor in his swift-changing feats of legerdemain.

Soft music and prolonged applause greeted him as he took his stand by the table. Bowing slightly he proceeded to scatter a pack of cards in a shower above his head, catching them deftly as they fell. From a cigarette case he extracted a clutch of chickens and permitted them to ran cheeping about the stage to show their genuineness.

Each new feat was met with outbursts or appreciation, accompanied by loud whistling from the gallery. One or two people in the family circle smiled sceptically at each renewal of applause. One man hinted that whenever certain Professors distributed small amounts of beer money among the gallery cliques there were sure to be desultory outbreaks of whistling at every trick.

In justice to the Professor it must be admitted that he had never attempted to placate the cliques who demanded beer in concession for applause rendered on his behalf. He was always prepared to stand or fall by his art

The stage was now prepared for the great Tulip Scene, a startling floral Illusion especially conceived by Professor Lamper. The screens were lowered to lend an atmosphere of mystery and weirdness to the performance. The screens appeared to stand away from the table, although in reality they were close enough to conceal a cunningly contrived apparatus at the rear indispensable to the Professor in the production of the great Tulip Illusion.

Turning to the audience be requested them in a steady voice to observe his movements closely. Placing a large gilt-edged flower bowl on the table he withdrew slightly, waving a silver-mounted wand over it gracefully.

A great silence fell upon the theatre; those who had come especially to witness the Tulip illusion craned forward to watch the mysterious pod sudden growth of a rare and beautiful flower. Raising the wand in a series of upward curves. Professor Lamper stood slightly as though his ear had caught a strange half-audible murmur coming from beneath the magic flower bowl. The wand remained uplifted, but many in the audience noticed that his face grew pale, and his eyes bulged with sudden fear.

"Now, Professor," bawled a voice in the gallery, "show us 'ow yer grow yer tulips."

"Left his garden seeds at home," commented another. "Lend him a waterin' can somebody." Symptoms of laughter greeted the remark.

Professor Lamper half turned his face to the audience for a moment; his lips quivered fitfully. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I beg—"

"Oh, give us more tulips," came from the gallery. "Can't yer spare a penorter?"

Catcalls followed, while a young man in an obscure corner yelled "Keubages" in a voice of a vegetable hawker.

Mr. Bulger hurried to the wings and glared indignantly at the dumbfounded Professor. "Go on with the performance," he snarled. "Do something, and for heaven's sake don't gape like that!"

The spellbound Professor shook himself violently as though he had seen seized by an octopus. Livid with apprehension tie raised the gilt-edged bowl from the table and retreated with a sharp cry of bewilderment. The sudden raising of the bowl revealed a blue-eyed baby lying beneath, its fat fists clutching the air as though it had left his mother's arms only a moment or two before. The audience gaped in surprise; a profound silence filled the theatre, then, as if outcome by the unexpected result of the performance, broke into thunders of applause.

"Lower the curtain!" snapped Bulger. "And remove that infant from the table."

"P'raps the baby belongs to somebody in the audience, sir," suggested a scene shifter hastily. "Hadn't we better ask? The Professor don't seem to know what he's about."

"I'm glad you mentioned it, Simmons. I quite overlooked such a possibility."

Mr. Bulger wiped his brow distractedly. "Good job they took it as they did in front. Wait a bit."

Stepping to the footlights he smiled benevolently upon the cheering audience and wagged his head.

"Has any lady or gentleman lost a baby?" he asked pleasantly "Sweeter than all the tulips; sweeter than flowers or honey," he added gracefully.

"Got a strawberry mark on its right arm," prompted the shifter from the wings.

A grave silence fell upon the assembly: hundreds of feet shuffled uneasily until the irrepressible voice in the gallery begged the audience not to desert its offspring. The voice appealed is a pathetic undertone to a stout elderly gentleman in the stalls, urging him to assume his paternal responsibilities immediately. It also asked the stout gentleman whether he was a man.

Mr. Bulger frowned ominously, "Come, come, ladies and gentlemen," he cried admonishingly, "Babies do not grow on tables. Surely the child's mother is among you."

"You can have it, Bulger," half-whispered the voice in the gallery, "An' be careful of the milk."

The proprietor withdrew behind the curtain suddenly, and confronted the half-dazed conjuror.

"Professor Lamper," he began hotly, "kindly explain the meaning of this unadvertised exhibition. Where did the baby come from?"

"I— I—" gasped the professor. "You don't understand, sir—"

"I know a live baby from a tulip!" roared the proprietor. " Whose child is it?'

"Mine!" choked the Professor. "How it came here I can only guess. But I feel certain that Arabella put it there. No one but Arabella understands the secret workings of my table and screens."

"Arabella! Who is Arabella?" thundered Mr. Bulger. "You stated in your agreement with me that you were unmarried!"

"You must forgive me that misstatement," said the Professor humbly. "Circumstances compelled me to abandon Arabella." He glanced round the stage wildly for a moment as though expecting the sudden appearance of his angry wife from behind the scenes.

"She has followed me from London to Iffleton, I fear, and is hiding somewhere at hand. If you will be good enough to look, Mr. Bulger, I— I think you will find her under the table."

At that moment a stout, over-dressed lady floated from the mysterious background of screens and glared at the trembling Professor. Blinking her finger in his face, she turned to , Mr. Bulger.

"This— this man is my husband, sir. He left me three weeks ago without a sign or a word. I arrived by this afternoon's train and hid myself behind the apparition box until the tulip bowl came in. I extracted the India-rubber flower, and," she laughed wickedly, "you know the rest."

"You might have waited until the performance was over instead of concealing our little Augustus under the tulip bowl, Arabella. Only a woman would have been guilty of such unprofessional tactics," he cried bitterly.

"Thank goodness I know all your tricks," fumed his wife. "Next time you run away from home I'll follow and spoil your performance. I'll do a turn myself and show how your wonderful illusions are done." Snatching the baby from the scene-shifter's arms she walked the stage, cheeks aflame, her whole body quivering with excitement.

The house had grown impatient during the short delay, the stamping of feet warned Mr. Bulger that his audience was not to be played with beyond a certain point

"Give us the baby-act again!" roared a dozen voices from different parts of the theatre. "Encore Professor! More baby!"

Mr. Bulger wheeled suddenly across the stage, his face glowing with excitement. "By Jove, they think it's a rehearsed bit of business!" he said jubilantly. Turning to Mrs. Lamper, he smiled gravely.

"My dear Madame, will you kindly allow your husband to proceed with the great Tulip scene. We may arrange," he glanced swiftly at the cowering Professor, "for a repetition of the baby-act to-morrow evening. It's the biggest thing in its way I can remember," he added.

"I'll allow him to go on with his business, providing he doesn't run away," she responded, sullenly.

"Arabella, you may trust me," pleaded the Professor. "I'm not saying it was your temper drove me away. Put it down to my nerves if you like— a conjuror's nerves."

"If,' said Mr. Bulger, turning to the pair with a smile, "If you will both guarantee to include little Augustus In future entertainments we'll call it another two guineas a week,"

"I don't see why we shouldn't," answered Mrs. Lamper, thoughtfully. "I trust I shall be included in the programme, though." Hugging little Augustus to her breast, she stared a trifle defiantly at her husband.

The Professor bowed approvingly, and advanced somewhat limply to the centre of the stage.

''Then we may consider the matter settled."

Mr. Bulger touched a bell at his elbow and nodded briskly to the stage assistants.

"Up with the curtain," he said genially. "The Professor will now proceed with the real Tulip act."

12: The Affair at the Bank

Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser 11 March 1908

THE WINTER rain was driving across the paddock in slanting squalls: A few head of cattle wandered in from the flat as though seeking shelter from the bleak southerly wind. Sergeant Cummins walked to the homestead, verandah; shook the water from his cap, and entered the house.

His wife came out to meet him— a small, brown-eyed, bush woman, who had suffered the cares of many a gold-rush to be near her husband when fever and ill-luck stalked through his camp.

'You're pale to-night, Kate,' he said tenderly. 'Where's Tom? Isn't he home yet?'

'He's gone to a party at Tranbar. He won't be home before midnight,' sighed Mrs. Cummins. 'I'm afraid he's given his heart and mind to Nellie Armstrong. He's as silent as a sick boy the last week or so.'

She took her husband's dripping water-proof into the kitchen, and hung it in a dry corner.''

The white-haired trooper, seemed in no hurry to change his uniform. Seated in a chair he watched his wife half-shrewdly as she prepared the evening meal. And the rain roared over the iron-roofed cottage and outbuildings with deafening insistence.

'Tregear, the bank-manager, spoke to me this morning, Kate!'

Sergeant Cummins sat back in the chair and glanced at his wife suddenly. 'He's in sore trouble.'

Mrs. Cummins turned almost sharply, and looked at her husband curiously. 'What's the matter with Tregear?' she asked, 'He doesn't complain as a rule.'

'Seven, hundred pounds missing from the bank safe. And he hasn't a word to say concerning its whereabouts.'

Sergeant 'Cummins wiped his face and paced the room thoughtfully.

'It's the nastiest business I've struck for years. Tregear told me the news in a half-confidential way, because Tom and he are the only two employed in the bank. He thought it was only right, he said, to let me know.'

Mrs. Cummins's face grew white as her husband finished. Tom was in his nineteenth year, and had been employed; by the bank since he had left school. He was their only child, she had marked every day of her son's life; planned his future for many a year to come. Now the news that £700 had been taken surreptitiously from the bank filled her with an unspeakable dread. She sat beside her husband, white-lipped, almost speechless.

'Did— did Tregear insinuate that our boy—' she broke down suddenly, and covered her face.

'Tregear made no statements, Kate. But he left no doubt in my mind as to what he thought.' Sergeant Cummins braced himself suddenly, and his spurs clinked on the board floor.

'Tregear reckons the money has been taken by a bank employee, and there are only two at Tranbar— himself and our lad Tom.'

'And Tom's away dancing, while this wretched thing is hanging over our heads,' sobbed the trooper's wife.

'Let him dance,' growled Sergeant Cummins. 'We'll have the truth when he comes home. We'll know who's taken the cash, and by G—d if there's a stammer in his voice, a shift in his eye, I'll shoot him, on the threshold.'

The trooper's wife was silent. There, was no need for her to fill the house with lamentations or futile pleadings. She knew her husband, and the value he placed on his son's truth and honesty. And she knew, too, as mothers know, that her son's hands were as clean as his mind. She sat immovable in her chair as the rain spilled over the iron roof and filled the night with the sound of rising flood-waters.

The ticking of the clock seemed the only incident that separated husband and wife from eternity. They sat silent through the long night, and waited—waited...

Doubt of her son's honesty stayed only one moment in the woman's mind. Suppose, he had gone— fled to Melbourne or Perth— with the money. How could, she face her neighbours again?

Like a frozen image sat Sergeant Cummins, his hands resting on his knees, his head sunk forward, listening for the sound of his son's footsteps. He could not believe that Tom had been tempted by the sight of money. He even permitted his mind to go back over the past, in his effort to recall one single instance of the boy's infidelity or untrustworthiness.

The grey dawn found the man and woman still waiting, until across the river came the sound of a young voice, singing in clear tones. A few minutes later the sound of a horse's hoofs slashing the rain-flooded hollows told them that he was at the gate. Sergeant Cummins stood up stiffly, like a man on parade. The door creaked; a face peeped in stealthily.

'Hullo, dad, hullo, mum. Been waiting for me?'

The boy paused as he caught sight of his mother's white face. Turning swiftly, he looked into his father's kindling eyes.

'What's the matter?' he asked, almost coldly. 'What's wrong, mother?'

'Listen here, lad.' The old trooper held up his finger, warningly. 'I got a nasty report from the bank yesterday. Tregear is talking of cash being pilfered.

It's hard for me to mention it; all my life I've fought , and struggled to keep our name clean. I'd go out in the world tomorrow, and begin the fight again rather than hear Tregear repeat what he said' yesterday.'

'Oh!' The boy nodded, dully. A red flush spread over his face. His mother's eyes were upon him in a flash, and in that moment of blinding indecision, he saw his father stoop forward, half savagely the next found him looking into the barrel of a rifle.

'Tom!' The sergeant's voice quivered in the cold dawn, 'It's you or Tregear. I'll give ye ten seconds to tell the truth. Quick now—!'

Behind them sat the mother, her nerveless hands resting before her. The boy's head drew level with his father's, his unflinching eyes moved from the deadly barrel to the stern, grey face beyond.

'There may be another beside myself or Tregear,' he said slowly.

'Tregear is an honest man!' thundered the trooper. 'I've known him all my life.'

'Dad.' The boy looked deep into the cold eyes in front. 'You're condemning me without a shred of proof or evidence. A stranger would have received more consideration at your hands. This thing touches your honour it; touches mine, too. And— ' he looked again at the steel-grey eyes, 'you'll give me the same chance as Tregear. If you can recall one day in my life where I crawled down on a point of honesty I'll take the lead you've got to spare.'

The rifle lowered suddenly; the old trooper bent his head as he swung the weapon into a corner of the room.

'I'll speak to Tregear to-day,' he said huskily. And as the boy walked from the room, he called to him unsteadily.

'I expect you to go with me to the bank at 10 o'clock,' he added.

THE RAIN continued throughout the morning. Father and son walked to the bank in silence. Tregear was sitting at his desk when they arrived: his haggard face and leaden eyes hinted at a sleepless night.

He nodded briefly to father and son as they entered. 'I have not reported the matter at headquarters,' he said significantly. 'I thought—' here he glanced hard at Tom Cummins— 'that the money might possibly have been returned.'

'I have no occasion to doubt my lad's honesty,' broke in the. old trooper. 'If ye have any proof, white or black, Mr. Tregear, that will show he took a pound of the money, I'll sell my home and refund the whole amount.'

'If the missing cash is not returned within 48 hours I shall report the matter at headquarters,' said the manager sternly. 'We must do our duty,' and again he looked at the white-faced boy.'

'I regret that I cannot allow you to resume your work here until the matter, is cleared up.'

The old trooper touched his son on the shoulder, and they passed silently from the bank.

'Ye may consider yourself under arrest, my lad, until I have the right man under lock and key,' he said, bitterly.

Sergeant Cummins escorted his son home, and warned him not to leave the house until the bank mystery was cleared up. At midday he returned to duty, and it was late before he arrived home. Near midnight he rose hastily from bed, and stole unseen from the house.

Arriving at the bank, he halted in the shadow of a timber dray and waited. The rain had almost ceased, but the river was charged with a full flood note as it whined and seethed under the distant bridge piles. Tregear's' house adjoined the bank. A row of pepper trees hid it from the road. It was a comfortable, well-built house, and the people of Tranbar envied him his broad, cool stone verandah that sheltered him. from rain and heat.

Sergeant Cummins seemed to doze at his post of observation. The hotels had closed an hour or two before; a midnight air of desolation hung about the township. The click of a lock made the old trooper look up suddenly. The door of Tregear's house opened cautiously; a pyjama-clad figure came to the verandah, and passed stealthily through the-gate towards the bank.

Sergeant Cummins breathed deeply as he scrutinised the man's, outline closely. A sullen look came into his eyes. He recognised Tregear in the pyjama-clad figure, the man who had practically branded his son as a thief and a defaulter.

The manager opened the bank door softly, and vanished swiftly inside. The old trooper crouched under the dray as he heard the rattle, of keys inside the bank, and the half-muffled slamming of a strong-room door. A few moments later Tregear appeared in the doorway, a small canvas bag in his right hand.

Sergeant Cummins was not certain whether he had a right to intercept Tregear entering or leaving the bank with valuables. The lateness of the hour gave an atmosphere of criminality to the proceedings. Yet the old trooper was too keen a bush-lawyer to arrest Tregear without further warrant. Country bank managers are at liberty to leave or enter their premises at any hour.

Tregear passed through the 'house-gate' and halted uncertainly, then took up a spade from the ground, and commenced to loosen the soil at the foot of a pepper tree. The soil came away easily as though it had been dug quite recently. Scooping out the dirt with his hands, the manager placed the canvas bag in the hole, and rammed back the soil with the flat of the spade.

Sergeant Cummins did not move as Tregear entered the house noiselessly, and closed the door. A sudden thought crossed his mind that made him pause in the shadow and lie still.

Another figure came into view at the -end of the street, and approached the bank at a sharp walk. The old trooper scarcely breathed as the man drew hear and vaulted lightly over the bank-house palings into the garden. Kneeling at the foot of the pepper tree he scooped away the loose earth, and hauled out the canvas bag half jauntily.

With his hand on the gate he turned sharply, and glanced at the army revolver peeping at him over the fence.

'I'll trouble you to put down that bag, Ben Field, and walk ahead of me to the police station. Maybe, ye know something of the seven hundred pounds that walked from the bank awhile ago?'

The old trooper spoke calmly, and without heat.

Ben Field dropped the bag with a grunt; a slight shift of the revolver barrel made him hold up his hands. Sergeant Cummins smiled grimly as the man stepped into the road.

Field was a notorious bank-thief and bush-spieler, who had caused endless trouble and annoyance among the out-back stations and banks, where mounted troopers were rarely seen.

Sergeant Cummins was satisfied that he had unearthed a pretty little comedy, capable of endless explanation. He was certain in his mind that Tregear was a confirmed sleepwalker, who rose from his bed night after night, and entered the bank when the township was asleep. In waking hours' Tregear was thoroughly honest, but in sleeping moments his spirit was evidently overcome by a desire to appropriate cash, and conceal it in different places.

The notorious Ben Field had without doubt become aware of the manager's nightly visits to the bank, and had watched Tregear, and unearthed the gold the moment it was placed underground. They marched to the lock-up quietly, Field keeping his hands well over his head. At the lock-up gate he turned to the 'trooper a little desperately.

'How do you know that manager Tregear isn't my accomplice?' he asked bitterly. 'Surely you saw him bring the money from the bank.'

'Tregear is a sleepwalker,' answered the trooper. 'His is a case for medical inquiry. A common jury will decide yours. March!'

An hour later. Sergeant Cummins returned home with the key of the lock-up in his pocket. His son was standing in the doorway, his face white and set.

'Did you hear anything, dad?' The boy met his glance half anxiously.

'Ye may resume your duties at the bank this morning,' answered the old trooper, hoarsely. 'I'll have a talk with Tregear after breakfast.'

AT THE TRIAL, Ben Field admitted that he had watched Tregear entering the bank night after night until he had assured himself that the manager was really a somnambulist. The sudden appearance of Sergeant Cummins had prevented his taking the second bag of gold, which the sleepwalker had concealed at the foot of the tree.

The circumstances were so peculiar that the jury failed to agree; and Field was acquitted.

The bank authorities thought fit to give Tregear a long holiday. No reputable Australian bank cares to have a sleepwalker on its premises.

13: A Chest of Chinese Gold

Sun (Kalgoorlie, WA), 29 May 1910

THERE was a sound of lapping water on the seaward side of the trade-house. The stiff, spike-crested palms seemed to pierce the blue span of sky overhead. In the east lay Espiritu Santo, while in the east lay Espiritu Santo, with its innumerable jungle-screened inlets and sloping hills. The lip of a young moon glinted with tropic brightness over the distant headland. The trade-house verandah was in darkness. A white-coated German, heat-fretted and lazy, rolled in the hammock, and watched a big-beamed lugger crawl to her moorings across the bay.

"Chow at the helm. Brings his craft up to a three-knot breeze as though he was sparring with an old-man cyclone."

Captain William Hayes moves from the deep verandah shade and glanced seawards through his night-glasses. "Jimmy Ah Lee chasing trepang and beche-de-mer. Wonder if he ever goes to sleep?"

"Der Chows haf der luck of mules," grunted the German.

"I used to laugh at chinkies once," said Hayes, thoughtfully. "But now I'd sooner skin a live wolf than meddle with a Chinese pigtail on the high seas."

"Dey haf no more brains dan monkeys. Dey was shoost a nation off flies crawlin' about der East. I vud sooner admire your skinned wolf, anyway, Hayes."

Hayes licked a big green cigar and padded uneasily up and down the wide verandah. "Up in Swatow nine years ago, they sold me a cargo of golden-tip Pekoe for six hundred dollars. After I broke all sailing records to land it in Sydney I found that they'd loaded me with dried dog-weed and warehouse refuse. Fancy me tearing south to hit the market with a cargo of pig-mash and plantation litter!"

A big-shouldered, lion-footed adventurer was Captain William Hayes. In his younger days he had bartered human lives for pearls and dollars. As a navigator he towered above Teach, Ross Lewin and other island black-guards. In his worst moments Hayes was always ready to laugh at his own blunders. He eluded gunboats and commissions of inquiry with the ease and diplomacy of a sultan. At a pinch he could pose as a cultured diplomat, even in the presence of British and American consuls. From Manikiki to the Line the sound of his name uttered suddenly on an island beach brought men, rifle in hand, to their trade-house palisades.

"I've had a hard life," he continued slowly, "fighting kanakas and keeping dirty little island kings in their places. There was a time when I'd have kicked

the linch-pins from the wheels of a Juggernaut car to upset a rival. And there were times when things used to hit back. Women put me away, and the gunboat dudes treated me like a dog whenever I hurt a black man's feelings."

"Hayes, Hayes, you vas a bad man!"

The German sat up in the hammock and regarded the buccaneer closely. "I haf seen you drunk, and you— you—"

" Don't say it, Schultz," growled Hayes. " I've stood knee-deep in wine I admit ; I've bluffed big-bended consuls and licked what I couldn't eat. The grandest bluff I ever put up was my scheme for stopping the Ning Po, a China steamer bound from Brisbane to Shanghai, carrying two thousand ounces of gold in her bullion-room.

"Yah! You vill bump der yard-arm some day, Billy. You haf no belief in der size of tings."

"Guess the hemp isn't spun, that will hoist me," grinned the buccaneer.

"I had a smart schooner once, and a nice lot of white lads lying idle on the beach at Mount Eames Island, 27 miles nor'-east of Thursday, between Long Reef and Nine-Pin Rock. Collecting copra and hunting kanakas had made us tired. And a crew that sails under me for a year is good enough to swap curses with anything that floats. Black crews are no good at a pinch. Strike a match in their faces on a dark night, and they fold up at the knees.

"Well, we settled it among ourselves that the Ning Po, with her big gold-box, was ours the moment she showed her black funnel ten miles east of the Barrier Light.

"I've helped myself to loose cargoes of trade from the Straits to the Marquesas, but my mouth grew hot and my heart danced the night we waited for the China-bound steamer. She carried gold won from Australian soil, stuff that had been dollied out of the Fraser Creek beds and Gulf mining camps: it was going to fatten the Chinese banks at Hong Kong and Shanghai.

"She was a two-thousand-tonner, with a nose like a plunging bison. She carried a coolie crew and four white officers. Her steel-clamped vault was between bunkers and store-room. It was guarded night and day by a gang of yellow dogs armed belt and fist. I guess a Chinaman can nurse his gold like a bull-dog hugging a bone— when it's worth while.

"The night was black enough to hide a crow. It was a night to help a poor man like me into nice white gaol or a Chinese saving bank. Most of us had starved in Sydney at some time or other. And as we lay for'ard, my mate, Bill Howe, reckoned that each man ought to come out of the affair with ten thousand dollars to his credit. '

"It was past midnight when we sighted her. She was standing well away from the Barrier, like a thing afraid, fuming and hooting from light to light.

Funny how these Chinese transports squeal in the dark— you'd think the blamed sea wasn't wider than a racecourse.

"We carried a long-range American cannon for'ard, one I'd picked up from a Chilian slave-agent in Samoa. But Howe looked after the ammunition and the loading, and he sent a shot across the Chinaman's bows as though he was shooting for a box of cigars. I signalled that we'd put a mustard plaster on her water-line if she didn't heave-to quick and lively. " She hove-to, coughing and swearing like an old woman with a cold in her head. I measured her fore-and-aft with my night glasses, and I could almost smell the dirty decks. I'd seen cow-boats with cleaner spaces abaft their funnels. There was a crowd of Chinese merchants and dig-crowd of Chinese merchants and diggers aboard; they heaved up from below in a simultaneous bundle, and they stood on each other's feet trying to get a look at us.

"We pulled towards 'em in the whale boat. There were eight of us carrying revolvers seated for'ard. Some of us had been fighting Chows since we were boys. It is a far better game than fighting poor policemen and tearing valuable uniforms.

" 'Steady, boys !' I said, as we pulled under her black, sweating side. She heaved and rolled above us like a hot thing with burning eyes. Funny how some ships glower at you! We felt her uneasy breathing; and we heard the stammer of her engines as the seas swung us under her port-rail.

" 'What ship?' says I, hailing her smartly. Two of the lads steadied the whale-boat to keep us from smashing against her ribs.

"A long, melon-faced chinky looked at me over the side, then another and another, until the steamer's rail was alive with pig-tails and squint-eyed Mongolians. The little white skipper, his face puffy with indigestion and whisky, threw his patent lantern on us. I saw his hand shake, and I knew that the bulge in his eyes spelt funk.

" 'It's that infernal Hayes!' he shouted to an officer. What the blazes is he after ?'

" 'See here, Cap'n Shypoo,' says I, briskly, 'no personalities, or I'll brighten the cabin fittings with your bald head. Savvy?'

" My word, he did. I guess the name of Hayes was as good as a charge of grape-shot in those unpoliced waters. The compass-light showed me his blithering face as he climbed down from the bridge, wild-eyed and clawing the air.

" 'Hayes,' says he, 'don't be an ass. I know you mean mischief— anything short of murder. What is it?' he asks. 'Mail bags?'

" 'No,' says I. ' Bullion-sacks— two thousand ounces or thereabouts. Hope you didn't think I was after the saloon ducks.'

"When a man turns away his face I know his knees are giving in, and his heart is trying to climb out of the front window. I've always taken credit for shooting away explanations. It's part of my business; and the cargo skippers trading between Sud Est and Thursday have good memories. As aforesaid, Captain Shypoo climbed down in a bundle.

"He looked down at me like a sick spaniel. 'Hayes,' says he, 'I've heard that you never did a scurvy act in the presence of ladies. We have several on board, travelling with their fathers and husbands, to Shanghai. Now, Bully, I ask you not to turn my steamer into a bear pit. Are you going to play buccaneer or white man?'

"Guess he had me in a soft place if he'd only known. I was never game to hold up a banana punt if a skirt of a woman showed itself. Still, I told myself they might be Chinese ladies, he had aboard, and Chinese ladies never let down their hair on a question of barratry or spirit-rapping. So I adjusted my voice and gave him my second-best yell.

" 'Don't want to interfere with your passengers. I don't want to stand clawing your greasy hull, sir. We're in a hurry, and if you can't make up your mind about the gold box we'll whistle it down with a five-inch shell.'

"It struck me that while we palavered over the rail, the Chows were holding a private meeting aft. They were explaining in their own lingo that I was a bad man with a string of buccaneers at my heels. I don't like Chinese when they rush together— they're as cute as the end of a lightning rod.

" 'Hurry up !' says I. 'My ship is riding on your quarter. Just chase your feet into the bullion-room and sling down the box, or I'll put a shell under your propeller.'

"The skipper was a piebald man, smitten with ague and loaded with Chinese habits. He squealed at me and threatened; then when he'd used up his rage he floated into hyperbole and collapsed. 'Hayes,' says he, 'this is a hanging matter. Piracy, by Heaven ! I'll have a warship on your heels in less than a week.'

"The Chows ran to the side and stared at us again. One of them, a fellow with an evil squint, spoke for the others. 'Hayes, you welly bad man,' says he. 'Wha fo' you want our money?'

"'Don't want your squeaks, anyhow,' I said, hotly. 'If you serve up any Canton bluff I'll present the crowd of you with a raft and a cask of water!'

"That sent 'em in a heap to the stateroom, where the captain was hiding his face in a brandy squash. They asked him to turn a steampipe on us and skin us alive. But the mention of my name had put him in a funk. He came on deck and consulted a pig-whiskered mandarin, who wore the order of the peacock and the gilt but-ton on his sleeve.

"The night was black enough for any devilry. You could have hit a man without seeing his face. And the seas rolled us in and out, threatening to stave us in against the Ning Po's sides. "

We waited six minutes while Pig-whiskers and the skipper hurried down to the vault-room to unlock and wheel the blamed bullion on deck. Things began to feel as nice as a free con-cert. There's nothing like a bit of gun-skite to steady a loose gang of rat-headed Chows.

"The skipper yelled a Chinese word from below, and then came the rattle and jolt of a steam-driven winch. 'They're going to lower the stuff in a box, says Bill Howe, in a whisper. 'I reckon two thousand ounces of dust ought to weigh close on half a ton, cap'n—'

" Bill was never much good at figures ; he couldn't reckon, the price of three drinks and a dog-license at a pinch. Still I allowed that the gold was heavier than a hod of bricks.

"Fore and aft the big steamer was as quiet as a church. Her engines seemed to breathe and strain, like a hound on a leash. The Chows had scampered below to wallop their joss and call me bad names. I guess it twisted their heart-strings to see their gold being heaved over the side.

" 'Some men sweat and groan trying to make a hundred dollars,' says I to the lads beside me, ' but it takes a man like me to get it hoisted into your pockets with a donkey engine.'

" From the boat to derrick chain was thirty feet, and as it swing over us I could almost see the bullion tank, bolted with steel, and copper-fastened, descending towards us.

" 'Stand by!' roared a voice from the winch; 'and hold her when she touches.'

"The bullion tank was hanging fifteen feet above us, and there wasn't the ghost of a light on our quarter to show us its exact bearings. We knew it was swinging in the air like a pendulum, in and out, in and out, until it hung level with the 'Ning Po's' rail.

" 'All ready?' shouts the winch-man. 'Aye, aye,' says I. 'Lower away, my lad. Heave ho for the yellow man's gold.'

" 'Heave ho!' sang the lads beside me. Bill Howe groped for the hurricane lamp while we stood up to steady the swinging tank. I was taller than the others, and my head was nearer to it by half a foot than the mate's. As I reached up something seemed to get into my throat like the taste of hot poison. Down came the black tank, long as a baker's trough and oozing water. Only a Chinaman or a devil could have planned what happened afterwards. 'Back water for your lives!' I roared. 'Back water!' No one heard me in the

unholy crash that followed.... And the thing struck us like a live comet, whipping us to match-wood as it fell.

"Guess I know the musky smell of a Queensland alligator when it breathes over me in the water. The Chows had upset the tank and spilled a big saurian on top of us. I awoke in the water, my hands gripping a piece of smashed whale-boat. I heard the beast grunt, and snap its jaws when it struck the boat. The tank was hoisted back to the steamer just as the alligator turned its snout shoreward and disappeared.

"Eighty Chows sprang to the rail, dancing like fanatics at sight of our broken boat and the crew struggling below. The skipper jumped to the bridge and rang full steam ahead, leaving us astern half blinded by the wash of the big propeller.

"I heard afterwards that a show-man was taking his live alligator and tank to Hong Kong when we bailed up the Ning Po. The Chows gave him a thousand dollars for the use of his blamed reptile. They said it was a nice Christmas-box for a man like me."

Captain Hayes leaned over the verandah rail and smoked reflectively.

"No," he said to the German, "I never afterwards met the skipper of the Ning Po. He faded out of this life on an overdose of opium, up in Shanghai, last year. There's nothing to prevent me congratulating the alligator showman when we meet, though. I admire presence of mind. But I'd like to tell that showman— with my heel on his neck— that we accepted delivery of his bull 'gator.

"I intend to be a better man in future, Schultz; and if you want a reliable navigator to hustle around the islands or boss a pearl lugger, I'll show you my certificate."

With a boisterous "Good-night" to the heat-fretted German in the hammock, Hayes swung from the trade-house to where his boat lay at the pier end. Later, his voice sounded across the bay— a roaring bass that seemed to shatter the tropic silence.

We heard the Chinkies prattle way up in China Town,
We heard the hawse-chains rattle that let the anchor down.

"Dot was a strange fellow, anyhow," grunted the German, and went to sleep.

14: The Lion's Eyelash.

Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton, Qld), 6 January 1914

IRENE Maxwell passed through the crowd of circus hands until she reached the semi-circle of wagons at rear of Hipla's World Famed Hippodrome. She paused a moment to watch the grooms as they led half a score of ponies to the drinking trough adjoining the camel's hay. A big fly-tormented elephant rocked at its picket, its eyes staring enquiringly from time to time, at the Mahomeddan driver squatting near the edge of the big sawdusted ring.

It was nearly seven o'clock. In another half hour the crowds would come surging past the pay-office, filling the long tiers of seats around the dusty ring. Irene Maxwell had no desire to he caught in the jostling mob of sight-seers that nightly filled the mammoth tent. A vague sense of terror held her as she stepped warily down the narrow lane of wagons. Half-seen animals slunk inquisitively from the barred cage fronts to the inner recesses.

Behind, in the growing dusk, a pair of flaming eye-balls followed her movements. Halting in the shadow of an awning she looked back as though a voice had called. A shudder passed over her. Ten yards away a big black-maned lion stood watching her movements from the front of the high-roofed ring cage.

Irene caught her breath sharply; the yellow eyes seemed to flare in the uncertain light. The huge head jerked up and down as with a slow leonine purr the lion strode away to the far end of the cage.

The grooms led the whinnying ponies from the water trough to the canvas stalls behind the pay-office. A clown, dressed in an old overcoat and bowler hat crossed the ring cracking a whip and calling loudly to a troop of performing dogs that ran yelping at his heels.

Irene watched, feeling a strange thrill at these unusual sights. And again her eyes went out to the big, black-maned head in the high-roofed ring cape. The lion standing erect was no longer conscious of her presence; its eyes were fixed in something in the dusky background.

A quick, familiar footstep caught her ear. Turning suddenly she found herself almost between laughter and tears, hurrying to meet the oncomer. A young man dressed in semi-military costume came into view. His face was particularly attractive and lacked that rigidity of expression common in men of his class. A certain boyish alertness invested his movements with a singular charm.

" You... have, been looking at my lion, Irene!" he said gently. "I did not expect you here this evening."

She trembled slightly at the touch of his hand, while her startled glance went out again to the maned head watching them both from the barred cage.

"The nature of your work terrifies me at times, Lenny," she declared between breaths. "Sometimes I wake at night feeling that you are in the grip of that terrible creature over there. I wish— I really wish to-night was your last in this dreadful place!"

He laughed in his amused boyish way, holding her gloved hand us they walked slowly towards the circus entrance.

'The men who drives autos and flying-machines take bigger chances than we lion tamers," he assured her. "Sultan and I—' he indicated the distant cage good humouredly— 'understand each other perfectly.'

"You with a tiny whip, and he with those horrible claws!' she broke out, unable to control her rising fears. "I dreamt last night that a terrible accident happened during your 'turn', she almost sobbed. "I really wish, dear, you had chosen another profession!'

He soothed her with many assurances of his ability to look after himself while in the cage with the almost intractable Sultan.

Two years before Irene had met the young lion tamer under fateful circumstances. At that time both were in the employ of a big theatrical syndicate, Leonard Vale appeared nightly with a troupe of lions while Irene came later in the evening to delight her overwhelming audience with representations of Shakespeare's heroines.

It was during one of these performances that a cry of fire flashed through the theatre. The young actress never quite forgot what followed. The safety curtain had failed to lower and the gallery and pit had become a living pandemonium wherein men and women were fighting for their lives.

Irene, dressed in some light gossamer stuff, found herself in a raging corridor of flame blocked at each end by blazing masses of scenery and stage property. Frantically she sought her dressing room only to find in its place a perfect inferno of smoke and blazing woodwork.

What followed was never afterward quite clear to her. Dragging herself back to the wings she became conscious of Leonard's arms about her; of him fighting through the stage traps and properties, his great coat drawn about her head and shoulders until they reached a side exit and safety.

Their various engagements had separated them at times. But when good fortune brought them to the same town it was to renew their pledge of love and affection. Leonard was merely awaiting the expiration of his contract with Hipla's management— a matter of one short week only— and then he and Irene were to be married quietly in a little village church some thirty miles from London.

Afterwards they were to travel together, under more lucrative terms with another big provincial theatrical syndicate. Irene was counting the days and hours now when Leonard would be free to take up his less risky 'turn', for Hipla's lion, Sultan, was regarded by public and press alike as the most dangerous animal in captivity. Her woman's instinct warned her that, sooner or later, the ill-tempered Sultan would turn upon him some night before a crowded audience. The thought was constantly with her. It had brought her into the hippodrome now to stare with hypnotised eyes at the big, black-maned head peering at them both through the iron bars.

Leonard's easy manner together with the nonchalant way he rapped the lion's paw as they passed the cage reassured her slightly. It was only after she had left him at the circus entrance that her fears returned.

A LITTLE horse-faced man slunk from the shadow of the big iron cage as Vale hopped nimbly to the ground, slamming the doo in the face of the black-maned lion within.

A dozen gas flare illumined the dark spaces between the semi-circle of wagons where the outgoing audience pushed and jostled their way from the menagerie into the street. Vale's turn' had been the last item on the programme. A biograph man had attended the performance to obtain films of the young tamer thrusting his head into Sultan's open jaws. Of course there were the usually critically disposed people who hinted of anaesthetics being secretly administered to the lion prior to the event. The biograph operator was satisfied, however, that the films would be a success and departed hurriedly with the crowd.

A little horse-faced man breathed warily as he followed Vale down the labyrinth of wagons until a canvas dressing room was reached at the rear of the pony-stalls. Yale's spangled coat scintillated under the flare lamp. Outside the dressing room, a drowsy-eyed eagle rattled its foot chain in the circus dust and fell again into its brooding lethargy.

Hanging his heavy thonged whip from a nail in the tent post the young tamer lit a cigarette and stretched himself, for a few moment on a hard couch in the far corner. In one of the adjacent cages a pair of Indian wolves padded up and down. Something in their uneasy movements caused Vale to look up suddenly. The horse-faced man was standing in the doorway.

In a flash the tamer was on his feet. "You have no right here!" he called out. "What business brings you to me at this hour?"

The figure in the doorway drew back half a pace, his left hand thrust deep in the pocket of his greasy coat. Physically he was no larger than a boy of fourteen, from his leering horsey manner one plight have guessed him to be a

jockey or circus groom. An odour of blackmail and the betting ring invested his movements, he regarded the young tamer with insolent good humour.

"A lady friend of yours asked me to pay you a visit, Professor. P'raps you remember Mademoiselle Lotti of the Variety Theatre?"

"Well?" The young tamer glanced hurriedly at his watch. "What does Mademoiselle Lotti want!"

The jockey-faced boy-man shrugged in a noncommittal way. then glanced back over his shoulder into the darkness where four slits of fire flashed to and fro from the corner of the wolf-house.

"I was sent here to-night, Professor, to give that lion Sultan a surprise tonic to make him feel skittish while you were putting 'im through his tricks."

The tamer eyed him with, sudden suspicion.

"Tell me your business, my friend. I am in n hurry."

He beckoned his strange visitor into the tent and placed a chair beside the hard couch.

"I think you have something to say. Mr. —"

'Odkins with the haitch blown off, Professor."

"Why did Mademoiselle send you to me. Mr. Odkins?" The tamer leaned back on the conch, hands clasped over his knee, his big white wrists blowing a pair of newly healed scares where the lion's claw had rent deep into the bone and sinew. His visitor's toothless mouth and shifting eyes impressed him momentarily. Reaching a small bottle of wine from a cupboard at his elbow he filled a glass and held it forward politely.

Odkins drank in a little famished gulps until his mouth grew slack, his eyes less avid and cunning.

" My word, that's the pure stuff, Professor. Your people know—"

"Your business, my good fellow. I think I mentioned that I was in a hurry !"

Odkins merely beamed at the young tamer across the empty wine glass.

"I hate being hurried, Professor, especially since my nerves have been twisted. You see I ain't been quite myself since the stewards warned me off the turf a year ago. And to-night, that lion of yours looked at me with his green yes. Quite awful. Don't know 'ow you boost 'im through the hoops though. It's a fair nerve breaker!"

Vale appeared to control his impatience at the fellow's gratuitous criticisms. Filling the empty wine glass he pressed it into the jockey's unsteady hand.

"Mademoiselle Lotti sent you here to-night to interfere with me when I was in the cage with Sultan," he hazarded. " Is it not so?"

Odkins drained his glass slowly then returned it to the cupboard top with a steady hand. I used to wire Mademoiselle tips from the stable when I was

riding to win, Professor. Last night she sent one of the theatre hands to my place across the river askin' me to pay her a call." Odkins' eyes glowed strangely. "I found her in the dressin' room with a lot of pomades an' hair-brushes.' 'Igh above her head, on the mantel-shelf, Professor, was your photograph; pair of lions at yer feet, an' yer chest blazin' with medals an' stars." '

"Go on!" The young tamer eyed him sharply. Far down the line of wagons came the man-like cough of a leopard.

"Mademoiselle commissioned you to do some-thing, eh? That is what you have come to tell?"

Odkin grinned as he continued.

"She began to tell me your history, Professor, how she hoped one day to be your wife until another lady of the Vaudeville Theatre had made a bid for your affections."

The young tamer flushed unexpectedly but remained silent. He had only met Mademoiselle twice. She had impressed him as a rather overbearing young lady whose attention he had striven to avoid.

Odkins lit a cigarette carefully. 'Mademoiselle Lotti read the announcement of your comin' marriage with Miss Maxwell, Professor. Am I right in sayin' that it takes place next week? I've forgotten the name of the church," he added with a malicious glance in the young tamer's direction.

"It cannot concern you, my friend, nor Mademoiselle Lotti. If—"

"Easy, Professor, easy; there ain't no need to get red on a mention of dates. You're goin' to marry Miss Maxwell next week or you ain't. Well, I put the question pretty straight to Mademoiselle askin' her what she expected me to do on her behalf. I couldn't stop yer marryin' Miss Maxwell any more than I could win the Championship Stakes on a blamed army mule!"

"I— I think you are a trifle offensive, my friend!" The lion-tamer half rose from his couch, his lithe muscles leaping under his light fitting clothes.

The ex-jockey shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I'm askin' you not to lose your temper, Professor. Wallopin' lions an' things has made your hand 'eavy. So don' don't hit me till you hear what I've got to say."

"Go on then!'"

"Well, Mademoiselle explained her business pretty sudden like. 'I want you, Odkins,' she says, 'to go round to the circus menageries to-night and get close to the cage where Professor Vale is performing with Sultan."

" 'What for?' I say.

" 'Because it's grand performance,' she raps out. 'The cinematograph operators are making special pictures of the Professor's turn. He will make the lion turn on its side and after it his lain quite still he will open his jaws and put

his head inside.' Well, she says, smilin' at me through blessed tears, 'when the Professor's head is well inside Sultan's mouth, I want you, Odkins, to squirt a little of perfume into the cage.'

" 'Squirt it on the lion, Mademoiselle?' I asks.

" 'Yes,' she says, fanning herself gently, 'squirt it on the dear animal's eyelash if you can, Odkins.' "

The ex-jockey paused, breathing hard like one in doubt. Then, fumbling inside his pocket he drew out a case containing a large glass syringe and held it up for the tamer's inspection.

"See how it works, Professor!"

He pressed the syringe suddenly. A jet of coloured fluid spat across the tent towards a piece of paper lying on the sanded floor. In a fraction of time the paper smoked and grew black.

"Vitriol! By heaven!" The young tamer leaped back, a luminous terror in his eye.

The ex-jockey returned the syringe to its case chuckling derisively. "Burns your fingers an' makes 'em sore. And Mademoiselle offered me fifty bob to singe the lion's eyelash with it. The price, I might tell you, Professor, isn't big enough!

Vale leaned against the tent pole and for an instant his teeth chattered. Odkins, his syringe tucked away in his greasy pocket, watched him apprehensively.

"I've done the straight thing in comin' here, Professor. Tonight. I stood by the cage when the cine operators was crowdin' in close, an' I had me chance straight an' clear. I could have got clean away."

"You want—"

"Call it a fiver, Professor, and you'll never see me inside the show again. I've been warned off the turf and I'm dependin' on little jobs like this for a livin'. Make it a fiver and I'll quit !"

His manner was leisurely, condescending almost, as he put forward his terms like one bestowing a favour.

Without warning the young tamer's hand went up and the heavy brass mounted whip flew down from the nail.

"Out!" he thundered. "You hell-beast!"

Odkins sprang through the tent door, the whip cracking with the sound of pistol-shots about his legs and ankles. Past the wolf-house he tore until his tumbling feet tripped him almost at the door of the lion's cage.

The young tamer held his twisting body as though it were a child's then raised it deliberately to the pair of green eyeballs behind the bars. Inch by inch

the tamer pressed the struggling Odkins until his death white face was pressed close to a snarling, breathing head inside.

"Come, here, Sultan!' the tamer's voice was scarcely a whisper. "Come and tell this little man what you think of him!"

A sobbing snarl seemed to run along the floor of the cage as the huge cat-like head brushed near. Softly, inquiringly it came until the proud stiff hairs and mane pricked and stabbed the ex-jockey's face.

" My God! You won't... not in there!" he choked. "Spare me, Professor... I won't come near you no more! I won't, I swear!"

The tamer lowered him suddenly and then still carrying him in his arms walked to the menagerie entrance and thrust him out into the night.

A FEW MORNINGS later Mademoiselle Lotti, while scanning the paper for a hint of the ex-jockey's success with a vitriol-charged syringe, received a perfumed envelope bearing her name and address. It contained a printed notice of Leonard Vale's marriage with the beautiful Miss Irene Maxwell, late of the Vaudeville Theatre, London.

Despite her vexation and anger the Mademoiselle was irresistibly attracted towards a small pad of bristles lying at the bottom of the envelope. Never before had she seen such coarse bayonet-like hair. It pierced the fingers sharp as wire when touched.

Months later, when Vale had gone north with his bride a circus manager told her that the bristles wore merely the clippings from a lion's eyelash.

_____

15: The Lie That Leah Helped

Freeman's Journal 13 Dec 1917

THE STRUGGLE to lie on our office couch was Hindenburgian at times among the foot-weary canvassers and out-of-works who drifted in for a rest during the day. The jewellery hawkers and unemployed journalists were the toughest offenders. Nothing disturbed the tranquillity of their repose once they assumed the horizontal on our chintz-back piece of furniture.

We are conducting the Classic Advertising Corporation ; and our belongings consisted of one flat table and typewriter, the couch and about one yard of signboard. My partner, Joe Hart, was three parts Israelite, and the blood-call on his side attracted all kinds of young and old Hebrew park-dossers into the office.

We had endeavoured to insult them separately and in groups, believing at first that a few well-directed cynicisms would hurt more than a fire-hose or a policeman.

The peddlers were mildly impressed by our flow of second-rate satire, but the journalistic Willies refused to be slanged to death by a couple of cold stunt promoters, as they termed Joe Hart and myself.

It all began the day we opened shop, a day of dead and live wires and heart-breaking experiences for my partner. We were seated at our invaluable table waiting for the midday mail when a classic nose obtruded between the jamb of the door and the electric switch. Then came the stertorous breathing of a man who wanted to lie down.

Joe looked up quickly, not unkindly, I thought.

'What do you want, Ikey?' he asked with a strange inflection of the voice.

The face and nose of 'Ikey' spotlighted for several moments like a beauty actor in search of home comforts. Then his feet made Chaplinesque movements towards the couch. Everything about him was slack and sub-humorous. In his childlike eye there were nineteen centuries of unfilmed privations. The dust of many suburbs was on his clothes, a box of cheap jewellery was tucked under his arm, and. his childlike eyes picked out the office furniture— with mental valuations—until his glance fell on the couch.

'May I, Joe?' he asked tremulously.

'Sure!' Joe nodded gruffly. 'But don't mistake this office for a dugout in Palestine,' he intimated, as Ikey stretched himself on the sofa and closed his eves.

We woke him an hour later and he ambled out yawning, his box tucked under his arm. Nine seconds later another nose, silhouetted against a tray-

shaped ear,, bulged in the doorway. Then a large onion-sized eye began to inspect the office fittings.

'Vere did you get dot sofa, Joe? Cohen ask me to give it der once over. What you say, Joe?'

Joe stifled an exclamation as the long figure of a youthful Hebrew, with a load of ironware and tin junk strapped to his shoulder, sat on the sofa breathing warily. By the time Joe had finished addressing an envelope to one of our clients our visitor was snoring.

It was almost dark when Israel woke up strong and refreshed. Grasping his tinware be dashed downstairs, clanking musically.

Next day a tide of visiting hawkers set in. They all knew Joe, and they sat with doglike humility on the sofa waiting for each other to go. Old men and young, poor and well dressed each had a horror of dossing in the park, so long as the Classic Advertising Corporation owned a couch.

After the first week Joe grew hollow-eyed and impatient of the constant influx of idlers who settled like sea gulls on our chintz-covered piece of furniture. The high sign seemed to have gone abroad . that the Classic Advertising Corporation possessed a couch of marvellous soothing powers, for once a canvasser stretched his length upon it only the use of a fierce and extensive vocabulary could elevate him into a sitting position.

About Christmas time Joe dragged the couch into the passage and wheeled it into an adjoining room, occupied by an artist named Pietro Delemento. With Delemento Joe had had a long and heated argument concerning the exact size and colour of the couch. Later in the day the Italian entered our office carrying several paint-pots and brushes. For several minutes he stood in the centre of the floor studying the blank wall where the sofa had stood. There was no hurry about Pietro until his agile brain seized the situation and the fires of his pent-up genius turned his dark face to a turkey-red. He made meaningless noises as the idea developed, strange teddy bear sounds indicative of great mental volition and grasp of affairs. Then his long arms swept and measured the wall with lightning skill. The bear-noises ceased as he commenced painting rapidly, his brush-hand making graceful curves and sweeps as it travelled over the calsomined background. Soon the picture of an elegant walnut-framed couch began to stand out from the sky-blue perspective.

Delemento worked vigorously, his brush sweeping with master strokes over the wall until the bulging, soft-curved lines were impressioned like a piece of real furniture. 'Et ees a vera goot picture sofa,' he declared, after picking up his brushes amd cans. 'See how it sticks outa from da wall!'

Joe was delighted, and swore that it would deceive a time-payment specialist. He spent nearly an hour adjusting the office curtains to prevent the

strong light entering. About mid-day Ike Steiner appeared at the door, a loose vacillating smile on his face.

Joe was addressing circulars o our clients; he looked up at Steiner and frowned. 'Ike,' he commented slowly, 'why don't you hit a medicine cure for this eternal bone weariness? Lying down only seems to make it worse.'

Without concerning himself further with our visitor, he continued addressing the pile of circulars at racing speed. Neither of us turned until a thunderous shock rattled the office to its foundations.

'Ike,' said Joe, without looking up, 'don't come in here smelling of wet stuff. This isn't a booze asylum.'

Steiner rose from the floor, adjusted his collar and tie, wiped the dust from his coat, and then passed his hand over the painted sofa. 'I thought it had springs in it,' he declared acidly. 'How much a dozen are they?'

He departed with an affectation of indifference that was distinctly impressive.

Half an hour later a couple of young Boston salesmen floated down the passage. One of them, Vander Jup Meyer, was distinctly related to a person named Rockefeller. Since coming to Sydney he had drifted into the advertising business. There were times when big things almost happened Jup's way—big contracts that ran into eight figures. Everything about him was big and breezy; his habit of slamming about the office and hurling himself on our couch was terrifying to Joe and myself.

The pair halted outside the door to discuss a two-million-dollar proposition in horsehair which they were hourly expecting to develop. Entering the office boisterously, both took a seat on the couch at precisely the same moment. Vander Jup hit the paint quite boisterously with the back of his head, while his friend appeared to be thrashing the naked wall with his body.

For fifteen, seconds a cold, unfriendly silence blew through the office. Vander Jup felt the wall airily, a scoffing light in his unemotional, business eye. His friend merely scowled.

'About time you fellows side-stepped the whisky wagon,' Joe volunteered icily. 'This office wasn't built to stand heavy gunfire.'

Vander Jup regarded the bare wall frostily, and then met Joe's smileless glance.

'I guess you've got more wood in your head, sir, than the painter man put into your blamed sofa. You've just succeeded in making me feel tired.'

Joe was silent. He could have said nine things in as many seconds about people with wooden heads. Joe appreciates a bit of silence occasionally, and he has never been known to make gloat noises at an enemy after a fall. Jup

and his friend departed talking loudly at each other about the two-million-dollar proposition in horsehair they were placing on the market.

For nearly an hour alter their departure Joe remained at the table completing his list of circulars for our country clients. Once or twice he glanced sorrowfully at the spot where the horsehair men had flung themselves at Delemento's inspired brushwork. The oppressive silence of the office was soon broken by deep breathing in the passage outside, and we knew that our inseparable friend, Carl Schneider, was, about to pay us a visit.

It was claimed that Schneider was the most immovable of our string of dead-ends, once he was firmly planted on the soft. Other men were content to rest for a brief space and depart in peace, but Schneider clung to the couch with the tenacity of a drowning man in mid-ocean. It was his home, his father and his mother, the moment he sank sighing against its springy cushions. He entered smiling sadly like one who had not known employment for years. There was sorrow in his eyes, the deep unquenchable remorse of the man who had lost his job.

'I haf come to keel meinself, Yo,' he began solemnly. 'I have lost all hopes of a yob at Yoost and Schloppers.'

Joe expressed his regret, but did not venture to look up from his pile of circulars.

'I know you vas sorry, Yo, I ' know you vas. Dot is why I come here to ixplain my misfortune. I tink I shall feel better veil I. lieshoost a leedle whiles on your sofa, Yo.'

His two hundred pound bulk quivered for a moment as he stood before us. We hung our heads shamefacedly, but we felt that his incurable sofa-habit would have to be broken. We heard his heavy breathing behind us, the long-drawn sigh that usually escaped him the moment his elephantine proportions reposed upon the springy chintz. The sigh remained unfinished, and in its place was heard a soul-shaking noise that almost wrenched the office fittings from the walls. It was as though someone had deposited a cargo of railway iron on the floor.

Joe sharpened a pencil and glanced sideways at me. 'The noise of people falling about this office is getting on my nerves.'

Schneider clawed the vacant wall as he scrambled into an upright position. A berserker fury illumined his eyes.

'You vas a blackguard to let me fall like dat, Yo. I shall never speak mat you again.' He departed, throbbing from head to heel with indignation. We rarely saw him afterwards, but we learned in a roundabout way that he never ventured near a sofa without pounding it with both fists to make sure that it was solid hair and not the result of an artist's imagination.

As our business expanded and the fame of our illusive upholstery spread abroad, we discovered that our circle of visitors grew beautifully small: Joe found time to drive to Potts Point of an evening, in spotless clothes and patent leather shoes. I soon discovered that my partner was a frequent visitor to the house of Simon Cohen, a ridiculously wealthy stockbroker who performed sleight-of-hand miracles in the world of finance. By dint of perseverance and a good business card Joseph Hart had managed to impress Simon Cohen, and latterly his somewhat robust and charming daughter Leah. For my part, I had long desired to see my partner married to some lady of his own religion and race. I knew that our business needed only a slight infusion of foreign capital to make it one of the most profitable little concerns in the city. Joe shared my enthusiasm in regard to the infusion of foreign capital, which meant, of course, the diluting of our molten liabilities with Simon's hard bullion on the day that Leah became Mrs. Joseph Hart.

Without attempting the vaguest aspersions upon her Semitic loveliness, I admitted reluctantly that her tilting the beam at one hundred and ninety-five pounds, could only be prevented by someone tying down the scales. In return Joe remarked that his betrothed, in spite of her abundance, was a fine example of the fresh-air girl ; he advised me in confidence to choose something heavier than thistledown when the firm's finances permitted me to enter the holy state of matrimony.

I returned to the office one hot day, after beating the district in quest of new business, and discovered my partner pacing the narrow apartment in a condition bordering on insanity. I plied him anxiously with a score of questions before receiving an answer.

With a weary gesture, he flung himself into a chair, his chin resting in his clenched palm.

'Leah called with her father while you were away,' he began, in a, choking voice. 'It was intended as a surprise visit.'

'Don't be chicken-hearted,' I consoled. 'Simon Cohen will understand by the half-furnished condition of the place that we are putting up a fight against overwhelming business odds. This sudden visit is the best thing that could have—'

'Cut it out, for pity's sake,' he retorted, 'or I shall go mad!' He rocked to and fro in the chair, covering his face with both hands. 'Simon and Leah came in here,' he went on brokenly, 'while I was engaged with a client. 'My back was to the door, and I supposed they were a couple of hard-shell canvassers who used to wear the life out of us.'

Joe paused and held his breath for a moment, like one in whom speech had fallen dead. Slowly, painfully, I caught a glimmering of what had happened.

Turning towards the painted couch on the wall, I stared dumbly at the floor where the full-grown Leah had deposited herself. A broken hat-feather and a pair of boot-buttons were the only symbols that remained of the catastrophe. I picked them up sorrowfully.

'They belonged to Leah.' Joe addressed me in a smothered voice, scarce daring to meet my glance. 'She sat down before I had discovered the ghastly truth: sat on that piece of inspired lunacy painted, to deceive my friends.'

'And Simon Cohen?' I demanded. 'You—'

'I couldn't save him. He's near-sighted, and he piled himself against the illusion like the broken end of a thrashing-machine. He hit the wall five times before settling down on the floor. It was the most awful thing you ever saw. It's blown me over the skyline as far as Leah is concerned. The old man will throw the fire-escape at me if I go near has house again.'

Leah and her father had gone home in a state of bewilderment and hysteria. Luckily my partner had not attempted explanations. He had allowed things to take their dreadful course, trusting to Leah's wit to redeem the dismal consequence.

It did. By a curious process of after-reasoning, she arrived slowly at the conclusion that a runaway motor truck had burst through the office wall at the moment they were about to seat themselves on the couch.

Joe and I admitted to each other that it must have felt like that, so we knocked about a dozen bricks from the wall to support Leah's theory when Simon called again.

It promised to be a gloomy end to my partner's bright career, until by a stroke of fortune we unearthed a drunken motor-driver who swore, in Simon's presence, that he was the person who had driven a ten-ton wagon through our wall. That truck driver would have perjured his soul for half the money we gave him.

Joe has been married about six years now, and although he has won his way to the limits of the game, Leah confesses that her drawing-room still lacks a couch.

16: The Judo Man

Sydney Mail 16 Jan 1924

THE schooner *Daphne* leaned her bows against the mangroves, where the mud-choked river oozed from the jungle into the clear waters of the Pacific. Under the schooner's sun-awning a white boy lay in a hammock. For all his length of limb and superb youth, Jimmy Dale was as helpless as a toy giant. Fever that lurks among the blue gnats and death-ticks of the Papuan river deltas had sapped his strength.

Outside the schooner's galley sat a small, winkle-eyed Chinaman, knitting socks for the sick boy, Dale. Down a narrow plank leading from the river-bank some native carriers ran with tiny baskets of broken quartz, to be emptied into the schooner's open hatch. Foremost among the barudi carriers stalked a Japanese overseer, Matsu Shinogi, a ponderous load of reef stone balanced on his bullet head. Into the hold thundered Shinogi's load of gold-studded quartz, while Lim Chin of the winkle-eyes look cognisance.

Six months before Dale had cut through the fringe of poison woods that the north of the Joda River, with little Lim Chin as axe-bearer and cook. They had cleared three acres of scrub timber and bush that concealed a shallow outcrop of gold-bearing stone. In the midst of their labours they were joined by Shinogi. The Jap was built on lines that amazed the tall, hard-slogging Dale. Of medium height, Shinogi bulged like a pocket Hercules in his blue sarong and belted coat.

Jimmy Dale hailed his appearance with joy, offering him immediate employment on the reef. Eight miles of foetid swamp land separated them from the coast. Across this mangrove-infested area every ounce of gold-bearing quartz would have to be borne to the schooner's hold. Once on board the ore could be treated at any of the North Queensland ports, and the last ounce of precious metal placed to Dale's account in the bank.

At a glance Shinogi saw the possibilities in the white man's venture. He worked with a bloodhound's instinct for reward. Dale cheered and encouraged him.

'Stick it, Shinogi! We'll clean up enough to keep us on velvet for the rest of our lives.'

The Jap grinned as lie swung his great bulk over a crowbar and levered a ton of crumbling rook to his feet.

'Goot, honourable sir. Shinogi take pleasure in a big velvet coat when the snow blow over Nagasaki.'

In nine weeks Dale pouched five hundred ounces of coarse gold, washed and cradled from the sandy bottom of the claim. At night. Dale's head reposed

on his cushion of gold dust, while in dreamland he encountered the wistful face of Mary Argent, daughter of Timothy Argent, pearl king of Fane Island

Never once, even during the fierce heal of midday, did Shinogi discard his blue leather-belted coat. Dale was puzzled until the Chinaman whispered one day that the Jap carried on his right arm the symbol of the sacred Judo clan— a black butterfly. Lim Chin further explained to the astonished Dale that under no circumstances does the Judo man leave his country.

Only in rare books had Dale read of the mighty deeds of these priests of Japanese physical culture. He knew that their system of bodily defence and attack made the experts of ju-jitsu look like children and weaklings.

One morning a letter reached Dale from the chief magistrate at Samarai. It ran:

'Dear Mr. Dale.

We beg to warn you that the Japanese in your employ is suspect. While proofs are wanting, there is a supicion that he is responsible for the wholesale smashing up of a dozen Papuan plantation workers at Lalanga. Some of the Papuans are crippled for life. As Lalanga is swarming with Japanese, his identification is difficult. We therefore ask you to be on your guard.

FLYLEY.'

Shinogi slept in the open by the smoky campfire. In spite of his bulk and tiger-like personality he was also a dreamer: but his dreams carried him no farther than Dale's gold-stuffed pillow. Instinct warned him that a thief would get no farther with it than the coast, where the black police would cast him into a stone gaol. And once within the stone gaol at the Fly River the centipedes and spiders would do the rest.

Two days after receiving the letter an attack of fever threw up Dale's temperature to the killing point. It was here that, little Lim Chin took up the white man's burden. With the help of two native boys he carried Dale to the schooner that leaned against the river-bank. Shinogi walked with them, but offered no help. And while the Judo man squatted in the shadow of the deck awning the little Chinaman deliberated on Dale's behalf. He had known the young American more than a year. A code of honesty, white as Dale's skin, lay between them. The little Celestial asked no more than to become a member of the white man's household when the cottage was built for Mary at Fane Island. To be Mrs. Dale's cook and bumble slave was the very Nirvana of his ambitions. And this fever?

'You see, Shinogi,' he said slowly to the Jap, 'me ready to pay you off now. Allee work finished at the mine. So why you wantee come to Fane?'

Shinogi frowned heavily as his experienced eye wandered over the trim little schooner, the sole properly of Mary's father at Fane Island. It was possible, he ruminated, that Dale might die before he reached this white woman with the rich father! The shadow on his brow softened.

'By-an'-bye you get dirty weather, Lim Chin,' he explained. 'This big dam boom you carry will send you to the bottom unless you have me to swing her. I am a goot sailor, Lim Chin; I will go with you to Fane.'

The Chinaman nodded a trifle desperately. The three Papuan deckhands barely sufficed for the run to Fane Island, although it was an easy course. But Lim was mindful of cyclones, and he felt that Shinogi could easily he kept busy and out of mischief.

The sea air cooled Dale's fevered blood and roused him from the death-like torpor into which he had fallen.

He woke one morning and called faintly to the Chinaman in the galley.

'Tell me, Lim Chin, where you have put the gold dust,' he asked faintly. 'The pillow that was under my head at the reef?'

Lim Chin smiled tenderly and disappeared into the state-room. He returned a few moments later carrying a heavy canvas pouch on his shoulder. He placed it reverently near the sick man's head. Dale leaned from his hammock and scrutinised the pouch for an instant ; then he pinched it feebly with linger and thumb. A frozen silence followed his simple act.

The Chinaman's bland smile vanished.

'This isn't our gold!' Dale remonstrated with an effort. 'Open it.'

With trembling fingers Lim Chin unlaced the fastenings from the throat of the pouch. His hand plunged inside and drew out some yellow sand and pebbles. Dale lay hack in his hammock: his eyes closed wearily. A curious mirthless smile touched his boyish lips.

'We've got it right on our honourable necks this lime, Lim Chin,' he sighed. 'Someone has handed us the sandbag with a vengeance. They might have given us a fighting chance.'

LIM CHIN blanched to his tiny ear lobes. Unlike the white boy, he wanted to scream out at the wanton cruelty of the theft. The gold torn from the Papuan fever lands had turned to sand indeed!

Within the narrow wheelhouse on the bridge Shinogi was keeping the course for Fane Island. His eyes deviated from the compass as Lim Chin spilled the sand and pebbles from the pouch into the sea. A deathlike stillness fell upon the schooner.

To Jimmy Dale, newly awakened from the nightmares of his delirium, the silence cut like a blade. Even in his delirium there had always remained he

conviction that his future was assured. The five hundred ounces of gold would have financed new ventures. Timothy Argent would no longer have regarded him as a worthless adventurer with nothing to his credit except his sporting record at an American university. The quartz in the hold might, cover the expenses of the expedition from Fane Island to Papua, but there remained the fact that Jimmy Dale would have to start again with fresh excuses lo the father of his beloved Mary Argent.

Lim Chin retired to his galley to attempt a few tasty dishes for his sick young master. At eight bells, noon, Shinogi was relieved from his trick at the wheel. He descended the bridge steps, yawning and stretching his muscle-ridged arms with tigerish impatience. Then his slit eyes fell on the Chinaman watching him from the galley door.

'You likee plenty rice an' curry, Shinogi?' Lim addressed him with the paternal solicitude of a restaurant chef. 'Plenty chicken in curry to-day, Shinogi.'

The Jap contemplated his diminutive figure with acid forbearance, a crucified grin enlarging his thick lips. 'I like plenty rice an' all the chicken, sah! I am now hungry: so move that food along.'

Lim Chin salaamed, and as he bent forward he noticed a curious bulge beneath Shinogi's blue coal, a bulge that caused even the strong leather belt to sag. Ordinarily the waist of the Judo man was as straight as a boy's. Now it bulged!

'Allee chicken, shuah!' Lim Chin breathed obsequiously. 'Barudi boys no wan lee chicken if Shinogi is hungly. Plenty banana good enough for them.'

Shinogi's glance traversed the deck to where Dale lay brooding in the hammock. A half-uttered word hung on his lips. He seemed to check it with an effort as he passed to his quarters in the forepart.

In silence Lim Chin served the midday meal— a few oysters to tempt Dale, a mountain of chicken and rice to placate the sullen-browed Shinogi.

Towards sunset the wind fell to a dead calm. A string of tiny atolls lay on their quarter, with myriads of sun-birds cheeping above the pendants-skirted beaches. The heat below deck was intense. Only a few hours before a school of small sharks had hung round the schooner's stern; then suddenly the shoal disappeared. Even the sooty-winged terns that dipped and cried about the galley door fell away into the sunset haze.

After his heavy meal Shinogi sprawled in the cool of the gangway awning and was soon asleep. The native at the wheel dozed as the schooner hung motionless in the suffocating calm. Lim Chin leaned over the rail and stared into the blue depths under the schooner's keel. He could not understand the

sudden departure of the shark shoal; usually they clung to the schooner's shadow with the pertinacity of sea-fowl.

The voice of Tamalpa, one of the native boys, called softly to the Chinaman from the shrouds. Lim Chin looked up quickly while Tamalpa indicated something floating near the gangway head.

The Chinaman peered down, and shrank back with a stilled cry of surprise. Like some huge tree shadow it spread over the face of the water, a dark green jungle of living tentacles and feelers. From the centre of its dish-shaped body a pair of sluggish eyes glanced up at the schooner and closed again.

Lim Chin drew hack from the rail, his Oriental mind alive to the possibilities presented by the giant octopus, which had evidently groped its way from the channels of some near-by lagoon or bank. A faint slimy odour drifted up from the slow moving mass as it pulsated like a wind-shaken tree in the outgoing tide.

The Chinaman reflected swiftly. Within the cubby adjoining the galley was a shark-line of the toughest Manila brand. It carried a double hook that had held many a twelve-foot hammerhead to its undoing. At the holder's end of the line was an iron clasp useful to clamp on a rail, or pin whenever the efforts of a caught shark threatened to weary the fisherman. Drawing the line from the cubby the Chinaman dropped the naked shark-hooks into the heart shaped centre of the slow-moving mass of tentacles.

The big squid sank a fathom's depth in a soft turmoil of rippling water. Lim Chin chuckled under his breath, the long shark line held cunningly in his pliant lingers. At a depth of two fathoms the octopus appeared to turn its indolent, squirming mass from the schooner's rail. And just here the Chinaman jagged the hooks with all his might through the pendulating tentacles.

The line in Lim's hands grew suddenly taut as a banjo string. Instantly he slackened out and waited, while his alert eyes became fixed on the snoring figure of Shinogi near the gangway-head. In the twist of an arm, and before Dale could call out, he had stealthily slipped the iron clasp at the end of the line over Shinogi's leather belt. Not a muscle of the sleeper's face moved to denote the slightest consciousness of the trick played on him. Stooping well over the schooner's rail, the Chinaman jagged the line with a seesaw motion and let go.

A terrific commotion happened in the water. It was as if a depth charge had been exploded. The livid shadow of the giant squid swept to the surface in a whirlwind of blood and brine. The ten feet of slack line which the Chinaman had been careful to keep in hand went over the rail like a whip-cut. The savage jolt that followed lifted the sleeping Jap from the deck and brought him with the sound of a slamming door against the gangway head.

Half stunned and not wholly awake, Shinogi gasped and choked under the thunderbolt force of the collision. His body lay half bent over the rail, the veins of his neck and hands starling like roots. Fifteen feet away the squid, with the shark-hooks planted in its fleshy body, clawed the line with powerful tentacles and pulled.

The heart of Shinogi came near to bursting as he dug his sandalled toes into the scuppers to prevent a headlong dive into the sea.

'Tashan!' he choked. 'What dog has done this?'

The deck hands laughed at his plight. Not a finger stirred to cut the madly dragging line that held the clawing reef devil to his belt.

Shinogi played to slacken the strangling pressure of the line: all the science of his craft was bent in his efforts to obtain a loop or half-loop round a stanchion at his elbow. But the fury of the hooked squid allowed no breath-giving pause. The line hummed and writhed stiffly over the churning, blackened water.

'Atana!' he called faintly to the Chinaman. 'Where is your knife? Swine, help cut... or when I am free...'

The Chinaman slipped from the shadow of the galley, a razor-edged knife in his hand. Drawing near the flattened body of the Jap, he stooped and raised the folds of his blue coat dexterously, and with the skill of a surgeon made two criss-cross incisions in the bulge under the waist. Instantly a stream of gold dust poured to the deck, the shining yellow grains and slugs won from the Papuan fever lands.

Lim Chin indicated the pile of precious dust that fell about the Jap's feet as he bent his head before Dale in the hammock.

'What shall do now, sah, with this Shinogi the thief?' he begged breathlessly. 'Me welly much like devil fish to pull him ovah, sah; but you no likee, eh?'

A faint smile broke from Dale as he raised himself in the hammock. 'Get my automatic, Lim; it's down in my cabin— under the red cushions of the settee. Quick! He's going to beat your devil fish. And— he will brain us all unless we get a pull somewhere. Hurry!'

Dale was right. Shinogi had succeeded in looping the line around a broken stay-end a foot or two from the gangway-head, it checked the intolerable strain of the fighting tentacles and allowed him to slip from the belt that held him to the line. The dark, fighting tentacles disappeared in a smother of foam and blood.

Shinogi drew breath and turned slowly across the deck. In his eyes was the look of a hurt tiger. The native deck hands scurried aloft, whimpering in their sudden panic. Shinogi turned his eyes on the galley in search of the Chinaman.

'Ao! The yellow dog plays treeks wit me, Shinogi!' His voice had a blade-edge challenge that seemed to run along the deck. A tense silence hung about the schooner, broken only by the soft gurgle of the tide wash under the bows. Dale turned in weary desperation to the companion-head that led to his cabin.

'Lim Chin,' he called softly, 'where—'

The little Chinaman appeared, smiling blandly. 'The atamatic is nowhere there,' he babbled in Dale's ear. 'Hush; let me see this thing through,' he almost begged.

Shinogi stood with his legs apart, his left hand resting on his beltless hip. He surveyed the Chinaman with eyes grown narrow as kris points, his teeth snapped tight. There was no denying the man's strength; it sat in every curve and ridge of his muscle-packed neck and shoulders. His flat sandalled feel were planted on the heap of gold dust which had spilled almost in a circle about him.

'You make game of me with hooks an' ropes, Chinaman,' he stated with deadly precision, while the muscles under the wide-sleeved blue coat seemed to gather for the stroke. 'I will now show the honourable little pigtail how to bait an octopus. I will—' He paused and stared at the little Chinaman. A curious long grass syringe appeared in Lim's left hand. The cylinder contained about a pint of dark yellow fluid. Lim Chin smiled pleasantly as he raised the syringe and spurted a thimbleful on the dry, sun-heated deck. Instantly the plank began to smoke. A curious suffocating odour filled the air.

'You see, Shinogi.' The Chinaman kicked a bucket of water over the fuming deck plank, while he held the syringe in line with the Jap's left eye. 'Always you findee me funny: always you findee me full of tricks.' A few drops of the yellow fluid fell to the deck, and again came the smoke and the throat-gripping fumes.

Shinogi leaped back and remained by the bridge steps, his shoulders curved, his eyes dilating at the new horror that faced him. The little Chinaman exploded with laughter, although his eyes held a malicious slant that opened a fear valve in the heart of the Judo man.

'You tink you get away with Missah Dale's gold an' treat yo'self to one good time in Nagasaki? No, fear!'

Shinogi bent his head and was silent.

Dale's voice rang out. suddenly.

'Get back to your trick at the wheel, Shinogi!' he commanded. 'Your strength doesn't seem to win you the price of a meal. Sweep up that gold, Lim Chin; there's a breeze, coming.'

'Oi, oi, sah!'

The Chinaman produced a broom and bag, into which he gathered the last grain of dust from the deck.

Shinogi, tense drawn, relaxed as he walked up the bridge steps to relieve the native at the wheel. All the battle light had faded from his eyes. Only for an instant did his glance wander over the rail to where a dark sinuous mass, with a line attached, was writhing and groping blindly towards the distant reef channels.

The schooner lifted to the rising breeze as Shinogi took the wheel. Lim Chin grinned with the bag of gold dust hugged to his breast.

'No good to play soft, sah, with those strong men. That fellah Shinogi him steer like hell now.'

TIIE following day Jimmy Dale called the Chinaman to his hammock. The palms of Fane Island were lifting above the opalescent skyline. In another hour or so they would he lying alongside Timothy Argent's jetty.

'Tell me, Lim Chin, where in blazes you got that syringe full of fire acid? What was it doing on this schooner?'

The Chinaman placed a cup of coffee beside his young master, his winkle eyes scintillating with good humour.

'You see, Missah Dale,' he explained gently, 'I buy gold from miners in New Guinea little while ago. Las' time I pay one hundred for a lot of nuggets at the Fly River. White miners say they wanted the hard cash an' they give plenty measure gold for coins.

'So when I takee this las' lot of nuggets to the bank in Port Darwin the manager look at them an' say they no good. "Lim Chin," he says to me, "'white miner sell you brass nuggets. They melted down allee ole cartridge cases they find. You try acid next time you buy nuggets," he advised me.'

The Chinaman grinned complacently. 'So I lay in good stock of acid, sah, an' cally it in my box. Welly good medicine for gold thief, sah,' he added as an afterthought.

A smartly-painted police launch ran from the channel at Fane Island to meet the incoming schooner. Three white officers wearing the uniform of the Queensland constabulary stood in the bows and hailed Jimmy Dale.

'You got a black butterfly man on board, Mr. Dale. There's eight charges against him for turning the islands hereabouts into blamed hospital wards. Name of Shinogi,' the sergeant informed him tersely.

The Jap was standing near the rail watching them darkly.

'All right,' he called out before Dale could answer. 'You come an' fetch me,' he invited with sudden good humour. The sergeant in the launch consulted hastily with his two subordinates.

'I'll cover him with my rifle while you boys get the handcuffs on him,' he decided al last. 'Up you go, and throw him over the rail if he won't walk down.'

The two subordinates, Casey and Flynn, big-limbed, well-drilled men, leaped al the opportunity. For years a cruel and remote Administration had denied them advancement. Here was their chance to bring promotion and kudos by the capture of the long-wanted and mysterious Judo man, Shinogi.

Up the steps of the lowered gangway they tripped, while the sergeant in the launch below covered the immovable figure of the Jap with his rifle. The Chinaman laughed from the smoky flare of the galley. Dale sat back in a deck-chair, feeling that the police had no need of his help. Briskly the two officers approached the brooding Shinogi, a pair of handcuffs glinting in the eager hands of Flynn. They closed on him swiftly, pinning his arms to his sides.

Flynn discovered in a flash that his handcuffs would not snap over the big wristbones of the Jap. In his vexation he flung his weight against the prisoner to force him down the gangway slope. Casey twined his arms under the Jap's, boring his chin into the hollow of his neck.

'Take care!' Shinogi warned them as he stood rooted to the deck. The sweat of agony broke over Flynn's red face. Not a muscle of the prisoner's body seemed to respond to their frantic efforts to gouge and prise him from his foothold.

'Bejabers,' Flynn panted. 'you're worse than a brick wall. But by the Great Cain I've a way with such contrariness.'

He raised his iron-shod fool over the bare sandalled instep of Shinogi and brought it down with a smash. Shinogi raised his knee, while his body slanted in a curious angle that brought both policemen upon each other with a crash. His right hand gripped Flynn under the heart in a squeeze that turned the big red face into a bloodless death mask.

'Oe, pa ona! You see what it means,' Shinogi articulated gently. 'No more rough stuff, eh? Now that we are beaten, let us be sweet an' gentle,' he persuaded, tearing the handcuffs from Flynn's paralysed fingers. With scarcely an effort he snapped one over the officer's wrist and flung him stammering to the deck. Casey received a side-kick on the knee joint that doubled him across the body of his friend. Shinogi stooped and snapped the other handcuff over his wrist. The key of the steel bracelets had fallen to the deck. He kicked it overboard languidly.

THE sergeant, in the launch had been a silent spectator of the curious contest above. He dared not shoot, but waited with a sense of uneasiness for the climax. The sudden handcuffing of his two subordinates turned his blood to gall. His fingers played wickedly with the trigger of his rifle. Just here Shinogi stepped over the prostrate policemen, and with a final nod to Dale descended

the gangway steps to the launch. The sergeant raised his rifle quickly, met the Jap's glance, and lowered it. Shinogi salaamed.

'I am vera sorry,' he said politely, 'but these pleecemen attempt too much. I will go quietly.'

The rifle in the sergeant's hands fell clattering into the thwarts.

'By heaven, Shinogi, you take the bean!' he rasped. 'Look at my men up there!'

Flynn and Casey, their wrists locked together, descended the gangway and blundered aboard the launch. Their initial outburst of rage and abuse, directed at the stoic-visaged Judo man, was checked sharply by the sergeant.

'Neither of you is fit to arrest a baked potato,' he reprimanded. 'Get those handcuffs off!'

The sudden click of a camera turned their glances upwards. The face of Lim Chin showed over the rail, a pocket camera tucked under his arm. He nodded to the group in the launch.

'You give Shinogi job in pleece force,' he advised the black-browed sergeant. 'Him only knock one or two saucy kanakas about on plantation. Shinogi show you how to catchum bad man.'

The sergeant glared al him. 'Hold your —— tongue,' he commanded hoarsely.

Lim Chin waved the camera over the rail derisively.

'Me takee one little picture, sah, to show how pleeceman get tied up in his own hooks. If you hurtee Shinogi I hand picture to newspaper to plint. You savvy, sah? You want plenly lesson befo' you tackle Judo crook. You makee him teachee you.'

The launch danced away in the tropic dusk, leaving Lim Chin peering over the rail in the direction of the island. A lantern-lit dinghy came through the warm stillness and pulled up under the schooner's lowered gangway.

'Ahoy there, Jimmy! Somebody here waiting ever so long!'

It was Mary Argent's voice, soft and clear as a child's after the polyglot tongues of the last six months. He walked down the gangway, a sense of new life leaping in his young veins as he caught her in his arms.

SOME months later a Queensland newspaper announced that the Papuan police had improved in physical drill in a way that did credit to the Administration. Some thanks were due, it said, to the unremitting efforts of a Japanese Judo expert named Matsu Shinogi, who was proving so useful in the suppressing of jungle thugs and plantation bullies.

17: The Wooden Ball

Sydney Mail 23 Feb 1927

LIKE a sick swimmer the boat shuddered down the green slope of water and collapsed in the heavy ground swell. It was Little Peter's fault. His steering oar was kicked from his grasp in the sudden backwash from the reefs. Hilda was caught in the scour and carried under the lee of the whaleback shoal.

Hilda was a swimmer of sorts. She lucked and stroked in the same instinctive way as she had often done at Manly when the tide was piling the surf waisthigh along the ocean front.

But here, off Lalango Island, the thunderbolts of surf fell on her young body with the impact of slamming gates. The green tides of the Malatonga Archipelago were skilled in the art of drowning small boals and dainty women. It was soon evident to the quick-brained Hilda that her Manly Beach training wasn't pulling any tricks in the belching chasms of brine and coral in which she now found herself. And just when she had decided that her past life had been a shallow mockery the fat hand of Little Peter closed on her neck and hauled her on to the bright, clean sands beyond, the reefs.

'You're all right, dear,' Little Peter shouted, flopping back into the water after the boat. 'But, dust my eyes, you've no more kick than a wet kitten!' he added with tender reproach, hauling the boat clear of the pounding breakers.

'If you hadn't let go the steering oar,' Hilda began, and stopped as he took her gently in his arms and smoothed her sea-drenched hair.

Little Peter was a professional fat boy, a star member of Bandon's world - famed hippodrome. Judged by the scales, he was heavier than any three men in the circus. From his pink feet up, Little Peter was a human whale with the appetite of a very small child. He was in his 20th year, a lover of games, in spite of his elephantine proportions, and was never happy unless following a football across a field or punching one in the circus gymnasium.

Both were clad lightly, just as they had been when the City of Canton had struck the coral barrier 70 miles south-west of Mindano. The passengers were mostly Malay planters ami coffee-growers bound for Fiji. A hurricane was piling the cross-tides over the ship's bows. And to his dying day Little Peter, from Bandon's Hippodrome, will never forget the wild and horrible scramble for the lifeboats. The Malays fought under the davits with kris and curses. It was the skipper himself who thrust Hilda into number four boat, shoved Little Peter in beside her, and spilled lead from his automatic into the black gang of cane-cutters who tried to swamp the boat.

For a day and a night they had drifted before the wind, Peter using the one steering oar to guide the storm-shaken little craft into the sheltered channels of Lalango Island.

They had been married a month before in Sydney, where the circus was playing to overflowing audiences. They were bound for Rangoon and Singapore. The circus management had decided to make Hilda their publicity agent. It had also been arranged that Little Peter should accompany his clever wife in her advance thrusts upon the circus-loving people of the Far East.

Little Peter dressed in a silk hat, frock coat, and white-spatted, patent-leather boots, was a big advertisement for the oncoming show. He was the fattest boy in the world. But, unlike many other human zeppelins, Little Peter had brains and energy of a bigship in action when the occasion demanded. The way he had dug Hilda out of the suffocating valleys of brine was proof that the big surf had no terrors for Peter.

Hilda sat against the upturned boat to recover her breath and adjust her sense of perspective to the bewildering mazes of inlets and jungle-covered headlands. Away over the reefs in the blue haze of the distant valley was a village; the smoke of a hundred cooking lires floated over the shimmering, green of the pandanus palms.

'Hurricanes and bananas!' Little Peter laughed. 'This place is down on the map as uncharted reefs; but I'll bet my last shilling that the village over there has more pigs and goats to the acre than Dan Moloney's holding on the Castlereagh.'

Herewith Peter executed a double shuffle in the sand as a kind of thanksgiving for their miraculous escape.

'Cheer up, kid!' he called out to the sad-eyed Hilda, nestling in the shade of the boat. 'When the news of our shipwreck gets abroad we'll be famous. Bandon will get you to cable the story of Little Peter on a cannibal island,' he suggested with amazing cheerfulness.

Hilda frowned. Always Peter was trailing off on some irrelevant theme. Their present position was one of extreme danger, she told herself. And, woman like Hilda hated to be torn from the mental pictures of starvation and death that thronged her overwrought mind. Moreover, her expensive wardrobe was lying in the forehold of the storm-beaten City of Canton. She didn't want to be cheerful.

Bandon, in Sydney, wouldn't thank them for getting wrecked, not if she wrote fifty stories about Little Peter's exploits among imaginary goats and cannibals. The only goat she was ever likely to see was capering right in front of her now.

'Sit down, Peter,' she commanded wearily. 'I've got a headache.'

At that moment the shrivelled figure of an old man appeared from the fringe of scrub that screened them from the village. He. was black, with a necklace of shark's teeth dangling from his wizened throat. He was the oldest man Hilda had ever seen, a mummified human, moving, foot by foot towards them with ineffable weariness and languor.

'Funny old bird,' Peter laughed. 'Looks as if he'd stepped out of the old. vulture house at the Zoo.'

Hilda sat up stiffly as the old man hobbled near. She spoke sharply to Peter, every nerve in her young body alive to a sense of coming trouble. Of course, the islanders hereabouts were friendly, she told herself. But the presence of a big fat boy like Peter might affect the minds of thrifty and needy natives. One could never tell.

'Prop yourself against the boat— squat down like a Buddha. You look like one, anyway. And, please, Peter, leave the talking to me,' she ordered quietly, all her show-woman's instincts aroused. The difference between Peter sitting still and Peter frisking about was as that of a human deity and a jack rabbit.

Little Peter propped his broad back against the lee side of the boat, controlled his cherubic smiles with an effort, and waited for things to happen.

IN the tropic sun glare the old man resembled an ancient waterfowl blown in from the distant reefs. He paused fifty yards from the boat and blinked at the Buddah-like figure of Peter after the manner of a crow scenting prey. Hilda made signs for him to approach, adding a whispered word of caution to the fat shadow under the Jee of the boat.

'Opa la lefonga papalagi,' the old man greeted, his head bent low, his clawed hands fumbling at the shark's teeth dangling over his shrivelled breast.

Hilda nodded encouragingly; she even smiled into his stark, shifting eyes. 'Opa la lefonga,' she murmured softly.

The old man blinked and craned for a belter view of the Buddah figure on the lee side of the boat, just as thousands of while people had done when they entered a room or leni where Peter was posing for effect.

'A little of the papa lagi talk is known to me,' he began querulously. 'For many years I worked on the Company's boats at Mombare. My name is Sagon. In the villages beyond the hills where dorai is king, men know me as the spirit doctor,' he proclaimed, his vulture neck still craning for a better view of the elephantine figure on the lee side of the boat.

'All right, Sagon,' Hilda answered brightly. 'I've got a little spirit doctor on the other side of that old boat who is in need of some cold chicken ind bananas. Same applies to me, if it's no offence. Apart from shipwrecks and the absence of home, comforts for nearly two days and nights, we're still pulling on flesh.

' The oH witch-doctor preened his dank hair, combed his lime-washed wisp of beard with a laloned forefinger, in silent agitation. 'Listen, wife of the papalagi,' he said at last. 'I have told thee of my connection with the company at Mombare. Although I live with these Kara men, I am not of their people. Yet my name is great among them. My medicines bring life or death to the chiefs and their families.'

Again Hilda nodded and smiled, but her starved body craved nourishment. She had heard that these beach pow-wows often lasted for hours. 'Let's get to business, Sagon,' she implored with a wan smile 'I'm hungry and want to keep alive, allee same as that fat baby on the other side of the boat.'

The witch-doctor poised his beak-like nose after the manner of a blind eagle.

'I catch thy meaning, wife of the papalagi; but see that thou catcbest mine,' he rasped. 'There is enough food in Kara to feed a thousand like thee. Yet before we talk of food and friendship I must see this great water-baby thou hast brought with thee. From the great waves I saw him haul thee to safety by the neck! Truly a child of the gods and a brother to the sun and the stars!' he added, with hands clasped over his shrunken breast.

Hilda eyed him sharply. This desolate beach had a hundred eyes, after all, she told herself. Not once had she detected a living presence along the jungle skirted channels or reefs. She called softly to Peter, without changing her position near the boat.

'A great medicine-man wishes to see thee, o son of the moon and stars. If thy spirit be willing we will allow him a glimpse of thy sacred face.'

Little Peter rubbed his eyes drowsily. Sleep had almost, overcome him.

'Cheese it, Hilda,' he murmured, yawning. 'Has the old fish got any fried ham and eggs?'

Hilda pushed the old man lowards the lee side of the boat.

'Behold the spirit of the simple life!' she exclaimed in her best circus voice. 'Look well upon him, Sagon. The gods have watched and protected him since the earth fell out of the great darkness!'

The witch-doctor gazed in wonderment at Little Peter, at the huge pink shoulders and baby face, the girth of waist and chest that made the figures of the Kara chiefs and headmen seem as children and starvelings. The knees of Sagon trembled violently at the spectacle the magic of this baby-faced boy's appearance. He bent his head in token of his deep humility.

'There is no man in Kara greater than thou,' he sighed. 'Never, never have I beheld such a shape. My eyes go blind at the wonder of it!'

Little Peter gazed sternly at the bowing head of the old witch-doctor. Then lie met Hilda's lightning glance. Her lips shaped words: 'Roast pork, kava, fruit— grub!'

Little Peier sighed acknowledgment to the bent head before him. He did not speak; his slight gesture of dismissal was enough.

The gods of the South Pacific never broke into speech. Peter knew that much. Sagon straightened his shoulders, covering his eyes with his hands in token of his humility.

Hilda, quick to take advantage of the impression created in the old man's mind, followed him across the beach as he moved towards his village. She almost hesitated to remind him that gods and humans needed occasional offerings of food. But it had to he done.

Sagon nodded in sympathy. 'Food thou shall have at once.' he promised. 'But hear me before I go,'' he entreated hurriedly. 'The ruler of these islands, Gorai is rich and prosperous since the big ship Caliph of Bagdad found a grave on these reefs live years ago. The riches plucked by his headmen and canoes from the ship's rooms and lockers hath caused him to neglect my teachings and to sneer at my charms and spells!'

'What lands of riches?' Hilda inquired with genuine curiosity.

Sagon shrugged as he moved on.

'The Caliph of Bagdad was a rich ship, for did she not carry the Sultan of Jaipore and his young bride the Princess Isko of Samarand? There was bullion and jewels for the Indian conference at Delhi, the native Durbar at Allahabad. Aei! She was a rich ship! But the seas that nearly swallowed thee, little one. broke her in half and scattered the red plunder of a thousand years across the shoals.'

'And the Princess Isko?' Hilda asked, her memory going back to the unforgettable story of Ihe famous wreck, printed in all the Sydney papers.

Sagon counted the sharks' teeth on the string about his throat.

'The boats took away everyone,' he told her. 'It was left to Gorai and his villagers in scrape the reefs for the plunder. Te ano! They worked like devils in their canoes before the salvage men from Australia could get here. And now Gorai is rich and mocks my medicines,'' he wailed. 'I think not of gold, but of power lost and the insults offered to my spirits!'

Sagon indicated a clump of palm scrub for her to wait his return with the food. With incredible speed for one so old he loped away into the dense pandanus woods, leaving her a prey to a hundred fears and anxieties. She was certain that the old man would seek to use Peter as a new spirit force to intimidate the backsliding Gorai. Sagon's job as witch-doctor was growing perilous; that much was plain to her. The old man was casting round for some

potent instrument that would help bring the fuzzy-wuzzy Gorai and his headmen back to the old spirit fold.

Hilda glanced up from her brooding reverie and saw two native boys, accompanied by Sagon, hurrying towards her. They bore two woven baskets filled with fresh fruit and meat. Hilda sighed gratefully as she acknowledged the timely offering, for without food and nourishment they would soon sicken and die. She led the way back to the boat on the beach, followed by Sagon and the smiling native boys.

'Cheer up, Peter,' she called out loudly. 'I'm here with the bananas and the chicken pie.'

She half ran across the beach, holding in her hand a broad green palm leaf on which rested a couple of fat, roasted quail. She peered under the boat and along the desolate surf-swept barriers of coral. Little Peter had disappeared.

HILDA'S amazement was tragic. A superstitious terror seized her fainting limbs. She turned up and down the naked beach with the speed of a woman bereft. Where, in these multitudes of reef and sky, could a boy like Peter hide himself? And why should the young fool seek to play on her feelings after tIhe misery and travail of the last few hours?

She found herself staring into the shaking eyes of the witch-doctor. He seemed to be tearing the air with his hands.

'Gone!' he choked, dropping on bis bony knees to the beach and examining the marks around the boat with Jhe avidity of a black-tracker. A dozen footmarks had disturbed the smooth surface of the finely powdered coral. Sagon beat his breast with liis clawlike hands as he scuttled round in the sand.

''See, thou hungry one, what has happened.'' he raved, beckoning the distraught Hilda nearer. 'While I sought food for thee Gorai's canoes descended upon thy water-baby Peter, even as eagles descend! His warriors snatched up the pink cub and bore him away! Woe! We are undone!'

A ghastly fear ran through Hilda that Peter might be carried to Gorai's cooking stones. She sat huddled on the beach, hands clasped about her knees. Sagon seemed to understand her thoughts. His toothless mouth framed a mirthless grin.

'Gorai's men are not cannibals,' he told her. 'They have been watching thee and me. Woe to us! I would have set up thy pink man to rule here among the treasures. But the evil Gorai hath read into my dreams.'

Hilda looked up quickly, a sick, faint feeling gripping her heart.

'Are they going to kill my husband?' she asked with an effort. The witch-doctor batted his eyes, while the sun rode above the tawny cloud bars in the

east. Myriads of sooty-winged terns screamed and circled over the in-driving breakers.

'They will not kill thy man. Worse will happen!'' he croaked. 'They will make sport of him: they will make him a jibe and a laughing matter for Ihe chiefs and villager's, so that no one may set him up as a god or a king in place of Gorai. They will put him on the big ball.'

'The big ball? What's that?' Sagon gestured wearily.

'Do not ask these questions. Stay here by the boat; until I return,' he advised. 'I will come back with news. I have many friends in the village.'

Hilda flung herself in the shadow of the boat to escape for a moment the blistering rays of the sun. The sea had gone down, and the incessant screaming of the gulls played on her pent-up nerves.

Here and there the long torpedo shadow of a cruising shark flitted along-the shoal-edge. Generally the seahawks followed in the wake of these sabre-toothed monsters. There were always pickings to be had, and the hammerhead shark is a master sleuth when a dead pig or drowned goat floats out on the tide.

The grip of fate seemed to close on Hilda's heart. Always this overgrown boy husband was being made the butt of roisterers and people anxious to raise a horse-laugh. And his one thought was games, in which he more than held his own when the big pinch came. There was not a member of the Hippodrome who did not remember the night of the fire in Melbourne, when, the flames encircled the poor screaming horses in the canvas stalls.

Peter had gone in through the whirlwind of smoke and flames, had cleaved a passage between the burning waggons, and driven his beloved ponies and ring-horses to safety. No one ever forgot the night he stole the baby from the arms of a Coonamble woman in the audience, and ran with it across the ring. The big fool! Yet how the people had gone almost crazy wilh delight when the mother of the little one chased him round the circus! And the baby enjoyed the chase more than anyone— didn't want to be taken from Peter's silly fat arms.

Hilda salt up suddenly, with the sun almost level with her eyes. The surf was breaking with the sound of gun-wheels on the beach. Squalling like a huge toad almost beside her was the witch-doctor. He had returned without sound.

'The hour has come,' he droned. 'I could do nothing. Gorai is all for the wooden ball. The chiefs wanted thy pink baby man spared. They fear the spirits that are in his body. Yet Gorai would not listen. The ball now gels thy husband!'

A sudden irritation swept, Hilda. She stood up, her eyes kindling, her small white hands shut tight. 'I'm going to the village,' she flung out. 'If I can't put

Gorai off this stupid game of his I'll take what's coming to me. I won't sit here while Peter is—'

A crucified leer touched the lips of Sagon. 'What is coming to thee will not be long, little one,' he murmured. 'After Gorai has done with thy pink man the bamboo-head knives may trim thy pretty neck! Take care what thou does!,' he warned.

Hilda choked back her tears. From the village came a long wailing murmur that soon rose to a passionate clamour, interspersed with the gleeful intonations of women and children.

'The ball will soon be on the water,' Sagon droned, crawling forward in the sand to where the long-seagrass offered shelter and a view of what was happening between the village and the inlet. 'Come and see the last of thy man,' he invited. 'No enemy warrior or chief has yet beaten Gorai's ball game. No player has ever found pity among the white-bellied sea-tigers who join the game.'

Hilda choked back the flaming wrath that rose in her as she followed Sagon to the shelter of the seagrass. For a fleeting moment she found comfort in the thought that of all games Peter loved water-polo best. At regattas and picnics he always contrived to lake a leading part as Father Neptune.

Given a ghost of a chance, Little Peter would beat any sea game these savages could put up, she thought. But would the foe given a chance?

'No man with only hands and feet ever came back from a game with these white bellied sharks,' Sagon insisted under his breath. 'How can it be otherwise? I was too late.'

From where they crouched in the long grass they could view the tide-filled inlet and the brown swarms of villagers converging on the narrow tongue of reef that, formed the southern extremity of the island. Hilda's eyes were rooted on a small, plume-decked figure surrounded by a bodyguard of chiefs.

'That is Gorai,' Sagon whispered. 'Gorai, who is turning our pink god into a mountebank. He hath the brain of a red fox. If I could have but placed thy Peter on a throne of teak the chiefs would have fallen on their ugly faces to worship. Aie, to nanoi! I was too late.'

Suddenly, from nowhere in particular, a huge black ball struck the water of the inlet, and floated buoyantly a few yards from the shore. A cry went up as the half-naked figure of Little Peter was thrust over the reefs by half-a-dozen armed natives. Peter stared at the shouting crowds, a puzzled look on his cherubic face. Then a chief from Gorai's bodyguard indicated the black, floating ball with a threatening forefinger. The surface of the floating object had been smeared with grease.

In the millionth fraction of time Little Peter had made up his mind for what was going to happen. He left the reef with a flying leap into the water and disappeared. In a moment he appeared within a few feet of the ball, his hands filled with grit from the coral floor of the inlet. Thunders of applause greeted the trick. Yet hardly had the chorus died away when a couple of dorsal fins flitted across the inlet's mouth with the precision of Prussian sentries.

The sharks of Lalango knew the game. In the fetch of a breath Little Peter saw his predicament. And just here a long stabbing spear whanged past his head and stuck fast on top of the greasy wooden ball.

A shout of dissent came from Gorai's bodyguard. No one had a right to cast spears during the play. Sagon chuckled under his breath.

'A woman threw it,' he told the cowering Hilda, 'for they do not want to see him die.'

For the moment the spear saved Little Peter. The two hammer-head sharks at the inlet's mouth slid nearer with the instinct of dingoes as Peter leaped upwards to the ball. Gripping the spear handle, he drew himself on the top of the swaying sphere and looked down.

The two grey-backed monsters lay almost motionless in the clear, sapphire depths, long-bodied, shovel-snouted scavengers that had doubtless played the ball game with many an unfortunate victim. Peter's left hand clutched the spear, stuck like a small flagpole on top of the ball. His slightest movement caused the big wooden dome to roll until the spear almost touched the water.

Peter's baby face hardened strangely. His breath was not so regular now. Every native child in the group was aware that these saw-toothed sharks were cunning enough to tear the steering oar from the hands of a canoeman. Driven by hunger they could, with a lift of their great dorsal fins, capsize a canoe, hurling its occupants into the water. Little Peter stared down at their steely, sloping backs, the flat heads and swinish eyes upturned to his own.

Slowly, gracefully almost, they cruised round the swaying ball. The very motion of their great bodies caused Peter and the spear to bob and roll down to the level of their bristling fins. Instinctively Peter braced himself: his soft mouth closed like a trap.

'Dust my eyes! They haven't given me a pup's chance!' he breathed.

Yet in his circus days Little Peter had performed many startling tricks in the ring, to the infinite amusement of indulgent audiences. He had walked on the big ball, played cards with Lizzie the elephant, and nursed the clown. But Little Peter had never played with the quick-shifting, man-eating sharks of the South Pacific. In a casual way he had heard of them; but like the flowers of spring, they had not obsessed his imagination.

'Not a pup's chance!' he gasped, as he returned the deadly, leaden stare that came from the swinish eyes in the water.

The game opened without the slightest warning. The larger of the two hammerheads, a twenty-footer with the girth of a motor-launch, dived beneath Peter's resting-place. The great back of the monster rose suddenly to the surface, and the ball, with Peter on top, shot three feet in the air. The big wooden sphere descended with a bang and splash that brought howls of applause from the dusky watchers on the reef-ends. The ball bounced over the waves, Peter clutching the spear haft and seeking to maintain his balance on the greasy globe beneath him. The water leaped and sucked beneath in the mill caused by the flashing fins and flukes.

Peter hugged the ball and spread sand from his pocket over the greasy sides. The twenty-footer backed away, but in a dead line with the bobbing, rolling dome of wood. In the fetch of a breath Peter knew what was coming. The shark dashed in with the force of a battering ram. Within five feet of the hall it swerved and swung over, its white belly and jaws glinting in the naked light.

The swerve caused the ball to pitch. Peter's head came over and down, in spite of his frantic efforts to keep an even keel. For one smothering, blinding instant Peter felt the blade of the twenty-footer's fin stab his cheek. Blood trickled over his chin. With his whole weight jolting backwards he righted the ball as the gaping tunnel of teeth missed his body.

The episode showed Peter that by lying flat on the ball he could avoid a repetition of the tip-over. Moreover, be felt that his desperate position needed a desperate remedy. Carefully he drew out the spear from the ball and held it over the water. He could not allow these sea-wolves to drag him piecemeal. Yet... if he stabbed and missed he would roll down to an unimpressive funeral.

Blood and salt wash scoured Peter's cheek. The mob of natives on the shoal-ends became a dull blur, a mere nightmare of yelling devils and pointing fingers.

For several moments the two sharks hung still as shadows below. He could almost reach them with the spear blade; yet one false thrust would send him amongst them with no more chance than a fat puppy in a house of tigers. A piece of coral thrown from the shoal stirred the brooding sharks. The twenty-footer dived to the floor in the inlet, rose with its great snout brushing the side of the ball.

Peter drew breath sharply, leaned with death in his eyes, and struck down at the swinish snout. The razor-edged point of the spear sank five inches into the soft pulp of the slat eye. With a lightning wrench Peter withdrew the spear and drove it home again into the wooden ball— and held on. And just in time.

The stabbed monster seemed to catapult from the water with the force of a lashed steer. The shock of its descent sent Peter and the wooden ball spinning across the inlet, with blood and brine slashing into his set face. A hurricane of shouts from the shore greeted his stroke. Chiefs and headmen roared their approval.

'Cho anna, pa ne! This pink man-whale is no sleeper, Gorai,' they vociferated. 'The tibawaka (shark) is tasting its own blood.'

The tibawaka was tasting its own blood, and the scent roused to fury the shoal of smaller sharks scouting under the reefs.

Peter hugged the dancing ball, filled his lungs with air, and waited for the second attack. Each moment the circus boy was learning to control the wobbling wooden sphere, as he had learned to control bucking bush horses and rebels. But he could not see the end of the game. From the shouts of the headmen, and women in particular, he judged himself a favourite in this shark and man act. Anyway, he would show them that a white man was able to put the jazz on their old tiger fish.

He wrenched away the spear at the moment the tibawaka doubled without warning beneath the ball. Peter balanced and waited for the shock of the slamming body. Then, with his temper on edge, he drove his spear-blade at the upturned throat. Behind the thrust was the whole bull weight of his chest and shoulders. A red gash the size of a hat opened in the throat of the swerving shark. Peter jagged his weapon fiercely and tore it free. In the turn of his wrist the spear was back in the ball.

In the flogging whirlwind of water and blood Peter held on to the spear and the ball. Up and down and round it gyrated, like a top driven by a dozen whips. Through the blinding spray and sand he saw the reefs of the opposite shore leap nearer. His straining eyes made out the upturned boat where he had been carried off by Gorai's men. He was also conscious that something was happening on the distant beach where the king's war canoes lay. A pillar of flame shot skyward.

A cry that the canoes were burning sent the vast crowd scampering in the direction of the smoke clouds. He heard Hilda's voice calling clearly.

'This way, Peter! Jump with that spear,' she commanded.

The wooden ball was ten feet from the reef. Peter dug the spear into the sand and leaped clear. He landed in a heap beside Hilda. A swift backward glance showed him that the shark shoal had followed to the edge of the beach.

The voice of the witch-doctor steadied him.

'Gorai's fighting ships are cinders, papalagi,' he announced. 'The people will know that my spirits are angry. Aie. I have friends in the village.'

In the village the men and women were calling out for the pink baby man. They wanted him to sit amongst them. Peter heard the cries as he munched one of the roast quail in the basket.

'Nothing doing,' he sighed. 'I'm busy.'

Two tall figures appeared in the long sea-grass. They wore long heron plumes in their headdress, and carried themselves with the air of chiefs. Sagon beckoned them near.

'They have come to strike a bargain,' he whispered to Hilda. 'Say nothing, thou. I will speak.'

The two visitors halted within eight paces of the witch-doctor, their heads bent, the thumbs of their hands locked over their shoulders. Sagon nodded.

'What news, Chekor?' he called out to the elder of the two.

'Peace to thee!' Ghekor pointed a black finger in the direction of the flames. 'A hand hath destroyed our fighting ships, Sagon. Already Gorai feels the wrath of the spirits thou hast set upon him. He says the two papalagi may leave the island now. But the young men of the village ask that the big pink papalagi stay with them. They cry out for him to sit in the house with their gods. They swear that his body is full of magic that wins wars. His spirits will bring us much oil and fruit to our plantations.'

'Nothing doing.' Little Peter kicked Sagon softly on the foot. Sagon spread a pinch of lime on a betel nut, wrapped it in a nipa leaf, and chewed reflectively. He spoke after awhile.

'The gods are angry with Gorai,' he pronounced gravely. 'If the big baby-faced papalagi stayeth on the island, then Gorai goes. The two cannot live here together.

'The king desireth the fat papalagi to depart in peace,' Chekor almost begged. 'There will be no delay.'

The witch-doctor shook his head and chewed in silence. Then he made a sign to the despondent Ghekor. 'The fat papalagi will not leave this land of plenty until Gorai makes offering. A great indignity hath been put upon him. But for the magic of his great body see what would have happened!'

And Sagon indicated the reddened water, where the ravenous sharks still hung about the drifting wooden ball.

Chekor bent his plumed head to the level of his lean hips. A string of blood-red pearls from the distant lagoons fell from his hand into Hilda's lap. A sudden sneer crossed the lips of the witch-doctor as he followed Chekor's movements.

The foot of Little Peter again pressed against him. Sagon's eyelid fell in Little Peter's direction.

'We must make a real offering to the pink papalagi,' he said to Chekor. ' He must have worthy gifts, or his body that is full of magic will send a plague upon our crops.'

Again Chekor's hand stole to his finely woven girdle of grass. Without wrarning he spilled a little stream of sparkling gems at Hilda's feet, gems torn from their gold and platinum settings, ornaments salved from ships' safes and the wrecks of a hundred typhoons.

Sagon nodded approvingly. 'Gorai knoweth right from wrong!' he exclaimed.'

'Say now that the big papalagi will depart at once. But Gorai must, build me a noble house for my gods,' he cautioned the two waiting- chiefs.

Chekor put up his hand in assent, placed his thumbs to his brow, and departed silently. Sagon turned to Little Peter, a satisfied grin on his withered face.

'Thy boat is in good condition. Food will be put in her. Two of my canoemen shall take thee and thy wife to Palone, which is but a day's journey in the north. The wind is good, and in a little while thou wilt be sitting in the hotel where Van Estman will tell thee of a sliip to take thee on thy way.'

TWO days later Hilda and Little Peter were seated at the breakfast-table overlooking Van Estman's well-kept lawns at Palone. Van Estman spoke in a hushed voice to his head waiter as he indicated the two travel-stained guests.

'A noble lady and her husband. They have survived a great shipwreck. Give them of our best. Never have I seen such jewels on a lady!' he added in a hushed voice, 'since the Princess Isko stayed here on her way in the Caliph of Bagdad to the Durbar at Allahabad. Never,' he concluded in sudden ecstasy, 'have I seen two great ladies wear emeralds and diamonds so alike in pattern!'

Hilda was inclined to the belief that a good shipwreck deserved a good breakfast. Van Estman saw that she got one.

18: The Sale of Yellow Face

Sydney Mail 2 April 1924

THE shadow of Ah Toy slanted across the mouth of the mine tunnel. His small fat body and pigtailed head lay flat against the white rib of quartz that bulged from the hillside. Within the tunnel two men wore arguing in fierce undertones, while the Chinaman squeezed nearer and nearer to catch each flung out syllable.

'Ye forget, Lorimer, we're owing money to that old cheese skate in the store— Marsden. An' winter is comin'! The rages I'm wearin' are tied on to me wit' siring an' rope. Tomorrow, unless we find a buyer for this mine, we'll be beggin' food from the old Chink across the hill. An' when you catch me plasterin' a bit of gold into the reef ye scowl like a young priest at a races meetin'!'

'I will not be silent, Hagen, while you attempt to plug this mine,' Lorimer retorted quietly. 'Day after day people come here only to laugh at your trowel work up there. They know the stunt and they never make an offer.'

Hagen was using a trowel in the reef crannies. In the palm of his hand were several pellets of gold the size of nail brads. With the craft of a jeweller her mortised and set them into the blue veins in the glittering white quartz overhead.

Teddy Lorimer was twenty-five, and had met Hagen while prospecting for gold in the Heathcote Ranges six months before. They had come upon an outcrop of reef thirty acres in extent that excited their energies. Both had mining permits. They decided to camp at Yellow Face, as they called the mica-crested ridge. After tunnelling to meet the lode that splayed downward like the claw of a bird they decided that Yellow Face was a good name for the mine that sapped their life-blood and gave nothing in return.

Hagen's body was built after the manner of a twisted root. His head and jaw seemed to have been blasted from red rock. And he- was unutterably bad.

He paused in his 'salting' operations to survey the priest-faced boy seated on an upturned bucket in the drive.

'We must sell, Teddy, or eat with the gaol thugs this winter. Old Marsden has been here an' seen the show. He'll buy! But just now he's sick from over-eatin'. And that long-legged girl of his—'

'Miss Nancy,' Lorimer prompted icily.

'Well, she's comin' here to take stock, an' to make an offer, maybe.'

'She's cleverer than most women, Hagen. That trowel decoration won't carry the bluff far. She was born and reared in these hills.'

A series of monkey noises escaped Hagen as he glowered at his young partner. 'All I want from you is a shut head when Marsden's girl blows in here,' he warned. 'Her father is rolling in money. He's the biggest thief that ever bumped a scale. Have ye noticed the bacon he sells us?''

THE sun disappeared beyond the scrub-covered hills, and the raw heat of the afternoon lifted with the first breath from the higher ranges. Softly, and with no more sound than a lizard, Ah Toy faded into the purple wonga vines that screened his solitary camp in the gully. Like Hagen and Lorimer, he was trying out the alluvial reefs in the hope of finding payable gold. In the present instance he was merely holding a watching brief in his own interests.

A fire sang and crackled near the mine entrance. Hagen sat cross-legged on a dump of tailings smoking, and sullenly watchful until the icy nip from the ranges sent him to his tent, and his blanket.

'Let's be up early,' he called to Lorimer. 'That girl of Marsden's has got the bird habit. She'll be chirpin' round in the mornin', maybe before sun-up. Let's make a show of bein' at work. Night!'

'Good-night,' Lorimer answered broodingly. His face, sunk in his hands, where the rose bloom of the dying camp fire was reflected in his boyish eyes.

AN hour before dawn Lorimer stirred uneasily in his blanket. His tent was pitched a few yards from the tunnel entrance, and within easy reach of Hagen's. A slight scraping sound within the tunnel had reached his sensitive ears. He sat up and caught it again; this time it sounded like a mallet striking against the soft schist formation in the cross-drive. Hagen's loud snoring in his tent dispelled any possibility of his presence in the drive.

Raising the flap of his tent cautiously, Lorimer peered out. A faint wisp of moon was setting in the south-east. The mouth of the tunnel was no more than a black arch in the uncertain light; but within this black arch he detected the faint nimbus from a covered lantern. Lorimer lay still, his chin resting on the ground. With some difficulty he restrained himself from calling out to Hagen. That anyone should enter their claim at that hour appeared incredible.

The mallet work ceased. A strange shadowy shape emerged suddenly from the tunnel, a covered hurricane lamp swinging at its side. Lorimer stifled a cry. The shadow revealed the pigtail and blouse of the Chinaman Ah Toy!

To leap out and catch the trespasser by the scruff would have been easy enough. Instead. Lorimer crept back to his blanket, too bewildered to sleep, conscious only that the dawn would reveal the nature of the Chinaman's visit. To be caught tampering with a white man's claim was more than Ah Toy would risk unless driven by dire necessity.

Hagen was abroad at the first streak of day. The sound of his shovel on the sandy floor of the tunnel brought Lorimer from his blanket. Kicking the fire together, they breakfasted hastily and the day's work began.

Lorimer joined Hagen in the crosscut, where the in-slanting sun rays lit the mouth of the tunnel.

'I'm betting that the Marsden girl will come to-day,' Hagen grunted as be attacked the overhead reef with the intention of impressing casual callers from the distant township.

'An' ye'll let me do me talkin,' he instructed Lorimer. 'Got an idea you're a bit soft about this Marsden nipper.''

Lorimer flushed, but held his longue. He had no desire to quarrel with his partner. Time enough to be outspoken, when the Marsdens started bidding for their worthless claim. Hagen worked in a desultory way, pausing al times to pick up loose rock that fell al his feel. Bending hit; shoulders to reach the angle of reef overhead with his pick, he paused transfixed, his eyes rooted on a five-ounce nugget nestling in the fragmented vein of the reef.

The pick slithered from his nerveless grasp; his jaw hung in amazement. Lorimer turned slowly in the funnel and stared in his direction, 'What's up?' he called softly. 'Somebody coming?'

Sweat streamed from Hagen's brow us he tore the slug of gold from the blue veins of the quartz. He licked it with his dry tongue, as men do who touch virgin gold after months of ill-luck and privation.

Lorimer drew breath sharply as he viewed the heavy slug in his partner's band. Then his eyes traversed the line of reef to the crumbling pocket in the angle in the cross-cut.

Inexperienced as he was, he knew instinctively that the piece of gold in Hagen's fist did not belong to that particular hole. He remembered the Chinaman's visit, his soft mallet strokes against the reef, and was silent. Hagen regarded him almost fiercely.

'Why the dickens don't you say something? Yesterday you couldn't afford a cigarette. I suppose ye know what this means? ' He pushed the slug within an inch of Lorimer's face.

Lorimer laughed with forced gaiety.

'It means life or death to us,' was his noncommittal reply. Hagen returned to the overhead pocket and worked with the fury of a demon.

'The old Yellow Face is not for sale now.' he called out from lime lo lime. 'We're only beginning to touch our luck. Stick to it!'

Lorimer worked less feverishly than the gold-maddened Hagen. He was now certain that Ah Toy had put the nugget in the reef; but all the logic and reason he could summon to his aid failed to explain the Chinaman's motive. In

the history of mining he could recall nothing that would help him to a solution of Ah Toy's strange trick.

For months past the old Chinaman had delved and burrowed in his own claim to win a few specks of colour to keep him in food and opium. He was poor and niggardly beyond words. But for the generosity of Nancy Marsden, who pitied his lonely condition and his everlasting struggle to keep alive, the wild dogs would have fought for his starved body long ago. And now he was salting their claim with five-ounce, slugs!

THE night came, full of stars and with unutterable tranquillity. Hagen was sprawling before the campfire, the gold slug held so that the flames reflected the water polished sheen of its virgin skin.

'Funny,'' he commented hoarsely, 'how this duffer of a claim should throw out an ace like this. What d'ye make or it?"

Lorimer was silent. Instinct strong as life warned him against hasty statements. Hagen was not the man to play a waiting game. His animal impatience would spoil everything once he became aware of the nugget's history.

An hour before dawn Lorimer sat up in his tent and listened. He had become conscious of a presence in the tunnel, and again came the muffled tap, tap of a mallet on the crumbling reef. A single peep under the tent flap revealed the shaded glow of the hurricane lamp in the cross-drive. This time the mallet work was more prolonged.

Lorimer leaned on his elbow, smiling grimly. He had given up the riddle. His youthful brain failed to answer why a stingy, poverty-ridden old Chinaman should, at the risk of being shot as a trespasser, find pleasure in hammering lumps of gold into their claim. He lay motionless under the tent flap as Ah Toy emerged from the tunnel, his hurricane lamp extinguished. For an instant the Chinaman allowed himself a fleeting glance at the white men's tents, a curious scathing smile lingering on his saturnine features. Noiselessly he turned towards the ridge that overhung the vine-infested gully, his ragged, scarecrow attire blending weirdly with the spectral foliage. He seemed to fade at the instant a lean, crooked shape hurtled in his rear.

LOCKED in Hagen's fierce embrace, Ah Toy was dragged into the open almost to the edge of the smouldering campfire. The Chinaman suppressed a scream of terror as the while man flung him stammering onto a heap of stones.

'What's your game, Toy? I'll have the truth if I tear it out of your yellow throat!' Hagen stormed.

Ah Toy whimpered inaudibly, knees updrawn, his slat eyes betraying the cold fear of the trapped dingo.

'You lemme go,' Missah Hagen. 'Me takee on'y one lille peep inside yo' tunnel. I likee you an' Missah Lollima velly much!'

'Save your lies, Toy. Nobody likes me, not even the dogs that come here, I want the truth! Speak up.'

The Chinaman squirmed on the stones. In the cold dawn light his face had grown livid and wan.

'I speakee trufh, Missah Hagen. You an' Missah Lollima go hungly. You welly poor. Me solly for you. I putee lille nugget in reef to helpee you.'

Hagen glowered at him. The one fact that flamed in his mind was that there was no gold in the Yellow Face claim except what Ah Toy had put there. He did not believe the Chinaman's story, and the mystery of it angered and unnerved him.

Ah Toy lay quite still on the stone heap, like a fat mouse that fears to stir. Hagen regarded him with the eyes of a hanging Judge.

'Chink,' he said slowly, 'your breed never tells the truth. Your infernal game's got me guessin'. No man born of a woman throws red gold into a stranger's dirt.'

Between the fat mouse on the stone heap and the man with the fingers of iron a frozen silence fell. The sun's rim showed like the edge of a volcano above the forest line. Smoke from the slumbering, campfire oozed and drifted across the gully.

It seemed hours before Hagen spoke. All the misery of his past labours was printed like hatchet strokes about his unrelenting face. He felt that he was being fooled by a Chinaman, guyed, and made to look ridiculous. The story would spread, and a whole continent would laugh at the newest joke in mine salting. And a crumpled up, swine-footed Celestial would lead the laughter.

'Toy,' Hagen began hoarsely, 'I'm goin' to warm the truth out of ye!' He kicked a heap of dry wood on to the smoking fire, fanned it with his hat until the flames peeped and ran through the pile. Then he unwound a length of rope that lay coiled about an old windlass. Stooping near the stone heap, he lashed the Chinaman's legs together, leaving his hands free. Hagen then drew the rope taut and hauled savagely. The feet of Ah Toy rested on the edge of the burning campfire. Hagen lay back on the rope; another jerk would bring the wriggling body into the centre of the flames.

'Goin' to speak, or shall we leave it to the fire?'

There was no answer from the wide-eyed Chinaman gasping at the end of the tight-drawn rope. Hagen hunched his root-like shoulders and strained

gently on the rope. A footstep turned him sharply. Lorimer was standing beside him, his hand on the rope.

'Drop it, Hagen. He's scared to the limit already.' Lorimer's face was drawn and white. He disliked scenes and resented the loss of sleep, but above all he resented his partner's methods of handling Chinamen.

Hagen spoke without dropping the rope.

'Stand away! I've caught this Chow salting the claim. Ye'll yet my meanin' if ye don't stand aside pretty lively.'

LORIMER walked to the prostrate Chinaman and unhitched the rope from his ankles and body. Then he turned slowly to meet the inevitable rush of his rage-blinded partner. The root-like build of Hagen's body and limbs gave him a formidable appearance. He had fought a hundred battles in different mining camps, and had won most id' thorn. But each new fight brings defeat a step rearer.

Lorimer shifted only slightly when Hagen hurtled towards him, a cursing, raving mass of spleen. Like a mastiff he bored in, missing and slipping across the clay-packed earth in his hate to pulp the boyish figure that stalled his wild blows. Lorimer fenced with him, boxed him at the length of his long left arm. until Hagen missed and slipped and missed as he had never done before.

'Hagen.' Lorimer spoke with a sharp intake of breath. 'I'll give you a taste of that fire if you don't stop trying to fight! Quit before you go too far!'

Hagen drew off for a breath-giving space, eyes bulging, sweat streaming from his face. Then, with hands covering his head, he charged. Lorimer's right fist descended like an axe on the nape of the bull neck, in the shift of a toe his long left ripped up to the swaying jaw. Hagen slithered like a shot beast within an inch of the fire and lay still. He uttered no sound as Lorimer drew him from the scorching blaze towards the tent. The Chinaman had disappeared.

Far down the bridle-track leading from the township a young girl rode leisurely in the direction of Yellow Face. Lorimer's eyes kindled as he watched her canter up the slope to the mouth of the tunnel.

NANCY MARSDEN slipped from the saddle, holding the bridle over her arm. She reached well above Lorimer's tall shoulder, and strode like a boy into the clearing. Nancy was eighteen, and combined a beautiful personality with charming executive ability. For weeks past she had kept in touch with Hagen's growing debt to the store. The man's presence oppressed her. He was the type of miner who preferred trickery to the more arduous task of developing his claim. Moreover, it pained her to think of his corrupting influence on Lorimer. She had watched their efforts from the first, and had been amused at Hagen's

attempts to interest her father in the purchase of Yellow Face. And now she was prepared to negotiate on her father's behalf, if only to be rid of Hagen and relieve Lorimer of his hateful partnership.

Lorimer moved from Hagen's tent door, fearing that Nancy's appraising eye might discern symptoms of the recent conflict. She hailed him cheerfully.

'Morning, Mr. Lorimer. I've come about old Yellow Face. They say you're dying to let go.'

Lorimer flushed to his hair roots. He was done with Hagen and the salted reef in the tunnel. He was determined to tell the truth.

'Fact is, Miss Marsden, old Yellow Face isn't worth a new spade and barrow. It isn't a mine at all— it's just a fifth-rate funeral.'

She regarded his worn clothes and toil-stained hands silently; then, throwing her bridle rein over a post, entered the tunnel.

Lorimer followed, secretly ashamed of the way his partner had inveigled her into the deal. A short laugh escaped her as she indicated the salted veins of the reef, together with, two shining slugs which Ah Toy had manipulated into the schist above the crosscut. Then her questing eyes followed the fall of the reef to the end of the tunnel, where the blue veins seemed to carry heavy mineral deposits. Out in the open she spoke with decision.

'This claim may be somebody's funeral, but I'm willing to acquire Mr. Hagen's share, and will pay five hundred pounds for it.'

Hagen appeared at his tent door, a badly shaken figure after his recent encounter. Nancy's offer dispelled the sullen lit of brooding which enveloped him.

'My share's yours for the money,' he agreed with avidity. 'It will make you both rich,' he added with an ill-concealed sneer.

Nancy Marsden drew a typewritten agreement from her pocket.

'Come along, Mr. Hagen. This is a deed of relinquishment and transfer of your rights to me. Put your signature here and take the money.'

With a shaking hand Hagen signed the document. The next, moment he had retired to his tent to count the roll of notes in his possession.

Lorimer hung his head dejectedly. He felt that Nancy Marsden had made a fool of herself. Nancy listened spellbound while he gave an account of the Chinaman's strange salting operations. The tiniest of frowns wrinkled her sun-sweetened face.

'Let's find him,' she suggested. 'Toy's been coming to the store for months past. He's as poor as a bandicoot— lives on rice and stolen chickens! Gold is the last thing he'd trifle with.'

Nancy led her horse through the scrub-choked gully, followed by the pensive Lorimer. Ah Toy's claim was difficult to locale among the piled-up

boulders and giant sassafras ferns that smothered the landscape. Speargrass and cactus formed an almost impenetrable barrier to progress.

Like most Chinamen within the Northern Territory, Toy's efforts to win gold from the ranges were regarded with indifference and scorn by the scattered whites. The tracks were difficult, and often led nowhere, and the ranges had a reputation for barren reefs and starvation claims. It was generally admitted that Toy was a harmless imbecile.

With the cunning of a bushman Nancy picked up Toy's recent tracks that led to the scrub-screened mouth of a tunnel. Only the most careful search revealed its existence. The dirt from the tunnel had been carried to a deep gully, where the creepers and undergrowth covered it completely. The faint sound of a pick told them that the Chinaman was at work inside. Lorimer detected a feverish haste in the pick strokes, accompanied by the low rumble of falling earth and stones.

'Come along, partner!' Nancy laughed, adjusting her pocket compass with the care of a mining surveyor. 'I've heard a good deal about Chinese miners; I'm just aching to see one at work.'

Lorimer stepped into the tunnel and noted the excellent condition of the timbering and slopes. Nancy paid strict attention to her compass as they stumbled forward over the loose stones and pebbles. The dull glow of the hurricane lamp showed at the end of the drive. Within the arc of the smoky flare stood the half naked figure of the Chinaman.

Lorimer gasped at the almost Dante-esque fury of the yellow man's efforts to break the white wall of reef in front. Like a bull-ant he rent and gouged at impossible masses of ore. At times he threw down his pick and tore away boulders with his naked hands. And as he laboured and chattered to himself Nancy's lingers closed gently on Lorimer's sleeve.

'Heavens!' she whispered. 'Look— look at the reef under his pick! Look— over his head!'

In all his life Lorimer had never beheld such strange workings and flow of virgin gold in a reef line. In every cranny and seam the yellow metal pouted and grinned. It lay in twisted slugs of curious design, some, knotted like a man's fist; in other places it seemed to have frozen in a solid stream, an open jugular in a body of crystalline quartz. Lorimer's lips parted in a weary smile.

'Good luck to old China!' he said under his breath. 'Let him enjoy his reward. After all, he only tried to be kind to us, and got small thanks for his pains.'

Nancy Marsden was standing at his elbow, her eyes fixed on her pocket compass. When she spoke her voice had in it a touch almost of resentment.

'Good luck to everyone, Mr. Lorimer. But— this Chinaman is mining on our properly! He's inside our thirty acres by a good two hundred yards. He's stealing our gold.'

The sound of Nancy's voice swung Ah Toy from his frantic labours. At sight of Lorimer a spasm of childish fury swept him. His talon fingers gestured hysterically.

'Why you come heah?' he screamed. 'Go 'way! You no light to tlespass on me!'

Lorimer glanced swiftly at Nancy. She answered with a nod of assurance. 'A good two hundred yards inside our properly,' she reiterated.

Instantly Lorimer remembered that the pegs of their northern boundary marked a line that made Ah Toy's operations illegal. The Chinaman had burrowed under the hill, attacking the northern extremity of the Yellow Face reef and striking the gold from the lower shoots in the strata.

After a while Toy sat on a heap of stones, wiping his hot face with a soiled lamp rag. The folly of protesting against Lorimer's entry dawned on him by degrees. Also, he was not unmindful of the fact that the young white miner had protected him from Hagen's wrath.

'Tell me Toy,' Lorimer began persuasively, 'why you risked salting the other end of our reef?'

Fat tears trickled down the Chinaman s hardened cheeks. His bald head wagged like a spring-fitted image. With a final flourish of the lamp rag he broke convulsively into speech.

'I find plenty gold heah. Then I get welly flitened you an' Missah Hagen find it out. Me supportee my ole fader in Soo Loon. So me t'ink if I keepee you an Missah Hagen hard to work in your tunnel you then have no time to pokee roun heah. You savvy me, Missah Lorimer?'

'Go on, Toy,' The young miner nodded encouragingly,

The Chinaman sighed. 'I takee fat lille nugget flom heah an' put it in your mine while you sleep. Me feel pletty sure you an' Missah Hagen would stay in tunnel evely day to find moah. Then by'm-by you too busy to waichee me cally away this gold in a cart to my fiends on the coast. ' "You saltee Yellow Face mine good an' hard," my fiend Ching Boh say to me one day. "That fellah Hagen him go blind lookin' foh moah; him stay likee ferret in his tunnel allee day! You hop, hop then, Ah Toy," he tell me. "Evely day aftah you' saltee claim him work hard while you fillee cart. Then you hop, hop to me."

'All welly ni',' Ah Toy concluded tearfully, 'until Missah Hagen wake up an catchee me like a debil. Hi ya; me welly unlucky.'

Nancy's rippling laughter filled the tunnel.

'Cheer up, you old sinner. Instead of handing you over to the police. Mr. Lorimer may give you a chance to be honest. At any rate, you've developed this end of the property.'

Lorimer nodded in agreement.

THE following day a police patrol took charge of the mine workings, north and south, until Lorimer arranged for men and modern machinery to tackle the rich ore bodies in sight. Ah Toy was kept on the pay-roll. Nancy's sense of humour demanded that his latent mining abilities needed the utmost encouragement. And in Nancy Marsden Lorimer found his true life partner. All the gold in the Yellow Face would have been as dust if her heart had not been found in it.

19: Thirteen Paces

Sydney Mail 22 April 1925

JIM KEELING was dead, and Owen Blyth felt that he had lost the one friend who had ever stood between him and the bread line. Altogether it was a curious situation for Blyth, whose experience in the management of pearling lagoons and squads of black divers was limited. And the passing of Jim had thrown the whole business on to his young shoulders. Keeling had died unexpectedly, although in the last year his gin account had gone up 50 per cent— a terrifying jump even for a South Sea pearl fisher.

The name of Keeling had figured in many an overseas cable message when the discovery of some unusually valuable gem was recorded. It was Jim Keeling who had negotiated the sale of the famous Pigeon Ruby pearl, found on the Yuen Li Bank in the Monday Group of atolls. The deal touched the twelve-thousand-pound figure.

Island mysteries are plentiful enough if one steers the true course among the ten thousand islands where the Admiralty charts show thirty fathoms instead of coral peaks and everlasting lagoons. Blyth had been part-owner of a twenty-ton fore-and-aft rigged schooner plying for copra and oil between Levuka and Samoa.

Blyth's fifth cyclone was the last as far as the twenty-ton schooner was concerned. Cyclones differ in quantity and quality. There are some cyclones that will spin a top or blow guava seeds through a beachcomber's whiskers. There are what old-timers call the she-winds, the playful gales that make a sailorman wink and laugh. It was an old man buster that put Blyth on the reefs at Matanga and pounded his life savings to driftwood in an hour.

Palm trees will often feed a shipwrecked sailor, but there are times when the scenery around a shipwreck is composed mostly of limestone peaks, razor-beaked sea-hawks, and sharks. Jim Keeling was glad of the storm that had sent Blyth to him. The boy was a gesture from the civilisation beyond the sea. He desired space for his energies, no doubt, unlimited work, and a measure of responsibility. He should have them. And just when Owen Blyth was beginning to understand the ways of the black 'skin' divers on the different lagoons Jim Keeling died, leaving him alone among the fifteen Malalonga boys, who now looked to him for guidance and support.

Owen was distressed and singularly embarrassed, for beyond the native crews of the luggers there was no visible heir to the riches that lay on the banks and channels of a hundred tideways. The trade-house was well built

with furniture made from the limbers of storm-beaten ships. If was cool and spacious, with wide verandahs screened from flies and instraying pests.

Among the dead man's papers he found nothing to help him in his disposition of the estate. It was beyond the law and part of the reefs and waterways of no man's land. If Blyth disappeared it would become the plaything of the childlike Malalonga boys, who would treat it as children treat a castle of sand by the sea.

In the trade-room Blyth explored the sea chests and cupboards that smelt of camphor and sandalwood, pearls and spices. But only the smell remained. Within a blockwood cabinet he came upon a jotter that struck like a shaft of lightning into the dark air of mystery that surrounded old Keeling's affairs.

'Dear, Dear Daddy. — for all you have done and are doing I am deeply grateful. Some day we shall meet, if the sea is kind. But just for once, Daddy mine! let your mind peep at my tragedy. Separated from you since I was a child, because of a dead mother's inability to make you happy, I grow up alone and friendless, with just one thought of seeing you again. May it be soon, and may the love of your daughter enter the solitude of your life and dissipate it for ever. Peggy Keeling.'

'And that's that!' Blyth sighed as he scanned the letter for a date. There was none. The paper on which it was written revealed nothing of its age. The envelope had been destroyed. It might be a year old or twenty, he told himself. It was a school girl's letter. but, alas the school ' girl might have become middle-aged ! There was only the Sydney address to guide him.

He wrote a letter explaining everything. This letter he would post by the incoming mission steamer All Saints, which would deliver it to a mail steamer at Levuka. The news of Jim Keeling's death had already gone abroad; the natives had passed it on to other islands, where the schooners and copra men would hear of the rich pearl banks and lagoons awaiting a claimant or heir.

Opening a ledger that contained a reference to fifty bags, of shell shipped to Sydney only three months before. Blyth came upon an entry in one of the broad margins:—

'Red Planet. Pearl: Nothing like it since the Southern Cross stone, 1889. Value undecided, but not less than eight thousand pounds. Colour: Blood opal at base; pear-shaped, orient and lustre matchless.'

Below the above entry was another, written five days later: —

'Worried to death over Red Planet stone. All my boys gone sulky, especially Noah, the Maluka diver. Perhaps mutiny. No help and there's sixteen of 'em. Must put Planet in place of security for Peggy's sake. Take notice, please. Number one Lagoon: From the sea entrance... Don't go. Hell's a pleasant place to what, you'll get... if you step over.'

A cigarette match had evidently burned parts of the entry in the ledger. In vain Blyth searched for a continuation of the directions.

Keeling had evidently been the worse for liquor at the lime of making the entry. After stopping the match flame from destroying the whole page, the old man had evidently fallen asleep and forgotten to complete his instructions.

Blyth cursed the gin that had fuddled poor Keeling's brain: he also cursed the habit that compels tipsy men to light matches over ledger entries. Here was a world prize in the shape of an incomparable sea gem completely lost as if it had been melted in the dead man's brain.

And what manner of girl was Peggy Keeling? he asked himself. A boarding-house drudge at Annandale, no less, a girl to whom a hundred pounds would mean unlimited picture shows, ice-creams, furbelows, bangles. Now she would get nothing, because a smelly match had dropped on the one square inch of paper that counted for heaven, or maybe serfdom, in Peggy Keeling's future.

IT was hot, even in the shade of the pendants palms; hotter aboard the luggers, where the sun smote the lagoons like a blazing sword. The heat made Blyth dizzy, until he loathed the outline of the blood-red disc that seemed never to set— just hung above his head to sear and blind.

The bubbling voices of the divers across the reefs died down. The chatter of the shell-openers' knives ceased as the boys sprawled fore and aft under the luggers' sun awning.

Diving was not permitted within the spacious preserves of Number One lagoon. Chicken oysters must be allowed to mature. With the tide at low ebb Blyth walked along the coral ridge that overlooked Number One. The bed of the depression was covered with curious marine grasses and sponge beds. Along the eastern bank stretched an endless vision of shells, immature, golden-edge spat that was the life blood of the trade.

The mystery of Number One lagoon gripped him. It was here Keeling had hidden the Red Planet gem; but where and how? His despairing glance traversed the endless rows of shell and heavy growth of marine flora that made the work of exploration an impossibility. The unlucky match had destroyed the directions in the ledger. His eye moved from the rows of shell spat to a big pink bivalve with black lips that lay alone on the edge of the bank.

Stooping near, Blyth dragged the bivalve from its resting-place, and with his knife opened it.

A cry broke from him as he glanced within. Lying beneath the clammy mass within was a human finger, encrusted with pearl!

Blyth sat on the hard coral reef and stared in amaze at his discovery. The finger had been in the shell for a year or more, before the Red Planet gem had been discovered. And it had been put there. Why? He had known experts manipulate foreign substances within the shells of growing oysters for specific purposes; but the placing of a human finger inside a bivalve smacked of savagery or worse.

A sudden shout from the luggers called his attention to the mission steamer All Saints making for the channel outside. The captain's signals were distinct and urgent. Blyth stepped towards the whaleboat lying under a canvas spread on the beach, and found five native boys preparing to go with him. His binoculars showed a tall white man leaning over the rail of the All Saints. Beside him was a young girl, staring at the reefs through a telescope.

The whaleboat gripped the mission steamer's gang way in a smother of reef-brine and grey-back combers. The short, fat, skipper on the bridge hailed him cheerily and then jerked his head in the direction of the two passengers.

'Miss Peggy Keeling and luggage, sir. The gent is Mr. Shannon, from Thursday Island. Says he's a friend of the late Jim Keeling.'

Peggy Keeling looked down at Blyth in the, whale boat, her childlike eyes exploring him with genuine interest. She was wearing a black arm-badge. So someone had broken the news at Thursday Island.

'All right, Miss Keeling,' Blyth called out, encouragingly. for he saw that she had left Sydney in ignorance of her father's death. 'There's a good house here, and in a day or two I'll get a few Malalonga women to look after you.'

Then his glance went over Shannon, standing near the rail. The eyes of the two men seemed to meet like thrusting blades. Shannon spoke. 'Sorry about my old partner, Jim Keeling. Blyth. I've come to look into his affairs. The deed of partnership between us is still in force. As a matter of fact, he added with brutal emphasis, 'I shall stay in possession until my claims are satisfied.'

Shannon was a giant of fifty. He smell of the sea and the beef cask. His face was the colour of an old saddle, with a pair of steely white eyes that squinted in the tropic sun-glare but mostly lip squinted at Blyth, his young face and slender, boyish figure.

'You've put yourself in charge of the Island,' he went on after a pause. 'Maybe you've been havin' a good time of your own.' He drew a nickel watch from his pocket and grinned sourly. 'It's midday, eighteenth of June, Mr Blyth. As far as you're concerned the good time stops here. I'm coming down.'

He entered the whaleboat with Peggy, while Blyth steadied his leaping nerves. Shannon's manner had touched him to the. quick, but a bucking, heaving whaleboat was no place to discuss Peggy Keeling's family affairs.

Boxes, bags, and dunnage were dumped into the stern while Blyth clung to the steamer's gangway with a boathook. Peggy sat. huddled almost at his' feet in the thwarts. Her soft dark eyes were grave and overcast at the prospect ahead. Shannon sat cross legged on the pile of luggage and bayed an order lo the crew of the whaleboat.

'Get to it! And by the holy, if you ship a pint of water I'll skin your tattooed noses! Pull away!'

They pulled.

Peggy Keeling glanced up slowly at his lank, heavy figure on the luggage, a tiny frown crinkling her brow.

'I like a man to grip things, Mr. Shannon, and to hold his place. But these natives were my father's servants. They're now going to he mine,' she stated sweetly. 'So we'll lake a pull, as the sailormen say, on the civility line.'

Shannon stared at her from the roots of his pale eyes; the veins of his neck bulged. Then he caught the tail of Blyth's eye as the young Australian's cheek came round with the sweep of his oar.

Shannon choked himself to silence. In Levuka once had seen a boy like Owen in a mix-up with three kanakas and a German overseer. The experience had impressed him considerably after the overseer and his black henchmen had received attention by the military surgeon at the local hospital.

'I'm only bundling these natives in my own style. Miss Keeling,' he grumbled, and fell into a sullen silence.

NEARING the lagoon entrance Peggy looked up at Blyth.

'Mr. Shannon met me at Thursday Island,' she explained. 'He came aboard the steamer that brought me from Sydney and explained that he was an old friend of my father. He said it would ne to my advantage if he accompanied me here, as the natives were untrustworthy.'

Shannon favoured her with a deadly stare as the whaleboat entered the lagoon. While Blyth and two of the boys hauled Peggy's belongings ashore Shannon sat on a coral hummock and lit a cigar. The whaleboat was drawn high and dry and covered with a canvas sail. Two of the boys remained in his vicinity like children courting favour with a new master. Shannon flung a handful of silver on the beach.

'That's for you, hoys,' he intimated with heavy good-humour. 'Enough to buy each of your girls a dress piece. Forget what I said in the boat.'

The boys picked up the coins with avidity, grinning sheepishly as they watched him. Shannon became aware that the elder of the two boys had a forefinger missing from his right hand. His pale eyes twinkled curiously.

'How'd you lose your finger?' be questioned. 'Dynamiting fish?'

The boy shrank from the question like one dodging a blow.

'Me bin no tell,' he quavered. 'Bring um bad spirit belonga Mistah Keelin'.'

He sidled away towards the trade-house like a sheep-dog that had suddenly lost favour. Napa, his companion, laughed derisively.

'Noah, him fool, Mistah Shannon. Long time ago he catch ole Keelin' plant pearl in big pink oyster alonga bank over there. So he creep one night an' stick his linger into pink oyster shell to feel for pearl.'

Shannon's eyes widened.

'What happened?' he asked hoarsely. Napa grinned apishly.

'Mistah Keelin' crawl up behind Noah an 'ask him why he put his finger in pink shell. Noah look like dam fool; he no say anythin'. Then baas Keelin' get so mad he fetch um machete an' lopped off Noah's finger. Me stickem finger in pink shell to teach lesson to other boys.'

Shannon nodded thoughtfully. 'Bit rough on Noah,' he commented after awhile, 'Queer place, though,' he added broodingly, 'to think of hiding a pearl.'

ONCE inside the trade-house Owen Blyth turned to Peggy, a strained look in his boyish face.

'I know of no deed of partnership between Shannon and your father,' he staled quickly. 'He's trying a big bluff in the hope of something happening.'

Peggy Keeling was twenty, and the voyage from Sydney had tempered the roses in her checks to a golden tan; but behind this wind-blazed loveliness of throat and brow lay a well-trained disposition. At a glance she had read Owen and all that he stood for on this tropic belt of sea-scoured atolls. For her life had not been without its privations. Early enough she had come to a sense of her position in the daily scramble for existence.

The meaning of her father's lonely life in the South Pacific was clear enough. He had sent her money from time to time; but there had always been the complaint on Jim Keeling's part that pearls were hard to find, and when found exceedingly difficult to market or hide.

Peggy sat in a rattan chair and look in the objects of interest scattered about the room, the bundles of sharks' teeth. native spears, shell specimens, and the big flute with the silver keys that hung over the mantel. She smiled sadly at the thought of her father's musical evenings on this lonely edge of the world. Then her thoughts came back to Shannon and the eager-faced boy standing with his back to the trade-house window.

'Dad wrote me a letter a few weeks ago,' she began earnestly. 'By the look of it he was sick and worried, I could only make sense here and there, as I read it. Mostly it was about a pearl he had christened the Red Planet.'

Owen's face cleared instantly. 'There is a reference to it in the ledger, with the details of its exact whereabouts burnt out. Perhaps the letter gives the locality?' he hazarded.

Peggy's mouth tightened suddenly.

'My last recollection of Dad's letter was after we left Thursday Island in the All Saints. I'd been studying it in my cabin, trying to make out what Dad really meant. There was a call on deck by the stewardess for me to see some flying-fishes. I must have left the letter on the cabin table. Anyway, I never saw it again. Blown away, probably; a half-gale was blowing at the time.'

Owen dropped into a chair, mopping his face with a kerchief and trying to mask the feeling of despair that now gripped his heart.

OUTSIDE, in the shelter of the pandanus palms, Shannon waited for Peggy and Owen to discuss the situation. He wanted to know what they were going to do. The crews of the luggers over the reef would stand by Blyth and Peggy if he declared himself master of the island. Bloodshed would certainly follow any immediate attempt on his part to control the pearling banks.

Very gingerly, and with eyes slanting in the direction of the trade-house window, he drew a letter from his pocket, the one that had blown from the table of Peggy's cabin when the stewardess called her on deck. The stewardess was an old friend of Shannon's.

He had read the letter a score of times, the drunken, illegible scrawl that revealed plainer than words the condition into which Jim Keeling had fallen in the last year. It was full of a gin maniac's maunderings, of the griefs and tribulations incidental to one at grips with his destiny on a lonely atoll in mid-Pacific. There was a plaintive reference to the thieving habits of his native 'skin' divers. Three of these had absconded with gems, taking with them a valuable seven-ton lugger, impossible to replace in those seas.

Keeling's whole energies were centred on the Red Planet gem. He must keep if for Peggy. Such a priceless stone would stave off poverty in the days to come. Of all the pearls God had made, this one reflected his handiwork. It was the dream of sea-fairies, and had come from a sea-fairies' garden. Here the letter was blotted and smeared with grease from a candle. It was the last page that forced Shannon's attention even while he cursed the dead man's slovenliness and penmanship. It ran:—

'Number One lagoon. The gutter runs from the sea entrance like a drain. At low tide it holds about two feet of water. Walk along thirteen paces from entrance. You will come to heavy bunch of sea-grass... wrapped in piece of rubber diving jacket... fastened to lead sinker stop here, or hell will be a picnic to your sufferings. Had to do it on account of those black dogs of mine.'

Shannon replaced the letter in his pocket. In spite of its incoherencies and candle-grease stains, it conveyed the one item of information he had waited months to obtain.

Of course, Peggy had read the letter, he told himself, and would recollect the instructions relating to the thirteen paces from the sea entrance to the lagoon. But there was just a chance that a girl like Peggy might not. If she did it, it was certain that Blyth would get the Red Planet for her. Shannon clenched his teeth savagely as he stared across the lagoon. In a few hours the tide would be out and it would be quite dark. A shadow of uneasiness crossed him as he recalled Keeling's ominous reference to the thirteen paces: 'Stay here, or hell will be a picnic to your sufferings.'

What was in Keeling's mind, he asked himself, when he scrawled those lines? Behind it all lay some infernal trick, Shannon told himself, or was it that Keeling's mind had become affected towards the end?

He was suddenly conscious of Noah's white teeth leering at him from the pandanus shade. The boy was making signs in his direction. Shannon moved stealthily towards him and waited for him to speak. Something warned him that the boy with the missing finger was going to solve a problem. Noah was crouching low in the long grass that skirted the beach.

'Lissen, papalagi,' he said slowly. 'You no go into that big feller lagoon aftah pearl.'

'Why not?' Shannon growled without raising his head.

Noah leaned nearer until his sharks' teeth necklace touched the while man's hand.

'One big lui-trap planted in big feller lagoon there. All set. You no see lui-trap in wet mush an' coral until him catch hold of you. Bing. Bang! Ugh!''

Shannon lay very still in the pandanus shade, while a drop of moisture fell from his brow. A lui-trap was a steel-fanged contrivance for gripping and killing octopi and giant stingrays. Of all the devilish contrivances for destroying unwelcome visitors within a lagoon, the lui-trap was a living nightmare. It was generally embedded in the slime and sea-grass where the man-killing eels and stingrays interfered with divers. Caught in its toils, a man's body would crack like a stick, or be torn to pulp for the scavenger sharks. Shannon drew breath sharply.

The face of the native boy betrayed a ghastly grin. He spoke almost in Shannon's ear.

'Long time ago baas Keelin' hide big pearl in big heap of grass out in lagoon. I watch him put lui-trap beside um pearl,' he grinned. 'Baas Keelin' know all Malalonga boys scared like um hell of lui-trap. One day twenty-foot stingray kill um two divers in lagoon long way off. So Keelin pick up lui-trap from here and put it in lagoon long way off.'

'And blamed well left it there,' Shannon chuckled.

Noah shook his head. 'No; Keelin' bring it back after trap smash up stingray. He put it fifteen steps from the entrance, a good way from the big grass lump.'

'Fifteen steps?' Shannon flung out. 'Are you sure, kid?' The while man sat up as though a knife had touched him.

Noah nodded with conviction.

'I watch baas Keelin' measure twelve to make sure. I hear him count, alla same as me. No mistake, papalagi. Tui-trap just one stride this side grass bunch now. So you get it from this side,' he added earnestly.

Shannon wiped his hot face. How like the action of a gin-demented old fish-trapper, he mused with inward glee, to change the position of the lui-trap long after he had written his instructions to his daughter! And if Peggy or Blyth were unlucky enough to search the gutter without knowing.... Whew! Shannon thrust a few more coins into Noah's hand, while his brow clouded with a sudden suspicion.

'Tell me, kid,' he said slowly, 'why didn't you go after the big Planet pearl when you had its bearings so pat?'

Noah held up his three-fingered hand meaningly.

'Too much bad luck, papalagi. Pearl no good to me, anyway. I go to prison next time they catch um me.'

Shannon drew a deep breath.

'All right, Noah. Keep your longue still to that fellow Blyth. But you can tell him, when you're passing the house, that I'll sleep on one of the luggers tonight. Say I'll see them in the morning, after Miss Keeling is settled down. Go now.'

The Maluka boy loped in the direction of the trade-house, leaving Shannon staring across Number One lagoon.

Noah delivered his message to Peggy. She was alone, Blyth having departed to a roomy boat shed at the other side of Number One lagoon. Owen had assured her that he would be quite comfortable living there with one of the boys to cook his food. In the meantime he had sent for two women of the Talunga tribe, at Nukana Island seventy miles to the south-west. They would come gladly into Peggy's service for the gift of a few yards of turkey red twill.

A FAINT breeze fanned Peggy's cheek as she peered from the open trade-house across the dark lagoon. She regretted the loss of her father's letter that contained exact instructions of the Red Planet's whereabouts.

For many reasons she had refrained from confiding too closely in Owen. In the first place she feared that the letter had been written under the spell of liquor. Her sensitive nature shrank from the disappointment that would come to Owen if the directions, which she remembered, proved to be only her father's bibulous ravings. The Red Planet itself might be a fiction of his distraught mind. She would seek the pearl herself, and if she were successful Owen would be told the truth. As for Shannon, her woman's instinct warned her that he was no more than an island, bully, looking for dead men's property. The South Seas was the home of such characters.

Thirteen paces from the sea entrance, if she followed the narrow gutter at low tide it was quite simple. She took a thick-soled pair of shoes from a bag and drew them on quickly. She walked slowly along the lagoon beach towards the narrow channel where her father had measured the distance along the gutter. The tide had ebbed long ago, but the moon had set, leaving only the bare outline of the jagged reefs and beach to guide her.

In the darkness the floor of the lagoon shone like a wet garment, with great feathery flounces of weed and moss strewing the slippery surface. But the darkness yielded to her young eyes. The gleaming floor of the shell preserve became visible, with its pitted banks of sea grass and sponge, its myriads of tiny crabs moving with the sound of rustling leaves at her approach. A candle burned in the distant boatshed where Owen was fixing himself for the night.

Peggy moved gingerly across the tangles of sea kale. Within a few feet of the sea entrance to the lagoon she stopped dead and took her bearings. With her back to the low coral wall of the channel, she paced out to the gutter that ran directly from the wall across the lagoon.

'One, two, three.'

The sea water in the gutter covered her ankles, and then in a flash she recalled the warning words in her father's letter: 'Walk thirteen paces from the entrance. You will come to a heavy bunch of sea grass... Stop here, or hell will be a picnic to your sufferings.'

Her heart beat furiously, but she comforted herself with the thought that there was no need to go beyond the thirteenth step. Her father would not deceive her.

'Right, nine, ten.'

Again Peggy halted, her feet faltering slightly, her eyes grown dim in the baffling light. Yet she could make out the big bunch of sea grass mentioned in

the letter. It was almost within reach of her hand. The Red Planet gem inside fastened to a lead sinker. Twenty yards away in the darkness something was moving towards her, a lanky, stooping shape with out-stretched hands. Her lips stifled a cry.

It was Shannon. His moving hands and loose garments gave him the appearance of a huge bird of prey making towards some dainty morsel. His old eyes failed to penetrate the darkness where Peggy had retreated. She lay quite still, among the wet kale, a sick feeling in her heart that this human vulture was clawing his way to the Red Planet gem.

Arriving at the coral wall, Shannon began to stride out along the gutter, counting as he strode. His voice croaked at each step, his lanky frame swaying in his pent-up excitement.

'Seven, eight, nine.'

He stopped with the precision of a man on parade, and then bent forward again.

'Ten, eleven, twelve.'

Peggy's heart had ceased to beat. The warmth of her young breast seemed to pass into the chill of death. Something had happened, something that drew the fainting blood from her heart to her lips.

Shannon had remained erect, an instant after the twelfth count. His foot had gone forward, and the word 'thirteen' had left him. If was then he seemed to slip forward in the gutter, his hands grasping at the big hump of grass. A shout snapped on his lips, short-clipped, a cry of despair out in half by the lightning grip of the unexpected. He disappeared. But in a little while she made out his angular figure rocking blindly to and fro across the bank. His hoarse voice reached her like the sob of an animal caught by fangs of steel.

In that moment the man's duplicity vanished from Peggy's mind. The courage of her race sang like the sea within her as she waded to her hips along the treacherous bank.

The tide was now rushing through the channel with the speed of wild horses. A scent of dawn was nipping the air, cold, grey, and desolate. Foot by foot, she thrashed through the in-driving waves until the livid, drawn features of Shannon were visible. He was lying backward across the shell bank, his ankles held by sabre-toothed flange of iron that pinned him to the bank like a bee caught between pincers. In the lift of an eye he saw Peggy battling nearer and nearer through the in-flowing tide. Something in her desperate courage touched him in his agony.

'I'm done for,' he choked, 'Get away as fast as you can. The sharks are here already.'

Peggy had discarded her heavy boots and was half swimming in the boiling inrush of brine.

'You're held by one of those octopus irons.' she gasped. 'I can't lift it and there's no help— in time.'

'Go back,' Shannon repeated. 'Look what's coming!'

The tide was beating over him in leaps and avalanches of foam. Again he struggled into an upright position, an automatic pistol slanting towards a phosphorescent wedge of light skulking on the edge of the deep water. He fired once, twice, until the grey-backed monster fled back to the entrance.

Peggy froze as she turned to grip the sea-grass above Shannon's head. The tide was fast covering the bank: the shark shoals were skirmishing close in to the trapped man on the bank. The iron tui-trap had often provided them with a meal. The tide slapped Peggy's face and limbs as she clung tenaciously to the sea-grass beside Shannon. She felt herself slipping gradually into the gutter below.

BLYTH had not slept. His nerves were on the jump, and the sound of pistol fire across the lagoon swept him to the door of the boatshed. Heavy seas were breaking through the channel. The grey dawn showed him the two blurred figures on the bank. His heart choked at what he saw. There was no mistaking the boylike figure of Peggy Keeling up-crouched among the sponge beds and sea-grass, spindrift, and foam breaking over her still figure. And there was Shannon—

Blythe's flying start took him across the beach to the dinghy drawn up in the sand. Mercifully the oars were in place. He knew that the pistol fire would rouse the boys on the luggers, but he did not wait. It was one of many races he had rowed in his life, and the dinghy seemed to skate across the millrace of water.

Peggy was clutching the sea-grass with failing strength, the water drawing her slowly from her hold. Blyth caught her in a fierce grip as he wore the tiny craft stern on to the bank. With some difficulty he drew her slight figure into the thwarts, and then turned to Shannon. The big man was lying hen I in the gutter, submerged to his shoulders. His voice was faint and scarce audible as he met Owen's glance.

'Blamed trap's got me by the feet, kid. I guess the tide and the sharks will get me before you unlock it.'

At that moment a whaleboat appeared, cutting across the lagoon in their direction. Six native boys swarmed along the bank and, following Napa's directions, forced back the great, spring jaws of the trap from Shannon's

ankles. Once in the boat the big man collapsed, his head resting on Blyth's knee. Nearing the beach he looked up at Napa with half seeing eves.

'That black runt Noah put me wrong. Told me a lie. I was nipped at the devils number.'

Peggy sat up when the boat kicked the beach, her hand resting in Blyth's. Shannon had fallen back in a deadly faint. She looked at him almost pityingly.

'Take him to Daddy's room,' she ordered quietly. 'I'm sorry my father meddled with traps. It isn't fair, even to thieves,' she added with a touch of bitterness.

SHANNON struggled for his life during the long days that followed the incident at Number One lagoon. His ankles had been badly torn, and the healing process was slow and uncertain. Peggy and Owen look it in turns to attend him. When the mission steamer All Saints called three months later. Shannon felt that he was sufficiently recovered to return to his home at Thursday Island.

Peggy and Owen had turned to the task of making ends meet and repairing the faults of the dead Jim Keeling. Wisely they decided to forget the past, together with the crazy hide-and-seek performances attached to the lost Red Planet.

'I'll be saying good-bye,' Shannon announced as he limped from the trade-house to the mission steamer's longboat waiting on the beach. 'I've cursed every hole and corner of this place. If I could lay hands on Noah, by thunder, I'd skin him with his own shell-opener.'

Peggy and Owen walked beside him to the boat, assisting his shaking limbs over the rough coral peaks. With his trembling hand on the boat's gunwale he turned his drawn face to Peggy. A dry, humorous grin touched his fevered lips.

'I'm saying good-bye to a white man and woman,' he said hoarsely. 'You've both played the game. As for me'— he paused to fumble in the pocket, of his coat— 'the only thing I played was your father's old flute, Peggy.'

'It was the only instrument he ever played.' Peggy responded with a sad smile. 'I thought of giving if to Noah. Every time he passes the house he begs me to lend it him. Some of the natives are quite musical.'

The grin on Shannon's face became fixed as he pressed Peggy's hand. A cry escaped her as she opened her palm.

A flaming pearl the size of a small pear glistened in its magic beauty and orient under her startled eyes.

'Mr. Red Planet,' Shannon stated hoarsely. 'Derned thing fell out of the flute, one night I was trying to play 'Home, sweet Home.' I must, say old Jim Keeling went funny in the head before he died. Good-bye, Peggy, and you. Mr.

Blyth. I'll send the padre along from Thursday Island: maybe you'll find him useful. Their ain't been a wedding in these parts for years.'

The boat pushed off, but not before he had added a parting shot.

'I'd give the flute to Noah, Peggy, with a little dynamite wad fixed inside. Cheerio!'

Peggy and Owen returned to the trade-house wondering at the curious ways of men and fortune. But both agreed that the coming of the padre would be a happy event in their lives.

20: The Fourth Circle

Argosy All-Story Weekly, 13 June 1925

A BABEL of voices drifted from the fleet of pearling luggers, straddling across the six-fathom channel of the Ki Wi bank. There was no wind; the sea shone like grease-paint where the helmeted divers bobbed up and down like goblins in a pantomime.

Norry Denham climbed from the cabin of his nine-ton lugger, *Sea Witch*, a small parcel of pearls in his hand. A slim, sea-browned girl of nineteen was standing at the rail, watching the black-billed hawks swooping over the tide-washed banks. She turned quickly at sight of the gems Norry held.

There were eighteen pearls in all, milk white stones, glistening with the matchless orient of the sea. They represented months of untiring labor along the coral-strewn floor of the channel, where death ran in the twisting currents and in the ghostly movements of giant stingrays and sharks.

"I'll ask six thousand dollars for them, Elean! They're worth ten thousand. But I'd like old Ty Foo to feel he's getting a bargain. His schooner's at Nadir Point. He's buying all the pinkies of the season!"

Elean had come from Sydney to spend a month with Norry on board the pretty, snow-white lugger. They had been married a year, but owing to Norry's work on the banks she had found it necessary to live with her sister, a thousand miles away!

She drew him to the rail with a little sigh of pleasure. Translated into sterling, six thousand dollars seemed a colossal sum to her.

But Norry shook his head gloomily. After he had paid his divers and shell-openers, to say nothing of the storekeeper's account at Thursday Island, the six thousand dollars would begin to look like the price of a new hat and Elean's ticket home.

"What's the matter, grumps?" Elean laughed, running her fingers over the creases in his brow. "It's not so bad for a season's work! And it's better than hunting a job at a glue factory. And believe me, Norry, it nearly came to that last time you got left in the big town. And why not get a better price from this Mr. Chu Chin Chow or whatever his name is. They're lovely pearls, dear!" she added, holding them carefully to the light. "Ask another thousand. He'll feel just as good about it!"

Norry considered her words, but shook his head after a while. He wanted to please the old Chinese pearl buyer. Ty Foo was rich. Every roughneck schooner captain between Darwin and Sud Est was striving to please him. He

bought shell at good prices. His godowns at Surabaya were filled with the trade of a thousand islands.

With the pearls stowed in the pocket of his twill coat, Norry kissed his wife and dropped lightly into the dinghy under the lugger's stern. The old Chinaman would be expecting him. The season was nearly over, and his own lugger hands had gone ashore earlier in the morning. Everybody wanted money, and there were Elean's bills in Sydney still unpaid!

A MILE across the glittering straits of Torres lay Nadir Point. The morning was insufferably hot. The sun flared down from a sky of angry yellow. Not a breath moved over the oily, heat-flattened straits. Past the Pandora lightship Norry swung the dinghy round where the tide bore him without effort under the lowered gangway of the Plum Moon.

A number of lugger captains had called on the Chinese pearl buyer earlier in the day, but it was soon evident to Norry that little or no business had been done. White shellers were notoriously greedy and held off selling in the hope of scaring the pleasant-voiced Ty Foo.

He received Norry with gestures of welcome in his silk- upholstered buying-room below. A man of full girth was Ty Foo in his jacket of blue shantung, his shining girdle of tooled leather and jade inlay. A merchant prince, Norry told himself, with his nails burnished to the color of live opal.

"Ah, my dear Norry, you have been working all the tides!" he greeted in good English. "Sit down please and tell me about yourself. I like to hear that men are working hard. The sea is always kind to them. She repays in pearls and gold, in good health as she has repaid me!"

Norry sat in a high-backed chair, fascinated to the point of silence by the air of wealth and opulence that seemed to exude from the Chinaman's perfumed vestments. A Tonquinese boy appeared with two glasses and a gold-topped bottle of champagne. Ty Foo beamed on the young lugger captain.

"There is much heat in the sky, my dear Norry! Drink, and then talk. You will find me full of good will!"

Norry sipped his wine and coughed a trifle nervously. "I've got a handful of pinkies to show you, Mr. Foo. I'm no salesman," he stated deprecatingly. "And there's no need to call your attention to a single stone. Eighteen in all. Got 'em out of six- inch shells mostly, that drift of black-lip I worked off Monday Reef!"

The Chinaman raised the pearls one by one from the table, his big, bland face expressing the keen interest of the expert.

"They are very fine," he said at last. "I am glad some one on the banks is finding his luck! How much, my dear Norry?"

Denham sat tight in his chair. "Six thousand dollars, Mr. Foo! Not a penny less!" In spite of the fact that he was asking considerably less than their market value, his voice trembled slightly.

"Six thousand dollars!" The Chinaman rolled the pearls skillfully in the palm of his fat hand, while a silence sharp as the reef-points, spaced his next words.

"Very well; I will make it six!" At a glance he knew their value. But it was no part of his creed to force up prices. He was aware that men courted his good will, for when bad seasons came he remembered their unselfish dealings.

"Six thousand dollars!"

"Check to bearer," Norry prompted, sipping the cool wine.

Ty Foo nodded briskly as he reached for his checkbook on the desk beside him. Very slowly and with an obvious effort he drew up the amount. Attaching his sprawling signature, he blotted it carefully and then passed the check to the young pearling master.

Norry glanced at the check before placing it in his pocket. He noted the ultra-violet hue of the ink used by the old pearl buyer.

"I'll give you a receipt now, Mr. Foo!" he said quickly as he drew out his fountain pen and a stamp.

Just here he discovered that the pen was dry. In the twist of a thumb he had helped himself to some ink from the stand on the table. In a few moments he had passed the receipt to the smiling Chinaman.

Ty Foo followed him upstairs to the gangway, shook his hand cordially, begging Norry to be sure to let him have all his business in future.

NORRY pulled slowly toward Thursday Island, his mind in a ferment, his nerves on the leap. He was thinking of Elean and the coming winter when the lugger would have to lie up for months. To-morrow he would divide the profits of the season with his crew. They were good fellows and comrades, and in need of every shilling. He would see that they got their just dues.

Elean was different. She had been accustomed to a refined home before her marriage, servants and a runabout car, theaters, and hosts of friends. She had surrendered all these to share his somewhat doubtful future. He had believed there were unlimited earnings in the pearling industry, only to discover a succession of unlimited risks.

Yet this wisp of girlhood had shown only smiles and letters of encouragement when his overdue remittances reached her in Sydney. He writhed at the thought of the paltry economies daily inflicted on her. She had traveled to him as a steerage passenger in an old coastal steamer to save a few pounds. In all probability she would return steerage, unless—

He pulled the dinghy under the pier, at Victoria Parade, It was lunch hour and the pier itself was almost deserted except for a solitary customs official and a couple of trepang fishers, throwing dice in the shade.

He sat on the steps of the pier, out of sight of the crowded Parade, and scanned the Chinaman's check hastily. He saw that Ty Foo had left the usual half-inch space between the written words six thousand dollars.

Denham took out his fountain pen and wrote the letters "ty" after six. The task of adding a naught to the figures in the check was simple enough. A scrap of blotting paper he carried in his pocket put the right shade on the added letters and figure.

The Bank of South China was at the far end of the Parade. The cashier was an Englishman named Gibbs. Norry was well known to Gibbs. The young pearling master had been in the habit of bringing Ty Foo's checks to the grille and getting them cashed. There had never been any trouble, and Gibbs had acquired the habit of expecting Denham and the Chinaman's check, every month.

Between the pier and the bank Norry had leisure to dwell on Ty Foo as a possible enemy. No man in the Straits had ever caught the Chinaman without his smile. Smiling was his strong card.

But Norry Denham had looked beyond Ty Foo's display of gold- filled teeth, had probed the eternal twinkle in the almond eyes. And what he had seen filled him with doubts and forebodings.

Norry set aside his qualms as he neared the bank. After all, Ty Foo was just a lucky Chinaman, nothing more. His luck had never failed him, and he would hardly feel the loss of the money that was destined to open the gates of a new heaven and earth for Elean!

A few customers moved in and out the bank, lugger and schooner captains drawing funds for stores and gear. At this time of the year large sums were needed daily to meet the demands of the Japanese shell companies and copra buyers.

Gibbs favored Norry with a slight nod as he entered the bank. Gibbs was forty and afflicted with insomnia. The heat and mosquitoes had soured his genial temperament, but not his capacity for scrutinizing a signature.

"I like the heat," Norry affirmed, leaning against the counter. "It's the wind upsets me!"

A tiny frown crossed the cashier's brow. He straightened his lean shoulders like one about to bat a ball, the check flattened out before him on the counter.

"Sixty thousand dollars!" he gasped. "Jerusalem! You've been selling some pearls to Mr. Foo, if I may say it!"

"There's no harm in saying it," Norry told him steadily. "There might be, though," he added as an afterthought, "if I'd been selling him flat-irons or water lilies, Mr. Gibbs! But just now I happen to be in the pearl business, and I assume that Ty Foo is in a position to buy up to a million pounds' worth when the fit takes him."

There was a snap in Norry's voice, a subtle challenge that brought the cashier round with a wan smirk on his nerve-ridden face.

"It's a large amount, Mr. Denham!" he stated sweetly. "To be quite frank, it's more than I have in bills or cash at the moment!"

"How long will it take you to get the cash?" Norry inquired without haste. "I'm mailing a deposit on a seventy-ton schooner I've bought at Surabaya!"

"I'll get it in an hour, Mr. Denham! Sorry to make you wait. Perhaps—"

"I'll call in an hour," Norry interrupted from the entrance. "Dollars or sterling; I'm not particular."

Norry strolled back to the pier, out of sight of the cashier's pursuing glances. He wiped his hot face and stared across the bay in the direction of Nadir Point. Ty Foo's schooner was a mile away, on the heels of the outstraddling lugger fleets.

He felt certain that Gibbs would not attempt to communicate with the Chinese pearl buyer. The check had been passed for payment. In an hour the money would be ready for collection. If there had existed a shadow of suspicion in the cashier's mind concerning the check, he would have referred it at once to the Chinaman!

Norry breathed like a boxer emerging from the first round in a stiff encounter. The next round would be easier, he told himself, unless Gibbs got drunk or the bank's messenger fell down with the money.

Phew! How hot it was!

Norry turned again to the lugger fleets across the bay. The tide had swung the Plum Moon stern on to the shore. To his horror he observed a boat pull away from the gangway. Seated at the tiller was the familiar outline of the Chinese pearl buyer.

Norry realized instantly that Ty Foo was coming ashore. It was almost certain that he would go into the bank, and at the very moment Gibbs was busy arranging to pay out the sixty thousand dollars!

Denham sat like a frozen image as the boat with the Chinaman on board reached the steps at the end of the pier.

AN almost childish desire to run away took hold of Norry as Ty Foo clambered from the boat and came swiftly along the pier. For one dizzy instant

the fear of the stone jail at Shark Island beat through Denham's young mind, as the eyes of the bright-faced Chinaman settled on him.

"Ah, my dear Norry!" he called out, his whale-like girth heaving after his climb up the steps. "I am going to a friend's house to eat. I had almost forgotten the appointment. Then I have some business at the bank! There is always a rush for money at this time of the year, eh?"

Norry's face was wet with the terror that drains men white. He forced himself into a smiling attitude, scarce daring to speak. He felt that the sound of his voice would betray him. He glanced at his watch to cover his mental torment. Then he scanned the fierce yellow streaks breaking across the northern sky.

"More heat, Mr. Foo!" he predicted at random. "I'm expecting to meet my sail-maker, Evans," he blurted out, scarce knowing what to say. "Lost most of my canvas last month!"

Ty Foo gestured cheerily. His face was wreathed in smiles as he passed down the pier. At the Parade he turned almost sharply in the direction of the bank, as though urged by an overwhelming impulse to see Gibbs. At the last moment he seemed to change his mind, and passed on to the lower part of the town.

Norry writhed in his agony; sweat dripped from his face as he saw the Chinaman pass on. Fifty seconds later he observed the stooping figure of the old bank messenger emerge from a side street carrying a black bag. The bag was chained to his wrist.

"He's got the cash!" Norry choked as the messenger hobbled into the bank.

The young pearling master checked an impulse to hurry forward and collect the money from Gibbs. Ty Foo's movements were too uncertain. At any moment he might appear outside the bank. Yet Denham forced himself to remain inactive. One false movement on his part might turn Gibbs's attention to the police.

Up and down the pier he snailed, staring blindly at the water, the schooners across the straits, at his watch until his brain grew sick and the tension of waiting threatened to smash his nerve.

Gibbs was reading a week-old newspaper when he entered the bank. But Gibbs had witnessed the brief interview with Norry and Ty Foo. To him the talk had seemed full of smiles and pleasant understandings. Any feeling of suspicion that had lurked in his mind was dispelled.

"Hello, Mr. Denham!" he called out cheerfully. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Please endorse the check. I'll pay you the cash."

Denham wrote his name on the back of the Chinaman's check, whistled airily as he counted the pile of bills before him, separated them into hundreds

and fifties, snapped an elastic band over them, and with a brief nod to the cashier left the bank.

Once outside he walked briskly in the direction of the pier. His plans were made. He would post money bills now to each of his lugger hands at their bungalows on Barren Head, where they lived with their families while ashore. He would give them a surprise in the way of an extra five hundred dollars each. They had wives and families, and the struggle to feed women and babies during the off season was pretty fierce.

Then he would go aboard his own vessel and tell Elean to make ready for a pleasant little trip to Port Darwin. With a couple of Manila boys they could make the crossing in a few days. The Sea Witch was the best little craft on the banks.

He turned the corner of the busy Parade and collided with the fast moving Ty Foo. The big pearl buyer was in a violent hurry. He paused only to emit a passing word.

"Sorry, my dear boy! I'm all out in my appointments. The bank shuts at three, eh? I'll see you soon!" He was gone in the fetch of a breath.

Norry stood rooted, then swung round in time to see the whale- like figure of the Chinaman disappear through the wide open doors of the bank.

"And that's that!" Norry declared under his breath as he fanned his burning cheek with his cap. It would take Gibbs about twenty seconds to lift the veil for the hard breathing Ty Foo. After that the deluge!

The big Chinaman would walk straight to the police commissioner's office, the receipt for six thousand dollars in one hand and the check for sixty thousand in the other!

Norry's thoughts flashed back to the stories he had heard of the convict gangs at the island prison, and how they welcomed new arrivals in their midst.

The next moment a soft blast of wind whirled a cloud of dead leaves into his face. A sulphur-hued bank of clouds was sweeping over the island, piled up masses of wind and steam from the hot, monsoon lands in the north.

Before Denham had gained the pier steps a thunderous rush of air had struck the town, scattering lean-to sheds and houses across the deserted thoroughfares. A green wall of water rose from the levels of the heat-whitened skyline and broke in squadrons of foam along the beaches.

In that moment of screaming wind and shouting voices, he saw the bulging figure of Ty Foo scurrying toward a powerful steam tug lying in the shelter of the bay. It belonged to one of his compradores and was hurricane-proof fore and aft.

Into this the big Chinaman scrambled, followed by a dozen Malays and Tonquinese sailors. Lying flat on the rocking, gale- swept pier, Norry saw the

tug move out into the mountainous slopes of brine. Her engines slammed her through and over the avalanches of foam and spray. At a glance Norry saw that she was making for the Plum Moon off Nadir Point.

The wind burst over Denham like blasts of artillery. It rocked the pier to its foundations. Through the smothering whirl of sand and beach litter, he made out a few luggers laboring in the hell- broth of surf and shoal-water along the banks.

His dinghy had been pulped to match-wood against the iron wood piles below. Nothing could live in such a torment of wind and fury. Foot by foot he fought his way from the pier, the seas breaking in long, murderous swells at each step. The wind tore him from every coign of vantage, blew him like a bundle of rags across the Parade.

It was here the bamboo slatted roof of Chi Hi Lee's vegetable emporium planed down and buried Denham's struggling shape in a ton of debris and Chinese ceiling ornaments.

NORRY woke with the sound of wind still in his ears. He seemed to have lain unconscious for hours with the ribs of the bamboo roof swaying and breaking above him. His shoulder hurt from the effects of the crash. With difficulty he crawled from his cave of slats and hessian roof-lining and looked out.

The beaches were strewn with spars and the wreckage of strange praus and schooners, blown from their island harbors and buoys. From one of a dozen uprooted gaming-houses on the Parade came the melancholy howling of a dog.

Denham crawled to the beach, his limbs grown numb, his brain sick. He was one of a few that remained to grieve over the havoc of the hurricane. His yearling lugger had gone the way of others. Nothing could have saved Elean. Without a single seaman on board, the Sea Witch could only drown like a kitten in a well!

Norry's fingers dug into the soft sand. His face had become a twisted agony. How could he meet the future without Elean? For her he had been ready to sell his life, his liberty. He had been ready to betray everything he held dear, if only her happiness were assured!

He lay in the warm sand, a craving for death in his eyes. He heard the faint voices of men searching among the ruins of the town. A police patrol passed in the direction of the bank. He fell into a stupor and emerged with the chill of night in his blood.

He fought to his feet and glared around. One or two lights showed along the Parade. People were searching among the wreckage on the beach. The

police were guarding the three banks in the town. Looters were abroad. Two men had been shot while attempting to enter the strong room of the Bank of South China.

Eight luggers had gone down; others were missing. He had taken a chance leaving Elean alone on the Sea Witch. Fate in the guise of a hurricane had struck swiftly and savagely. That was all! His pockets bulged with money. But—his heart was in the grave.

He crouched in the warm darkness of a deserted store, the sparkle of life gone from his mind. At dawn the wind died and the sea quieted. Rain blew out of the west and the air felt sweeter.

He joined the small crowd of searchers along the beach. His distracted eye fell on Gibbs leaning over the wave-smashed pier rail. The cashier hailed him dejectedly.

"Man—you were lucky yesterday!" he greeted dourly. "The bank has suspended payment! Our directors in Canton have been fooling with the revolutionaries—squandering the bank's funds in military enterprises! God—it's awful!" he wailed.

"Yesterday's storm seems to have cut a track through most of our plantation properties in the north. We're smashed!"

He raised his nerveless face to Denham and grinned oddly. "When I told Ty Foo, yesterday, that you'd drawn the whole of the sixty thousand he looked a bit worried!"

"What did he say?" Norry inquired, dully.

"What could he say? It was his check and he owed you the money! And to be quite frank it was all the coin he had with us! Not so rich as people think! Without a word he bolted from the bank and ran right into the storm! Hell of a hurry to get aboard his schooner! I'd have stayed ashore. But you never know what's in the mind of a Chinaman!"

Denham walked away to avoid further parley. It occurred to him that the storm had temporarily paralyzed the Chinaman's wits. But where was he now?

The voice of Bill Lane, an old pearler, snapped on the morning air. His big hand fell with a slap on Norry's shoulder.

"Where you been, lad? Ain't you heard?" he demanded in rough but kindly tones. "That little old girl of yours was picked up safe an' plucky yesterday. She was at the wheel, holdin' the Witch up to the hell smother! Old Ty Foo's tug butted in when it looked as if David Jones was going to get her!"

"Ty Foo picked up Elean!" Norry's, voice cracked, but the warm blood leaped to his cheeks.

"I guess there was no one else afloat to do it!" Lane told him quietly. "That old Chinaman fought through weather that would have bent an ironclad. He's

got your little woman safe and trim, lad. Your lugger's on the beach, none the worse for it either!"

A pause followed. Then Lane, noticing the young pearling master's agitation, drew him towards the pier steps.

"I got a bit of a launch over here. I reckon you'd like to see your wife! You helped me wunct, an' by the holy I'll stand by you now, lad!"

Norry followed him blindly to the launch, clambered aboard with stiffly groping hands. He almost missed his footing and would have fallen but for Lane's friendly grip on his arm.

"Steady, lad! I know how it feels to have your little girl back from the dead! Easy does it! And don't forget the old Chinaman next time you're at prayers!"

One thought flared in Norry's brain as the launch worried through the storm swell toward Nadir Point. The Chinaman had him at his mercy. And after what had happened the mercy would be applied in a way known to Chinamen and timber wolves!

All the ghastly tales he had heard of Chinese devilry assailed him now. Yet—he must go to his crucifixion if need be. He could not leave Elean in the hands of these yellow men!

The launch swung under the bows of the Plum Moon. The big trading schooner appeared none the worse for her fight with the wind and sea. A cable's length away rode the big tug, her crew alert and watching Denham's approach.

Lane steadied the launch and called out to Norry as he clambered up the gangway, "I'll stand by, lad! There's no hurry. Plenty of calm here!"

A terrible silence struck Norry as he reached the deck of the Plum Moon. Not a hand showed on the poop or cabin stairs. He recalled in a flash the story of the providore's wife, decoyed aboard a Chinaman's yacht in the Samarang Roads.

The providore had robbed and cheated the Chinaman. True to his nature the Celestial had bided his time. Then, one day, under the guns of a patrolling destroyer, he had kidnaped the white man's wife. Months afterward they found her on the beach at Apia, her speech and memory gone!

Norry stood at the cabin stairhead, the stark silence gripping him by the hair. Where was Elean? Where was the Chinaman who had dragged her from the shoals of death?

FROM the ghostly silence of the cabin below came the shuffling of sandaled feet on the polished teak floor. The voice of Ty Foo came up through the open door.

"Your husband is safe, Mrs. Denham! He is now on his way to this schooner! Even now I hear his steps on the gangway. How can I repay him for his noble efforts on my behalf?"

"What has he done?" It was Elean's voice, pleading and tremulous after her recent experiences.

The Chinaman ceased his shufflings to and fro. His words touched Norry like whip strokes.

"He has done everything for me to avert misery and ruin. Yesterday, before the great storm fell upon us, he took my check for six thousand dollars to the bank. Some one must have whispered in his ear the story of the bank's difficulties, its coming suspension. He realized there was no time to warn me, for at any moment the wireless might order Gibbs to shut the bank's doors. So your husband did a noble thing on my behalf!"

"Tell me," Elean pleaded in a hushed voice.

"It was simple, Mrs. Denham. Your husband altered the check from six to sixty thousand dollars. Gibbs paid him the money an hour before the news of the banks ruin was being broadcast from Canton!"

A sigh of relief came from Elean.

The big Chinaman laughed loudly as he resumed his pacings to and fro. "It is written that good deeds shall save men from the everlasting wrath!" he intoned. "There is always the choice of heaven or hell! Only the fool—"

"Ahoy, there!" Norry called from the cabin stairs. "I'm coming along!"

Elean's arms were about him as he stumbled forward across the polished floor of the cabin. Norry recovered himself, straightened his shoulders as he turned to the big-browed Celestial.

"By Jove! I was just in time to lift your capital from that bucket shop on the Parade, Mr. Foo!" he exclaimed, dropping the pile of money bills on the table. "Only just in time!"

Elean laughed excitedly as she patted his shoulder affectionately. Norry was always the victim of brain waves! Imagine him forging a friend's check to beat a bank before it flopped! Good old Norry!

Ty Foo raised the bills slowly from the table, counted a number to the value of twenty thousand, and squeezed them into Elean's hand.

"I am very superstitious!" he confided seriously. "It was foretold in the calendar that yesterday was to be the period of my humiliation. I was born under the Sixth star of the Fourth circle. And, you see, now," he added with infinite tenderness, "that by putting the fourth circle on my check Norry has saved me from disaster and ruin!"

Elean looked quickly into the big Chinaman's face, into his smiling eyes that revealed the sunshine of his open nature.

Norry's voice sounded steadier now.

"We'll find our lugger Elean!" he said, drawing her to the cabin stairs. "She's safe on the beach!"

Elean kissed him tenderly and it was then she noticed the sudden flush of a tear on his cheek.

"Silly boy!" she chided with an unaccustomed tremor in her voice. "But we're safe!" she added when they reached the stairhead. "And—oh, Norry, it must never happen again!"

He wiped the moist agony from his brow, drew in a breath of clean air from the cooling sky. "It won't—never happen again, dear! My God!" he added under his breath. "Only a Chinaman could have passed it off like that!"

"Passed it off?" Elean regarded him in silent commiseration for several moments. "Ty Foo believes every word of it," she declared with a final breath of relief.

21: The Tattooed Man

Sydney Mail 15 July 1925

'A RAFT,' Jeremy Saltwyn admitted, wiping his old binoculars and peering again across the dazzling belts of surf to where the square black object floundered among the mountainous breakers. Saltwyn's mouth snapped with sudden decision as he turned to the group of five half-naked islanders standing beside the big canoe.

'I'll not risk a good boat in that hell-smother,' he decided, pointing to the long, deadly walls of green water bursting with the sound of gunfire on the reefs.

'They're dead, by the look of them,' he added, focussing the two figures on the raft, 'and two dead men are not worth one live boat.'

It was a sight that held the little group of natives spellbound. The raft tilted and sagged as the current swung it into the maelstrom of pounding surf. The two men lashed to the sail-less mast had the appearance of wind-dried mummies in the steely-white glare of sun and sea-foam.

Saltwyn's hand restrained the natives from plunging into the boiling mass of reef-broken waler in their desire to assist the raft and its occupants from drowning.

'Stand by your boat, I say!'' he roared. 'How in thunder am I to carry on here alone if you are drowned or crippled on those reefs? This lifesaving stunt is no business of mine: I've other work that needs attention.'

The raft with its two glassy-eyed occupants was now attending to itself. Caught in the undertow, it swirled and dived until a large comber drove it full onto a ledge of reef under the whaleback shoal. Unable to control the five impatient natives they leaped into the whirling waters and fought their way through the deadly scour of the tide until two of them succeeded in gripping the raft.

With the cunning of their race they played skill against the sledge-hammer blows of the waves that now battered the raft as a bull batters a broken hurdle or fence.

'Aei tai ano!'

Swimming. dragging and steering the raft with their bodies, they forced it into the shallows with the gusto of children at a beach party.

Saltwyn remained a stiff-lipped spectator, his sun-withered face unable to control the look of boredom that overcame him as a result of their superhuman efforts. His hawk eyes quested over the two shapes now huddled on the beach; one a middle-aged sailor with the frame of a Hercules and the

face of a beast. His flat, simian brow and cheek bore evidence of knife scars from some recent conflict. His great hairy chest was bare and covered with tattoo marks. He sprawled in the hot sand, gasping like one who had escaped from the equatorial hells of a waterless desert.

His companion was little more than a boy, slender in shape and dressed in tattered clothes that once had borne the cut of fashion. His face was a pallid mask, almost lifeless in its immobility. His milk-white teelh were visible through his dry, sun-parched lips.

The scarred Hercules raised a hand and pointed to his mouth, and then, as though the effort was more than he could endure, sank back to the beach. Saltwyn grinned unamiably. Here were two mouths, to feed, two starved bodies to nurse and win back to life. And for what, he asked himself in silent contemplation of the tattooed man's giant proportions. In a week the pair would be up and about the island, prying here and there amongst, his most treasured shell hatcheries and preserves.

Philanthropy was no part of Jeremy Saltwyn's creed. If a few meals and a little money would have dispensed with his uninvited guests he would gladly have paid the price. It might be months before a schooner or tramp visited Vitonga, and Jeremy quailed at the prospect of spending his days in the society of the ape-browed man with the tattooed chest, and arms.

Moreover, his studied seclusion in that part of the Pacific was now at an end. Both these men would carry the news of his precious shell-hatcheries to the boozing kens of a dozen trading ports, where the scum of sailordom lived and dreamed of undiscovered atolls like Vitonga.

The possibilities of shipwrecked sailors and visiting schooners had been his nightmare in the past. He had discovered an El Dorado of golden-edge shell in the five lagoons that made up the group of atolls surrounding Vitonga. He employed only native shellers, men who never voyaged beyond the group. But now— these two whites had come like starved wolves to disturb the seclusion and tranquillity of his island home.

A native poured water from a nut shell between the blackened lips of the. tattooed man. The boy also got his share, while across the glittering stretch of beach the sun stalked like, a flaming jewel to draw the life sap from heart and brain.

Saltwyn watched each movement of the tattooed man, lying face down in the wet sand as though to shut out the fierce rays of the sun. Around his shaggy throat was a coarse red kerchief, twisted into a dozen knots and bulging slightly in places. Saltwyn moved a step forward and slit the red kerchief with the blade of a jack-knife. It fell to the beach. With the

deliberation of a prison governor Saltwyn picked lip the rag and shook it between his strong fingers.

A dozen blood-hued pearls fell into his palm. For fifty seconds he held them to the light, weighing, scrutinising their colour and orient with the craft of an expert. At the conclusion of his survey his eyes snapped vindictively; a half-uttered word froze on his lips.

Slowly the tattooed man rose to his elbow, his hand fumbling at his throat, Then his animal eyes turned dumbly to the figure of Saltwyn brooding over the wine-hued gems in his palm. A look of unutterable hate crossed him: his thick lips seemed io crack in the effort to find speech.

'Say, Mr. Man. I fished in hell for them stones. They're mine.' His hand stroked the air like the paw of a tiger. 'I got a nerve when it comes to divin' for other people's beans, but you— well, you're the limit!' he concluded with unexpected vehemence.

The boy wilh the milk-white teeth woke up from his thirst agony and looked at Saltwyn. His lips quivered strangely, but he made no sound. Saltwyn placed the pearls in the pocket of his white coat. Then he signed to the five natives standing on the beach. 'Get these people into one of the huts,' he ordered. 'As for you—' he spun round on the tattooed man with darkly blazing eyes— 'another whine from you and I'll clap you in irons. In the meanwhile I'll put an inquiry through the consulate at Honolulu concerning your identity.'

Without ado the natives bore the two men to a palm-thatched hut that stood in the shadow of some pandanus scrub overlooking a medium-sized lagoon. Village there was none, only the interminable saucer shaped reefs that surrounded the sapphire mirrors of the five lagoons. A couple of sewen-ton pearling luggers rolled in the tideway of a distant channel.

SALTWYN'S house was a roomy, flat-roofed affair, with a wide verandah overlooking the nearest lagoon. On the third day following the raft episode he stepped into the hut where the two white men had been carried by the natives. The young man was seated near the door. He rose at Saltwyn's entry and stood wih head slightly bent. The tattooed man was lying on a camp bed. He made no movement, although the voice of the lagoon owner cut like a knife on the still, hot air.

'Morning to you, my lad,' he said, addressing the boy. 'Tell me your name, and the reason you are found on a raft in this part of the Pacific,' he commanded without ceremony or hesitation.

The young man had recovered from his recent privations. His skin was clearer, his eyes more humid. There was a slight tremor in his voice as he spoke.

'My name is Kenneth Fane. I was passenger by the steamer Valmos that left Sydney for Honolulu and London five weeks ago. The Valmos struck a reef after leaving Samoa. The weather was bad, and as far as I can judge only a select few got away in the lifeboats.

'It was a ghastly business all through.' Fane paused, as though the recollection of his past experience had burnt into his young brain.

'Go on,' Saltwyn gritted. 'I want to hear.'

Fane took breath like one caught belween raging seas as he continued: 'After the Valmos struck I found myself in the midst of a struggling crowd of men and women. I need not tell you that the struggle was for the lifeboats. It was a fight I could not join. So I waited under the bridge until the Valmos was well down by the head, and the last of the passengers had been swept away or drowned in the lowering of the boats. The seas were running over the rail. 'The captain was still on the bridge, and remained there until the last. The Valmos went down with a terrific lurch to starboard. I was carried off my feet and hurled into the sea.

'When I came to the surface I spied the raft with'— he paused and turned slowly in the direction of the tattooed man— Mr. Buck Trope, there, using a steering-oar to some purpose.'

'And no one on that raft but himself.' Saltwyn accused. almost fiercely. 'Looking after his own beef, they say in thee shanghai ships.'

Fane was silent for a moment, like one unwilling to draw Saltwyn's wrath upon the head of his raft mate. His breast, laboured painfully as he continued: 'Trope allowed me to climb on the raft. And so we slaved together, drifting and battling with currents and winds, hoping to make land. We had no chart or knowledge of navigation. We just drifted and guessed our course, and these atolls might have been in Tahiti or the Marquesas for all we knew.'

Sailwyn laughed succintly.

'Maybe you'll explain how your friend here came to be wearing a thousand pounds' worth of pearls around his neck?' he demanded icily. 'Did one of the lady lassengers throw them into his pocket before the Valmos went down? Or did the Captain hand them to him for safety?'

Fane shook himself like one taking a beating on another's behalf.

'I know nothing of the pearls,' he answered steadily. 'Absolutely nothing.'

Slowly like a panther roused from his rest the tattooed man salt up on the camp-bed. Like Fane, food and rest had worked wonders in his appearance. Heat and strength radialed from his muscle-packed frame.

'See here, Mr. Boss, you got too much gab an' gas for my likin'.

His great shoulders were hunched like an ourang-outang's. His naked forearms were knotted where the rolls of sinew moved like ropes under the

thick black hair. His slat eyes burned with the slow rage that dozed in him. His long, unclipped fingernails worked like the claws of a bear.

'You pinched my pearls!' he stated slowly and wilhout stirring on the camp-bed. 'Just like a crimp-shop Mary. An' when we was near bein' sucked down by the breakers you stood by like a cheap showman in front of them kanakas.'

Saltwyn listened while a stark, bleak rage swelled in his own breast. He was fifty, more, and it was years since a man or woman had dared to accuse him of a misdemeanor.

'I took charge of those pearls because I know you are a thief, a ship's robber, a safe-smasher. One more squeal from you, Mr. Buck Trope, and you'll find yourself with irons on your feet, lying in the tideway where the man-eaters come to feed.'

Trope leaned on his elbow and stared at Saltwyn as a panther stares at a bull in the distance.

'Ship's thief, eh, Mr. Boss? Safe-smasher?' He paused to moisten his lips and clip his nails together in his suppressed rage. 'Who says I'll let you hand me down to the sharks?' he inquired with a drawling mimicry in his voice. 'I reckon your lagoons are full of the beasts; kind of watchdogs to keep out poachers and divers, eh?'

Saltwyn made no answer. But in the, doorway he paused to look back at the crouching figure on the camp-bed. Then he signed to Fane thoughtfully.

'I'll find you a job on one of my luggers, my lad. There's nothing like work for idle hands. Come along.'

Once clear of the hut Saltwyn's hand fell lightly on Fane's ragged sleeve. 'You'll be needing a new rig-out , Kenneth Fane. Come to the store; I'll fit you up,' he added, with an approving glance at the young man's clean-cut figure and honest face.

Fane was glad enough to discard his rags and accept clean linen and a white canvas suit. The Valmos had swallowed his wardrobe. Of a small fortune he had inherited two years before nothing remained except the memory of a cattle station he had attempled to run in Queehsland.

Saltwyn took a ledger from a safe, in a corner of the store and thrust it before the astonished Fane. Opening it, he indicated an entry made on the 17th or November of that year:

'Sent, twelve blood pearls of extraordinary value, size, and lustre, per island mission steamer John Williams for despatch to London, November 17. — January '28: Mission steamer John Williams retumed here, her captain reports 11ml the twelve pearls were shipped per steamer Valmos front Sydney to London, December 10.'

Saltwyn drew the, twelve pearls he had snatched from Trope's kerchief and placed them on Hie store counter triumphantly.

'And that's that, Kenneth Fane,' he declared. 'Beat it if you can!'

Fane stared at the gems in round-eyed amaze.

'You mean that these pearls are the ones you sent by the John Williams?' he gasped.

'They're my pearls come back,' Saltwyn flung out. 'My pearls, come back in the greasy neck-clout of that boob in the hut!'

'He was a fireman on the Valmos,' Fane informed him. 'I never met him until I saw him on the raft. Possibly he stole them in the stampede for the boats. Officers and passengers were dropping things about the decks. I see no other solution to the mystery, Mr. Saltwyn.'

The old man nodded broodingly. It was some time before he spoke.

'You'll judge me a hard and difficult man, Kenneth Fane,' he said at last. 'But no harder than other white traders struggling against the sea and the hosts of thieves— thieves with talons like Trope. In ten years I've made enough to secure my daughter Molly from want and privation. Six months ago I arranged her passage out here. It's a lonely life for an old man,' he added with a sigh. 'Her last letter said she was coming with all speed. But the ways of God and the sea are strange, Mr. Fane. Instead of Molly, the sea sends me that!'

Saltwyn gestured in the direction of the hut where Trope lay snoring on his camp-bed.

Kenneth was interested in the old pearler's store, that held many relics of the surrounding atolls, together wilh a number of interesting undersea, photographs taken by experts with special cameras. The voice of Saltwyn broke in on his thoughts.

'The presence of your raft-mate on this island puts my belongings in jeopardy, Mr. Fane. It's difficult to protect valuables here. A crook like Trope would walk away with my office safe, after murdering us, and put it in a boat.

'I remember Bully Hayes walking off with the German Consul's safe at Apia. There's no insurance against such men. While Trope and the pearls are here I shall know no peace.'

Kenneth went, a board the smallest of the luggers to familiarise himself with the wonderful shell-hatcheries of the lagoons. He was glad enough that the fates had presented him with another chance in life, and although Saltwyn was not the angelic type of trader so often depicted in South Sea society, the milk of human kindness ran in streaks through his vitriolic temperament.

It was the thought of Trope, who had lain in torment by his side on the raft, that kept him awake a night. Trope, with the gorilla hands and the strengh of

six men! Even in his dreams Kenneth fell that his ugly raft-mate was spying on Saltwyn for a scent that would show him the hiding-place of the pearls.

TROPE stirred uneasily on the camp-bed. A huge tropic moon swung like a lantern over the distant reefs. The sea had gone down: the silken thrash of surf on the beach broke the ghostly silence of the island night. Rising softly, he peered from the hut doorway in the direction of the store near the lagoon. The sharp outline of a lugger on No. 2 lagoon was revealed in that quick, wolf stare. A lugger would lake him anywhere. Men had sailed the seas in smaller craft. It would be more comfortable than the raft, anyway! He laughed silently, his black teeth munching a piece of tobacco he had begged from one of the natives.

Saltwyn was merely awaiting the arrival of the mission steamer to pack him off in irons to the nearest consulate, where the charge of stealing pearls from the Valmos would be laid againsl him. Trope felt that his chance was now, before a police launch came scooting across the skyline. He strolled from the hut with no fixed purpose except the pursuit of his wild-beast instincts.

Nothing came to men who slept day and night, he told himself. Being awake when others were stampeding blindly for the boats that night on the Valmos had led him on the trail of the ship's purser when he dropped the pearls in his dash for the lifeboat walked in the shadow of the pandanus scrub, his glance wandering across the lagoon towards Saltwyn's house.

The tide was out, and had drained, the lagoon almost to its bed, leaving only a number of shallow holes awash. It was some minutes before his eyes accustomed themselves to the moon glare on the waterless expanse. Then he saw the outline of Jeremy Saltwyn standing within the channel entrance to the lagoon. The old man was pilihg palm logs across the bottle-neck of coral through which the tide water flowed. Trope's curiosity held him stiff-jawed and motionless. His bristling jaw hung. Then he stole forward to the edge of the tide-emptied lagoon and lay flat on the naked beach. A curious feeling of terror gripped his spine; he was almost on the point of calling out.

In the lagoon mud, within a few yards from Saltwyn, lay a long torpedo shape that flogged and squirmed in the shallows of a half-drained channel. The moonlight played like white fire on the quick shifting figure of Saltwyn. In his had was a small cylinder-shaped piece of metal attached tn a line with a running knot.

Like a boxer in a ring Saltwyn circled round the kicking, thrashing shark that was unable to float or turn in the shallow water of the channel. Once or twice the sabre-edged fluke struck the old man as he stepped near.

It was evident to Trope that Saltwyn aimed at slipping the line, with the cylinder attached, over the shark's propeller fin and making it secure. And then—

Trope was aware that sharks entered lagoons when fed. He had heard of Chinese pearl-stealers trapping sharks, as Saltwyn had trapped the monster in the channel, for the purpose of attaching illicit gems to their bodies. If the Chinaman know his business there was no fear of the shark escaping from the lagoon wilh ils precious burden. It was a matler of controlling the entry and outflow of the tides. The shark could be overhauled at will and the booty recovered. Of course, men were only driven to such expedients when they feared a visit from police patrols or island desperadoes in search of loot.

Once more Saltwyn approached the grey-bellied monster, the line with the cylinder attached held craftily in his hand. The shark had grown quieter, its long hammer head wallowing in the mud and sea-srass of the channel floor. Kneeling warily beside it. Saltwyn cast the noosed end of the line over the propeller fin and knotted it with the swiftness and skill of a born sailor. He leaped back in time to avoid a blow that sounded to Trope like the slamming of a door. A shower of mud and stones almost blinded Saltwyn as he retreated from the monster's awakened fury.

Climbing the coral wall of the channel, he paused to examine a teak-wood sluice gate that was sometimes used for preventing the outflow of waler from the lagoon. This sluice gate faced the open Pacific. Saltwyn crawled back through the channel and removed the logs from the lagoon entrance to the channel.

Trope scratched his chin in some perplexity, but in a flash he saw lhat the old man inlended the shark to escape to the ocean the moment the tide flushed the lagoon. His amazement deepened until he recalled the fact that the hammerhead would certainly return, if tempted by a plentiful supply of fresh bait. The outer reefs were hungry places for full-grown sharks, and the inner lagoon teemed with fish and oyster mush thrown from the luggers.

Trope cursed under his breath. With the return of the tide the hammerhead would make its way to the outer shoals; and then good-bye to the pearls for days, weeks perhaps.

In the bright moon glow he saw the shape of Saltwyn disappear in the direction of the house, satisfied, no doubt, lhat the pearls were beyond the reach of thieving fingers.

It came to Trope, lying face down on the beach, that his golden hour had struck. What was there to prevent him cutting the line that held the cylinder to the monster's spiny length? Earlier in the day he had seen a native cutting wood with an axe for the galley fires. The native had carried the wood aboard

the lugger at No. 2 lagoon, leaving the axe on the pile at the rear of Saltwyn's house.

Crawling through the sand, he clung to the shelter of the coral outcrop, while the sound of the returning tide hummed like a death chant in his ear. Once the monster in the reef channel felt the water swirling about its body it would soon flog its way down the channel to the open sea.

The sweat of rage and apprehension broke over Trope. All his life he had slaved in the hellish stokeholes of Pacific and Atlantic ships. He had endured the heat of fires that wrung men's bodies to tatters. Drink, pain, and misery had been his lot. And now— one clout of an axe would put him in easy street, lie would see to it that Saltwyn would never get the pearls again!

A light burned in the store-room window. The woodheap was mercifully in the shadow of an outbuilding; he crossed the last strip of beach on all fours, his shins running red from contact with the jagged coral. His eyes started, his hands clutched right and left across the woodheap. Where was the accursed axe? Surely the native had not taken it aboard the lugger. Without a steel weapon he could not approach the saw-toothed brute grovelling in the chan nel.

Then his staring eyes beheld the long-handled chopper lying in the shadow of the woodheap. Gripping it with an oath, he slid back to the beach under the shelter of the reefs. His nerves tingled as he moved forward to ihe splashing sounds near the channel.

The hammerhead and snout rose in the air as the tide crawled into the channel. In a little while Ithe water would be over its dorsal tin. He laughed hoarsely now at the monster's struggles as he waded to his hips through the sea-grass, the axe gripped in his right hand.

The shark rolled from side to side, awaiting instinct ivelv the big flush that would lift it clear of the mud and weeds. The surf was pounding heavily outside the reefs. Trope drew breath as he poised himself within a few feet of the gleaming while throat.

An unexpected touch of panic entered him. The glinting, sabre-toothed jaws seemed to reflect the ghostly brilliance of the moonlight; its scaly, flashing length seemed ready to leap from the water. For an instant the swinish eyes or the monster fastened on him with almost devilish intensity. There was enough water in the channel now to allow it to move a foot or two down the channel.

Digging his toes into the soft, mud and sea-grass, Trope measured his stroke, while his heart hammered like a pislon at his ribs. There must be no mistake, no hitting the air. One good blow was worth a dozen taps in the wrong place.

Hoosht! He launched his flashing stroke with the deliberation of a matador. The axe blade touched the moonlit skull of the shark with a sliding, glancing effect, skating off into the air. Trope was jerked from his foothold in the treacherous sea-grass and flung across the kicking, bucking fins and fluke. The contact, of his hot hands was like an electric stroke to the already maddened shark. Its body doubled like a hooked salmon and shot back with the force of a catapult.

Trope was struck with the impact of a flying boom and hurled face down into the waler. Struggling blindly to his feet, the axe still clutched in his hand, he faced the bristling, wave-drenched body, his muscles binding like roots, his red brain sobbing from the pain of the blow he had received.

'Come on, you cursed sea-hound! I'm beaten when I'm dead, not before,' he bellowed hoarsely. Torn by his fury and pain he rushed close in and struck. The axe-blade quivered and sank into the up-driving head, and again into the sloping grey back. A red gash the size of a scarf showed across the gleaming while throat of the rolling, squirming monster.

Trope laughed, with the axe raised in the air. Steel was the stuff to stop these reef-swine from playing up. Cold steel, with plenty of man-beef behind it. Whoost: Just here the wounded shark doubled with the velocity of a mud-eel, its white belly raised clear of the tide. Trope dodged the down-slashing stroke and struck like a slaughterman at the throat. The blade hummed and held to the white flesh.

'That's done it. That's—' he babbled, holding to the long axe-handle. He must not let go. The tide was strong now. The cursed brute might yet force his way out, out...

Trope's feet slithered in the sea-grass, his whole weight bent on the handle. But even in its death-throes the shark was a flailing mass of muscle and hate. And the blade in its gullet jagged it to a final lurch. The lurch brought Trope with a flying spin across its body. His head struck mud and water beneath the outspread fluke. And the fluke beat him down and down with the precision of hammer strokes. He fought with the water closing over him and the great grey body swinging above him in the tide

KENNETH FANE had heard sounds during the night as he lay in his hammock under the lugger's deck awning at No. 2 lagoon. The reefs were full of strange noises and bird cries, the cheeping of pigmy geese and herons, the shouting of the breakers at dawn.

A question of raising shell from a sponge covered hulk outside the lagoon took him in the dinghy to Saltwyn's house. The old man was examining some

chart photographs of marine shell deposits when he entered the store-room. He looked up with a grin of welcome.

'Good morning, Fane,' he greeted 'You've come about that ugly sponge-bed by the look in your eye. But just, now I want you to go with me to the hut to hand old tattoo-neck a job. There's no sense in letting him wander about the island. He's strong enough to nail shell-cases together. Gome along.'

Together they walked in the direction of the hut, using the soft beach track in preference to the hard, lumpy coral path over the reefs. Glancing across the lagoon Kenneth indicated a dead shark drifting near the channel. From its gullet protruded a long axe-handle. Saltwyn stood transfixed at sight of the axe-handle: then he strode nearer the channel, his eyes kindling strangely.

'Trope at his monkey tricks,' he half shouted as the gashes on the shark's body became visible. 'The fellow's crazy. Why does he go out of his way to hack one of my old pensioners to pieces?' he stormed, pointing to the axe marks on the blue head and throat. 'For the last eight years that old reefer has been a useful scavenger. He has always respected the presence of my divers and kept the water clean. Blast Trope! He shall answer for his tricks.'

Kenneth was exploring a metal cylinder fastened with a line just above the propeller fin. A sudden suspicion crossed him. He glanced quickly at the old man. Saltwyn was also regarding the cylinder attachment.

'You see,' he explained slowly, 'it's a Decroix submarine camera I've been experimenting with for a long time. Last year I got a picture from it at five fathoms, showing oyster-spat on a bank fifty miles from here. Only a Frenchman could have invented it,' he went on thoughtfully. 'It can be timed and flashed to a click. It occurred to me I might use old Bill, as I called the shark, as a picture-getter. I'm looking for new shell grounds, Fane: and there was no harm in letting old Bill loose with a camera among the banks and reefs. The machine has a chronomographic attachment that sets the locality to a minute.'

They found the body of Trope in the channel itself.

TWO DAYS LATER the mission steamer anchored in a fairway outside the channel. Saltwyn and Kenneth went out in the whaleboat for letters and stores. There was very little news, but plenty of stores, including Miss Molly Saltwyn, aged nineteen. The old man shouted in his joy, the man whose nature had been warped by his solitary existence, and whose bitter voice had once sounded like a scourge among the reefs and inlets.

Kenneth Fane was immediately offered a chance to return to Sydney in the mission steamer. The tubby little skipper gave him an hour to make up his mind. Curiously enough, the sight of the sweet-voiced Molly walking up and

down the beach wilh her babbling, overjoyed parent decided him in five minutes. He stayed on.

For young gentlemen of fortune the islands have many fascinations, but not always do they provide a Molly Saltwyn. In the store the following day, with Kenneth and Molly beside him, the old man took his twelve pearls from the safe and laid them in his daughter's palm.

'When you are able to match them with twelve others, Kenneth Fane, we'll draw up a deed of partnership,' he intimated with a laugh. 'In the meanwhile Molly will act as stakeholder.'

Kenneth went back to his work wilh a will. And the sea in her pity gave him the fairest of her gems, until the eager, trembling hand of the stakeholder was filled.

_____

22: Sally of Sunday Reef

Sydney Mail 28 July 1926

'WHAT kind or a little fish are you, anyway,' Dick Jessop demanded of Sally, 'to risk your neck among the tides and stingrays of a ten-fathom bank? Get out of that diving dress!'

Sally was five feet three inches in her sun-browned feet as she cast aside the funny little tan-coloured diving jacket and helmet. For the fifth time Uncle Jessop caught her manipulating the newly-acquired diving gear.

He did not want Sally aboard the nine-ton lugger. There was the bungalow at Nadir Point where she might amuse herself diving the plates and dishes and scrubbing, floors. Sally was a jewel in her way, but he didn't want her to jump in and out of the sea for a living.

She met his rebuke in the ordinary way.

'Why can't I pick up a bit of shell, Uncle Dick? Last month little Babas raised seven bags of silver-lip between tides. Shell's fetching more than copper in the marvels. Yesterday, while you were building that old hen-house ashore, I popped down and collected a whole bagful of six-inch pearl. A pound's worth! I want shoosies, and stockingses, Uncle Dicky. I could scoop up two bags every tide if you'd only stick to the hen-house and let Babas work the old air-pump for me.'

Uncle Jessop swore softly and stared round the distant sandhills for the missing boy, Babas, who conspired during his absence to feed the air-tube while Sally, in the light helmet and rubber outfit, groped in eighteen feet of water for silver-lip oyster shells.

On Nadir Island, not ten cables' length astern, a number of white posts marked the graves of certain Japanese shell divers who had gone deep in search of the black-lip, and golden-edge mother of pearl.

Scenting trouble, Sally laid aside the jacket and helmet and scrambled for'ard to the galley, where a pan and a fire helped to a quick breakfast of ham and-eggs. Jessop, his brows buckled in thought, followed slowly to the galley door to add one more sting to his. warnings.

'And don't forget the new shell-inspector the commissioners have sent to watch these banks. He told Kimmel, the storekeeper, he'll dive you into gaol first time he catches you lifting spat from the banks. Poaching he calls it, seeing that the commissioners don't issue licenses to women.'

Sally's derisive laughter was heard, by the trepang fishers across the Sunday Channel. Jessop gave his niece a stern and searching glance, his eyes

betraying nothing of the tenderness and concern that lay deep in the toughened fibres of his storm-bruised nature.

Ten years before he had taken Sally from the hut of her dissolute parent among the cattle camps of Southern Queensland. He had brought her to Nadir Island, where the mother of Babas, the Manila boy, had attended to the child's upbringing. Uncle Jessop had found the struggle for existence grow daily more keen. Fleets of Japanese luggers invaded the channels and bays, skinning the banks and drifts of immature shell, and running like gulls before the wind at sight of a police launch on the horizon.

THE coming of the young inspector Leighton promised to end the surreptitious lifting of shell from the banks. Uncle Jessop seized this fact as he munched his breakfast within the sunlit cabin of the Water Witch. Some day he would ask Leighton to treat her roughly the first time he caught her inside the diving dress.

But Sally had discovered a new world among the sponge beds and the fairy-like grottoes of the coral strewn banks. The sensation of sinking to the sandy floor of the channel beneath the lugger's keel had stirred the flames of her imagination. When the tide was easy and Babas sent down plenty of air, the pressure of three fathoms of water was hardly felt inside the rubber-lined apparatus. Above her loomed the shadow of the lugger, its great breast cradling in the sapphire blue water. Looking up, she could make out the squat shape of little Babas bending over the pump. But everything was out of proportion. The glass of the helmet and the water magnified everything. The shells on the bank appeared to dilate and wobble to and fro as she reached for them with both hands.

After the third descent the sea became no more than a wide blue cradle that rocked and pressed about her young body with motherly tenderness. The big blackand silver barracouta and the coral parrot fish flashed past at her approach.

The young bullhead sharks, cowards to the, scooted back in swirls of white sea fire from the dully shining helmet and the shooting air bubbles that Sally aimed at them from her rubber wristband.

'Leighton will get you, sure as nuts,' Uncle Jessop predicted, his mouth full of fried egg. 'Don't tell me you aren't scared of going to gaol.'

Sally blushed under her golden sun tan.

'When Leighton gets older he'll stop taking, Uncle. He's fresh on his new job. Firstly, he's got to catch me in four fathoms; secondly, he'll have to build a gaol to put me in!'

'And thirdly,' she concluded, helping Jessop to another egg, 'He's so ignorant he doesn't know whether an oyster walks upstairs or takes the lift. Arrest me? Wow!'

A little while before the monsoon Uncle Jessopp went to bed with an attack of dengue fever. Leighton carried him in the Government launch to the bungalow hospital at Thursday Island.

'Lil black pearl at the bottom' of the sea!
Doo dah doo dah dee!'

Little Babas sang from the deck of the deserted lugger. The sea lay flat under the burning eye of the sun. Flocks of man-o-war hawks drowsed in the still, hot air. The tide was running out over the coral hummock's of Sunday Passage, where a few spiky palms stood listening for the first crack of the big wind.

It had been a bad season for Jessop. The Malay proas and sampans had taken loll of the outlying channels. Next month the Sea Witch would tie up. Uncle Jessop would come home to a lot of unpaid bills and storrekeeper's accounts. In the meanwhile the agents in Sydney were yelling for shell.

'Lil black pearl at the bottom of the sea!'

The song was enough for Sally.

The Sea Witch was running short of tea and sugar and eggs. Uncle Jessop would be a mere bag of bones when the fever had done with him. Sally caught a question in Babas's eye. She decided quickly.

'Fetch out the googly goo, Babas— the one with the little lead feet and the glass eyes. And please see that the little lead feet will kick away from the boot if I want to come up quick. Savvy, Babas?'

Babas savvied. Nothing hurt the little brown imp more than long spells of brooding inactivity. His old mammy in the hut on the beach had ceased her coon songs. She was worrying now over Jessop's illness and the bad men in the proas, who stole all the shell from the reefs and ran away with it to Lombok and Penang.

'I take turn at the work when you want um spell, Missey Sally,' Babas said as he put. the last twist in the screw of her headpiece. His voice did not reach Sally as she dropped from the steps into the glittering blue nest beneath the lugger's keel. Babas stood by the air pump and lines, humming softly, but keenly alive to every movement, on the part of the venturesome Sally below.

On the lugger's port side a figure was moving among the scrub-covered sandhills that sloped to the beach. He wore a pair of frayed dungaree pants, and his matted beard flowed like a red decoration over his bare chest.

The shelters on the schooner at Nadir Point, five miles to the south-west, had observed him an hour before. They had sent a messenger to Leighton's quarters saying, that a red ziff and dungarees had gone in the direction of Sunday Reef. Stingray was the only beachcomber, who wore two feet of hair on his face these days. Would someone get busy and pinch the wop be fore he stole somebody's dinghy?

Leighton had gone to Thursday Island with Jessop. There was no one at the little weatherboard depot to. take the message. And the schooner hands were too busy scraping up the last of the shell on the banks to pay further attention to stray ziffs among the sand.

STINGRAY belonged to the beach. He fed with kanakas and trepang fishers, or wherever curry and rice was doled from the galley of a ship. It was Stingray's first visit to the little group of atolls near Sunday Reef. His bird-like glance took in the sloping shelf of reef where the *Water Witch* hovered above the shell-drift below. From the cover of a sand dune he noted little Babas's efforts at the pump, together with the fact that no other living soul was moving aboard the *Water Witch*.

In the bat of an eye he had decided that the lugger was being worked by some lone hand Malay or Jap diver. A poacher, no doubt! Some of the slip-and-run crowd that could make a living where a dogfish would starve. Stingray was fifty, and had grown weary of the eternal scramble for mere food. He had been tra velling since dawn through cactus and sword grass mostly, wading, swimming from shoals to islands, from islands to reefs, wherever the smoke of a galley fire promised food and entertainment. But his first approach to the gangway of a working schooner or lugger was the signal for a pan of hot ashes to fall in his direction. Failing the hot ashes, there was a never-ending supply of fish offal in the buckets beside the shell-openers.

Stingray's glance rested long and dreamfully on the beautiful lines of the *Water Witch*. The bubbles that shot up like white blisters from below told him that a diver was at work— stealing Government shell.

The day was stiflingly hot, with swarms of vora cious gulls planing over the lugger's rail. Babas at the air-pump was a diminutive figure, dreaming and crooning at his work. A mile away, beyond the white posts of the Japanese graveyard, was a store. From the heat-flattened skyline in the north to the white clutter of reefs in the south scarcely a living thing was visible.

'By the holy, it looks good!' Stingray commented aloud. 'A chance like this only comes onct in a lifer, just that yeller kid at the pump, an' the ole man slopping round after shell in three fathom. It's a gift with rum an' pickles in the pantry, and the the man's Sunday suit in the cabin locker! Safe as cheese, too.'

Babas straightened his back from the air-pump and stared for an instant into the melting sapphire of bubbles under the sloping banks. Satisfied that Sally was keeping to the drift, and that the lines were running free, he bent again to the task of feeding air to the bobbing helmet among the sponge beds. As yet Sally had made no signal, a sign that she was on a good patch of shell. In another minute at most, she would come up for a breather.

STINGRAY took the water with no more sound than a seal. He allowed the current to bear him slowly but surely under the lugger's steps. A curious, unaccountable movement among the gulls overhead directed Babas's glance to the shaggy form-floating within twenty feet of the rail. The boy's cheeks blanched.

'Hi, there!' he called out from the pump. 'You keep outer dis water! Can't you see we got lines out? Gil 'off you ole blubber bat! Git off de air line!'

Stingray, drifted nearer. He had made up his mind now. The breeze off-shore, would be stiffer once he got the lugger's foresheet out and moved her away from the hank. A couple of pulls would fetch the anchor aboard. But he would have to be smart, he told himself. Always someone with an odd pair of binoculars was scanning the coastline. This yellow kid at the pump wasn't going to stop him climbing, aboard, anyhow.

He reached the steps, and paused an instant over the tangle of lines and tube that trailed about the pump. Then his eye followed the blurred outline of the diving helmet moving slowly along the edge of the bank. Through the soft blue water he saw the hands of the diver plucking away the marine growths for the saucer-like shells that were dropped into a basket. For a fraction of time he remained in a stooping attitude, as though considering the diver's chances after the *Water Witch* had been cut free from the unholy tangle of lines and tube. Divers knew their own business best. An experienced man could always get, ashore, especially in shallow water on a sloping bank. His sheath knife came deftly from his belt. His huge hands gathered up the tangle of lines until they hung stiff and taut. Babas' scream of terror went across the deserted straits!

'Hi, stop that! Git' off them steps, you big cowfish! Git!'

Stingray drew breath as he glared up at the panic-stricken boy above. The screaming of the gulls almost, drowned his voice.

'I'll dig out your tongue with my fingers, you yeller whelp!' he stated between breaths. 'Just wait till I come up! Cowfish for you, sonny, in half a jiffy!'

SALLY looked up through the glass of her helmet at the big shadow of a man floating above her head. Seen under twelve feet of blue water, the shadow resembled a giant Christmas toy, a celluloid doll with washable whiskers. What was the fat fool doing in the water? she asked herself. Men didn't swim round pearling vessels for fun. Nearer and nearer he floated with the tide, a bloated patch on the softly swelling blue. An instant of cold terror seized her. Grasping the lifeline above her helmet she tugged it desperately.

'Ask that fat fish to swim away,' she was saying aloud, but her voice carried no farther than the helmet. Paralysed with fright, she saw the bloated shadow settle on the steps of the lugger among the bunched-up divinglines. She saw Babas' small, clenched fists raised in angry protest, like a child thrusting back an invading Neptune from the deep.

Babas ran from the pump, pursued by the goblin shadow with the pantomime whiskers. The shadows seemed to fly round the narrow deck, Babas ducking and leaping to escape the hairy arms that sought to pulp his head against the rail.

The *Water Witch* swung round in the tide. Sally could hear nothing. The shadow of Babas had disappeared over the side in a smother of brine. It was all shadow work now. Shadows, shadows. She streamed softly as Stingray again gathered up the lines from the steps of the lugger, as a coachman gathers up the reins of a four-in-hand. His sheath knife sliced down at the air tube, and again at the signal cord.

In a flash she had closed the air chamber of the helmet at the moment water began squirting into the inlet valve. Fortunately she had been about to ascend, and had tightened her outlet to inflate the suit. Luckily the helmet possessed an adjustable inlet, and she was able, therefore, to quicky shut both valves. Sally's mind leaped at the sudden tension within the helmet. She jerked at the lifeline, but it drew slack in her hand. With a kick and a shuffle she had freed herself from the load weights that held her to the floor of the bank. In a moment she had come to the surface.

HERE a fresh peril awaited her. She was afraid to open the emergency valve lest the in-pressing water might drown her. Also the diving lines were trailing about her. A blinding, stifling mist pressed on her heart and lungs. The inflated diving suit rolled with her in the tideway, with not enough air in it to keep her alive more than a few minutes. She had heard of divers in similar

predicaments, but somehow there had always been help at hand. Babas was gone!

And Sally was a prisoner within the tan-coloured, two-ply rubber suit. Even If she had kept her knife the first, slash of the blade on the cloth would have filled, it with water. And the helmet was screwed on tight and fitted into segmental neck rings. The strong brown hands of Babas had screwed hard down to catch at the back of the neck!

With her face pressed against the glass of the helmet she rolled in the tideway; the stark horror of the green flood below and above her. Vividly she recalled the experience of Kashimo Oyada, the pearl diver, picked up alive after floating fifteen minutes in his watertight dress.

The steamy glass of the helmet obscured her vision. Each moment the heat of the rubber garment became more intense. The wind over the bank seemed to strengthen and lift, her into the long greasy swell of the turning tide.

SHELL Commissioner Leighton drove the Government launch through the in-racing tide in the direction of Sunday Reef. A mile to windward the *Water Witch* was beating towards a cluster of wooded atolls in the south-east. From the reef ends of Nadir Island the diminutive shape of Babas was seen gesticulating frantically. The young shell commissioner was not concerned for the moment with the personal griefs of Babas or the fortunes of the fast disappearing *Water Witch*. He was staring in fierce amaze at the inflated diving outfit, wallowing ludicrously in the trough of the gently driving seas.

With his native boy at the sleering-wheel of the launch, Billy Leighton clambered into the forepart, a boathook in his hand, and waited for the next slope of water to slam the pantomime apparition across his bows. And the inflated rubber goblin was borne to him on a softly rising wall of green water. Leighton crouched I'or the wall to deliver its prey.

'Steady, and keep her head on!' he yelled to the boy. 'For your life, Toni!'

Toni held back the chattering fear in his young limbs as he clung to the wheel. Leighton threw aside the boathook, and with the skill of a Japanese wrestler grappled the unwieldy apparatus and brought it with a flying catch over the rail. Half a ton of water followed in its wake, deluging the whaleback bows of the launch and flooding the cabinway.

Toni eased her a couple of points, while Leighton staggered into the waist with his burden. The young shell commissioner found the catch at the back of the headpiece, and with some difficulty unscrewed it. His lips moved strangely as he released the still, straight drawn figure from the rubber suit. A pale blue skirt and smock clung to Sally's boyish figure. Her facewas a death mask.

With the skill of a surgeon he set himself to revive the fainting heart,' to bring back the breath of life to her stifled. lungs. Instinctively Toni swung the launch in the track of the disappearing *Water Witch*.

'Bymby little gel come round, sah,' he predicted eagerly. 'Plenty Japanese boy go sick like missey here after line foul under pearlin' boat. She come' round, sah, you pull um arms back, twenty, thirty times.'

Sally came round and her eyes stared1 cloudily into the clean-cut features of the, young commissioner kneeling beside her. She moved wearily, as though pressing the shadow of the sea from her mind:

'A fat hunk of a beachcomber cut me loose,' she confessed with an effort. 'All whiskers and eyes. Gave me a bump when I looked up. Thought a whale had got astray on the banks at first. My! Some men have got a nerve!' she added, with a sudden sob of dismay. 'And Uncle Dick down on his luck in hospital.'

Leighton's jaw set as he whispered an order to Toni at the wheel.

Dusk was falling over the channels and bays. Twenty miles to the south an accusing finger of light from the Barren Head Shoals told of the swift-coming night.

'Uncle Dick will be well in a month,' he assured her. 'He's demanding fried eggs already!'

Sally sat up with a jerk. 'Where are you taking me?' she asked, a sudden fear of the police at Thursday Island entering her. He smiled and patted her hand reassuringly.

'Old Stingray's borrowed your lugger. I can't put you ashore till I find him. Every minute counts now. He'll probably lie up in one of these dark inlets or bays. He aims to get away to the Queensland coast and sell the *Water Witch* for a couple of hundred pounds.'

LEIGHTON was scarcely out of his twenties. Since his appointment wilhin the pearling zone he had kept a sharp watch on Sunday Reef. Although Sally's attempts to raise shell had often exasperated him, he knew something of the curious water delirium that seizes the children who have been reared on dry, dusty plains. Sally had been reared outback. The sight of a mile-long belt of smoking surf had often affected his own genial spirits. Moreover, these island bays did not often provide little auburn-haired mermaids of the Sally type. Leighton was thankful for small mercies. His work among the rumrunners and poachers was bitter enough at times. Let the kids alone was his motto. And Sally, in spile of her tomboy tricks, her flouting of authority, had only tried to win a livelihood from the sea.

Now she had started to cry at the knowledge of mischief done. The loss of the *Water Witch* would drag Uncle Jessop into poverty. He depended on every ounce of shell raised and sent to the markets. And tnis fat thief with saltb ush in his whiskers had come like a sea-cievn mio ner me.

'Go after him!' She came forward from the cabinway, her small hands clenched. 'I can't face Uncle Jessop if anything happens to our little ship! It's all he's got between the hospital and starvation.'

Billy Leighton took the wheel from his native assistant. The launch was now leaping from channel to channel, past sandy headlands and whitening shoals. The chase was on. There was a frosty gleam in Leighton's eye.

'I'll trail his cursed whiskers to the Equator,' he said under his breath. 'I'll put him where he'll smell stone walls for the rest of his life!'

IT WAS DARK when the launch crept into a wooded inlet fifteen miles from Nadir Point. Leighton had sniffed afar the smoke of a galley fire. The smoke carried the undeniable message of fried bacon and eggs. Among the fleets of luggers working in and around Sunday Reef, the galley of the *Water Witch* was famous for the quality of its bacon and eggs. Other luggers boasted tinned fish or Irish stow. And if luggers were to be judged by their smells, the one Leighton espied in the black shadow of the creek timber was Uncle Jessop's. The young shell commissioner switched off his light and peered through the darkness.

Fifty yards up the creek he made out the sharp lines of a lugger. A flare of light from the galley revealed the figure of Stingray, his whiskers, his mop of hair, and the big fryingpan in his right hand. Leighton allowed the launch to drift silently into the shadows, of the creek bank until it lay within a few feet of the *Water Witch*. Stingray was eating from the pan with his sheath knife. Between mouthfuls he managed to gurgle a refrain, known to every beachcomber south of the Line: —

'Oh, Lulu, Lulu, Lulu, My warm Pacific pearl!
My lovely, lively Lulu — My own Kanaka girl!'

UNDER cover of the big. shouting voice Leighton slipped over the lugger's rail and stood like the lean shadow of retribution between fhe steps and the galley door. The Lulu song ceased instantly. The sheath knife, the whiskers, and the frying pan bobbed suddenly from the door. 'Who's that?' he bellowed softly, the light of the galley fire in his searching eyes. 'Anyone come aboard?'

Leighlon leaned against the lugger's rail, his automatic pistol slanting into line with the sunburnt brow of the beachcomber.

'Don't move, Stingray,' he warned quietly. 'I want you for a birthday present to the Chief Commissioner of Police.'

The frying pan clattered to the deck as the lugger thief whirled from I'he galley. His startled eyes merely encountered the fistful of steel that seemed to follow each wriggle and movement.

'Don't try jumping overboard, you old beer fish,' Leighton warned. 'Don't you know that cutting people adrift from a pearler is just plain murder on the seas?'

Stingray's fists opened and shut spasmodically. 'Murder!' he almost shouted. 'For slicing a line in a couple of fathoms. Why, all he had to do was walk up the hank and take the air.' He laughed until his beard shook in the smoky glare of the galley fire. 'Down at Broome or Goulbourne Island the fellers think nothin' of makin' the Japs walk up the banks. It's a Sunday mornin' lark. Now, if I'd dragged that Jap diver out to sea instead of cutlin' him loose, you'd have been all right about the murder, Mr. Policeman.'

'It wasn't a Jap diver,' Leighton lold him. 'If was one of— er— Dick Jessop's people. I'll pinch you, all the same.'

A pair of handcuffs flashed from the young commissioner's pocket. Stingray scratched his head doubtfully. A puzzled frown seemed to buckle his brow.

'Dick's lugger?' he muttered, staring along the clean deck. 'Nobody told me he was at Nadir.'

'He's in hospital,' Leighton informed him, conscious that this old battler was in some way connected with Jessop's past. 'What's your real name?' he demanded sternly.

Stingray hunched his big shoulders, stared loneinffly at the dark waters of the creek for a moment. 'My name's Stephen Marsh,' he almost choked. 'You satisfied?'

'Stephen Marsh, alias Ben Field, alias Tom Conlon, and a lot of other fancy frills. Between ourselves, Mr. Marsh, you're sizzled in the upper storey. You want a rest.'

He slipped the handcuffs over the trembling wrists and thrust him down the cabin stairs. Stingray laughed strangely as the young commissioner found the key of the cabin door.

'I reckon most of the fellers on these banks are sizzled,' he roared defiantly. 'Fancy Dick Jessop starvin' and slavin' all the year for a few bags of shell on Sunday Reef, when the water in this creek covers miles an' miles of true golden-edge shell. Right here under your nose. Tell Dick,' he declared, in a suddenly lowered voice, 'that I spotted this drift on'y yesterday when I was hookin' up some black bream. Tell him I forgive him takin' my kid away an' sendin' her to school. Now I'll go to gaol, Mr. Policeman.'

His voice was lost as Leighton snapped the door, locking him in the cabin. Peering over the rail, he saw that Sally was asleep on the seat in the launch's stern.

Toni signalled from the darkness. 'She bin all better, now, sah,' he whispered. 'One good sleep make her plenty strong again.'

Leighton nodded approvingly. Then in a low voice, 'Toni, this old white man I'm taking to prison says he discovered a drift of rich shell along this creek. What do you think?'

By way of answer, Toni cast aside his canvas knickers and dropped feet first into the still, dark waters of the inlet. It seemed ages before anything happened. Then his dripping head shot up under the rail. In each hand he held two perfect specimens of seven-inch shell.

'Bank all covered with it, sah,' he breathed. 'Golly, someone get rich quick here.'

Following Leighton's order, Tom clambered aboard the *Water Witch*, carrying with him a light hammer. Ten minutes later the police launch was towing Jessop's lugger back to Sunday Reef. Leighton had placed a cushion under Sally's head. Under that soft, indigo sky her features took on a strange gipsy loveliness he had often seen among the children of these island beaches. Heigh-ho, it was a tough proposition that now faced him. An older man would have handled it without mercy. The starshine revealed something of Leighton's mental conflicts. A warning shout from Toni, standing at the wheel of the lugger, flung him round. A pair of handcuffs fell with a clink on the deck beside him as though flung from the for'ard rail of the *Water Witch*. The voice of Stingray reached him from the darkness.

'Good-bye, Mr. Policeman. Ye put the bracelets on me, but ye forgot to lock 'em. I'll take my chance with the sharks.... I'll get a job if I'm not trapped. Hooray!'

A heavy splash followed near the lugger's side: the head and whiskers of Stephen Marsh were visible swimming like an otter in the direction of a sheltered bay on their port side. Sally tumbled to her feet. The voice of Stingray had torn the dream threads from her mind. She stared over the rail at his fast-disappearing shape in the water. Her eyes flashed indignantly as she turned to Leighton. 'You— you let him go!' she accused.'Why didn't you snap the handcuffs properly?'

Leighton shrugged.

'There's evidently a second outlet in that old cabin of yours. I didn't build the *Water Witch*. Anyhow, he'll never trouble us again. Miss, er—?'

'Marsh,' Sally told him. 'That's my name. Uncle Jessop's on my mother's side. I don't remember dad. I think he was a bit of a wanderer,' she confided with a sigh.

'So was my dad,' the young commissioner confessed, stooping over the wheel to hide the lightning grin on his boyish face. 'My old dad never came back from his incurable wanderings.'

'But my dad wasn't a bad sort,' Sally hastened to assure him. 'He was terrible fond of the sea.'

'You bet be was,' Billy agreed.

A lantern moon was climbing out of the Pacific when Leighton dropped the *Water Witch* at her old moorings off Sunday Reef. Babas was waiting on the beach to take charge. Sally did not speak when Billy walked with her to the bungalow. After her recent fright she was ready to laugh or cry on the slightest provocation.

'No more diving dresses, Miss Marsh,' he said, holding out his hand in good-bye. 'There are prettier dresses for little women. I saw one last month at a wedding in Surabaya, and—'

Sally was regarding him from the door of the bungalow, his clean, straight figure, his honesty, and frankness. Then her mouth closed like a bruised berry.

'Maybe I'll wear any dress that becomes me, Mr Leighton. Thanks for saving my life; but I never did fancy those white mosquito nets they wear at weddings in Surabaya. Good-night and thank you.'

She closed the door of the bungalow and listened to his footsteps crunching on the path.

UNCLE JESSSOP came home a month latter and allowed Leighton to guide him to the creek entrance where the shell lay thick as gold in a bank vault. Of course, Sally responded to Billy's kindly impulses. She showed her gratitude by keeping out of the diving dress. There was always some other fool about who liked diving. After the monsoon the orchards were filled with blossom— miles and miles of it. The sight stirred the old frenzy in Billy. But he was going to settle the matter with more tact this time. He had been too hasty with references to wedding dresses. Sally was a sensitive little bird. So Billy with an armful of orange blossom (part of a consignment sent to a local resident from a Sydney firm) walked deliberately up the bungalow path. He was going to use diplomacy this time.

Sally breathed the fragrance from afar. It filled her heart with tenderness.

'Alright, Billy.' She opened the door. 'Don't say any more— second Tuesday in September.'

23: The Lipstick

Sydney Mail 22 Sep 1926

THE yacht seemed to fall across the reef, her sails flogging to ribbons in the short blasts of wind. Standing at the trade-house window, Elsie Cromer was a helpless spectator of the pathetic little sea drama in progress. Her father had gone to Malolo Island in the nine-ton pearling lugger with the five Rotumah boys, leaving her alone in the trade-house. She had vainly tried to launch the old whaleboat from the skid, with the idea of casting a line aboard the ill-fated little vessel. For the first time in her young career Elsie discovered that a thirty-foot whaleboat has a will of its own: it simply refused to break from the skid and face the walls of green water tumbling over the beach.

About the yacht there was no sign of life. The name, Trixie, was painted in gold letters across the stern. Everything about the snow-white deck and companionway spoke of the owner's wealth; the brass-bound buckets, the silver-plated stair head rails were something of a novelty in those parts.

Never had such a thing happened at Nadir Island. There had been half-a-dozen wrecks during the last hurricane, vessels from the pearling banks or Torres Straits. But always there were men and boys clinging to boats or hatch coamings. While buoyancy remained in a ship or schooner there was the inevitable survivor to tell the tale.

The trade-house was some distance from the beach. From the storm-proof windows she had a clear view of the Trixie. Her father would be home before dark. In the meanwhile the tide was rapidly falling. The twenty foot drop would leave the yacht almost dry in the cradle of the reef.

Elsie waited. It was not every day a seventy-ton, silver-fitted millionaire's toy came into a young girl's life. She wanted to climb aboard before her father returned. It was her lucky day, maybe. Yet a touch of pity entered her as she stared again at the gallant little vessel that had fallen on the reef like a victim from an assassin's sword.

THE tide dropped. The banks of sulphur-hued clouds whirled south, leaving a sky of raw purple above the palm-skirted atolls. Soon a fiery sun was pouring down on the naked reefs of Malolo Bay. Flocks of sooty winged terns planed above the stricken Trixie, caught in the basin of the reef, her stern rail bent against an overhanging ledge of coral.

The silence of the bay was almost terrifying. Elsie waded out with a hundred feet of line about her slim waist. Crawling along the shoal edge, she

saw that the yacht's toy gangway reached the shallow water, her mast and funnel aslant, her foc's'le laved by the creaming swell, silent and abandoned.

Since childhood Elsie Cromer had lived among South Sea luggers and pearling craft. She had even dived for shell and earned a little money when her father was sick and the tides were kind. Her skin was now a golden tan, her body as lissom as a boy's.

The seas had swept away the Trixie's boats and raft; her decks were snow-white, her hull, as far as she could judge, intact. Sure-footed as any topsail hand, Elsie reached the heavy mahogany door that led to the saloon below. The door was locked!

Elsie drew away with a startled cry. Yet it was possible that the door had been locked from the inside. But why? It occurred to her in a flash that the occupants must be on board! A touch of panic fear assailed Elsie.

Between the inner and outer locking of this little ship's door lay a question of life or death. If the Trixie had accidentally broken from her moorings within the harbour of some adjacent island while her owners were ashore, the door might have been locked to prevent thefts. Such things had happened before. Elsie decided to try the skylights. She found them half-open, with enough space to allow her slim waist and shoulders a passage through.

The stateroom below was plainly visible. Water had poured in through the skylights; the carpets of Genoa velvet were flooded ankle-deep. Dropping lightly on to a card-table beneath the transoms, she found the door leading to a small stateroom was shut. With a strangely beating heart she pressed the handle. It opened, revealing the flooded floor and two shut portholes looking on to the reef. Directly under the portholes was a heavily cushioned divan of red plush. Huddled against the padded end was a man in evening dress.

Elsie did not scream. Her terror had drained her white. Yet within the recesses of her mind had been a subconscious intimation of the coming shock. The man was fifty, with grizzled hair and beard. His face was harsh and drawn. Beside him on an ebony table, a silver alcohol-lamp still smouldered. A pipe with a stem of bamboo lay on top of a pair of 'cooking' needles. Elsie's wandering glance fell on a tiny platinum box containing a sticky brown substance. He had been dead hours, had slept through the gale and the yacht's fight for life within the coral strewn archipelago.

Swiftly Elsie withdrew from the cabin of death. At, the top of the stairs she found the door had evidently been locked from the outside and the key taken away. The mystery began to frighten her. For a few moments her lips framed a short prayer for the dead as she returned to the skylight and reached the deck. With scarcely a backward glance at the yacht she hurried to the trade-house to wait her father's return.

OLD Bob Cromer treated the matter as he found it. A search of the Trixie revealed the name of the dead owner in the cabin:— Hesketh Rollins, Darling Point, Sydney. Bob was a thrifty son of the sea, who had fought poverty and shipwreck since he could remember. He had denied himself the barest necessities of life in order that Elsie might board at a good school in Sydney. In her eighteenth year she had returned to Malolo to share his life and help in the big trade-house near the beach. When seasons were good Bob shipped his shell to Sydney, and got his cheque within a month or two at most. After paying his store accounts at Thursday Island there was little left to spend on beer and tobacco.

It was a lonely life for Elsie. But Bob Cromer always betted on his luck. Some day he was going to find a rosy pearl, like Jim Anderson had done; or he might happen across a new bank of shell that would fill the empty cases in the trade-house, and put his account right with old Gibbs, of the South China Bank. And now he had returned from Nadir Island to find Elsie in a state of depression because a valuable bit of salvage, in the way of an unbroached seventy-ton yacht, had come to them like a gift from heaven.

The Trixie, with her fittings, linen and silver, furniture, and stores, was worth several thousand pounds. Even a Chinaman wouldn't deny them salvage!

And here was Elsie crying like a baby because the owner, Hesketh Rollins, had taken the indulge in an opium jazz. Men who puffed that kind of dope had no right to be alone on a gilded tomb like the Trixie. Yet, in spite of his good fortune, Bob was inclined to ponder the mystery of the Trixie s lonely voyage.

Old Doctor Clunes had come from Thursday Island to certify the cause of Rollins's death. Bob had also taken care to notify the Commissioner of Police of the yacht's tragic arrival within his waters. Beyond moving the trim little vessel to a safer anchorage across the hay and pumping her dry, not a locker or drawer had been interfered with. Bob was going to be satisfied with the law's finding in regard to his part of the salvage. The press and public were welcome to whatever solution the police arrived at in regard to the bamboo pipe and the sticky brown mess in the little platinum box.

SIX days after Elsie had boarded the stranded Trixie a big snuffling police launch ran into the bay and cast her shore-line over the pin at the end of the trade-house pier.

The Police Commissioner, a man of sixty, stepped ashore, followed by a woman of twenty-five. Behind her walked a youth scarcely out of his teens. The woman was smartly dressed in a suit of well-cut, pongee. She carried a pink, jazz-painted parasol that seemed to match the smiling red of her mouth.

Bob Cromer hurried from his work in the boatshed to greet his visitors. Elsie remained indoors, her childlike eyes exploring the lovely creation in pink and cream pongee. The Police Commissioner shook hands with the old pearler, and then briefly introduced his companions.

'This is Mrs. Rollins, widow of the late Hesketh Rollins,' he said, indicating the pink parasol. 'And this young man is Neville Darcy, secretary to the late Hesketh Rollins. A sad business, Mr. Cromer, a sad business!'

Neville Darcy was well over six feet in his Oxford tans. He smelt of school and the cricket ground. At random Bob Cromer labelled him a sport and something of a gentleman. For the lady with the pink stuff on her lips he had no label whatever. A keen judge of tiger sharks and Chinese cyclones, old Bob was worse than a blind man when it came to summing up a rich widow. All he knew was that she was now his guest, and that this grizzled police officer was going to say a few things in reference to a bamboo pipe, a platinum box, and the sticky stuff inside it. He was going to say plenty about the young gentleman who smelt of the cricket ground and the hay paddock. Also, Bob had a premonition that the grizzled officer, whose name was Pat Brady, might make a few remarks to Mrs. Rollins, who smelt and looked like a flower garden after rain.

Not a moment was lost in getting aboard the Trixie. Elsie, at the bidding of the police officer, made one of the party. Mr. Brady was anxious to hear from her own lips the story of her entry into the cabin of the dead man.

The morning was stiflingly hot. Clouds of Pacific gulls drowsed over the gently heaving yacht. The whaleboat put the little party under the lowered gangway. Quickly the Police Commissioner ascended, beckoning the others to follow. The eyes of Norma Rollins drank in every line of Elsie's beautiful young face as she outlined in simple words the story of the yacht's miraculous entry into the bay, wind-driven and helpless in the smothering, seas. Norma Rollins looked up sharply when Elsie spoke of her journey through the breakers with the line about her waist.

'Trouble comes to some people unasked; other folks hunt for it with ropes!' she commented bitterly.

A flush deepened on Elsie's cheek. She made no reply. Old Bob gestured apologetically. Been used to yachts an' luggers all her life,' he explained. 'Can't keep Elsie off a new ship. Some gels like going into shops an' bazaars. Elsie likes the feel of a clean deck under her feet. She could no more stop boardin' this here vessel than them birds can stop flyin' over the masthead.'

The Police Commissioner nodded sympathetically. Norma Rollins coughed and favoured the young secretary with a swift glance.

'Miss Cromer's curiosity led to an unpleasant awakening,' she declared with a wistful smile. 'I hate ships and the very thought of them. That is why I never set foot aboard the Trixie.'

The Commissioner wrote down her statement in his notebook. Then lie turned to Bob Cromer, standing in the cabin doorway. It had occurred to him that an explanation of the affair from his side might not come amiss. It seemed only fair that the Cromers should understand the true meaning of the Rollins's riddle.

'The yacht,' he explained slowly, 'was used by Mr. Rollins for a cruise around these islands. He had been ill for some months in Sydney. He reached Nadir Island on the seventeenth of last month. His only travelling companion was our young friend here.'

He nodded towards the quiet-browed Neville Darcy, who had followed Norma's statements with growing interest.

'I may say,' the Commissioner went on, 'that Mrs. Rollins did not accompany her husband. She joined him at Nadir Island the day after he arrived. She did not go aboard the Trixie, saying she preferred to meet him on shore at the trade-house of a Consular friend. They met in the Consulate to settle some private business matter, and Mr. Rollins, accompanied by his secretary, returned to the yacht.

'That night,' the Commissioner stated with emphasis, 'the Trixie broke from her moorings and drifted into the storm that bore her finally into this bay.'

Bob Cromer looked up quickly. 'Where was the crew?' he demanded. 'Where was Mr. Darcy?'

The Police Commissioner answered for the young secretary.

'There was a crew of nine Erromango boys and a skipper named Trent. Trent is in hospital at Nadir as a result of an affray with two of the boys. This affray led to the crew's desertion on the night of the Trixie's breakaway. 'Neville Darcy had gone ashore to acquaint Trent of the wholesale desertion. It was a very natural proceeding,' the Commissioner stated with feeling. 'Something had to be done, and Trent was the man to advise him. When Neville returned to the moorings he found the wind had risen and the yacht gone! It was pitch dark.'

A hush fell on the cabin. The Police Commissioner studied the faces, of the little group around him. Elsie's quivering lips and moistened eye told him nothing beyond what he already knew. The face of the young secretary expressed pity and restraint. He had nothing to say. Norma's gloved fingers toyed idly with the fringe of a cushion beside her. The silence was stark, broken only by the gulls outside.

'We now come to Elsie Cromer's discovery,' the Commissioner went on. 'It is beyond us how Mr. Rollins got possession of the pipe and opium that resulted in his death.

'I am permitted to say that Hesketh Rollins was an opium addict, but he had long ago sworn to give it up. It was for this reason he undertook the island cruises. Not a grain of the drug accompanied him. His doctors had made it plain that further indulgence would be fatal. So we come to the conclusion that the smoking outfit was carried on board from Nadir Island during Neville's short absence. Moreover, the person who supplied the drug took the trouble to bolt certain doors, in the hope, no doubt, of puzzling the opium sleeper if he tried to come on deck.'

Old Bob Cromer fidgeted in the doorway of the cabin. He was sorry for the dead man, sorry for this quiet young secretary who seemed to have been caught in the shadow of a cruel domestic tragedy.

'You got your work cut out, Mr. Brady,' he volunteered bluntly, 'to spot the party who put a knife across the Trixie's mooring-line. As a sailor I'll say the line was cut so's the yacht would drift into that hell smother that was blowing down at the time.'

The light of agreement flashed in the Commissioner's eye. He waited for more.

'It was the most ungodly tiling that ever happened in these parts,' Bob continued, unable to control his feelings. 'Here was a man like Hesketh Rollins settin' his teeth to beat the drug habit. We've all got to fight somethin', if it's only rotten Governments or crooked partners. Rollins was fightin' the worst kind of a devil that ever came out of a metal box. If he'd been left alone he'd have won his fight, maybe. I'm game to bet that the party what brought the stuff to him pressed it on him pretty hard— made him believe a few puffs would buck him up. By the look of things,' Bob concluded sorrowfully, 'the poor fellow smoked like a Chinaman after a long fast.'

Norma Rollins fanned herself with a palm leaf vigorously. The proceedings bored her. Every moment spent in the cabin seemed to shatter her self-complacency. Again and again her eyes sought the young secretary, as though begging him to say something that would end this stupid inquiry. Elsie saw no answering light in Neville's glance. He was like one who courted investigation. It was now evident to her that he had loved the man who had paid forfeit to the poison-god in the platinum box.

Returning to the trade-house, the Police Commissioner heard with dismay that his petrol tank aboard the launch was leaking badly. His engineer informed him with a wry face that there was not enough oil on board to lake them back to Nadir Island.

Norma received the news with a bitter smile. Always something was happening to spoil her plans for the future. She glanced at Neville Darcy for sympathy, and found him speaking in an earnest undertone to Elsie Cromer. Old Bob bade the party welcome to his trade-house. Some time must elapse before he could bring a supply of petrol from Barren Head lighthouse, a hundred-odd miles to the south.

While Elsie was glad to meet new faces and listen to the chatter of the city-bred Mrs. Rollins, she could not escape the sense of tragedy that enveloped the silent little vessel across the bay. Her young mind began to peer beyond the curtain of this strange sea mystery until every detail lay stark and clear for her to read.

During her father's absence at Barren Head the position of hostess fell to Elsie. The trade-house had boasted two Chinese cooks, but they had gone to another trading post in the Navigators, leaving Elsie to the cooking fires and the occasional help of Narangi, the Rolumah boy.

'I want you to feel at home,' she said to the visitors. 'We own a mountain and one lagoon. Any amount of fish and game. Two old muzzle-loaders in the shed that Dad uses to kill time. That's all I've ever known him to kill when he goes shooting duck,' she added, with suddenly twinkling eyes.

The Police Commissioner laughed heartily at this slim, girlish figure seated at the head of the table. He had his own two girls at school at Brisbane. He knew the meaning of Elsie's lonely life in this out-of-the-way group of islands, the bi-annual hurricanes, drought, and flying epidemics, to say nothing of the occasional appearance of a drunken schooner captain, demanding stores and liquor. He was attracted by her unusual beauty. The sea and her life on the open beaches, tumbling in and out of pearling luggers, had made her as whippy and agile as a boy. A brave little girl, he told himself.

Neville Darcy appeared to appreciate the result of the leaking oil tank. At the back of the lagoon he found a stretch of pandanus forest, with clouds of black duck and teal rising at every step. The mountain streams were stiff with trout; the inlets swarmed with mullet and barramundi.

Neville had spent the last few years in the society of Hesketh Rollins, retired wool-broker. Norma had been a member of a travelling theatrical company before her marriage with Rollins. Nearly the whole of his fortune had been settled on her. For the last year and a half she had avoided her husband's society, losing herself in a daily round of social engagements. Here, among the pandanus palms and the piping of birds across the lagoon, he had ample leisure to review his past life within the Rollins's household at Darling Point.

He had been a rich man's slave, his typewriter fixed at the rich man's bedside. What a life! Yet in Hesketh Rollins he had lost a friend. For the last

week the tragedy had preyed on his young mind. At one time he had felt sorry for the young actress who had practically chained herself to a corpse. But youth will often break chains, he told himself, whether they be forged to the gates of heaven or hell.

A hot pipe of opium had melted Norma's chain! And this rich woman's visit to Nadir Island, only a little while before Hesketh's disappearance, pressed on him. He felt that the crime was his fault. He should never have left his nerve-ridden employer alone, not for an instant.

He walked quickly in the direction of the trade-house. In the coral-strewn path he found himself face to face with Norma. She had just come from the cool sitting-room. In the scented island night she seemed ablaze with jewels, a stage queen playing her very best.

'Enjoying the sights of the island, Neville?' she questioned sweetly. 'Killing Father Time with Elsie's muzzle-loader?' she added, with a malicious glance at the ancient weapon in his hand. He checked a passionate retort; shook himself as one chafing under a perpetual lash.

'I'm busy thinking of my next job,' he declared flatly.

The perfume of her scintillating presence affected him no more than a dead queen bee. He felt tired. In the star-shine her face had grown suddenly pleading.

'I want to tell you, Neville, that your next job will need more man a typewriter and ten hours a day by a sick man's bed. My husband treated you like a galley slave.'

A flush darkened his cheek for a moment. From the trade-house dining room came the sound of Elsie's fingers running over one of Strauss's haunting songs from 'Ariadne.' The theme was full of the jewelled fragrance of lonely island nights. The piano itself seemed in perfect tune.

Neville turned away, paused an instant to look back at the woman standing in the path.

'I am going to ask Mr. Cromer to let me stay here,' he said quietly. 'He wants a partner. And for the born slave there's nothing like a change of galleys occasionally.'

He entered the trade-house with a buoyant step.

BOB CROMER returned from Barren Head with several drums of oil in the lugger's forepart. 'You can fill your tank now,' he said to the waiting Police Commissioner.

The wind had gone down; the surf was breaking in zones of dazzling white along the pandanus-sheltered beaches.

'A good night for the crossing,' Bob declared cheerfully, as he transferred the drums of oil to the big Government launch. The Police Commissioner nodded.

'We'll fetch Nadir before daybreak,' he predicted, glancing at the sapphire sky above the windless stretch of sea.

Norma Rollins stepped lightly from the trade-house, looked back swiftly at the open window where Neville Darcy was finishing a letter at the little writing-table.

'You won't escape toil and hardship staying here,' she intimated, with a touch of despair in her voice. 'Come with me, Neville,' she begged.

He went on writing rapidly, then raised his head as one who had not heard.

'I'll come to the beach and say good-bye,' he told her with finality. 'We'll let it go at that.'

Norma turned to the beach, humming softly to herself as one sure of her purpose. A faint wisp of moon had risen in the south-east. The voices of the men in the police launch reached her with startling clearness. Bob Cromer's words, addressed to the Commissioner, were definite enough.

'Young Darcy wants to try his hand in the pearling business. Said he'd like to join me as a partner.'

'Well, he's a nice lad,' came from the police officer. 'I've studied him pretty close in the last week or so. Take it from me, Bob, he had nothing to do with Hesketh's last sleep on the Trixie. There's no real evidence to prove it wasn't an ordinary misadventure.'

Norma turned sharply at sound of footsteps in her rear. Elsie was standing beside her, tall, shy, and with a troubled look in her violet eyes.

'I wish you'd arrange to take the yacht, Mrs. Rollins. I've gone over the matter with father, and he says you're welcome to retain it. There's no question of salvage between us.'

Norma shot a glance at Elsie as though for the first time. 'You are very kind, Miss Cromer, to offer me something I don't want. I told you I loathe ships, big and little. And'— she pointed to Neville's open window— 'will you be good enough to tell Mr. Darcy I'm waiting?'

Elsie stood like a young bamboo in the path, resolute and fixed of purpose. 'Never mind Mr. Darcy,' she answered quietly. 'Forget everything but me.'

Norma Rollins eyed her askance. This was not the sweet-voiced child who had played the laughing hostess for the last two days. This was not the little fetch-and-carry girl that one might have handed a five-pound note for service rendered. Something had happened!

'Forget everything,' Elsie went on, 'but the one who climbed aboard the yacht out there when she blew in like a ghost ship from the dead.'

'We know that,' Norma snapped, completely on her guard. 'Tell me something fresh— something about tulips or Iceland poppies. I want to keep cool.'

Elsie's eyes were fixed on the dream-like yacht across the bay. Norma's sneer was lost.

'When I boarded the Trixie,' she went on, 'I saw that a lady had been there.'

Norma whipped round with a sudden catch in her breath. All the willowy softness had left her. Her face was keen set as a blade.

'Now, look here, little girl,' she said with frozen deliberation, 'I haven't come to this old island to hear your voice. Let's be straight. When I commit a crime there'll be no daggers left behind for kids like you to show the police. Forget all about, my husband's habits. Drug fiends will be served!'

'Someone went out of their way to serve your husband,' Elsie told her. 'Yet I pitied the woman who had entered the cabin of this morphia man. I wanted to cry afterwards when I read traces of her chalked evening shoes on the red carpet. She had come in haste from a dance, evidently, at a time when people's attention was fixed on the music.'

'Why did you withhold this information from Mr. Brady?' Norma challenged.

'Because women often pity women,' Elsie answered sadly. 'Who could look at a dead opium victim without a thought of the woman chained to him for life? Even a savage might have read the signs I saw around.'

'Signs?' Norma cried, blanching now under the younger woman's fearless statements. She turned blindly from the beach as if to hide her emotion from the people in the launch. 'You are mad to talk like this! You have been dreaming!'

Elsie sighed. 'Dreaming of a cut rope trailing from the yacht's cleat, the cut rope that sent a man out to his last sleep in the storm! No one saw it done.'

Norma recovered her shaking senses with an effort. A soft laugh escaped her. 'My dear child, you are living on an island, of dreams. And you've been dreaming wrong. There isn't a scrap of evidence to prove that a woman was near Hesketh before the Trixie broke from her moorings. Try another dream, Miss Cromer!'

The voices in the big police launch grew silent. The Commissioner had seen them, was making signs in their direction.

'Come along, Mrs. Rollins! I'm sorry Neville is staying on with Mr. Cromer. Anyway, it's a fine night for the crossing.'

Norma came back to where Elsie was standing. There was a touch of the theatrical and the vulgar in her flaunting adieu.

'Good-bye.' She held out her hand defiantly. 'Make a better guess next time. Tral-lal-la!'

Elsie took her hand, held it firmly for a period of six heart-beats.

'Good-bye,' she said. 'A little thing like this stops all the guessing. You left it on the cabin table beside the platinum opium box.' It was a tiny diamond-studded case that Elsie had put in her hand. The monogram N. R. was engraved on its pencil-shaped surface. Fitted into the end was a stick of carmine.

Norma Rollins stared at the jewelled lipstick, a sudden film of terror blanching her eyes. With phantom haste she turned and staggered towards the waiting launch. Neville Darcy seemed to follow on her heels, a letter in his hand. He reached the launch, and for a while was lost among the bustling shapes on the deck.

The night and the palms seemed to revolve about Elsie. She heard the last farewell hoot of the police launch as it sped from the island, her lights gleaming dully in the sea mists.

A footstep on the coral path roused the fainting blood from her young heart. Neville Darcy was beside her, his strong arm steadying her swaying steps.

'I wonder,' he said as they reached the warm lights of the house, 'whose ghost scared Mrs. Rollins at the last moment?'

In the great peace that had come to her Elsie felt there, was no need to answer Neville's question. The ghost had left the island.

_____

24: Fairy Money

Sydney Mail 18 May 1927

THE youngest deck-hand and cabin steward aboard the *Arafura Belle* Had speculated upon Nan Lorimer's chance of ever returning from Fane Island. It was the last coral bead within a far-flung necklace of reefs where men and trade-houses still clung. There were forty-odd passengers aboard the *Arafura Belle*— copra farmers and their wives returning from a visit to Sydney and Brisbane, with a sprinkling of young men on their way to the rubber lands of Kotal Lambang. The daily talk under the ample sun-awnings included things like typhoons, rhinoceros beetles, flies, fever, and the rubber that gets into the necks of shiftless, tennis-playing planters.

Each day the *Arafura Belle* drew alongside some rattletrap wharf or jetty to take in cargo and leave a few passengers behind. Often the longboat dropped passengers on naked beaches, where the blinding surf raved and drenched the huddled figures in the thwarts. Each day the groups on the deck of the *Arafura Belle* grew smaller, less inclined to talk. The merciless longboat took them off, like a sea-hearse, to their garden of rest by the sea. Women called out good-bye to the last watching group by the rail. Maybe they would never meet again. Things were always happening in the islands to spoil one's plans.

Miss Nan Lorimer next! The longboat would put her ashore at Mission Bay, where an ancient padre and his 'boys' would convey her in a schooner or launch to Fane Island, the last bead on the rim of the bending blue.

Eight people remained at breakfast in the little white and gold saloon for'ard. Perhaps they took an added interest, in each other now, as friends will at times when a loved, member of their, sacred company is about to step into the shadows.

Nan was twenty, with a shade of sapphire in her eyes that became brighter with the passing hours. The man seated opposite her was John Medway. He was thirty. There was nothing of the dreamer about John in spite of his deep brown eyes and far-away glances. No one would ever have guessed his calling.

'Then it's good-bye at the gangway to-morrow at dawn,' he said to Nan. By way of emphasising his remark he pushed some toast and marmalade in her direction. Nan appeared grateful for the toast.

'I never did like gangways,' she confided pensively, 'or jumping-off places. They ought to build nice piers to avoid all this longboat business. I'm going to get horribly soaked!'

There were one or two things in life that mattered to Nan Lorimer; one was her intense self-respect, the other might have been a Brahms sonata or a game

of golf. But whether it was Brahms or golf, it mattered a good deal to Nan. During the last week of the outward voyage Medway had constantly reminded her of the passing hours, of the exact bell and tide that would lift the longboat and her belongings across the bar at Mission Bay. And then?

'So... to-morrow at dawn,' John repeated, rather heavily this time. 'You're not likely to forget, eh?'

'Forget nothing!' she retorted sweetly, her big silver-plated spoon deep in the marmalade. 'Once upon a time, a very long time ago, Mr. Medway, I mistook a Wednesday for Thursday. But just now I'm going to see that this longboat doesn't forget anything.'

ALL the passengers had gone on deck. She was suddenly aware that his fingers had slipped across the table and had closed softly on her hand. His voice sounded a trifle husky.

'I'm going to tell your fortune, Miss Lorimer, with or without apologies. May I proceed?'

'Please let go my hand, Mr. Medway,' she begged, with a stark, inquiring glance into his smiling eyes. Hitherto she had felt at ease with Medway. Unlike the rest of the passengers, he had not pressed for too much information concerning her past and future prospects in life. She admired his cheerful banter— the way he had stood beside the skipper on the bridge when the big yellow squall had struck them off Thursday Island. Nan had missed nothing of his daily life on deck, his games, his books, his exercises. And, last but not least, his standing among other men.

'For the second time, Mr. Medway, don't mistake my hand for a deck quoit. As for my fortune, it's as good as settled, so there now!'

'Your fortune is bound up with the hungry seabirds of Fane Island,' he assured her blandly. 'Whether you applaud or not, I'll take a dive into your dark future. On Saturday last,' he reminded her with a cheerful grin, 'when you were floating about the deck in the backwash from that hurricane, whose hand was it plucked you from the yawning moisture?'

'Yours,' she admitted brightly. 'But if, in return for saving my wretched life, you claim the privilege of telling my fortune, I'll say it's a punishment I didn't expect. Get on with it, and for goodness' sake leave out all the future sea voyages I'm going to make. Say nothing about the money that's coming to me from nine uncles. And don't dare mention marriage!'

He stared at her hot cheeks, the brilliant but dangerous light in the sapphire eyes.

'Well, I won't,' he promised, drawing her flinching palm nearer. 'I'll content myself with the merest reference to your unhappy childhood. Unhappiness

pursued you to the door of your college, and maintained its pernicious sway during the months of your father s financial troubles.'

Nan Lorimer sighed. 'Anyone with a taste for newspapers could have told me that. Everybody in Sydney knew Dad.'

'I didn't,' Medway grumbled, his steady brown eyes boring into the lines of her delicately-shaped hand. 'I can see you now, though,' he went on seriously, 'living with your father in a cottage at a cheap Sydney suburb, with your neighbours' chickens and dogs breaking through the dilapidated fence. Everything belonging to your father has been seized by his creditors— cars, jewels, art treasures, house, and yacht, and even the little Shetland pony you rode to school. I observe these things in the spirit of a professional seer, Miss Lorimer; also the fact that your father is sick and worried to the point of distraction. There remained but one remedy for your ills,' he stated, releasing her hand.

'To wit?' she questioned warily. 'The good old fairy prince. In your case he was sorely needed. And he came!'

Medway bent forward, his voice full of sympathy and understanding. 'A prince with money and gifts for your nerve-shattered father. In a few short months he raised you from the slough of despond. It was a miracle. Then a strange thing happened,' Medway concluded with a sigh.

Nan sat hack in her chair.

'What?' she demanded.

'Only that your fairy prince was sent to prison! A cruel, unbelievable event!' His voice was low and not without pity. 'Three years hard for our fairy benefactor. It matters not that he happened to have altered the written words and figures of certain cheques paid to him. We see Nan Lorimer in tears at the news; we can almost hear her vow to help and sustain the poor prince the moment he is turned adrift from gaol.'

Nan sat very still in her seat. 'And then?' There was a challenge in her question, a girlish defiance of his almost uncanny revelations.

Medway's voice lost his caressing intonations. The brown eyes had somehow turned to flint.

'The seer has gone blind,' he confessed stonily. 'After serving his sentence our fairy prince emerged from his confinement and disappeared into space. Vanished!'

Medway's eyes kindled strangely as he contemplated her blonde loveliness, the cupid lips, the flashing danger signals in her steady eyes.

'Have I, sweet lady, told you a pretty fortune?' he begged meekly.

She passed him a shilling in silence. He regarded it almost wistfully, and then placed it in his vest pocket. Followed a long pause. Uneasily she rose as though to leave the room. His slow, kindly glance restrained her.

'But you do not answer,' he complained at last.

'The good seer has spoken the truth,' she said, with an effort to appear at ease. 'And a fairy prince has a right to vanish into space when life becomes a burden.'

Something rose to his lips like a blood-drop. He checked it with his hand.. Silence fell again. The long, low thrash of the seas ended in a shrill whistling murmur along the white lines of distant reefs.

'So the prince went away,' she continued, as though unable to bear Medway's silence. 'He shook himself from the city pavements to the mists of his enchanted island.'

Medway lit his first morning cigarette, and again regarded her in the warm tropic light. Her eyes seemed to burn with fever, fever of suspense and hopeless wailing. She appeared to be on the verge of laughter and tears.

'He was a humorist,' she said in a choking voice.

'I'm glad to bear it,' Medway assured her gravely. 'Always you'll find me near the box-office when the humorist is billed to appear.'

MISSION BAY at last, with the dawn trailing across the east, like a shawl of yellow and pink. The skipper of the Arafura Belle did not lower the longboat, but stood off the smoky reefs and let his siren go. In a little while the mission-house whaleboat came through the sea haze and headed for the vessel's side. Eight Erromango hoys sat at the oars. Nan's belongings were summarised in one suitcase. She stood rather white and lonely by the rail, watching the whaleboat meet the first line of breakers; she saw it strike like a clean-driven wedge, ride high and fall down the sloping wave, rise dipping on the crest of a second smoker, and swing under their lowered gangway to the sonorous chanting of the boys behind the oars.

Medway leaned against the rail as the steward dropped Nan's suitcase into the whaleboat. In the flaming dawn, against an infinitude of reefs and sky, it seemed to him like the end of all things. She was going. He recalled how he had once stood at the grave of a child, when a crying voice had bidden him cast one more flower on to the tiny casket before the earth closed it in. It was Nan's voice that brought him back to life.

'Good-bye, Mr. Medway. The longest chapter must end.'

He wanted to ask fiercely why she was going, but an inner voice warned him against such a folly. He had read the fever in her eyes. And when he met fever in babes and girls he found coolness and silence an infallible remedy.

Once upon a time she had made a promise to a white-faced boy in the shadow of a prison gate. She was keeping that promise now.

Nan looked up from the last step of the lowered gangway. Her cheeks had blanched at the sight of the smothering line of breakers, at the grinning brown faces of the kanakas in the whaleboat. The old padre was not there. He would meet her on shore.

'Good-bye, everybody!' she called again as the boat shot away info the green abyss of brine and spindrift that wrapped her slender figure like sheets of death.

John Medway breathed through his shut teeth. 'A good little boat,' he said to the skipper, standing beside him. 'Bucks into that surf like a young seal.'

'You know, Mr. Medway,' the skipper was saying, 'Miss Lorimer is going a devil of a way round to reach Fane Island. She could just as easily have gone on to Port Chadwick. From Chadwick it's only half a day's sail to Fane Island.'

'She's meeting the padre here,' Medway roused himself to say. 'There mightn't be a priest at Chadwick— and that would be awkward for a girl who wants to get married. You see, she's playing safe,' he added with a tortured smile.

The skipper of the Arafura Belle grunted inaudibly as he returned to the bridge. But his reference to the short cut to Fane Island, via Port Chadwick, touched Medway to the quick. The *Arafura Belle* would fetch Chadwick about midnight. Any kind of a launch or sailing craft would reach Fane Island before Nan could start on her way.

Port Chadwick was reached before midnight. John Medway went ashore with his luggage. He discovered an old-time whisky bar among the sand hills, to accommodate the pearlers and trepang fishers across the hay. And there was Ling Poll, owner of the eight-ton schooner Lantern.

Ling Poh was a shark-fisher. He sold fins and oil to the compradores of the South China ports. The Lantern was lying alongside the sandbag jetty when Medway stepped aboard to discuss ways and means of reaching Fane Island. Ling was frying chicken in the stuffy little galley. Over the sizzling chicken he was squeezing lemon-juice and butter. He greeted the tall white man with a smile that came from his twinkling almond eyes.

While he was prepared to hand over all the chicken and lemon to his visitor, Poh stated regretfully that he knew little or nothing of Fane Island or its owner. He, Ling Poh, kept to his own reefs and channels. Plenty trouble waiting for Chinaman if he pulled fish or pearl from the other man's waters. White man no likee! Yet for the modest sum of fifteen dollars Ling Poll was willing to carry the honourable sir to Fane Island.

Of course, there was great hurry. But after some chicken and tea, and a breath of tobacco, the Lantern would he ready to cast off.

IT was well past midnight when the *Lantern* slipped away under a sudden slant of wind. The Chinaman hung over the wheel, while his three native boys stood by the big flapping boom and foresail. The warm gusty night freshened as the dawn drew near. Far down the horizon Fane Island showed its few spindly palms against the reddening sky. The atoll was surrounded by barriers of coral hummocks. As the schooner drew close in the loud mutter of the breakers became a thunderous din.

It was agreed that Medway should land in the big dinghy. The *Lantern* would return to Port Chadwick without him. It was his intention to meet the mission schooner with Nan on board. The padre would give him a lift back to Mission Bay.

He saw no signs of habitation as the dinghy pulled into a channel on the lee side of the atoll. He searched the low pandanus scrub with his binoculars, a sudden doubt entering him. It was possible that the owner of Fane Island had gone elsewhere or died since Nan began her voyage.

The steersman pointed to the coral walls of a foursquare shanty, almost unseen in the black shadow of the pandanus.

'A white feller live there, sah. He sleep alla rnornin', maybe. He get up make fire bymby.'

The steersman accepted some silver thankfully, and departed promptly to the schooner, outside the channel. Medway lit a cigarette as he contemplated the coral shanty. There was no sign of cultivation about the place, no garden or fruit trees, no verandah or hammocks. It was just a hermit's cell, a dugout that merely sheltered a soul-blighted wanderer from the wind and sun. Other island recluses had been known to keep fowls, pigs, a goat or two for milk, a banyan grove, taro patches, and breadfruit trees. Nan's fairy prince was above such things. He lived, no doubt, on store food, canned butter and beef, canned fruit, and hard-boiled tea. Poor tucker for a prince!

Slowly, reluctantly, Medway approached the front door of the coral hive. A square aperture in the south wall overlooked the channel and a mile-long vista of grinning shoals. The door was closed. Medway halted and called out cheerfully: 'Ahoy, there! Anybody home?'

There was no immediate reply. In the tense silence Medway heard the heavy movement of someone turning on a creaking camp-bed. Then came the hasty thump thump of bare feet on the floor. It seemed ages before the feet steadied themselves. 'Who's there?'

It was a thick, sluggish voice, sleepy and irritable, that struck on Medway's nerves. A half-naked figure came to the door, opened it slowly. The face of the shanty-owner was slightly swollen, a face that belonged to the gaol gate. He was not more than twenty-five, with eyes that worked shiftily as if to escape the ordeal of a straight glance. Behind this queer figure Medway saw a shelf covered with bottles— gin, brandy, whisky— and nearly all empty.

'You seem pretty settled here, Mr. Troop,' he began in a friendly tone. 'But rather lonely, if one may say so. May I presume upon your hospitality for an hour or so?'

The sun was well over the atoll and lagoons. Troop's eyes grew clearer. His lean figure stiffened.

'Hospitality?' he echoed sharply. 'I guess you'll find that stuff where you pay for it. What's wrong with the air outside, that you want to burrow in here?'

Then something in Medway's pose, an undefined gesture or trick of the hands, stirred Troop to a more defensive position. He retreated to the darkness of the shanty interior, as one measuring his visitor from a safer coign of vantage.

'A cursed policeman!' he burst out. 'Handcuffs, warrant, and all complete!'

Medway did not alter his position in the doorway. His features expressed his lightning concentration of purpose. He remained quite still, left hand resting idly on the slight bulge in his side-pocket.

'As you say, Troop, a policeman,' he confessed lightly. 'The, guess about the handcuffs is also correct. But these details need trouble no honest islander or recluse. Fact is, Troop, I'm on a holiday jaunt. I give you my word I hold no warrant or commission to arrest anyone! I'm studying the habits of seagulls and typhoons,' he added with a pleasant laugh.

While Medway talked his glance stole across the darkened interior of the shanty. On a low table behind Troop he made out a large, expensive camera, together with a number of plates and drawings. There were half-a-dozen bottles containing strange-coloured liquids beside the camera. Scattered over the table was a pile of Australian banknotes and bills. In the south corner of the room, beneath the aperture in the wall, was a small printing press.

Medway drew breath sharply. Here was the fairy prince in his forger's den, cheating the law, circulating his artistic productions throughout the archipelago!

Myriads of hungry seabirds planed and squalled over the reefs. Beyond this chain of hungry reefs and atolls the vast wheel of the Pacific churned and heaved.

'Couldn't you understand, Troop,' Medway said at last, 'that the paper money you're making was bound to blow on to the desk of the Chief

Commissioner of Police? And why, in the name of humanity, did you ask Nan Lorimer to come here?'

Troop's eyes snapped dangerously.

'Because I can't live alone!' He shuffled his feet uneasily. 'She promised to stand by me to the last ditch.'

'A pretty deep ditch,' Medway commented. 'And all because Nan regards you as the one who saved her poor old father from the slums. You!'

Troop hunched his lean shoulders sulkily. 'Let her decide,' he retorted. 'She's glad enough to have me.'

'Glad!' Medway took a step forward. 'Why, you poor boob, she threw down a brilliant career to keep her word to you! Glad! She imagines you are living in an island garden, surrounded by forests of young palms and singing birds. She thinks that nothing but the memory of her is keeping you alive!' John Medway paused to take breath. 'And you're just a hopeless gaol rat leading a sweet, simple girl into a pit of crime!'

He spoke without a shadow of anger. He was too amazed, too much on his guard, to indulge in outbursts of temper.

Troop shifted uneasily from the shelf to the table where the camera stood.

'I'm beyond the law, anyhow,' he stated defiantly. 'If a few of my notes do get among the Chinks and the gaming-houses up north, it's no worry of yours! Why should your Commissioner squeal?'

Medway contemplated him in amaze.

'Troop,' he said quietly, 'the mission-house schooner with the padre and Nan on board will be here shortly. There will be no marriage.'

Troop steadied his swaying body.

'Why?' he asked.

'Because I'm going to take you back where you belong,' Medway informed him. 'The high stone walls for you, Troop; a regular diet, with plenty of sleep and freedom from worry.'

Troop appeared to recede further into , the gloom of the darkened apartment.

'You mean you're going to pinch me?' he challenged.

'That's what I'm going to do. Sooner or later the Chinks would get you, and then they'd dip you in molasses and feed you to the ants and the flies. They don't like forgers, Troop.'

Troop leaned heavily against the table, reached to the shelf, and helped himself to a gulp of brandy.

'Have a swipe of this stuff, Mr. Policeman,' He invited, with a sudden change of humour. 'Then we'll have some breakfast before Nan arrives.'

Medway shook his head. He, too, was thinking of Nan, of the effect of her meeting with this bleached and dishevelled crook.

'I asked you to have a drink,' Troop reminded him, filling a second glass to the brim. 'Then we'll talk about tidying up this shack and making it comfortable for Nan.'

He held out the glass.

Medway gestured impatiently.

'She must not come here,' he declared. 'We must spare her feelings.'

Troop put down the glass and turned with a grunt of scorn to where his canvas jacket, hung above the camp bed. In turning his right hand closed on a covered jar beside the camera. With the speed of a boxer he whirled backwards, hurling the jar at Medway in the shanty entrance. The jar smashed against the coral wall. Instantly the burning fumes of vitriol scorched the face of the young detective. For a moment he seemed enveloped in a choking miasma of poison as he charged across the room. Troop gained the aperture in the south wall, dropped out, and ran towards the far-stretching reefs.

Medway paused to wash his vitriol-burnt hands in a bowl of clean water that stood beside the printing press. Troop would not go far, he told himself, on these barren reefs. Luckily the jar of acid had missed his face; a few scattered drops had splashed his cheek and brow. The cool water in the bowl relieved his slightly scalded wrists and hands.

Outside he gave chase to the fast-running Troop.

The young bill-forger gained the reef wall that sprawled in and out the white lines of surf. But the clean-living Medway gained on him stride by stride. It occurred to the detective, as he raced for the coral barrier, that Troop had a boat concealed somewhere among the hundred and one gleaming inlets. All the better, he reflected, if only he would take himself from the sight of men. Small comfort in dragging him back to civilisation by mission schooners and coasting vessels, with Nan on board to witness his humiliation. But duly was duty, and John Medway obeyed the instinct to run his man to the limit and prevent him lying doggo and murderously-inclined in some coral crevasse or gully. He did not relish the sting of the vitriol on his wrists. But better the scald of Troop's acid than the thought of Nan meeting him alone on these brine-roiled reefs.

With surprising agility Troop dodged the mountainous seas that broke over the coral barrier. He ran and leaped the narrow gutters and channels, with Medway in full cry. A wide opening in the reef yawned suddenly between Troop and a biggish boat fastened to a stake in the sand. Without pause he waded in the breast-high water and struck out in his savage desperation for the craft that would carry him to safety. Once he hoisted his stick of sail

Medway could only watch him disappear over the skyline. Medway drew up on the steep bank, half inclined to resent the fellow's escape. Troop was a good swimmer, but Medway realised in a flash that the waters of the channel contained other live desperadoes.

A wet triangular fin was moving across the channel at lightning speed. It cut the water between Troop and the boat. Troop saw it, and 'turned with a howl of dismay hack to the bank. But the fin was not discouraged by the manoeuvre. It slewed round gracefully and shot in pursuit. Troop had fifty feet of deep water to negotiate.

'Shoot, for God's sake!' he called to Medway. 'It will sheer off if you bang away.'

Medway's fingers smarted from their recent contact with the vitriol. But his automatic jumped into line with the livid, shadowy length sweeping on the heels of the madly plunging Troop.

Troop did not wait to observe the effects of the shot on the inrushing shark. Cursing, choking with his lungs full of sea water, he was assisted to the bank by the tense-browed Medway.

'Set a shark to catch a crook,' the detective commented drily. 'After that bath of vitriol you gave me my aim was bad, and the fish bolted.'

The incident sobered Troop. In silence he followed Medway back to the hut of coral.

THERE was nothing to do but wait for Nan. In the meantime Medway built a fire in the chimney corner and fed it with the piles of counterfeit bills and notes he discovered everywhere about the place. Then, in the forger's presence, he smashed the camera and plates with a hammer he found in the fireplace. The printing press he took to pieces, pocketing the screws and smaller parts, and scattering the rest in the deep waters of the channel. By the afternoon nothing remained within the shanty to prove that Troop was other than an eccentric dweller on the reefs, with no possessions or aim in life.

For Nan's sake he could start afresh. As far as John Medway was concerned, his past was wiped out.

Troop lay huddled on the camp bed, watching with a dumb hate in his heart the destruction of his life's work, of the almost priceless rolls of paper that spelt riches, drink, and an easy time when Nan got used to his ways. He had never dared to keep a native servant for fear of betrayal to the naval patrols.

'How am I going to live without a quid to buy stores?' he whined as the last of the paper money disappeared in a blue blaze within the chimney corner.

Medway shrugged unconcernedly.

'Get back to the beach towns and work. If Nan wants you I'll lend you some real money to keep you out of gaol. If you touch another plate or camera I'll put you away for life!'

Darkness came soon enough. Medway lit an oil lamp that hung from an overhead beam, made some coffee over the hot fire, and ate a few biscuits he carried in a small bag. Troop helped himself to brandy, and later to some canned fish and preserved vegetables.

Once a month passing schooners looked in with stores and cases of spirits. In return they accepted Troop's counterfeit money. The bluff little skippers had never questioned its legality. Artistically it was as good as the best English and American currency. The Dutch traders took it as a matter of habit. They passed it on to the Chinese banks and gaming-houses; then it disappeared. Troop gritted his teeth as he twisted and wriggled on the camp bed.

'With Nan I could have made this place into a comfortable little castle,' he broke out passionately. 'All the nice grub and savouries, the furniture, and the flummeries would have come soon or later. I've only been here a year. And now'— he clenched his fist at the smoky rafters— 'I'm left without a note to show Nan!'

Medway secretly ground his heel into the coral floor of the shanty. It was around this abandoned forger Nan had weaved her romantic setting, had invested with a halo the man who had made a tool of her innocent father! Would this slim, bright-eyed girl from the south ever learn the difference between a gaolbird and a gentleman? Well, she was going to get a glimpse of her unshaved fairy prince, with his background of empty whisky bottles, his empty fish tins. If she could recover the missing magic, the wonderful lantern-lit garden, she had promised herself, then he, John Medway, would forget for ever more the one woman who came like a flower of paradise into his came like a flower of paradise into his life.

'If I were you, Troop,' he advised steadily, 'I'd try a wash and shave. There's something moving outside. I'll lend you a hair-brush and soap. Can't you dig out a change of linen? It's the mission schooner I hear piping over the reefs.'

Even in his own mental torment Medway was not unmindful of Troop's degradation. The fellow stood for something in Nan's dreams. And he was still young! Above all things he did not want to see Nan's feelings torn the moment she entered the hut. He wanted Troop to stand up and show himself with decency and courage.

OUTSIDE the hut it was dark. Beyond the reefs a few stars showed dimly through the rising mist. A schooner's riding-light winked at the mouth of the channel. With a backward glance at Troop on the camp bed, Medway

sauntered towards the schooner. Fifty yards from the channel he halted and uncovered his head. An old white-haired priest with a lantern was standing before him. The priest drew a deep breath.

'The blessing of heaven be on you, my son,' he greeted, raising the lantern to the level of Medway's tall shoulder. 'You are not Martin Troop,' he commented, with a long-drawn sigh of relief.

Medway gave a reason for his visit to Fane Island. About the printing plant, or Troop's trickery with the acid jar, he said nothing. He was content to await the padre's movements and the coming of Nan. The priest stared undecidedly at the hut in the distance.

'For weeks I have dreaded this hour,' he confessed hurriedly. 'I could not let Miss Lorimer come here alone. Someone had to be here when she met Troop.'

Medway merely nodded. The padre made a sign towards the schooner outside the channel. Then he shook his head.

'She insists on meeting Troop alone. On that point her mind is made up. But,' he added in a lower voice, 'there's no reason why you should not be on hand. For a while it will be better, perhaps, if Miss Lorimer does not see you. Time enough, my son, when they have revealed themselves to each other.'

From the deep shelter of the south wall of the hut Medway saw the slim figure of Nan approach. She also carried a lantern. It lit the rough coral path about her tripping feet. Straight to the shanty entrance she hurried. The door was open. Inside, under the smoky flare of the lamp, Troop was leaning against the bottle-covered shelf, a cigar slanting from his loose lips, a leering expectancy in his swollen eyes. Nan's footsteps in the doorway stirred him.

'Come in,' he invited hoarsely. For a fraction of time Nan hesitated, then, gaining courage, stepped inside. Her eager eyes swept the almost hare interior, the naked limestone walls and floor, the rows of bottles on the shelf, the tumbled blankets on the rickety camp bed.

'Your little home, Martin,' she commented in a scarce audible voice. 'And, by the look of it, the lagoon and garden you described so enthusiastically in your last letter are still in the making.'

He came forward unsteadily and put out his hand. 'Don't get scared because the ornamental lagoon isn't on view, girlie. We'll get the old hut into shape by-and-bye.'

All the blood had drained from her cheeks. The fever spot that had burned during the voyage aboard the Arafura Belle had faded. Her lips were ashen.

'Not many women would have followed you here, Martin,' she said at last. 'Even when my father warned me against you I took the warning with bad

grace. I believed you only needed a fighting chance, that you were sick of cities and the long shadow of the prison gates.'

'Have you come here to say that, Nan?' He slouched against the shelf, biting his thumbnail that had struck sharp coral in his mad race from the shark.

Nan's supple figure took on the pliancy of a whip as she bent near him.

'You were thoughtful enough, Martin, to send money for my trousseau. You imagined I was without funds. It was kind of you, and I paid the money to a firm of dressmakers.'

He smiled, chuckled under his breath. Nan watched him closely, as a child watches a toy with a broken spring.

'The man who sold trousseaux was very sweet about the matter,' she told him. 'He asked me where I got so much money to pay for my wedding clothes.

'My heart was too full to tell him everything. I said that my good fairy had sent the money— sent it from his enchanted island among the palms and paradise birds of the Pacific.

'Martin,' Nan went on, with a tiny flash in soft eyes, 'I saw that the manager of the firm was troubled. He listened just like my father used to listen to women who came for help and advice. After a long, long talk with his cashier he said: "Little girl, I don't know anything about your fairy prince. Mine died, years ago, before I could lead him into trouble. But I'm sorry to say your fairy money won't buy our clothes!" '

Nan paused, drew a packet of notes from her pocket, and very gently thrust them into the fire. Troop was guilty of a drunken grin.

'You're fresh to the game, Nan. A little more practice and you'd get away with the cash register!'

She drew away from his leering face with a shudder of dismay. The mechanism of her play box stood grinning and broken before her.

'Good-night, Martin Troop. There was just a chance that a mistake had happened— just a chance. I had to find out. One cannot carry fairy tales to the police.'

In the darkness outside she almost collapsed in Medway's arms. His lips pressed her burning cheeks tenderly.

'I don't know what would have happened to your fairy majesty if this old policeman hadn't been here,' he protested firmly.

Nan sighed as the cool darkness beat about her.

'I should have been surprised, John, if my policeman hadn't been here,' she sighed happily.

25: The House of the Earthquake

Sydney Mail 24 Aug 1927

THE sun heat at Kapang Rabaul was reflected in the drooping tamarinds and in the white-shrouded figures huddled in the shade of old Jan Kroomer's verandah. Under the slope of the trade-house stockade a stream, the colour of tobacco juice, flowed seaward. The stream smelt of sago swamps and decayed opium farms, for it drained the ancient jungle lands of Malwar Kote.

A fleet, of red-boomed sampans and schooners lay at the trade-house jetty. Cargoes of rice and coffee, manila hemp, and coral, were stacked inside the zinc godowns ready for shipment. Old Jan employed five Chinese clerks and a fat compradore from Surabaya to do his yelling. With the temperature at the grilling point, the yelling at Jan's was done in the best Chinese manner. But neither yells nor threats could galvanise the old Hollander's coolies from their midday torpor.

In his stuffy office overlooking the tobacco juice stream Jan fretted at the heat and the jellyfish habits of black and brown labour. And the white beachcombers who drifted up from the islands were no better. Given a pair of shoes and a new shirt, the beachcomber dedicated his morning hours to the sampling of native arrak and other poisonous drinks. At least, that was old Jan's experience.

BILLY CARDEW had come from Sydney, to Kapang Rabaul. For three nights he had slept on the beach, out of sight of Jan's trade-house. Billy had lost his job as first mate on board the island tramp Lucy Loo. His misfortune had arisen out of an argument with the red fisted Baltic skipper, Schultz. Cardew had been a cruiser-weight champion before he took to the sea. He had won more fights than he cared to remember. But accidents will happen, even at the best regulated sporting clubs, and in his memorable fight with the Pittsburg Terror Billy, in the thirteenth round, found himself with a dead man in his arms.

Cardew never quite recovered from the shock. It had been a fierce encounter. But the doctors agreed afterwards that the Pittsburg man had suffered from a chronic heart trouble, and that no blame could be attached to Cardew. Billy left the ring for good.

Sailoring was a man's work, he told himself . He had always liked the sea, and Schultz had found him a berth in his big, coral-hunting tramp that plied between the Arafura and China seas. Billy Cardew might have hunted coral cargoes till Doomsday if the red-fisted Schultz had not struck him one

afternoon over a matter that concerned the thrashing of a native boy for tampering with a precious tin of biscuits.

Between one port and another Schultz kept himself fit hammering beachcombers and cargo thieves who ventured too near his shore lines. He beat native urchins on principle, and in eight years he had left a train of crippled youngsters in his wake that roused even the ire of the slow-witted Melanesian boat-steerers.

It was only natural, and in keeping with the laws of poetic justice, that Schultz of the gouging thumbs and iron-shod feet should finally hand one to Billy Cardew. It was a blind blow that fell like a spent bullet on Billy's left ear.

Cardew straightened, pushed his left hand into the bulge of the German's waistband, and then smashed gently with his right on the upturned nose. Stepping sorrowfully round the bull-bodied Teuton, he clouted him along the deck and into the cookhouse. Here Cardew, with the memory of a dozen bruised and battered native boys to nerve him, jammed Schultz's head into a big iron pot that stood on the board. Billy was not aware that the iron pot contained a mass of warm beef and onion stew. He was sorry afterwards, but was forced to let it go at that. It was a sad and memorable day for that coral-hunting tramp schooner.

Of course, Billy had to leave. No German skipper thinks well of a first mate who puts pots of beef and onion stew before discipline.

Cardew got ashore at Kapang Rabaul, where the river smelt of dead mangoes and live leeches, and where the sheeted Arabs rose from Jan Roomer's verandah like spectres from a tomb. A good place to die, Billy thought bitterly as he chose a soft place on the beach to brood over the situation.

The situation was as old as the hills, if Cardew had only known it. He was young and fresh, but it soon dawned on him that even beef and onion stew did not bloom on Malayan beaches. He must find a job, or fight for one. Life in the East was a game of two-up, fists mostly, when it came to the deadly business of squeezing a regular income out of the tropical scenery.

Billy straightened his neckwear, glossed his tan shoes with a moist banana-skin, and stepped into the trade-house, where Jan Koomer was piling Dutch guilders into a rusty safe.

'I want a job, Mr. Koomer. A fellow's got to do something. You'll find me a regular glutton for heartbreak commissions. All I want is a start,' Billy stated without a pause.

Old Jan locked his safe hurriedly, and then glanced round at the pair of long legs and tan shoes that had come into his life.

'You wants work?' he boomed softly, his white whiskers rippling from the effects of his laboured breathing. 'Maybe you'll find a yob mit der police commandante. Beoples,' he added, mopping his hot face, 'tinks o' is office wass a home for stiffs and sand babies. Ja, you hunt a yob where der wass an ice chest, young mans.'

Billy backed from Jan's office, and almost collided in the passage with a smartly-frocked young lady carrying a handful of typewritten sheets and correspondence. Her bright eyes took in Cardew's dejected bearing.

'You gave pa the wrong story,' she said cheerfully, with another bright glance at the sand in his hair. 'Come again to-morrow,' she advised in a swift underbreath. 'There's plenty doing in Kapang when pa is properly instructed.'

Her parting smile proved that the hot weather had not melted all the dimples in Rabaul. She passed into Koomer's office, leaving Cardew stammering his thanks in the doorway.

Billy passed, his fourth night on the beach. He breakfasted early, on the sunny side of an abandoned banana plantation. After a brush-up and a brisk shaking of sand from his hair and pockets he headed straight for Jan's trade-house.

'Morning, Mr. Koomer,' he began pleasantly. 'I want a job. A fellow's got to do something. You'll find me a regular glutton for heartbreak commissions All I want is a start,' Billy concluded without a pause. Jan was in a position similar to the one he had occupied the previous morning— he was shovelling Dutch guilders into the rusty safe.

He looked up at Billy's six feet of sun-tan and eagerness with the slow deliberation of one counting his past gains and losses. Again he locked the safe and mopped his hot face and whiskers 'Maybe you'll find a yob mit dor police commandante. Beoples links dis office wass a home for stiffs and sand babies. Beoples?'

'Hi, pa, don't!' a girl's voice interrupted from an inner cubicle. 'The young man wants work, and that big schooner Jade is eating her head off at tho pier. Does nothing but miss the tide and pile up the overhead. About time we put a white skipper aboard. Our black crews have gone stale.' Jan batted his eyes but did not swear.

'Joanna,' he retorted sorrowfully, 'how dares you come into my talk?'

'Three months ago,' Joanna went on undisturbed from her cubicle, 'one of our Arab gangs piled a hundred-ton schooner on the mud bank at the, river mouth. Cargo look water— coffee, salt, fifty tierces of tobacco, and no end of silk trade. All because, there's no one to speak about it. The truth is,' Joanna concluded, peeping in at the office door. 'pa doesn't like those Arabs with the long knives. He doesn't like to tell them that they're a lot of tar-faced goofs,

eating us into bankruptcy. He's like me,' Joanna added with refreshing candour; 'he'd rather walk round those long knives than go through them!'

Jan's face blew hurricane red as he stormed up and down the narrow office. In a singularly brief space he cooled down and turned to the grinning Cardew in the doorway.

'Joanna should mind her business,' he confided weakly. 'But it ers true about dose Arab stiffs. Dey put my schooner in der mud, where all dor cargo is spilled.'

Billy glanced slowly at the golden lop of Joanna's head in the doorway of her cubicle. He caught a flash of her ice-blue eyes, the rapid instructions fluttering silently on her lips.

'Got on with it now. Bustle him hard for a command on the schooner Jade. I've done my best for you.' And Joanna disappeared.

Billy Cardew drew a big breath as he faced the typhoon yellow in old Jan's shifting eyes.

'See here, Mr. Koomer, I've got a master's certificate. I'd like to handle your fleet so that the boats will bring you money instead of mud. My name's Cardew. I'll fight any six of these long knife men— and then I'll make 'em work In six months I'll make men out of those black lizards camped on your verandah. Give me a show!'

A HUNDRED dollars a month was all Jan Koomer gave him for running an Arab crew up and down the coast. Still, it was better than eating black bananas in a fly-infested plantation. He made two trips a month to Saigon and Cambodia. He doubled the Jade's earnings, and called the bluff on the first mutiny his Arab crew had planned. The Jade was loaded with rubber and oil for Singapore, and the tide was running over the bars at Rabaul. Billy had passed the word to haul in shore-lines and stand downstream. It was Billy's first trip. The six Arabs had lit their customary cigarettes. So if the Jade missed this tide there would be plenty of water in the river to-morrow. Allah be praised!

Cardew spoke again, but, his words fell dead on the ears of the easy-going six. They stared at him drowsily, resentfully. It was during the heat of noon, with the sun staring like the eye of a devil from the raw purple above. Billy stepped down from the poop.

'Keep Allah out of this,' he snapped. 'Lay to those shore-lines. Pait satoe. Do it lekasi na bisa!'

Billy was conscious of Joanna's eyes peering from (he trade-house window. She had seen her father's schooners miss tide after tide. But for once she would see the Jade pull out on time. No had about five minutes to make good; after that he would be left on the mud bar for the night. Abdul Mehmet, a flat-

footed mast hand, and the leading lazy man of the crew, struck at the oncoming Billy with an iron pin. It missed. Instantly the other five sought to gain the shelter of the forepart.

Running from Billy Cardew across ten feet of case-littered deck was difficult and fatal. The man who had sprinted round twenty-foot rings after middle-weight champions knew what to do with a low-browed, rice-fed Arab when he caught him between a pile of cases.

Billy did it scientifically, but he did it first to the thrower of the belaying-pin.

'Get those shorelines,' he ordered, driving his first into the scrunching jaw. 'Get!'

Abdul raised himself from the deck, and with a trembling signal to the others crawled out to obey the order.

Joanna at the trade-house window heaved a sigh.

'Pa,' she spoke to a hump of shadow near the iron safe. 'Our fuzzies didn't pull any wool over Mr. Cardew. He handles them like beads on a string.'

Jan shrugged gloomily. 'Dose beads will be round Billy's neck when he gels to Samark! Dere is dat Jap man, Higo, who puts contraband into my schooners at Samark. I hopes Billy will meet Higo,' he muttered fervently. 'All my ships und crews have suffered from Higo's opium, Higo's arrak, Higo's shanghai blood-money. I wish dot big fat policeman Larry from Singapore would put de wool on Higo.'

'Larry the Leech,' Joanna sighed. 'The detective that's always eating chocolates. Why, he's a joke. Higo has broken from every gaol in the Settlements— nothing holds the man. ' Anyhow I hope Larry gets Higo before Higo gets .our Mr. Cardew.'

ARRIVING at Samark, Billy dropped fifteen tons of cargo at the agent's wharf. The night was pitch black, with a single lantern blinking at the end of the crazy pier. Samark was a beach town with six hundred miles of back country and rubber lands to assist its growth. Cardew dozed in his hammock under the awning. It was his only chance to snatch an hour's rest between port and port.

The crew had slopped ashore for a spell. A slight change from the schooner's discipline worked wonders with these Arabs. In a little while, when he had worked them into a proper frame of mind, he would allow them plenty of leave. It was nearly midnight.

Billy sat up suddenly; the tide was rippling over the bars, and not one of the Arabs had returned! Without them he could not put to sea. Billy was not the man to grit his teeth and vow reprisals for breaches of discipline. He was

the servant of the tides and the northern Chinese agents, the busy compradores screaming for deliveries. Also, Jan would do some screaming if the black six went missing. Joanna with the dimples and the ice-blue eyes would probably tell him he ought to run a hen farm and leave schooners alone.

Slipping down the gangway, Billy slopped past the agent's deserted office in the direction of the town. Lantern-lit puk-a-pu shops sprang into view as he forged along to whore the crowds of Malays and Chinese thronged the smelly bazaars. Scores of black prahu men skulked within the passages of the samshu houses, where the heavy joss lanterns cast Dante-esque flares across the hot, sandy road. A friendly Dutch voice hailed Billy from the depths of a sour-smelling wine bar.

'Hi yah! You Sydney man! That black rat Abdul is over here in Higo's joint.'

Billy nodded and crossed the road to where the Dutchman's linger had pointed. In his traffickings up and down the Settlements the fame of Higo the blood-master bad reached Cardew. The fellow was just a coolie ruffian from the slums of Hakodate, he told himself. His tricks never varied. Sailors who entered his house were drugged, robbed, and often thrown aboard the cinnabar boats and forgotten.

Cardew halted a moment in the lantern-hung doorway. The shanty was of bamboo and matchboard, a frail, jig-saw arrangement built, on stilts over the yellow estuary that allowed small craft and sampans into the town. In the turn of an eye Billy saw his six Arabs seated at a table where a dice-box was being rattled. Behind the shelf-like bar stood Higo, his naked chest glistening, his face the colour of wet leather.

A pocket tiger of a man, Billy mused, a little blood-alley when the marbles were out. Higo glanced over Billy's straight white figure with the eye of a military governor. It was the look that one fighter gives another, up and down and through his man. It was an all-sufficient stare, and it was enough for Billy Cardew. He indicated the six Arabs genially.

'Those boys belong to my schooner; it's time they were aboard,' he staled simply.

A clammy hush fell on the reeking horde of sampan men within tho crimp - house. A sudden shuffling of feet came from the platform at the rear of the house. Three sing-song words in the vernacular seemed to come from the darkness of the river.

IN the passing of a breath the crimp-house was empty. The six Arabs had gone also. Billy turned to the swinging door leading to the' road. Higo checked him with a gesture.

'When you want a crew you must come to me,' he stated thickly. 'I get you six boys, one hundred dollar a head, in two hours. Ole Koomer will have to pay if you sign contract,' he suggested, a veiled menace in his slat eyes. 'You tell Koomer your boys left at Samark. You savvy?'

Billy Cardew stared in amaze at Higo's bull-neck and the bare chest that shone like wet leather.

'See here, Higo,' he protested good-humouredly, 'I can't run a schooner on those lines. They belong to the bad old days. I have to keep my crews. Those six Arabs who have just bolted are signed up for this trip and many others. They've got pay in advance from Mr. Koomer. And they're going back to my schooner for the benefit of their health. Get that?'

Higo got it, and his slat eyes took on the gleam of a frozen snake. Cardew had seen a similar gleam in the eye of a red-handed, knife-wielding Malay. And just here the voice from the river sounded a second warning to the Jap behind the bar. It seemed to impress upon the little crimp-house keeper the necessity for instant action. At the moment Billy's hand went to the swinging doors a wet towel struck, at the lantern over the bar counter.

The room was in darkness. Cardew never knew how he lost his exact bearings within that long, narrow bar of matchwood and bamboo. Deft fingers had closed the swinging doors while he searched up and down in the Stygian gloom for an exit. Then the folly of trying to get out by the doors occurred to him in a flash. He could smash through the crazy old walls and go his way!

His hand touched a heavy stool near the bar. With a laugh he swung it above his head and turned to the flimsy, patchwork walls. Just here a bamboo pole skated down from the ceiling and struck his shoulder lightly. Another and another came spearing down, followed by a shower of dust and sun-baked flower-pots.

Cardew swore softly under the rain of choking dust and debris. The sky showed suddenly through the torn slats above. He caught sight of arms and feet kicking and scattering the roof covering on to his head.

'Aloha ha!' a voice called down to him. 'How you like it, eh? Plenty more coming, tuan. Plenty more, an' some rats.'

There was no illusion about the army of squealing rodents, rooted from their nests under the thatch. They fell or scampered down the poles on Billy. He was caught in a network of sagging, twisting bamboos. A shower of dust, the refuse of the local bone and ivory mills, fell in choking clouds about him. A diabolical yell from the rafters gave the signal for fresh activities on the part of Higo's assistants Without warning the floor of the shanty collapsed.

With a goat's instinct for maintaining his foothold, Billy's toes clung to a rib of bamboo jammed in the floor joists. It bent under his weight as he struggled

to maintain his balance. A wet, dank mist struck up from the black void beneath him. It came from the soft, bottomless mud of the river below.

Like a cat on a pole, Cardew listened to a soft whooping noise above his head. A black fist, gripping a piece of lead pipe, was striking down in his direction. Nearer and nearer the lead pipe struck, cleaving through the tangles of cane with deadly precision. The bull-neck and bare knees of Higo were visible on a slanting cross-beam.

'A-h-h! A-h-h! You did not go down into the water, Beel?' he grunted cheerfully. 'You are still there. Beel, still hangin' on to the ole house?'

Cardew saw the black, goblin figure above gather itself for a final assault with the lead pipe. Higo moistened his palms, licked his thick lips as he gauged the distance between the lead pipe and Billy's neck. Choked with dust, and the plague of rats scrambling over his half-recumbent body, Cardew rocked to and fro with twenty feet of swamp mud beneath him.

'Eh, Beel?' The lead pipe crashed and slogged through the fallen debris within a foot of the pugilist's shoulder.

'Eh, Beel, you do not answer me.'

This time the pipe cut like a sabre past Cardew's cheek, flattening the bamboo sticks to pulp. Higo balanced himself on the cross-beam and struck again. Cardew ducked and dropped down into the squelching darkness of the tidal estuary.

A world of soft, warm mud shot round Billy's legs and waist. It climbed to his shoulders and squealed with life every time his fists closed on it, living, squirming mud hot from the Malayan valleys and rice fields. For one dazed moment Billy wondered whether he was going down to the bottom of the river. Then his right hand touched a soft, warm face. Billy became suddenly conscious that the face was speaking words of sympathy and courage. The legs belonging to the face were astride an overturned canoe. An electric torch flashed over Cardew.

'Ye brought the rats with ye, Mr. Cardew,' the voice behind the torch said easily as the wave of squealing rodents scurried by.

'I've been watching Higo swing the lead up there. Have a chocolate, Mr. Cardew ?

Billy spluttered and dragged himself to the overturned canoe, glad of refuge and companionship for the moment. Instinct warned him that he was in the presence of the notorious sleuth Larry the Leech. The blows from the lead pipe had ceased overhead. A strange silence fell on the ruins of the crimp-house. Yet Cardew's ear caught the faint pat-pat of naked feet as they left the rear of the house and ran in the direction of the schooner. Larry's voice snapped on his nerves.

'That's Higo running. He'll be aboard your vessel in two shakes. Have a chocolate, my son, and we'll catch up with him.'

Cardew was in no mood for chocolates, or the society of fat detectives roosting on upturned boats. A number of loose planks were strewn under the house. In the turn of a foot Billy had wriggled from the canoe and had crawled over the fallen woodwork to the hank.

'See you later, Larry,' he called out. 'My job won't wait.'

Cardew pelted down the byways, under the hot banyans, past the all-night gaming houses, until the pier was readied. The Jade still carried a rich cargo in her roomy forehold. In a flash he realised Higo's intentions. With the police on his heels the Jap could not stay in Samark. So Higo was going to do something extra in the way of schooner running. Once among the thousand islands of the archipelago the Jade could be retrimmed and rigged and sold for a fortune.

Through the darkness Billy made out the schooner's slender lines moving from the pier. He heard the laboured movements of hands at the heavy boom and foresail. The shore-lines had been cut. A huge pole was being used to shove clear of the jetty. Billy's leap landed him like a wet sack over the Jade's stern rail as she swung away With the breath knocked from his body by the impact, Billy hung cat-like over the 'rail, fighting silently to regain his wind.

In the dull glow of the port binnacle light he made out the shapes of the six Arab boys hauling at the sails. Their voices were raised to a screaming crescendo as the schooner picked up the first slant of wind from the straits.

'Pull hard! By Allah, we are well out of it! The mud of Samark has choked better men than Beel. Allah watches over our good friend Higo.' The crimp-house keeper shrugged deprecatingly. He was standing in the schooner's waist, his leathery chest gleaming from his hurried sprint to the schooner.

'In a little while we will have a look at the cargo.' he intoned gruffly. 'It was no easy thing to pull down my house. Yet it is the right way to bonnet policemen and troublesome schooner captains. Always there are few loose poles fixed under my houses. One or two shakes will bring down the ceiling. Hinges on floors are useful to bring up rum and let down policemen. Ho, it is a simple way out of difficulties when the house does not belong to you,' he bragged cheerfully.

BILLY CARDEW crawled over the. rail and rolled silently beneath some spare canvas piled under the anchor bitts in the stern. His hands wont out instinctively and rested against a warm face, a face that smelt of chocolates and river mud.

'The devil!' Billy choked.

'I took a shorter cut than you, Mr. Cardew,' the face explained. 'I'm an even-timer on the hundred yards dash. And you think I'm fat! Wow! Have a chocolate, boy '

The dawn showed in crystal streaks across the widening skyline. The Jade was now beating up against a south-east wind, with two of the Arab boys at the wheel. Higo dug into the sea with a rope and bucket, and was soon sluicing his face and chest with cool water. Shaking his head like, a mastiff, he reached for a towel that hung from the galley door.

'How are we going to get, him, Mr. Cardew?'' Larry whispered, his automatic pistol clumped under his fat, list. 'If I shoot him out of his trousers the Consuls will bleat for a year about the matter.'

Higo dropped the towel with an oath, and whirled like a tiger at sight of the moving canvas in the stern. Billy Cardew was standing between the deckhouse and the stern rail. He was stripped to the waist, and the cold, clear tones of Larry under the canvas reminded him of the voice of a referee.

'He's a man-killer. Cardew! For God's sake don't close with him. He's wanted for killing two planters in Saigon. Look out!' For an instant every muscle and line in the Jap's body seemed to relax. Then he doubled across the deck with the spring of a cheetah and closed with Cardew. For a silent second or two they writhed and fought for grips. Again the voice of Larry came from the canvas bulge in the stern.

'You're crazy to tackle that fellow. I'm sorry. Cardew, but it's the end for you.'

Billy went down with a crash against the deckhouse, as easily as a schoolboy is flung by a full-grown athlete. Higo danced backwards, crouched for a running kick at the white man's head.

In his many fights Cardew had been floored oftener than he could remember. This constant, tumbling had taught him a number of things; he was on his feet smiling at the butting mass of muscle charging towards him. Higo pulled up with a jerk, feinted with his hands outspread. Cardew accepted the wide-armed gesture; his long left shot through like a piston jolt.

To the watching detective it was only a short push on the jaw Higo sagged and swayed across the deck. Billy stepped close in and flashed in his right with the ease of a matador. The crimp-house master dropped face down under the schooner's rail.

'Thank you, Mr. Cardew.'

Larry the Leech emerged from the canvas and snapped a pair of handcuffs over Higo's wrists.

'I'll take you to a gaol that's built inside an old elephant yard,' he told the slowly recovering Jap. 'The walls are eight feet thick. If you can shake 'em down I'll hand you my six-cylinder car and a free pardon.'

Higo smiled wanly as he stared at the handcuffs.

'My body is made, of paper,' he grunted. 'Gi' me a chocolate, Larry. Higo is fed up with his luck.'

CARDEW returned to Kapang Rabaul with a cargo of cotton goods for Jan Koomer. The trade-house was shut for the night, but Billy saw that the glass doors of the big dining-room were, wide open. The voice of the old Dutch trader was audible inside.

'I worry about you, Joanna. I grow old, and my business will go to nothing if you are left alone here. Dose Malays watch me efery day now. Und der white mens are, just as bad.'

Cardew halted in the palm shadows and drew back. The settlement was full of these old traders, afraid almost to die and leave their womenfolk at the mercy of unscrupulous agents and natives.

Joanna's voice sounded unusually wistful as she crossed the room.

'But he is different, Pa. He's honest. Don't I know? Think of the white dudes and merchants' sons I've met. Shiploads! They know we are rich. Yet not one of them would take on Mr. Cardew's job. They'd like to sit here and handle your guilders, or loaf and tease the billiard balls at the Sampang Club. I've applied a very simple test to them all.'

'What test, Joanna?'

Joanna's laugh seemed to tinkle on the hot night air.

'When these young fortune-hunters come here I offer them a bunch of forget-me-nots at parting. Of course, they swear by book and ring that only death will ever separate them from my little gift of flowers. I've seen those dear boys drop those flowers overboard the moment they got among the white frocks on the saloon deck of an outgoing steamer. Bless them!'

Old Jan stirred uneasily.

'Ja! Men tink of oder tings, Joanna. Who would keep flowers on a ship ?'

A short silence followed, and Cardew in his nervous tension heard the palms whispering above Joanna's soft voice.

'Well, when Mr. Cardew left here two months ago, I gave him a few forget-me-nots. Maybe he threw them overboard like the others; maybe he didn't. These big, rough Australian hoys are like children. They do sometimes remember a gift of flowers from a lady.'

Billy Cardew heaved a deep breath as he back-stepped into the road. Soundless as a bird, he gained the schooner at the jetty end and almost leaped

down the cabin stairs. Opening his locker, he took out a tiny hunch of forget-me-nots he had placed tenderly beside the photograph of his mother. Pinning them to his buttonhole, he hurried back to the trade-house, halted, and then coughed noisily as he stepped to the verandah.

Joanna's shadow seemed to leap across the lighted space at sound of the cough.

'Why, it's Mr. Cardew, Pa!' she announced in surprise.

Old Jan moved from his seat heavily.

'Good evening Cardew. I hear you haf had a good passage,' he, greeted hoarsely. 'I hear, too, dot de boys are now behavin' demselves. Sit down und tell us how Higo was caught und shut in de elephant yard at last.''

There was a beam in Joanna's eye as she looked up at Cardew in the full light of the house-lamp.

_____

26: The Magic Mule

Sydney Mail 28 Sep 1927

KITTY ARDEN had bought the mule. It was tied in the schooner's forepart for the sea-birds to inspect and admire. Kitty's husband. Phil, had asked her to buy the mule. He needed it for his claim at Beetle Creek. Owing to the shortage of labour in New Guinea, and the unwillingness of the natives to work in a mine, Phil had been forced to haul up his wash-dirt single-handed. Now with a windlass properly rigged a mule can be made to haul up clay and rocks till the cows come home.

So Kitty Arden had bought Little Willy at a horse bazaar in Brisbane. He was a small, blonde mule with slim, dainty feet that appealed lo Kilty's aesthetic temperament. Little Willy had been auctioned from a mob of other mules, dark, sinister creatures with hoofs the size of pancakes. One of these hulking creatures had tried to bite Kitty when she leaned over the rail to pat Willy's neck.

Mary's father, Nick Tolliver, owned the schooner. Nick had a share in Phil's claim at Beetle Creek. He too was certain that a young, upstanding mule would prove a blessing to the overworked Phil. A woman could drive Little Willy, he averred, if she used him kindly and kept her hatpin to herself.

During the long, slow voyage from Brisbane the mule's appetite had almost caused a famine on board the schooner. Little Willy ate all his fodder during the first week. After consuming a small cargo of beans in the forehold, the point arose in Tolliver's mind whether the mule would eat bananas or go on a hunger strike. The schooner's after-part was loaded with bananas. When a sailor lost his foothold aloft he fell on bananas.

In consideration of the mine at Beetle Creek, Nick didn't want the mule to die. In his best bedside manner he made offering of a big ripe bunch the size of a piano case. Little Willy accepted the bananas sadly and with ears flattened. But the next day and the next his attitude towards bananas sharpened, as the market, reports are fond of saying. The crew admitted ruefully that Nick had a bedside manner with mules. At the end of the voyage not a scrap of anything eatable remained on hoard. It was discovered, on a rough calculation, that, if the bananas Lillle Willy had consumed had been placed end on end they would have reached halfway from Gulgong to Kilaloe.

Phil Arden was waiting on the jetty at Beetle Creek when the schooner, with the mule on board, made fast. To the sunburnt Kitty Phil appeared drawn and nervous. His young eyes were full of trouble.

'How's the mine, dear?' Kitty asked, with her arms about his shoulders. 'Hope your iuck hasn't run away?'

Phil wiped his hot brow as he turned to greet Nick Tolliver. Crowds of natives swarmed over the beach, watching at a distance and sullenly expectant. A few carried spears, but the headmen and chiefs had come unarmed.

'A week ago,' Phil staled hoarsely. 'I was away in the bush cutting props for the workings. When I returned to the mine I found that some of these people had carried away nearly two hundred ounces of gold. I had hidden it in a tool chest under the reef. Confound these Kooma natives!'

Kitty's face paled at Ihe news. Here was the price of Iheir new home gone for ever.

'The mean, sneaking loads!' she quavered, holding Phil's trembling hand. 'And what in the name of old hals can they do with gold dust, anyhow?'

'Sell it for rum,' her falher growled. Turning to his crestfallen son-in-law, he bade him cheer up and keep a stiff lip before llie Kooma headmen. No use getting mad with them. Now that the mule had come and Kitty was here a better watch could be kept over the mine.

A great commotion was happening on the beach. A crowd of warriors bearing a palm-lined litter approached the schooner. Reclining on the litter was a small fat native wearing a bundle of heron plumes and hornbill heads in his thick hair. In his right hand was a short spear.

'It's old Chuka, chief of the village,' Phil told Nick Tolliver. 'Sick, as usual, and wants medicine.'

'Let him come aboard, dad,' Kilty interrupted hastily. 'It's a chance to make friends with him and his people.'''

'Oh, Chuka's welcome,' Nick Tolliver grunted. 'The old fellow's been a patient of mine for years,'' he told his daughter. 'Cured the old wop of 'flu once. A most awful liar. Steals my empty medicine bottles, too. Still, it's just as well to keep friendly. He's been soaking Dutch arrak, by the look of him.'

Chuka was borne to the gangway, his warriors indicating by their gestures thai, he wished lo come aboard. Tolliver nodded briskly from above.

'Hullo. Chuka!' he greeted, scanning the old chief's gin-inflamed eyes. 'Sins finding you out, eh? Come along; I'll put, you right in no time.'

Ohuka's fat jowl expanded in a grin as they bore him up the gangway and placed him in a deck-chair under the awning.

Nick Tolliver waved Ihe bearers back to the jelly, he did not want their pilfering fingers aboul his schooner.

'I'll send the old man ashore when he's oiled up,' he told them. 'Off with you, now! I'm busy.'

Kitty had drawn a canvas hood over the mules box. The sun was hot. and Little Willy objected to the swarms of big brown flies that had journeyed from the bush to lickle his ears.

Tolliver helped carry Chuka below to the cool little stateroom where he kept his medicine chest and clean whisky. After a dose of oil mixed with a comforting stimulant Chuka was soon snoring on the couch under thie open port window. Kitty remained on deck with Phil. Bolh were interested in the crowds of natives collecling on the jetty. The women's shrill voices made known the fact that not a single yard of red twill had come ashore.

Nofki. Chuka's own medicine man and witchi doctor, hatangued a group of headmen on the folly of allowing their beloved chief to partake of the white man's mixlures.

A fiery-eyed little man with the neck of a rooster was Nofki. His soul was torn by jealousy at the thought of Nick Tolliver's usurpation of his own particular healing powers. With his bony fingers Nofki plucked the string of sharks' teeth about his wizened throat as he foretold of the dire calamity that would fall upon Chuka as the result of Tolliver taubada's spells and incantations, his turning physics.

The headmen listened to Nofki's predictions in frozen silence. It was not by their wish that Chuka delivered himself periodically to the white man with the magic bottles that cured the arrak sickness. It was Chuka's wish. Te ko, na shon! The taubadas were full of magic! For had they not seen a white soldier man take off his right arm and hide it beneath his bed? Even Nofki could nol equal thai for magic.

PhilL translated to Kilty the gist of the headmen's argument. Instantly her mind seized the point of the witch doctor's jealous fury. She had been more than angry at Phil's loss. It now occurred to her that the old chief in the stateroom might be used to bring pressure for the return of the lost gold. It was more than likely that Chuka had himself participated in the mine robbery. Neither Phil nor her father could use force against these hefty spearmen, she told herself. But it was possible to play on their superstitious fears. And Kitty Arden, who had experienced hard times in Sydney during Phil's struggle at the mine, was eager to use her wit and her last ace to bring back the lost gold to her husband.

Kitty tiptoed to the stairhead and addressed her father below. Her voice was no more than a whisper. 'I want Chuka's ornaments, dad; I want to borrow them.'

'Ornaments!' Tolliver repeated darkly. 'What in thunder?'

'I want his spear, his snakeskin belt, and all his head plumes,' she interrupted. 'He will get them back when I've done with them. Be quick, dad; there's a kettle boiling in my little head,' she added with a playful grimace.

Nick's experience of his daughter's humours was profound. He knew when the kettle was boiling and when to made haste. Moreover, she was nol the woman to start skylarking at a time when Phil, was in the dumps over his bad luck. Them was always a reason for Kitty's boil-overs. Very gently he raised the chief's spear from where it lay beside the couch. Unclasping the snakeskin belt from the bulging waist was a task requiring skill anf finesse. It was Kitty's fingers that liberated the gorgeous hornbilled heron plumes from the tangle of ornaments in the chief's mop of hair.

Nick followed his daughter on deck, scarce daring to ask a question as she approached llie canvas-covered mule. Little Willy appeared interested in her movements. He looked at the gorgeous heron plumes with the eye of a dandy.

'The difference between some men and mules is in front of the collar.' she expounded philosophically as she adjusted Chuka's hornbill plumes between Little Willy's straight, listening ears.

'Mother of Moses!' Nick gasped, 'the girl's gone dippy!'

He drew away with a groan of despair as she buckled the chief's snakeskin belt around the mule's ribs. Very dexterously she fastened the spear-handle between the belt and the animal's skin. Chuka's necklace of coral and sea-shells was fastened about his neck. The canvas hood had concealed Kitty's actions from the mob of natives on shore. She made a sign to her astounded husband.

'Litlle Willy's going to walk down the gangway alone.' she announced. 'H's his birthday, not ours!'

Phil scratched liis head dubiously.

'All right, dear. But I don't quite grasp what's in your mind.' he protested faintly.

Tolliver backed away from the plume-decked mule with the snakeskin belt and the spear. The difference in Chuka's appearance and the mule's was negligible. He confessed. It wasn't hard for some fellows to look like mules. All they had to do was to gel inside the right collar.

Touched with a bamboo, Little Willy stepped to the gangway. With the plumes frisking his ears, the blood of Willy's Spanish ancestors responded to the magic thrill of so much finery. Also, there was wafted upon the breeze a smell of the green earth and the tender young shoots of the forest glade.

'Gee up!' Kitty hissed in his ear. 'Gee up. Willy, and keep on geeing!'

The mule reached the jetty at the moment Nofki, the wild doctor, had concluded his final warning anent the magic of Tolliver's potions.

'Woe, children of Kooma!'' he wailed. 'My warning hath fallen on foolish ears. Harm will yet come to Chuka! There are devils on this ship ready to eat his body!'

The hoofs of the mule touched the jetty with a sounding bang. Already he sniffed some delicious shrubbery across the beach. Pawing the air in sheer lightness of heart, Little Willy cast himself heels first into space.

In other countries, and among other people, the mule's gaiety and abandon might have proved startling enough. But to the headmen and warriors of a Papuan settlement a mule was a bolt from the blue. In their virgin remoteness within the Huon Gulf they were familiar enough wilh the glittering, flame-hued feathers of the paradise birds, the lyre-winged beauties of the forest. They knew the four-legged wallaby and the scarlet-crested parakeet. But they had never seen a Spanish mule wearing a chief's head plumes, his spear, and his snakeskin bell.

Little Willy pranced and shot his heels skyward, and then fetched up with a snort of surprise in front of the paralysed wild doctor. It was also Nofki's first mule. In the turn of a toe the beach had become a raving rabble of natives, all heading for the foresl. Back to the village they ran, the witch doctor leading the way.

After endless days aboard Tolliver's schooner Little Willy became infected with the spirit of motion that had seized the simple people of Kooma. He followed on the heels of the fast-moving witch doctor. They raced through gullies and over the scrub-covered ranges, the mule betraying a yearning for the companionship of the tufty-headed medicine man.

The village of Kooma came into view, with Nofki at the head of Ihe slampeding natives. The witch doctor ran in the direction of his own palm-thalched dwelling, terror in his streaming hair and eyes.

'We are undone!' he panted to the few headmen who stayed near him. 'Look and believe thine eyes!'

Little Willy had pulled up at the door of Chuka's big house that occupied the centre of the village square. The door was open, as Chuka's bearers had left it. The earth floors were covered with mats. On the rough slab walls hung a number of native weapons and trophies. Above a throne-like seat, where Chuka often held council with his followers, were clustered a dozen bunches of ripe guavas and bananas. With neck outstretched and breathing cautiously, Little Willy stepped into the deserted house and reached for an appetising-bunch of green and yellow fruit.

Now, in spile of his sudden terror and surprise at seeing a mule, Nofki was no fool. All his life he had had fools for clients, and had grown wise on the folly of others. During the run home his monkey brain had been searching for the

deep down meaning of the mule's make-up. By the time Litlle Willy had helped himself to his fifth banana the witch doclor had got his second wind. He stood in the shadow of Chuka's house and observed Little Willy, his ears and hoofs, his tail, and his hairy hide.

Nofki drew a deep breath, and then with a sudden effort pulled the plank door of Chuka's house towards him, closing if almost without sound. Lillle Willy was now a prisoner!

The headmen, cowering at odd corners of the village square, followed the witch doctor's movements in superstitious honor. Unmindful of their shouted warnings, Nofki bent near a cranny in the plank door and registered each bite and mouthful on the part of the mule inside. Gaining courage, the headmen joined him one by one at his post of observation. Some were armed, and now craved the privilege of killing the strange devil creature.

'Let us strike wilh our spears when he cometh forth,' the bearer of a shining weapon begged. 'One touch on his long neck, O Nofki, just one touch!'

The witch doctor scowled at the spearman. 'Fool!' he snarled. 'It is no devil. It is but the magic of the sea captain on the little ship.'

The headmen gaped at him. 'Can you not see,' Nofki went on, 'that the white man. Tolliver, hath changed the body of our chief, Chuka, into this four-hoofed creature? See how he swallowelh the ripe nabanos! Look through this space in the door,' he invited them blandly. 'Look well at the creature's belly and his mouth, and thou will look upon our chief. No other man in the forest or the valley could swallow nabanoes in such numbers as our beloved Chuka.'

The headmen peeped, one by one, through the crevice in the door. The front hoof of Little Willy was resting on the throne-like seat in his effort to pull down the last of the bananas hanging above.

The headmen watched spellbound. Even the most critical was forced to admit that Tolliver had practised his magic on their beloved ruler. The position. they argued, was not without peril to their tribe. How could this four-footed animal, that most certainly contained the spirit of Chuka, rule in Kooma? Doubtless the great wisdom of Chuka was still embodied in this strange creature. Even the white man's magic could not destroy their ruler's spirit. Yet.... something must be done.

They appealed to the witch doctor. Where was his magic, his spells and potions distilled from alligators' blood and the fat, of his own ancestors? The witch doctor knitted his brows as he faced the owner of the shining spear.

'Thou art right, Booda. By magic only can our chief be returned to his rightful shape. It can be done only with the help of the yellow dust thou stolest from the white man's mine. Bring hither the yellow iron!' he commanded wilh unexpected severity.

Booda of the shining spear was afflicted with a sudden shaking of the knees. Recovering himself under the scowling glances of the headmen, he loped hurriedly across the square and disappeared within a palm thatched hovel on their right. In a little while he was back with a heavy goal skin bundle on his shoulder. The witch doctor scanned it greedily, and dug his talon fingers into the shining heap of yellow riches critically.

'This is the medicine, good Booda, for stricken spirits,' he intoned dreamfully, his fingers closing on the shining gold. 'In my hands it will change the tail of a sheep into the wings of birds.'

'Greal is Nofki!' murmured the headmen.

'Into the wings of birds,' the witch doclor repealed in silent rapture as he gripped the bundle from Booda's shoulder. Staggering with his burden to the door of Chuka's house, he made a sign to the headmen.

'Go to thy homes,' he ordered. 'I alone must make offering to the spirits of Chuka's ancestors. In the dawn of to-morrow our chief will be with us at the council seat. Go, now.'

THE first breath of night saw the witch doctor leading the mule from Chuka's house. They descended a rocky slope that led to the village of Momba in the north. Fastened with a rawhide thong on the back of the mule was the goatskin bundle. Once within the friendly stockades of the natives of Momba, Nofki could live at ease on the proceeds of the yellow dust stolen from Phil Eden's mine. He could become a chief among the simple villagers. The gold would make friends everywhere, even among the white settlers. He laughed at the trick he had played on the headmen. As for Tolliver, who held Chuka in his keeping, he would never see Nofki again!

How clever they had tried to be, he chuckled. It was Tolliver or the white woman who had dressed this four-fooled animal in Chuka's trappings. They had foreseen that the natives would leap to the conclusion that Chuka had been spirited into the body of this stupid animal. Almost he had believed it himself.

'Hurry, thou beast of the bone feet! Hurry!'

He struck Little Willy a sounding blow with a short bamboo he carried. The mule had halted to nip the sweet herbage on the range side. The blow from the bamboo sent it at a fast gait down the track.

At the foot of the range they came to the beach. Here a narrow inlet separated them from the good Government road to Momba and safely. The channel gleamed darkly in the starlight. A high tide had flushed it, and the sound of lapping water gave pause to the hurrying witch-doctor. Mixed with arrak, water was good: but under a man's feet it was sometimes a death snake.

Yet he must go forward. In a couple of hours the headmen of Kooma would be scouring the forest and beach for him and the mule. Scant mercy would be shown him once his trickery was discovered. Visions of their slim bamboo head-knives startled him inio action.

'On, beast that hath no name! Lift thy legs!'

The bamboo slammed and cut at the quivering ribs. Little Willy did not approve of bubbling, tree-shadowed inlets. With the tide water swirling about his legs he saw the reflection of things that startled his nerves. He saw a shadow, topped by a livid smear of light, not twenty yards away. From the crest of this smear of phosphorescence protruded a sabre-edged fin.

Nofki was staring at the bush-flanked road that led to safely. Almost he could hear the whizz of the bamboo head-knives in his rear. Again he struck at the mule's ribs, as he had often struck at men and women who sometimes jibbed at his orders. Little Willy moved forward under the slashing canestrokes until the tide water reached his girth. Beside him, the sinnet halter twisted round his wrist, the witch doctor led the way. In mid-channel his eye fell on the livid wedge of sea fire streaming in his direction.

Nofki was no warrior. All his life he had lived on the superstitious fears of the villagers. In the bat of an eye he saw that a twenty-fool reef shark had found its way into the channel.

The hairs of Little Willy's neck stiffened in terror. Nofki obeyed a lightning impulse to reach the opposite bank of the channel. The mule hung back, rearing and pounding the floor of the channel with its hoofs. A squeal of rage came from the witch doctor as the shark flashed in. For one smothering instant man, mule, and shark thrashed together in a blinding smother of foam and out lashing hoofs.

Little Willy's panic fear did not blind him to the folly of getting his slim legs mixed up in the scythe-like jaws of the reef monster. Willy knew razors from jazz bands; he knew also that if he remained still he would become mule pie for the shark. So Willy danced like the little devil he really was, his sledding hoofs reaching the soft white throat and belly beneath him.

Considered as a side-show it was enough for any self-respecting shark. So the mule was allowed a flying chance to return to the bank. In the triangular scramble Nofki had let go the halter or he would have been jerked to safety by Little Willy's shoreward rush. He turned to the opposite bank wilh a despairing yelp. But the shark had gained its second wind in the deepening flood, although the hoofs of the mule had bent its steering gear.

There was some consolation, however, in the sight of the two-legged figure yelping and kicking in the neck-high water. He caught Nofki, as the cricket reporters say, at point, and held him firmly.

CAPTAIN NICK TOLLIVER threw himself into the only deck-chair the schooner possessed. Kitty sat on the port rail, breathing the soft night air, while Phil sprawled at her feel, a touch of fever in his blood brought on by the worries of his mule and his mine.

'I like a good mystery,' Tolliver growled, 'but this mule act is worse than anything Shakespeare ever put up. We've simply paid our money to get slung.'

'That's a fact, Phil agreed gloomily. 'And don't forget we've still got Chuka on our hands. Poor fellow snored all the sea-birds away this afternoon. At first the silly things didn't mind it. Then, after deciding the noise was something to do with gun-cotton or a non-stop-native sermon, they flapped off, like that blessed mule.'

'And the things that blessed mule could eat, lad,' Tolliver related mournfully. 'With my own eyes I've seen him lick up a plate of fried eggs from the galley.'And them derned deck hands used to give him beer,' Nick lamented, 'Anyway, it wasn't my fault he fell a victim to bananas.'

Kitty peered over the rail into the darkness of the forest, a feeling of hopeless inertia closing about her. She had lost their mule, and Phil had lost the results of a year's hard toil. Always her little plans miscarried. Phil slept feverishly on the hard deck. In spite of his joke about the sea-birds, she felt that his spirit was crushed by suffering and disaster.

'Never mind, girl,' her father whispered at her elbow. 'The best of plans go wrong. In a week or two Phil will be fit for another go at the mine.'

Kitly sobbed quietly, her cheek resting on the schooner's rail.

'Always Phil must have another go at the mine,' she answered passionately. 'Never a rest for sick boys in this country. They're worse off than mules!'

Across thie spreading dawn a ghostly outline that was like a mule bulged on the skyline. Very slowly the mule outline approached the schooner, limping, halting at times to sniff the air. Like a homing spirit he came to the beach, looked up with flattened ears at the silent schooner, and then hung his head dejectedly. The scramble at the inlet with a razor-jawed fish had temporarily unsettled Little Willy. For the moment he was inclined to take his amusements sadly.

'Dad! Here's Willy! He's come back!'

Before Nick Tolliver could restrain her Kitty was down the gangway and cleaving across the beach to where a lame, wet animal was standing on its halter dejectedly. The mule blinked at Kitty in the dawn light, ears slightly bent in token of recognition. To Willy it seemed a cold, cheerless world with long, long intervals between bananas.

Kitty hugged his head and his ears in the sheer delight of his return. After all, they could get along at the mine now that Willy was here to give a pull. Her glance fell suddenly on the ugly goatskin bundle, fastened wilh rawhide thongs to his back. Chuka's spear and snakeskin belt were still in place.

Her busy fingers plunged instinctively into the ugly goatskin bundle. The swiff contact with the cold, wet dust inside was like a shock from the outer spirit world.

'Daddy,' she called out softly, 'you can send Chuka home. I've got another patient there— a cut leg, but nothing serious. There's two hundred ounces of red gold in this parcel!'

AN hour after dawn Chuka came, on deck, smiling sleepily. He was much better, he declared to Tolliver, he could now return to his people with a firmer step. Real was the magic of the white man's medicines! The old chief halted on the gangway to say that none of his warriors would ever again put their fingers into the yellow sand within the mine.

The sight of his gold put Phil on his feel quickly. Kitty was the best girl in the world. But if all the gold in Papua were offered him he could not explain how the fool mule had gone among the natives and recovered the stolen metal. Having no immediate explanation on hand, Kitty wisely held her tongue. There was a ghost of a suspicion in her mind that the witch doctor had tried to lead Little Willy astray. If only mules could tell!

When Kitty sent the dressed-up mule down the gangway she knew Nofki would accuse her father of changing the shape of their sick chief. There had been an idea at the back of her head that the natives in their superstitious fear might be led to return Phil's stolen gold. She had been prepared to bargain with Nofki and the headmen for the safe delivery of Chuka in his natural state, and not as a mule. And as Chuka was on board the schooner she had fell determined to keep the old chief until her husband's hard-won earnings were replaced. But mules and witch-doctors have ideas of their own. And Kitty Arden was glad to let it go at that.

A WEEK later, when the natives of Kooma beheld Little Willy hauling up buckets of wash dirt from the while man's mine, they knew that the spirit of the witch doctor had passed into his body. Even a native could see that the mule had Nofki's eyes and appetite. To a man the villagers felt thal Nofki was now well employed and kindly treated by the busy little while lady who shared her husband's camp in the far hills. The spirits, they inferred, arranged these things very well in Kooma.

27: The Sapphire Slug

Sydney Mail 29 Feb 1928

JIMMY DILLON had lost his schooner and something of his self-respect. He stood on the beach at Falona with less than the price of a meal in his pocket, and the price of a meal within Sam Lee's chop-suey was exactly twelve cents. Falona's wind-swept thunder belt of beach offered nothing to eat or drink. His daughter Naura, employed at the Mission House school, would fill his long-felt want if he cared to present himself at the side door. It was the thought of Naura that had brought him to Falona. For two whole years he had not written or heard from her. But he knew that her work among the native children had become part of her life, and that Falona, nestling in tropic flowers and palms, was the garden of her girlish dreams.

Dillon was a pink-skinned, greyhaired mariner of fifty. He was raw with brine and sleeping out in tropic rainstorms. He was hungry for meat and the brotherhood of white men. He had been drunk at the wheel when the Sydney Lass slid on the reef at Malanga and broke her spine, spilling her cargo of vegetable ivory and copra into eighty fathoms of water. The breakers did the rest, while the saw-toothed sharks that cruise eternally off Malanga attended to the crew of six hands battling blindly in the mast-high walls of surf. Dillon came out alive, and spent his days in search of Paradise Haven, where the days are long and the dinner hell is always ringing.

He found Naura within the white-walled cottage adjoining the Mission Station. She greeted him in glad amazement, for, after all, he personified the sailor father whose secret vices were hidden under a mask of sun-tan and bluff good-humour. His story was not long in the telling— a sketchy tale of a slorm and a crew that didn't know a gaff from a gumdrop, a horde of mainsheef rats who had left poor Jimmy Dillon to his fate on the reefs of Malanga.

Naura listened in shocked surprise as she prepared a good hot meal from the Sisters' pantry.

'I'm down and out, Naura. A bed for the night is all I ask,' he mumbled between mouthfuls. 'Maybe I'll harpoon a job in Falona. There's a big Chinese rice mill and store in the town. Who owns it?' he inquired, lighting a honey-coloured cigar she had unearthed in the visitors' room.

Naura turned quickly from the cooking stove at his question, a touch of colour in her pretty cheeks.

'The mill belongs to Kuen Li. He owns most of the factories and junks in the Archipelago.'

'A Chink always owns the sunset in these parts, Naura,' he growled from the cigar fumes. 'Maybe he'll find me a berth on one of his paddy boats. I could save a bit of money down here, where living is so cheap.'

Naura sighed, and became suddenly thoughtful. It was some time before she spoke.

'Kuen has lost his son, a boy named Nigel Trenwyth. Things have gone wrong ever since.'

Dillon glanced shrewdly at his daughter.

'How could a boy named Nigel Trenwyth be the son of Kuen Li?' he demanded with a puzzled air.

Naura laughed strangely.

'Kuen adopted him years ago. Of course, Trenwyth is Australian. His father was killed in France. The old Chinaman was very fond of Nigel, and allowed him to run the mill in the village. Nigel would have given you a job, Dad. All the beach-combers and new chums found him easy to handle.'

Dillon flinched slightly at her words, but covered his confusion with another question.

'What killed him, guns or drink?' She shook her head.

'I'm not sure anything killed him. Some months ago a report went through the islands that a party of Sydney prospectors had discovered a valley of sapphires in Bhuta Laut, in the Malay Archipelago. The report worried Nigel; it seemed to loosen his grip on his work. Of course, I'm only supposing it was the sapphires that unsteadied him. Anyway, he left Falona without a word to anyone. Not a whisper of his whereabouts has reached Kuen since.'

'The young fool!' Dillon muttered. 'Fancy leaving his golden chopsticks and a fifty-million-dollar father to chase bits of glass in the fever-hells of the Bhuta valleys!'

Naura smiled sadly. 'Men get broken on reefs, just like you, Daddy. Sometimes it's a gold reef or a sapphire mine. I know a boy who went, mad over an alum mountain he'd heard of in Queensland. Another threw away his savings looking for camphor in Sumatra. Sapphires got poor Nigel.'

Naura prepared him a bed in a room adjoining her own. It was possible that the affluent Kuen Li might find him employment in the mills or on one of his small copra schooners plying between Falona and the Dutch settlements in the north. Once this was done, she would cease to worry about his comings and goings, his shipwrecks and his desperate needs.

DILLON slept hard, and woke with his head full of plans for the future. He could not rid himself of the story of Nigel's disappearance. Of course, boys ran away from comfortable surroundings, he told himself, to mix with pigs and

sleep in foetid straw with gaolbirds and island cut-throats. His seaman's nose smelled a commission in Trenwyth's disappearance. He would see Kuen Li, and bring up the question of the missing son. The old Chinaman could be made to stand for some kind of an expedition to bring the boy home. It needed only a little tact.

'I'm going to hunt this job,' he told Naura after breakfast, 'I'm willing to bet,' he added, swallowing the last cup of coffee, 'that Kuen will hand me a white uniform and a command before the day's out.'

Naura shook her head as she straightened his cravat and brushed-the threadbare nap of his seaman's coat.

'Remember, Dad, Kuen is harassed daily by scores of job-hunters. It takes a man of genius to get an interview. All Sydney couldn't do it.'

He smiled grimly at her words. 'I've never taken the wrong turning with a Chinaman, Naura,' he told her, buttoning up his coat and brushing back his irongrey hair.

'I'll bring the bacon home to-day, or I'll chew the rind.'

He walked briskly along the beach front, past heavily-shuttered gaming-houses and pak-a-pau shops, until he reached the wide, lantern-docked verandah that screened the offices of Kuen Li.

The shufflings of a hundred sandalled feet went up and down the heavily-curtained passages that threaded the squat-roofed store-houses. At the very entrance he was accosted by a lemon-hued Celestial with the neck and fists of a champion heavyweight.

'Solly, sail. You no squeeze by this mo'ning. Missah Kuen suffah one big headache. He no talkee to anybody.'

Dillon shrugged as he surveyed the keeper of Kuen's privacy. 'My son, I've heard about that headache; you'll hear about mine if Mr. Kuen doesn't get my message sharp and lively. Step on it ana tell him there's a white captain with news of Nigel. Tell him now, or there'll he horns on his headache when he hears you've turned me away.'

The slat eyes of the doorkeeper widened instantly at sound of the name Nigel. It was like a keyword uttered in that vast establishment, where the rich merchandise of a hundred islands bulged from every corner and landing-piace.

The slat eyes disappeared, and, after a heart-breathing space, returned to the palpitating seaman in the passage.

'Come along,' he intimated with Celestial brevity. 'The Giver of All Things will hear the white captain.'

Dillon caught his breath, and braced himself like one steering into a cyclone. His hour had struck. The ineffable murmur of Oriental voices reached him, like the sound of bees foraging in clover, as he followed the doorkeeper.

At the end of the passage they halted before a solid teak door decorated with Chinese inscriptions.

'Inside is the Giver. Go in,' prompted the conductor wilh a salaam.

DILLON entered, his faded cap clenched in his sunburnt fist. The room was stuffy and dark; it smelt of cinnamon and strange fish oils. A small window shed light on an elf-like figure in a black skullcap and yellow jacket at the far end of the apartment. The figure was bending over some papers scattered over a glass-topped desk. It was an old face that looked up at Dillon, a face that age had corroded and hammered to a yellow crust. But the hands that sifted the papers on the table were as delicate as chaste ivory. The eyes blinked curiously over Dillon's shabby clothes before they shifted to his face.

'What you want?' lie demanded in a flat, bleak voice. 'Who sent you' heah?'

In his day Dillon had met Chinamen by the score, but Kuen Li, in the black skull-cap and the jewelled, ivory hands, was like some spirit out of the tomb.

'Mr. Kuen Li,' he answered slowly, 'my luck's out. I've lost my ship. So, if you'll excuse me, I'll cut out the windy stuff about my trade experience in this Archipelago and get to the point where your adopted son, Nigel Trenwyth, comes in.'

The old Chinaman's delicate hands opened and shut convulsively. A crucified smile that might have been caused by a sudden stab in the back rent his parchment-like features.

Dillon coughed as though the Chinaman's eyes were probing and searching the nerve channels of his brain. He spoke witli an effort.

'I don't know why Nigel left Falona, Mr. Kuen. They say he got sapphire fever and wandered into Borneo. It may be that some of the blue glass stuck in his feet. Anyhow, he landed in a crimp-house at Sarawak without a dollar to mend his shoes. The crimp shop is owned by an old German convict named Gluckmann. Let me tell you when a boy falls into Gluckmann's hands he falls to the fifth floor of Gehenna.'' 'Gluckmann!'

The old Chinaman brooded over the name, wrote it with his gold-topped pencil on the blotting-pad beside him. 'I do not know Gluckmann of Sarawak,' he intoned.

'So much the better for you,' Dillon stated blandly. ' Gluckmann is a shanghai expert, a man-crimp, a bloodhound in the pay of coffin-ship owners. He sells men and boys as you sell rice and soya beans. I can't tell you, sir, how Nigel got into his clutches, but, like scores of others, he can't get away until—until—'

'What?' snapped Kuen Li, peering al Dillon under his shrivelled brows.

'Until the blood money is paid. Nigel is in debt to Gluckmann for food and lodging and money advanced. Until someone pays that debt Gluckmann will hold Nigel in Sarawak until he rots and dies.'

Kuen. stirred himself, after the manner of a hen caught brooding.

'Money,' he fluted softly? and was silent.

Dillon paled under his sun-tan. He had begun to believe his own story now. He slammed a clenched fist on the glass table, and looked into the Chinaman's eyes.

'If I had a vessel and three square meals in the galley I'd bring the boy back lo Falom. Who wants money? A few hundred yards of cotton trade, a bolt or two of red cloth would fix up Nigel's debt, to Gluckmann. Any old schooner or junk would carry me to Sarawak.'

A dozen sing-song words seemed to float into the room from a near recess, as if a listener had picked up the thread of the argument and answered it to Kuen.

The old Chinaman lay forward on the desk, his chin cupped in his fleshless palm.

'I cannot send a schooner to Sarawak with a strange man. You offer no security.'

Dillon chafed inwardly al the coldness of the reception, but controlled himself wilt an effort. His hasty temper in the past had lost him more than enough. He must play tbis rich Chinaman as men play a big fish. The book was well under the gills. With patience he would land him flapping on Ihe bank. The prize of victory was a schooner loaded with island trade goods. Once clear of Falona he could go anywhere and live the life of a South Sea merchant.

'I'm thinking Nigel, and not of the loan of a junk. I don't ask for money. All I ask is a chance to bring the boy safe and sound to your verandah.'

Again came the sing-song words from the recess. Kuen batted his almond eyes and stared abstractedly at the points of his manicured fingers.

'I s a w enough schooners at your wharf to-day to move an army,' Dillon flung out. 'You use them for shifting lumber and vegetable truck— any derned refuse that will bring dollars. But when it comes to risking a few rotten planks to save a bov from ruin youfreeze down and call for security.'

'I will write to Cluckmann,' Kuen parried, still conning his nails. 'I will post him a cheque.'

Dillon retreated slowly to the door and opened it. He looked back at the black skull-cap, the small shrivelled figure at, the fable. 'Post Gluckmann a cheque, Mr. Kuen Li. Make it half a million dollars, if you like, and you'll find yourself still in Gluckmann's debl. Once he discovers he's dealing with the wealthy Kuen Li of Falona he'll cut your jugular— and good luck to him, I say!'

DILLON stepped out into the passage, rage and disappointment almost blinding him. He had made his throw, and had missed badly. Halfway down the passage a soft voice hailed him, the voice of the slat-eyed doorkeeper.

'The Giver of All Things is ready to listen again. Be not hasty. The door is still open.'

Dillon strode hack to the room, cap in hand, a tense feeling of victory surging in him. Kuen Li was straining forward in his low chair, a telephone receiver al his ear. He put it aside and raised his eyes to the white man standing before him.

'That is what Gluckmann would do— open my jugular,' he purred, taking up the thread where Dillon had dropped it. 'There is white wisdom in that.'

The seaman inclined his head at the compliment. 'I'll go to Gluckmann with a gun; it's the only argument he'll understand when I demand Nigel. Once he smelt gold in the family he'd behave like a wolf.'

'How long would it take to get my son?' came from the dry, shrivelled lips of the Chinaman.

Dillon's answer was swiff and certain. 'A couple of months, if the weather leaves me with a stick to stand by. A lot depends on the kind of craft you'll send.'

Kuen look up the receiver and spoke to a compradore at the quayside. Turning to Dillon, he nodded gravely.

'You shall go to Sarawak and get my son. I will lend you a good schooner, and my name will help you with the Consuls wherever you claim help.'

'I want a good rifle,' Dillon begged. 'A Lee Enfleld for choice. When do I sail?'

'To-night at six o'clock. Go now and make ready. A boy will take you to Ihe quay.'

IT was a handy fifty-ton schooner Kuen placed at Dillon's service. The sight of her clean deck and snowy canvas thrilled him like a draught of wine. Bales of cotton trade and valuable fabrics were lowered into the batches under the eyes of a tally-keeping compradore. Provisions were rushed aboard from the storehouses— tinned chicken, ham, beef, and. flour; while Dillon chuckled inwardly from his coign of vision on the poop. At last the gods had listened to his prayers. There would be no more mistakes and fooling with destiny. Within a week he would be safe on the other side of the Pacific.

He was disturbed in his speculations by yhe sudden appearance of Naura at the quayside. Her face betrayed unusual animation as she joined him on the poop.

'I've heard the news, Dad! It's splendid of you to go after Nigel. The whole town is talking about it.'

Her warm fingers closed on his stiff hands, while her breath came in laboured expulsions.

'God bless you. Dad, for thinking of poor Nigel! I— I thought the world had forgotten him.'

Dillon stared in stiff-lipped amaze at his daughter. Tears flashed in her eyes; she was crying softly with her face half-buried against his shoulder.

'Why, I didn't know you took such an interest in the youngster,' he stammered hoarsely. 'Can't he lose himself without you worrying?'

A sense of impending tragedy gripped Dillon. His dreams of a free-and-easy life in the Pacific began to fade. He raised her face between his rough bands, and looked into her dark, tear-filled eyes.

'See here, Naura, I mightn't find Trenwyth. Malaysia's as big as Europe, and I've got my own affairs to look after. What's the trouble, anyway?' he demanded coldly.

'Daddy'— Naura turned away her head for a moment, as if to escape his fierce scrutiny— 'Nigel and I were married eight months ago. Kuen Li knows nothing about it. I want Nigel back, Dad! The sapphire boom up north is dead. There are better chances for him here in Falona. Kuan worships him, and he's ashamed to come home.'

Dillon's arms fell stiffly to his side. The tragedy of his daughter's position struck him with numbing force. His blackguard soul shrank from the tangle he had almost woven about her. He could not believe that Nigel Trenwyth was alive. No boy could survive a lone-hand journey into the jungle hells of Malay. His young body was probably rotting into some mangrove swamp or creek-bed.

'Naura, I couldn't even begin to look for him! I'd spend my life hauling this schooner up and down the 'pelago, shoving her off sandbars and fighting dyaks. You're asking me to hunt for a dead man,' he blurted out.

He fell her huddle in his arms as though he had struck her between the eyes. He smoothed her hair with unusual tenderness, his memory groping back to the days when she had lain in his arm as a baby in their old weatherboard cottage at Dawes Point.

'Dad, I feel that Nigel's alive. Three months ago he was at Bhutang Laut. I got a message from some pearl-shellers. They said he was working in the hills, prospecting. Bhutang Laut is an island off Sumatra. You know every cape and bay in the locality,' she pleaded.

Dillon gestured heavily as he put her aside. It was getting dark and the tide running out.

'Good-bye,' he found voice to say. 'I'll see what's doing at Bhutang. If he's alive I'll bring him home. All the same, girlie,' he added ruefully, 'you've given your father a pretty difficult job: but I'll do my best. Good-bye.'

THE sea lay still as a cloud undor the sun's fiery disc. A coastline of jungle-covered inlets and estuaries showed through the overhanging mists and vapours. Dillon perspired at the wheel, his weary eyes scanning the distant tablelands for signs of life or habitation. For eighteen days he had cruised and sulked among the mangrove-infested cays of the Landang Isthmus.

Bhutang Laut lay on his quarter, mist-wrapped and noxious as a coolie fever camp. Myriads of sea-hawks squalled and circled about the mangrove-darkened beaches. Into a scrub-poisoned inlet he wore the schooner until his shore line lay securely about the bole of a lightning-blasted banyan. Descending from the poop he turned to Goa, a halfcaste Malalonga boy, whose knowledge of the coast was instinctive.

'You like go ashore with me, Goa?' he demanded cheerfully, as he indicated the lawny, scrub-infested gullies in the distance.

Goa paled under his coppery skin, 'This place belonga Orang Saya,' he quavered. 'Gunboat catchee him one, two year ago for burnin' white mans' rubber trees, sah. He keep um plenty cock quail to fight alla day in compound. Hand um dyak baby to ole tiger sometime. Then dyaks come in from swamp an' poison his buffaloes. Always war an' plenty fight round Orang Saya's compound. No like go ashore, sah.'

Dillon shrugged and laughed as he brought his Lee-Enfield from the stateroom.

'Come with me, Goa. I'll shoot some fresh meat and let you do the skinning. Maybe I'll give you that knife with the shiny handle. Come along.'

Goa brightened at the prospect of the gift, and, after instructing his native deck hands to stand by the schooner, Dillon clambered ashore with Goa at his heels.

Forging across the tide-scoured bunds and heavy bamboo grass, Dillon halted on the crest of a sandy ridge and searched the forest line with his binoculars. His seaman's eye was not long in locating a miniature white-walled residency, scarce visible among the clumps of camphor laurels and banyans that surrounded it. Goa followed the direction of the binoculars.

'Orang Saya's hunting box, sah,' he chattered. 'By-an'-bye he come out alonga elephant, maybe!'

Swarms of pigmy geese trailed overhead without, bringing a shot from Dillon. His eye had suddenly overtaken the edge of a blue sarong dodging through the bushes on his right. Sprinting forward, he easily caught up with the

bent figure of an old dyak crone staggering through the tree-ferns. Her eyes were crazed with fear as she crouched from the white man with the rifle.

'Na pa, tanga, tuan. Spare the aged. I will tell everything,' she begged.

'Tell her I'm a friend,' Dillon instructed Goa. 'Say I'm looking for a white boy. Ask her if she's met any sapphire maniacs in the hills.'

The crone shook her head as Goa translated Dillon's inquiry. Then her eye brightened unexpectedly at the promise of immunity from punishment if she confided good or bad news to the big white rajah with the gun. Her bony forefinger indicated a wide depression in the bamboo grass about, a mile from the bullock track that led to the Orang's residency.

'Follow the watercourse, tuan. You will come to the long chain and the iron lizard. Look farther; you will see the man with the white skin. There is sapphire in his eyes only. Let me go now, tuan, or I suffer the Orang's anger.'

Dillon listened while the sun smote into the sweltering cane. He-would have riddled the crone with questions concerning the long chain and the man with the sapphire eyes. Goa tugged at his sleeve impatiently.

'Let her go; sah. She speaks of a devil lizard in the hollow. There is no white man, believe me. She lied to get away.'

Dillon thrust him aside as he plunged down the cactus-covered slope of the water-course. Through the stiff, flesh-piercing cane he ploughed, his rifle tucked under his arm. Dillon was no visionary, but something in his white man's brain leaped at the crude hints dropped by the dyak crone. Somewhere in the tundra a white man was hiding. But what of the iron lizard and the mysterious chain?

Goa panted in Dillon's wake, murmuring at the folly of seeking jungle devils and the spirits of dead white men.

'Cut that snuffle,' Dillon snapped, striding through a patch of thorn bush to gain the watercourse. He hailed and stared round. Here and there he saw the ruins of an ancient shrine protruding from the tangle of lianas and cane. Broken pillar slumps and archways indicated where priests and holy men had once foregathered. His glance wandered along the watercourse to the shadow of a massive stone tank that dripped water and slime into the hollow below.

A sudden cry from Goa took him with a jump into the knee-deep slime and mud of the gully. The scarce audible clink-clink of a chain struck like a bell on the stifling air. It seemed to come from the rolling reed-beds beneath the dark mangroves on his right.

'Look, look, tuan!' Goa almost screamed. 'The green devil... Down there!'

Fifty feet of mud-rusted chain was sliding along the bed of the gutter almost at Dillon's feet. Link by link he followed the gently sliding movement until his eye rested on a twelve-fool alligator slithering through the mud.

'Great Kafoozlum! You call that a lizard!' Dillon gasped, wiping his brow. 'That darned reptile's chained up, too,' he added, peering at the iron bell, that held the chain to the saurian's body. The chain stretched along the bed of the watercourse to whore a crumbling stone parapet, crossed the gutter at ngh angles. A hole in the masonry showed where the chain passed through.

Skirting the creek-bed, Dillon picked his way to the breast-high parapet and looked over. The space beyond was covered with rotting vegetation and tangled spear-grass, flattened out as if a body had been dragged over it.

Dillon looked far up the creek-bed for a continuation of the chain, but saw nothing. Then his eye dropped to the mud bed immediately under the parapet where he stood. Crouched under the wall, his knees jammed against the masonry, was a youth of twenty, naked except for a strip of cotton rag around his waist. His right ankle was held to the chain by a steel ring. Dillon choked back a bitter oath as he stared down at the semi-conscious, figure of the boy.

Clambering over the parapet he knelt, beside the huddled figure, his brandy flask touching the parched, ashen For ten seconds Jimmy Dillon allowed the spirit to trickle between the clenched teeth, while his left hand moved with a woman's tenderness over the faintly beating heart.

In a little while the boy stirred, and lay breathing harshly with his head in the old seaman's lap. Dillon saw that the steel ring was held to the boy's ankle by a short iron pin. Gently and without effort, he crouched low and, with the point of his rifle barrel, hammered the pin craftily, moistening its rusty point from time to time with the spirit from the flask. The sun stayed like the hand of a devil on his neck as he drove the pin with a soft curse into the rank grass.

Goa picked it up as the ring fell away from the boy's ankle. Instantly the chain with the steel anklet attached was drawn through the hole in the parapet by the slow pressure from the big saurian on the other side of the parapet.

Dillon turned suddenly to Goa. 'Cut back to the schooner and fetch a hammock and pole. Tell two of the boys to come along.'

Goa bounded away through the long grass in the direction of the schooner. Dillon drew the boy higher up the bank, and again applied the flask to the heat-tortured lips. After a breath-giving space he addressed him quietly.

'I guess that iron mugger's been dragging you up and down this gully for a long time, eh, kid?'

The boy looked up at the old seaman, and his eyes smiled wearily. 'Up and down the gully— as you say,' he intoned with difficulty. 'It was when the brute had me hard up against the wall by the ankle I saw red. It was at feeding time he hurt most. You see, the Orang Saya and his servant stake a live goat or sheep just out of the mugger's reach. The beast naturally strains to get it. The strain in the chain used to drag me up to the hole in thp wall I had to lie there,

jammed, helpless faint, until I could bear no more. That happened three times a week.

Dillon clenched his fists as he wrapped a big silk kerchief about the boy's head to shield it from the fierce sun-rays.

'I guess you're what's left of Nige Trenwyth,' he proclaimed hoarsely. 'I'll cut it short by saying I'm Naura Dillon's old man. I've got a commission to take you home to Falona. Why did Orang Saya hitch you to that bull-mugger?' he demanded fiercely.

Nigel gestured feebly in the direction of he hills.

'I staked out a sapphire claim without asking his permission. His men rushed mv camp late one night and brought me down here. The Orang swore I was part of a gang of sapphire-hunters from Sydney who annually steal from his estates. He said he'd make an example of me.'

'And he's had you chained here all the time?'

'For days at a stretch. Then he'd put mo in camp among those cannibal dyaks until got strong enough to stand the chain punishment again.'

Sounds on the sandhills above fell on Dillon's ear. Goa, followed by two of the schooner hands carrying a hammock and pole appeared, gesticulating wildly. 'Tuan, quick! The Orang is coming here. If he catch us on his land we die, sure.'

DILLON'S teeth snapped like a wolf trap. Not by the fraction of an inch did he move from his position beside Nigel. His rifle lay at his feet.

'Shut up and sit down, he said to his followers. 'There's going to be some fun.'

From his sandalled feel lo his turbaned brow Orang Sayah radiated sapphires and jewelled weapons. He came on foot, across a well-worn track until ho stood gazing down inlo the watercourse at the armoured devil blinking idly in the sweltering ooze, its great snout resting in the warm mud. A kris handle sparkled from the folds of his peacock blue smock; his plump fingers blazed wilh precious stones. Beside him skulked an attendant carrying a hammer.

A spasm-like grin broke over the Orang's saturnine face as he contemplated the giant lizard. Curiously enough the monster had not shifted its position since Dillon had freed Trenwyth. It only needed a slight pull on the saurian's part to bring the loose chain and anklei through the hole in the parapet. Orang Saya walked pensively to the parapet, halted, and looked over.

Dillon was still squatting in the grass, a match held to a black cigar between his teeth. The Orang drew away with a smothered cry, his hand dropping

instinctively to his kris. In the snap of a twig his attendant, was beside him, staring wide-eyed at Trenwyth and the white captain with the cigar.

Dillon made no effort to raise the rifle that lay at his feet. His steely eyes were fixed on the jewelled weapon in the Orang's shaking hand.

'Always your black breed is ready to stick someone,' he sneered. 'One day its a pig; next a man or a dyak woman's baby. Put away your steel, Orang Saya; well have a different kind of pig-killing to-day.'

The Orang quivered as though the insult had stung. 'Akino purata! Who sent thee to my lands?' he demanded sternly. 'Rise and begone. Your white face brings hate and ruin to my people.'

A short laugh broke from Dillon. In the backwash of a dozen Malayan rivers and ports he had met the half-caste dyak landowners, whose inbred cruelty and pride were a constant menace to lonely sailormen.

'Sit on that wall, Orang,' he commanded with something like judicial restraint. 'It will do for a dock, and you're going to answer the only white judge you're ever likely to know. Sit down!'

Orang Saya sat down.

A curious smile touched Dillon's lips.

'I just stumbled on my young friend here,' he went on, with a side-glance at the listening Nigel. 'And I found him hitched up by the ankle to that chain. I needn't point out, Orang, that, you had a bull alligator fastened to the other end. I'm going to ask you what this young white man did to deserve a little thing like that. If he's wrong I'll shoot him to save further trouble. If he is not I'll plug you, in case you get the habit of chaining up boys and babies to jungle horrors.'

Orang Saya met Dillon's steel-white eyes and bent his head like one who comes speedily to grips.

'That dog!' He jerked a finger in Trenwyth's direction. 'He was caught, taibo mara, on my lands. I lose sapphires, juga, by the gobletful. I swear by the prophet that I will kill these poachers. Who art thou, dog of a sailor, to question my acts?'

Orang Saya swung on his heel with a light gesture to his attendant with the hammer. 'A dozen times a year my pride is hurt by these gaol thugs and sea bandits who suck my land of its fiery gems,' he added in the vernacular.

Dillon allowed him twelve paces before he rose and brought, his rifle into line.

'Halt, Orang! I'm not through yet.''

Again the Orang faced him, his hectic pride dimming the fear of death that looked at him across the parapet.

'I have spoken, white man. Take care, what you do. Your head is in my lap.'

Dillon answered along the barrel of his rifle. His lips quivered strangely. 'I'm going to put that, leg-iron on you, Orang.' He indicated with a nod the steel band lying at the end of the chain under the parapet. He was morally certain now that the attendant had brought the hammer for the purpose of refastening or lightening the ring about Trenwyth's ankle.

'Hold up your hands, Orang, or I'll kill you where you stand!'

There was no denying the white rage that now flamed in Dillon's eyes. The live menace of his gestures swept the last spark of courage from the Orang's poise. His hands went up. Dillon spoke to the attendant with the hammer.

'Stick that leg iron on your master's ankle. And you, Goa,' he added sharply, 'hand him the pin.'

The attendant hesitated only the fraction of a minute. Then he stooped, muttering a prayer of anguish, and clamped the steel ring above the sandalled foot. Goa handed him the pin. With three deft strokes of the hammer he had fastened the Orang to the chain.

Dillon strode over in the direction of Hie basking saurian. 'I guess we'll start the show now,' he stated with a grin. Snatching the hammer from the attendant's hand, he hurled it with thunderbolt force at the reptile's blinking eyes.

THE hammer struck the scaly snout with the impact of a bullet. The effect was electrical. The dormant alligator whipped round with the speed of a motor-car. A whirlwind of mud and stones blew round its churning, flailing length. The chain raced through the reeds as though drawn by a giant wheel.

'Batu mara!' screamed the Orang as the slithering chain volplaned him across the slime-choked reeds. The belching head of the monster was within a yard of his face. He rose from the clinging slime, staring blindly around for some means of escape. The saurian ceased its mad gyrations as it followed the movement of the jewelled, mud-smeared Orang. The lids of its fishy eyes glinted hatefully as it darted through the intervening cane grass.

Dillon chuckled under his breath. 'Get him, mugger,' he called out. 'He's the last pie in the window.'

With scarcely a ripple of its scaly body the iron jaws flashed and snapped within a foot of the Orang's knees. He leaped aside in time to avoid the sabre-like stroke of its tail. Panic terror gripped him. He dared not move too far from the saurian; it would mean a tightening of the chain and another volplane through the mud. He dug his heels, into the slush. The courage that binds men to life took a leap in his veins. He cast an inquiring glance at Dillon that was a half-uttered request. The old seaman nodded comprehendingly.

'Get him if you can. I'll allow any man a fighting chance. One of you has got to take the count.'

Orang Saya drew his jewelled kris as he circled through the reeds, the clashing jaws of the bull alligator narrowing the circle at each new rush. Moreover, the long chain had fouled a long tree-root, bringing man and saurian almost face to face. Bent forward, his knees resting in the mud, Orang Saya held out his left, arm temptingly to the oncoming snout. The saurian accepted the invitation with a short grunt, its sabre teeth snapping at the naked flesh. 'Baste!'

The naked arm was withdrawn suddenly, while the Orang's kris hand shot into the mouth, over the slavering tongue to the tender mass of flesh with the tunnel-like gullet. In a flash he had withdrawn his hand, leaving the kris wedged like an upright stick within the throat. The deadly kris prevented the pain-maddened monster from closing its jaws.

Wrapped in a smother of flying stones and sand, it rolled, belching furiously, over the floor of the watercourse. At a sign from Dillon the attendant with the hammer struck the ring from the Orang's ankle. Dillon watched the alligator's frantic gyrations as it sought to shake the kris from its gullet. Then he turned to the mud-covered Orang, whose eyes had grown dim with the agony of his brief ordeal.

'I guess, Orang, we'll give that mugger a holiday. His time's up.'

Dillon fired into the soft, upturned throat of the reptile and strode away.

The deck hands swung the hammock from the pole and, with Nigel inside, followed Dillon back to the schooner.

Orang Saya stared at the quivering body of the bull saurian and turned away.

'By Allah, the breath of the lizard has made me sick.' He beckoned wearily to his attendant. 'Get my kris, Rabaul,' he ordered, pointing to the dead saurian. 'God punishes men in curious ways.'

EIGHTEEN days later Dillon landed Nigel Trenwyth at the quayside, Falona. Naura was waiting beside Kuen Li for the gangway to fall. Her eyes were aglow with the news of Nigel's homecoming. Trenwyth sprang down the gangway and caught her in his arms, while Kuen, in his spotless linen, nodded wisely.

'The real sapphires are on your heart, Nigel,' he intoned gravely, his eyes full on Naura. 'Your wife is my daughter. She has told me everything.'

Dillon grinned happily as he patted Nigel's shoulder.

'Youth will be served, Kuen. And Trenwyth has eaten a dishful of trouble with a spiny lizard for dessert. He wants a job.'

Kuen's ivory hands held Nigel in a tender clasp.

'There is a story in your good book of a Prodigal Son.' He pointed suddenly to the lantern-lit house among the coral trees and palms, where a multitude of servants moved among crystal glasses and white napery. 'Let us forget the swineherd past and go into the feast. My son has come home.'

Dillon followed Kuen into the palatial dining hall like one in a dream.

'Holy smoke!' he muttered under his breath. 'My luck changed the day I decided not to pinch the schooner.'

_____

28: The House of the Snake

Sydney Mail 18 April 1928

THE two Chinamen were always watching Lorna from the lamplit corner of the room. There were times when she had to return their bland, feline glances. Her father insisted that their custom kept the roof on the store, kept him from bankruptcy and the beach. Ching Lee and Tung War exported shark oil and tins to China. They employed the native fishermen at Beetle Creek as harpooners and cutters-up. And there were enough sharks off the reefs and inlets to keep a dozen oil junks busy during the season.

Lorna's father, Jim Croydon, kept the store that overlooked the wide-mouthed, mangrove-skirted creek. Times were bad. The gold rush on the Yoda River was a thing of the past. The miners no longer waited in queues outside the store with pill-boxes and jam tins stuffed with gold dust to pay for tea, sugar, flour, and bacon, and that rare miner's luxury, a tin of condensed milk.

So with the passing of the gold boom Jim Croydon sat between the devil and the beach, as they say in New Guinea, with the two Chinamen as his only customers. But Jim hung on to the store; the land in the north, was loaded with minerals. At. any moment the. news of a 'find' might come down the river, and then the big-hearted crowds of men with the pill-boxes and jam-tins would line up once more for the bacon and the et ceteras.

THE night had come up with shifting puffs of air from the forest-darkened river, hot and stifling with the sickly breath of the mangroves. And always this jungle-wrapped river supplied the evening's music, in the way of the big mosquito choir that hit as it sang, and drove men hurriedly to the shelter of their nets and gauze-proof rooms.

Ching Lee and Tung War were seated at the rough table, where the smoking oil-lamp played tricks with the contours of their Mongolian heads and faces. From his pocket Clung produced a hollow black bean, the size of a walnut, and laid it cheerfully on the table. The black bean was supplied with four match-stems in the way of legs. In a little while the bean began to shiver and waddle spasmodically. Incidentally, one of the front legs began to move.

Lorna watched with fascinated eyes as the two Chinamen began to bet on the movements of the hollow black bean that moved hither and yon on four match slicks. Ching would bet that the next movement would come from a hind leg, and Ching always covered his bet with a small heap of gold coins. Tung War would stake that a front leg would step out; and so on, until a pile of sovereigns found its way into the game before, midnight.

Before leaving the store Ching released a fierce black ant from the interior of the bean and moistened its feelers with a sticky brown substance he kept in a small metal box. Then very carefully he replaced the ant within the narrow shell.

'You go sleepee now,' he murmured, dropping the bean in his pocket.

Tung War smiled like the good loser he was.

'Welly useful lille ant,'' he confessed with a yawn. 'To-mollow ni' him win fo' me. Hi yah!'

Lorna suppressed a shudder as she watched them pass out to the darkness of the creek.

She had almost grown accustomed to this nightly game with the bean and ant. Frequently the white miners played it.. It was all a matter of chance; for no living man could square a black bull-ant.

IT was a month since the last white man had called at the store. His name was Noel Villiers, and he had stayed only one night. He was a young clergyman who had responded to the call of the Sydney Missions. Her father said he was crazy, but somehow Lorna knew better.

Yet it did seem an act of madness for a young, inexperienced minister to land alone in a place like Beetle Creek, and after only a few inquiries concerning the natives in the north-west, to disappear into the unknown. It was hinted that he had gone in the direction of Merke, a native settlement of nearly a thousand souls.

In the argot of the Papuan Merke means stone god. Perhaps that was why Noel Villiers had gone. Streams of while men and boys had gone that way. The jungle beckoned like a loose-necked siren, a jungle that poisoned and then covered their weary bodies with leaves and the tears of the ever-dripping mangroves. The rapids and torrents drowned them, fever dealt with the few who survived the treacherous streams and crossings.

Her father had tried to restrain Noel Villiers— had pointed out, roughly enough, that the people of the rivers were just human snakes and head-hunters. A lot they cared for the white man's religion. What they wanted was a new kind of head-knife, plenty rum, and liberty to carry off their neighbours' women and children.

Well, Noel had gone, with his books, his soft white hands, his shining eyes, right into the home of the stone gods and the head-hunters. And that was that.

'All the argument in the world won't take the shine out of these fellers' eyes,' her father had said. 'Once a clergyman comes to Papua with that light in his eye, shut your mouth and let him go. That kid Villiers don't know a head-hunter from a humming-bird.'

VILLIERS had gone with a bright, quick step, and a cheery good-bye to Lorna standing on the verandah. The jungle, with its attendant horrors, its hotbeds of disease and witch-doclors, were the very things he had come to see and subdue. He was going to be painfully disillusioned, he said, if he did not encounter these obstacles to human progress. He wanted to meet them where they lived; he wanted to lay his hand on them as a surgeon lays his hand on a septic wound.

Lorna had come upon a bundle of letters that had fallen from his knapsack. They were letters written by his mother, and addressed to him at a certain college in Sydney. She had to read them. And the loving messages in them touched the deep-down woman that lay in her young heart. They smell of lavender and a country home. Poor little grey-haired mother, waiting in her weatherboard rectory for news of Noel's shining deeds— away there in the Gulf of Huon where the stone gods sit! Outside in the darkness of the creek the two Celestials blundered homewards.

It was the sudden whining ol' Gyp, the Alsatian wolfhound, that startled Lorna. The dog had once belonged to Eugene Detrail, a sub-commandante at the French penal settlement, Noumea. Detrail had paid an official visit to Beetle Creek in reference to the capture of three notorious transposes who had found their way to the Gulf of Huon.

With the assistance of another Alsatian hound, Gyp had led the sub-commandante to the hiding-place of the convicts. Their arrest had been accomplished without a single hitch or the firing of a shot. As a token of gratitude for Jim Croydon and his daughter's hospitality M. Detrail had presented Gyp to them, with the assurance that the dog would repay a hundredfold for any care and affection bestowed on him. Lorna had always felt secure in the company of the clever, swift-moving animal. And the reward of her kindness and companionship was an almost frantic attachment on the part of the Alsatian wolfhound.

'That, dog don't, yelp for nothin'.' Jim said quietly, as he stepped to the door. The warm, misty darkness touched him like an anaesthetic. And the creek was always alive with the croaking of monster frogs and the movements of big saurians in the mud.

The figure of a man bulged across the track— a doubled-up figure wilh a tent-fly strapped across his shoulders. He rolled forward and collapsed almost in the doorway of the store. Jim Croydon stooped over him, a match burning between his fingers.

'Why, it's Dave Saunders!' he stated in surprise. 'What's up, Dave ?' he inquired in a kindly tone, for he had known Saunders for years as one of the straightest miners in New Guinea.

With Lorna's help they placed him on a bed in the spare room. An altack of fever had rendered him almost helpless. He had managed to stagger in from the Yoda field after a life-and-death struggle among the swamps and creeks.

IN the morning he seemed better. His eyes brightened when Lorna entered with a cooling drink and an extra dose of quinine. He talked a trifle feverishly of his recent experiences, which had brought him through the village of Merke, fifteen miles higher up the creek. It was a rotten hole, he muttered, full of witch men and professional magicians with lime in their whiskers. All the black magic he had ever heard of was running loose in Merke. And, worse than all, the people were getting opium from the schooners that visited the coast.

'One of the blamed old witch-doctors has got hold of a young minister chap, a white lad. Dash me if I ain't forgot his name.'

'A minister?' Lorna quavered, the empty glass trembling in her hand.

'One of them scfnled stiffnecks the mission societies send to the islands,' Saunders chattered., 'He's lying in the house of a wilch man, in rags. The headmen say he got hold of a supply of Irook (opium) that had been consigned to the village. And they say he won't give it up. He says the stuff is destroying the men and women and boys. I must say,' Saunders went on querulously, 'that the women and kids are dying like fles. Seems to me the young minister saw red when he got hold of that packet of dope. They're afraid to kill him, him being a kind of holy man; so they're lettin' him die to save trouble.'

Saunders fell back on the bed, the fever rising for a moment to his throbbing temples. All the blood drained from Lorna's cheeks. There was no doubt in her mind concerning the identity of the young man in question. And in all this land of rivers and ranges there was not a white man to whom she could turn for help. Her father was too old, too afflicted with rheumatism, to attend to the life-and-death affairs of every young spiritual worker who fell foul of the river natives. The two Chinamen did not approve of missionaries. They certainly would not stir a finger on Noel Villiers's behalf.

Saunders stirred on the bed uneasily, a hectic flush on his brow.

'Kago's the name of the old witch man who's got charge of this minister kid. Regular old beast! Lives in a plank-built house full of big clammy spiders an' stuffed toads. He's got a big, fat iguana chained to the beam of his roof, with a dozen greasy lizards to keep it company. A leery, limewashed old pig is Kaga. Got the whole village scared to death with his pet alligators an' stuffed monkeys. He doesn't want any white missionaries to steal his congregation.'

LORNA turned from the room with the blinding sun-glare in her eyes. She tried to think quickly, to steady her thoughts. Her father was busy in the store, unpacking cotton trade goods and taking tally of his old stock. At any moment a new rush might be expected on the Yoda River. And miners needed shirts and clothes, boots and razors. The stock had to be watched.

The soft whining of Gyp, the Alsatian wolfhound, distracted her thoughts. Her father kept the dog chained to his kennel at the end of the garden. Jim said there were reptiles in the bush capable of striking the animal to death. He didn't want the dog to get in touch with the natives. They were too handy with their fishing spears.

'Steady, boy, steady!' she cautioned as she led him out of her father's hearing. In the creek bend was a small but serviceable skiff, with a toy jib sail and slender mast instepped. Lorna knew every current and eddy of the coffee coloured stream. The skiff had a pair of light oars also, and was easily managed. Indeed, she had spent most of her days on this softly-gliding stretch of water. But it was understood that there were limits to her voyagings. Merke was out of bounds for every purpose. Even the police commissioner had advised her to give the village of Merke a wide berth. The skiff was hidden from her father's view by a clump of pandanus scrub.

Further along the creek stood the slab and bark hut where the two Chinamen lived. The place had a neat garden and verandah. Over the low-framed doorway hung a red lantern with the face of a Chinese devil stamped on its four square sides. When lit at night it had a startling effect on stray visitors, especially the beachcombers who came begging food. The Chinamen declared that its light kept away evil spirits. In the daytime it was practically unnoticed.

Gyp trotted beside her to the front of the Chinamen's hut, his stately wolf head upturned as if to read the message in her eyes. She stroked his thick grey fur gently.

'I want to go to Merke, Gyp,' she confided thoughtfully as she drew the bundle of lavender-scented letters from her pocket.

The wolfhound sniffed suspiciously, while she wondered vaguely whether this wonderful dog would recall the tall slim body with the shining eyes who had stooped to caress him the morning he left the store.

The Alsatian wolfhound thrust his nose over the letters and looked up. Then he squatted at her feet in the long grass, while the heat struck down from a cobalt sky.

Something was crying softly in Lorna's heart. In the eight years spent with her father in Papua she had seen the sons of women go blindly through the

bush and swamps. Some died with hard-won gold between their clenched hands; others were caught in the death tangles of the everlasting mangroves. Here and there a white-faced dreamer plied his calling among the stone idols of the flat-browed river men of the teka forests. Noel Villiers was one of these.

A cake of smuggled opium had brought him into conflict with the witch men and chiefs. Other young ministers had fallen foul of the natives through protesting over-much against acts of human sacrifice. Always something sinister awaited these Sydney boys with the shining eyes and the praying hands. Lorna was conscious of some inner force impelling her as she stared, at the devil lantern over the shanty doorway.

The Chinamen were controlling the gang of native fishermen on the reefs, spearing, netting, and using dynamite among the shoals of hammerhead sharks in the offings. All around the deserted shanty were mounds of broken eggshells. Never in her life had she seen so many eggshells lying around the home of two single Chinamen. The mystery of it held her for a moment until she turned again to the devil lantern above the doorway.

With a sudden inspiration firing her young brain, she released it from the hook and tucked it under her arm. Then she remembered a small electric torch that had been among her father's stock-in-trade. It was under the cushions in the skiff. Followed by the wolfhound, she walked back to the river bend and glanced through the bushes in the direction of the store. Her father was still busy among the cases of trade goods. He would not notice her absence for some time. In the locker of the skiff was a tin of biscuits and some chocolates, enough to last until she returned— if her luck held. The Alsatian wolfhound sprang into the boat, and with ears stiffened watched her fix the tiny jibsail.

THE fingers of death seemed to stretch across this soundless Papuan river. Here and there the jungle formed a dripping wet roof above her head. A few black duck, and cranes, flapped away at her approach. On the distant mudbars a few sun-shy alligators wallowed in the steaming shallows. The swooning heat of noon lay over the jungle-darkened valley. Things moved from her path that she could not see. Giant eels with the girth of boa constrictors rose from the rotting mangrove depths, or flashed their leaden-hued bodies under the slowly moving oar-blades.

But Lorna did not see these horrors of the Papuan deltas. Her softly beaming eyes were only occasionally diverted when small troops of wallabies stole to the river-bank to peer at her and the slow-moving boat. Sometimes a swarm of crimson-crested parrakeets followed in her wake, screaming, chattering in a frenzy of excitement. The Alsatian police dog sat in the forepart of the skiff, chin thrust over the gunwale, alive to each movement of the

st.rangp denizens of the river. Lorna felt, the first breath of night as the boat moved slowly under the archway ol' giant trees. The fluting of wild things in the ranges quickened her pulse, sharpened the sense of danger that brooded in every shadow and bird cry. The acrid'.fumes of cooking-flres' drifted across the dark stream, fear-off voices came with the softly rising wind. The wolfhound stirred and whined uneasily. Lorna shipped her oars and stroked his bristling head. A bare, foot-trodden bank lay before her. With some difficulty^ she made fast to a thick bunch of bamboo stems and took breath. There is little or no life in a Papuan village after sundown. Men and women crowd into their stuffy huts to eat and sleep. One or two fires smouldered close to the bank, a proof that the village was not far distant.

Raising the devil lantern she had taken from the Chinamen's shanty, she fitted her electric torch into the candle socket. The Chinamen had used a thick candle, and by wedging some paper from the biscuit-tin into the socket the torch remained rigid and firm. The blaze of the electric torch made the devil-faced lantern visible for half a mile. The gibbering mouths and gargoyle eyes struck a momentary note of terror into Lorna. Within the darkness of the jungle-screened river it flamed like a toy volcano.

She screened it hurriedly with the broad silk scarf she worse. Unfastening her thin leather belt, she ran it through the hanger on top of the lantern, and with a few cajoling words buckled it round the neck of the patient-eyed police dog.

Gyp's early training had fitted him for every kind of enterprise attached to the tracking of men. Removing the scarf from the lantern, she caressed his upturned head, speaking in low tones as she walked beside him up the river-bank in the direction of the village. Gyp trotted along, unmindful of the glowing, devil-faced lantern suspended from his neck. In her hand Lorna carried the j packet of lavender-scented letters that had once reposed near Noel Villiers's heart,

At intervals she held them above the poised head of the Alsatian wolfhound.

'Find him, Gyp! Find him, boy! Bad man shut him up. Find him, Gyp!'

Gyp made sounds as he loped forward, soft, whines followed by a quickening of his stride into a series of rushes and leaps. The fires of the village smoked dully in the damp night air. Lorna ran in the wake of the fast-travelling police hound. She saw that he was heading for a plankbuilt, palm-thalched house that stood in the centre of the village square.

ALTHOUGH Lorna ran lightly and without sound, the sharp-eared headmen had sensed something amiss, A dozen tall shadows emerged from a hut on her right and remained bunched together watching her movements.

For one instant the black shadow mass stood eyeing her approach; the next saw the mass split asunder as though a knob of dynamite had exploded in their midst.

'Ai, topa kera na!'

A demoniacal yell, followed by a piercing scream of horror, passed over the square. Devils were plentiful enough in the village of Merke, but the one that came galloping straight towards them was the finished article with the brand of Hades streaming from its burning eyes and lips. Like stampeded cattle the warriors of Merke hurtled from the village, howling, chattering, and pointing to the devil with the burning head that had sprung into their midst. And had not their witch-doctor, Kaga, foretold dire calamities to their tribe only a few hours before? Kaga himself was no believer in illusions, but he headed the stampede for the woods like the good sprinter he was. He preferred his own well domesticated devils that never spat white fire across the village square.

In the passing of a breath the village was empty. Not a man or child remained to argue with the fiery, four-footed fiend that was leaping in the direction of Kaga's house.

Ten yards from the doorway of the witch-doctor's abode the police dog halted, its ears pointed, its eyes watching something that moved in the dark space that led to the interior. The soft tinkle of a chain reached Lorna, a soft metallic tinkle of links being gathered in a corner.

'Steady, Gyp! There's something moving,' she called to the dog. 'Wait, boy wait!'

THE police dog remained like a statue in bronze, its eyes dilating, the fur of its throat bristling. Lorna crept nearer, for something shouted in her young brain that Noel Villiers was lying inside the dark house. Her straining eyes sought the ground within the doorway. Her glance was interrupted by a pair of eyes that scintillated towards the dog. She recoiled with a sob of terror from a twenty-foot python swaying in and out the doorway. In the light of the lantern she saw that its middle was held by a thick rubber band to a fine chain attached to the doorpost. A sickening fear held her speechless, her hand clutching the belt round the police dog's throat.

'Steady, Gyp,' she quavered. 'Not— not that thing! No, no; we can't fight, that. It's too horrible!' Again the python's head darted within a foot of the bristling police dog. Again the soft, clink, clink of the chain told her that the reptile had struck as far as it could reach. The Alsatian wolfhound bared its fangs ; the muscles of its powerful body gathered for a leap and snatch at the glittering head in the doorway. Lorna held fast to the belt round its throat. 'Steady, boy!' she cautioned faintly. 1

'That thing is death. Easy, boy!' A choking, inaudible word came from the interior of the house. It seemed to end in a long-drawn sigh. Then, after a heart-breaking silence, the voice reached her.

'Who are you? What do you seek with that mask and torch?'

Lorna steadied her shaking limbs, fought back the fainting. sickness that threatened to overcome her.

'I'm Lorna Croydon, from the Creek. I— I want to help you, Mr. Villiers.'

Followed a frozen silence, in which she heard the painful movements of something stirring on the ground. Villiers spoke again.

'Thank you, Miss Croydon; but it was foolish to come here. I can't say what has happened to the crowd. They've bolted. That king python Kaga put in the doorway is deadly— been there for weeks. Fever's got me— can't move. If — if I could crawl past the snake sentinel, maybe....'

Another silence, with the police dog straining frantically to close with the darting, flashing head in the doorway. Lorna held tight to the collar.

'They'll come back shortly,' Villiers went on painfully. 'You see, I got hold of their opium supply. I've been lying on it for days. I don't know why they've held off killing me,' he intoned wearily. 'Please, don't stay any longer,' he begged. 'But— you'd serve me if you would take this opium away... Throw it in the creek, burn it, only don't, let these poor fools get it.'

WHAT followed was without trickery or design on the part of the fevers-tricken young clergyman lying on the damp rushes inside. The package of opium was wrapped in a number of broad, moist banyan leaves loosely held together. The package, flung from his nerve-shaken band, struck the doorpost with a slight thud. At sound of the impact the python's head swayed and dived like a boxer avoiding a blow. But the chain permitted little freedom of action, and the sticky mess of Batavian opium broke in a soft trickle over its fanged jaws. Lorna drew away without relaxing her hold on the collar of the straining police dog. The light of the lantern showed Villiers what had happened. A soft exclamation brokefrom from him.

'That was a fluky shot!' he gasped, with a note of self-reproach in his tone. 'Poor old snake, I didn't mean to smother even you with that beastly stuff.'

The python thrashed gently to and fro, dived, and shook its flat head as the sticky brown mess oozed into the corners of its mouth. A lump the size of a man's fist was clinging to the little flat space between its glittering eyes. To Lorna's amaze the reptile's tongue darted out and licked the brown drippings from its neck. Often she had seen big forest snakes lapping milk left in a cup or saucer outside a tent or shanty door.

Almost before she could move or call out to Villiers the python had begun to stretch its great length in sudden languor. Its throat expanded as it fell limply forward and lay motionless across the doorway.

A long-drawn sigh came from the young minister.

'Please don't let the dog kill it,' he begged earnestly. 'It was unable to escape— never had a fighting chance.'

From the distant woods came the sounds of rushing feet, the voices of natives calling to each other. The faint starlight showed a close-wedged mass of figures charging across the open in the direction of the square. The thud of their feet on the soft soil was like the breaking of surf on a beach.

'Quick, go!' came from the young minisler. 'They will spare no living thing now!'

Lorna turned the head of the dog in line with the oncoming horde. 'At 'em, Gyp!' she shouted. 'They're just a crowd of bananas!' she added, with desperate courage. 'Not one of them has the kick of a rabbit.'

The dog leaped from her hold and shot straight for the centre of the howling line of natives. The devil-lanlern swinging from its collar seemed to dance and whirl over the ground, a nightmare of colour with two vampire slits of flame for eyes. The squad broke in a pandemonium of shrieks and grunts. Back to the dark scrub they scattered, with the blazing head of the vampire racing madly on their flanks.

Lorna whistled loudly once, twice, before the dog headed back reluctantly. Satisfied that the crowd of villagers would not recover the shock of the lantern's second appearance for a while, Lorna entered the house of the witch-doctor hurriedly. Villiers was resting on his side. She stooped over him tenderly.

'I've got a boat on the river. Can you manage to crawl if I help you?' she he*T-red. 'It isn't far.'

He struggled to his elbow desperately, icsied a moment, and would have fallen back if her arm had not steadied him. ''io ghost of a grin played on his boyish lips.

'Running away from trouble isn t a parson's job,' he protested faintly. 'I'd sooner play the game and slick it out.'

'Of course you would,' Lorna agreed in cheerful desperation. 'Personally I'd prefer to use a machine-gun on some of these head-snatchers. Anyway, you'll have to get well before you can Jackie this crowd. So come along.'

The young minister struggled to his knees, gasping dizzily as he strove to reach the doorway.

Inch by inch they fought their way to the open, the dog bristling again at contact with the torpid python stretched across the exit. The night air came

sweet as wine from the hills to the boy who had lain in the foetid atmosphere of Kaga's house. The deep draughts from the mountains were as new life. Lorna wound her big silk scarf under his chest to relieve the strain as he crawled over the rough ground. Foot by foot they struggled through the cane grass, ever y ounce of strength in her young limbs centred on the task of reaching the boat.

A dozen times he lay still and begged her to leave him. In response Lorna began to roll him gently until the slope of the riverbank made the task easier. She had reserved her strength strength for the last tussle of gelling him on board.

Here was the boat, and here was the limp, exhausted figure of the boy who wanted to stay behind. The bristling throat, the soft whines of the two wolfhound told her that the very undergrowth was strewn with death. The smothered yells from the forest informed her that the men of Merke had grown aware of the trick she had played with the lantern.

Drawing the edge of the skiff down to the level of the bank, she uttered the only prayer she had ever known. 'Oh, Lord, Father, we're in a fix! Help us this once to get home.'

She pulled, dragged, and rolled the half-fainting young minister over the gunwale. He collapsed in a heap beside the biscuittin in the thwarts. The Alsatian police dog whirled back to the bank, his great fangs baying the unseen shapes that were now moving through the grass.

'Come hack, boy!' Lorna shouted, dropping the oars into place. The dog returned sullenly at her command, sprang aboard as the skiff moved downstream. The black shadows of the mangroves engulfed the tiny boat as Lorna switched off the torch inside the devil-lantern.

JIM CROYDON had hunted all the day for Lorna. The missing skiff explained little or nothing. With his hurricane lamp and rifle he made his way along the river track in the direction of Merke. He had heard from Dave Saunders the account of Noel Villiers's plight in the village of Merke. It was almost certain, he argued, that his foolish and impulsive daughter had gone alone to the house of the witchdoctor.

Past midnight, he delected the far-away voices of natives along the river-bank, the voices of warriors running in his direction. Jim was old, and his joints cried out: against the dripping slime from the mangroves. But the rifle in his hand was young and spoke the only language that ever appealed to a charging buffalo or a hunter of human heads. The soft yelp of a dog reached him out in midstream. Dimly he discerned the outline of a boat drifting idly under the bank ferns and creepers.

'That you, Lorna?' he called out. 'It's your dad speakin'.'

The police dog answered from the stern of the skiff with a low, sobbing whine. Old Jim Croydon took his chance with the alligators as he waded out and clambered into the drifting vessel. Two figures lay huddled in the thwarts. Croydon bent over his daughter, his shaking hand pressing near her heart. She stirred quickly at the touch of his fingers, then lay back in his arms, breathing with difficulty.

'See if he's alive. Dad. They chased us good and hard over every mile. I wish I'd had your gun!'

STRANGELY enough, this episode was the turning point in Jim's fortunes. With the young minister on his way to recovery, in the south room of the store overlooking the beach, the new gold rush began. The crowds poured in from Mombare and Samarai.

At the crazy pierhead a small schooner was unloading stores. Ching Lee and Tung War stood near to count the cases of eggs packed in lime that bad just arrived. Noel Villiers was sealed near the open window overlooking the beach. Lorna was planting Australian violets and mignonette beneath the casement, the flower's so often mentioned by Noel's mother in her letters to him.

From where he sat the young minister had a good view of Lorna, where the sun seemed to flame in the tawny red of her hair. Day after day he had watched her movements about the magnolia-sheltered patch of garden, wondering vaguely at the beauty and strength of her slim, boyish figure, so vital and lithe, with a mouth like a crushed mulberry. But always there were the soft, mutinous eyes and chin, the wild, slightly heavy-scented flower of the north Australian lands. He raised himself slightly and pointed lo the schooner.

'See how those two Chinese take care of themselves. Eggs by the hundred! When the wet season comes and our people are tearing open cans of bully-beef, or eating damper, these good fellows can smile over their fried eggs and bacon,' he added, with a subhumorous twinkle

'Eggs!' Lorna's lithe young body straightened instantly over tlie flower-bed. 'Why, I counted two million shells round their old hut. the other day.' A tiny frown lined her brow. 'Why, two men couldn't eat all those eggs, if they'd begun frying them about the time of Henry the Eighth. Maybe,' she added, meeting Villiers' smiling eyes, 'you can tell me how many million eggs a healthy man ought to eat in the wet season.'

Before he could reply she had scampered across the beach to where the cases of lime-packed eggs stood at the jetty-end. The backs of both Chinamen were turned to her as they bent over their task of nailing up the broken sides

of the cases. They worked feverishly at the nailing-up, muttering to each other at the rough methods employed by the schooner hands in discharging cargoes.

Deftly and silently Lorna extracted a couple of eggs from one of the open cases and hurried back to the store. In the bat of an eye the Chinamen detected what had happened. Like leopards they sprang after her, screaming for her to stop. Lorna waited for them to approach, the lines about her soft mouth tightening strangely as she cast one of the eggs full at the oncoming Ching Lee.

It struck his breast. Instantly a sticky brown substance ran down his white jacket. The eyes of the Chinaman bulged in terror as he strove for one frantic moment to hide the dark mass with his wide sleeve. Lorna laughed bitterly as she turned to the young clergyman, who was now hastening to her side.

'The stuff you threw at the big snake, Noel,' she told him in her pent-up anger. 'They run it into empty shells and broadcast it throughout the islands.'

The two Chinamen hurried back to the beach at the moment the new police launch from Mombare was entering the bay. Villiers sighed as he caught her hands gently. There were tears on her cheek. The horror of her recent experience with opium in the house of Kaga, at Merke, had been recalled.

'Hush, dear,' he whispered tenderly. 'Let the police handle this matter now. After all, the fates have been very kind to us.'

When Jim Croydon dashed to the verandah to discover the cause of the shouting he saw Lorna's cheek resting against the tall shoulder of the convalescent Villiers.

'Blamed if I didn't guess as much,' he growled, retiring unobserved to the store. And for once in a while old Jim guessed right.

_____

29: The Gold Squid

Sydney Mail 6 June 1928

'WE'LL buy no more wrecks,' Stark shouted across the board-room. 'The tin hull of that crook liner has cost us sixty thousand pounds. I hope you're listening, Gait? Sixty thousand golden goblets chucked into mud!'

Jeremy Sark was chairman of directors in the White Reef Salvage Company, and David Gait, who had supervised the recent unsuccessful attempts to recover specie contained in the hull of the SS Lismore, trembled slightly as he read his report.

The Lismore, a steamer of 8,000 tons burden, trading between Sydney, Macassar, and Hong Kong, had struck a reef in the Fanuti group of islands and had become a total wreck. Out of a crew and passenger list of seventy-five souls not one had survived the terrific seas that had driven the vessel to her undoing. In her bullion tank the Lismore had carried nearly 200,000 sovereigns, together with a quantity of bar silver from the Broken Hill mines.

Within a few weeks of the catastrophe the White Reef Salvage Company had sent Gait in charge of a salvage corps to the scene of the wreck. Gait and his party had been absent for six months. His report now showed that the heavy seas had pounded the vessel to driftwood. Not a pound's worth of salvage had been recovered, although Gait showed how he had blasted the surrounding reefs and shoals in his attempts to locale the missing bullion tank.

To Jeremy Stark it was unthinkable that an iron-bolted tank the size of a henhouse could disappear from a reef in mid-Pacific. Yet the reputation of David Gait stood by the report, and Gait's name among Sydney underwriters and marine surveyors was not to be trifled with. The acid test of thirty years' experience was behind the man. And Gait spoke his mind.

'It wasn't a wreck you bought, sir; it was a washaway pile of planks with the reef sharks swimming in between. We did what men could do. We tore up the banks for half a mile on each side of the hull for days on end, when the tide allowed, the gang worked without food or rest. I repeat, Mr. Stark, we found nothing. As for the bullion tank'— Gait snapped his fingers derisively— 'beyond a cartload of copper stew pans, and a cask of nails, there wasn't enough gold on the Lismore to buy a haircut.'

In an office adjoining the board-room Teddy Helmore sat listening to the storms of argument that blew over Gait's head. He was sorry for Gait and the little band of investors who had pinned their faith in his ability to bring the specie home. Now it was more than probable that the White Reef Salvage

Company would go into liquidation. Sixty thousand pounds gone and not a tin of beans to show for it!

Teddy Helmore, at £5 a week in Stark's office, was weary of the wood he sat on. Months ago his boyish imagination had burned white over the details of this particular wreck. He had visioned a whaleback reef in the lonely Pacific tides where the Lismore had belched and strewn her valuable cargo of sandalwood, silver, and gold across the coral floor of the atoll.

After Gait and the directors had left the board-room Teddy rose from his stool and passed inside. Stark was seated at his desk, his big, fighting chin cupped in the palms of his hands. He cast a sidelong glance in Helmore's direction, a kind of wolf stare he reserved for office boys and insurance touts.

'What the devil do you want?' he demanded wearily. 'Have you sent out the Bellman Tug Company's accounts yet?'

'I sent them in yesterday, sir,' Teddy informed him. 'I want to say that I'm going out to Fanuti to have a look at that heap of timber on the reef. Gait's through with the job, and I'm done with mine.'

Stark pivoted in his chair to glare at Teddy. 'You confounded ass!' he almost bellowed. 'Get back to your desk.'

Helmore braced his well-knit shoulders, glanced at his wrist watch, and then stepped to the rack where his hat and overcoat hung.

Stark's voice reached him as he gained the dark passage outside. 'Come back! How dare you visit Fanuti without a word of permission from the company? Are you mad?'

Teddy halted in the passage, a broad grin on his good-natured face. For days he had tried to overcome the overwhelming desire to explore the locality of the wreck. He did not doubt Gait's report or his honesty of purpose. He felt now that something had happened which Gait had overlooked. All through the long weeks of waiting for David's report he had been moved to a premonition of failure awaiting the salving of the wreck. Three years in Stark's office had taught him many things relating to ships and shoals, and the white-faced city men who gamble on the shifting tides.

Teddy was strong because he was alone in the world. There were no sick aunts or crippled brothers to tie him to his office stool. He had missed the loving hands and lips of his mother, but Nature had endowed him with a courage and vision that overleaped the city slave-lines.

'I am going to Fanuti, Mr. Stark,' he repeated with a smile. 'A few moments ago I heard you tell Charnley and Bream, the underwriters, that you'd gladly cut your losses for £500. If I heard rightly, Bream replied that you'd be lucky if you ever saw five hundred pence.'

Jeremy Stark made fresh mental valuations of Helmore as he surveyed his swank, boyish figure. Then his eyes batted owlishly as he completed his sinister scrutiny.

'Mr. Helmore, you can please go to the devil!' he exploded at last. 'From this moment your salary ceases. The company is satisfied with Gait's report. Go to Fanuti by all means. I can lend you some photographs of the wreck,' he added with a covert sneer. And the office door banged in Teddy's face.

TEDDY had invested £300 in war loan. He sold it and booked a passage to Honolulu. He was informed at the shipping office that a fortnightly service of cargo and copra tramps existed between Honolulu and the Fanuti group of islands. He was warned, however, of the difficulties of sea travel among the remote outlying islands. A glance at a navigators chart would show him the impossibility of maintaining direct communications with the thousand and one pinhead reefs in the archipelago. Teddy thanked the shipping clerk for the information, and hurried away to get his kit on board.

The mate of the schooner Cutty Sark threw Teddy's belongings into the forepart as the gangway rattled down to the shelf of reef under their bows.

'All ready, sir!' he called out. 'You'll need a Lick telescope to see the nearest hotel,' he added banteringly. 'But there's enough darned driftwood to build a dozen. Hope you'll enjoy your holiday, sir. We'll be back in a fortnight. Cheerio!'

The reefs at Fanuti sprawled to the uttermost sky-line. They were ugly reefs that threw up white plumes from the smoky surf, and there were reefs that grinned at him with the camaraderie of tombstones. Beyond the reef on which he stood lay a coastline of wind-torn palms and flame-crested trees. He counted a score of small tidal creeks that penetrated the jungle-covered flats and marshes. But chiefly his thoughts were centred about the forbidding whaleback shoal that had torn a brave ship to piecemeal.

It lay on the northern extremity of the atoll, its coral flukes thrust far out into the dazzling sheen of sapphire. The eternal thunder of breakers ran in a hoarse murmur along the fifty-mile front of beach and lagoon edge. The crying of sea-fowl wheeling and drowsing above the wreck struck sharply on his tingling nerves. Never in his life had Helmore dreamed of such loneliness and immensity of sea and forest line. He was sorry now to leave the homely little schooner that had brought him from Honolulu Not a hut or a roof broke the unending monotony of reefs and palms crests. But somewhere in the far west lay the village of Takananeena, which, according to the mate of the *Cutty Sark*, was peopled by a score or so of Bhugis men and Malay trepang fishers.

Teddy turned to the task he had planned to accomplish in Stark's office. He had enough stores to last him a month, without relying on game or food to be had in or about the lagoons. Piling his belongings between some reef boulders, he marked the place with a stone cross and bent his steps in the direction of the wreck. The shoal itself sprawled whale-like in the white smother of brine and spindrift. At low tide a man could wade hip-deep on its smooth, wave-worn crest.

The hull of the Lismore had become a roost for squalling sea-birds and gannets. Never had Teddy seen so many beaks and wings hovering around a dead ship. All along the shoal was the mark of Gait's labours. The sea floor had been blasted with gelignite in the hope of locating the lost bullion tank. Gait in his desperation had evidently imagined that the heavy bullion box had slid through the torn strake of the ship's bottom to the shoal-gutter below.

The more Teddy gazed at the wreck the more convinced he became of foul work on the part of someone who had survived the horrors of the hurricane. Why had the sea left the engines intact, the kettles and pans and oil drums that littered the edge of the shoal? A storm capable of obliterating a tank full of metal sovereigns, and bar silver would surely have destroyed the galley pots and tinware. All around the shoal the water showed clear at ten fathoms. The great holes blasted in the vessel's sides by Gait's party revealed only the swarms of parrot-billed fishes swimming in and out.

Teddy was a good diver, but the sight of a score of swift-moving sharks on the ocean side of the wreck kept him within bounds. The night brought only the big white stars and a sky of velvet softness. His small tent proved sufficient for his needs. His oil stove and his saucepan gave him hot soup, toast, and coffee. Fresh water leaped from a spring not twenty yards from his camping ground. The mate of the *Cutty Sark* had dropped a dozen big bundles of bananas for his eating. And for the first time in many weeks Teddy Helmore enjoyed a pipe of tobacco outside the flap of his cosy tent.

The days passed slowly. Stripped to the waist and flayed by a merciless sun, he worked within the body of the hull, his feet safe from the saw-toothed sharks that haunted the reefs with the persistence of wolves. Once, while examining a breach outside the hull, he had slipped from his foothold on the planks and had fallen into the seething tide. Instantly a long torpedo body struck in his direction. Only by the width of a hand did he escape the sabre-toothed jaws that snapped on the plank he was quick enough to grasp. Teddy shivered as he struck down with an iron stanchion at the swinish eyes watching him from the water. Everywhere these grey-backed monsters stalked in his shadow, shepherding his movements with the silent ferocity of tigers. Above him screamed the senseless sea-hawks and terns, their wings beating and

flashing near his body at times as he sat astride the reef-torn boilers inside the hull.

It was now evident to Helmore that the wreck was not worth fifty dollars as a side-line. After all, he had been a fool to dream of finding the bullion tank where experts had failed. He would return to Sydney with barely enough money to cover expenses.

TURNING his back on the wreck he ventured inland, for the first time, among the stunted palms and guava patches. Again his eye was attracted by the scores of tide-water channels that intersected the low-lying spaces. Subconsciously he became aware that he was following a well-worn track from the wreck. Human feet had trodden the grass and coral! Nearing the edge of a deep channel his eye fell on a scrap of newspaper, pulped into the coral trash by a heavy foot, Teddy examined the paper carefully, and came to the conclusion that Gait or one of his men had wandered inshore and dropped it. Halting with the scrap of paper crushed in his palm, he glanced downward. At his feet, half-covered in coral dust, lay an Australian sovereign! Teddy choked in surprise as he examined the coin. It was from the Australian mint, pale yellow and new.

'And that's that!' he exclaimed, kneeling in the coral slush and scooping it with his hands. Through the tangle of lianas and ferns he crawled, searching feverishly for a trace where men had dug and buried. He found none. Helmore lay quite still in the cool, wet sand, and his thoughts went out to the late captain of the Lismore, Ben Mole by name. Mole's record was good, although, he had a trick of cutting loose with a rattan or belaying pin whenever his coolie crew got stale or sulked. No nonsense about Ben, except when he allowed the October hurricane to dish him for good and all, Teddy ruminated.

A faint foot fall reached the listening Teddy. It seemed to come from the forest side of the land, and was evidently made by a sandal on a limestone floor. It came nearer, stopped, and then, after a pause, advanced quickly in his direction. Turning slightly on his elbow, Helmore suppressed a cry of astonishment.

A girl of eighteen was crawling along the channel edge. At times she paused and lay still, as though waiting for a sound to reach her. She was dressed in a smock of peacock blue. Her heavily braided hair was drawn back over her brow, revealing a type of beauty that was distinctly European. The tawny gleam in her hair disproved any suggestion of a Malay ancestry, although the smock and the rich golden tan of her skin made it difficult to judge her nationality. She was certainly most attractive.

'In the name of Pat and Mike,' Helmore breathed, 'what fool game is she playing?'

Slowly, painfully she crawled through the sand until the edge of the channel was reached. Here she paused and drew breath sharply as she stared into the water below her elbow. With face set and pretty teeth clenched she plunged, her naked arm down and out of sight. Unable to control his curiosity, he slid through the undergrowth until he lay within a dozen yards of the channel bank. Slowly he raised his eyes to the level of the stiff grass.

She was lying full stretch, her face bent to the water's level, her body writhing in her efforts to retain her position on the bank. It occurred to Helmore that something was tugging her arm, drawing her with irresistible force into the channel. A smothered cry of pain escaped her as the soft muscles of her arm quivered under the terrific strain. Then with a shout of relief she shook her arm free. Helmore' saw that, her tight-clenched hand was holding something. Crawling nearer, he stared in amaze as her tiny fist opened, allowing a score of gold coins to roll in the coral dust beside her.

A tense, hot silence followed her movement. She lay breathing heavily before turning again to the channel bank. In her face Helmore. detected a look of revulsion and fear. Her lips seemed to be framing a long-forgotten prayer. ,

Helmore controlled himself with a fierce effort as her hand slid again into the water. She made plunging, groping strokes to right and left, her, sandalled toes hooked in some outlying palm roots to prevent a sudden header into the water. This time her arm did not return so hastily. Her young limbs seemed to writhe in an agony of muscular activity. Deeper into the palm-roots went her toes, while her straight, boyish figure quivered like a breaking ash plant.

'My God! I... will not come, here again! Not for gold or the pain of his blows.... Never, never!'

It was evident to Teddy that she could not free her arm. This fact was made clear by the paroxysm of terror that suddenly overcame her. Again she took breath, and this time her hand jerked free, but held only a few strands of weed and sea-grass. She remained quite still on the ground, chafing her wrist and moaning in a sobbing underbreath.

Very quietly Helmore stepped beside her, anger, curiosity, and pity. showing in his eyes. His soft footfall brought her into a sitting posture, panic terror in her wide eyes, horror of a man's unexpected presence stamped on her young face. She was plainly greatly unnerved.

'I am sorry,' he began gently, 'but, like you, I imagined I was alone here. Are you hurt? And what is it that's—'

She leaped to her feet and regarded him with short, frightened glances that plainly revealed her intention to be gone at the earliest moment. Her eyes

fell guiltily on the gold coins scattered in the dust. She did not speak. Teddy smiled reassuringly and lit a cigarette; then, as an afterthought, offered her his case. She shrank away with a gesture of refusal, her glance wandering in the direction of the wooded hills.

'Please don't run away;' he begged. 'Maybe we can help each other. Of course, you may go if you like,' he assured her; 'but before you go I'd like to save you from repeating this performance. Isn't there an easier way of getting what you want?' he added, indicating the black, mud-stirred channel and the gold coins at her feet.

Her lips parted slightly; the fear in her eyes vanished as she gazed into his smiling face.

'Rabaul sends me to get the gold,' she confessed, with a slight shudder. 'He is blind through fishing with dynamite. He helped the English captain. Mole, to hide the money just here.'

Helmore's brow cleared suddenly. This quick-witted girl knew everything. Curiously enough, he was more interested in her presence on the island than in the gold that lay in the mysteriously muddy depths of the tidal inlet beside him.

'My father was a ship's captain,' she went on with a touch of sadness in her voice. 'He, too, was wrecked off these reefs many years ago. My mother lived with him at Takananeena. She died of fever a year after my father was drowned. Rabaul's wife sent me to school at the Mission House. They call me Anita,' she added simply.

Helmore was staring pensively into the turgid waters of the channel. Anita followed his glance, but not for a moment did she cease to rub and massage the livid weal on her wrist that showed like a whip stroke. '

'THE iron money-house is buried in the mud,'' she explained. 'After the storm that brought the ship to the reef the captain got ashore with three of his coolie men. All the others were drowned. Rabaul's wife saw the wreck, and watched the Australian captain carry all the gold and silver ashore. Then he made a raft from the broken timbers, and with the coolies to help he placed the empty gold tank on the raft and brought it to this channel. 'At low tide he dropped it into the mud. Next day he carried all the money and silver on the raft and brought it here. With the coolies he counted the gold and dropped it into the tank.

'Two nights after, they saw Rabaul's wife come down and try to get some of the coins from the tank. Rabaul says the coolies killed her. We never saw her again.

'Although Rabaul is blind,' she went on sadly, 'he is no fool. He told one of the parairi head-hunters in the hills that four foreign dogs from a wreck had killed Nayla, his wife. But Rabaul said nothing of the gold that the captain and coolies had sunk in the creek.' Anita paused and drew breath sharply, as though the pain of her thoughts had become unendurable. Helmore bound a silk kerchief about her wrist, and then drew away to a respectful distance. 'No one saw the three coolies or the Australian captain again.' Anita spoke with head averted, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the kerchief.

'And this Rabaul sends you here every day, I suppose, to get handfuls of money?' Teddy broke in at last. 'And by the look of your shoulders, Anita, and those red stripes showing above your smock, 1 should say he persuaded you with a bamboo cane,' he added with rising anger.

Anita's silence seemed to verify the fact that Rabaul had driven her with blows and threats to the task of snatching coins from the tank in the creek. The rusted edges of the big bullion box wore visible now above the swirling outgoing tide.

Teddy became suddenly aware of a flat, black tentacle stretching across the surface of the tank. It seemed to search the air for a moment, before it sank in the muddy depths.

Teddy swore under his breath. 'A beastly squid!' he flung out. 'How did it get into the lank, Anita? And why did you risk putting in your arm when you knew it was there?' he demanded with growing amazement.

'It crawls in and out at high water,' she explained. 'The sharks drive it up the channels, and it sought shelter from them by climbing into the iron box. They could not reach it there.'

'And you stick your arm in while the squid is there?' he exploded in genuine anger.

Anita shrugged. 'I have fished off the reefs with Rabaul before the dynamite blinded him. I have killed reef eels with a stone and bathed among the sharks,' she answered simply. 'Someone had to get money for blind Rabaul. There was no food, and he has taken to drinking arrak. He must have gold. And, ... the squid in the tank may go away next tide. It is not very dangerous yet. It is only half-grown.'

Helmore was busy exploring the tank. The top had been removed by Ben Mols and his coolies. The four sides and bottom remained, with the silver and gold evidently intact within. As for the invading squid, he would prefer to have it killed outside the tank.

'Anita,' he said thoughtfully, 'the money and silver inside this tank belong to people in Sydney. They took a sporting chance when they bought it, and some of them are as poor as ourselves.'

Anita flinched, while her lips quivered at his statement.

'I am very sorry,' she began with child-like humility, 'but I did not know.'

'That's all right, Anita. Rabaul will have to do his own groping if he wants another handful of Australian gold. I'll see him do it, too.'

Teddy smote the corner of the tank a violent blow with the slick he carried, as a gentle reminder that things were about to happen. The impact of the stick caused a terrific commotion within the tank. Instantly the squid's dish-shaped body floated to the surface, its slimy tentacles outspreading like the branches of a tree. From the centre of the furious, clawing mass of muscles and venom a slug-like aperture showed and blinked in Helmore's direction.

'It is looking at us,' Anita said hurriedly. Then a mischievous twinkle lit her dark eyes. 'If we had a bar we could force down one of the sides of the tank. Then I would show you how to make this little octopus move into another house.

Teddy laughed at the prospect of a little sport after the weary days spent within the wreck, alone. Begging Anita to await his return, he hurried back to his camp and selected a crowbar from the pile of tools scattered along the beach. Guessing what was in Anita's mind regarding the squid's eviction from the tank, he collected several tins of preserved beef he had salved from the wreck. He then returned with his load to the waiting Anita.

THE tide was flooding the inlet. In a little while the water would be well over the tank. A few hefty strokes of the crowbar dislodged a couple of rusty bolts that held the seaward side of the tank into place. It fell with a loud splash to the floor of the channel. The tank was now like a lidless box with one of the sides gone.

Anita clapped her hands as Teddy broke open several of the beef tins and scattered their contents into the channel at distances of fifty feet apart, until the sea entrance was reached and similarly baited. Then he returned to the tank to watch results with Anita. They had not long to wait.

The scent of the newly-opened beef brought a couple of grey dorsal fins scouting near the channel opening. Swiftly these two livid, torpedo shadows turned and entered the channel, their great snouts scooping up the beef baits like shovels. Warily the saw-toothed monsters approached the tank, their jaws clashing in the flowing tide. Anita sat in the dry grass clasping her hands, her eyes dancing at the Homeric spectacle in full view.

For the squid there was no retreat except past the sabre-toothed sharks flashing nearer and nearer. Instinct warned it that the eternal enemy was at the gate. Instantly the viscid mass of tentacles became a mill-wheel of activity that beat and slogged the tank entrance with the force of a hundred hammers.

The two reef sharks swept up to the opening like hounds scenting a badger. The slogging tentacles stayed them only for a moment. Then a blue-grey snout that had torn drowning men from the shoals slid like a battering-ram into the tank. Swift as light the viscid tentacles closed on the scissor-point jaws of the shark, enveloping it in a stranglehold of living muscle and flesh.

In the shift of one eye Helmore saw that a twelve-foot shark could not attack an octopus. The squid's hold pinned the head to the floor of the channel. In a second or two the reef shark would be a gasping mass of pulp and bone. But the sea-wolves of the Pacific know the squid from infancy to old age. The channel was now alive with bullhead sharks, frantic for food and scenting it in the open bullion box.

Their jaws snatched down at the dish-shaped body that still gripped the twelve-foot greyback to the floor. They tore the outstretched feelers, dragging the flat body to the surface. Like gluttons at a feast they hauled and towed the kicking, squirming mass into the open tide. In a moment, it seemed to the wide-eyed Anita, the channel was silent again, with the slowly rising waters washing and breaking into the bullion tank.

'A great scrap,' Helmore laughed to the silent Anita sitting in the grass. 'I'll drop into the tank now, before the tide gets higher.'

Standing almost shoulder-deep in the submerged tank, Helmore's bare feet touched the milled edges of the closely packed gold coins. They were ranged in long columns along the bottom, where lien Mole had placed them after emptying them from the wooden boxes supplied by the Mint. The silver ingots were packed like bricks against the sides.

The sun flamed over the western skyline, and Anita knew that within an hour the darkness would prevent her returning to the village.

Helmore was not without imagination. He saw what it meant for her to go back without money. There would be more beatings and ill-usage. It needed no effort on his part to envisage the living hell she must endure when the rascally Rabaul learnt that the rightful owners had taken away the gold and silver from the creek.

He gathered from what Anita had told him that fear of his neighbours had kept the blind old fisherman from descending upon the gold and silver and transferring it to his house. But Rabaul could trust no one, not even his relations. And so Anita had borne his terrible secret alone, together with the unenviable task of snatching gold coins from the retreat of a shark-hunted octopus.

'Anita,' he said cheerfully, 'you cannot go back to the village. A schooner will call here for me in a day or so to take me to Honolulu. I will take you to

Sydney. I regard you as a partner in this important salvage operation,' he added gravely.

'But Rabaul will find his way here,' she warned. 'If he suspects the presence of a white man he will bring those horrible people who killed Captain Mole and his coolies.'

'We must risk it. Anita, and trust to these.' He drew a pair of flat-faced automatics from the coal he had left on the bank. 'Sixty a minute,' he added through his slightly clenched teeth, 'and plenty to follow.'

His quiet bearing calmed Anita's tense-drawn nerves. She decided without further questions to accept his generous offer.

THE shock of his life awaited Helmore as he neared the beach. A strange schooner was anchored within biscuit throw of the wreck. Seated outside his tent was the dour figure of Jeremy Stark, of the White Reef Salvage Company. At sight of Helmore and Anita he rose from his camp-stool with something of the baulked tiger in his stooping shoulders.

'Hands off the wreck, Mr. Helmore!' he shouted, without a word of greeting. 'My party is in possession.'

'You've possessed yourself of my camp, at any rate,' Teddy answered, unruffled.

'This is not your island, nor your Sydney office. The darned wreck was any man's property the moment Gait abandoned it. Shall we have supper first, or the scrap?'

Jeremy wolfed the frayed edges of a cigar for a moment. Then he looked up slowly at the sun-tanned clerk in the canvas suit, and the wrath that had borne him across three oceans died.

'Helmore,' he began with an effort, 'I feel that you've got me, and... I'm a ruined man. I put everything into this venture, including my wife and my daughter's little fortune. In cities men are apt to forget themselves. Here'— his shaking hand indicated the jungle-darkened skyline— 'men may confess their sins. I never took you seriously, and I'm man enough to ask pardon.'

Anita drew a deep breath. Teddy's lips quirked strangely as he noted the sharp misery in the twitching face and mouth. It was a face that had once driven and heckled him without mercy. But here, on the reef, he—

Teddy took a bright new Australian sovereign from his pocket and flung it down on the coral floor. It rang clear as a bell in the still, warm air. With bent, quaking knees Jeremy stooped and snatched it up, his eyes bulging, his body swaying in an agony of doubt.

'One that the robbers left here,' he almost sobbed. 'My God, what beasts men are! They lie in wait to plunder ships. They hide and burrow, and run like the devil when you're cleaned out.'

Helmore exchanged swift glances with Anita. An unforgettable smile illumined her beautiful features.

'Yes, they steal and run,' she agreed.

'Mr. Stark,' Teddy broke in at last, 'a few pounds— fifty, a hundred, maybe—have been taken from the tank. The rest is intact, as far as one can judge. We'll pass over the conduct of Captain Mole in removing the specie. Dead men cannot defend their actions.'

'My dear Helmore,' Stark interrupted in a sudden gust of good-humour, 'I trust you completely. In the presence of this young lady'— he indicated Anita with, parental solicitude— 'you are at liberty to quote your own terms for the excellent service you have rendered the company. To be candid, I'd written off the wreck as a dead loss. You may now stand in to claim 50 per cent of the whole amount.'

Helmore shook his head.

'I'm thinking of the other shareholders, Mr. Stark. But if you'll sign up to help this young lady in Sydney, on account of help rendered in recovering the specie, I'll swap cigars with you and hand over the tank.'

Stark thrust out his hand, his eyes kindling strangely.

'Hang it, Helmore, you're decent. If you don't sign up to come into the firm with me I— I— upon my word, I won't touch the stuff.'

AT NOON the following day the schooner cleared the island, after the last ounce of specie had been stowed safely away. Anita and Stark watched the fading jungle-line and the white-winged birds crying over the wreck. There were tears in Anita's eyes. With all the pain and anguish of her past, the reefs and skies of the lonely atolls were very dear to her.

When Teddy joined them at dinner in the little stateroom aft, the shadow of grief and the memory of blind Rabaul had gone from her eyes. She held out her hand to him. Teddy bent over it for an instant, while Jeremy Stark whispered in his ear.

'Some girls bring trouble, but I'm predicting that this island waif will bring more happiness than all the yellow dough we lifted from that old tank. She's your find my boy, so watch your luck.'

From Teddy Helmore's point of view Stark's well-meant advice was utterly superfluous, a fact that was borne upon Anita long before they reached Sydney.

30: Luck and a Cyclone

Sydney Mail 29 Aug 1928

EVERY kind of bad luck had blown into Norry Templeton's life. Bad luck and an unscrupulous land agent had sent him to Beetle River where nut-worm and pestilence gnawed at the fruits of his three years hard toil.

Beetle River is a coffee-coloured estuary that drains the swamp lands of north-eastern Malangai At the back of Templeton's mangrove-skirted inlet dozed a thousand square miles of unsurveyed jungle and marsh. Over this mangrove-infested delta the hoof of the Beast had made a bigger impression than the heel of the man. Templeton had lost a crop of nuts that should have returned a handsome output of copra. His credit with old McMurdo, the storekeeper at Kadob, eight miles away, was ruined. McMurdo's agent in Sydney had sold him the estate, and also the myriads of rhinoceros beetles that lived on it, to say nothing of the hosts of tree-climbing crabs that took nightly toll of his crop.

On the estate were a six-roomed bungalow and some outbuildings given over long ago to the white ants and centipedes. There was fishing off the reefs. The fishing and the yams had kept Norry alive. They were the two things to be had for nothing at Beetle River.

One of the native carriers from Kadoo had left a note pinned to the verandah rail. It was from McMurdo, and reiterated the statement that unless Templeton squared his account for stores, etc., by the end of the month the penalty of forfeiture and bankruptcy would inevitably follow.

Templeton was in his twenty-fifth year, and with only his raw health to stave off McMurdo and the beetles. He sat alone on the verandah that overlooked a strip of palm-shaded beach which formed a link between the river outlet and the Pacific Ocean. Never had the air tasted so sickly and rotten. It reminded him of putrefying mangoes. The sky-fringe in the north had turned from a curious yellow to bellying clouds of steel whiteness. Strata of hot air oozed from the jungle, those strange exhalations from the poison woods that affected him like an anaesthetic.

The bald, pig-tailed head of Ah Moy peeped from the open window. Moy was his one remaining servant, whose honesty and pluck had brightened the dreadful months of heat and scourge.

'Catchem wind, sah, bymby,' he intoned cheerfully. 'No likee sky; no likee birds all go away yessaday. Chickens an' ole hen hide in deep hole. Sea smell likee bad melon just now, sah.'

Templeton moved uneasily in his deck-chair. His eyes explored the skyline anxiously. If the wind got up to a hurricane it could only complete the ruin wrought by the beetles among his coconut palms. Time was when he might have viewed an oncoming tornado with alarm. But now it didn't matter. A man without possessions may laugh at cyclones, he told himself bitterly. The planters up the river would suffer— the men who had mixed science with their farming, the men who had countered the invading pest-swarms, only to see their lofty palms go down like skittles in some tropic hell-blast of wind and rain.

'Shut all windows, Moy, and put some grub in the cellar. I can feel something coming, something with a punch. Those poor devils on the hill will get most of the clout.'

The soft slamming of windows was the prelude of the bigger o slams to come. The steel-white wedge of cloud on the sky rim became a visible blade of wind cleaving the sea. This blade of wind took a leap at Templeton's palm-dotted beach, bringing with it a mountain of water that fell in a thunder-blast of foam and eddies along the reef-strewn coast.

It was the screen of salt toughened mangroves that saved the bungalow. Deep in the slime and mud they held true while the hammers of the cyclone beat down from the north. From the far jungle-line came the crashing sound of palms uprent and stripped of their precious yield. Roofs and outbuildings disappeared in a whirlwind of leaves and flying branches.

A year before Templeton had dug a cyclone cellar beneath the bungalow. Into this retreat he crawled, followed by Ah Moy, while the storm devil clutched the riven forest and taught it to scream. It screamed in a hundred voices and tongues. Rivers were blown from their beds, and the dead fishes lay in gleaming shoals over the naked mud-banks and flats.

For eighteen hours Templeton hugged his cellar while the wind piled ruin and disaster over the coastlands. In the grey dawn he awoke from his stupor filled with a superstitious uneasiness of further trouble in store.

Climbing from the cellar he reached the verandah, and stared , seaward through the piled-up masses of timber and wind-torn scrub. Avalanches of surf were thundering inshore interspersed with paving masses of green water that threatened the low-lying plantations in the south. Ah Moy crouched near his elbow, his hand flung out to the millrace of foam and flying scud on the skyline.

'You see— over there, sah! One lille ship. Straight come heah. Wind no let stop. By cli, she hit um reef bymby, sah!'

A small fifty-ton yacht showed through the breaking seas, a mere toy in the running mountains bf brine and spume. A few torn strips of sail whipped her yards as she tore head-on to the shore. Grabbing an old pair of binoculars from the verandah table, Templeton followed her erratic movements anxiously.

It did not take him long to discover that she was without steersman or crew. There was no sign of life about her snowy decks or poop.

'Broke from her moorings, no doubt,' Templeton said, half aloud. 'Poor little thing! You'll hear her scrunch on those reefs in a minute.'

Just here Templeton received another surprise in the shape of a small cutter beating with the driving seas in an effort to weather the headland that formed a bay in Templeton's part of the coast.

It was McMurdo's cutter, and the binoculars revealed the old storekeeper and estate agent lashed the tiller of his tiny craft. He was alone except for a native boy huddled in the stern.

Ah Moy laughed and shivered by turns as he watched McMurdo's efforts to prevent the swamping of the cutter by the heavy seas.

'Missa McMurdo goin' to pick up that yacht, sah,' he called out. 'Findin's keepings, sah. Welly pletty yacht, sah. Fetchum twenty tousan' dollars in Flosco or Saigon.'

The Chinaman's words touched Templeton like a whip, stung him into sudden activity. Here was McMurdo, the copra king and land-owner, playing the game of salvage-hunter'

Never in his life had the old storekeeper missed a chance to pick up any odd trifle the sea might offer. His chance of reaching the derelict yacht lay in his ability to weather the point.

The hurricane force of the wind, although somewhat abated, was against him. There were moments when the cutter disappeared from view among the sliding valleys of rushing water. With the wind astern the yacht plunged shoreward, her slender hull cleaving the mountainous crests. It was suddenly borne upon Templeton that wind and tide were driving her 'straight for the river's mouth, now in flood, and sheltered by the mangroves from the slamming seas and wind.

ONCE clear of the point the yacht behaved as Templeton anticipated. She missed the whaleback reef by half a cable's length. Five minutes later she was flapping her canvas strips within calm waters.

'By golly, sah,' the Chinaman chuckled, 'ole McMurdo too late. Allee this water belonga you— right up the creek foh one mile, sah.'

Templeton's brain worked in single shafts of thought. Always a dreamer, his visions had clouded his every day actions. While other planters had waged a ceaseless war against the plant pests he had sat and dreamed.

McMurdo's cutter had fought the battle of wind and sea had cleared the point, and was now bearing straight for the estuary. The sound of the cutter's motor galvanised Templeton into swift movement. He signed to Ah Moy.

'I'm going to board the yacht and tie her up to our jetty. Stick close, Moy, and catch any rope I drop over her rail.'

The Chinaman breathed through his shut teeth as he followed Templeton to the water's edge. Here Templeton flung away his canvas coat as he waded to his breast in the swirling current, and then struck out for the yacht in midstream.

Not by a screw-beat did McMurdo slow down his fast-racing cutter. The muscles of his tough frame quivered under his silk jacket as he jerked the lashings free from his waist. His restless energy, together with his fierce lust of ownership, had made him feared and respected among the planters within the copra-belt. He had noted Templeton's move to board the yacht, and his teeth snapped over a bitter oath as he raced the cutter full-tilt into the river mouth.

'The swat of a pommy!' he gritted to the boy in the stern. 'I'll show him the salvage laws in these parts. She's mine. I saw her first, curse him!'

Templeton found the flood water stronger than he had expected. For a moment it seemed as if he would be carried past the lurching, swaying vessel. His glance went up to her polished brass rails and ventilators, the spick-and-span paintwork, the shimmering nickel-plated skylights. And all for the man who could board her first and grip her wheel! The flood swept him in a half-circle under her stern, while his glance settled on a toy gangway that slanted from her starboard side almost to the water.

A night spent in a damp cyclone cellar had not keyed Templeton to a pitch where his strength cried for full play. He was tired, and a deadly undertow was slowly sapping his strength. But Templeton remembered one or more miserable failures in the past, the good things that had come so near his hand, only to be filched away by a more aggressive spirit.

His jaw was set now. His heart pounded at his ribs under the suffocating pressure or the tide. One more effort, and... The elusive toy gangway seemed to be playing its own game. At one moment his fingers almost clutched the step; the next it reared above him in the fast-moving flood. Again he fought and trudgeoned near, while McMurdo stood with his foot on the cutter's rail, a boathook grasped in his hands, ready to spring aboard the yacht the moment he forged alongside.

Templeton knew that the next few moments would give practical ownership to the first man who boarded the yacht. If McMurdo succeeded only in making a show of steering her to safety he would employ an the money at his disposal in keeping her for his own use.

Again the yacht rolled to starboard, bringing the gangway within a foot of Templeton's grasp. This time he leaped from the water, both hands looping the

step. A cry of rage broke from McMurdo. 'Lay off, there,' he bellowed; 'or I'll brain ye with the boathook!'

Templeton heaved himself from the water to the steps, while his heart seemed to stammer and halt in the fierce effort of muscle and brain. 'Lay off!' the old storekeeper repeated, his long boathook stabbing in Templeton's direction. The jab missed as Templeton half-ran up the steep steps.

The soft grating of the cutter against the yacht's side told him that McMurdo was on his heels. With a forward rush Templeton gained the bridge steps, and flung himself into the deserted wheelhouse. Gripping the wheel, he put the floundering yacht over to the bungalow side of the river-bank, where the current favoured him and Ah Moy stood waiting to lend a hand.

McMurdo's boathook clutched the gangway and held the cutter fast to the yacht. In a moment he had mounted the steps, and stood for a space glaring at Templeton in the wheelhouse.

'You're mighty smart for a beetle farmer!' he sneered. 'I'll ask ye to step down while I take over this little craft. Ye may know I'm a magistrate in these parts, with powers to decide on questions of marine salvage.'

Templeton brought the yacht to the bank in seaman like style. Seizing a coil of rope that lay on the bridge outside, he cast it in Moy's direction.

The Chinaman caught it cleverly and looped it round a charred tree-bole on the bank. Templeton made his end fast to a cleat and returned to the wheelhouse. The first breath of anger escaped him as his glance fell on McMurdo standing in the waist.

'Get off that deck,' he commanded. 'It's the owner that's talking. Get off and keep off,' he added with gusto. McMurdo winced and steadied his legs as the yacht bumped the bank. Then his rage swept him to the bridge steps and up to the door of the wheelhouse.

Templeton was not inclined to be trapped inside a steering-house by a heavy-limbed, bull-necked battler of McMurdo's reputation. Templeton had once been apprenticed to the sea, and although shipboard fighting was not his speciality he knew that a wheelhouse was no place to meet a human tiger.

in time to meet the flailing arms and battering head of the oncoming storekeeper.

Templeton had been weary and sick of soul after his long vigil in the cyclone cellar. But anger and disgust at his neighbour's methods of appropriating a valuable bit of salvage woke, the slumbering youth in him that would not be denied. He was not greedy or inclined to fight over lost property. But ruin and the wolf had recently stared in at the door. Other settlers in the district had sunk to the slime through their inability to seize the gifts of the elements. And men of McMurdo's calibre had laughed at their indecision and

mistaken sense of honesty. So... it was fight or sink in the mud with the wasters and bankrupts, or die in the coolie compounds of some ruffianly, slave-driving planter. Fight! There was not an inch of foot-space on the yacht's poop. They clinched and rocked hither and yon, McMurdo using short wrist-blows with the venom and craft of a bar-room expert. Hip and shoulder, thigh and neck, he was pounds heavier than Templeton. And within the rat-cramped limits of the poop his poundage gave him stability and assurance.

'Quit, or I'll kill you!' he choked. 'Another blow and I hand your carcase to the hillmen!'

Youth is difficult. It bends, staggers, and recovers with the speed of life. Templeton almost collapsed within the bear-grip of this forest-bred ruffian. The fellow's breath sickened him. But in a moment his heart had ceased to hammer his ribs. His lungs grew clear; the gorilla-like bulk of his head-butting opponent seemed to wobble and gasp like a hurt squid. Templeton was not cruel, but his blows ripped and hooked with deadly precision against the red throat and chin. His straight stabs lengthened as McMurdo recoiled the whole length of the poop.

With his back to the rail the storekeeper played his last fighting card. An open-bladed knife flew from his fist within an inch of Templeton's eye. The dagger-like point stuck with a ping in the wheelhouse door. Templeton stooped low, gripped his ankles, and the cursing, rage-blinded knife-thrower pitched over the rail into the current. Breathing like a spent colt, Templeton watched him rise to the surface and grab the boathook held out by the boy in the cutter.

'I'm sorry you've got wet, McMurdo,' he called out with a laugh. 'There's no malice and no heartburning now it's over. Come aboard as a friend, if you like, and we'll hunt out some whisky below.'

'The whisky will keep,' spluttered the old storekeeper, clambering into the cutter. 'And so will your neck after my headmen have done with it.'

The last threat was uttered as the cutter steered for the open bay.

Templeton descended from the poop, wiping the stains of the conflict from his face. He was hungry, and anxious to overhaul the storm-blown little vessel now in his keeping. Everything about her snowy decks revealed the good taste and wealth of her previous owners. Yet the mystery of her coming puzzled him. Was it possible that she had broken away from her moorings in some distant harbour at the first crack of the storm? And did wealthy yacht-owners leave their vessels without a single deckhand to watch over them?

IT was almost dark now. The shadowy outline of Ah Moy was scarcely visible among the storm-shattered foliage on the bank. Templeton signalled for

him to keep a sharp watch on the bungalow, in case McMurdo returned unexpectedly by one of the coast tracks. The Chinaman nodded and withdrew silently towards the bungalow.

Templeton descended the brass-plated stairs that led to the yacht's spacious stateroom. In the uncertain light he made out a number of packing-cases strewn about the heavily-carpeted 'floor'. On a table at the foot of the stairs were a dozen birds-of-paradise, the marks of padded arrows showing on their brilliant plumage. It was evident to him that, the birds had been killed quite recently, and the mystery of the yacht's abandonment increased as he groped among the litter of butterfly cases and rare, orchid specimens, flung together during the fierce passage through the cyclone. Templeton searched for the electric switch in the hope of lighting the rapidly darkening space.

He had become conscious of a peculiar odour that did not belong to the birds or flowers around him. To his acute, fear-sharpened senses the strange effluvia seemed to come from a heavily moving body somewhere within the dark cabin corridor on his right.

Templeton had been hungry for tobacco. He had expected to unearth some cigarettes or a little wine to alleviate the inertia resulting from his recent exertions. For the first time in his life he experienced a stark sense of horror as he receded from the cabin corridor. In boyhood this unnamed terror had often come upon him when traversing an unlit passage. It was the bleak terror of hands reaching for his young body, the fear of unseen shapes stalking in his wake.

He turned again quickly, while his thumb touched an electric switch in the wall. It was then the sheaths of his nerves seemed to shrink to pulp as the light from the exhausted storage battery sparked and went out. In this momentary flash of light he saw the flat, spotted head of a king python poised almost level with his own. In the darkness he heard the faint piston-like sound of the head striking within a foot of his throat. Templeton's back-spring took him to the stairs, with twenty feet of the python's uncoiled length reeving and floundering about his ankles. Bounding up, he slammed the teak door against the upcrawling monster and turned hurriedly to the gangway. He must wait for daylight before dealing with this unexpected phenomenon.

Ah Moy had returned hastily to the bank and was gesticulating frantically in his direction.

'Somebody inside cabin, sah,' he called out, indicating one of the portholes overlooking the bank. 'Me see somebody strikee match inside porthole, long way flom heali, sah. Come, quick; another match just strikee, sah.'

Templeton sprang down the gangway and turned incredulously to the portholes at hand. One of these brass-bound windows had been pushed open. The momentary glow of a match inside illumined the cabin.

The next instant it was in darkness. Pressing his face to the aperture Templeton struck a light and peered inside. A young girl in a silk kimono was lying on a couch beneath the porthole. The efforts to attract attention by holding a light to the window appeared to have exhausted her remaining strength. She lay quite still until Templeton's voice broke the fainting spell into which she was fast relapsing. She raised herself from the couch, and then sank back with the ghost of a smile in his direction.

To reach her from the saloon stairs was out of the question. All the for'ard skylights led to the state-room, where the king python still lay in waiting. To cut through the deck above the girl's cabin appeared the quickest and safest way of reaching her.

With the Chinaman's help he brought a brace and some cutting tools from the bungalow, together with a couple of hurricane lanterns and a small ladder. A space was sawn through the teak deck and cabin ceiling. With a lantern to guide him, Templeton dropped lightly through the opening and knelt beside the couch. The noise of the saw and hammer had roused her to a sense of her position. Templeton's fingers fell soothingly on her brow and wrist.

'I'll get you into my bungalow,' he said in a half whisper. 'My name is Norry Templeton. I'm just a planter living on the edge of the creek. Your yacht is tied up safely to the bank,' he explained hurriedly. 'When you are rested we'll fix things up.' She rose with an effort and smiled wanly in the lantern glow. A slight Devon accent betrayed her nationality. It seemed years since he had looked upon anything so wistfully feminine.

'Thanks for your help, Mr. Templeton. I— I shall be glad to leave the yacht for a while. The last few hours I've suffered to the brink of madness.'

'Please don't tell me now,' he remonstrated. 'My bungalow weathered the gale, and is at your service.'

Norry found her an easy burden with the help of Moy's steadying hand on the ladder. Holding her in his arms he gained the deck and descended the gangway. The Chinaman followed with the lanterns until the bungalow was reached. A white moon, the size of a ripe breadfruit, had risen above the jungle rim. The wind had gone down, and the crying of pigmy geese sounded eerie in the tropic stillness as they flew in a mile-long flock to the back swamps and reaches.

Ah Moy prepared a light repast from his scanty larder while Templeton administered to the immediate needs of his young guest. Some freshly-made coffee with fruit and omelettes worked wonders in her appearance. The faint

roses drove the death-tinge from her cheeks. In a little while she was seated on the lamp-lit verandah relating to the astounded young planter the curious incident which had led to the yacht's entry into Beetle River.

Her father, Sir John Caley, had fitted out the vessel at Singapore, eight months before, to collect orchids and birds within the Malay Archipelago.

'We reached the Songolo River about seven weeks ago. The chief of the village at Ambaya promised us unlimited facilities for acquiring orchids and rare birds. We had a native crew of seven, including an old serang who had sailed in many seas.

'At the junction of the Mah and Songolo rivers the outgrowing jungle forms a black arch overhead for nearly twenty miles. Progress up-river was exceedingly difficult. We did not go far.

'Last Thursday we lay in midstream with only a light line holding us to the shore. My father had gone to the village lo help the carriers with some cases filled with quartz specimens.

'About three in the afternoon the storm came up. The trees overhead began to snap. One or two heavy branches fell on the deck, almost smashing the skylights. The serang said that a hurricane was coming down from the north, and sent a messenger to hasten my father's return.

'I was standing under the poop,' Miss Caley went on quietly, 'and saw what looked like the giant limb of a tree fall to the deck. The serang screamed a warning to me, while the crew shouted, 'Haino, hohoreira!' Before I could speak the crew and serang had disappeared over the side.'

'The dogs!' Templeton gritted under his breath.

'The hohoreira is gifted with the anaconda's appetite for swallowing small cattle and stray women and children,' she continued with a grimace.

'The hohoreira within a glass-house at the Zoo is a picturesque reptile, Mr. Templeton ; but on the open deck of a fifty-ton yacht, lashing itself to fury and wrecking most of the chairs and the one lifeboat, one felt its ghastly strength and its murderous swiftness—

'I dashed below and locked the cabin door, hoping my father would meet the serang and come to my aid. What followed, Mr. Templeton, is not very clear to me. I was conscious only of the fearful wind and the fact that the yacht had parted her line. The hurricane carried the yacht across the river's mouth and out to sea.

'I was stunned by the fearful din and rush of water along the decks. Then I remembered that I had not closed the door at the top of the saloon stairs. If I had done so the hohoreira would have been washed overboard. As it was the dreadful thing took refuge from the storm in the passage outside my cabin!

'Once in the night I heard it beating through the water that had washed downstairs. It made me sick.... And I knew that the yacht would strike a reef sooner or later. I prayed that I would be drowned in my cabin, and not alongside the— Ugh!'

Templeton nodded in silent appreciation of her terrors.

'Your good star steered you safe,'' he commented after a long silence. 'To-morrow I may get a wireless through to your father.'

Ah Moy padded across the verandah and whispered softly to Templeton. 'McMurdo is back, sah, with a p'liceman. You speakee to him, sah, or he takee the yacht away in the dark.'

With a hasty word of apology to Miss Caley Templeton passed hurriedly in the direction of the river-bank. McMurdo was standing near the yacht's gangway. Beside him was Shinogi, the Japanese judo expert, whose services had been retained in Malinga by the Commissioner of Police. Shinogi was the big stick on which the Administration leaned in time of riot, and disturbance among the plantation workers.

McMurdo nodded sulkily in Templeton's direction. 'I claim salvage here,' lie stated. hoarsely.

'Mr. Shinogi,' he added, indicating the smiling judo man, 'will act as my deputy until my claims are settled. In the meantime, Mr. Templeton, I can promise you a broken neck if you set foot on the yacht.'

Again the Jap smiled as he waved Templeton from the vicinity of the gangway.

'Enough is as good as a wink,' he muttered in his deep bass. 'When I keel a man he falls to pieces an' the wind blows heem away.'

'But— you can't go on that yacht,' Templeton began.

'Shut up!' McMurdo interrupted fiercely. Turning to the judo man; he beckoned impatiently and strode up the gangway.

'Come aboard, Shinogi. We'll go over this hooker and make an inventory of her cargo and furniture. Knock that fellow down if he speaks again.'

Shinogi followed the old storekeeper up the dark gangway. Templeton heard a string of oaths later on as McMurdo stumbled over the opening in the deck where the ladder had been lowered to assist Miss Caley from her cabin. A tense silence followed the opening of the door leading to the state-room stairs. A match was struck as both men groped for the electric switch. Their muffled voices reached Templeton on the bank. He lit a corn-cob pipe and waited. But not for long.

A sudden rush of feet accompanied by a yell of dismay came from the stateroom. McMurdo's voice split into short whines of fear as he raced for the stairs. Then a furious slamming of bodies against wood-work was heard, as

though an army of wild cats had broken from the hold. The shadowy form of the old storekeeper appeared on deck as he dashed blindly for the gangway.

Templeton waited until he had left the yacht and disappeared with lunatic strides along the bank. Then he mounted the gangway and stood near the stairhead expectantly. The saloon stairs were in darkness. But there was no mistaking the nature of the Homeric conflict in progress below. From keel to truck the small vessel vibrated under the shock of hurtling bodies.

To the listening Templeton it seemed as if truckloads of iron were being shot across the state-room floor, followed by the slogging strokes of the hohoreira's scaly length against the partitions and walls. Templeton peered into the darkness below.

'I'm here, Shinogi,' he called out. 'How can I help?'

There was no response for a while; only the fierce slamming noises, the low, harsh breathing of the judo expert in travail.

'A light,' he choked at last, 'and I will twist the poison from this mud. worm. A light, sah... I trip and fall in one coil aftah another. Tashan! It is a living screw worm.'

Snatching an oilcan containing a wick from the binnacle at the head of the stairs, Templeton lit it and descended to the state-room.

The scene at the foot of the steps was one that the young Australian never, forgot. The hohoreira had coiled its enormous length around the Jap's ankles, and waist. Shinogi's muscle-packed hands had gripped the soft throat until the thumbs and fingers met like teeth in a wolf-trap. His right heel had caught the hohoreira inflated body and had flattened it to the floor. There was a curious grin on the Jap's face as he rocked to and. fro in the python's toils.

'A tree worm, honourable sir; a killer of birds. It caught me in the dark; mistook Shinogi the muscle-priest for a dam spring chicken ! Stand away, honourably or the poison from these fangs may spurt and blind us!'

The iron pressure of his. thumbs, the pulverising effect of his-heel, relaxed the python's strangle clutch. Dragging the limp, battered length upstairs, he gave the flat head a final slam against the bulwarks. The hohoreira's fangs dripped poison as Shinogi flung the inert length overboard.

'Watch, now,' he requested Templeton. From the dark reaches of the flood waters came a score of gleaming, phosphorescent shapes that circled and rushed in blinding smothers of foam around the hohoreira's sinking body. The millwheel of light and rending jaws lasted for ten seconds. In a little while the river was dark again: Shinogi smiled strangely.

'So— the shark gets the jungle worm at last. The tree-hens will sing louder to-morrow.' He glanced round the deck swiftly. 'Where is McMurdo ?' he inquired stonily.

The old planter did not return to Beetle River. To prevent further complications Templeton explained everything at police headquarters the following day.

In response to Templeton's message a Government launch brought Sir John Caley to his daughter's side. The baronet had despaired of seeing her again. The havoc wrought by the cyclone on Templeton's property touched a tender chord in the hearts of Sir John and his daughter. They could not offer him money for his kindness, but they plotted to take him from the fever marshes that were slowly sapping his energy.

'It isn't a black serang you want, Daddy, for sea travel in these parts. Try a white man who'll be found at the wheel when the wind gets up. Try one, Daddy.'

They tried Norry Templeton. He was a great success.

At least, Iris Caley thought so.

31: The Opium Fishers

Sydney Mail 11 Nov 1925

'THE barbarian, Dean, has sworn that no more opium shall come to the islands. He has given his word to his priests and his Government. There is a gunboat watching the channels of the Seven Straits. What will the Giver of All Things do now?'

The speaker was a small, shrivelled Chinaman, dressed in the garb of a Buddhist priest. The other man was Kum Sing, who owned the string of gambling houses and pak-a-pu shops in Sumala.

There was nothing of the starved ascetic about Kum Sing. From the roots of his bull-neck to the soles of his sandalled feet he breathed of rich foods and the silken comforts that surround the yellow croupiers in every Eastern town. Kum was seated on the sun-screened verandah of his island residence, sheltered from the prying eyes of Government officials by a tall stockade of bamboo and close-planted palms. The priest's words awoke an angry flush in his saffron cheeks.

'Tell me, Chuen,' he said slowly, 'how this Customs dog, Dean, learns so many things about my private business. Who among our people is likely to breathe the secret of my household? Give me his name!' he demanded in a savage underbreath, 'so that my swordsman shall know his neck before the next moon gives light.'

The priest shook his head. 'No one knows the secrets of thy opium trade, O Giver. I have come here to warn thee of this Government officer, Dean, who seeks to punish the children of heaven for eating of the poppy that groweth in the fields.'

KUM SING had grown so rich in the last few years that his existence began to threaten the very life of the working community. The meanest coolie in the Archipelago knew that his agents supplied thousands of plantation workers with opium. In this matter European and British consuls are not over-squeamish, but when the juice of the poppy began to figure like poison gas in the daily death-rate a plaintive howling is heard on the skyline.

Norry Dean was the sole Customs surveyor at Sumalu. Norry was twenty-five, and fresh from an Australian college. Sumala, with its teeming native life, its busy plantations of guava, tobacco, rice, and copra, gave him an interest in the daily lives of the natives, who toiled from dawn till dusk in the rich valleys and cane-belts. He saw the products of their labours go east and west in the big brown sampans and junks to feed the starving millions of the great yellow

land in the north. Gold taels and dollars came back in payment. Sumala prospered.

Then silently, like a dreadful skeleton hand, the opium-hunger fastened on a hundred thriving villages and settlements in the Sumala group of islands. Like the breath of the beast, it rotted and disabled, it destroyed the morning laughter in the valleys. The men who had once ploughed and reaped lay huddled and nerveless in the darkness of their huts.

Dean beheld this slow process of village extermination in the full knowledge that an elephantine Chinese with jewelled hands was operating in the background.

And Kum Sing, sat tight as a stone god in his big house overlooking the bay. He laughed at Dean's efforts to counter the illicit traffic in the drug. He laughed at the gunboat in the offing that nightly thrust its powerful searchlight into the windows of his sleeping apartment. At any moment of the night the accusing finger of this searchlight was likely to stab through the palms and foliage of his house, to the infinite discomfort of his guests and friends.

No man had yet connected Kum Sing with the traffic. The planters were helpless to stop it or produce evidence that would convict him. Incoming vessels were halted and searched systematically in mid-channel, but not enough opium had been found to affect the health of an inquisitive bee.

'At night they blind my house with their searchlight,' Kum snarled to the priests of the Buddah temple that stood near a clump of mangroves at the water's edge. 'Bymby I blind the lot of them with the black smoke. Hi yah, children of heaven, watch me!'

MARY WALTERS, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the Sumala mission house, was at her wits' end. She had never interfered with the Chinese in their opium lairs, but she bitterly resented the undoing of the clean-minded natives, who wilted like children under the poisonous breath of the poppy. Mary was conscious that the authorities were blaming Norry for permitting the illicit traffic. In all likelihood some older man would be sent out to replace him. And that would mean the end of her dreams as far as the young Customs surveyor was concerned.

In her woman's heart she knew that Dean was shouldering the work of six men. And against him was arrayed the whole gambling community of Sumala. These Chinese gamblers were remitting large sums to various banks in Hongkong and Shanghai, while their victims became added burdens to the mission.

'Norry hasn't a chance with them,' she complained to her father. 'Day and night they watch him. The junk captains have a code of signals. They are always talking about him with those yellow flags.'

'Norry has brains,' the vicar told his daughter. 'These junkmen have only got pigtails,' he said, somewhat bitterly.

Mary often called at the little office on the wharf where Dean took toll of incoming vessels, the copra schooners and liquor-laden prahus that blew in from Malaya. The little, fat Malay skippers joked with Dean on the eternal opium feud. They advised him to put a wire fence round the port and wear horn-rimmed glasses. He might then see how the contraband walked into the smoke parlours of Sumala.

'All right, my brown brothers,' Dean retorted good-humouredly. 'When I catch Kum Sing, his hat and feet will go into a twelve-foot cell.'

WHEN Kum Sing heard this threat he shook in his elephantine wrath.

'Allee my life I hopee that feller Dean on the hop, hop. He think he marry Missey Walter, bymby. No feah! I makee him worry until he losee his sleep an' go mad. Him no sendee me to plison. I sendee him into one big madhouse.'

Also, the gunboat crews were not pleased at the state of affairs in Sumala. They wanted a change from the eternal searchlight practice and the chasing of smelly prahus and sampans. Chasing pirates from their river nests in the northern estuaries was more to their fancy.

One hot afternoon Dean found himself wandering among the coral hummocks along the northern extremity of the island. A ten-mile stretch of glittering white beach bore the thunder-shocks of the in-driving surf. A canopy of storm clouds drifted low over the jungled headlands in the far north. Day after day Norry came to this spot on account of its remoteness and freedom from the squalling voices of the coolie hordes and cargo-shifters who infested the wharf. He liked to be alone at times.

His eye wandered along the beach to where a round piece of rubber lay in the sand. He approached it casually, and saw that the rubber ring was attached to a small air-tight tin. Dean's fingers snapped over it as he crouched in the sand. His jack-knife prised open the tin, revealing a leaf-wrapped cake of the purest Indian opium.

'And that's that!' Norry flung out under his breath. The storm broke over his head in sheets of white tropic rain that whipped and drenched him in a moment. But throughout the squelching blasts of water his brain worked steadily to a conclusion as certain as life. The rubber ring, with the air-tight receptacle attached, had once been fastened to the foot of some big bird. The rubber ring itself was broken, and had no doubt fallen to the beach while the

bird was in flight. Dean's mind went over the names of the birds that frequented the coast and atolls of the Sumala Archipelago. He thought of the spindly blue herons that haunted the rocky pools and streams of the mountainside; he thought of the flat-footed Pacific gulls that flocked to the reefs and sandbars of the channels and bays. And the reflection did not help him at all.

A Chinaman might catch a gull or heron and attach a rubber ring and tin to its tough ankles. But that didn't get big quantities of opium anywhere, he argued, even if the booby-brained gull or heron could be induced to enter the conspiracy. Pigeons were also out of the question. They did not exist in Sumala or the neighbouring islands.

Dean returned to his office on the wharf, ate some supper his kitchen coolie brought him, and for a while tried to forget the rubber ring and the seven ounces of pure Indian opium contained in the tin.

IT was past midnight when lie left the office. Always there were a number of junks and paddy-boats ready to slip away with the tide. They carried livestock, goats, pigs, and the small Sumala cows that were in demand at the thickly-populated ports of the South China coast. Alongside the pier he saw a frowsy double-deck junk with lantern gods suspended from the dragon-headed poop. The lanterns revealed a number of crates crowded with live geese. The junk captain greeted him with a slat-eyed grin.

'Good wind, sah,' he intimated, with a gesture at the storm wrack of clouds on the horizon. 'Plenty cyclon' come bymby to worry me. Poor Chinaman in lille junk no likee slip-slap weather.'

Dean nodded abstractedly as he studied the geese in the crates. 'Where are they going?' he asked, pointing to the crates.

'And who's sending them from here?'

The junk captain grinned good-naturedly at the young surveyor's question. 'They go to Van Gall at Shark Island, sah. Him welly fond roast goose.'

Dean pondered swiftly. It occurred to him that Van Gall was the possessor of a Gargantuan appetite if he consumed all the geese in the crates. And Van Gall was not a breeder of geese. It also came back to Norry that this particular junk was in the habit of carrying heavy consignments of geese to Shark Island in the north. But until now the fact had not bitten into his mind. Surveyors of Customs are not usually concerned with the outward destinies of geese and fowls.

Shark Island lay about ten miles from Sumala, and was administered by the Netherlands Government. Van Gall was a trepang fisher of no particular standing; he lived alone in a two-roomed hut with his wife. Beyond a couple of

native boatmen who assisted him at his work, there were no other people on the island. Dean counted fifty geese on the crates, youngish birds, he thought, but in rather poor condition.

'All right, Jo Koon,' he said to the drowsy eyed junk captain. 'Get a move on. Good luck and plenty of rice!'

The unclean junk put to sea an hour later, and Dean went to bed, but not to sleep. The fifty live geese in the junk's crates formed a disturbing incident. And the more be examined the rubber leg-ring with the opium tin attached the more, his brain responded to a simple proposition in smuggling, as conducted by an over-fed Chinaman named Kum Sing and a piebald Dutchman named Van Gall.

'Geese it is,' he again soliloquised. 'And here I've spent the last two years fooling blindly among the plague-soaked cargoes of every squint-eyed banana tramp in the China trade! And all the while the dope has been sailing over my head on the feet of Sing's grey geese. Mother of Mike! I thought I knew Chinamen— me, that doesn't know fantan from fantails!'

It was as clear as day to Dean that Van Gall, at Shark Island, was receiving the drug from Hindu agents in Singapore or Calcutta and sending it across the narrow straits by means of Kum Sing's trained geese. The goose pens were within the tree-sheltered stockade at the back of the big Chinaman's residence on the hill. There they were regularly fed and attended. It was possible, he argued, that many of the geese were hatching eggs, and the moment Van Gall liberated them, with the rubber-leg rings attached to each bird, they flew back to the stockade on the hill.

Unable to control his feverish anxiety, Norry put off in a dinghy to the gunboat that, lay a few cables' length from the pier. He found no difficulty in seeing the young lieutenant on duly. At first the young naval officer regarded Dean quizzingly as he listened to the story of the rubber ring and the theory or the homing geese. In a little while, however, his face lit up at the suggestion of Kum Sing and Van Gall working together.

'I think you've called the right 'phone number this time, Mr. Dean,' he said at last. 'I might also mention,' he went on quickly, 'that I have noticed flocks of geese flying over the bay at odd times, but generally an hour or so before dawn.'

'I wish we could intercept a few,' Norry hazarded. 'About time we put these drug devils out of commission.'

The lieutenant looked up quickly, his eyes grown keen us stiletto points.

'Our searchlights will beat the geese if they come, across in the dark. Go back to your rest, Mr. Dean,' he urged. 'Leave this bit of sport to us. You may

come aboard if you hear firing. We'll bring some of the birds down as evidence.'

But Norry had been made to writhe under the jibes of the Administration and the taunts of the sampan crews. He had been called a slacker for allowing the yellow-skins to conduct the most pernicious traffic known to men. Sleep was not for him. Up and down the beach, like, a young tiger out for a kill, Norry padded. The storm clouds had blown south. He watched the starlit sky in the north where Shark Island snuggled among the reefs and sandbars of a typhoon-ridden archipelago.

Gall's nationality protected him from interference on the part of the gunboat, but if it were possible to bring down a few birds carrying opium to Kum Sing's stockades the wrath of a dozen consulates would be on the big Chinaman's head. Norry felt that the knockout was coming. He could almost hear the yellow man's squeals for mercy. He paused in the shadow of some pandanus trees and again looked at the sky. In a little while the dawn would be at hand.

His glance went out to the gunboat, and he detected the shapes of men moving stealthily about the deck. And just here the whirring sound of wings overhead reached him, the unmistakable air motion of geese in high flight. One or two ragged clouds lay across the star track in the north, but Norry's sharp eyes picked out the blurred line of necks and wings trailing down towards Sumala. Then a mile-long splinter of light stabbed the sky in front of the down-streaming geese.

The fierce white rays sprayed the leaders of the Hock like a hose. Instantly a strange piping cry of protest came from the goose trail as the leaders veered from the blinding beam of light and planed in a blundering circle above the gunboat. A dozen shots rang out from the gunboat's poop. Norry saw several birds pitch down into the water. A moment later he was running to the dinghy he had left under the pier.

He rowed frantically to where the dead geese lay on the water, and was joined almost immediately by a launch from the gunboat. The searchlight aided them in recovering the shot birds. Fully a dozen had been now brought down, and the willing hands of the blue-jackets in the launch soon had the geese spread out in the thwarts.

A sick pain seized Norry Dean as he stared at the result of the night's bag. There was no sign of rubber rings or opium-boxes about any of the geese in the launch. A sense of having been fooled came to him. His stark disappointment was voiced by the gruff-voiced petty officer in the launch.

'These Chinks have got us by the leg, sir. They're makin' geese of us to-night, curse 'em! And we ain't got a dog's chance of handin' him the. bird at this game. They got us by the whiskers.'

KUM SING sat on his silk-padded divan and bellowed with laughter at the sound of firing from the gunboat. Beside him stood the trusty Chuen from the temple of Buddah at the waterside.

'And the while dog Dean, picked up the goose's leg-ring and carried a story of air-smuggling to the gunboat people,' the priest informed him for the fifth lime. 'The ways of these white barbarians make, my little gods laugh, O Giver of All Things.'

The big Chinaman on the divan controlled a fresh outburst of laughter with an effort. His saturnine face grew serious as the priest continued.

'The rubber ring and the opium box on the beach would have set any Wiseman thinking, O Giver,' the priest hazarded. 'We must not laugh too much at the boy Dean for making a simple guess. I do not see,' he added slowly, 'why the Giver of All Things should try to make Dean believe that geese are carrying opium from Gall's island to Sumala. It is risky.'

The gunfire had ceased across the bay; the searchlights no longer wheeled across the starlit sky.

Kum Sing lit a long-stemmed pipe at his elbow and puffed with the serenity of one who had accomplished a big piece of bluff.

'I will tell you why I have turned the searchlights of this gunboat on to my geese, Chuen,' he confessed after awhile. 'I could not sleep for those lights. Aei, chu bo! They picked the locks of my doors and windows, those lights. I could not see how this big consignment, of opium from my Indian agent was to be brought ashore to me if the lights and that fool Dean kept spying along the waterfront. So one of my coolies put the rubber ring on the beach, and the geese on board Jo Koon's junk did the rest.'

Chuen the priest fidgeted uneasily. His thin face wrinkled in an effort to gauge the strange workings of the big Chinaman's brain.

'The geese have returned to their pens, O Giver. That much I understand. But my brain is clouded. I cannot yet see what is in thy great mind. Thy wisdom and secrecy are beyond me,' he deplored.

Kum Sing's fat forefinger rested for a moment on the sleeve of the priest's vestment.

'It is well that holy men do not always understand,' he intimated softly. 'I will go with you new to the steps at the fool of the temple. You will see why I kept the lights busy searching the sky for my geese. You will see why I kept the eye of the gun-boat men and Dean turned upwards.'

Kum Sing heaved his great bulk from the divan and drew the priest after him to the wide verandah outside. The night was black at the length of one's arm now. At the foot of the jungle-clad slope below a solitary lantern glowed in the deserted temple of Buddah.

The priest trembled slightly as he followed the elephantine Chinaman down the steep slope. For once in his life he was to be shown the key of this master smuggler's mind. He was going to peep into the mystery that was driving strong men to the verge of madness.

MARY WALTERS had ventured alone into the house of a sick Chinaman named Yip Lee. The garden of Lee's house lay almost in the shadow of the Buddah temple. Yip was a fisherman, and owned a leaky sampan and some mats. Wet clothes and opium had put the sign of the sickle on his brow. He had once been a visitor to the mission house, but the pipe and the poppy had lured him away.

Mary had brought him some medicine, and had opened the window of his stuffy bedroom to give breath to his failing heart. She had heard the firing from the gunboat. Yip, with the death sweat on his cheek, also heard, and even his sick brain understood something of the young girl's apprehension at the thought of Norry Dean's nightly efforts to check the criminal tactics of the Sumala drug-runners.

Yip turned his bleached, pain-wasted features to the flickering candle beside the bed. Then his fevered eyes again took in the slim figure of the girl with the medicine glass beside the bed.

'Why you takee trouble with me, Missee Walter?' he sighed. 'You go home an' letee me die. Evelybody die some day.'

The sound of geese crying overhead brought a wan smile to his blackened lips. A deep sigh escaped him as his fading eyes explored her winsome face.

'Kum's geese,' he intoned faintly; and then with an effort he struggled almost to his elbow, beckoning her nearer with his shaking hand.

'They will ruin Dean,' he gasped. 'Kum an' the big Opium Six! Opium killee me, Missee Walter. I want... to speakee one, two words befo' I go.'

Mary touched his shoulder gently, held a cool drink to his bleaching lips.

'Don't worry now,' she begged him. 'Kum's sins will find him out. Some day his foot will slip, and then the people of Sumala will breathe clean air.'

Yip Lee smiled, and again fought back the grey film of death from his eyes as only a Chinaman can.

'From here you go to the Buddah temple, Missee Walter,' he advised with a gasp. 'Go soon— go now, befo' Kum Sing and Chuen take away the big basket from the Buddah altar.'

Mary Walters stared at the shrunken features of the Chinaman, while her heart hammered noisily within her warm breast.

'The big basket from the Buddah altar!' she repeated slowly. 'What is the. basket doing there?' she inquired in a whisper.

Yip Lee made a sign with his stiffening lingers. 'Fisherman's basket, full of big eels. You getee that basket— show it Dean. He will understan'. I— I go now.'

Yip Lee fell back oh the bed as though an invisible hand had pushed him down. For some moments Mary Walters remained staring at the dead face of the old Chinese. Then gently, very gently, she placed her white silk shawl over the strangely quiet face, and then turned to the open door of the house. She could do no more. The outlying villages were full of similar cases of drug poisoning.

Outside, the air was cooler. A breath of the dawn wind was beating in from the sea. The sky in the East was belted with saffron and the smoky flares that heralded the coming sun. In front of her stood the flat-roofed temple of Buddah. A green joss-lantern still burned inside. In a little while Chuen the priest would come with his punk sticks and dried lilies to burn at the altar. The gate of the temple was wide open, for there were times when coolies and compradores shuffled in at midnight to ease by prayer and offerings the torment of mind and body. An uncontrollable impulse moved her into the dark gateway, where a drowsy praying-flag hung listless above the grinning masks and gargoyles. Her young eyes darted to the altar where the fat, bland outline of the Buddah image showed in the green glow of the joss lantern.

On the step of the altar was a big black fisherman's basket filled with dripping seaweed and moss from the coral-strewn banks of the channels outside. Inside the tangle of woods and moss lay half-a-dozen silver-bellied eels; fat, glutinous offerings for the priest of Buddah.

Mary Walters hesitated for the fraction of a second, then stepped into the temple. The silence within touched her liken naked blade. A fear that comes to lonely white women in tiger-haunted forests seized her heart. It was a fear that stifled and killed like the cord of a thug. The odour of burnt offerings floated about her with the insistence of a dead priest's hands.

The words of Yip Lee lingered in her mind — 'Go now, before Kum Sing and Chuen take away the basket from the altar.'

The basket was near her hand. She. touched it, and then turned with an inaudible cry towards the temple gate. Above, on the jungle-clad slope, the voice of Kum Sing fluted and chattered as he descended the path, accompanied by Chuen the priest.

For an instant terror blinded her movements. All her childish fears of yellow men and temple priests came scorching on her heels. She was a trespasser within the sacred gate.

Immediately behind her was a tiny door that led from the temple to the waterside. It was used by the junk crews and fishermen of the bay. who often squeezed into the sacred presence with their joss sticks and offerings from the flowery land. The voice of Kum Sing had reached the temple gate. His soft explosions of laughter suggested a certain tension of mind bordering on the hysterical.

'Lift thy feet, Chuen,' he giggled. 'The good fishermen have not forgotten the eels. While the white dogs looked at the sky the eels slipped to the altar of the Sacred One. Let thy hands alone raise them from the heavenly presence, O Chuen.'

Mary Walters felt that this one moment of life would never return to her. Already the crunching of Kum's heavy sandals sounded in the gateway. And the dead fisherman, Yip Lee, had begged her to act.

Her hands snatched at the basket on the Buddah altar. The leaden weight of it amazed her as she staggered through the tiny side door.

And only just in time. The bulging shadow of Kum Sin crossed under the green joss-lantern. A short-clipped sound came from his throat.

'Where is the basket?'

He turned with a sudden panic fury in his eyes to the trembling priest. Sweat glistened on his coppery skin as he blundered across the . altar, peering, sniffing like a huge jungle cat, into the dark corners of the temple. 'Where is the basket?' he repeated with murder in his voice. 'Speak up, thou rice-fed dog!'

The dozing eyes of the priest came to life at sight of the big Chinaman's panic terror. From a slow-footed, prayer-chanting servant of Buddah he became nimble as a dingo as he darted in and out the temple shadow's, clawing the tapestries, snatching in every hole and corner for the missing basket. Then his slant eyes suddenly focussed a girlish figure hurrying from the side path, through the temple garden, down to the waterside.

'Look, O Giver!' he almost squealed. 'The mission girl! The daughter of the barbarian priest, Walter. She is running with the basket! May the breath of Gehenna overtake her! Woe to the Giver!'

Kum Sing stood rooted beside the Buddah, his bull-neck bent to the level of the scarce visible doorway that revealed the dawn light, and the slim figure of Mary Walters, the heavy fisherman's basket in her arms, walking swiftly towards the pier.

'Someone has given her my secret.' he wailed. 'She will run to Dean. Stop her, priest of the devil! Run fast!' He gesticulated frantically. 'You have a right to punish the temple thief. Bring her back with the basket.'

The priest stood frozen in the narrow doorway, then dashed down the garden path on the trail of the fast-moving girl. His spindly legs flew over the ground, while his hands searched in his vestments for the lead-lined rubber cosh, capable of stunning a bullock.

Chuen knew that the future well-being of Kum Sing depended on the possession of the fisherman's basket. As a priest, of Buddah it was his business to play shut eye to his wealthy patron's tricks and fancies. It was also his duty to see that young white girls did not enter the temple and remove offerings from the Buddah altar, a crime punishable with death, he told himself.

Chuen ran like a dog on the trail of Mary Walters. As he gained on her he saw with relief that the wharfside was deserted. Not a foot or hand moved along the slumbering quay. The high godowns along the front obscured the movements of Mary Walters from the look-out on board the gunboat.

'Stop while we discuss this matter,' he panted. 'It is not good to steal from the sacred presence.'

Mary Walters half turned, and in a flash saw the deadly weapon in his hand. There was still a long stretch of deserted quayside between her and the pier, where Dean's office bungalow was situated. Her frightened glance leaped to the black-shuttered gaming houses in the frantic hope that some friendly coolie or sailorman might stave off her pursuer. Not a shadow stirred within the drowsy, drug-bound hovels.

'Stop!' the priest fumed almost at her elbow. Then the lead-loaded cosh whizzed within an inch of her swaying shoulder.

'Stop!' he insisted. 'Why you run away flom my temple? I teachee you?'

The cosh fell wide as Norry Dean's six feet length crashed across a pile of empty shell-cases near the wharfside. The cases rattled and spilled away from his hurtling body: he landed with a soft oath on the priest's sandalled toes.

'Mustn't chase white girls, Chuen,' he remonstrated, tripping the Chinaman headlong into the doorway of a chop-suey restaurant. 'If you've a grievance, what's wrong with the Deputy Commissioner of Police?'

He raised Mary in his arms and held her for an instant. She was white-faced, ashen-lipped, but still possessed of the fisherman's basket.

Dean turned at sight of the elephantine figure of Kum Sing ploughing in their direction. The big Chinaman ran like an overweighted cyclone, clawing the air and emitting blasts of Mongolese.

'Leave him to me, dear,' he whispered to the trembling daughter of the mission house. He raised the basket curiously from the ground. His face

coloured slightly at sight of the contents; his lips framed a scarce audible word as he thrust his hand among the silver-backed creepers inside the moss and weeds.

'Touch not the sacred gifts of the temple!' the priest screamed from the doorway of the chop-suey. Kum Sing arrived like a bull slamming through a gate.

'My basket!' he bellowed, turning to a sullen-eyed crowd of Chinese who had formed around round the Australian and Miss Walters. 'Those white barbarians planned to steal from the Buddah house; is there, not enough food in Sumala that they rob our priest?' he demanded.

Dean hesitated a moment as he again scrutinised the contents of the basket. Then he drew one of the long sea-crawlers from the basket and slashed it in the middle with his knife. A dark brown mass of pure Indian opium oozed over the knife handle. Norry snapped his teeth.

'So this is your property, Kum Sing. For the last eight months eels from a fishing prau have been transferred to the temple. The prau goes to sea every week and meets a vessel from Singapore. I have searched that prau,' Norry confessed to the crowd, 'and found nothing but live eels in her fish tanks.

'It seems to me,' he went on slowly, 'that the eels were skinned alive, the skins washed, and then stuffed with opium.'

Yelps of laughter went up from the yellow-faced throng. The knees of Kum Sing sagged slightly; his thick lips fluttered in an agony of suppressed rage.

'This stuff'— Norry indicated the brown mess that trickled from the tight-packed skin— 'is ready for the cooking needles and the pipe. And until this moment,' he added bitterly, 'I never associated the eel-fishing in these parts with the cemetery full of dead people over there.'

He indicated briefly the palm-sheltered little grove adjoining the mission house. In the passing of a breath, it seemed, the coolie crowd had vanished into the shuttered gaming house and pak-a-pu shops.

Dean remained silent for a nerve-breaking period. All the futile searching of ships, the endless vigils, and sleepless nights came back to him now. Norry had a sense of humour, but he found little to relieve the atmosphere of greed and devilry that clung to Kum Sing.

The big Chinaman addressed him in a quavering voice, the voice of the trapped tyrant who sees himself stripped of authority and deprived of his days of ease.

'I pay up, Missa Dean,' he choked. 'I wantee no noise. How muchee?'

Dean's eyes had the chill glisten of white steel as he replied, 'You'll build a big hospital for sick children and health trained men and women, Mr. Kum

Sing. You'll build it on the hill up there, where the clean winds blow. It is going to cost from fifteen to twenty thousand pounds. That's that!'

The big Chinaman clawed the air with his manicured fingers. His face and neck dripped moisture and tears.

'I no pay,' he screamed. 'What then?'

Norry Dean turned to the bay of Sumala, where the sun flashed across the huddle of junks and rice boats. A big canoe with eighteen convicts at the oars pulled slowly towards the mile-long breakwater in course of construction.

'Or what?' the big Chinaman insisted. 'I want to know.'

Dean pointed to the convict gang heading for the day's weary labour on the seawall.

'That's the other thing you can help build, Mr. Kum Sing. At the Government's expense, of course,' he added.

The Chinaman's glance went out to the murder gang in the canoe, head-hunters and island cut-throats from the mercury mines at Bangola. His face grew suddenly wan as he turned away.

'I likee build big hospital, Missa Dean,' he gasped. 'No savvy plison gang!'

THAT night, within the mission house compound, Norry and the Rev. John Walters laboured over a huge copper boiler perched on a blazing wood fire. The boiler sizzled and threw up a curious sticky brown scum as the clergyman stirred the fuming mass with a sapling. An odour reminiscent, of witches' cauldrons floated over the compound.

'If the stuff is properly applied to the cocoanut palms, my dear Norry, it will save hundreds of young trees from destruction. I tried some of this opium mixture on my own prize trees, and found masses of drugged rhinoceros beetles lying around. This year my crop of fruit will beat all records,' the minister assured him.

All that year Norry and Mary Walters knew where to find swarms of dead and drugged rhinoceros beetles. But the following season they experienced difficulty in obtaining fresh supplies of opium. Chinamen also have a sense of humour. There isn't one Celestial smuggler south of Saigon willing to risk his liberty merely to provide rhinoceros beetles with a lot of sleep.

32: Red Honey

Sydney Mail 20 March 1929

A BLACK river with the smell of a hundred dead forests on its bosom was flowing gently under the nose of Andy Mill. It was one of the malarial tributaries of the Joda, and there were men in Papua who believed that its bed was paved with gold. Andy Mull was sluicing and dredging for the New Guinea Gold Corporation. The river slid through countless miles of rolling jungle and quartz-strewn valleys before it reached Andy and his unwieldy dredge that shovelled up sand and ooze from the bottom of the river.

Andy's hut stood on the edge of the forest clearing, apart, from the crowded tents of the creek fossickers who came in droves from the Australian towns to comb the sands of New Guinea and wash gold from the viscid mud that had lain there since the dawn of creation. Men came in rags, shoeless and starving, to the back reaches of this Papuan poison ditch. And the only machines they brought for extracting the gold-slimes from these fever hells and swamps was an occasional piece of blanket and their naked hands.

Old Andy, working in his comfortable motor-dredge, pitied these vagabond 'sluicers' in their wild scramble to get rich. But, bare-banded, bare-footed white men are no match for the pestilential vapours of this mysterious land. With gold in their fists they died on the beaches under the palms or at their work within the poison ditch, where the yellow slimes trickled from the bosom of the earth, from between the bones of dead saurians that belonged to the nameless and forgotten centuries.

And then, in a night, it seemed, Andy found himself alone on the river. His assistants had responded to a far-flung cry of a strike committee that called off every machine hand and labourer in the employ of the New Guinea Gold Corporation. The staff vanished south, where the big towns offered modem comforts, whisky bars, picture shows, race meetings.

The little steamer that had brought the strike mandate from Sydney had also brought a letter to Andy from his daughter Mollie. No other girl could have written such a letter. The big drops of perspiration on old Andy's face bore witness to the fact that the pen is mightier than river ploughs, tiger mosquitoes, or blackwater fever.

'Dear Dad, — This isn't to say that I'm coming to Slarfield Creek. But you may expect Clarence at any moment of the night. He has just left the big prison at Long Bay, Sydney. Tells me he picked up a good story. He's a journalist. I run an electric iron over shirts and things in a laundry. Be good to Clarry. He wants a change. You'll like him. — MOLLY CHARD.''

Molly Chard! And she hadn't even remembered to tell him that she had married this fellow Clarence! Of all the wonders created in a world of strikes, earthquakes, poison forests, and bully beef, women were the limit, he told himself. His brow darkened and his fists clenched at the thought of his clean-minded little girl marrying a man from the whale-backed, red-walled prison at Maroubra Bay. In his various mental preoccupations Andy had a recollection of a person called Clarence Chard, who cropped up in Molly's brief dialogues whenever he met her in Sydney. But that was all. And the fellow had been in gaol! Molly had married him, no doubt, in a fit of compassion while her young mind was mushed up with grief and emotion.

Damn the fellow! His very name implied a state of imbecility on the part, of his parents. Of course, he couldn't help it. But in the name of the eight Gehennas of the Chinaman why was Clarence coming to roost in Papua, the land that killed old army veterans faster than Dutch arrak or machine-guns?

With the help of his native boy Kini, who had just returned from a visit to his native village, a fire was made outside the hut and a meal prepared. Kini was unusually silent and morose. He spilled the boiling water over the fire, and evaded Andy's glances when the last of the tea-cups went crashing to the ground. Andy Mull became suddenly thoughtful as he lit his pipe.

'See here, Kini. I don't want a sulker hanging about these works. Up till now you've been a good fellow, alla same as white boy. But now you start playing up just because the camp's taken a holiday, and you're thinking of some fatheaded girl in your, father's village,' he said reproachfully.

Kini wriggled uncomfortably, his coppery skin glowing in the afternoon light.

'Me no sulk, tauhada,' he declared uneasily, and proceeded to spill more hot water on the, fire.

Andy stood up, and his brass-buckled bell slipped from his waist into his big clenched fist. A few months before he had taken Kini from a slaving existence among the sago swamps of Taganowa, where he had been flogged daily by the headman and sent to work among the leeches, Until the strike he had served Andy faithfully. In return he had been treated kindly and had been allowed to visit his mother and sisters with unfailing regularity.

Kini looked , at the belt in Andy's fist, and his face quivered strangely.

'You no whale um me, tauhada,' he begged. 'When I leave um village today I hear big tale about um drunk fellers. Jacky Daw an' two other white man, who break trade-house at Poison River an' steal um Govement launch. My fader say Jacky Daw come along heah bymby an' shootee you an' me. Jacky Daw hp murder old chief, Labango, one long time ago. Jacky want um Labango's canoe, an' fifty pon's Labango hide in house.'

Andy stared at the boy as he replaced his belt. His lips had grown suddenly dry, but the muscles of his big arms leaped a little at the thought of Jacky Daw in possession of the. Government launch. Daw was a member of a notoriously hard-drinking gang at Poison River. With a fast-moving launch and a couple of rifles he could play up with the small traders scattered along the rivers.

'All right, Kini,' Andy said after a while. 'Don't pull a face over that gasbag talk you hear. Somebody's always breaking loose in the hot weather. And I'm just about as scared of Jacky Daw and his leg-iron pals as I am of the blue cheese you brought me from Putak. I've had to watch that cheese, Kini,' he added good-humouredly. 'I'll have to buy it a pair of pants if it keeps on following me about.'

Whereat Kini laughed loudly and busied himself with the fire and the shore-lines that held the company's unwieldy dredge fast against the outgoing tide. With the coming of night Kini rolled himself in a blanket beside the fire, where the drone of the tiger mosquitoes rose to a fierce wail as the night mists settled over the low-lying flats and swamps.

Andy filled his pipe and strolled to the river, where the dredge loomed among the tree shadows and vapours of the slow-moving stream. A slender steel crane projected from the dredge. Attached to the crane was a river devil or rock grip that fished boulders and snags from the river-bed. It was necessary when the bucket dredges got to work that the floor of the stream should present a clean surface to the big shovel-nosed scoops that brought up the sand and slime.

Andy's eye wandered to the opposite bank, where the scarcity of timber offered few hiding-places for visitors with guns. A few bushes often gave shelter to a spear-throwing Maiheri or raiders from Kukuku. The only object that gave pause to Andy's sigh of satisfaction was the fallen trunk of a mahogany tree.

It weighed several tons. Half-a-dozen men could hide in the shadow of its great hulk. The natives called it the death log from the fact that its rotting cavities harboured scores of big green centipedes and poison adders. There had been efforts in the past to burn it, but the spewey river soil had saturated its red interior, and the fire-stick never got a chance. It had been Andy's intention for weeks past to shift the log by blasting. But at the end of his long day's shift he was too tired to tackle a job that promised no immediate reward for the expenditure of good dynamite.

He stared moodily at the log across the narrow stream, and then strode hack to the camp fire. Tomorrow he would put a charge of 'dinny' among the ants and centipedes that infested its interior. The infernal log could be turned into a barricade by the first bushranger who happened along!

AN imperceptible throbbing sound came from the river entrance, where the while combers raved and thundered at high tide. Andy listened, and then jerked himself into an upright position, kicking aside his blanket and straining in the direction of the sound. It was past, midnight, with a few faint stars piercing the fog-veil that shrouded the distant timber. Andy's heart rapped with unusual violence as he listened. The voices of men reached him now—blatant, irritating voices, accompanied by the clinking of glasses and occasional hoarse, yelps of laughter. Crawling from the camp fire, he moved nearer the sounds. The green light of a launch appeared in midstream; the soft throb of the motor lold him that she was heading in his direction.

Andy Mull lay flat as a lizard on the wet ground. Jacky Daw and his crew at last! All the hair-raising stories he had heard of Daw's plunderings and shootings ran molten through his mind now. Jacky had terrorised whole plantations, demanding drink and money from the owners at thee point of a rifle. An old game, but full of queer thrills when the game came to one's hut door with two other blood-letters to swing axes and machetes wherever they barricaded themselves.

'And there's a dozen cow-faced policemen playing bridge on that blamed courthouse verandah ten miles away!' Andy gritted. 'These stall-fed cops make me tired.'

He returned to the sleeping Kini and touched his shoulder gently.

'Gel, up, kid and bunk to the dredge. The gang's coming. By the holy fires, I'll fight 'em till the cows come home! Shift yourself, sonny.'

Kini did the shifting after the manner of an electrified squirrel. Scrambling aboard the dredge, he crawled beneath some copper battery plates and lay still as a rabbit. Nothing spectacular about Kini, except his large brown feel that, protruded from the bulge in the quick-silver-covered plates. After him went Andy, but not, to cover. The old sluicer stood grimly silent within the dark, covered deck-space of the dredge, a curious gleam in his veteran eyes as the howling, yelping voices drew nearer.

A shadowy shape was humped near the launch's wheel. In his swift intake of the vessel's lines Andy recognised the stolen Government cutter with its shining brass stern rail and cabin skylights. A natty J it H 0 water boat, he told himself, with a piano and teak-fitted cabins for the use of the harbourmaster and revenue officers.

The vessel hove to almost in the shadow of the dredge. Andy crouched back, his nerves tingling with a thought that sent the blood hurtling through his old veins. The shadowy outline in the stern disappeared below to join the fist-hanging, glass-clinking revellers at fin' cabin table. The sudden popping of a cork was followed by the chorus of an old South Sea chanty.

'This girl she waits in Grosvenor Street
That's hard by Sydney Quay.
This girl she waits in Grosvenor Street,
This long two years waits she.
And 'er heart may weep,
But he's sleepin' deep
In the South Pacific Sea!'

It was Daw's voice and a big lump stole into Andy's throat as he thought of his daughter slaving in a laundry to provide a gallivanting ass named Clarence with a passage in New Guinea. And these roistering chain-gang men were after whatever gold might he stowed in the little safe within the hut!

Silently as a seal Andy thrust over a shining lever near his hand. In a moment the long slim crane, with the steel-hooked river devil attached to the swinging chain, glided over the narrow creek and stayed like the claws of a vulture over the big mahogany log.

'Longshore lassies came greet us—
Blow my bully boys, blow!
Bumboat men were glad to greet us—
Blow my bully boys, blow!
Sold our toys to buy bad liquor.
Pawned my pants an ' popped the ticket—
Blow my bully boys, blow!'

The teeth of the river devil opened and snapped on the bulging waist of the mahogany log. A touch of the motor's hand-grip swung the log high over the creek until it swayed directly above the while-painted. brass railed launch.

'His girl she waits in Grosvenor Street.
That's hard by Sydney Quay.'

Andy pulled over the shining lever.

The fangs of thee river devil yawned wide. For a fraction of a moment the huge log slanted round like a black arm from the hot night sky: then it fell with a blinding crash from the teeth of the rock-grip.

In the bat of an eye Andy saw that the log had canted unexpectedly and that only the frayed and splintered edges had struck the narrow launch's rail.

'Mull's my name,' he choked under his breath as Daw's song snapped in the middle and a string of curses came from the cabin stairs. There were a rush of feel, a sound of scuffling, and more oaths as the little crowd below fought to gain the narrow space above.

The lights went out, and Daw's voice and fists sought to restrain his drunken, half-maddened companions in their efforts to roach the deck.

'A branch from a tree, that's all, you frowsty wops. Steady, steady, while I get my gun. Overboard with our friend Clarence! Too many hands and feel on this little coffin. Over with him!'

A tall, boyish figure appeared for an instant near the stern rail; before the hands of Daw's men could seize him he had leapt over and disappeared in the Stygian gloom of the mangrove shadows.

Shrieks of laughter followed from the three drunken shapes peering across the dark water from the stern rail.

'He was no good to us,' Daw bellowed, turning a drink-sodden face to the slim crane lowering sharply above his head. In that shifting glance he saw the bayonet-like edges of the river devil's teeth swinging, gaping like some jungle monster in search of food.

'It's that blasted steel gargoyle of Mull's,' he choked, backing towards the cabin stairs. 'Get my gun from the table down there!' he roared. 'That white livered galoot Andy is messin' with his engines. That gun, curse you!'

Andy uttered a silent prayer as he swung the river devil with its shining sabre-edged teeth down to the launch's forerail. The powerful motor worked with an audible cluck-cluck as the teeth of the grip mumbled and then fastened on the launch's foc's'le rail. With his hoisting switch thrown back the chain of the rock grip became tight as a banjo siring. Then like giant hook fastened in the jaws of a young whale it raised the launch's bows from the water.

A terrific commotion followed; plates, crockery, and cabin furniture flew with splintering crashes through the open door, across the stunned and huddled figures of the men in the stern. With the nose of the launch hauled skyward, the stern had become a well, with the cabin furniture spilling through the open door and jamming the occupants close to the deck and stern rail. Andy leaned from the dredge-house and called to the tangle of arms and legs seeking to disentangle themselves from a heavy couch and piano that had burst upon their crouching bodies.

'How d'ye feel, Jacky Daw? It's the bully boy you are with the dishes an' the piano on your chest! Maybe you'll tell me what that boy Clarence was doing in your company? I'm waiting to hear, Jacky Daw.''

Only a string of oaths came from the tangle of shapes in the launch's stern. In a little while a voice answered him.

'We found the kid on the beach at Gambat. He'd just missed the steamer that brought mails here. He thought we were miners, so we brought him along, damn him! He went overheard to the iron fish of his own accord.'

Well enough Andy knew that the iron fish of New Guinea spared nothing that ventured into the mud-belts after dark. It needed not the glow of his pocket torch to show him the black outlines of the twenty-foot alligators cruising around the dredge.

So much for poor Molly and her wretched boy husband, he told himself, with a sudden twitching of the throat. Fools and blackguards were quickly tested in these crawling death-lands. And Molly could weep, too, for the man that was lying in the deep black mud of Papua.

Andy peered into the sullen darkness of the river, the sweat of his mental torment clinging to his furrowed brow. Then, with only a passing glance at the launch hanging above the slowly moving stream, he shot down into the punt that trailed from the dredge's stern. Andy Mull was no dreamer. It was still possible that Molly's husband might lie drowning under his eyes, somewhere within the foetid tangles of roots and vegetation that lined every foot of the creek-bank.

'Ahoy there, Clarence!' he called out in a choking treble. 'Hold on, lad! Look out for the iron fish, an' the ten-foot eels that drowned Jock Sanders last flood.'

Not a ripple came to reward his efforts as he thrashed in and out the dripping maze of mangrove roots and flesh-like creepers. A couple of baby alligators snorted under the punt, and their yapping protests were answered by the big-throated mother cruising under the stern of the launch up-stream.

'He's gone, poor fellow,' Andy sighed, poling the punt towards the hut near the hank.

'Damned if I know what Molly will say.' He tried to whistle as he neared the bank, but his old heart was full of tears and rage at the unlooked-for trouble that had come upon him. The news of this kid's death would wring his daughter's heart. A touch of consolation entered Andy, as he thought of the fix he had put Daw in. If the gang tried to enter the water the wailing alligators would not be disappointed. Andy wiped the moisture from his eye with the sleeve of his torn shirt as he staggered dizzily to the hut. The fire was crackling merrily, sending showers of sparks and flames into the misty night.

On an upturned bucket close to the fire sat a young man in steaming clothes and mud-soaked tennis-shoes. At Andy's approach he turned, holding a steaming silk coat to the fire, a grin of welcome surprise on his boyish features.

'Quite an Arabian nights entertainment, Mr. Mull.' he said genially. 'Until a few moments ago the launch was quite comfortable. But it was really Daw's singing Dial, drove me to my fell act. ...Baritonitis is a disease with some drunkards.' Andy came near to collapse as he stared at the steaming figure on the upturned bucket.

'So you're Clarence!' he gasped, with a swift survey, of the young man's bare chest and reach that would have qualified him for the world's cruiser-weight championship. 'And what in blazes brought you here?'

Clarence turned the silk coat once more on the fire, and, feeling satisfied that it was almost dry, drew it on. Then he straightened his spoiled silk lie and lit a damp cigarette with a stick from the fire.

'My dear sir, I came, and I am now sorry,' he answered cheerfully. 'I wouldn't send a dog here, not if you promised to wash it in your best gold mud.'

'But ye came!' Andy roared. The nervous tension of the last few hours pressing on his nerves, 'I may tell ye, Clarence Chard, that we don't wash pups in gold baths, nor provide jobs for out-of-works. And be good enough to say something about my little girl that's pushin' an iron in a Chinese laundry down south,' he added with growing wrath. Clarence kicked the fire together, and then drawing an empty biscuit box from the hut placed it beside his upturned bucket.

'Please sit down, Mr. Mull. The air of this jungle would spoil a sheep's temper. Don't let it spoil ours!'

Andy sit down mopping his brow, his anger evaporating at the other's sudden change of manner. He began to detect an unknown quality in the young man's bearing.

Across the creek came sounds of Daw's anguish, accompanied by the cries of his two companions, begging to be released from their perilous position.

'Let them hang awhile,' Clarence advised, 'until my position is explained, Mr. Mull.' He smiled and drew a cigar from a silver case.

'Smoke, sir, while I ease your mind. Molly is well. Now,' he went on, placing a red ember against the cigar in Andy's mouth, 'I'm here on cold business. Smoke up. Those fellows in the launch fooled me into joining them. Of course I didn't know they were hold-ups when I accepted their invitation at Gambat for a free trip to the New Guinea Gold Corporation's works. I wanted to see you. But I spoiled their game the moment we entered the river.

'I'm a journalist. My life is spent running about the city picking up news and stories. I go into prisons and hospitals to hunt up a story. One day I'm at the wharves, among the schooner captains and sailing masters, combing out the story of a wreck or murder on the high seas. It's all in the day's work.

'A few weeks ago, after Molly and I had been quietly married, I visited an old convict at Long Bay penitentiary. His name was Captain Slarfield. Five years ago Slarfield was goldmining and sluicing on this creek. It was named after him. Well, I found him almost delirious— dying, in fact.

'The old chap had been a bit of a buccaneer, and had been mixed up in several shindies hereabouts. He was tried on this river for shooting a couple of natives. He was deported, and his sluicing outfit was confiscated by the police.

'He landed in Sydney, and got into fresh trouble. The penitentiary got him for keeps. He told me he had worked on this creek before while men suspected there was gold on the Joda River. But I found that I had called too late. The poor old chap was raving. He babbled incessantly about a sack of red honey he had found in a tree. Wild honey, of course. He said the bees and the police were always after the honey— especially the bees. So he hid it inside a mahogany tree that used to be hereabouts,' Clarence concluded, with a slight yawn. Then, rousing himself on his upturned bucket, he fell for another cigarette.

'Poor Slarfield died next day. And I knew that I had missed the real story of his life.'

'And that's what took ye into the gaol.'

Andy grinned with another shrewd survey of Chard's handsome face and lengthy limbs.

Silence fell between the two, broken only by the frenzied calls of the three trapped bandits in the launch. A sudden depression had come over Clarence Chard, a feeling of home-sickness and a thought of the young wife standing in a crowded, hot workroom, her movements watched and checked by an aggressive, loud-voiced forewoman.

'And so the bees got into Slarfield's old bonnet,' Andy ruminated. 'And I'm still waitin' to hear, Clarence, what, sent ye from Molly to this black river of sorrow and death.'

The young man straightened his bent shoulders instantly.

'My editor suggested the trip here. He is of opinion that New Guinea is an interesting country to write about. He said it was an unlocked chamber of romance. I'm to get £200 for a series of articles. Molly said the money would help buy a bungalow. And just here, Mr. Mull,' Clarence declared, with a sad note in his voice, 'I am beginning to feel that those articles and the bungalow are going to flop badly.'

'And serve ye right, too,' Andy growled, rising slowly from his seat near the fire. 'We have three cut-throats hung up by the wing over there,' he added almost fiercely. 'If I right the launch, or try to, they'll be at us like a pack of wolves. Sit where you are until I come back,' he ordered bluntly. Passing inside the hut, Andy look a bright-bladed axe from the fireplace, thumbed the edge critically and with a final glance at the silent figure of Clarence on the upturned bucket, spoke again.

'Ye can't play the Good Samaritan with men who'll reach for you with a razor while you're getting them food and drink,' he cautioned. 'Freeze your mind and sit still.'

Clarence sat very still indeed, watching the dawn steal in orange-hued mists across the distant forest lines. And through the dawn haze he saw the, three men clinging tenaciously to the rails and poop of the. suspended launch. Immediately below them, in the black, sluggish depths of the creek, the armoured snouts of the manhunters moved briskly to and fro.

Egged on by his companions, Jacky Daw climbed in the launch's forepart in the hope of reaching the crane above, and eventually the dredge. Once his hand touched the lever he could right the launch and allow his friends to join him. Daw's monkey-like body wriggled and squirmed in the ascent. His talon fingers reaching for the chain that linked the rock grip to the forecastle rail. Some grease from the rock-grip streaked over his clutching fingers. A squeal of agony escaped him as he fought with knees and toes and oil-dripping hands to maintain his position.

'Hold on Jacky,' a voice quavered from the well of the launch. 'These iron fish'll get you by the boots if you tumble down. They never forgive a man his sins, these iron fish.'

Daw came down the launch's rail with the scream of a frightened rat. In a moment the alligator shoal bunched together to receive the down-sliding morsel. Miraculously his foot touched a cleat in the deck of the perpendicular launch. His down-rush was stayed.

Clarence rose from his seat at the sound of voices higher up-stream. In the grey light he saw a squad of police and native trackers emerge from the beach trail in the south. They approached the dredge with carbines at the ready, the trackers shouting in amaze at sight of the hanging launch and the three outlaws bunched in the well. It was Daw's voice that cracked on the dawn air in response to a short-clipped command from the old sergeant in command of the police.

'Give us a hand out of this, sergeant. I'm sick with the smell of those iron fish below us. Mull played this trick on us,' he wailed.

'And a good trick, too,' the sergeant laughed, nodding in Clarence's direction. 'The dredge and the iron fish manage to keep this creek clean,' he added significantly.

Andy appeared from the dark of the mangroves in time to assist in lowering the launch. The vessel righted itself quickly, white the police stood by to cover the exhausted runaways with their carbines. The punt brought them ashore, and after a few words of commendation for the service rendered by

Andy the police squad trailed off with their three prisoners in the direction of the settlement.

'We'll have breakfast,' Andy announced, stirring the fire into life and thrusting a big coffee kettle on top.

'Lay the table out here, Clarence,' he ordered. With a strangely quivering mouth, Clarence obeyed quickly enough, bread and bacon being placed in the pan beside the reddening camp-fire. A pair of tin cups were unearthed as Ivini came limping from cover to assist. Andy sipped the hot black coffee that tasted like nectar in the dripping atmosphere of the marsh-sweated jungle lands.

'Try a bit of red honey on your dry bread. Clarence, my son.'

Andy drew a sack he had carried in from the bank towards the fire. 'It's years since I tasted pure honey. You see,' he added, with a gesture towards a shelving bank of the creek. 'I found the log poor Slarfield mentioned. It drifted yonder after I freed it from the grip. But the red honey was there, sweet an' fresh as the day he hid it. Try a lump, my son.'

Clarence thrust his arm into the sack, strained for a moment at the weighty parcel within, and then with a mighty effort dragged it out. It was bigger than a man's head, and was wrapped in old sail-cloth.

'Gone hard and heavy in the passing years, Mr. Mull,' Clarence commented, ripping it open with his knife. A stream of gold dust flowed over the breakfast, cloth, over his bread and tin plate that held Andy's nicely browned rasher of bacon.

'Easy, Clarence— easy with the honey,' Andy grinned, as he watched the stark amazement in the young man's eyes. Clarence Chard trembled slightly as he fingered the rich, virgin metal which had lain for years where hundreds of starving fossickers and deadbeats had cursed their luck and gone away.

'Poor Slarfield!' he said at last. 'Dreaming in his narrow cell of this red metal until his brain got twisted. I suppose Molly will be glad. We'll send some of it along and give her a spell from that electric iron.'

Andy's eyes snapped disapproval. 'Send nothing!' he objected. 'We'll carry it ourselves and build the bungalow while the strike's on.'

He gestured towards the young man's plate. 'Brush away that yellow dust from your bacon, my lad, and we'll drink to poor Slarfield's memory in a cup of black coffee.'

The sun rose like a big red lantern over the dark Papuan forest in the east. The voice of Ivini was heard chanting a hill song as he rolled up old Andy's belongings for the trip south. The purse of yellow dust the white man had thrust into his hand would enable him to buy a valley and a bungalow, 'alla same as *taubada* Clarence an' his good little wife.'

33: The Ruby Rat

Sydney Mail 15 May 1929

'HE'S got a letter from the owners,' Varneck growled to the white-faced steward in the steamer's waist. 'Sling her duds into number three cabin. This hooker is being used as a boarding-house for the owner's friends,' he added, with a scowl in the direction of the young girl waiting at the gangway head.

Varneck was first mate of the *Omar*, bound from Rangoon to Sydney. It was his second voyage under the house-flag of Jonathan Martin and Co. In view of the fact that a dozen companies were competing for the Australian passenger trade Varneck could not understand the mentality of a young lady seeking a long, hot voyage on a noisy cargo tramp. There were fools, he argued, who felt that a trip in a ship named *Omar* would be productive of poetry and wine. He had read *Omar*, and had sailed in the ship, and the nearest thing to poetry in her was her almost fiendish capacity for shipping tons of water out of a calm sea.

But Varneck in his wrath was unaware that Miss Jose Pender had interviewed old Jonathan Martin in his stuffy office on Malay Avenue and had explained that her father, Captain Mark Pender, had until recently owned the *Omar*— a fact well known to the company and directors. The Martin Line had acquired her only a year before, at scrap iron rates, owing to Captain Pender's ill-health and his inability to meet his creditors.

Furthermore, Jose had confided the news of her father's death to the sympathetic Jonathan, who listened to the story of her constant privations, her struggles to obtain a livelihood in an Eastern city. Some slight property still remained to her father in Sydney. The granting of a free passage in the Omar to Sydney would enable her to attend to many small matters in connection with her father's unlucky investments. Jonathan Martin had given a ready assent, and by the time the Omar had left Rangoon the captain and mate were aware of Jose's identity.

Two days out Varneck broke the news that a stowaway had been discovered under the for'ard hatches.

'One of those derned Sydney poets, by the look of him,' the mate informed the captain irritably. 'By the lord, I'll trim his silk socks and make him feel the difference between hell and home!'

'The cook wants a mate,' the captain interposed, one familiar with Varneck's seasoned brutality. 'Let him peel potatoes and feed the galley fires. That's plenty for the toughest Sydney poet.'

The cook, peering from the galley, shouted the stowaway's name along the decks.

'Hi there, Harold Tulse! This way for the ham an' the cinders. Lend me a hand with this tub of spuds.'

Tulse's appearance would have gladdened the heart of the most taciturn director of photo plays. Tulse was twenty-five, with the physical make-up of Jack Dempsey and Adonis. In the language of the atelier artist, his face was a money-map and a house-filler.

Harold dived into the galley like a young seal scouting for a livelihood. He was glad of the let-off and eager to fan the cook's affections after his forty-hour fast in the stifling forehold.

'It will be trying for you to work with a goat like me, Bidge,' he said to the cook after his first morning in the galley. 'No other food artist afloat would put up with me.'

It was the first time in his life that Bidge had been referred to as a food artist. Hitherto his cooking had been regarded by the ship's company as something between slow poisoning and deliberate murder. He began to like Harold Tulse, and after the first evening's wash-up allowed him freedom to look round the ship.

During the day Tulse had kept a sharp eye on cabin number three. It was the cabin occupied by the lady passenger. As yet he had not seen her ; but from various hints dropped by the steward during his visits to the galley Harold gathered that Jose Pender was recovering from a slight attack of mal-de-mer.

It was a wet night, with occasional seas breaking over the Omar's rails. Six bells had sounded, and the look-out man loomed dizzily in his oilskins in the fore part of the ship. Varneck had gone below, and the second officer on the bridge was staring silently ahead with his back to the galley. For the fifth time Tulse strolled idly past cabin number three, and then, with a lightning, glance along the alleyway, opened the door and entered.

Jose Pender was, seated with' her back to the cabin door, so that the light from the electric bulb fell directly on the book she was reading. She turned quickly at sound of his entry, her eyes widening in surprise.

'What do you want? Who are you?' A shadow of annoyance crossed her face at so unexpected an intrusion. Tulse fell back at the first impact of her kindling eyes. 'I— I beg your pardon.' he stammered, his flaming cheeks revealing the shock of his own amazement. 'I really... You see,' he blundered on under her merciless scrutiny, 'I was under the impression that this was Miss Jose Pender's cabin.'

She put aside her book, and her look of indignation changed to one of good-natured forbearance.

'And assuming that it happens to be Miss Pender's cabin, what then?' she inquired with a grim little smile.

Harold Tulse recovered himself with the skill of a matador who had missed his thrust. A grin expanded over his good-natured face.

'But you aren't Miss Pender, and that makes all the difference, Miss—er—?' He paused and regarded her inquiringly.

'Pender,' she informed him icily; 'Miss Jose Pender.'

Tulse wiped his brow with the one silk kerchief in his possession. For his years Harold was a person of wide culture and academic attainments. He hated liars and all forms of knavery. At the same time his keen sense of chivalry had more than once prevented his examining the lie' too closely when it began and ended in the presence, of a lady.

'I beg your pardon. Miss Pender,' he found voice to say. 'I ventured on board this vessel under stress of circumstances, with the object of accompanying my fiancée, Miss Jose Pender, to Sydney. She was the only passenger aboard the *Omar*, and this cabin, number three, was the one allotted her.'

He was about to pass out. She beckoned with the air of one accustomed to certain forms of obedience in others.

'One moment, Mr. Tulse. Your entry into my cabin has caused me more surprise than you imagine. I did not expect that you would hide in the forehold and follow me to Sydney.'

Tulse stared hard into her unflinching brown eyes, while a touch of indignation betrayed his fast ebbing patience,

'I have never met you before in my life!' he flung out. 'Miss Jose Pender is the daughter of the late Captain Pender. She is known to the manager of this company. And you are not the Miss Pender for whom this cabin was reserved!'

Not for an instant did he remove his eyes from hers. Finding them evasive, His fingers closed suddenly on her wrist.

'Tell me,' he said quietly, 'your little game.'

In the twist of a finger she had shaken off his grasp and stood with lips grown hard as fate. 'The game, Mr. Tulse, is law! I am the law on this ship as long as that wireless amidships continues to function. Get that?'' Her lips relaxed as she spoke. Something of tenderness, pity, came into her eyes as she explored the young stowaway, the creased, well-cut pants already showing stains from the galley wash-pots, the silk socks, and the low Oxford shoes that spoke of his youthful tastes and up-bringing.

'It was my painful duty,' she went on at last, 'to arrest, and detain Miss Jose Pender at the moment she was about to go aboard this vessel.'

'Arrest Jose?' Tulse experienced a sick, frosty feeling within him. 'What was the charge, pray?' he demanded hoarsely.'

'Conspiring to defraud the Burma Ruby Corporation, Mr. Tulse. I am attached to the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard. I demand to know what you are doing on this ship,' she inquired with disconcerting brevity.

Tulse's mind grew limpid as a mountain stream. It reflected and genuflected before her. But. it did not respond to the cold bluff that was behind her inquiry.

'I am a stowaway, Miss C.I.D.,' he retorted blandly. 'When I'm through with being a stowaway I'll find time to stand your department on its silly head for arresting Miss Pender.'

She lit a cigarette, and offered him one from her gold case as an afterthought. He shook his head, although a few moments before he would have sold his shoes for one.

'If I were a he-policeman,' she informed him sweetly, 'I'd pinch you before we got to Fremantle.'

He breathed through his shut lips as he regarded her more closely, the rich mass of Titian-like hair drawn back and held by a broad diamond-hilted pin, the strong, quiet face that was not without beauty.

'Instead of which,' she went on, 'I must again ask you to explain your presence on this ship. When you have done that to my satisfaction I shall be able to say whether Miss Jose Pender shall remain in custody, so it is up to you, Mr. Tulse.'

The young stowaway heaved and writhed his shoulders like a mastiff shaking off a beating. This woman was batting well in a game he was only beginning to understand.

'You mean that my fiancée will be held in custody until I or someone, else helps you with your job of smashing up the Burma ruby gang. You are asking me to lay the goods before you and bring the right pair of wrists to your handcuffs,' he retorted impatiently.

She smiled coldly. 'Your wrists will do. Mr. Tulse, the moment a doubt of your honesty of purpose crosses my mind.'

'Thank you.' He bowed slightly. 'Tell me what you desire,' he said, after a breath-giving space.

She adjusted the diamond-billed pin in her hair before responding. She fell, that his eyes were battening on if with almost childish curiosity.

'To put it squarely. Mr. Tulse. I'm after a small parcel of rubies that the late Captain Pender acquired from the superintendent of the. Burma Ruby Corporation.'

'Well?'' He waited for her to continue. 'There is a theory that Captain Pender left the gems in the care of an agent at Rangoon. He did not take them to Australia, or he would not have, died in poverty. The Omar was searched on his arrival. Well, Mr. Tulse,' she continued naively. 'Scotland Yard slept on the case until Jose Pender made a move for Sydney. Acting on instructions, I arrested her an hour before the Omar sailed, and stepped into her place, it was as easy as shelling peas.'

'There's going lo be some more easy shelling later on,' he predicted with a smile. 'Jose Pender never saw the rubies. Her father bought them, and I've, the superintendent's receipt; here.'

HE drew a closely-folded sheet of paper from his coal, pocket and spread it before, her. She examined the stamp and signature, carefully, pausing a moment to make a note of the date in a small book she carried.

'The deal was an illicit one,' she assured him. 'The parcel of stones was worth a hundred limes more than Captain Pender paid the superintendent. The Burma Corporation dismissed him from the mines.''

'A good thing, too, Miss Clad,' Tulse agreed. 'But while he was in authority he had the power to sell. Let, me tell you frankly,' he went on with determination, 'you shelled some peas when you arrested Jose Pender.'

She flinched slightly at his words. A shadow of doubt lurked in her eyes, a passing sense of uneasiness that, did not escape him.

'If I'm wrong,' she said slowly, 'Jose Pender comes out of prison, and I'll be told to chase an electric iron in a laundry. Tell me the truth about those rubies. Mr. Tulse, and I give you my word this case will go no further.'

There was a ring of sincerity in her voice that impressed Tulse. and the fact that Jose Pender's liberty depended for the moment on her goodwill quickened his desire to prevent further misunderstanding. No taint of complicity must attach to Jose's name. A footstep sounded in the passage outside. Tulse regarded her inquiringly.

'If I'm caught here,' he began in a whisper.

'Never mind these stewards and firemen,' she told him. 'I'm law here. We're holding an inquiry. Get busy with this explanation. Maybe I want to go home.'

Tulse drew breath sharply. His mind flew back to the inexcusable tragedy which had come into the life of Jose Pender owing to the carelessness and folly of her father.

Tulse had set himself the task of locating the last hundred thousand dollars of a weak man's fortune. Captain Pender had trusted his associates blindly. His servants had robbed him without pity or regard for the half-grown daughter

who was fated to be left penniless. And now this woman from Scotland Yard was crossing his trail. If he trusted her he might complete the ruin which Mark Pender had begun. If he flouted or disregarded her presence on the Omar she might work incalculable harm to Jose. He would tell her the truth, the hard, unbelievable truth that still shrouded the movements of the Burma ruby gang.

THE stammering beat of the engines was the only sound that reached them in the small, stuffy cabin. A cross-sea swept the decks from lime to lime, burying the Omar to her rails in blinding gulfs of brine.

Tulse leaned against the shut cabin door, his powerful back barring any sudden entry on the part of steward or mate.

'If you had been born in the Far East, Miss C.I.D., the events I am relating would seem as natural as the people concerned. Being a white woman, you will probably accuse me of beating up a lie instead of the egg.'

'Guess I know an egg when it's fried,' she retorted, with an affectation of mirth. 'You hand me the yolk with that ruby in it, Mr. Tulse. You were talking about some information?'

'bout Captain Pender and, I may add, his Burmese, cabin steward, Bhu Chin. This fellow was the tool of a Chinese gang known as the Yellow Five. Little Bhu was as harmless as a drugged bank manager while at sea. Ashore he had the police in the apple-guessing competition. They didn't know whether he sold poison or stole sweets. But folks knew that he worked the illicit gem stunt, in company with the notorious Lucy Loo, a clever woman with a university education.

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, her chin resting in her while palm.

'I have seen her with Bhu Chin. Go on, Mr. Tulse.'

'Well, Captain Pender little guessed that his ship was being used as a thief-boat by the Five. On the last voyage home, a year ago. Pender sold and gave away the smaller rubies he had bought from the superintendent of the mines. He kept one, a big pigeon-blood stone that was christened the Morning Star, and worth in London or Antwerp a hundred thousand dollars.

'The captain kept the Morning Star in his cabin safe. He trusted Bhu Chin, because he had never found him stealing anything heavier than a roast chicken. He had rescued the kid from the toils of a coolie slave driver up in the Shan States, and he never dreamed that the kid in his gratitude would play solo with a little thing like the Morning Star.

'Like most sea captains in the East, Pender's predilections ran mostly to the morning cocktail, followed by an indefinite number of gin-swizzles,' Tulse informed her, almost, ruefully. 'On the home run the swizzles used to last right,

up to the South Head light. Then poor Pender used to pull himself together, while little Bhu Chin got out his shore-going clothes.

'Well, on this last trip, home Bhu found the time, dragging, and he knew that the Omar was making her last trip as far as Pender and he were concerned. The old man had made up his mind to sell the ship and retire with Jose in a villa at Coogee. The Yellow Five knew it, and Lucy Loo had asked little Chin what he was going to do about it.

'The gin-swizzles answered the question; they left Chin with nothing to do but fan the captain to sleep after dinner. I will not insult your intelligence, Miss C.I.D., by telling you that Chin had the run of the safe after the last swizzle. If you follow the picture closely you will see little Chin licking the big ruby and holding it up to the light, and wondering what was to become of him and the beautiful Lucy Loo when a fresh bunch of owners got hold of the Omar. He wanted a country house for Loo, and a car that, would freeze out competition as a road-burner. He had dreams, and Loo filled them like the paint in a picture.'

TULSE drew breath for an instant as the bell on the bridge overhead stroked the hour. The voice of Bidge, the cook, was heard rating the steward for the theft of a ham pie. The Omar thrashed and dived through the cross-seas, her binnacle lights showing dimly in the smother of brine and rain.

'To cut it short,' Tulse went on quickly, 'little Chin saw a way to keep faith with his dreams.'

'How many of us do that,' the lady detective interposed with a sigh.

Tulse nodded in sympathy.

'Chin made up his mind to stop licking the ruby and call it his own. As I said before, he found that the monotony of the voyage was going to drive him to the dope. He had always kept pets in his cabin— a tortoise was one that kept him company until it got under a falling load of pig iron one day. He tried two pigeons, and fixed up a hutch in the foc'sle, but lost them both at Adelaide. As a last effort to be sociable he made friends with one of the big brown rats that peeped in and out of his cabin.

'The ordinary ship's rat will stand a lot of handfeeding in the way of cheese rinds and bacon scraps. Chin fed his pet rat until it ate sugar from a spoon. Before half the trip was over he had it running in and out of his cabin through a chink in one of the panels.

'I am giving you the story, Miss C.I.D., as it was related by Chin to Lucy Loo and to the detectives at Sydney when they arrested the little fellow for opium smuggling.'

Tulse paused in his narrative to note the effect of his words on the. lady detective. She shrugged and made a slight gesture of dissent.

'I never heard it, Mr. Tulse. But I'm not saying everything isn't true,' she answered, without looking up.

'What followed may interest us both,' he continued thoughtfully. 'Three days before the Omar reached port the Morning Star had disappeared from the cabin safe. Captain Pender lost his head at the discovery, he swore that he would not take the Omar through the heads until the big ruby was put back in the safe.

'Everything and everybody in the ship was searched, sifted, and put. through the hoops a dozen times in a morning. Pender saw red. He said he'd line the Omar's gangway with plain-clothes detectives and search parties, so that every man Jack of the Omar's crew would be gouged and bored to their eye-roots before they got ashore.

'Pender would have kept his threat about not entering the heads until the ruby was replaced. He overlooked the question of coal. But he kept his word regarding the plain-clothes police on the gangway when the Omar berthed. They showed up six-deep around the stokers and firemen coming ashore with their duds. Chin went through the search twice on account of his proximity to the skipper's cabin. Nothing doing!'

The lady detective smiled reminiscently. 'Chin was arrested,' she reminded him.

'For concealing opium in his mattress.' Tulse added, 'Perhaps you know what happened lo the Morning Star?' he inquired, meeting her shaft-like glance.

'You are going to tell me.' she parried almost wistfully. Harold Tulse fell into a brief study of cabin number three as he stooped here and there to scrutinise the chinks and crannies in the panelled walls. Straightening his shoulders, he leaned reflectively against the shut cabin door.

'I am going to tell you what Bhu Chin did with Captain Pender's hundred thousand dollar ruby, Miss C.I.D. You are listening?'

She inclined her head, while her shut hand resting on the cabin table appeared to tremble in the agony of self-repression.

'Bhu Chin,' Tulse stated coldly, 'realised the difficulty of carrying the gem ashore when he took it from the cabin safe. He felt that if he could hide the stone on the ship until she returned to Rangoon he would beat the cops in the first round. He had also made up his mind to return in the Omar to Rangoon, either as a stowaway or steward. This would have given him an opportunity of recovering the Morning Star. His Asiatic mind groped and gyrated around the possible hiding-places for the stolen gem. No place was police-proof. He had

seen illicit stones taken from bottled wine, from newly-baked bread, sausages, and motor tyres. Then when the search parties were scouring the ship and howling for the scalp of the thief, little Chin looked down at the fat brown rat that was nibbling some biscuit crumbs from his hand. And that settled it for Chin.

'You see, miss, on the day he took the ruby from Pender's safe he also took the precaution of covering it with a hard coat of blue-grey enamel he kept, handy for his illicit purposes. The enamel gave it the appearance of an ordinary pebble.

'He wore a wrist watch.' Tulse informed her grimly. 'Forcing the watch from the strap, he set the enamelled ruby in its place. With a strong needle and some pack thread he covered the gem with a fine network of stitching. Then he gouged a lower hole in the strap and fastened it like a collar round the rat's neck.

'When the search parties tore into his cabin to comb his belongings and strip him in Pender's presence the rat and ruby were running between decks among the cargoes of hemp and kapok.'

The lady detective stood up, white-lipped and trembling, her hand pressed to her mouth, as though a drop of blood had welled from her heart.

'Oh, the damned little fool!' she burst out. 'They pinched him at Sydney for the opium. Two years hard! And that biscuit-nibbling bilge-rat running about the hold with the real money round its neck!'

Her sudden outburst steadied Tulse. Slowly, deliberately he drew a pair of silver-plated handcuffs from his inner pocket and laid them silently on the table beside the book she had been reading when he entered.

'Lucy Loo,' he said suavely. 'I am the law on this ship. I've followed you ever since I arrested little Chin. What about it?'

HE WAS prepared for what followed. The sleeping strength of her young torso and hands woke with the feline agility of a lioness suddenly prodded from her lair A thin-bladed knife struck out and down at his breast. He stopped it with a light blow above the forearm, and wrenched the weapon from her hand.

'I knew you'd play up, Loo,' he chided. 'And, after all, I can't arrest you for being acquainted with the Yellow Five and little Bhu Chin. But I can stop you hunting rats on this ship and assuming Jose Pender's name. You sent her a wire purporting to come from Jonathan Martin and Co., asking her to postpone her trip on the Omar owing to lack of cabin accommodation. l saw that wire and suspected a trick. I asked Jose to keep quiet and allow me to handle the situation. I didn't enjoy stowing away on this ship, but it's part of my daily work

as a policeman. Seems to me the owners weren't looking when you came aboard!'

Lucy Loo shrank against the cabin wall in the stifling reaction that followed her hopeless clinch with the young detective. Her life had been spent in desperate encounters with crooks and jewel-thieves. She had heard from Bhu Chin the account of the Morning Star ruby and the curious way he had sought to hide it from Captain Pender. But, like Tulse, she had only half-believed the little fellow's story.

She had bided her time for an opportunity to investigate the truth. Chance favoured her one day when she learned from one of the Omar's stewards that number three cabin had been reserved for Jose Pender. A thought had flamed in her mind that Jose had picked up the rat story and was travelling by the Omar in the hope of finding a way to recover the lost jewel which really belonged to her father.

Just here the voice of Bidge, the cook, sounded in the alleyway. 'Ahoy there, Tulse! Lend a hand here with some casks of flour. Hurry up, man! Hurry!'

Since he had secured his passage by strategy Tulse felt obliged for the moment lo obey orders promptly; otherwise he might be called upon to reveal his professional status to the captain of the Omar.

'You may keep these bracelets as a souvenir, Lucy Loo.' He indicated the silver-plated handcuffs on the table. 'In the meanwhile, if you attempt to carry on your schemes I shall provide a rougher pair from the ship's armoury.' He slipped from the cabin and joined the cook at the galley door.

Tulse discovered almost immediately that Bidge was more in need of company than help. In spite of his big babbling voice the autocrat of the galley was fonder of a game of cards in his cubby than yarning with the deck hands in the forepart.

Into the cubby Bidge led Tulse. It was not spacious, but it belonged to Bidge, and two chairs and a square box-table, the walls were covered with portraits of Bidge and his wife Melinda. Tulse's glance look in the cubby and its simple adornments as he played aces, kings, and jacks to anything that the galley master felt disposed to lead. And as the young detective listened to Bidge on the art of not playing bridge his eye took root in a small wrist-strap that hung between Melinda's picture and the' framed portrait of John Henry Ridge.

'Not one of them fire-fighters downstairs can play the game.' John Henry repeated for the fifth time. 'I can beat Jaikes, the second officer, three nights out of four. But he ain't always off duty '

Tulse played on abstractedly.

Inset in the wrist-strap and sewn with pack-thread was a blue-grey pebble the size of a small watch!

Tulse batted his eyes as though someone had slashed them with a whip.

'This cubby, my dear Bidge, is a cosy stall on a night like this. May I ask where you got that wrist-strap with the building material sewn up in it?'

His cook sorted the cards before answering.

'You might ask who the bunch of yahoos was that ran this ship afore it changed owners. Harold, my boy, it was a rat saloon! It's my believe those Chinkie sailors and firemen used to feed 'em. Some of 'em was big enough to eat off the table without climbing up. They owned the derned galley when I took it over, and some was as tame as chickens on a farm. Blamed if they didn't wear ornaments too.'

'Bidge,' the young detective interrupted with a gesture of dissent, 'easy does it. You are going to tell me that the rats wore watch-guards, silk hats, and coloured waistcoats, I'm—'

The cooks grew purple in his effort to remain calm and cold of speech.

'I'm saying, Harold, I killed a rat in my galley last trip that was wearin' that derned dog-collar up there. Ain't it proof that those Chinks played with the vermin? I told Mr. Varneck: I showed him the collar. "Bidge," says he, "lay off the wet brown. I don't want to inspect the horse's collar. Fry me some steak and forget yourself."

'Bidge'— Tulse placed a gold coin on the table— 'I want to buy a wrist-strap. The one up there will suit me fine.'

'Never knew you'd a wrist watch, Harold.' The cook eyed him sharply. 'Besides, it wouldn't fit a ham like yours.'

'I want it for a lady,' Tulse explained truthfully. 'I've been examining it the last ten minutes. It isn't an ordinary leather strap,' he confessed with admiration; 'it's a kind of French suede, and hard to buy in the shops.'

'Well, it's yours, Harold, and may it bring your lady luck. The stone, ain't—'

'My dear Bidge. I'm obliged.' The young detective took the strap before the cook had made up his mind about the stone.

Tulse stayed in the cubby, losing game after game until eight bells had sounded on the bridge. Then he turned in for the night....

THE *Omar* put in at Thursday Island to unload. The moment she was fast to the pier Tulse reached for his hat and strolled ashore. Ten minutes after he had gone, Lucy Loo followed. They met unexpectedly on the parade. Her face had blanched, her eyes grown hollow.

'I'm going on to Sydney, Mr. Tulse. And I want to say this: Next time you're at the pen where Chin is tied up tell him that Loo will be waiting outside when

his time's up. Tell him I'll be at the gate with a piece of gas-pipe inside a stocking— the blob-eyed Chow.'

Jose Pender was waiting when the Brisbane express landed Harold Tulse at Redfern. Holding her sweet, sad face between his hands, he kissed her tenderly again and again.

It was not until a year after their marriage that he confided to her the real story of the Morning Star ruby and the part that Lucy Loo had played in it.

_____

34: The Mystery the Yellow Ace

Sydney Mail 12 June 1929

YOU heard it whispered in travellers' clubs and on the verandahs of commercial hotels wherever you trailed a sample case between Sydney and Thursday Island. It was the kind of hush-hush affair that, so often screens the reputation of a well-beloved friend or hostess.

There came a time, however, when details of the Yellow Ace mystery arrived at the desk of a certain Commissioner of Police. It look a whole year to separate what was yellow from the truth. And the C.O.P. got the shock of his life before he laid the mystery to rest. There are many who remember Paddy Duane's circus, wrecked in a memorable cyclone somewhere between Pitt-street and the Equator. For months afterwards children and men talked of the wind that had blown Winnie the elephant thirteen miles from the nearest post-office, and driven poor old Terry, the kangaroo, among the pearling luggers of a foreign community.

The Joss of the big tent was the last stroke in a succession of bitter misfortunes which had pursued Duane from Sydney to Pine Creek. He died at Darwin, leaving his daughter, Zora, with just enough money to cover funeral expenses. The fragrant loveliness of the little circus dancer had hitherto kept Duane's fortune from the low ebb which drought and shipping troubles had conspired to bring about. Her very name had filled the circus at a time when other travelling companies were humping it back to the railway.

A week after her father's death Zora was joined by her brother, Shan, whose fame as a card and dice expert was almost international. He was known to most of the shipping companies as the most persistent gambler on the coast. Shan built a charming house for the seventeen-year-old Zora, where the palms and magnolias sheltered it from the gaze of the town. One or two relics of the circus remained to fill Zora's heart, with the old yearning for the road. But these circus relics Shan kept apart from the luxurious surroundings he had chosen for his sad-eyed sister.

To the innocent Zora the house's one besetting sin lay in the fast and furious card parties that, soon gathered within their fan-cooled salon. Always spotlessly attired, Shan appeared to attract merchants and rubber planters on their way to Sydney or the islands in the north. They preferred his cool rooms and gardens to the drink-sodden lounges of the local hotels.

Soon the fame of Zora Duane as a hostess and beauty was known to every white man south of the camphor-bell and the Sulu Sea. Travellers on their way to Sydney carried the news of Zora's social triumphs in the far north; they told

of her brother Shan's unbounded hospitality, the wealth that spilled across his tables month in and out.

Of the men and women who visited the palm-screened house overlooking the bay, Zora recalled one young Sydneyite, Gale, who had played with her brother and lost three thousand pounds. It had all happened in a single night, and Gale had gone his way like one eased of an unpleasant load. Therein lay the spirit of the true gambler, she told herself, the gallant young gentleman of fortune who had kissed her hand at parting, leaving almost his last gold coin in Shan's iron safe. And there had been no crooked play on Shan's part; she had assured herself of that. Indeed, during a part of the play Gale's luck was phenomenal. But Shan had persisted, like the gamester he was, until the luck changed, and Gale went his way a beggar.

THE people of Darwin knew little of Frampton Gale. It was hinted that his father owned a cattle station somewhere in New South Wales. One old pearl buyer, who gambled nightly at the Duanes', had proof that the boy was in the Government service, and that the money he had lost had been taken from the Tax Commissioner's office. While Zora listened she believed nothing.

But from the day of Gale's departure the luck of her brother changed. He began to lose his money and his nerve. Evil reports of Shan blew along the Straits and Peninsula. Stories of foul play within the house were hinted at,. It was stated openly that a rich American named Boomer had been badly handled within the house, had been put aboard an outgoing steamer in a crippled and almost unconscious condition. It was said that Shan and Boomer had fought in the garden after a quarrelsome game of poker. The American had tried to use a pistol, and Shan in self-defence had protested with a razor.

It was certain Boomer had won a considerable sum of money, for since his departure Shan had been borrowing from his visitors and selling his jewellery to raise funds. Zora was a lonely figure in those days, a girl-woman craving the society of her own sex, for, as the days passed and Shan's reputation as a man-handler increased, women visitors were few and far between.

Shan's habits disturbed and frightened her. For weeks she absented herself from the house, visiting Townsville and Brisbane in the hope of obtaining an engagement at, one of the theatres. In Brisbane reports of Shan's doings at Darwin brought flashes of shame to her young cheeks. It was now hinted that unpleasant things always happened to the visitor who won money in his house.

'I don't believe a word of it,' a coasting skipper assured Zora. 'Shan's no saint. The people who play with him know that. But I'll never believe he raises his hand to a guest who happens to clean up the pool. All the same, little girl,'

the old skipper added., patting her hand in a fatherly way, 'matters won't mend in Darwin if he's left to his own devices.'

And so, while Zora was on her way back to Darwin, Frampton Gale had decided to again try his luck in the house of Shan Duane. Business carried him up and down the coast at certain times of the year. His heavy losses to Shan had in no way affected his first impression of the fragrant, childlike Zora. While he regretted the loss of three thousands pounds within the palm-sheltered gaming house he found it difficult to banish the memory of Shan's sister from his young mind. And the rumours of Shan's doings reached him at every port, had helped him to a final resolution to test the rumours and squeeze out the truth. And why hadn't the young mistress of the palm-screened homestead answered his letters? He had written twice.

Shan greeted him like a long-lost brother. And in their brief handshake Gale saw that the little gambler had changed. His eyes were sunken, restless; his clothes fitted him badly. But he talked incessantly.

'I miss Zora. I miss the cards. Since the war no one has any money.' He paused to cast, a fleeting glance over Gale's tall, spick-and-span figure, the smiling, milk-white teeth, the lithe, muscle-packed shoulders.

'How well you are looking, Gale! You smell of Australian flowers and society,' he declared with affected gaiety.

Gale sprawled in a rattan chair on the verandah. Where was Zora? The night was blue at the length of one's arms. Around him breathed the unforgettable odours of wild lime and vanilla, frangipani and camphor laurel. Beyond the garden lay the straggling sandhills and tea-tree scrub. The smoky blue of the Gulf-waters was dotted with small craft and an occasional cargo tramp.

Gale noticed the absence of guests. Without Zora the place was a tomb. He fidgeted in his rattan chair. Shan explained that it was the off season in Darwin. Everyone had gone south to the Melbourne, Gup, curse them, leaving him alone with a few beastly Chinks and trepang fishers. It was understood that Gale had returned for his revenge. That was only natural. All Australians were welcome to his house, Shan reiterated for the twentieth time as he strode up and down the lantern-lit verandah, his sunken eyes grown luminous at the prospect of play.

Gale smoked in silence, inhaling a well-remembered perfume that conjured up in his mind a slenderly lovely Madonna-eyed girl whose slow glances had tacitly warned him against her brother's play. He looked steadily at Shan, striding up and down in the lantern glow, his hair polished like patent leather, his pruned moustache that somehow resembled twin leeches on his lip. A

funny little chap, Gale thought, spoilt by overindulgence and hopelessly unfit in spile of his alleged prowess as a man-handler and bully.

After dinner they played poker in a wonderful room that overlooked the tropic gardens on the south side of the residency. The ceilings were of panelled mahogany, and the walls were covered with island curios and aboriginal relics, spears of the Arunti, by the dozen. Gale's, eye measured everything from the spears and boomerangs above the portiere-hung exits to the trap-door cunningly inset within the panel directly above the broad teak mantel-board.

They played poker to the low strumming of a Chinese fiddle across the dunes. They played in a spirit of cheerful watchfulness, like two champions intent on discovering the strength of each other's pocket and mind. Gale drew a roll of Australian banknotes from his pocket. He placed them in a thick wad beside his elbow with a gesture of affirmation that was a challenge to the lynx-eyed Shan Duane across the table.

The little gambler smiled patronisingly as he plucked and smoothed the twin leeches on his upper lip.

'Your Sydney money is good to look at, Gale,' he drawled, slapping a pile of notes on the table. ''Only please understand,' he added with princely concern, 'there is no limit at this table. I go up as high as—'

'Blazes,' Gale chuckled, staring at the three aces he held in his hand. 'People who preach the no-limit gospel ought, to say their prayers a bit oftener.'

Gale felt that this leech-lipped young gambler might not be proof against a little timely bluffing. If he could shake his nerve a bit things might happen. And the three aces he held would support all the bluff he had to spare.

A sudden grin creased Shan Duane's face, the grin of the player intent on killing.

'My dear Gale, I will begin by handing you a little one on the neck for five hundred pounds! And I make no prayer.'

Gale whistled and sat tight in his seat. 'You'll need the luck of a fat Chinaman to get away with this lot,' he declared banteringly. 'Give me one card,' he said.

'Same for me,' Shan purred. They drew, and to his own sharp amazement Gale discovered he had drawn an ace, making four in all. Whatever doubts he had hitherto entertained concerning Shan's ability to cheat or shark at the game were instantly dissipated. Or was it that the spieler had lost his skill?

The slight twinge of Shan's lip as he stared al his own draw satisfied Gale that no such luck had attended his experiment.

'I'm in for my last pound,' he intimated cheerfully to the dark-faced brother of Zora opposite. He pushed his money across the table, two thousand in all.

'Come along and be eaten, or fold up with a smile,' he challenged.

It was the briefest game Gale had ever played. Slum eventually revealed a pair of queens, two small clubs, and a seven of diamonds. Gale collected his winnings with the celerity of a bank cashier. There had been no need to call Shan's bluff in this game of draw poker with four aces in his hand. But he had a purpose to serve, and he was well aware that his host was on the verge of bankruptcy. The black leeches on Duane's lips seemed to bristle, in Gale's direction. His eyes became slits of tire as he scrutinised the backs of the cards which his visitor had thought fit to bring with him.

He looked up a Gale, after a silence that, seemed to press upon both their nerves. A sudden wan smile touched his lips, the smile of one grown wiser than the centuries.

'You will pardon me, Gale, for not continuing this delightful play. You are tired after your long journey. And, to be quite frank with you, my health is not what one could expect. My servant will attend your needs,' he said, rising from the table. He halted near the portiere-covered exit, the crucified smile still on his lips.

'I congratulate you on your winnings. May you live to enjoy them,' he added, hacking away down the passage.

A STRANGE silence enveloped the house. The croaking of frogs in the swamps came with startling clearness. He caught, the soft sound of a door opening at the end of the bottle-necked passage on his left. Shan's voice was heard addressing someone in the darkness of the grounds. Gale tiptoed towards the passage. He heard his own name mentioned amid a torrent, of imprecations. Shan was explaining the cause of his ill-luck.

'This Sydney bird! Four aces! And I sit pat like a fat pigeon waiting to be killed! I am sick of these big town crooks. This kid Gale has been studying the tricks and passes. Four aces! By the holy, I'll give him the other ace— the yellow one!'

Followed the scraping sound of a door being jerked open. A moment or two later the thump-thump of padded feel, was audible on the teak floor of the passage.

In the snap of a word a furious change came upon the house. It was as though a quick shift of wind had come into a quietly breathing grove, scattering leaves and dust about the sleepers in the chairs. Gale almost vaulted from his seat at the table, his muscles responding to a subconscious sense of deadly peril. He turned to the 'portiere to meet, the owner of the thumping feet. It was a beaded portiere that clicked and rustled at every touch of a passing shape.

A head came through the beads, a pair of yellow eyes that flared above the spotted shoulders of a full-grown leopard.

For a fraction of time the beast stared at Gale, very much as a bloodhound faces a stranger standing in its path. In that split second Gale's glance fastened on the trap-door in the panel of the ceiling above the broad mantel-board. In the snatch of a breath he had gained the mantel, his hands shooting up to the mahogany panel in his desperate conviction that the trap was bolted on the other side. All the evening his eyes had centred on this particular panel that appeared to serve a very definite purpose.

It opened at the first thrust of his hands at the moment the leopard, hounded across the room. The searching claws ripped over his shoes as he swung up through the aperture. The great fangs clashed; a low, sobbing snarl turned to thunder between the wooden walls of the long room. The huge cat-hound reached upward to the mantel with its searching claws, leaped and fell hack with an angry purr.

Gale closed the trap-door swiftly, cast a hurried glance round the apartment in which lie found himself. It covered the whole length of the big room below, but was destitute of furniture except for a few lengths of tapestry trailing from the bare walls. From a heavy beam in the roof hung a brass oil-lamp. The windows were barred. At the far end of the room was a door that led, no doubt, to the downstairs region of the big house.

Gale shrugged his supple shoulders as he returned to the trap-door in the ceiling. Opening it cautiously he peered down, and saw that the room was in darkness. The standard bronze lamp which stood near the mantel had been overturned. Miraculously it had not caught fire. Across the darkness of the room the two flaming eyeballs seemed to leap and crouch by turns, as though seeking an exit. A low, coughing snarl greeted the opening of the trap-door. Again the leopard stood, man-like, against the mantel, leaped up, and remained on the broad ledge within a few feet of the opening. For several moments it remained thus, its catlike body bristling with hate as it watched each movement of Gale through the square aperture.

So... this was Shan's way with guests who won heavily at cards! Gale had known of crimp houses in Saigon and Sarawak where sailormen were drugged and robbed before being thrown into the river. But to uncage a ferocious jungle-cat and allow it to pounce into a drawing-room seemed a new way of obliterating visitors who broke the bank.

And just here Gale awoke to the fact that he had left his paper money on the table below. It was pretty certain that Shan or the old circus animal's keeper would enter the room shortly and pick up the money.

Gale smiled grimly as he followed the movements of the big cat below. It had bounded from the mantel board and was squatting near the chair he had just vacated. For a heart-breathing space he fingered the big automatic pistol in his side-pocket. It was an efficient weapon, capable of stopping a dozen oncoming Assailants in as many seconds. Yet for the moment he was reluctant to start firing shots in the house filled with memories of the absent Zora.

There was nothing desperate in the situation, he told himself. For the moment the possible loss of the money below did not worry him. His thoughts strayed round the girl who had spent happy days within this fragrant homestead. Yes.... she had found the place intolerable!

Gale allowed the trap-door to fall back into place. From the passage outside the room in which he stood came quick steps and the sound of voices. Afar off, across the bay, a steamer's siren whined drearily. Gale waited for the door of the apartment to open. The voices passed on and died away in the maze of passages that intersected the upper regions of the big house. A red moon showed through the barred window at his elbow.

The eerie fluting of a dingo across the scrub filled the hot, windless silence of the night. Below him he heard the soft racketing of chairs and tables as the impatient circus leopard moved from corner to corner. Then he saw the door open softly within a few feet of where he was standing in the overhead room. The shiny, patent-leather hair of Shan shone under the glow of the lamp. He entered like a shadow and slipped towards the trap-door.

Gale was standing flat against a piece of tapestry that draped the angle in the wall. In his fierce haste to learn what was happening in the room below Shan had eyes only for the trap-door. He raised it with shaking hands and looked down. In the moonlight that penetrated the verandah window's below he saw only the yellow head and flaring eyes of the jungle-cat as it sniffed and padded up and down the spacious apartment.

By all the rules of the game Gale should have been heard struggling with the quick-shifting leopard. Some instinct brought his glance across the empty apartment where he crouched beside the trap opening. The cold, flat face of Gale's automatic looked at him from the angle in the wall.

Shan's teeth snapped over an oath. There was no mistaking Gale's pose or the film of rage that blanched his eyes.

'A good game, Shan Duane,' he said frostily. 'That yellow ace downstairs is evidently your trump card. The time has arrived to line your coffin with the creature's skin.'

Shan Duane remained rooted by the open trap-door, the leer of the beaten gambler on his pasty lips. He spoke with an effort.

'You have the devil's luck, Gale. A fool left this panel unbolted. You and your four aces!' he sneered.

'Well, you kept a yellow one for me, Duane,' Gale confessed sadly. 'I'm willing to bet a level five hundred you employ a native keeper to handle that spotted card below.'

Shane merely grinned at the implication; but the grin vanished at Gale's next words. He huddled back from the flat face of the automatic.

'You'll skip down through that trap hole now, Shan Duane, and bring the stakes from the table, every dollar and pound!'

With scarcely an effort Gale gripped him by the collar of his evening jacket and thrust him through the open panel in the floor. Shan struggled violently to prevent himself falling on to the head of the prowling animal below.

'Mercy... Gale,' he chattered, clinging frantically to the edge of the trap. 'I'll get the money— every dollar and pound. Only... this hell beast, does not know me too well.'

'Good!' Gale laughed, still holding him by the shoulder. 'Do it your own way, but get my money off the table.'

Shan slithered to the broad mantel below, where several long-bladed fishing spears were hung with other native weapons. Balancing his slim form on the mantel, he grasped the handiest spear, poised it dexterously, for an instant, and then stabbed down at the pack of banknotes on the table. It was a clever thrust, and revealed Shan's skill in reaching for money with a spear. The barbed point penetrated the bundle of paper, leaving only a few notes behind. Drawing in the spear gingerly, he passed up the money to the waiting Gale. The remaining notes were quickly pinned by the spear, while the leopard slunk suspiciously across the room, its flaming eyes following each movement of the spear blade.

Shan Duane was evidently taking no chances with the animal that he kept exclusively for his guests. Regaining the room above, he grinned like one who had accomplished a notable deed.

'You will go your way now, Gale,' he suggested cheerfully. 'Like good gamblers let us part and forget. It has been a most enjoyable evening,' he giggled nervously. 'You have all the tricks; so let us part in peace.'

Gale shrugged. He was thinking of the wistful-eyed Zora Duane and the real cause of her absence from Darwin.

'Tell me, Shan, the name of the man who manages Ibis yellow ace of yours,' he asked shortly.

Shan lit a cigarette and sat cross-legged on the floor beside the open trap-door.

'A half-caste named Marul; one of Dad's tamers. He's a bit of a Malay. Zora kept him on. It was Marul who said that Boomer, the American, was a crook, and that others like him came to the house to drink our wine and run away with the bank.'

Gale eyed him closely. In the past Shan had kept open house for all and sundry whites who cared to talk local politics and cards from midnight till dawn. There was no doubt that Shan had gambled away a colossal fortune. He sighed again as he recalled the unprotected girl child and her dislike of Shan's nightly parties.

'So Marul suggested playing the yellow ace on to the crooks who got into your house?' he said with a smile, 'Just like a Malay.'

'It happened without thought, my dear Gale. This Boomer had the fingers of a musician at cards. He heat the bank in two sittings. He took all our savings, mine and my sister's. We knew he was cheating when he began to play with his revolver beside him. His pockets were filled with gold and notes. He sat like a big thief over his plunder, shaking his gun at the house, so to speak. He sat all night waiting for the steamer to come and lake him to Singapore.'

Gale nodded and smiled.

'Well, we sat and waited with him,' Shan went on, the smoke from his cigarette oozing from his red lips. 'You know how the poor loser sits and waits. I found comfort in the sight of the money this fat crook had taken from me. Then I saw the face of Marul peeping and beckoning me from the passage. A good fellow, Marul. He does not like to see money go out of the house. With his big eyes Marul told me to get out of the room, quick. I made an excuse to Boomer and got out.

'And just in time, my dear Gale. I heard the cage of the leopard's house open. I saw Marul with his whip drive the creature slap down the passage and into the room where Boomer was sitting with his fists and his gun on top of the money.

'The leopard pulled him out of his chair with the money on top of him—four thousand pounds in paper and gold, my dear Gale. And if Boomer had been Dempsey if would have been just the same, Gale. No man can fight even his own weight in leopards.' Shan grinned. 'Two hundred pounds' worth of my furniture was smashed in the scrap. Boomer tried to pick up his pistol, but the yellow ace got hold of his wrist, and pulled him up and down the room.'

'And you?'

'I could not let the ace kill Boomer. I called in Marul and he beat the animal back to its cage in the shelter house among the lumber and canvas.'

'That's all you could do for Boomer,' Gale said absently.

'We gave him another suit of clothes and his fare to Singapore,' Shan stated solemnly. 'And Boomer boomed to other gaming houses where the yellow ace does not jump on the table to eat the cheat.'

Gale stepped to the door of the apartment and beckoned Shan. 'I'm sorry, Duane, but you're not fit at present to be left in this residency. You'll have to come with me.'

A sudden light came into Duane's eyes. He was about to speak, but checked himself. With scarcely a protest he followed Gale to the garden and out into the road, where the tall palms made an avenue to the exit. Shan walked steadily now, his cigarette glowing in the shadow of the palms.

'I am not sorry to go with you, Gale,' he confessed at last. 'I was alone in the big house with Marul. Being Malay he is not good company after a night of arrak. He is drunk now.'

Gale halted a moment to look back at the house. It was bathed in shadow; only a few crumbs of light showed through the barred window. Gale was certain that there was movement in the bamboo grass on his left. Shan's fingers trembled as he sought to light another cigarette.

'The game is not over,' he declared hoarsely. 'Marul is dealing another hand.' His fingers touched Gale's sleeve apprehensively. 'The ace will not be beaten. It is coming! May the devil take Marul and his trick leopard!'

Gale whirled in the track to the velvet palm shadows that skirted the approach to the house. It came with a living howl from the free-clump on his right. The swiftness of the animal's attack amazed Gale. It was Shan that stood in its way. Before Gale could use his automatic the two went down together in a clawing bundle of howls and oaths. One moment the beast was astride Duane; the next saw the diminutive brother of Zora astride the fighting, spluttering jungle-cat, his knife driving with lightning strokes into its ribs and heart. A couple of shots from Gale's automatic ended the scrimmage. The leopard rolled away and lay slid in the track. Shan remained on his knees dazed, and wiping the blood from his hands and face.

Gale knelt beside him solicitously. 'You're badly clawed, Duane. I'm sorry.'

'A good game and a good fighting ace,' Shan choked inaudibly as he collapsed in Gale's arms.

Out of the darkness of the quayside, where a steamer had just moored alongside, a slim shape came swiftly in the direction of the house. Gale remained undecided for a moment. He glanced up as the footsteps drew nearer, his breath sharpening at sight of the newcomer.

Zora Duane halted beside them, a cry of pain escaping her at sight of Shan and the dead leopard in the path. Gale swallowed a lump in his throat.

'Shan is hurt,' he explained hastily. 'I was taking him to the steamer, but Marul intervened by sending the big cat after us.'

Zora stooped near her brother, and at sight of the ugly claw marks and bloodstains on his face cried out in her misery. Gale held her for a breath-giving instant in his arms, while the fragrance of her girlhood touched him like an opiate.

'We'll go back to the house. Miss Duane,' he said with difficulty. 'My plans are subject to alteration.'

She met, his swift glance and was silent. Gale raised Shan in his arms and walked steadily back to the palm-skirted dwelling. At the open gate he paused uncertainly at the thought of Marul and a fresh onslaught from some other animal in his keeping, a python or pest from the old travelling menagerie, maybe.

Nothing happened as they entered the house. Shan was placed on a couch in his own room. In a little while, with the help of Zora. antiseptics and bandages were applied to the little gambler's wounds. They were not serious. Gale turned suddenly from the quietly breathing Shan to a fresh contemplation of the ashen-lipped girl beside the couch. She averted her eyes like one who had tasted of misery and despair in the last months of her brother's gambling orgies.

'You came back for your revenge,' she said, speaking for the first time, a tiny humorous smile hovering on her lips. 'In this town one never knows the real strength of an opponent's hand. Dad's untameable leopard, too!'

Gale was standing beside the couch.

He drew a number of bills from his pocket and placed them beside the patient's head. Then he stepped to the passage, beckoning her gently.

She followed, knowing what was in his mind. 'You know why I came?'

There was a soft challenge in his voice.

Zora Duane glanced up at his tall figure, the face that was saddle-tanned and very serious now.

'I know you are the son of a chief commissioner of police,' she answered fearlessly. 'You came to arrest Shan on the strength of reports that have reached headquarters. Am I right?'

He shrugged.

'After Boomer had stirred up the consulates I came along with my own pack of cards, all nicely marked, to see what would happen when Sinn Duane got properly fleeced.'

'And you will arrest him when he is better?'

'I would if he had cheated. Seems to me the real crooks and spielers have cleaned him out. He's just a saloon punter depending on runs of luck,' he told her quietly. 'He won lots of money on the steamers.'

Zora demurred. Gale shrugged. 'He has never tried to cheat me, anyway, Miss Duane. He could manipulate a pack; what need for the spotted ace of Marul's?'

Faint tints stole across the east. The steamer at the pier was preparing to cast off at dawn. Gale shook himself uneasily as he took in the strange loveliness of the young circus dancer's features. He could not leave her alone in the house with Shan in his present condition. And Marul was at large.

She was studying his face, the lean, youthful poise of him, the very thoughts in his grey eyes.

'I'm scared of Marul returning,' she confessed with a sigh. 'I don't want him to find me here alone with Shan.'

'He won't,' Gale answered with sudden decision, as he dropped into a chair. 'I'll have to see you through, Miss Duane.'

The shadow vanished from Zora's eyes. In a moment she had put, aside her light travelling coat and donned her pretty pink overalls. He stared in amaze.

'What are you going to do?' he asked.

'Me?' She laughed softly and ran to the door. 'Getting breakfast for two. Then I'll round up my missing household. Please, Mr. Gale, make yourself at home in Darwin.'

Gale felt there would be no dereliction of duty if he followed her advice.

35: A Pipe for Peter

Sydney Mail 10 July 1929

PETER'S pipe was seven miles long. It carried oil from the company's wells at El Marash to the refinery overlooking the Gulf of Akbar. To Peter the surrounding sandhills recalled Suvla Bay. Desolation throbbed in every pulse-beat of air. It was hotter than Bourke at its worst, a strangely dementalising heat he had never experienced in his native Australian bush or desert.

The call of oil had carried him from Sydney to the company's pipe-line within the flaming, heat-drenched Gulf of Akbar. Andy Gordon, one of the Australian directors, had nominated Peter for the post of assistant surveyor in view of the fact that Moslem Arabic was the boy's pet study.

Peter's bungalow nestled in the shade of a dozen Lebanon palms on the crest of a sand-ridge. From this eyrie he had an uninterrupted view of the pipeline and works; also the blue sleeve of water that emptied with each tide into the historic depths of the Red Sea.

A strike was on at. the refinery. The whole staff bad gone to El Marash to await a settlement'. So Peter stayed in his bungalow to keep an eye on the deserted works. He had begun to loathe the Gulf of Akbar, the mirage-haunted dunes, and the fly-bitten Arabs lurking in every finger-strip of shade. His only companion was a forty-pound Australian bulldog named Bill.

Bill had once been a regimental mascot, and had marched with Allenby's buglers into Jerusalem and Baghdad. It all seemed a long time to Bill, dozing, chin down in the sand, his slit eyes waking only when Peter or the houseboy, Hasan, stepped to the verandah.

A LONELY life for Peter Trent, whose business it was to see that wandering Bedouin and Arab dhow kept clear of his pipe-line. The jackals were his only familiars. Like the Bedouin and the dhow, these pariahs had a nose for the haunts of white men. At night they fluted in chorus about his verandah, lean, yellow carrion-snatchers that took steady toll of the company's sick animals and carriers.

He had been a year in the company's service, filling the iron holds of the tankers with oil from the pipes at the sandbag pier. Once a month he visited El Marash in the company's car.

At El Marash was an American picture theatre, and Arlette Gordon, daughter of Andrew, the watchdog of Australian oil interests west of Basra and the Persian Gulf. Peter and Arlette had danced in the Consulate at El Marash, had wandered together under the green lamps of the old Mahommedan

mosques, where the palm shadows were blue under the crystal intensity of an Arabian moon.

Gordon was a Barrier millionaire who had fought foreign oil interests with the strength of his dour mentality. Victory had come to old Andrew after years of pitiless strife and spending. A smile or frown from his steel-grey eyes made or destroyed men's careers in El Marash. Although Andrew liked his daughter to dance and make merry with the clean-minded young officials in his employ, it was never assumed that- Arlette's smiles meant speedy promotion for her dancing partners. Strange to say. the reverse was often the case. For it was well known that the lovely Arlette gave her sympathy to the boys who somehow failed to make good. Her tender nature went out to these failures in life's grim battle. And the battle for promotion among the company's servants had grown fierce since Arlette's arrival. Andrew was emphatic in his belief that the slim-waisted youngsters with the dancing feet never got anywhere except on his daughter's toes.

The old Barrier director loved men of brawn and hair, men who could endure the sun or throw, a barrel of oil over the skyline. And if a man's hair was red and his face tough as the hide of a sphinx so much the. better.

Arlette had her own ideas anent the kind of toughness necessary in a man's face. Her father supplied all the toughness of manner she was ever, likely to need. So in the spring of her youth she had turned to lonely Peter Trent for a change.

Peter once clouted a sailor for, calling him a scented stiffneck. Peter hated stiff necks and picture-faced men. He would have preferred to live up to old Gordon's idea of manliness. There were days in the solitude of his bungalow when he almost regretted that his hair was glossy and dark; his legs long ' and streaky. For it was on record that the father of Arlette had stated that long-legged boys always fell down in a race.

PETER was returning from a long inspection of the pipe-line. A big tanker was due at the pier in a couple of days, and strike or no strike she must get her oil. He had attended to the hydrants; the pier pipes were ready to fill her up.

Since the strike a number of petty thefts had happened at the refinery. Steel tools and kit-bags left about the deserted yards had gone missing. The Arabs stole everything but oil. And of late an old dhow, commanded by the notorious Ghouli, a slave-runner from the old Sudan, had been reported within the gulf. Ghouli was wanted in a dozen Red Sea ports for all the crimes in the Egyptian calendar.

Peter halted within sight of the bungalow and whistled loudly, in the hope of waking Bill from his afternoon siesta. His glance wandered suddenly across

the sandy gutter that separated him from the bungalow. A long fibre line was moving steadily along the gutter in the direction of the beach. Attached lo this line were several knotted bundles of bed-linen and clothes— Peter's clothes. He beheld the last of his white silk tennis shirts, ties, and shoes, the dress suit he had worn in his last dance with Arlette, trail noiselessly away with the speed of a hawk. Peter held himself with an effort. Well he knew that a dozen filthy Arabs were dragging his belongings to the beach as fast as they could haul in the line. His flying start carried him into the gutter, where another surprise awaited him.

At the end of the tow-line that was guiding his personal belongings and most of the company's bed linen to the beach was the big-chested bulldog, Bill!

Bill's jaws had snapped on the line. The bulldog was enjoying a free ride in the direction of the thieves. It was clear to Peter that his house-boy, Hasan, had been clever as usual. Tying things to a line and sliding , them to his associates was much safer than using a donkey. The kavass, or local patrols, often intercepted loaded donkeys. The tow-line was an inspiration.

'The black pigs!' But Peter raced after the disappearing garments, teeth clenched, his long legs scarcely touching the , sand. 'Hold on, Bill!' he shouted. Arlette's picture's inside that dress coat! Stick, Bill; I'm coming!'

Bill's plug-shaped body seemed to sail over the dunes and disappear in a whirlwind of dust down the slope where the Gulf of Akbar gleamed in the sunlight. As usual, Bill had been asleep in the shade when Hasan handed the goods through the bungalow window. In a general way Bill loved movement and gesture. On principle he attached himself to anything that seemed in a hurry to fade away. And when his beloved Peter's dress clothes and et ceteras began to glide from the bungalow Bill took a dive, so to speak, and caught up with the game.

IN spite of the fact that Peter had once run a hundred yards in a trifle over ten seconds the tow-line with Bill attached, improved on his record. It vanished towards the blue. Peter's flying strides carried him to the last dune in the wake of the disappearing rope. Then he halted as though a brake had been applied to his long limbs. Below him was the beach. Standing around an old dhow were a dozen Arab sailors hauling on to the line. Their leader, a smart Arab in a red fez, his face pitted and seamed as though it had been hewn from a pyramid, directed their attention to the Australian bulldog at the end of the line

'By Allah, it is the laughing dog!' he rasped., 'The company's watchman!'

There was no need to indicate the palpitating figure of Peter Trent on the hill above. They parted like rooks at his coming, but only to form a ring round his swaying, gesticulating young body.

'See here,' Peter flung out to the wearer of the red fez, 'a man must have clothes to cover his ugliness, chief! You've taken everything I own in life, including my watch and the portrait of a lady.'

He pointed reprovingly to his dress coat and gold watch chain dangling over the line. Bill still clung to the rope-end, awaiting a sign from Peter. The dhow captain eyed Peter coldly for an instant; then he beckoned the crew to haul the line, clothes, and bulldog aboard the evil-smelling vessel. He checked Peter's advance with an upraised fist.

'Thou art well dressed,'' he snapped in Arabic. 'We walk in rags.'

His black forefinger indicated the tousled, half-naked figures drawing in the line. 'Go back to thy wooden house,' he commanded darkly. 'Take with thee thy devil-faced dog, or, by the Prophet, I will fill both thy stomachs with sand. Away with thee!'

Again Bill looked up at Peter for a sign. The young pipe-line surveyor drew breath sharply, and then dived forward into the centre of the stooping gang. Luckily for Peter the muskets and knives of these Arab marauders were piled in the stern of the dhow. His rush hurled the leaders cursing into the water.

Pivoting nimbly he met the captain with a right swing on the mouth that shook him to his knees. Just here Bill let go the line and linked up with a squat dhow man who was fumbling with a knife in his belt. The pair went down together in a whirl of sand and Mahommedan oaths.

This did not prevent the crew closing on Peter. Fighting was their trade. Next to robbing a harem or raiding a village of women and children they preferred beating an occasional unbeliever to death. It was a short, savage encounter, with one forty-pound bulldog and a leggy young man hitting out for their lives on the sloping beach of Akbar. Peter went down with six shining black bodies rolling under and over him in a violent effort to pin him to earth, or garrotte or pound him to insensibility.

One by one Peter flung them off, fighting with knees and fists and his good young brain. Like panthers these dhow-runners came back to the fight— a fight that provided neither sponges nor referees. They struck him on the face and over the heart. They kicked him with their bare, hard toes, and then reached for his eyes with their talon fingers. 'Chumak , chumak! Gouge, gouge!' they advised each other. 'He will not stop striking. Blind him. He will know better tomorrow! Chumak, chumak, brothers!'

Peter's movements grew wilder. His blows missed. Three of his assailants had fastened to his waist while a rope was strung about his limbs. They cast him flat on the beach, and licked their lips and wailed for their captain to speak.

The fight had gone well with Bill until a noose line found its way round his kicking body. A few deft turns and Bill's part in the fray ended. They flung him with jeers beside his master. The dhow's captain squatted on the beach and wiped a faint trickle of blood from his mouth. He had been struck by this accursed giaour! And, by Kismet, blood had followed the blow!

Near the company's pier were a number of stakes driven into the sand. At a sign two of the crew brought a couple of these posts and lashed them together crosswise. Without ado Peter was stretched out, his wrists and ankles securely roped to the timbers.

That, was all. A very simple operation, accomplished without bloodshed. The dhow's captain rose from his haunches and stared down at Peter on the crosspiece.

'I could kill thee with a nod,' he stated coldly, 'for the blow thou gavest me. But now we will rifle thy house in peace, and leave thee as thou art. If thy star holds thy people may find thee,' he jeered. 'Thou art now in Allah's hands. It is written that unbelievers shall perish with dogs!' he added, with a scornful gesture towards the well-roped Bill.

The dhow's captain moved away in the direction of the bungalow, followed by his hungry squad. Peter heard them, an hour later, tumbling into the dhow and calling upon him to make his peace with Allah before the night came. The loud banging of their sail told him they were moving out fo sea.

A SLIGHT breeze stirred the spindly palms on the crest above. Sand, as fine as flour, fell on Peter's cheeks and lips. It, seemed to rise and fall in waves about his limbs, sliding into his pockets and settling like powdered glass in the hollows of his clenched hands. The sun stayed in his eyes like the fingers of a devil, while his thoughts raced in fiery wheels through his brain. Once or twice during the endless afternoon his dry lips framed a litany that became a softly babbled prayer for the darkness to cover him. A coppery flare in the west showed where the sun had set, A cool smell of night came to the beach, but did not relieve the growing pressure about his wrists and ankles. The knots in the rope were like hammered iron. Bill wriggled inside his bindings. From time to time faint mumblings escaped him as his muscle-packed jaws worked towards the elusive rope strands. Waves of sand flew into his tiny flat ears.

The fires of Peter's thirst started a beautiful delirium in which Arlette appeared, dressed in white and carrying a huge carafe filled to the brim with iced water and lemons. But the lemons and the iced water had a trick of fading over the horizon the moment he woke and called to Arlette. Always those lemons were in the greater hurry to be gone, he told himself with, a sub-humorous grin.

A cold night wind left him awake with his swollen wrists and ankles. Faint sounds came from the distant sandhills. Each breath brought them nearer. They came in sobbing circles, then in straight rushes, but always in his direction. Peter strove to ease the rope-grip on his right wrist, fought to draw his swollen hand through until his flesh quivered and throbbed with the pain of his efforts. A peculiar jackal odour blew round him. The muffled whoof-whoof of innumerable nostrils, followed by the velvet patter of paws in the sand, reached him. Lying flat on the cross-stakes he caught a momentary glimpse of eyes and ears pricking the darkness in front. Like dingoes they whimpered and drew nearer, testing and trying out each yard of space with their pencil-pointed snouts.

In his desperation Peter shouted at the circle of eyes and ears. The crack of his thirst-hardened voice caused the nearest jackal to skip back beyond the frisking tails of its comrades. But the inner circle of the jackal pack remained solid and determined to proceed with the investigation. Peter reserved his second shout until the furry head of the king jackal advanced boldly to the foot of the crosspieces. Here the dry, hot snout nosed over his naked ankle before it set up a long-drawn yelp of invitation to its brothers.

'Shoo! Get away, you beasts!'

A dozen bristling heads and manes had bounded in, their paws striking like mallets on his half-clothed body. Peter's flesh leaped at the contact. He was conscious of the king jackal's spindly legs planted on his chest, the dry, hot muzzle snarling in his face, 'Shoo! Get off!' Peter's voice had lost its potency. Stiff -backed and snarling, the big jackal stood over him, as it had stood over scores of helpless victims along the lone camel tracks. Peter's lips, moved. He was praying hurriedly to the vision of Arlette. And he hoped that she would never hear how this Arab's cross had been licked clean by hosts of desert pariahs. He knew that the boys would keep secret the real story of his end.

IN the middle of his prayer a strange thing happened. The king jackal by right of its strength and grip was first to leap at Peter's throat. A jackal's spring is as sure as a panther's unless its attention is suddenly diverted. In its downward' snatch at the unprotected throat the big desert hound received an unexpected shock.

It came from the clawed-up sand pile near the water's edge, from some torn strands of rope, scissored to pulp by restless teeth and jaws. Bill's brindled body arrived at the jackal's head with the impact of a six-inch shell. He seemed to fall amongst the frisking heads and tails with the speed of a champion heavyweight looking for a purse.

In its day the jackal leader had led the raving pack to the trail of many a sick camel and horse. They had clean-picked wounded army mules and blinded

infantrymen. But the king had never been called on to stop a rush like Bill's. It was murderous, indecent. Long, long afterwards the jackal pack remembered Bill's amazing behaviour towards their leader. There was a hurried recollection of the king being worried and battered against the only rock on the beach, with Bill's jaws glued to the desert king's heart region. The diversion lasted about sixty seconds, and the king's howls for mercy melted into stuff thinner than air. Bill swung from his rock-pounded adversary and stared at the empty spaces around Peter.

A wisp of moon had risen in the south-east. The faint light j beatified Bill, revealed the dumb sorrow in his eyes for the sudden and unexpected collapse of the jackal army. Dutifully he ambled up to Peter and licked the rope-strangled wrists of the right hand. Then he moved around the cross and licked the other hand. Peter opened his eyes wide. The cold sweat of horror was on his brow. What had become of the jackal?

Bill's tongue played over, his lacerated wrists with the tenderness of a masseur. Peter' felt the cold clasp of dawn in his limbs while the bulldog trotted round and round him. Finally Bill lay down, his chin resting on the young surveyor's breast.

A poisonous smell of jackal still lingered in the air. Only a blast of dynamite or a heavily-shotted gun would move them from the locality now. While marching with the colours in Palestine Bill had gauged fairly accurately the habits of these sand-hill sleuths. He could feel their presence among the cactus on the high ridge. They would scout and watch for days. The tank of water with the dripstone beneath had been carried from the bungalow by the captain of the dhow. Bill licked his dry lips and nuzzled closer to Peter. He felt that it was going to be a long time between drinks.

Peter Trent fell into a sick sleep, in which he heard the soft fluting of the red pack on the hill above. Then he dreamed of a white-walled villa and garden, with Arlette seated beside him in the tender glow of an Australian afternoon. The fierce heat of the sun woke him. It was flaring high above the sapphire waters of the gulf. Bill's hoarse barking from the vicinity of the bungalow reached him. The unmistakable hoot, of a motor horn echoed through the sandhills.

LATER on— hours, it seemed— Bill appeared on the slope, escorting a girl in a white dustcoat and veil. Bill led her to the beach like an enthusiastic fisherman about to exhibit the catch of the season. She paused an instant to draw aside the dust veil. Then she saw Peter.

She was aglow to the warm light of the beach, a very real vision of health and youth, her tall, athletic figure silhouetted against the raw red of the

sandhills. It is to Arlette's credit that she did not speak until her small but efficient penknife had sliced through his wrist and ankle ropes. In a few moments Peter was sitting up, rubbing and chafing his wrists with new-found energy and life. Arlette's capable hands were busy on his rope-reddened ankles.

'Accidents of this kind do happen in Persian territory,' she affirmed steadily. 'Arabs?' she queried, patting Bill's neck in token of her regard.

He nodded briefly as he shook sand from his hair and clothes. He wanted to suppress the idea that men have only got to dream of angels to produce them in the flesh. To prove his cheerfulness he tried to whistle, but the dried blood on his lips cracked the tune. She laughed in spite of herself.

'This kind of life won't do at all, Mr. Trent. There ought to be a real guard at this pipe-head— men with machine-guns and poison gas. These desert fuzzies respond to nothing else.'

There was pity in her voice, for she had not been unmindful of Peter's position m the company's service, his unwavering loyalty and sense of duty.

'They seem to have made a job of you,' she intoned with a sigh. 'You ought to be at the offices in El Marash. This location requires a really hefty guard. Dad was right when he said that boys with charming manners never won prize-fights. He always said you had charm,' she added, with suddenly twinkling eyes.

Peter's cheeks were steeped in red as she returned to her work on his ankles. He spoke with a big lump in his throat.

'Charm or no charm, I'd have put that Arab crowd into a can if there'd been another fellow named Peter standing by me,' he stated defensively. 'I wasn't in top-hole form yesterday, and the twelfth Arab was.'

'There were twelve, eh?'

Arlette bent to her task of reviving the blood circulation in his ankles. He could not tell whether she was laughing or angry. But he was grateful for the spiritual fragrance of her leonine hair, the soothing touch of her beautiful hands. He felt that he could kill all the Arabs in Persia if they so much as looked at her veil.

'I called at your bungalow after my tyre went flat,' she explained at last. 'Dad doesn't know I came. He's tootling the lunch at Selim's hotel with a party of directors. They'll hear something from me when they come here,' she promised sweetly. 'Allowing one solitary person to guard a million pounds' worth of property! How do you feel now, Mr. Trent?'

Peter struggled to his feet, shook himself vigorously. 'When I've had a bath I'll be fit to—' Arlette was responsible for the interruption. She was gesticulating towards the company's pier, where the big black dhow was

making for the steps, her giant boomsail flapping weirdly in the light breeze. Peter's jaw snapped.

'The Arabs are coming back. They're scared of the gunboats— want to destroy evidence of yesterday's scrap— burn up the crosspieces and what's left of me,' he told Arlette hurriedly.

Arlette was far from smiling now. Only for her flattened tyre she might have put a safe distance between Peter and these sea-carrion. There was no place to run or hide. A touch of dismay entered her.

THERE was no sign of panic in Peter. Yet a sick thought entered his mind at Arlette's presence on the beach. The dhow was rapidly approaching the pier steps. It was certain that the lynx-eyed crew had seen the car on the hilltop and the figure of Arlette crossing the beach. A sudden thought burned into his young brain. He ran with sobbing breath to the pier, calling to Arlette as be ran.

'The key of the petrol hydrant, Miss Gordon! Turn it, quick, for your dear life!'

He gained the pier head with the bulldog beside him. A number of small pipes trailed from the refinery to the pier end to feed a hose that hung from a wooden bracket near the steps. It was used to fill the tanks of launches and turbines. An out-of-date hydrant, regulated the supply. The big key of the hydrant reposed within a sand-sheltered box a few yards from the pier.

Arlette knew the meaning of Peter's hasty command, knew what the turning of the key could bring about. The dhow was flapping: like a huge vulture under the lee side of the pier. The big, slanting boom came down with an ominous rattle. With his tattered shawl drawn about his bony shoulders the captain directed the casting of the line over the post, at the pier end. Arlette looked up from the hydrant as the key turned slowly.

'That man in the shawl is Ghouli Baba!'' she sang out to Peter. 'Take care, boy ! He is the Evil One. A single mistake and he'll make jackal pie of us both.'

Peter made no sign that he had heard Arlette. His face was white as frozen linen. There were going to he no mistakes on his part. Once the black horde gained the pier his strength would not allow him to stand between them and Arlette. In Ghouli Baba's eye was the yellow spleen of the snake. His lips parted in a fierce shout of joy as the line curled out from the dhow's side. It, fell short by a few inches, but, not before a long boathook had grabbed the pier and held the dhow fast.

THE dhow captain was first to the rail, his wolfish toes dug in the wood, his gaunt body poised for his outward leap. In that instant of frightful suspense

Arlette saw a stream, of petrol flash from the hose. It, struck Ghouli Baba with the sound of a swishing blade across the face and eyes.

'Son of the Beast!' Peter volleyed, 'let this purify your abominable ship and destroy the murder stains.'

The force of a million-gallon pressure lay behind the slashing stream of petrol that poured over the deck of the dhow. Ghouli Baba pitched backwards, but recovered himself with an effort. In the fierce heat of the sun the fumes of the petrol deluge rose in suffocating waves.

'By Allah, we are undone!' the captain choked as the tide swung the dhow's head seaward. In a moment the current had carried her beyond reach of Peter's hose.

'We'd better go,' Peter called to Arlette. 'They might, land on the beach and—'

A length of scarlet fire ran from the valley of the dhow. With a quick, fluttering movement it wrapped its burning length around the huddled figures of the men near the rail. A screen of black smoke enveloped them, covered for a moment the gulf of fire that roared over the boomsail and deck.

'The hell of their dreams has come true,' Peter muttered. 'Anyway, it was better than a machine-gun— much cleaner.''

Arlette followed Peter to the bungalow. A sudden limpness had come upon him. He lurched to the verandah stammering apologies for the unexpected faintness which had come over him. Arlette did her best to make coffee on the primus stove. The boy was famished, hurt, she told herself.

Sounds came from the road above them. A big touring car came sliding through the sand in front, of the bungalow. Andrew Gordon stepped out, his face revealing the raw lines of his mental agitation. He had tracked his daughter to Trent's bungalow. Rumours of Ghouli Baba's presence in the Gulf of Akbar had reached him. In the last two years the notorious Arab dhow had abducted four white women from various beach stations. Arlette's glance went out to the smileless mouth and buckled brows.

'Hello, dad ! You seem worried,' she greeted, a pot of boiling coffee in her hand. 'Do you want Mr. Trent or me?'

A black scowl sat on the old millionaire's face. For the last three hours he had been torn by the thought of her madcap journey to Trent's bungalow.

'I'd almost forgotten Trent, was here,' he snapped. 'It won't prevent ye returning to El Marash with me.'

His lightning eyes took in Peter's outstretched figure on the couch inside the bungalow. The scowl deepened.

'Another man on strike,' he rasped. 'And my daughter ministering to his comforts.' He turned away almost savagely to his car.

Arlette followed, caught his arm, and turned his bitter glance to the black smoke pall on the distant skyline.

'That's some of your oil, dad! It represents the bath of fire Peter Trent gave Ghouli Baba and his gang of slave-runners. About a thousand gallons, I should say.'

Arlette then pointed to the refinery and works where the company's untold resources were stored. 'The smoke of Ghouli Baba's fire-sticks would have been over those tanks and buildings only for somebody's presence of mind.'

Andrew Gordon stared at the sullen smoke fumes on the skyline, his jaw grown slack, his brain slowly absorbing the meaning of his daughter's words. A drop of sweat fell from his brow. Arlette's fingers twined in his own.

'Go into the bungalow, daddy mine, and thank a gallant young gentleman for his services. It's much easier than having to write off a million pounds worth of destroyed plant.'

Andrew Gordon was a man of affairs and something of a sport. He took the coffee from his daughter's hand and stepped in to the bungalow. Arlette signed to the chauffeur in her father's touring car.

'Mr. Trent will return with us to El Marash,' she said. Bill rose from the verandah and took his place inside Andrew Gordon's car.

36: A School For Failures

Sydney Mail 15 Jan 1930

JIMMY DEAN leaned over Nina Clifford's chair, where the perfume of camphor laurels beat like new wine on his senses. The bungalow faced the beach that sometimes provided them with a lantern moon, together with a three-mile belt of surf that fell occasionally with the sound of gun-wheels on a corduroy road. Nina's voice had a jaded note in it.

'A man never gets a woman's point of view in love matters. I like Tempest immensely. He's one of the whitest boys that ever came to Falona. All the same, Jimmy, I'm not perjuring my soul about loving him.'

'You'll love him in time.' Dean answered in his matter-of-fact voice. 'He's twenty; you're eighteen. In Sydney the girls would chase him into the church and up the steeple for that twenty-thousand legacy of his. As one pal speaking to another, Nina, the kid wants looking after. He's nice and young and clean. He's got the sweetest mother that ever wrote ten-page letters to a son. His sister Beryl married young Les Amberly in July last. Tons of money and social prestige. They would put you on the visiting-lists of the right people when you go home as Mrs. Bellamy Tempest.'

A tropic sun flared over the beach. Behind the bungalow stretched unending vistas of palm -dotted plantations, with a white-walled factory and storehouse nestling among the flamingo-crested coral trees.

Dean shared his bungalow with Tempest. Jimmy was twenty-eight, and, as far as his overseer's work was concerned, was getting nowhere in particular. He controlled eight hundred natives in the coffee and copra plantations owned by Dan Clifford, father of Nina. Dan paid him three hundred pounds a year, with a slight bonus on output. Everything was left to Dean, Dan being interested in the rubber estates back of the banyan country in the far north.

Nina was Dan's only child. She had been to school in Sydnev. and had returned to find a newcomer in the person of Bellamy Tempest sharing Dean's quarters.

Like others, Tempest had come to Falona to grow coffee and acquire a South Sea island complexion. Jimmy Dean had been with Nina's father nearly five years. She seemed to have known him all her life. Nina had the fragrant personality of a jungle flower. All her pretty frocks had come from a Sydney house. Her father grumbled and said it was waste of money to bring such things to the islands to shame the peacocks and parakeets. Yet he loved her in his hard-handed way, and would like to have seen her married to Jimmy

Dean— careful, slow plodding Jimmy, who handled natives like a real kangani and a gentleman.

'I expect Tempest here to lunch,' Dean said after a long silence. 'That new yacht of his is eating up his time. We're having pigeon pie, and my cook is giving us a wine salad made of lemons, mangoes, and bananas. You'd better stay,' he almost begged. 'We'll knock up a set at tennis afterwards.'

'Not to-day, Jimmy. Next Wednesday will suit me, if you'll cut the mangoes from your salads. I suppose Bellamy supplies the wine, eh, Jimmy?'

'It comes in cases from a firm in Oporto,' he confessed. 'Ninety bob a dozen.'

She nodded with a quick sense of appreciation.

'I assume that Bellamy can look a whole bottle in the face at lunch?' she inquired with girlish naivete.

Dean blushed; the question was unexpected.

'It's pretty lonely here at times,' he explained with an odd grimace. 'And I'm not saying that Bellamy looks harder at the ninety-shilling stuff than I do. That's why I'd like to see him— er—'

'Married to little Nina, eh, Jim?' she flashed back, a tiny spot flaring on her cheek. 'It's nice of you to throw that in,' she went on quickly. 'The man's point of view again! Someone has got to marry Bellamy Tempest to save him from drowning himself in the rivers of ninety shillings a dozen.' She rose wearily from her rattan chair.

'Jimmy, I'm going,'' she declared with finality.

Dean stirred uneasily as he made a pretence of looking for his pipe.

'For goodness' sake, Nina, don't get mad with me,' he called after her. 'You see— I'm worried, too.'

She glanced back from the verandah steps, at his long shape sprawling now in the verandah chair, the thick, dark hair brushed back from his ample brow. Her lips had grown set, her eyes full of the shadows that come to women who stand on the threshold of their destiny.

IN the long school years in Sydney she had carried Jimmy Dean's picture in her silver-mounted dressing-case, had often smuggled it into the class-room, where other dreamy-eyed creatures had inspected Jimmy's exceedingly likeable face. She had returned to Falona to find her romance dissipated, with Jimmy pleading like a hired advocate for her to marry the man who paid for the wine!

Nina Clifford had the mental grasp of a college professor when it came to a question of relativity, as applied to her own romance. The whole dream fabric

had gone. To put it in her own college slang, Jimmy was just barking for the other fellow.

'Good-bye,' she called out, and her voice sounded like an everlasting farewell in his ears.

He sat very still in his chair, like a boxer who had taken the count. And Jimmy knew what was the matter— knew that Nina Clifford, aged eighteen, was in love with him. He also knew that at twenty-five Nina would bless him for bringing the wealthy Bellamy Tempest into her life. How could he, Jimmy Dean, marry Nina? Even with her father's consent it would mean a castaway's life for Nina compared to existence with Tempest.

In all his life Dean had never seen why women of brilliant temperaments should he condemned to live in the jungle with beetles and hookworms and malaria. It was bad enough for the man.

Jimmy filled himself a glass of port from the decanter. It was better than whisky; it mellowed the disappointment of things, the little dream house he had once promised himself, with the girl wife seated at his table, smiling, coaxing, twitting him for a hundred little neglects and follies in the past.

The islands, as well as the bush, were full of such tragedies— the tragedies of misapplied affections, the dragging in the mire of lonely girl wives, sacrificed to years of anguish through the unutterable selfishness of men. And Nina was too young and sweet for such a sacrifice. Her chance had come with Bellamy Tempest. She must not miss the tide!

TEMPEST did not appear at lunch. Probably the young fool had missed his way in the scrub on his way to the coffee lands at the back of the factory.

The night, came hot and windless. Jimmy Dean returned from the factory a little more tired than usual. The bungalow lamp was lit, the table set for dinner. Inside the kitchen his two coolies chattered softly as they prepared an appetising list of curries and soups. Dean found himself wondering what had delayed Tempest. He sat alone on the verandah for the first time since Tempest's coming to Falona. His mind was uneasy, depressed. And the bungalow always felt like a tomb after the kitchen coolies had gone to the village to spend a few hours with their own people.

A footfall, followed by the sound of stifled breathing, caught him. Looking into the darkness beyond the camphor laurels he saw Tempest approaching the verandah steps. The boy's face was ghastly and drawn. His well-cut clothes were mud-splashed, as though he had stumbled into a creek. In a flash Dean was beside him and had half carried him into the bungalow.

'What's up, Bellamy?' he asked earnestly. 'Why crawl through that infernal scrub when there's a good road from the factory?'

Once inside the room Tempest grew steadier; his tense, wire-drawn expression relaxed as Jimmy poured some wine between his lips. Crouching almost to a chair, he made a sign for the other to shut the door. His breath came in laboured expulsions, but his words struck like bullets on the listening Dean.

'Jimmy, I've killed Kini, brother of that young chief Tona. He followed me from the plantation, jeering and insulting me all the way. I asked him to desist, and he grew more abusive.... Down by the watercourse, between the sandalwoods, he struck me across the face with a bamboo. We rolled across the watercourse... and in rolling I got a stone and hit him twice. He let go, stood up, and then collapsed.'

'Dead?'

Tempest did not answer. He seemed to be fighting to keep down the suffocating mists from Ins straining heart. Then he breathed with an effort and spoke.

'I sat beside him, hoping he'd come round. But... dead men never come round, Jimmy! And... sitting by a dead thing, out there, got on my nerves.'

Dean stared hard at Tempest's dishevelled, bloodwashed figure in silence. All the life had gone out of his own face now.

'It's a ghastly business,' he said at last. 'Kini was the best headman in the archipelago.'

Tempest lay huddled in the chair, like one who had just run his race with wolves. Once or twice he stirred in the silence, as though listening for sounds outside. The soft crash of the surf on the bars became almost vocal , in its maddening intensity.

Jimmy Dean took a turn across the matted floor, and then came back to the crouching figure in the chair. A spot that was like the point of a stiletto burned in his eyes. 'You've been looking at that little Manhikian girl, Voyola, lately, Tempest. You gave her a gold bangle the other day,' he accused sharply.

Tempest stirred and sat up, wiping the blood from his lips and eyes.

'What about it?' he demanded shortly. 'It's the first present she ever got in her life.'

'She's Kini's promised wife,' Dean snapped. 'How in Hades do you expect to control your labour if you start butting in with gold bangles and sheep's eyes on your headman's sweetheart?'

Tempest rested his chin in the palm of his bruised hand, his boyish mouth shut tight.

'If a white man is to be followed home and thrashed for being kind to a girl. Dean, I'm through with planting. Get that!' he flung out passionately.

Dean stood rooted, staring down at the bruised and battered boy whose coming to Falona had filled him with new life, with dreams of Nina's social betterment and Tempest's love. And in a space of a few hours the dream had become a sordid crime, with a pretty Manikian girl as the central figure.

Jimmy stood near the verandah lamp listening to the dull beat of the surf on the outer reefs. In a few hours the Island would be in a state of fierce exeitement owing to the death of Kini. The fighting men of Kini's family would demand blood for blood; also, the long line of men cousins attached to Yoyola's house would be in arms when they learned that her sworn lover had died in a quarrel with her white admirer. Nina was now out of the question. The business was to save this young fool from the wrath of the headmen, to send him home and forget his existence.

THERE was no sleep that night for Jimmy Dean. He lay waiting for the knock at the door that would bring the blood-hunters on Tempest's trail. It came shortly after daybreak, and the knocking was done with the butt of a spear. Before answering the knock Jimmy peeped into Tempest's room and saw him lying full stretch on his bed, sleeping with the impassivity of a child.

Opening the bungalow door, where the spear-butt was still pounding, Dean drew back from the figure standing outside. It was Tona, the young chief and brother to the dead Kini. In the dawn light his skin shone like wild honey. His naked body dripped dew from the pandanus forest he had crossed to reach the bungalow. He stood taller than Dean, slim as a young panther, but with a brow that bore the iron frown of the killer. His eyes flitted in and out the bungalow and back to the white planter standing in the doorway. It had been said that Dean could handle natives as some boys handle beetles and flies. He met Tona's black frown with another.

'Why come here, Tona?' he snapped in the vernacular. 'At this hour I sleep best. Nor does the papalagi strike the door of his friend's house with a weapon,' he added, pointing rebukingly to the spear in the young chief's hand.

The chin of the young savage lifted with a jerk. There was a framed insult on his lips that died in his throat as he met Dean's glance.

'I come,' he said slowly and with precision, 'to find your guest, the papalagi who has killed my brother. There is great woe amongst my people. It is Tona speaks for them. Where is the papalagi who gives gold arm rings to our women?' His voice was that of the butcher demanding a sheep.

Dean flinched and held back the fierce retort on his lips.

'Tona,' he announced steadily, 'there will be an inquiry into your charge. I will answer for the papalagi. Go back to your people and say that I have spoken.'

The young chief rested on his spear thoughtfully, while the flames of the rising sun cauglit him in a burning silhouette. In his eyes was the brindling rage of the lion.

'I will not go!' he snarled. 'I will not eat or sleep until I have put my spear into this white man's heart. For you, O Dean, I have no other words.'

Jimmy Dean, standing in his pyjamas, smiled on the sun-reddened young savage. Tona made quite a picture in his scarlet waist-cloth and shell ornaments, with the glittering sapphire of the Pacific to heighten the background. A picturesque young buck indeed!

'Tona,' he said with unaccustomed sweetness, 'get on— beat it, before I hand you a bullet in the neck!'

The retort took Tona between the eyes, left him open-mouthed, gripping his spear. He turned in the path and shouted a few words across the camphor laurels to someone awaiting him in the scrub. Then he flung round towards Dean, fury in his eyes.

'In a little while I will come again without this!' He placed the spear across his knee and snapped it in halves, casting the pieces into the laurels. 'I will fight the killer of my brother with these!' He shook his clenched fists at the bungalow. 'If the papalagi will not fight, then will I call out my people to stone you from this house, to burn your factory, to strip your lands! I give the papalagi the one chance to fight, O Dean. To fight with empty hands until one is dead!'

He strode away into the forest without waiting for Dean's reply.

Dean did not go to the factory that day, and Tempest slept till long past noon. He rose and took his bath in the usual way, and met Dean in the diningroom with a brief salutation.

'I'm hungry, Jimmy, and thirsty,' he said, reaching for the wine decanter. Dean nodded cheerfully, and the two ate in silence, like men preparing for an unpleasant reckoning.

With the coffee Dean pushed cigarettes across the table and cleared his voice. He spoke briefly of Tona's visit in the early morning, and dwelt with tightened brows on the young chief's parting words.

'He wants to scrap, Tempest. He'll give us no rest until he gets a hiding or gives you one. I scared him into breaking his spear. Now he's satisfied to kill you with his hands. Of course, you can side-step the whole business by leaving Falona. In any case you'll never settle here after what's happened. They'll taboo and boycott you for years.'

Bellamy rose from his seat, and stared at the wine decanter thoughtfully.

Dean stretched forward and shoved the decanter into the tantalus and locked it.

'Tona first,' he said meaningly; 'the booze afterwards. What's your plan, Bellamy? I'll fight the fellow myself for the sake of my colour if you want to stay in Falona.'

Bellamy Tempest remained standing in the centre of the room, his long white hands resting on his narrow hips, his boyish face clouded, his eyes dreaming and far away.

'You mean, Jimmy,' he answered at last, 'that this black buffalo, Tona, wants to light me with his fists.'

'He doesn't care how he fights so long as it's to a finish. But the point is—' Dean's glance went over Bellamy's slender lines, the wasp waist and curiously long, flexible arms that always reminded him of a champion tennis player he had once seen. 'The point is, Bellamy,' he repeated, 'can you fight at all?'

Tempest passed his slender white hands through his thick, dark hair, while his lips seemed to be intoning a litany.

'I didn't mean to hurt his brother, Dean. I give you my word, I didn't. He struck me twice from behind. Even in the watercourse he fought like a tiger. What was I to do?' he almost implored.

Dean shook himself impatiently.

'We are done with Kini, Tempest. This Tona wants to kill you. But... run away if you like, Perhaps it's best,' he added meditatively. 'I'll tell the headman you drew the colour line at black men— but not at women,' he concluded with a touch of bitterness.

Dean turned to leave the room, but found himself staring into Bellamy's white face and burning eyes. The boy planter had become suddenly transfigured. His long, sinewy hand fell like a dog-trap on Dean's shoulder.

'I'll fight Tona on the beach or in his native woods if it will bring him peace. Tell him I'll fight with my hands. And I'll just leave the darned old island any time I like, Dean, and with the one woman whose shoestrings I'm ready to eat.'

Dean was silent. Bellamy laughed1 scornfully and the I ripple of his young shoulders revealed the soft, flowing muscles under his silk shirt. 'Since I left, school I've been hunted by people who want to dictate a line of conduct for me; I'm not allowed to love a woman or a flower or a glass of wine without someone threatening me with awful consequences. Because a sweet little native girl was kind enough to leave flowers at this bungalow for me after that bout of fever, my life is attempted. A headman attacks me savagely on my way home. Now, his brother is sticking feathers in his hair with intent to murder.'

Again Dean was silent.

'If Tona can beat me, Dean,' Bellamy flashed out in conclusion, 'I'll crawl from this hell of beans and bananas on my hands and knees.'

TONA rested in bis own house until the cool of the evening. Then he walked to Dean's bungalow, feeling that the omens were in his favour. He could kill Bellamy without trouble, and then claim Voyola as his own lawful property. That was the law of the archipelago. It had not changed since he could remember. It was evident that Bellamy expected his coming. The young planter's glance rested for a moment on the swart limbs and quick, shifting eyes and feet of the savage, standing in the open space between the laurels. The voice of Jimmy Dean snapped on his ears.

'I'll send him away if you like, Tempest. After all... you can't degrade yourself.'

But Tempest had hopped from the verandah and stood facing the black-browed Tona. At his coming the young chief shifted his ground, his hands thrust out, his lips muttering softly in the vernacular. Tempest had planned nothing for the encounter. His heart, had drunk its fill of pain, and like a sniped tiger he turned to attack.

Tona seemed to leap from his haunches, his black, sinewy hands out-thrust for a throat-hold. Instinctively the boy from Potts Point ducked and tackled low. Tona's top weight did the rest: he pitched over. Tempest's head and landed heavily on his shoulder.

'A point to you, Bellamy,' Dean called out from the verandah. 'Look out!'

But Tona had fallen over wild boars and buffaloes in the past, and the jolt merely steadied him. With the spring of a monkey he obtained a clutch on Tempest's shoulder. In a moment ihe two were locked in a death grip. The young chief worked his powerful right arm under Tempest's guard, while his snake-like left sought to pin him by the throat. He knew no other style. With the instinct of the dog and the wolf he made for the channel between the brain and the heart. In the shift of a foot his fingers had snapped on the soft, white neck.

Dean stirred uneasily.

'Break away, kid,' he called out. 'Punch his middle. Quick now, and listen to me,' he added with snap.

It was a fight without rules; at least, Tona knew none. With the terrible left arm working like a garrotter's the end looked certain. But through the suffocating strangle-hold Tempest heard the call of Dean.

Instantly his right fist stabbed the bulging, breathing waistline of the snarling savage. All the fury of the last few hours was in the blow. Again he drove at the sagging belt, this time with his left. Tona's eyes bulged, a sickly, greenish hue overspread his dark face as he fought against the stifling agony within him.

'Now!' Dean spoke in the same audible tones, 'rip one on his chin. Hard and quick to finish this fooling.'

Bellamy heard through the singing noise in his head. With toes dug into the soft earth, he shot his right fist under the sagging black chin. It was not a hard blow, and would only have shaken a professional pugilist in training. But it was an unusual blow for Tona, with the breath already out of his lungs. He reeled and collapsed in a heap, legs and arms flung wide to the forest. Tempest stared at the unconscious figure, and then with a sudden impulse knelt and raised the young chief's head in his arms. In a flash Dean was beside him.

'Let him lie,' he ordered. 'And if I may suggest it, Tempest, you'd be well advised in taking a spell aboard your yacht. This fellow will start the band again when he recovers.'

IT WAS near midnight when Nina Clifford's skiff shot across the starlit water under the yacht's stern. Plying her oars cleverly she reached the toy gangway and made fast. The portholes of the little stateroom glowed with light. It was not the first time she had been on Tempest's yacht, but always with her father or Jimmy Dean. Tempest emerged guardedly from the little stateroom aft. A smile of swift understanding touched his swollen lips as he met her glance. How these. island girls risked a scandal to seek him out, he told himself. No sooner was he out of one entanglement than another presented itself.

But... Nina' Clifford, above all women! He stared at her dumbly, conscious of the serene beauty of her face and poise. In the tropic moonglow her filmy hair seemed to shimmer in a silvery halo. She spoke quickly with nervous back glances in the direction of the beach.

'Because I'm the only white woman on the island, Mr. Tempest, I am compelled to hear the complaints of my brown sisters at the factory and elsewhere.'

He flinched, but held his peace.

'Voyola is a good girl,' she went on. 'She will marry one of her own people, some day— not Tona or any of his breed. There are a number of decent boys at the factory who hope to win her. The mothers and women in the village are bitter against—'

'Me?' He shifted uneasily. In his brief sojourn in the South Seas Bellamy Tempest had witnessed more than one savage attack by native women on intruding whites— had seen a mob of Fijian dames drag a man from his schooner and cast him to the sharks.

'I'll cut away at day-break,' he said after a while. 'I'm just wondering what's the matter with me. I'm treated like a kanaka,' he declared with a touch of self pity.

'There's nothing the matter with you except your money, Mr. Tempest. Men with eight thousand a year needn't grow bananas. Go home where they'll fetch them to you with cream and ice,' she advised almost sweetly.

Bellamy Tempest caught his breath fiercely.

'You'll go back to Jimmy and hard times, Nina!' he flung out. 'In three years he hasn't saved enough to buy a nickel-plated wrist watch. He's a hopeless failure.'

She did not answer his taunt as she stepped down the gangway to her dinghy.

'Good-bye, Mr. Tempest,' she called out, her oars dipping in the liquid phosphorescence under the yacht's bows. 'It was your cheque-book and your expensive ways that made Jimmy look a failure. Money's a good thing if you must have a top hat to eat sugar melons.'

'Nina!' He ran down the gangway steps beckoning frantically. 'Come back— listen—'

Her laughter reached him in silvery waves.

'Run away home, Mr. Tempest. I'm going to start a school for failures in a day or two. And to be quite candid I've only room for one pupil.'

THE dawn revealed the fact that Tempest had scraped a crew together from the riff-raff on the beach, and had disappeared in the yacht.

Jimmy Dean breakfasted early and with if a curious tugging at his heart strings. He felt that he was going to be lonely without Bellamy. But more than anything he felt that Nina had missed the tide— at least he wanted to feel that she had.

The heavy crunching on the coral outside carried him to the window of the bungalow. Dan Clifford came slowly up the steps, a big, leather-tanned trader, with the worry of his investments digging grey seams in his brow and hair. Of late the markets in copra and oil had slumped badly. And there was always the deadly fear that the next hurricane would clean up what the rhinoceros beetles had left.

'Morning, Dan,' Jimmy hailed cheerfully, for he always welcomed the rare visits of Nina's father with enthusiasm. A single glance at the furrowed face warned him of a fresh crisis in his affairs.

Dan Clifford nodded brusquely, as one in no mood for morning salutations. Leaning on the verandah rail he spoke of his losses under Jimmy's management, of the days wasted during the planting season with Tempest and

his yacht. It would be his painful duty to take over the estate himself ana run it on a profitable basis. He did not wish to be hard or unjust, but plantation work needed constant attention, and in this connection Jimmy had not pulled with the whole weight of his organisation. Before dismissing Jimmy from his service he would like to offer him the management of a cattle station in the Maranoa district of South Queensland. The climate was good, cold in winter, and the life a hard one. But in a few years a good man might save enough to own a property of his own.

'And the pay?' Jimmy questioned uneasily, for he was no stranger to the hard and bitter prospect that lay in the successful management of a cattle-run.

The reply came swift and certain. 'Two hundred pounds a year and find yourself.'

Jimmy almost collapsed in the doorway. 'Why— why, a man can't keep body and soul together on the money!' he retorted in a shaking voice.

'Take or leave it,' Dan Clifford told him abruptly. 'I've a dozen young fellows on my list who'll scrap like tigers to get the job. 'Twill be no strain on me, Jimmy, if you turn it down now.'

Jimmy blanched and gritted his teeth in silent humiliation. He knew the failure had been his. Something had been lacking. And... and those wine parties with Bellamy Tempest! He trembled slightly as he straightened his shoulders. Then drew breath slowly as one recovering the debilitating effects of an easy time.

'I'll take that cattle station, Dan. When can I go?'

'To-morrow. The mission steamer calls here on her way to Brisbane. You'll find the station a change from heat to cold. There's a wooden hut for you in the ranges, cold mountain water, and plenty of salt beef in the casks,' Dan added with a final handshake. A moment later he had passed down the path in the direction of the factory.

JIMMY DEAN threw off his coat and dug out his old travelling bag from the shed at the rear of the bungalow. Dan Clifford was a hard employer, he told himself, but no one in the islands had ever accused him of paying a man less than he was worth.

Jimmy looked up suddenly from his packing and saw Nina in the doorway. It was the first time she had ever seen him in his shirt-sleeves. He flushed scarlet.

'Off to-morrow, Jimmy?' she commented casually. 'Just passed Dad down the road.'

Dean made no answer as he struggled with his bags. Yet there was a curious stare in his dark eyes as he glanced down at the small white silk-

stockinged feet in the shadow of the doorway. And just here there came upon him a sense of everlasting failure, of the abysmal depths into which he had fallen. He had made the capital mistake of thinking that Bellamy, with his money and social position, could make Nina happy. And all his unselfish plottings had ended in the packing of his bag, and a cattle station situated in the mountains of the Never-Never.

'Yes,' he answered after, a while. 'I'm moving out among the wild dogs and the owls. Dan gave me the job I've been asking for.'

'The country is lovely,' she said, without moving.

Dean went on packing. The returning steps of Dan Clifford fell in loud crunches on their ears. His big shadow slanted near the open window as he thrust in his head unceremoniously.

'It's only fair to say, Jimmy,' he declared hastily, 'that Thargomin station is Nina's property. It will pass into her hands on her twentieth birthday. Belonged to her mother. It is not my wish, maybe, that the management, was offered you.' He shot a swift glance at his daughter in the doorway. 'But if Nina is anxious to experiment with her own fortune and managers I've no more to say.'

After he had gone Jimmy straightened from his task like one rising from a grave.

'That's one to you, Nina.' His voice had -grown steady and strong. 'I wish I could say something— something about men who try to muddle their own lives and other people's.'

'Don't say anything. Jimmy. I don't want to cry. Crying women are worse than—'

'The men failures?' He was holding her in his arms, where all the crying in the world didn't matter, where failures are mended and forgotten.