

Black Mutiny

By JUDSON PHILIPS

Author of "The Betrayal," etc.



A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

HAMILTON tossed the letter across his desk to Digby Smith, then leaned back in his heavy mahogany chair and blew a cloud of cigar smoke toward the ceiling.

"See what you make of it," he grunted. Digby picked up the letter and read:

JOHN R. HAMILTON, ESQ.,
President, Hamilton Import and Export
Company, San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Mr. Hamilton—For a long time I have wondered whether I should write this letter to you or not. My daughter says I am an old fool—not disrespectfully, you understand, sir—and I sometimes think she's right.

Years in this country are apt to do queer things to a man, Mr. Hamilton, what with the heat and the hellish monotony of it. Yet it sort of gets you and holds you. That's why I've stuck to this post for thirty-five years.

When I discuss the situation here with my daughter she says I'm romancing—just an old-timer wishing for the old days when there was adventure at every turn. She says I'm looking for trouble. But, damn it, sir, *I know these blacks!* What's more, I'm too old for romance now. Frankly, sir, the way things are going here has me beaten.

Just checking over the reports in your office you can't help but see that in the last five years there's been a gradual decrease in our export of copra. It's been so gradual

that you may not have noticed it, but the boat that's bringing you this letter has just half the amount of stuff in her hold that she should take from us.

I've had it out with Lutu, my black foreman. He lays it to the fact that the coconut trees aren't as fruitful as they used to be. He says the beetle pest gets worse every year. He hasn't enough men to fight it. But he shifts on his feet when he talks and he won't look at me.

He's lying, Mr. Hamilton. I know this game well enough to be certain that the trouble is subtler than that. It's the men themselves. They get more and more restless, as the days go by. They're drinking more than I ever knew natives to drink.

When I first came here I used to see a native drunk during some festival—one of their dancing orgies—but never any other time. Now I see it every day. I've tried to put a stop to it, but it's hopeless.

Lebeare, the Frenchman who runs the supply post here, swears that he isn't dispensing liquor. He says some of the Chinese coolies who are working on contract at the dock have discovered a way to make alcohol out of coconuts. He says it's stronger and better than grain alcohol. He says the natives are getting their drink from them. Wherever they get it, it's raising the devil with them. These blacks can't stand drink.

Then there's another thing which I haven't mentioned to my daughter. There have been at least six definite attempts on my life. I can't prove it, but I know it. These natives are crafty and sly. They're the best liars



in the world, and they're clever. Near accidents—that's what I've been up against. It's only by the grace of God that I'm alive now. Perhaps you'll call this an old man's fancy—but I know!

We're up against it here when it comes to discipline. There are only six whites on the island besides myself and my daughter. It's only by diplomacy that we keep the upper hand. The natives could wipe us out in fifteen minutes if it weren't for fear of the British gunboats that blow in unexpectedly.

Major Cornsweet, who runs the "government" end, is a dangerous man for this position. He's quick-tempered and iron-fisted. If it hadn't been for me and Dr. Trelawny, the medical missionary, we should have had trouble before now.

We can't afford to antagonize the natives, because we're dependent on them, not only for our business, but for our lives. Cornsweet, if he had his own way, would have 'em flogged in the center of the town when they go wrong. He doesn't understand the sullen, vengeful temperament of these blacks.

Cornsweet's assistant, Overton, is an inconsequential ninny who does nothing but drink and pay unwelcome attentions to my daughter. He is of no consequence whatever and would be no help if a crisis should arise. Lebeare, the Frenchman of whom I spoke, is also unreliable. He knows which side his bread's buttered on and he'd do anything to save his own hide.

Old Tom Healy, who is boss at the harbor, has been in these South Seas longer than I

have. He has sensed the unrest in the air and warned me of it. He's inclined to put the blame for it on the only other white that I haven't mentioned.

This fellow is a derelict Englishman who dropped off here about eight months ago. No one knows anything about him, but I suspect that he is a cashiered army officer. There's something of the military in his bearing, and when he's sober—which is very infrequently—he has the air of a man who has been a gentleman. But this is all guesswork.

He is constantly drunk, and spends most of his time in the woods away from the town, coming back only to replenish his supply of liquor, it seems. He earns his money by helping about the docks when an occasional boat puts in.

Healy suspects that this fellow has gone native—raised some sort of hell among the blacks—and that their resentment has spread to all of us whites, and to me in particular, as their direct boss. But this is only conjecture.

Frankly, Mr. Hamilton, I am asking to be relieved. My daughter is now twenty years old. She has been here all her life, except for an occasional trip to Sydney or Melbourne. It's time she saw something of her own country. Moreover, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that these blacks might be diabolical enough to strike at me through her. God forbid!

I shall expect you to send a younger and more capable man to fill my post on the next boat. I should be glad to stay on and show him the ropes for a bit.

Sincerely,

JOHN CONVERSE.

P. S.—I have reread this letter, Mr. Hamilton, and I realize that I have not mentioned any possible cause for the situation here.

'That's the very devil of the whole thing, sir. I can give no earthly reason for it.

We have treated the natives well. Things went on smoothly for the last twenty-five years. Until now everything has been peaceful and quiet. Personally, I can't believe that this derelict Englishman is at the bottom of it. Believe me, Mr. Hamilton, there's something much subtler than that, something that an old-timer like me, versed in all the lore of this country, can't get at. If I could locate the source of the trouble I could stamp it out in no time.

Cornsweet says the cat-o'-nine-tails will cure a sulky black, but I know better. There's something afoot that I am no longer young enough to handle. Something that makes me afraid for myself and my daughter—and for your interests here.

Digby Smith put the long letter down on Hamilton's desk and looked at his chief with a broad grin.

"Sounds pleasant," he said. "When do I leave?"

Hamilton, who had been looking thoughtfully out of the office window while Digby read, swung around sharply. His cigar was clamped tightly between his fine, white teeth.

"You think it's a lot of moonshine?"

Digby nodded.

"Just an old fellow who's living in the past, I should judge from his letter. The loneliness has got the better of him, and the natives have taken advantage of the fact that he's no longer able to keep a tight grip. Wouldn't you say so, sir?"

For a moment Hamilton paused, and then he shook his head.

"No, I wouldn't," he answered. "Let me tell you about John Converse. To begin with, he's not an old man. Just my age—fifty-five. He knows that country inside out. He's the best man we've ever had in our South Sea service. His wife died of fever out on one of the islands, and he stayed on with his kid.

"Most fellows want to leave after a year or two, but John Converse had lived there with his wife when they were first married and had raised his daughter there. It's home to him, and you can bet your last dollar that he wouldn't suggest leaving unless it was getting mighty hot. No, I think there's something in what he says."

"But he doesn't say anything!" Digby

pointed out. "The blacks don't work as hard as they used to, and they drink more. Just the result of contact with civilization, I should say."

"What about the near accidents?" asked Hamilton.

"Imagination. He and this old codger Healy have got together and built up a bugaboo."

Hamilton referred for a moment to a sheaf of papers on his desk.

"We export copra from a dozen islands in the South Seas. At Manuia we have huge coconut groves that we leased for fifty years from the British government. That's where Converse is. For years that has been one of our most profitable holdings. But as Converse says, in the last five years the output has been cut in half. Now that may be the result of native contact with civilization, *but*"—and Hamilton pointed to the papers in his hand with the end of his cigar—in our other places the output has been nearly doubled! How do you account for that, young fellow? These other places, especially the American holdings, have been thoroughly civilized. The Cook Islands, in which Manuia is located, are the least civilized of all the lot."

Digby grinned again. "Seems to knock my theory full of holes," he admitted.

"Furthermore," continued Hamilton, "I trust Converse implicitly. He has never been an alarmist. Something's decidedly wrong at Manuia or he'd never have written that letter."

"Have you any idea as to what it might be, sir?"

Hamilton lit a fresh cigar and smoked for a moment in silence.

"Those South Sea natives are a funny lot," he said finally. "I worked among 'em for years, so I should know. It may be that Cornsweet, this British major in command there, has antagonized them. It may be some internal religious upheaval. It may be—"

Digby cut in eagerly:

"This derelict Englishman—couldn't he be employed by some rival company, sent there to disrupt things so that you would become willing to release your holdings?"

"If he is—" Hamilton's face assumed

a grim expression. "That's what I want you to find out, if you decide to go, Digby."

"Decide, sir?"

"I won't order any man to a dangerous post," said Hamilton. "I think you might straighten things out down there, but you don't *have* to go. It's up to you."

"When does the next boat sail?" asked Smith.

II.

FOUR days after John Hamilton's interview with Digby Smith, the Hamilton steamer, Corsicana, sailed out through the Golden Gate for the distant port of Manuia, carrying Digby as her one and only passenger.

The Corsicana was not a fast ship, and the journey promised to take about two weeks. To Digby the voyage was one continuous delight. It had been some years since that young man had had anything in the way of a vacation, and he managed to enjoy this one to the fullest extent, lolling in a deck chair under the scorching sun until he was browned to a crisp.

Digby Smith's association with Hamilton had begun in a peculiar fashion. Back from the war, Digby, like so many others, had been unable to settle himself into any position that suited him. The inaction of a desk job drove him to distraction.

Being something of a gambler at heart, he had finally given up any serious search for work, and began to spend his time at his university club, playing bridge or poker. At times he prospered; at other times there was an alarming number of I O U's out against him.

But in the main there was enough uncertainty as to the source of his next meal to keep Digby amused. Anything was better than routine! He had seen enough of that in the army.

One night John Hamilton, on from the West, sat in at the same poker game with Digby. For awhile the younger man won, but as the evening became early morning Digby began to wriggle a bit in his chair.

His pile of chips had dwindled. The men in the game were strangers to him, and he could not very well offer them promises.

A final hand in which he felt he stood a better than even chance to win. The betting simmered down to a duel between him and Hamilton. At last Digby looked up with a smile.

"I'll have to drop out, sir," he said. "Couldn't cover that last bet if I lost."

For a long moment John Hamilton studied Digby's square jaw and his frank blue eyes.

"I'll make you a proposition, young man," he suggested. "If you win, well and good. If you lose, you go back to California with me to-morrow and take a job that I have in mind."

Digby hesitated.

"It's a man's job. Not one for any one a trifle white-livered," observed Hamilton dryly.

Digby's eyes flashed, and he held out his hand.

"Done!" he snapped.

The next morning Digby Smith was westward bound.

Four years followed in which Digby was completely satisfied. He traveled, he worked, he fought for John Hamilton. He had found his niche in life.

Hamilton became more like an older brother, a companion in arms, than anything else. He had lived a life of adventure himself, and he never gave a thought to personal danger.

He worried considerably more about his workers than he did about himself. It was for that reason that he had hesitated to send Digby to Manuia, although he knew that the younger man would jump at the prospect of adventure.

He knew, too, that he could trust Digby, and that if any man in his organization could get at the heart of the trouble on the island, Digby was that man.

Hamilton had come to the dock to see Digby off.

"You're playing a lone hand," he said. "If you get in a mess you'll have to get out of it yourself. Get every scrap of information you can from Converse before he leaves. Keep me informed of any developments. And remember, old son, I'm counting on you to straighten things out."

A silent handshake, and Digby jumped

into the tender which was waiting to take him to the Corsicana.

It was not until they had been nearly a week at sea that Digby got under the skin of Captain McLeish, the dour old skipper of the Corsicana. McLeish had been sailing the South Seas before Digby was born, and he was just a trifle crusty in his dealings with "greenhorns."

But one night he asked Digby to join him in the chart room after the evening mess hour.

"I can remember," McLeish told him, "when it wouldn't have been safe fer a feller of your complexion to set foot on these islands."

"How so?" inquired Digby.

"Your hair ain't exactly brick red," observed the captain, "but it has a reddish tinge. They tell stories about red heads out there that wouldn't of been cheerin' a few years back."

"What sort of stories?"

"Head hunters," explained McLeish. "A whaler put in at one of them Cook Islands years ago. One of the crew was an Irish lad, a little redder than you, no doubt. They went ashore for water, and the natives treated 'em grand. But just as they was leavin', the chief called aside this Irish kid and started palaverin' with him. Before the rest of the crew could say 'Jack Robinson,' the chief knocks this kid for a loop, and slices off his head with an ax.

"The rest of the crew wasn't armed, and the natives chased 'em to their boat. After that the other tribes got jealous of this red head stickin' on a pole outside the chief's hut, and there was a premium on 'em. Red headed fellers stayed on shipboard after that."

Digby gulped at his drink, while McLeish chuckled.

"Those days is pretty well done for, though," continued the captain. "Things has got pretty tame out there nowadays. Missionaries has made a bloomin' Sunday school out of them islands."

"There seems to be some sort of trouble at Manuia, though," observed Digby.

McLeish looked shrewdly at his passenger for a moment before he replied.

"I can't quite make it out," he said

finally. "I had a talk with old Tom Healy on the last trip. He has charge of the loadin' and unloadin' of cargoes at Manuia. He's been in and around them islands most of his life. The last couple of times I've been there he's said there was trouble in the air. At first I laughed at him, but to tell you the truth, Mr. Smith, the last time I was there I got a whiff of it myself."

The captain puffed reflectively on his pipe.

"What sort of whiff?"

"It's hard to tell," said the captain slowly. "It was the blacks, I think. They didn't act the same. They was more sullen and grouchy than ever. It took 'em nearly twice as long to load the ship as it should have. Got my goat a little, for I wouldn't stay in that hole a day longer than I had to. Manuia's not the place for me. No women!"

Digby laughed. "That's a tragedy, captain. But I thought Converse had a daughter?"

"And a fine girl she is," admitted the captain. "Not the kind for the likes of me. And if I was Converse I'd get her out of Manuia before long. It's no place for a woman. No companionship for her; not a young man in the place, except a bird named Overton. He's assistant to the major there, and a worthless, lily-livered fop, if I know anything."

"Just what are Overton's duties at Manuia?" Digby asked.

"Secretary to the major," snapped McLeish. "Never did a day's work in his life. Fingers like a woman." The captain grinned maliciously. "He don't shake hands with me any more. My grip's a little strong for him."

Digby smiled. He remembered with some dismay the crushing handshake McLeish had given him when they first met.

"We got something on board for him now," added McLeish. "A piano! Imagine a bird wanting a piano at Manuia! Ordered it from Frisco, he did. If you stay in Manuia long, Mr. Smith, you'll grow to share my opinion, I think. Just why the government should send that kind of a fellow to a wild place like Manuia is

hard to guess. Back in the States he'd be a librarian, probably!"

It was evident that the captain had little use for a man with artistic bents.

"Well," said Digby, as he tossed off the last of his drink, "Converse and his daughter will probably go back with you, and then Overton will have no one to court but yours truly. I doubt he'll thrive on that."

During the rest of the trip Digby and the captain became the best of friends, but Digby was able to learn practically nothing more about the situation at Manuia. The captain could only say that he had himself sensed a vague foreboding of trouble. Like Converse, he could not put his finger on it or assign any reason for it. It was just "in the air."

When the Corsicana came into view of Manuia, Digby had the sensation of entering upon an adventure. The harbor does not permit the tying up at a wharf, and several hundred feet from the shore the Corsicana dropped anchor. The island itself looked to Digby like one vast expanse of mountainous forest.

He could see no signs of life except a few scattered figures on the beach, and an odd-looking boat which had put out from shore for the Corsicana.

In the bow of this boat, which was being paddled by natives, stood a white man. He was dressed in canvas trousers, a shirt and a pith helmet. This, no doubt, was Converse coming to greet him.

But McLeish dispelled this idea.

"It's Dr. Trelawny," he said. "The only preacher I'd ever give a damn for. Religion's practical with him. No hocus-pocus theories."

A few minutes later Dr. Trelawny was climbing up the rope ladder which had been lowered over the Corsicana's side.

Digby liked him instinctively. He was a tall, rangy man, with a face which told of a hard, difficult life. It was lined and stern, yet when he smiled a greeting at Digby it lighted up charmingly.

"It is a delight to meet you, Mr. Smith," he said. "We so seldom see any one from our world. I am eager to talk with you."

"I hope we shall have many opportunities," answered Digby.

"I hope so," agreed the doctor. Then his face took on a grave expression, and he turned to the captain. "I should like to have a word with you and Mr. Smith privately," he said.

"Certainly, doctor. And if you're not above a little nip of real liquor and maybe a good cigar—"

Trelawny smiled faintly. "You're generous, captain. But first I have news of the utmost importance."

McLeish led the way to the chart room, and presently the three men were alone.

Trelawny turned to Digby.

"I want to explain why Converse isn't here to greet you," he said. "The fact is, Converse is ill. Very ill."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Digby. "I had hoped he and his daughter could return with the Corsicana. Is it fever?"

Trelawny looked squarely into Digby's eyes as he answered.

"We are calling it fever," he said. "I have told the truth to no one. Not even his daughter. It is not necessary to alarm her too much."

"But what is the truth, doctor?"

"Converse has been poisoned. Deliberately poisoned," said Trelawny.

"God in heaven!" exclaimed McLeish. "Will he get well?"

"That is my profound hope, captain."

But there was a decided note of doubt in Trelawny's voice.

III.

In the silence that followed Trelawny's announcement Digby became suddenly aware of the stifling heat in the chart room. Until now on the trip the movement of the ship, the faint sea breeze, had kept him from a full realization of the stuffiness of the atmosphere. Now, as the Corsicana lay at anchor, he felt its frightful oppressiveness.

McLeish broke the silence.

"You said 'deliberately' poisoned, doctor? Do you suspect any one?"

Trelawny shrugged.

"No one and every one," he answered.

"Margo, Converse's daughter, does all the cooking for him. It couldn't have come through his food. But out in the grove where he might have quenched his thirst from the water pail or from coconut milk—"

Digby wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Is it any recognizable poison?" he asked.

"That is the difficulty," admitted Trelawny. "Our equipment is of the crudest sort. Really just first-aid stuff. I have no way of telling. I'm just working in the dark. Therein lies the danger, for I may be failing to treat him properly for his ailment. If I knew what I was fighting!"

Trelawny's lips tightened and he looked away. It was evident that he had been going through a strenuous time. The relief of being able to talk to some one about it was apparent.

"Look here, Dr. Trelawny," Digby cut in, "I've come out to Manuia on a sort of wild-goose chase. There seems to be some very definite trouble, and yet no one can tell me what it is. Perhaps since Converse wrote to Mr. Hamilton you've learned more. Can you tell me what it's all about?"

Trelawny drew a pipe from his trousers pocket and lit it before he replied.

"It is the most peculiar situation I have ever encountered in my whole experience," he said, puffing a cloud of smoke toward the cabin roof. "As you say, it is indefinite. But unquestionably one thing stands out. All sorts of attempts have been made to get rid of Converse. At first these attempts were rather crude and ineffectual; this last one is much more deliberate—much cleverer.

"In addition to these thrusts at Converse himself, there has been a very obvious and partially successful effort to corrupt the men working for him. The output of copra has dwindled appreciably.

"There are mutterings and grumblings among the natives unpleasantly like the days when mutiny was not an uncommon thing. I know the signs, Mr. Smith, for I have served in these parts for twenty years. To a newcomer like you, to Major

Cornsweet, who's in charge here and new to this sort of thing, the moods of these negroes mean little. But to me—frankly, I'm in a funk about it.

"Understand, I'm not afraid for myself, but for Converse—and especially for Margo. We would have no means of successfully fighting a rebellion. We're just a handful of whites, and"—here Trelawny paused and his brow knitted into a dark scowl—"and some of us not too damned courageous."

"You mean Overton?" grunted the captain.

"Frankly, yes," admitted the doctor. "And not only Overton, but Lebeare. That Frenchman is a slick customer, but his own precious hide is sacred beyond anything else. Sometimes I wonder if he may not be at the bottom of our whole trouble."

"I'd break the damned frog in half if you had anything on him," growled McLeish. "Never liked him anyway."

"But we haven't anything on him," Trelawny pointed out, "or any one else, for that matter. I can't do any better than make guesses in the dark. Lebeare and Converse had a row over the distribution of liquor among the natives. Converse was convinced that Lebeare was giving it out, and Lebeare insisted that he wasn't. They had some pretty hot words on the subject, and there's been bad blood between them ever since.

"Lebeare is the sort of chap who would never drop a grudge. But I can't believe that any man would carry an effort at revenge to such a serious point—revenge for a few ill-tempered words. It's not reasonable—even in a rat like Lebeare."

McLeish shook his head. "It's funny none of these things happen when I'm here."

"It's not funny at all," contradicted Trelawny. "The natives know that you have a crew of men here who could arm themselves quickly and put up a good fight. It's been the fear of a ship putting in at a crucial moment that has saved us so far. Of that I'm convinced.

"And that reminds me of another important point. It has come to our notice that several of the natives are in pos-

session of firearms. That is an extremely dangerous thing for us."

"But how do they get them?" asked Digby. "Surely they're not for sale at the store?"

"Not for sale," said the doctor significantly. "Lebeare isn't allowed to import firearms—and yet some of the natives have them."

"Can't you examine the goods that are delivered to him?"

"When we discovered that some of the natives had guns, Major Cornsweet flew into a rage and had Lebeare's place ransacked from roof to cellar. Net result—nothing! Nothing but further ill feeling toward the rest of us on Lebeare's part."

"It all seems like a Chinese puzzle," said Digby. "No one knows just what the trouble is, who's causing it, or why. Personally I'm anxious to get ashore and have a first-hand look at the problem myself."

"The best idea," agreed Trelawny. "I want you to have a talk with Converse—while it's still possible. Since you've come to take over his post, he'll have a good deal of importance to tell you, I suspect."

A few minutes later, following orders by the captain, a boat was lowered over the side of the Corsicana, and Trelawny and Digby were rowed ashore. The captain had duties on board ship which would detain him for another hour or two, he explained.

"If it were not for the grave problem at hand," said Trelawny on the way to shore, "you might enjoy your first sight of this country, Mr. Smith. To me it is the most beautiful spot in the world. I've never been a man for the cities myself. This is nature in its crudest form, and I love it."

Digby was inclined to believe that Trelawny did not exaggerate. Before leaving San Francisco he had read all the available literature and seen all the pictures of the South Seas that he could get his hands on. But Manuia surpassed anything he had imagined.

The vividness of the colors impressed him more than anything else. The intense blue of the sky and the water; the green

of the foliage, a green which only one who has seen the tropics can visualize.

Back from the white sand of the shore rose the mountain, sloping gradually and then rising abruptly; a mass of jungle growth to its very tip. It seemed too peaceful, too lovely a place to harbor the dark murmurings of revolt and sinister plotting.

Trelawny apparently read Digby's thought.

"There's another side to it," he said. "One that you may get all too soon. The heat; the deadly monotony of seeing the same few people day after day, week after week; of eating tinned salmon and tinned beef until the sight of a can opener turns your stomach."

"And no women. No matter what sort of a chap a fellow is, he misses the society of women. We've been lucky here. We've had Margo since she was a baby. She's been the one bright spot in our lives. It will be devilish hard without her."

"Aren't you painting the dark side a bit heavily?" asked Digby.

"Because I don't want you to have any illusions, my boy. Frankly, the magic of the place is in my bones. When I tell other people that I wouldn't leave if I could, they laugh at me. But when I sit on the porch of my shack on one of the gorgeous moonlight nights we have here, smell the smells that I've grown to associate with my life, hear the chanting of native music in the distance, feel the caressing night breeze after a scorching day in the grove somewhere, then I know that I love it. To some the nights are lonely. To me they are filled with a mystery and a bewitching beauty that I can't resist."

As the small boat approached the beach Digby saw a short, stocky, white-bearded old man walking down to meet them.

"Healy," explained Trelawny. "Has charge of the boat loading. Bosses a bunch of Chinese coolies that do the work. He's something of a character, having lived in these parts for God knows how long."

As Digby jumped from the boat to the beach, Healy greeted him with a sour expression on his face.

"And it's sorry I am to see you, Mr. Smith," he announced glumly.

"Not as bad as that, I hope!" laughed Digby.

"This is no place for a man that doesn't know this country," said Healy, with a shake of his head. "You'll be in for a hot time, I'm thinking. None of us will see many more moons if them blacks keep getting riled. There's storm clouds ahead, Mr. Smith, mark my words."

"Come off, Tom," Trelawny chided. "You're a pessimist. Perhaps Mr. Smith will clear things up for us. He'll have a fresh viewpoint. We've been parboiled under this hot sun too long, Tom, and I sometimes think we imagine things that don't exist."

"No imagination in that dose of poison some one fed John," the Irishman said grimly. "No imagination in them sullen black faces up in the grove. No, doctor, it's lucky we'll be if we see another rainy season, I'm thinkin'."

"In any event, Tom, it's not a very hospitable greeting you're offering the new chief," rejoined Trelawny, striving to keep the conversation light. "Get a couple of those China boys of yours to bring up Mr. Smith's luggage to the bungalow."

"And when you're in a more cheerful mood," added Digby, "come up and have a drink with me. There's a great deal you can tell me about the island, Mr. Healy."

"I'll not be cheerful," muttered Healy, "but I'll have the drink, and thank you for it." And he stalked off to get his men for the luggage.

IV.

THE village of Manuia was even more primitive than Digby had imagined. Dr. Trelawny led him up from the beach into a sort of clearing at the edge of the wood, which was really all there was to the village. Scattered here and there were thatched huts in front of which naked black children played in the dust.

Once or twice as they walked on, Digby detected a dark face peering out at him from within a shadowy hut. In the center of the clearing, three or four hundred yards from the beach, was a large building, which was obviously the trading post.

It was made of rough hewn slabs with

a thatched roof in dilapidated condition. It suggested a slovenly owner, for it was surrounded by scraps of paper, broken crates from which goods had been removed, and odds and ends of trash.

As they approached the store they passed several groups of natives, tall, powerful-looking men, who were talking excitedly, and evidently about Digby. They looked at him curiously, and gesticulated.

Digby put it down to imagination, but he felt that there was something hostile in their attitude.

Farther along their path they encountered another person, whom Digby immediately guessed was the derelict Englishman Converse had mentioned in his letter. He was a tall, slender man, raggedly dressed.

He stood leaning against a tree, a cigarette drooping from between half parted lips, peering at Digby and the doctor from under a battered sun helmet.

If he had shaved within a fortnight, his scrubby growth of beard showed no evidence of it. As they drew abreast, Digby heard him singing under his breath in a thick, alcoholic voice:

"An' when I die,
Don' bury me at all.
Jus' pickle my bones—"

His voice drifted off as they passed him. There was no sign of greeting, no indication that he had ever laid eyes on the doctor before. A queer person.

"Another of our little enigmas," laughed Trelawny, when they were out of earshot. "Nobody knows much about him. His name is Grant, and he dropped in on us about eight months ago. He spends most of his time in the bush, but inevitably puts in an appearance when a ship arrives. He works along with Healy's Chinese in the loading and unloading, and spends nearly everything he earns for bad liquor. An unsavory person, to put it mildly."

"Not a very sociable cuss," remarked Digby. "He acted as if he had never seen you before."

"It's his usual manner," said the doctor. "We've become accustomed to it here. By the way, before going to Converse's bunga-

low, I'm going to stop off at the post and have you meet Lebeare. I should like to suggest that you try to establish a friendly relationship with him. It is possible that he knows more than he cares to tell. His enmity toward Converse has been a distinct drawback in the past."

"I should certainly put my foot down, just as Converse did, if I suspected him of trafficking with the natives," said Digby.

"And quite rightly, Mr. Smith," agreed Trelawny. "However, John's mistake was in making accusations before he had definite proof. If it is not impertinent, I should suggest your treading more carefully."

Lebeare's store was a thing of some wonder to Digby when he entered it. Nothing in it seemed to be whole.

The chairs and tables which were scattered about the center of the main room were all of them broken and dilapidated. On and under the tables were broken glasses and bottles. Previous breakage and been swept into the corners, which had received a considerable accumulation.

On the sagging shelves and hung from hooks about the walls was every conceivable sort of merchandise, canned foods, musical instruments, tobacco, books, tools of all sorts, mirrors, pots and pans, cheap perfume, hats, bright colored chintzes, beads.

In one corner of the room the proprietor had built up what passed for a bar. Behind it was a broken mirror. A calendar for three years back hung in one corner, decorated with the picture of a semi-nude woman.

A wooden footrail had been built in front of the bar, and it was well worn; in fact, like everything else in the place, it was broken down in one spot.

In another corner, as Digby and Trelawny entered, was the proprietor himself, sitting in a rickety Morris chair, reading an ancient copy of *Le Rire*. He was a fat little Frenchman with a meticulously waxed mustache. His raven black hair was carefully wetted and brushed.

M. Lebeare jumped up with alacrity as the two entered. He flashed a brilliant smile as he came toward them.

Digby noticed that the lid of his left eye drooped peculiarly, as if the muscles were affected. It gave to Lebeare's countenance the singular effect of having a perpetual roguish wink.

"This is Mr. Smith, who has come to take charge of the grove here," Trelawny explained.

Lebeare's good eye opened wide with surprise.

"Ah, *c'est bien!*" he cried. "We have long need a young man for thees job, M. Smith. The old fellows get the queer ideas, eh, doctaire?" His laugh was not pleasant.

"I have only one idea," said Digby. "That is to clear up the trouble here. Perhaps you can help me, Mr. Lebeare?"

Lebeare shrugged. "I know of no trouble, monsieur."

"I'm glad there's one optimist on the island," laughed Digby. "So far I have heard of nothing but impending disaster." He had no wish to antagonize the Frenchman.

Lebeare looked puzzled for a moment, then an exaggerated expression of sudden understanding spread over his face.

"Monsieur refers to the natives," he said. "It is true. We have felt none too comfortable for some months. No doubt monsieur will quickly straighten that out, eh? A firm young hand is what we have needed here."

"You feel that is nothing more serious than lack of discipline?" asked Digby.

"Monsieur," said Lebeare gravely, "there are a great many idiots in the world, and it seems to me many of them are here at Manuia. *Monsieur le docteur* is a man"—he bowed graciously to Trelawny—"but the rest—poof!"

"Why do you stay here, then?" Digby asked.

For a moment Lebeare's good eye narrowed, and he stared sharply at Digby. Then slowly the bland smile spread over his face again.

"The past is hard to escape, monsieur," he answered. "Here I am safe from those who would pry."

It was Digby's turn to smile. The man's frank admission of a rascally past was a

bit disarming. But Lebeare was suddenly serious.

"There has been unpleasantness here, monsieur," he went on, "which was not of my own seeking. It is my earnest wish that monsieur and I shall be friends." And he held out his hand.

Out of the store a few moments later Trelawny put into words the thoughts that Digby had been thinking.

"Lebeare is a slippery customer," he said. "You cannot believe a word he says. One moment you like him, the next you mistrust and despise him."

Leading from the clearing which was the village, a much traveled path, as wide as one of our country roads, struck back into the woods. Along this path Digby and Trelawny went.

It ran back into the grove, Trelawny explained, and was the route over which the copra was brought from the grove to the ship. Branching off this main path, a short distance from the store, was a small footpath which led to Converse's bungalow.

At once there was evidence of care and attention. Although there was no effort at design, an obviously cultivated arrangement of plants and flowers lined the way.

"Margo has made this place almost civilized," said Trelawny. "I wonder if any of us will have the energy to keep up the gardens she has started for us here after she has gone?"

As the doctor spoke, there was the sudden sound of some one breaking through the underbrush to the right of the path. Trelawny stopped short and called out: "Who's there?"

His voice evidently startled whoever it was into more violent action. The person redoubled his speed, heading for the deep wood.

Quickly the doctor crashed through the undergrowth, but the foliage was so thick that they could see no one. Farther off they could still hear the man running.

"Some native prowling about out of curiosity?" suggested Digby.

Dr. Trelawny looked puzzled.

"I doubt if a native would make so much racket," he said. "They move

through the woods as silently as serpents. I'd almost swear that that was a white man. But who the devil—"

V.

It was night. Digby stood on the porch of the Converse bungalow looking out into the woods, turned silvery by a gorgeous tropic moon.

It was just such a night as Trelawny had described coming in from the ship. There was something magical in the dead stillness, broken only by the faint, rhythmic beating of a native drum somewhere far distant.

Digby sat on the porch rail and lit a cigarette. Things had happened so quickly since he and the doctor had discovered a prowler in the brush as they approached the bungalow early that afternoon, that the significance of that event had faded away.

Margo Converse had come running down the path to tell the doctor that her father had taken a turn for the worse. John Converse was a very sick man. Shortly after their arrival he had fallen into a comatose state from which Trelawny had been unable to revive him.

Any possibility of a talk with him was out of the question, and Digby had wandered aimlessly about the house while the doctor and Margo kept a vigilant watch on Converse. For the time being everything was forgotten but the illness of the father and friend.

Digby had been shown, without ceremony, to a room, where he unpacked his things. It was obvious that Converse would not be able to make the trip back with McLeish, and until such time as he was able to leave the island Digby was to share the bungalow.

He had suggested going to the doctor's or even to Lebeare's, but Margo would not hear of it. The girl had a very positive personality, and, as the doctor whimsically remarked, ruled the island with an iron hand.

Margo had been something of a surprise to Digby. He had expected some sort of a half wild, naïve young thing. Instead he found her a trifle more masculine in her walk, burned a little browner than the

women he was accustomed to seeing, but otherwise a very modern, quite sophisticated girl.

In spite of the difficulty of the situation, she had greeted him with a casual friendliness which was altogether charming. She had brought clean towels to his room and laughed over the smallness of the quarters in a way which would have indicated that being hostess was an everyday event in her life instead of the rarest.

Digby was completely won to her and already agreed with the doctor that it was unthinkable that she must soon leave.

She had got Digby's supper for him and then they had had an opportunity to chat a bit. He wanted to get her thoughts away from her father, and had tried to discover what sort of talk would interest her.

She was quicker than he had expected. She saw at once that he was floundering around for something that they both knew about.

"We do have books and magazines out here, Mr. Smith," she had said. "Really, I'm not altogether primitive. Perhaps if you wouldn't try so hard—"

They had laughed together then. She was adorable, Digby decided.

Later Major Cornsweet appeared to ask after Converse. He was almost exactly as Digby had pictured him; a big man, too heavy for his height, with a florid complexion which was burned almost beet-red.

He spoke to Margo in choppy phrases, never completing a sentence.

"Heard about your father—rotten luck—hoped he was better—perhaps the heat—devilish the last few days—never get used to the damned climate, anyhow—anything I can do—most awfully glad to help in any way— Ah, Smith—glad to know you—you come at an unfortunate time, eh? Drop over to my shack some time—talk things over—right-o!"

All the time he talked he moved restlessly about, never at ease. He retreated presently reiterating that it was a "damned shame, and all that sort of thing."

"The major is a dear," Margo explained, "but his temper is almost as short as his conversation. He doesn't understand the tropical temperament, I'm afraid."

Digby had then questioned her about Overton, whom he had still to meet. Margo frowned in a perplexed sort of fashion.

"In a tiny community like this one cannot afford to dislike people," she said slowly. "You see every one day in and day out and it would be awfully unfortunate if you couldn't get on with the whole lot. But Dick is trying at moments. His complete lack of seriousness or purpose of any sort puts him at a disadvantage with the other men.

"They think he's a worthless bounder. His attitude toward me is difficult, too. He thinks, I sometimes believe, that the sole reason for the existence of women is to amuse men. He rather tends to bully me—in the matter of monopolizing all my time." Then Margo laughed. "Out here one simply can't plead another social engagement. There just aren't any."

"Perhaps, from now on, there may be a bit of competition," Digby said. And he was pleased at the slight flush that mounted to her cheeks.

Digby snuffed out his cigarette and lit a fresh one. His thoughts strayed back to the time of his arrival at the bungalow.

Who was the man who had been prowling about in the bushes? Trelawny was certain that it was a white man. It couldn't have been Lebeare, for they had just left him. It couldn't have been old Healy or the major. Both of them were above suspicion.

It couldn't have been Overton. He had access to the Converse menage. There was no reason for skulking about in the woods.

Grant, then. Perhaps the mysterious Britisher had followed them from the beach. But for what purpose?

He decided he must have it out with the major. If Grant were back of the trouble with the natives it would be a simple matter to deport him. The major was in absolute authority on the island, and his word was law—in so far as the other whites were concerned, anyhow.

Digby suddenly realized that his thoughts were being distracted by some unusual sound. It was that native drum in the distance. It was much louder now, as if several of them were being pounded in unison.

The rhythm was faster, too. Presently it was punctuated by staccato shouts.

Digby felt a faint chill of excitement sweep over him. The shouts now developed into a sort of organized chant, a queer, tuneless song.

The drums were louder. Then Digby realized that they were coming closer, beating in a sort of march time. The voices rose and fell monotonously, nearer than before.

Presently through the trees Digby caught a glimpse of a flaming torch of fire. Some one was waving it in fantastic circles. Another sound, the steady tread of many feet.

The door behind Digby opened and Margot came out on the porch. Her face was a shade whiter than it had been, and Digby detected a look of fear in her wide open eyes.

"That's not the usual dance," she said. "I've never heard it before."

She stood beside Digby and peered out into the woods. Suddenly he felt her hand grip his arm.

"Those torches—they mean trouble."

Then above the chanting voices came a succession of several sharp reports from a pistol. Digby saw the flashes through the trees. Some one was firing into the air.

The sound seemed to excite the approaching natives. Several voices broke away from the chanting in loud shouts. The hysterical laughter of a woman floated clear above the babel.

Now they had drawn close enough so that Digby could see a dozen of the burning torches through the trees. The bearers seemed to be in a frenzy, leaping high in the air and shouting.

Trelawny joined the two on the porch. His face was set, and his lips were drawn in a grim line. He was strapping on a revolver holster.

"They're coming along the main path toward the village," he said. "If they turn in here—" He spun the cylinder of his revolver. "Smith, there's a rifle hanging on the wall in the living room. Better get it. And put out the lamps. We'd make excellent targets with the light behind us."

Digby hurried into the house for the

gun, blew out the lights, and returned. The natives were almost at the head of the little footpath that led to the bungalow.

In silence they waited to see what would happen. Digby made certain that the rifle was loaded, and threw off the safety device.

The natives were now at the turn. A few disconnected shouts arose. Some one with a torch ran a few steps down the footpath, waving his light.

Digby's hand tightened on the gun. But the main body passed on and the one straggler joined his companions again. The bungalow was not their objective.

Digby put down the rifle against the porch rail and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Then some one came striding along the path from the other direction. It was Cornsweet, his face apoplectic with rage.

"Those filthy natives—drunk again," he snapped. "Got firearms—I'll teach the black—"

Trelawny checked him—as he started on down the path.

"This is not a usual situation, major," he said.

The gravity of the doctor's tone caused Cornsweet to look up in surprise. For the first time he saw the pistol in the doctor's hand and Digby's gun against the porch rail.

"What the devil—" he spluttered.

"I have been in on one native uprising," said Trelawny. "That chanting and those torches are painfully reminiscent. I hadn't thought they would dare start anything with a ship in the harbor, but—"

For just a second the blustering major seemed meek.

"What would you suggest?" he asked.

"The back path will get you to the village before they do. Perhaps you can get some one out to the Corsicana for help. Those natives are in a dangerous mood, and any show of strength that you can muster would be advisable, I should say."

Cornsweet turned back. "Perhaps you're right," he said.

Digby picked up his rifle. "I'm with the major. Can you manage alone here, doctor?"

The doctor smiled grimly.

"We're as safe here as anywhere," he said. "If they decide upon violence our collective goose is cooked, I'm afraid."

VI.

FROM Converse's bungalow the little footpath led further into the wood to two other houses. One of these was the doctor's, and the other was the governmental house.

This was distinguished in no other way from the others except that in the daytime a British flag flew from a pole projecting from the roof. From this house a path cut diagonally down into the village.

It was much shorter than the main route, but impossible if there was baggage to be carried, or for more than single file progress. Cornsweet explained to Digby that by going this way they would in all probability reach the village before the natives since they were moving slowly, hampered by the frenzied singing and dancing.

But Major Cornsweet had not reckoned upon two things. One was his temper, and the other was his assistant.

As he and Digby, hurrying down the path, approached the government house, Digby saw another man sitting on the porch. First only the red point of his cigarette was visible, but as they stopped in front of the house, the light from within outlined Overton's figure.

He was stretched out in a steamer chair, a highball on the table beside him. He was a slight, almost cadaverous looking fellow, of medium height with a scrubby mustache.

He turned languidly in his chair as they arrived, and Digby noticed the long, slender white hands of which McLeish had spoken.

"I say, major, what's all the shouting?"

"Hell to pay!" snapped Cornsweet.

"Looks like an uprising of some sort. This is Smith—Hamilton's new man."

Overton got slowly up from his chair and held out a hand to Digby.

"Charmed, I'm sure, Mr. Smith. Is the celebration in your honor?"

Overton's thin lips were drawn together

in a supercilious smile. Digby disliked him at once, although he put this partly to a natural prejudice developed after hearing what every one had had to say about the young assistant.

"It's a warm welcome, at any rate," he replied.

"Get your pistol, Overton, and join us," said the major impatiently. "We're going to the village. Put an end to this damned nonsense!"

"Good Lord, major! Not stepping into a hornets' nest, are you? What? A bit foolhardy to mix with the pesky johnnies when they've been drinking, I should say."

"Can't let 'em ride rough shod," growled the major. "A little show of authority—that's what they need."

Overton sank back in his chair.

"I say, if you don't mind, I think I shall stay here," he said placidly. "I've no taste for this sort of thing." He turned to Digby. "My business is writing letters, and all that sort of rot," he explained. "Never did care about scrapping—especially on a hot night, y' know. So fatiguing!"

Cornsweet took a quick step forward.

"This is serious!" he thundered. "We need every man we can get—no time for tomfoolery."

Overton still reclined in his chair. He picked up his highball glass and sipped at it insolently.

"You'll really have to pardon me, major," he drawled. "I'm not in the mood for this sort of thing."

Cornsweet's throat muscles were bulging with anger. Digby saw him clenching and unclenching his fists spasmodically.

"Had just about enough of your damned impertinence," he said. "This is a matter of life and death to all of us. If for no other reason than to save your own yellow hide you'd better come with us!"

Digby thought he detected a slight narrowing of Overton's eyes, but in no other way did he betray any anger.

"Let's not brawl about it, eh, major? I'm staying here."

There was a note of firmness in his voice that rather surprised Digby. If the man was a coward, he at least was not at all afraid of the blustering major.

"They shall know about this damned insubordination at home," said the major, turning away. "By God, I shan't stand it any longer."

"Glad to take your dictation any time, major," replied Overton coolly. He addressed Digby. "I think you're something of an ass to mess around with those blacks. It's not what I should prescribe for a health cure, Mr.—ah—Smith."

Before Digby could reply the major had taken him roughly by the arm and started along the path.

"No time to lose," he said gruffly.

As they went down the path Digby heard Overton chuckling softly. What an unutterable cad the man was! And yet Digby was puzzled.

Overton had been described to him as a coward, yet he apparently was unafraid of the major, who could have broken him in half with one hand. Moreover, it occurred to Digby that it took more than a little courage to stay alone in that bungalow, with the natives on the rampage. It would have been more like a coward to stick with the rest of the whites at a time like this.

Then came a suggestion of the possible truth. It was Margo, of course. Overton would probably start for the other bungalow as soon as they were out of sight.

The major was hurrying along the path ahead of Digby, swearing softly under his breath. It was evident that his animosity for Overton had reached a boiling point and this last incident had capped the climax.

In addition to that, this back route to the village was steep and rough. It was little used, and the path was obstructed by low hanging boughs, stones, and fallen trees.

The major plunged along, stumbling and cursing. If the chanting of the natives had not been an unpleasant reminder of the seriousness of the situation, Digby would have been tempted to laugh.

After five minutes of hurrying, the major paused. They were on the edge of the village clearing. Already the procession of natives was in sight on the main path.

The delay at the government bungalow had been fatal to their plan of arriving

before the shouting, singing crowd. The natives were now worked up to a hysterical pitch.

Several of them had guns which they persistently fired into the air. The torch bearers cavorting like whirling dervishes, their black, oily bodies gleaming in the flickering light. It was a grotesque sight.

The major wiped the perspiration from his face with a large red silk handkerchief.

"The other whites are probably all at Lebeare's," he said. "The best thing for us to do is to make a break for it."

From the point where they stood, still shielded by the woods, there was a distance of nearly a hundred yards in the open to Lebeare's place. There was no time to be lost if they were to make it before the natives reached the clearing.

The major took a deep breath and bolted, Digby at his heels.

An excited shout went up from the natives. Several shots were fired, and Digby heard the whine of a bullet unpleasantly close to his head.

"The damned beggars shoot pretty straight," he panted.

The major wasted no breath on a reply. A moment later they were pounding on the door of Lebeare's shop. Evidently the inmates had barricaded the entrance, and it seemed an interminable time before they opened it, although it was actually only a matter of seconds.

VII.

THE white, drawn faces of the little group in Lebeare's gave mute evidence of the strain they had been under for the last half hour. Lebeare himself, an unlighted cigarette between chattering lips, bolted the door behind Digby and the major, and pushed the several packing cases against it which he had used as a barricade.

With him was old Tom Healy, complacently smoking his stubby pipe, but with a gleam of excitement in his weather-beaten eyes. Another man, a sailor from the Corsicana who had come ashore for a drink, was peering anxiously out of the window at the throng of natives who were slowly approaching the store.

Two Chinese coolies, the men who had taken Digby's luggage to the bungalow, were huddled together in one corner, silent.

At first Digby thought this comprised the whole group. There were no lights in the store, only the pale shimmer of the moon through the windows and the ghoulish shadows resulting from the dancing torches in the village clearing.

But now Digby was aware of some one else. A besotted voice came from the corner near the makeshift bar:

"An' when I die,
Don't bury me at all;
Jush pickle my bones
In alcohol—"

Grant. Grant seated in Lebeare's old Morris' chair, a glass of gin in one hand, and beating time to his song with the other.

His dirty sun helmet was pushed back on his head at a rakish angle, and he stared dully, uncomprehendingly at Digby and the major.

"'Nuff fer a poker game now," he muttered.

Lebeare was excited.

"*Mon Dieu*, major! What is this? Have these blacks lose their mind?"

The major's pale blue eyes bored into Lebeare.

"No time for play-acting," he snapped.

"Those blacks are armed, Lebeare! Where the hell did they get guns, eh? If I thought you were responsible for this—"

He took a threatening step toward the little Frenchman. It was Healy who diverted the quarrel.

"A man would be a damn fool, major, to give guns to the natives so they could turn 'em on him. That mob out there are looking for more liquor, you can bet that. Somehow I don't figure Lebeare here would give 'em guns so's they could shoot him fer a drink. No, sir. It's deeper than that. This is a sure enough uprising, sir. Those babies out there'll stop at nothin' to-night. I know 'em."

As he spoke there was a tearing sound and a bullet ripped through the door and buried itself in the opposite wall.

"Where's Trelawny?" Healy asked the major.

"Stayed with Converse," explained the major. "Couldn't move him, and Margo stuck too. That yellow swine, Overton, refused point-blank to help. He's hiding in the wood now, no doubt."

"No doubt!" This comment came from Grant, a silly smile on his face. The major turned away from him disgustedly.

"What's our next move, Healy?" he asked.

The old timer shifted his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other before he replied. There was a faint note of amusement in his tone.

"It's up to them devils out there," he said. "But mark my words, sir, unless you find the cause for all this trouble, we're done for. It's like poor old John up there. The doctor don't know what poisoned him, so he can't treat him proper. Unless we find out who's stirred up these blacks and who's givin' 'em guns—"

Healy completed his idea with a suggestive shrug.

"But, good God, man, we've been trying to do that very thing for months!" fretted the major. "Everything that's landed at the island passes through your hands, and you've been able to detect nothing. Lebeare—well, we've searched this place, you know that."

Digby had no further illusions about Lebeare. He was watching the Frenchman throughout this conversation and the terrified expression on his face was not assumed. He was in a blue funk, his teeth chattering so loudly that Digby could hear them.

"Before God, major, I know nothing of thees gun business," he cried. "Look, monsieur, we all face death here. Let us be honest. If I had guns for the natives I would give them to you now so that we might defend ourselves. I do not want to die, monsieur!" And he crossed himself fervently.

"The fellow's telling the truth, sir," Digby cut in. "I'm sure of it."

The major looked helplessly about. Healy seemed his only refuge.

"You know more about this sort of thing than any of us, Healy," he said. "Would you advise opening fire on them? Could we righten them away?"

The din outside was becoming terrific. The drums were pounding in unison again and the noise of the chanting was redoubled. The sailor at the window turned to the others.

"They're surrounding the place," he said. "Dancing and singing to beat hell. More than half of them are armed, I should say. Looks bad."

He came across and joined the others.

"The captain's got a machine gun aboard ship," he said. "If we could get word to him."

"If he doesn't hear this noise," said the major, "there's something wrong."

"He'd be a fool to come ashore without knowing the lay of the land," Healy opined. "He's only got a handful of men and they'd be helpless out there in the dark."

The old man shook his head.

"Find the cause for this and we can stop it," he persisted. "Find the man that's caused the trouble."

Digby had been thinking. The number of whites on the island was so small that to spot the man Healy was talking of should be comparatively easy.

Of the group here in the store, Grant was the only one he really suspected. Lebeare's fright was too natural. He couldn't suspect the blustering major. Healy was an old-timer. He knew better than to fool with the natives.

That left only Grant as a possibility. Grant and the Chinese coolies.

He turned to the major.

"Don't you think, sir, it's time we found out the truth about this fellow Grant?" he asked. "He spends most of his time in the woods, I'm told. He helps unload the ships that come in. Couldn't he have smuggled firearms to the natives? Couldn't he have fermented all this trouble? For God's sake, sir, isn't it time to make him talk?"

"We've no time to hold a court," cut in Healy. "Hear that noise out there? It's getting louder. Unless I'm mistaken, the best thing for us to do is to take our posts near the windows and prepare to fight. We've each got a gun of some sort. We can hold 'em off for a bit and trust that McLeish will come ashore in the morning."

"We haven't five rounds of ammunition

between us unless Lebeare has some hidden away," said the major. As he spoke a broadside of shots ripped through the door. The glass in the rear windows was broken by another volley. "They mean business all right."

Suddenly Grant, who had been singing in his maudlin fashion, got to his feet.

"Have a novel idea," he said. "I'll stop the blighters. Music 'll do it. Give 'em a barrage of music."

In the corner stood the case which contained Overton's new piano. It has been unloaded from the ship that afternoon, and still in its wooden crate, it stood in the far corner of the store.

"Get out the piano and play music," muttered Grant.

Before any of them could stop him he had picked up an ax which lay on the floor and approached the crate. With three solid blows he demolished one side of it, disclosing within the solid mahogany top of a small grand piano.

"Stop the damn fool before he kills himself with that ax," snapped the major. "He's drunk."

Grant laughed.

"Music 'll do it," he assured them.

Once more the ax rose, but instead of further demolishing the crate he smashed the top of the piano. Again and again he brought the ax down on the piano. Then he laughed again.

"See, what did I say? Music is man's best friend."

He backed away and staggered over to his chair. With a sudden ejaculation the major stepped over to the smashed piano.

Inside the splintered case were no strings, no little padded hammers. Instead, neatly packed, were a dozen army rifles of the newest design.

"Overton!" thundered the major.

Back in his chair, Grant was singing once more.

" . . . Jush pickle my bones
In alcohol."

VIII.

WHEN men stand shoulder to shoulder in defense of their lives one has a pretty good

opportunity to determine their mettle. So it was that Digby, during a lull in the native attack, took stock of the men who were huddled together in Lebeare's store.

The heat was unbelievable. There was scarcely any movement in the air and the store itself was heavy with the pungent odor of gunpowder.

Digby wiped the perspiration from his face with the sleeve of his shirt and leaned against the wall.

There had been no time for questions after Grant had unearthed the contents of the piano crate. Along with the rifles the major found several hundred rounds of ammunition packed carefully in the box.

How Grant had known that the guns were there was something of a stickler. At first Digby had been almost convinced that it was a pure, drunken chance.

But later he altered this opinion and began to have serious doubts as to whether Grant were drunk at all.

The natives, having surrounded the store, started a steady firing. Meanwhile the torch bearers began to creep as close as possible.

Old Tom Healy pointed out at once that their objective was to get close enough so that they might throw their burning brands on to the thatched roof of the store. If they succeeded in this the fate of the men inside would be very definitely sealed.

Healy seemed automatically to take charge of the situation. The major, blustering and cursing and swearing that "if he ever got his hands on that swine, Overton," was of little value. Healy ordered each man to a point of vantage with instructions to concentrate entirely on the torch bearers.

The natives twice tried a very simple ruse. A large body of them would pretend to rush the front of the store with the purpose of attracting all the attention. Meanwhile several of the torch bearers attempted to sneak up on the rear of the building.

Healy fully understood this maneuver and was prepared for it. He had posted Digby and Grant at the two rear windows and he kept them there while he, the major, Lebeare, and the sailor repulsed the front attack.

It was during one of these moments that Digby got his first suspicion of Grant. The Englishman had taken a gun and staggered to his post, the picture of drunken helplessness.

Healy had gravely told Digby that Grant would be of little use.

"Everything will depend on you, lad," he said. "That fool won't be able to hit the side of a house."

But old Tom was wrong.

Grant had fumbled awkwardly with the magazine of his rifle to make certain it was loaded. But presently, when an overenthusiastic native rushed into the open waving a flaming torch, Grant's gun went to his shoulder so rapidly that Digby was dumfounded.

One shot from that gun and the careless native crumpled in a heap. Then Grant swayed on his feet, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and smiled in a maudlin fashion at Digby.

But Digby was not fooled. That one moment when all the uncertainty, all the unsteadiness had left Grant, and that rifle had come to his shoulder with a precision that was perfection, had convinced Digby that for some reason the man was shamming.

His whole pose of the drunken derelict was broken down in that one fleeting moment.

Digby smiled back at him.

"Nice work, old man."

"Used to shoot pheasant on the wing," explained Grant thickly.

There was no time for further prying into Grant's game, for at that moment another attack was launched on the front of the store and again a torch bearer crept out into the open at the rear.

This time it was Digby who nicked him. He had to fire twice, however, for his first shot went wide.

"Dreadful waste," muttered Grant.

It was during a lull which followed that Digby had an opportunity to talk with Tom Healy.

"What do you make of this gun-running by Overton?" he asked.

The old Irishman took his pipe out of his mouth and expectorated.

"There's a reason for everything in this world," he said. "Overton isn't any one's fool, Mr. Smith. You can take my word for that. He's a smart man. For some reason he wants to get rid of the whites on this island. In particular he wants to get rid of Mr. Hamilton's interest. The poisoning of John Converse is tied up with this, I'll bet."

"But for what reason?" Digby persisted.

Tom shook his grizzled head.

"It beats me," he said. "There's more in it than Overton, of course. Some one's been shipping him this stuff from America and maybe other places."

"What do you make of him?" Digby nodded toward Grant.

"I've never been able to dope him out," admitted Healy. "Between you and me, I don't think he's half as drunk as he pretends. For a long time I've thought he might be at the bottom of the trouble here. I'm not such I still don't think so. He may be in with Overton."

"But why would he give away the gun-running business?"

"I dunno, Mr. Smith. Except that he'd risk a lot if his life was at stake as it is here. Then again it might have been just a lucky chance."

"That's out," said Digby. "Watch him handle a rifle and you'll soon see that he's as sober right now as you and I. I'd like to know just how much he understands the situation; just how much he knows about Overton; in fact, just who the devil he is."

"It 'll all come out in the wash," replied Healy. And he went back to his post. Another attack was being organized by the natives.

All through the night these spasmodic sorties by the blacks were continued without success. The incessant beating of the drums and the chanting continued, even during the fighting.

It was evident that the blacks had given up the idea that they could take the store by force, and the torch bearers had lost any relish for stepping out into the open.

The men inside began to feel that the danger was past. Healy assured them that with the first morning light his old friend,

McLeish, would come ashore with his sailors and that then the natives would retreat into the hills.

Digby began to wonder about Margo and the doctor back there in the bungalow. There was no way for him to tell whether any of the natives had gone back to bother them or not.

It occurred to him that if they were under Overton's protection they would be all right. It was inconceivable that Overton, however much of a villain he might be, would permit Margo to fall into the hands of the blacks.

Still, it seemed probable that he was back of the poisoning of her father. Digby remembered the man's cool insolence to the major.

The steely look in his blue eyes when the major had called him yellow suggested that Overton, if aroused, might prove even more ruthless, more dangerous than the natives. If he had organized this uprising of the blacks the time was evidently ripe for whatever plans he had in mind.

What could the fellow's object be in this business? What was there to gain?

If he was trying to frighten John Hamilton into giving up his property at Manuia he was working at a futile task. Hamilton was not the type to be frightened. If Overton had in mind a little high-handed piracy he would find himself bucking an overwhelming opponent in the Hamilton interests.

It must have been about half past three in the morning that the first faint light of the coming day began to appear. Almost at once there seemed to be a renewed excitement among the natives.

The men in the store who had relaxed their guard a trifle went once more to their posts. But no new attack was contemplated. Instead, the natives were drawing back into the woods along the main path.

"It's the skipper and the crew!" cried the sailor.

Hurriedly Lebeare and the others pulled the barricade away from the door. Up from the beach came McLeish and his men.

The captain strode along in front, a rifle in his hand. The crew followed, two of the men carrying a small brass cannon.

Lebeare was in a fever of excitement. The strain had been great on the little Frenchman, and now he was dancing about like a lunatic.

It was he who told McLeish of the events of the night, dramatizing them to their fullest extent. The captain explained that he had not dared come ashore in the dark.

"We might all have been wiped out," he said. "Then there'd have been no hope for any of you. Another ship may not be along for weeks."

Old Tom Healy then told the captain of the discovery of firearms in the piano crate. The captain's profanity was eloquent. He had always known that Overton was a so-and-so of the vilest sort.

"And this Grant," he demanded. "Is he mixed up in it too?"

Healy turned to speak to the derelict Englishman, who had come out of the store with the rest of them. He was not there.

"In the store drinking," McLeish suggested.

Lebeare went after him, and came running out.

"*Sacre bleu!*" he cried. "He has gone! And with two bottles of my best whisky."

X.

A COUNCIL of war was held on the spot. Digby's deep concern for Margo, her father, and the doctor caused him to urge an immediate trip to the bungalow. The major was with him, but his motives were a trifle less philanthropic.

"Want to get my hands on that chap Overton," he fumed."

But Healy and McLeish were opposed to any offensive move.

"I have only fifteen men," explained the captain. "We're well armed, and we could hold off any sort of an attack here at the store. But the minute we move into the woods we have hundreds of those black devils shooting at us from behind trees, or lurking in the bushes waiting to stab us when our backs are turned.

"No, sir, Mr. Smith, I won't order my men forward. My suggestion is that I send a man back to the ship to wireless the nearest British gunboat. If we had a body of

trained fighting men it would be a different matter."

"But, good Heaven, captain, you can't leave Margo and Dr. Trelawny at the mercy of those blacks," protested Digby. "It's unthinkable."

"The way I figure it," said Healy sagely, "is that if anything's going to happen to them, it's already happened. Overton's back of all this, and if he chooses to save them, they're probably all right. Anything we do would simply endanger all our lives and do Margo no good. I'm no fellow to sit back and twiddle my thumbs when a woman's in danger, but we can't do any good. If we move up into the woods, it'll be just as the captain says. 'Like lambs to the slaughter.' We'll have to wait for help."

Digby's lips set in a firm line.

"Then I'm going up alone," he announced.

"Don't be a damned fool," observed Healy dryly.

Digby shook his head doggedly.

"Converse has been working for Mr. Hamilton for years," he said. "Hamilton wouldn't consider sitting back and waiting. He'd go to his assistance regardless of the danger. I must do the same thing. It's my job."

"Monsieur is a brave man, but an idiot," remarked Lebeare.

Healy was sucking on his pipe thoughtfully.

"One man would stand a better chance than all of us," he said finally. "He could move quietly. At least he might be able to scout out the situation."

He took his pipe out of his mouth and spat decisively. "I tell you what, Smith. I'll draw lots with you to see which one of us goes."

Digby laughed, and put his hand on the old Irishman's shoulder.

"You're a great guy, Tom," he said, "but this is going to be my party. You're needed here."

"Damn me, there's no reason why I shouldn't go, is there?" the major queried.

"Major," said Digby, smiling, "you're too much like a bull in a china shop. They would hear you coming through the woods

miles away. Not only that, sir, but it's your duty as commandant here to stay with the main body of men."

The major grunted. "All I want is to get my chance at Overton!"

Lebeare made no offer of any sort. He could not leave his post. The men must eat and drink. Alas, it was his duty, he feared, to stay here.

However, he did go into his shop to make a snack of breakfast for Digby before he set out. Monsieur would be even braver on a full stomach.

Lebeare's breakfast consisted of boiled rice, a tin of salmon, and steaming hot coffee. It does not sound like an appetizing meal, but Digby was ravenously hungry.

While he ate, old Tom Healy explained the lay of the land to him. Beyond the bungalows was the coconut grove which Hamilton leased. Beyond that was a native village. Only a few of the blacks lived in the clearing near the beach, and they had all deserted with the coming of McLeish and his men.

If the natives had taken Margo and the doctor prisoner, they would undoubtedly be at the inland village. If Digby could find out the exact situation it would simplify the matter of a rescue when reinforcements arrived.

"But you're going at your own risk," Healy concluded. "Your chance of coming back alive is—well, it's small, Mr. Smith. When those black devils are in the mood for fighting it's not healthy for a white man. Once they were all head hunters, and it's in the blood."

Digby forced a laugh.

"I've no ambition to have my head decorating a pole, Tom," he said. "I'll have a rifle and a revolver—and I'll save one cartridge."

"A good idea," said Healy grimly.

Fifteen minutes later Digby was ready to start. The little group of white men gathered around him with solemn faces, and Digby shook hands with each of them in turn.

McLeish, the man who detested green-horns, was the last to approach him. He nearly crushed Digby's hand in his iron grip.

"Good luck, lad," he said gruffly. "And if you have to fight, give 'em hell!"

"Right-o, captain. And if I don't come back," added Digby, "tell Hamilton that this is better than the best game of poker he ever played."

Digby slipped away to the back path down which he and the major had come a few hours before.

He did not look back at the silent gathering of men who stood in front of Lebeare's store watching him. There was something a little too doleful about their expressions to make him feel comfortable.

Digby was fully aware of the danger he faced in going back into the woods alone, where hostile natives might ambush him at any turn, but as in the case of most young men, death seemed to him to be a remote possibility. He had a belief that some Providence watches especially over drunkards and fools, and he was inclined to put himself unreservedly in the latter class.

Yet he could not help the something in his make-up which impelled him to go to the assistance of the doctor and Margo. Call it old-fashioned chivalry if you will; waiting for help to arrive was not one of the things Digby could do with a comfortable conscience. He had come here to help Converse, perhaps dead by now, and help him he would.

Quickly, silently, and keeping a sharp lookout on both sides of the rough trail which led to the government bungalow, Digby made his way through the woods.

Perhaps the most uncanny thing about it was the profound silence of the shadowy depths of jungle growth. It was so still that it seemed almost to shout a warning.

Digby felt that he was being watched on all sides, and yet he could detect no one, and put it down to an imaginative temperament.

As he approached the government bungalow he loosened his revolver in its holster and then gripped the rifle he was carrying tightly in his hands. Here he might encounter Overton, the man who for some mysterious reason was back of the uprising.

He might or might not know that he had been discovered, and Digby, remem-

bering his cold blue eyes, decided that the man who was quickest on the trigger would be more apt to live to a respected old age.

But there was no sign of life as he reached the government house. There was a stillness about the place that Digby did not like.

After a moment's hesitation he walked boldly into the house. Everything seemed orderly and untouched.

The highball glass from which Overton had been drinking the night before stood on a small table just inside the door. Digby called Overton's name, but the echo of his own voice was the only reply he received. Nothing doing here.

He hurried along the path to the doctor's place. This, too, was entirely deserted, with no sign of any commotion. The natives had not been interested by the possibilities of loot, that was apparent.

With a sensation almost akin to dread, Digby left the doctor's cottage and continued along the path. As he passed a turn and the thatched roof of Converse's place came into sight, his apprehension increased.

The utter quiet was appalling. Digby quickened his pace and rounded the house to the porch, where he had chatted with Margo the night before under that gorgeous tropic moon.

What he saw made him recoil with a sharp exclamation.

Lying head downward on the little flight of three steps that led up to the porch was Dr. Trelawny. One arm was bent under him in a grotesque, unnatural fashion.

"Doctor! Dr. Trelawny!"

Digby knelt beside him and gently turned his face, which had been buried in the grass. Between the doctor's staring eyes was a small, round hole, clotted with blood.

A bullet hole. He was dead.

X.

DIGBY stood beside the doctor's body for a full minute before he finally stooped and lifted it to a more dignified position. He remembered the doctor's words as they had come ashore the day before: "I would not leave this island if I could."

Well, he never would now. Until now Digby had not quite felt the grim horror of the situation.

A bitter hatred for Overton, the man at the root of it all, welled up in him, and he swore softly under his breath.

Digby was preparing to carry the body into the bungalow, when he heard a sound which startled him. It was a man's voice in a low, agonized moan. It came from within the cottage.

Digby had forgotten Converse. He hurried into the house and to the back room, where Converse lay on his little, low cot.

Digby had not seen him before, for the old man had been so ill when the Corsicana arrived that the meeting had been postponed at Trelawny's order.

Converse lay on his back, his eyes wide. His lips were swollen and half open, and his hands gripped the coverlet as if he were in terrific pain. At sight of Digby a look of hope came into his bloodshot eyes.

"Water!" he said thickly.

Beside the bed on a chair was a pail, half full, with a tin dipper beside it. It was close enough for Converse to reach it, but evidently he was too weak. Digby stepped forward and filled the dipper. Converse writhed to a half sitting posture. His eyes were wild again.

"No—no—no!" he protested. "Poison!" And he fell back on the cot, breathing heavily.

Digby decided that this was a fevered hallucination, but he knew where he could get fresh water. He had gone to the spring back of the cottage for Margo the night before. There was another pail in the kitchen, and Digby got it and hurried out to the spring.

Converse drank eagerly from the china cup which Digby brought with the fresh water. He had evidently been suffering acutely from thirst.

Even before he had strength enough to explain, Digby had guessed the truth about the pail on the chair.

Converse spoke with an effort. "Overton left that water there to torture me," he said. Then he looked quickly at Digby. "Who are you?"

"Smith is my name, sir. I am your re-

lief, Mr. Converse," Digby told him. "I arrived on the Corsicana yesterday, but you were too ill to see me. Since then a great deal has happened. Can you tell me what took place here, sir?"

Converse passed a hand over his eyes as if he were trying to wipe away a vision which pained him.

"I heard the natives last night," he said finally. "I knew what was happening. Then Overton, the major's assistant, came. I've never liked him, but I never guessed—Look here, Smith, he's back of all this trouble here. He—he killed Trelawny, and left me with that pail of poisoned water to die like a rat. God!"

Digby hated to ask the next question.

"And your daughter, sir?"

Converse writhed on his bed.

"He took her, God knows where. The man's a maniac, Smith, or else the most ruthless, cold-blooded scoundrel I've ever known."

Suddenly tears came to the old man's eyes, tears of helpless rage. His body shook with a convulsive sob.

"Margo—Margo!" he cried. "Oh, God, that I should fail her now when she needs me most."

Digby reached out and took the old man's hand in his.

"Don't worry, sir," he said. "We'll get Margo back. And we'll get Overton. Already we have sufficient evidence to hang him."

Converse was pathetically eager.

"You don't think it may be too late? If he harmed Margo—"

To Digby the answer was obvious. Overton had intended that Trelawny and Converse should be found dead. Margo he wanted for himself, and it was safe to assume that things had been happening too quickly for any harm to come to her as yet.

But there was no time to lose. If only McLeish had seen fit to attack!

He explained the plan to Converse. Nothing could be done until help arrived in the shape of a British gunboat.

"But that may be days!" Converse groaned.

"But I'm going ahead alone, sir," Digby

assured him. "Personally I can't stand inaction. I've got to know what's happened to Margo, and I'm going to get a crack at that guy, Overton, if it's the last thing I do on earth."

For the first time Converse seemed to gain control of his emotions.

"Look here, Smith, you're a game kid, but you can't whip a whole village of natives. McLeish and Healy are right. It would be walking into certain death if they attacked with an inferior force."

Digby smiled. "Where is the village, sir?" he asked.

Converse's tired eyes met Digby's bright blue ones. A faint suggestion of an answering smile flitted over his dry lips. He gripped Digby's hand tightly.

"Keep along the main path until you reach the grove," he said. "It's not more than a half mile. Then keep to the north for another mile. But remember one thing, boy. These blacks aren't like white men to fight. You can't stop to palaver. If you're attacked, you've got to fight to kill. They won't ask questions or answer any."

Digby nodded. "First I must get you down to the post. I can't leave you here alone."

"The hell you will!" Converse said with some spirit. "Leave me food and water where I can reach it. You can't waste time. Margo—"

Converse would not listen to an argument on this point, and Digby finally agreed. He had no wish, personally, to delay.

In the kitchen he found food, which he put on the chair beside Converse's bed. In ten minutes he was ready to leave, having first brought Trelawny's body into the front of the house and covered it with a sheet.

He had no further conversation with Converse, except to say good-by. The older man was so eager for help to reach his daughter that he had no thought for anything but to get Digby started.

Out on the trail once more, Digby moved forward as rapidly as he could, sometimes almost at a run. The more he thought about the situation he had discovered at the bungalow, the more anxious

he was for a meeting with Overton, whom he believed to be thoroughly depraved.

He had poisoned Converse, deliberately murdered Dr. Trelawny, and abducted Margo—a night's work which it would be impossible properly to avenge.

His chief concern now was for the girl. Yet as he hurried along the path for the grove he realized that he had little if any chance of bringing her relief of any sort.

He was alone against a whole village of blacks and Overton. Overton would stop at nothing, that was evident, and if he discovered Digby attempting to rescue Margo, Digby's life would not be worth the proverbial plugged nickel.

The best Digby could hope for was to get a thorough idea of the lay of the land so that he could direct a successful attack when reinforcements arrived.

Suddenly Digby stopped. Ahead of him on the path he saw a native—a tall, oily-skinned black. He had been coming down the path, and at sight of Digby had stopped too.

Now he turned and began to run back the way he had come. Digby thought quickly. If this fellow got back to his village and warned the others that a white man was lurking about in the woods, the success of his venture would be impossible. He raised his rifle and took aim.

As he did so, there was a crashing in the bushes behind him and a voice, a white man's voice, spoke sharply:

"Drop that gun—quickly!"

Digby spun around. It was Overton, and he was covering Digby with a rifle.

XI.

Digby's first impulse was to shoot it out with the major's assistant. But he realized that if he moved he was done for.

Overton, his gun to his shoulder, his thin white forefinger trembling on the trigger, had a decided advantage. Digby dropped his rifle and slowly raised his hands above his head.

To accept defeat before he had been able to do a thing for Margo was a bitter pill for Digby to swallow.

"Now, unbuckle that revolver holster

and let it fall," Overton ordered. "And don't let your fingers stray, Mr. Smith, or I shall be forced to bore a neat little hole between those lovely blue eyes of yours."

Digby could do nothing but obey. Completely disarmed, he waited for Overton's next move.

The Englishman lowered his rifle and came forward a step. His lips were twisted in that cynical smile that Digby had seen on their first meeting.

"Really, old fellow," drawled Overton, "I couldn't have you shooting that native. The chap's a friend of mine."

"No doubt," said Digby shortly.

"Oh, come, Mr. Smith!" Overton laughed softly. "A fellow must be a good sport, even when he's beaten, eh? Won't do you a bit of good to pull a long face, y' know. Fortunes of war, and all that sort of thing. You shouldn't wander about in the woods alone if you don't want to get into trouble. It's not safe, I assure you."

"I've seen enough of your work, Overton, to be quite certain of that."

Overton laughed again.

"Then you really can't complain, can you?"

He came forward now and picked up Digby's discarded weapons.

"I'm very much afraid," he said, "that you'll have to accept my hospitality for a bit, Mr. Smith. I'm spending my time in a lovely little native village at the present. Very quaint place, especially if you're at all interested in primitive civilization. You'll find it a veritable treasure house of quaint objects and customs."

Digby bowed in mock courtesy.

"Charmed," he said dryly. "I suspect the place is overrun with vermin, though."

Overton's pale eyes flashed.

"Your repartee is a trifle edgy," he said. "I advise against it. And now if you'll about-face and start along the path we'll reach my domain in a jiffy. It's really just a pleasant little walk."

Without a word, Digby turned and continued along the way he had been headed. He was angry and bitterly disappointed. Somehow he had felt that he would be able to outwit Overton, and to be caught like a child was unbearable.

Moreover, he realized that his position was an extremely dangerous one. He couldn't understand why Overton was taking him prisoner, instead of handing him the same treatment that he had given the doctor and Converse. It was obvious that the man had absolutely no scruples about committing murder or any other crime.

Then the old question repeated itself to Digby: What was back of it all? Why had Overton organized a revolt? To what end all this bloodshed and murder?

Surely not just for the purpose of securing Margo for himself. That was unbelievable. Behind it all there was some obscure reason which must explain it all.

Presently the path ahead of Digby opened out into an enormous grove of coconut palms, obviously cultivated.

"This is the grove you came here to manage," said Overton. "Do you know, old chap, I'm awfully afraid you'll never get around to that little chore."

There was an ominous note in his cold voice.

On through the grove they proceeded in silence until they reached another path, along which Overton directed them. A few hundred yards beyond they came into view of the village. A mass of thatched huts surrounded by a low, mud wall.

Several blacks came running out to meet them. Evidently news of their coming had preceded them.

Overton handed Digby's rifle and revolver to one of the blacks and spoke to him in a tongue which was quite beyond Digby's comprehension. The blacks formed a sort of prisoner's guard about Digby, and Overton, his gun tucked under his arm now, drew alongside.

"These fellows speak Javanese," he explained. "A really beautiful language when you get to know it. The people themselves are delightful. So trusting. Just like children!"

They entered the gate of the village and made their way between rows of huts. A crowd of blacks gathered about them as they moved on.

They were all armed, most of them with crude lances or swords, but many of the younger men had guns, Digby noticed.

They all stared at the prisoner, and there was a good deal of ill-tempered muttering.

Once a black tried to break through the little guard to strike Digby. Overton spoke sharply and he slung away, murmuring to himself. Evidently there was considerable bitterness toward the whites who had protected the store.

Suddenly as they rounded a corner Digby saw Margo. She was standing in front of one of the huts, guarded by two huge natives.

At sight of Digby she gave a little cry and started toward him, but her guards pulled her back. As they drew alongside, Overton halted the procession.

"Of course you know my *fiancée*, Miss Converse," he said.

Digby saw Margo's eyes flash, but she ignored Overton.

"I'm sorry they've got you," she said. "Desperately sorry. You can expect nothing but the foulest sort of treatment from this murderer!"

"Oh, come, my dear," Overton expostulated. "Haven't you been treated with the utmost courtesy. Really, I think you're a bit unfair."

Then Digby's anger boiled over and he turned on his captor with burning eyes.

"You damned cad!" he exploded. "I had just left the bungalow when I encountered you. Mr. Converse told me the whole story. Moreover, the men at the store know the truth, too. Your piano, Overton!"

Margo, at the mention of her father, stepped forward eagerly.

"Dad is—is alive?" she asked.

Digby nodded. He was watching Overton, who had turned a shade whiter and was breathing heavily.

The Englishman, for just a moment, showed that this news was unwelcome. Then he turned to the natives and gave an angry order. Digby was taken roughly by the arms and pulled along the row of huts to a large one at the end. He caught one last glimpse of Margo, who was watching him dejectedly.

Digby was pushed into the hut, followed by Overton and the natives. The hut was barely furnished. A rough hewn table and

chair and a straw sleeping mat in the corner was all it contained.

Once inside, Overton's insolent manner left him and he faced Digby, snarling.

"Now, young man, you'll tell me just what in hell is going on down at the store. What are their plans? Will they attack us here, or are they waiting for us to move?"

For the first time Digby felt that he held the upper hand. Overton had shown his first sign of uncertainty.

"Don't be an idiot, Overton," said Digby. "You can't really expect me to give you any information of that sort."

"I not only expect it," said Overton grimly, "but I'm going to get it from you."

He turned and gave an order to one of the natives who stepped out of the hut.

"Make up your mind to one thing, Smith," Overton continued. "This is not a matter of child's play. Your life isn't worth a penny unless you come across with what I want to know."

"Not all of us are traitors and murderers," said Digby. "You can't get one iota of information from me, Overton. You're wasting time."

The native who had gone out of the hut at Overton's order now returned. In his hand was a long, ugly-looking, rawhide whip. He was smiling hopefully.

"One chance to change your mind," said Overton. "Just one chance, Smith. I'm not going to argue with you. Haven't the time, y'know."

"You'd better proceed," answered Digby. "I've taken beatings before this."

"But none quite like the one you're about to get," said Overton. He spoke sharply to the natives.

Before Digby could move two of them had ripped off his shirt, and he writhed under a vicious blow from the lash which whipped and cut around his body. Then he set his teeth and braced himself.

Again and again the snakelike thong bit into his flesh. Perspiration stood out on his forehead, but he didn't flinch. Just once Overton held up his hand to the whip handler.

"How about it, Smith? Change your mind, eh?"

Digby shook his head. Overton smiled his cruel smile.

Again the lash descended. Digby's strength was waning, and now he crumpled down on one knee and covered his eyes with his arm.

The pain was almost unbearable, but Digby was silent. Finally he collapsed, in a semiconscious state onto the floor. The lashing stopped.

"I'll give you a few hours to think this over," he heard Overton say. "Then we'll repeat this little performance if you keep so damned stubborn."

Some one turned him roughly over and tied his hands behind his torn and bleeding back. Some one else secured his feet. Then he was left there alone, on the floor of the hut.

XII.

It seemed like a lifetime to Digby that he lay on the damp floor of the hut. In point of fact it was several hours.

At first he had been too weak to move at all. Later he had tried to work his way into a more comfortable position. But his hands and feet had been bound cruelly tight and his back and shoulders were so badly lacerated from the beating he had received that any position at all was agony.

As he lay there he had an opportunity to contemplate just what had happened and what was likely to happen.

It was a sure thing that Overton would never release him, even if he were to give the information desired. It would be suicide for the Englishman to have any one go free who had as much incriminating evidence as Digby possessed.

That his career, such as it was, had come to an end, Digby was certain. If he could only do something to help the girl before he was put out of the way.

But it was hopeless even to think of such a thing. Overton held all the aces, and Digby was helpless.

He was terribly thirsty. He had had nothing to drink since leaving Converse hours before, and the experience he had been through had left him dry and parched.

But Overton evidently had no intention of being at all human in the treatment of

his prisoner. Digby knew this from having witnessed his diabolical treatment of Converse.

Once or twice Digby struggled hopelessly to loosen the bonds, which cut into his wrists. Finally he lay back on the damp floor, unresisting. There was nothing he could do to help himself or any one else.

When the shadows of night fell over the village Digby had still been unvisited. He had reached a point of such acute suffering from thirst that he felt, when suddenly the door of the hut was darkened by the figure of a huge native, that he would give almost anything for a drink of water.

The native seemed to be looking up and down outside to see if he was observed, and then came quickly into the hut. In his right hand Digby saw the gleam of a steel knife blade.

So he was to be slaughtered in cold blood! Well, anything was better than this agony of thirst.

The native knelt beside him, and Digby saw the flash of his white teeth bared in a smile. To his intense surprise, the native slit the bonds that had held his feet and hands. Then, from a gourd which he carried over his shoulder, he offered Digby a drink.

Relief! It was with something very like a sob that Digby lifted the gourd to his lips.

While he drank, the native took two objects from the folds of his loin cloth. One was an automatic pistol. The other was a folded piece of paper. He handed them to Digby.

Digby unfolded the paper and read:

You can trust Lutu. Don't fight if you can help it. It's best to cut and run. This is all I can do for you, old fellow.

GRANT.

Digby stared at the note. Grant! Grant, who seemed to always do the unexpected and helpful thing at the right moment.

Lutu was tugging at Digby's wrist.

"Must hurry!" he said in a low, guttural voice.

Digby got laboredly to his feet. Every movement was an agony of pain. But he was armed once more, and there was hope in his heart. Still he hesitated.

"Lutu, we must help Miss Converse," he said.

The native shrugged as if to say that it was a task doubtful of success.

"Must hurry!" he repeated.

Digby always contended afterward that it was a kindly Providence that hid the bright moon behind heavy, threatening clouds that night. As he and Lutu emerged from the hut the village was in inky darkness, except for the faint glow of fires here and there.

As cautiously as hunters stalking game, they crept along the row of huts until they approached the one in which Margo was held. In front of it stood the two guards, as they had earlier in the day. Digby whispered to Lutu:

"Creep around behind the hut. You take one and I'll take the other."

The big native nodded understanding and slipped away into the darkness. Quietly Digby crawled to the side of the hut and then slowly around until he was almost directly behind one of the guards.

Using the revolver Lutu had given him as a club, Digby suddenly rose to his feet and hit the guard in front of him a terrific blow on the back of the head. Without a sound, the man sank to the ground.

His partner, astonished, started forward, but with equal suddenness a huge black hand was clasped over his mouth and the fingers of another sank viciously into his windpipe. Presently he lay beside his companion.

Digby heard a low chuckle from Lutu as he stepped into the hut.

Margo was lying on a straw mat in the corner as he entered, but she was not asleep. At sight of him she sprang up with a glad little cry.

"Oh, my dear," she said softly, "I thought they had killed you."

And before Digby knew quite how it happened she was clinging to him, sobbing like a child. But it was no time for comforting or explanations.

"We've got a chance to make a break for it," Digby said. "There isn't a moment to lose. And, listen! If anything happens to me you're to keep going. Do you understand that?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice to reply.

"We've got to try to get clear of the village without attracting attention. One of the natives is helping us. But if we have to fight, I don't want to feel that you're in danger. You must promise me that at all costs you'll head for the store."

"I promise," she said. "But it's so unfair that you should risk your own chances on my account."

"Perhaps," he said, a faint twinkle of amusement in his eyes, "I am strengthening my chances—for you."

Then he took her hand in his and led her out of the hut. Lutu was waiting.

"Must hurry!" he said once more, and slipped away so quickly that Digby and Margo had difficulty in keeping up with him.

Twice natives came wandering along the open row between the huts, and the fugitives ducked into the shadows, Digby gripping the revolver tightly. But they were unnoticed.

They had almost reached the village gate when a great shout went up behind them. One of the fallen guards must have recovered or else a passing native had seen their flight.

Lutu, who had been moving along in a half crouch, stood upright with a grunt.

"Run!" he said sharply.

The big native was fast as an antelope, and Digby and Margo struggled after him, panting. At the gate were two natives, evidently guards.

As they caught sight of the flying trio, one of them who had a gun raised it hurriedly to his shoulder. Digby stopped and dropped on one knee.

There were two sharp reports from his revolver and the native with the gun crumpled into the dirt. The other, with a cry of surprise, ran. Lutu now took Margo by the hand and pulled her along.

He moved so quickly that her feet scarcely touched the ground. Digby looked back over his shoulder. A dozen natives, headed by Overton himself, were tearing after them.

Digby lowered his head and ran as he had never run in his life before. Several

shots were fired after him, and once he heard the whistle of a bullet perilously close to his head, but he didn't stop. This was no time for a fight.

Lutu raced down the trail toward the coconut grove with Margo in tow. Digby, gasping for breath, stumbling in the dark, followed as best he could.

He was still stiff and sore from the hours he had been tied on the floor of the hut. His muscles ached painfully. But he kept on.

The pursuers were gaining on him, but it was almost joy that he felt when he saw that Lutu and Margo were also pulling away. They at least would be safe.

Suddenly Digby's foot caught in an outgrowing root of a tree. It was all so quick that he scarcely knew what happened.

He plunged headlong off the path into brush at the side, and rolled down an embankment into a thickly grown gully. He lay still, hurt and exhausted.

A moment later he heard the pursuing party rush past on the path above. For the moment he was safe.

For a long time Digby crouched in the gully. As he lay there the clouds which had enveloped the moon dissipated and once again, as on his first night at Manuia, the forest was bathed in a glorious silvery light.

But to-night it was a menace to Digby. He dared not move out into the open until a long time later he heard what he presumed was the pursuing party returning. He could only guess that they had been unsuccessful in overtaking Lutu and Margo.

When they had passed out of earshot, Digby slowly pulled himself up the embankment to the edge of the path. He parted the bushes in front of him and peered up and down the path.

The natives were out of sight, but coming slowly after them, Digby saw something that made his heart leap.

Overton, a gun tucked under his arm, the picture of weariness, was returning to the native village. Overton—alone.

With every muscle tense Digby waited for Overton to draw abreast. Then he sprang out at him.

His first objective was the gun which

he wrenched out of the Englishman's hands and threw aside.

"Now, damn you, I'll do a little beating of my own!"

For just a moment Overton fell back, a look of fear in his eyes, and then as Digby smashed at him with a wicked right-handed blow, he sprang forward, fighting desperately as a man fights for his life.

Whatever advantage Digby had in physical size was lost in the weakening experience he had undergone in the last hours, but his bitter hatred for the man who had murdered Dr. Trelawny, who had poisoned Converse, and who had directed the laying on of that frightful lash, made a demon of him. He brought Overton to his knees with a fierce blow to the point of the chin.

Overton was quick to see that he could not match blows with Digby and as he staggered to his feet he hurled himself forward and closed his long, white fingers on Digby's throat.

For one horrible moment Digby thought he was beaten. McLeish had laughed at those slender, feminine hands, but now they were like steel hooks, biting into the flesh, cutting off Digby's breath.

Digby shook his man as a dog shakes a rat, but Overton clung to him. It was his only chance. Then with one despairing effort Digby connected once more with the Englishman's jaw.

A smothered sob, and Overton dropped to the ground.

Digby leaned against a tree, struggling for breath, and wiping the blood and sweat from his face. Finally he kneeled beside Overton.

The man had been unarmed except for the rifle. Digby lifted him across his shoulder and staggered down the path toward Lebeare's store. The victory was his.

XIII.

It was an excited and happy group of men who ran out of Lebeare's to relieve Digby of his burden when he appeared, staggering under the weight of Overton's still unconscious form. Margo had arrived an hour or two before with the account of their escape, but there had been tre-

mendous anxiety for Digby and they had almost concluded that he had been recaptured when he appeared.

Digby was so exhausted that he could not tell his own story at the time, and Lutu, after getting Margo safely to the store had disappeared again with no explanation. Margo dressed Digby's injured back and he rolled up in a blanket and went to sleep.

Restoratives were administered to Overton, and he eventually regained his senses. Major Cornsweet and Healy questioned him as to the motive back of his crimes, but Overton only smiled faintly.

"You chaps are such silly asses," he muttered. "You don't really think I'll talk, do you?"

And so the night passed away and in the morning, Digby awoke, smelling the delightful odor of Lebeare's steaming coffee-pot.

Over his breakfast he told his version of the escape. Old Tom Healy sat by, rubbing the stubby growth of beard on the end of his chin.

"This fellow Grant," he said finally. "There's something about him I don't understand. How does it happen that he's in with Lutu, the native? How did he know about the contents of the piano box?"

"He's a thief!" pronounced Lebeare as he poured another cup of coffee for Digby. "He stole two bottles of my best whisky."

Digby grinned. "I tell you what, Lebeare. I'll pay for those myself. After all, I owe the fellow my life, I expect."

Margo, who had finished her breakfast and was listening to the talk in silence, spoke up.

"Two or three times I caught him sneaking around the bungalow," she said. "He was always drunk, and I could never get any explanation from him."

The major confirmed this story. He had caught Grant near the government house one night, and, in spite of all sorts of threats, the derelict Britisher had refused to talk.

"His drunkenness was something of a hoax," said Digby, pushing his chair back from the table and lighting a cigarette. "He was apparently on the verge of

passing out here the night of the fight, but when the time came for action he was as steady as a rock. Never saw a better shot with a rifle in my life."

But the real explanation of Grant came from the man himself.

Just as breakfast was completed he appeared, walking briskly across the clearing to the store, followed by Lutu, who was weighed down under a mass of bundles. Grant's first words were to Digby.

"Glad to see you're all right," he said. "Sorry I couldn't do more for you last night."

Digby shook hands with him. "You probably saved my life," he said.

"All in the day's work," rejoined Grant. He turned to the major, and his heels clicked together as he gave a brisk, military salute.

"I've been perpetrating something of a fake here, major," he said. "I'm Captain Grant of the Intelligence Department, sent here by the government to find out just what the trouble was on the island."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the major.

"I always knew that monsieur was a man of importance," remarked Lebeare with a sage nod.

Grant laughed.

"The government owes you a little bill for liquor," he said. "I had to have it to keep Lutu on my side. The man's capacity is enormous, believe me."

Once more he addressed the major, "Sir, I want you to arrest this man, Overton, on my charges. Murder and treason are sufficient grounds, I suspect. My one regret is that I was not able to get the necessary information soon enough to prevent the death of the good doctor and the discomfort and danger to Miss Converse, not to mention Smith here, who proved himself something of a brick. I think you will find that the natives, deprived of their leader, will be easy to manage."

"Then you think it is safe for us to go to my father's assistance?" Margo asked eagerly.

"Your father, Miss Converse, is all right. I stopped at the bungalow on the way here. He had gained enough strength to get out of bed and make himself an ap-

petizing breakfast which I shared with him."

"But tell me, captain," said Digby, "what in God's name is back of this business?"

Grant looked at Overton, who was standing sullenly by one of the windows, his hands tied behind him.

"Will you tell them, or shall I?"

"Really, you're a much better narrator than I," said Overton, with his twisted smile. "Pray tell the story yourself, captain."

"It's the old, old story of greed," began Grant, lighting a cigarette. "Our friend here discovered a secret which was unknown to the government or any one else, for that matter. There is a rich deposit of gold in the stream which runs through Hamilton's grove. You must admit that that was a great temptation. Overton communicated with friends at home who helped him with his scheme.

"They sent him guns and all manner of trinkets with which to bribe the natives, whom he quickly won to his side. His next move was to make things so difficult and dangerous here that Mr. Hamilton would be willing to give up his lease when Overton's friends approached him.

"I think he might have succeeded in this effort if suspicion hadn't been aroused at home by the falling off in the export of copra. I was sent here, and unfortunately dared not confide in any one, for the only person I really trusted was myself. It was not until I saw Overton panning samples of the gold one night that I learned the truth.

"Still I had no evidence against him and it was a long time before I had enough to convict him. In fact, it was not until I surprised you gentlemen by breaking open that piano crate the other night, that I had a complete case. That was guesswork on my part, but it proved a correct one."

Lebeare threw up his hands in a despairing gesture.

"*Mon Dieu*, all the time there is wealth at my back door and I do not know it! This is terrible, monsieur."

The major explained that Captain McLeish, who had gone out to the Corsicana

that morning for supplies, had wirelessly for a gunboat, which should arrive at any time.

"Then with your permission, sir, I shall take the prisoner aboard myself," said Grant. He turned to Digby. "I couldn't help you personally last night," he explained, "because I dared not endanger my own life until I had given this information to the authorities."

Digby accompanied Margo to the bungalow where they found her father, still very weak, propped up in a chair. He had already got the whole story from Grant, but his joy at seeing Margo was almost pathetic.

All day Margo busied herself in straightening up the bungalow, and Digby had the doctor's body removed to the post where arrangements for its burial were made.

It was not until after supper that Digby had a chance to talk with Margo. It was just such a night as his first one on Manuia when he had chatted with her on the porch of the bungalow. The strenuous activity

of the last few days seemed almost like a dream.

"I suppose you and your father will be going back on the Corsicana," Digby said.

"Dad is still very weak," Margo replied.

"But he could make the trip," said Digby.

"Yes, he *could*. But you've had very little time to learn the ins and outs of the management here—Digby."

Digby turned eagerly toward her.

"You mean you think he might stay on a bit to help?"

"Now that the mystery here has been solved and there's no more danger, I think he might," said Margo.

"And will you mind putting off your trip to the States?"

"I shall like staying," said Margo. But she looked away quickly.

For a moment they were silent, then Digby reached out and took her hand in his.

"This country certainly does *get* you," he said, a twinkle in his eyes.

THE END



BY THE FIRE

WHEN the shadows blur the sunset is the time I love the best,
By the crackle of a fire where a thousand fancies nest.
In its flames I see proud seigneurs tramp the galleons of Spain,
And I watch Drake send an Armada below the restless main.

I can see the hardy pilgrims landing on a coast line bleak,
And their taming of the savage after turning him each cheek.
In the crackle of the fire I can hear the song of guns,
Like the dim-remembered lullaby that stilled the warring Huns.

There are sweeter visions also in the embers in the grate,
Of an understanding mother and a dad who was her mate.
And a girl who brought me romance when the lilacs were in bloom,
Just her mem'ry warms the flickers that enhance the friendly gloom.

There are faces of old buddies long forgotten in life's rush,
They smile at me from the firelight in the long day's closing hush.
Yes, there's pleasure in the fire when the stars are hanging low—
It is then that mem'ry's treasure chest lies mirrored in its glow.

Pat Costello.

3 A