

A Strange Place To Be

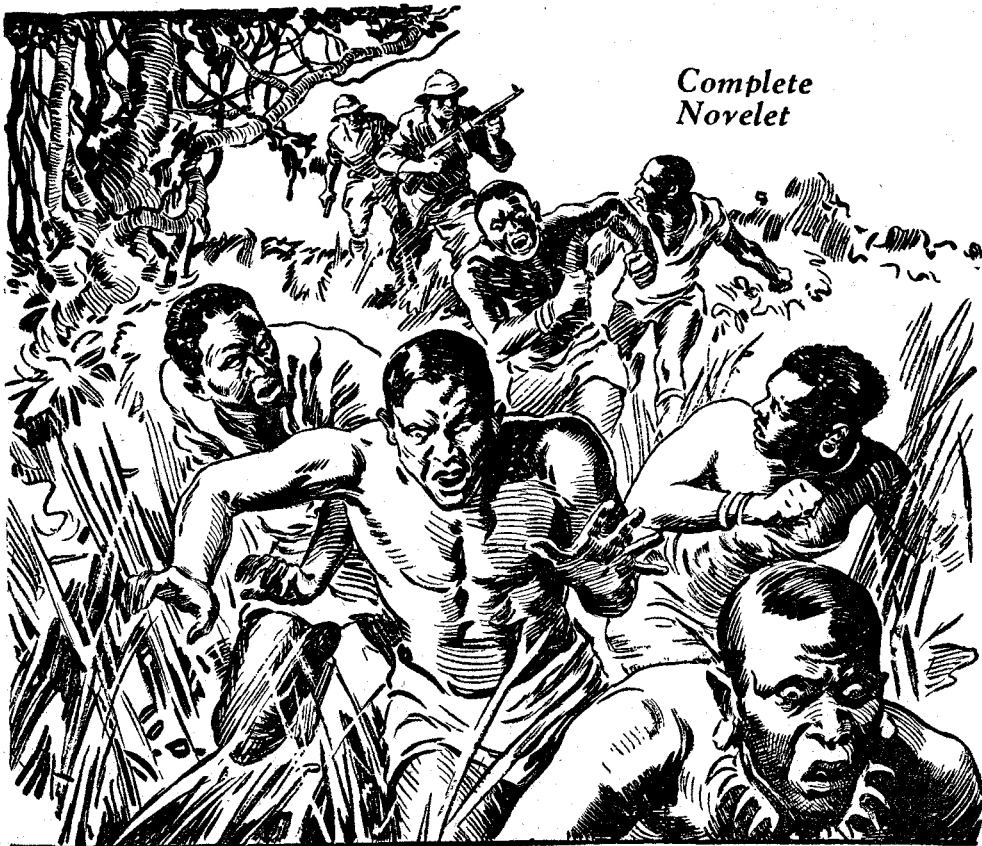
By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

Author of "Graveyard of the Gods," "Night on the Whangpoo," etc.

THERE wasn't even a mechanical piano. However, there was a gramophone which local sports occasionally fed with records, and there was a pingpong table, and a small billiards table. There were no electric lights, not even gas; a couple of benzine pressure lamps, looking like old-fashioned gas mantles, cast a half-hearted illumination, attracting mosquitoes by the millions and some wan, disconsolate moths driven indoors by the rains. For

this was the middle of the rainy season. It was also the middle of the malaria belt, a haphazard, sun-scorched, fly-ridden aggregation of corrugated iron shacks, a nest of fever, amoebic dysentery, yaws, leprosy, and elephantiasis, with, from back in the bush, just to make things interesting, occasional dashes of beri-beri.

Kelsing sat alone with a glass of warm beer, a cardboard coaster over it to keep insects from falling in. He didn't particularly want the stuff, but it was early, and the night was still



*Complete
Novelet*

much too hot to think of getting any sleep. So Kelsing sat and cursed his luck; and when the trouble started he was amazed and almost delighted.

There were perhaps eighteen men in the place, Frenchmen and half-castes and a one-eyed Tonkinese who scuttled here and there with drinks. There was also Madame, two-hundred-and-fifty-odd pounds of watchfulness who sat aloof and apart continuously fanning herself. Some of the customers were drunk and they were all pretty noisy, but there had been nothing to suggest a fight. It was, when it happened, one of these breath-taking flare-ups for which nobody could possibly be prepared. Maybe the heat, as well as the whisky, had something to do with it.

The billiards game was a miniature one, to fit the table, but the cues in use were full-sized. A player—Kelsing later learned that he had a reputation as a dangerous and un-

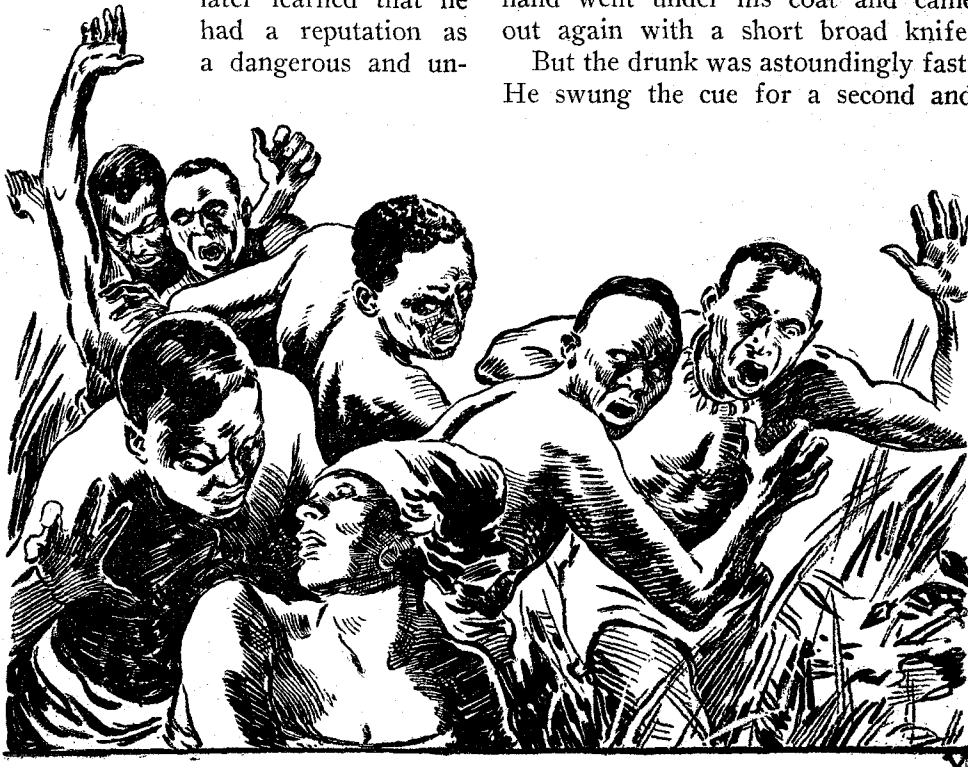
predictable drunkard—reaching far back for a shot, struck with the heavy end of one of these cues a tall, thick, tattooed Frenchman at a nearby table. The seated man slapped the cue angrily aside, cursing the player's clumsiness and making him miss an easy shot. He didn't look up, he didn't even look around. He had the arrogance of undisputed strength, the arrogance of a man who could ordinarily do as much with his frown as most men would venture to do with their fists.

The effect upon the player was immediate and violent. He clubbed the cue, and turned, snarling. Kelsing half rose from his seat.

"Look out!" You could kill a man with one of those cues.

The first blow was awkwardly struck and glanced off the left shoulder of the giant, who rose, roaring like a wounded bull. The giant's hand went under his coat and came out again with a short broad knife.

But the drunk was astoundingly fast. He swung the cue for a second and



more accurate blow, balancing on his toes. He would certainly have landed that blow—if it hadn't been for Grant Kelsing.

KELSING did not have to move fast, only to think fast. He was immediately in back of the man with the cue. He reached up, grabbed that cue as it was started on its downward stroke. He jerked it, twisted it. Blatantly, yammering like a lunatic, the player turned. Kelsing hit him neatly on the point of the chin, and he fell. Before anybody else in the place could move, Kelsing had hauled the man to his feet, had slapped him twice more in the chin while he held him there, and was dragging him toward the swinging doors. A moment later the man was lying flat on his face in the rain, moaning a little. Five minutes after that two bare-footed Melanesian cops in gaudy uniforms were carrying him away, and Madame was so excited and so pleased that she was actually tearing up the chit Kelsing had previously signed for his beer.

The assaulted giant, with his companion, came over to Kelsing's table.

"*Merci, monsieur.* You are English, eh?"

"American."

"*Ah, américain! Il vous remercie de tout mon coeur.* You save my life. You will perhaps have a drink with us, eh?"

"Well, I'll finish this one with you anyway."

If it came to that, they were both gigantic. Grant Kelsing, no little man, felt a dwarf beside the pair of them. The one he had saved was all French, bearded, with hard black teeth and hard dark blue eyes. He wore a dirty yachting cap, dirty ducks. There were small gold rings in his ears, and his arms were covered with tattooing. He smiled

a lot, but it was an unpleasant, calculating smile. His name was Malraux.

His companion spoke much better English, and looked like an Englishman; he had a stiff yellow-gray mustache and stiff yellow-gray hair. He said his name was Jacques Ramel.

They were both older than Kelsing himself, men in their middle forties, but magnificently built, easy-moving, unafraid. Obviously they had been in many a barroom fight. Malraux, though his left shoulder must have been badly bruised, made no complaint, seemed even to forget the thing. He beamed upon Grant Kelsing. Ramel, on the other hand, though polite, was more watchful, less talkative.

Ramel asked, "What in the world does a young American happen to be doing in a hole like Port Vila, if I may ask?"

Kelsing sipped his beer, shrugged his shoulders. "I wanted to have a look at the South Seas—wanted to go places the tourists don't go. So I've been knocking around with one yacht or small schooner after another."

"Paying passenger?"

"No, working passenger. I'm not a member of any union, but I've handled boats, in Long Island Sound, and I can do my share. Came here two days ago in a trading schooner from Suva. She was due to go to Noumea, where I figured I wouldn't have any trouble picking up something else, but when they got here they decided they'd only go as far south as Erromango. I thought I'd better stop here if I expected to pick up a boat. Erromango's not much of a place, from all I hear."

"We came from Suva," Malraux cried. "Stopped there on our way from Papeete. You see our schooner out there off the Comptoirs Français dock?"

"Yes, I saw her when she came in this morning. Looks like a sturdy little craft."

"Ah, she go anywhere, that boat! *C'est un rêve!*"

Ramel, who had been studying the American, said cautiously, "So you want to go to Noumea? Well, we're going down there ourselves, from here."

Malraux looked at his partner sharply, questioning, and it seemed to Kelsing—though he could not be sure—that a kick was exchanged under the table. Then Malraux brightened.

"Why not come on to Noumea with us, *alors?*" asked Ramel. "We really need a third hand. We can handle it all right most of the time, but if the going got rough it might be different. No pay, of course. But it would be better than staying here."

"Anything," Grant Kelsing said with feeling, "would be better than staying here!"

THE third day, at about noon, they dropped anchor in the middle of a small, lovely, reef-protected bay, a bay all by itself, dominated but timorously by a small high island. The place was utterly quiet. There was no beach, no dock, and except for a glimpse of some sort of white house far up on the plateau which comprised most of the center of the island, it might never before have been visited by man. Surf thundered distantly but without malice upon the reef; where they anchored there was no disturbance except when a flying fish skittered across the surface of the water, creating a trail of tremulous catspaws before it plopped back into the bay.

"Plantation up there," Malraux said thoughtfully, and Kelsing saw that although the island was edged with

jungle the top of the plateau itself, where the white house gleamed, was a mass of coconut trees. "Maybe we trade our sharks for some fruit, eh?"

They had caught two sharks that morning, four-footers, which lay in the after deck, not yet thoroughly dead, in everybody's way, and threatening to become a nuisance to the nostrils very soon. A basket of fresh oranges would be much more acceptable.

"Good idea," said Jacques Ramel. "The planter's sure to have coolie labor, whoever he is, and those boys are crazy about sharks. Suppose you climb up and make a dicker, Kelsing? He'll probably be delighted to see a fellow white man."

It was not that Kelsing minded the climb; on the contrary, the prospect of stretching his legs was a pleasant one. He had, however, a logical objection. "He'll probably be a Frenchman, and my French isn't much good."

"*Pas du tout*. Not at all," Ramel said heartily. "You speak like a native! *Venez*. I'll row you ashore in the tender. You won't have to lug the sharks up, of course. The planter'll be glad to send down coolies to do that."

Well, Kelsing was only a hand, and these men were joint owners of the forty-five foot *Tani*, so there was nothing for Kelsing to do. He thought it strange at the time. He was to understand, soon.

Yet he didn't sense danger. Not then! The little blue bay, hedged by the intensely green jungle, was far too lovely and quiet ever to suggest danger. Kelsing just thought it was odd, that was all. But he went.

There was no beach, and he was obliged to scramble ashore through a thicket of slimy-rooted mangroves and mahoes. Stepping out of the boat, he

lost his balance for an instant. Ramel grabbed his arm, righting him; but Ramel had been so rough about it that Kelsing's sun helmet toppled from his head into the water.

Ramel was all apologies as he rescued the helmet. "That's a shame! Clumsy of me! But you can't make a climb like that without a topee. Here—use mine. I'll be in the cabin for a while anyway so I shan't be needing it."

He clapped his own enormous helmet—the biggest Kelsing had ever seen—upon Kelsing's head.

"No, that's quite all right! Quite all right! Fits you perfectly. You may catch a bit of rain before you get back, but you couldn't hurt this old bonnet anyway. Well—cheero!"

Certainly the topee was no thing of beauty. It was huge, and very dirty. Heavy tropical rains had so pelted and soaked it that the red silk lining and the green felt of the underside of the brim had made their way smearingly up through the cork to the linen covering, so that what had once been white was mottled pink on top and a sickly green around the edges. It was a disgrace, that hat. But it would keep the sun off a man's head.

KELSING found a path readily enough. It twisted about for a time with seeming aimlessness, and the jungle was so thick that he could not see where he was going; then he came abruptly to the foot of a yellowish-white coral cliff.

The path continued, not too steep, not too narrow, and well defined, in a zigzag up the side of this cliff; but Kelsing did not ascend immediately.

The rain Jacques Ramel had predicted was already on its way—Kelsing could see it just beyond the reef, a slate-gray, fog-like mass approaching

swiftly. He knew something about tropical rainstorms. This one wouldn't last long, but it would come up suddenly, and while it did last, would be terrific. There was even a chance that a man climbing that cliff path, without the protection of trees or shrubbery, might be beaten off the edge by the sheer force of the downfall. He didn't care to chance that. And there was no hurry—there never was any hurry about anything in these parts, he had learned. So he found himself a clump of plantain trees, additionally protected by a huge overhanging mango, and there he waited for the storm.

It came, as he had known it would, with breathtaking suddenness and ferocity. The daylight disappeared as though somebody had snapped out a light, and a hollow thin thunder started in the leaves high above Kelsing's head. Then the thunder came closer. Drops of rain smashed their way through. A fetid warmth, as though of steam not visible, rose from the places where they fell. Kelsing lighted a cigarette and managed to get three good puffs before the violence of the rain-drops caught him. He was wetted, though not too seriously. He wasn't thinking about the rain anyway, as he stood there with his hands in his pockets, staring at nothing. He was thinking about the cruise of the *Tani* of Papeete.

There had been something funny about it from the very beginning. Malraux and Ramel, particularly Ramel, had been a shade too eager to get this third hand—a third hand they didn't really need at all, as Kelsing soon decided, for they were both excellent sailors and the *Tani* was shipshape and seaworthy in every respect. They had a funny way of looking at him. Malraux, in particular, was always staring

at him as though through the bars of a cage, as though at some sort of biological specimen rather than at a man. The bearded Frenchman, caught at this, invariably would break into one of his broad unpleasant smiles, showing his blackened teeth; but Kelsing was not reassured.

Jacques Ramel, though he behaved more carefully, was somehow even more disturbing. He looked and acted as though once he had been far above this business of sailing a schooner. In the old-fashioned phrase, he had once been a gentleman. What his education amounted to it was impossible for Kelsing to estimate; but his manners, when he wished them to be, were impeccable. He knew his world of men. Nevertheless there was something rotten about Jacques Ramel—something decadent, decayed. It was suspicious, too, that he insisted he was a Frenchman—he with his blond-gray hair worn stiff and short in the Prussian style, and his toothbrush mustache, and most of all his south British accent. Grant Kelsing didn't like him and didn't trust him.

Another thing that was strange—why had they turned north once they cleared Vila harbor, instead of south in the direction of Noumea? Malraux and Ramel, protesting that they meant indeed to go to Noumea, had explained that they wished to pick up a small shipment of copra somewhere in Ambrym, just a tiny shipment, as a favor to an old friend. It would only delay them a few days. Yet this explanation sounded fishy.

THEN there had been the business of the sea chest, which had happened the previous day. The chest was under Malraux's bunk in the tiny cabin the three of them shared, and Kelsing

had never seen it opened or even touched. The owners were on deck, Kelsing was below straightening some things in his bag. A circular belt buckle without a belt, a souvenir from some forgotten island, popped out and annoyingly, perversely, rolled under Malraux's bunk, behind the chest. Kelsing stooped, cursing. Then he got to his knees, and thinking of innumerable not-very-funny jokes about collar buttons rolling under beds, he began to fumble with his hands.

He did not hear Malraux approach. The first thing he knew of the Frenchman's appearance was when a hand descended upon each of his shoulders and he was hauled to his feet as though he had been a sack of coffee. Malraux was shouting something in French, and his face was twisted with fury, his little dark blue eyes were hot with rage. Kelsing, gasping, broke one shoulder loose.

The space in which they struggled was not large—cabins in 45-foot cruisers never are—and when Malraux went for the knife it sucked Kelsing's breath out. For Kelsing had no possible weapon. And Malraux, for a reason unknown by the working passenger, was a madman; it was in his eyes, his taut, bared lips.

It was Ramel's voice which saved Kelsing. Ramel, always a shade the superior of his companion in any pinch, possibly because of his greater intelligence, sensed from the deck that something was wrong below, and he spoke sharply, loudly.

"What's the trouble down there?"

It straightened Malraux, sobered him, though he still held the knife and still glared at Kelsing.

Ramel, getting no answer, took a chance and left the wheel—they were sailing before the wind in a quiet sea

—and hastened below. His small gray eyes moved back and forth swiftly. Then he stepped forward, took the knife out of his friend's hand and started to speak rapidly in French. Kelsing could only catch a few words here and there. He gathered that both men were using many Polynesian words as well.

The affair was settled almost as suddenly as it had started. Raymond Malraux apologized with profusion and embarrassment. He must have been dazed by the sun on the deck, he explained; he must have been a little giddy. Once he had lost a valuable crucifix as well as several valued photographs at the hands of a thief who came aboard the *Tani* while in port, and recently he had been thinking about that crucifix and those photographs. Coming down into the dim cabin after the dizzying glare of the deck, and seeing Kelsing kneeling before the sea chest and apparently fumbling with its lock, had driven him wild. He had not realized, until he heard his friend's voice, what it was he was doing. He hoped that Kelsing would forgive him.

All this was offered in Malraux's best English and with apparent sincerity. What was Kelsing to do? He shrugged, he even managed to smile, and he said of course it was all right, forget it. They shook hands.

But all the time Kelsing, who had never thought of it before, could not help wondering what was in that sea chest.

HE was remembering these things now as he waited at the foot of the cliff for the rain to stop. He pulled absently at a wet cigarette and stared at the black earth between his feet and wondered what was going to come to him this trip.

Presently the rain ceased, as abruptly as though turned off by one twist of a celestial spigot. The thunder above was no more. In its stead there came a sad irregular dripping as drops baffled by the leaves of the mango and plantain were finding a more leisurely route to the jungle earth. The earth itself seemed to exhale, as though sighing in gladness because the beating was past. Things lifted themselves. It became very hot. And it was light again, for the sun had reappeared.

Grant Kelsing wiped his face, replaced Ramel's monstrous topee, and started up the cliff path. A minute earlier a furious torrent of chocolate brown water had been hissing and searing its way down this path, but now the path was clear and not even a rivulet showed. The stones were loose and sometimes slid away under Kelsing's feet, but for the most part the path was wide and not steep and the going was easy.

When he reached the top, the edge of the plateau, he saw that the white building visible from the *Tani* was not in fact a plantation house, but a *kiosque*, octagonal in shape, with two doors, and jalousied on all sides. This *kiosque*, not in the least like those of Paris, is a characteristic piece of architecture in the New Hebrides where servants are cheap and breezes treasured. It is in fact an outside, detached dining room in which the master of the house and his family and guests can eat, far from the smells of the kitchen, the heat of the main house itself, the noise of the coolie quarters. With wide jalousies on all sides, virtually open to the air, it usually contains no more than a table and a few chairs, possibly a sideboard.

This particular *kiosque*, which

seemed deserted, was on Kelsing's left as he reached the top of the cliff, and he glanced toward it, casually at first, then more sharply. *Was* it deserted? Had he not heard something move around in there? But this was foolishness! Because of the open blinds he could see practically all of the inside of the *kiosque* and if anybody were in there he must be on hands and knees. Kelsing did not stop to investigate. He was much more interested in the plantation house itself, which was perhaps seventy-five yards away.

There was a small garden, even some attempt at a lawn, and on the veranda—a small one but new—were several comfortable wicker chairs, one of them rocking gently in the breeze. There was nobody in sight.

There was nobody in sight; yet Grant Kelsing had the curious conviction that he was being watched. He felt this the instant he came into sight of the plantation house.

Behind that house was a large and well kept compound, huts for the coolies, copra storage sheds, an open drying platform for copra when the rains were not on, a smoke shed, a sacking shed. Smoke curled from several of the outside stoves among the coolie houses, but there was nobody in sight. Not even a dog to bark, a chicken to cluck stupidly.

Beyond the compound were coconut trees, a forest of them, sweeping away toward the blue ocean the other side of the island, clearly visible. They lifted and tossed their fronds indifferently, and the breeze played across the tops of them as you have seen breezes ruffle a field of winter wheat. Further away, nearer the shore, and on right and left at some distance, were patches of jungle either half cleared or not cleared at all. There was plenty

of evidence of human labor here. Somebody was bravely attempting to clear the whole island of jungle and to plant it with coconut.

GRANT KELSING started slowly toward the house. He was uneasy. Photographed, this scene would have been one of vast tranquillity. Seen, it was something different. There was a tenseness, a strained pause, a waiting in the air as Kelsing started forward. He had a hunch that something was going to happen very soon.

Something did.

The parti-colored sun helmet left Kelsing's head as though jerked off from behind, and he heard a sound like a whip crack. There was no smoke; he saw no gun; but he knew what had happened. Somebody in one of those seemingly blank windows had taken a shot at him—and had missed by rather less than an inch.

He wheeled about, threw himself on the ground, wriggled to the nearer door of the *kiosque*, scrambled inside. On the floor, panting, he waited.

Then there came a voice behind him, from directly behind, inside the *kiosque* with him, and it said, in French:

"If you move, Monsieur, I will blow you to pieces."

Very slowly he turned his head. The girl was not eight feet away, a double-barreled shotgun in her hands. The two muzzles faced Kelsing. The two hammers were cocked.

The girl was not more than eighteen or nineteen, a brunette, slim and straight, strikingly beautiful. She wore white linen, fresh and smart as any mannequin at Longchamps. But her features were not those of a mannequin. Her mouth, very small, twitched a bit, and her forefinger on the nearer of the two triggers was not altogether

motionless; but her eyes blazed with determination, her tiny nostrils were drawn tight and firm, there was that in her pretty chin which said she meant business.

Grant Kelsing stared for a long time. Then he said quietly, "I would rather you spoke English. I don't understand French very well. Do you speak English?"

"Of course I speak English. My mother was an American."

"Ah," said Kelsing.

"Why do you say 'ah'?"

"I don't really know. Why do you point that pair of cannons at me? It wouldn't take much to set them off."

"I know that. Why should I not set them off, as you express it? You have come here to kill my father!"

"I never saw your father," Kelsing said. "I don't know who he is, or who you are."

"It is true," said a voice from the doorway. "This man has never seen me. At least, I have never seen him, I am sure."

The planter entered very quietly, coming from the direction of the house. You would have known him immediately for this girl's father. His mouth was small and firm like hers, his eyes dark, fine, alert. He showed no fear or anger. In each hand he held one of the longest pistols Grant Kelsing had ever seen—heavy pistols but thin, flat, exquisitely polished, with smooth Circassian walnut stocks inlaid with ivory. One, the one in his left hand, smelled even then of gunpowder. The planter did not point either of these weapons at Kelsing, but this threat was not necessary. You knew from the way he held them, from a glance at his firm proud eyes, that this man could and would shoot to kill.

II

"I DID not know you had come here, *chérie*," the planter said gently to his daughter. "I thought you had gone back behind that hibiscus hedge. You would be safer there. I do not believe they know that you are here on the island."

"Should I go in hiding when you are in danger?" she asked.

Grant Kelsing said, "I still don't know what this is all about, but off-hand, judging from the way the young lady's holding that shotgun, I wouldn't say that she was in danger of anything so much as becoming a murderer. I do wish you'd put it down," he said to her. "It makes me nervous. It would make *anybody* nervous."

She smiled, and it seemed to Kelsing that she was admiring him a little. But promptly her eyes became hard again. She lowered the shotgun, stood it against the wall, and pushed both triggers.

"There was never anything in it," she confessed. "We're out of shells."

Kelsing sighed and leaned back against the wall. He felt a great deal better. The planter held the two long matched pistols negligently as he stared out between the jalousies toward the head of the path up which Kelsing had come.

"I could have killed you, and almost did," he confessed unemotionally. "I thought at first you were Jacques Ramel. That's Ramel's topee. I couldn't fail to recognize it."

"Ramel's a taller man than I am."

"True, *monsieur*, but you are not short yourself. Your shoulders are as broad as his. And when you first came over the top of the cliff path you were leaning low with the effort of climbing, which made me uncertain about your

height. So I waited an instant. I am glad I did. When you straightened I saw that you were not Ramel, though you wore his topee and though that's the *Tani* below in the bay, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes, that's the *Tani*."

"I couldn't possibly mistake that stay-sail and that long boom. Very few stay-sail schooners in these parts. Where is Ramel, then? And where is Raymond Malraux?"

"In the schooner, as far as I know. Ramel rowed me ashore."

"What did he tell you to do?"

"Come up here and ask the planter, whoever he might be, if he'd care to exchange some fresh fruit for a couple of sharks."

"Did he tell you who I am?"

"No. I don't know that even yet."

The planter ignored this. He had been staring out between the jalousies like a man who expects something. Now another downpour of rain came, suddenly, tumultuously, and he turned away, satisfied apparently that nobody would try to ascend the path for a time. He walked to the center of the room, laid one pistol on the table, opened the other, took a large cartridge from his coat pocket, inserted the cartridge directly into the barrel of the pistol. These were, Kelsing now noticed, duelling pistols—French duelling pistols—long, lean, utterly accurate, heavy-calibered, single-shot weapons. The planter clamped his pistol shut, picked up the other.

"If you are telling me the truth, *monsieur*," he said, "I owe you an apology for shooting your hat off."

"Did you do it with one of those," Kelsing could not help asking, "at that distance?"

"Yes."

"You're a fine marksman!"

The planter smiled for the first time, but it was a brief smile, almost an absent-minded one. "Yes," he murmured, "and Ramel and Malraux know that. Perhaps that is why they sent you up first. As an innocent decoy, *hein?* Tell me about it, *monsieur*. Mind you! I do not agree to believe what you say! My daughter's life and my own are at stake, and I am bound to be skeptical. But tell me about it."

THE rain had ceased, and with its stopping he had returned to the side of the *kiosque* nearest the top of the path and was again staring out. The pistols hung at his side.

Grant Kelsing told his story swiftly and without waste of words. The planter did not stir, did not at any instant take his gaze from the top of the path. Afterward he said slowly:

"I believe you, *monsieur*, and I am sincerely sorry that I shot your hat off. But it was not a time for the asking of questions. Usually"—he smiled a little—"usually we are not so inhospitable when a white man visits us. But Raymond Malraux and Jacques Ramel are not white men. They are devils!"

"If you really expect them to storm this place," Kelsing suggested, "wouldn't it be better to get out some other weapons than two single-shot pistols?"

"*Hélas!* we have no others! As Thérèse told you, we are out of shells for the shotgun. I gave her that just in the hope that she might frighten somebody with it in an emergency. And my rifle dropped over the cliff only the other day, in a slight accident. It was hopelessly smashed."

"Where are the others? Surely you and your daughter aren't the only persons on the island?"

"Except the natives, yes. I sent the natives out into the jungle on the far side as soon as the *Tani* appeared. They are ignorant fellows, without arms, and after all it is not *their* fight."

"But why," Kelsing asked with growing exasperation, "should Ramel and Malraux want to kill you? They don't look like a very pleasant pair of customers, but after all men don't go around assassinating strangers simply for the fun of it."

"I am no stranger to them," the planter said sadly. "They picked you up because you are an American and alone. I am not sure, but I suspect that they were not quite certain which island my plantation was on. There is another planter, alone on another island a little north of this, and his name is likewise Carot, though we are not relations. Doubtless they inquired in passing here on their way from Papeete to Port Vila, and doubtless they heard about both of us. They would not dare to make too close an inquiry, for that would be remembered afterward when I had been found murdered. So they needed a decoy to go ahead of them. If the wrong planter was up here, nothing would happen to you and they would not be seen. Then they could go to the other island and find me, and kill me."

"I would have seen them! I could have identified them!"

"I see that you do not truly know this pair, *monsieur*. You would not be considered. You would be murdered also, when you had played your innocent part, and your body would be weighted and dumped overboard. Then they could change their course for Noumea, keeping out of the way of other vessels. They had cleared for Noumea in the first place. They could explain the long while they took in

getting there by contrary winds—the *Tani* has no auxiliary—or by miscalculation in the course, or by both.

"Your absence they could explain too. You had fallen overboard one night when you were alone on watch. They had missed you, put back, looked for hours in vain. This too would help account for the long time it took them to get from Vila to Noumea. The authorities might be skeptical; they *would* be skeptical, knowing the reputations of these two scoundrels; but what could they prove? The real evidence, your body, would be at the bottom of the Pacific."

"The natives! Suppose some of the natives saw them, or saw the ship—"

"I think they have taken that into account also. No doubt they remember that old saying about dead men telling no tales."

"But they couldn't slaughter a whole—"

"You do not know these two as I know them, *monsieur*."

The girl, very frightened, her eyes very wide, was back against a wall. Her hands were over her mouth. She was staring at her father. Kelsing, too, stared at Carot, the planter who spoke in a low even voice, never relaxing his watch on the path.

"But why," Kelsing cried again, "should Ramel and Malraux want to kill you?"

"That is a long story, *monsieur*." The planter sighed a little. "But it is a story you are in decency entitled to hear, since I fired upon you without warning. Thérèse, you, too, are entitled to hear it, so that you will know what these men are like and how you should act when they come up the cliff here—as I am sure they will do.

"I had started to explain this to my daughter, *monsieur*," he went on,

"when first I sighted the *Tani*. But there was not time to finish it. So I will tell it now."

RAIN was falling again, but it was not a heavy rain, and Carot did not move from his position of watchfulness. He was obliged to raise his voice in order that they could hear him.

"About four months ago, before you, Thérèse *ma chérie*, had come out here from France, I had an opportunity to turn over this plantation to a friend for a few weeks. I am the only white man here, *vous comprenez, monsieur*, and it is not often I get a chance to leave. There was not time for a visit to France, or to the United States, where also I have many friends, but there was time to go to Tahiti, where I managed a plantation before I bought this one. A friend took me to Vila in a small schooner, and there I bought a return ticket to Papeete on the Messageries Maritimes. I had only a few weeks in Tahiti, which is always too short in that place. A lifetime would be too short a while to spend in Tahiti, *monsieur*. Have you visited it?"

"Yes, and I agree with you."

"Ah, yes! Well, I had only a few weeks, and I called on this old friend and that, and the last one on my list was the trader Hennessy, part Irish and part Polynesian and the only half caste on a small island about half a day's sail from Papeete. It is a lonely place and not many schooners stop there, none regularly. I was obliged to charter one. I chartered the *Tani*.

"I should have known better. I was warned that nobody was safe with a precious pair like Jacques Ramel and Raymond Malraux, and indeed I knew of their reputation from my previous stay in Tahiti. But I was happy, and I scoffed at warnings. We went to

visit my friend Hennessy in this lonely island. Besides Ramel and Malraux and myself there was a native hand, a young Solomon Islander, a good sailor but deathly afraid of his employers. He was afraid even to run away from them, that boy. He was virtually their slave.

"Hennessy was charming, as always. He knew about these rascals and did not like them, but because I was with them he insisted that we all stop at his house for the few days we were to spend there. He even invited the Solomon Islander, but Malraux and Ramel decreed that this lad should remain aboard the *Tani*, which was anchored a couple of hundred yards off the beach.

"Now surely there seemed to be no cause for worry here. I myself had practically no money with me—I had been prudent enough to leave most of my cash in Papeete at the Banque de l'Indo-Chine—and Hennessy, poor fellow, had never made a cent out of his trading, for he was much too good natured to be successful. It would seem that there was nothing for Ramel and Malraux to do but enjoy themselves. Which they did.

"Hennessy, I said, was poor, notoriously poor. But on the second afternoon, as he and I were taking a walk along his little beach there, his own piece of property, I saw and pounced upon something which took the breath out of me. Have you ever heard of ambergris, *chérie—monsieur?*"

The girl nodded slowly. She did not try to say anything. Kelsing said, "Ambergris . . . I've heard of it, yes. I've never seen a piece."

"Few men have," said Carot. "It is one of the rarest substances on earth. And the curious thing about it is its origin. A whale is sick, you compre-

hend? A whale is sick, and it throws off this nasty spongy substance, which floats. Sometimes it floats for many miles, many hundreds of miles. Sometimes it washes ashore somewhere, but even when it does it is not always found. A friend of mine in Paris, a chemist employed by a big perfumery company, once told me about it and showed me samples. For it is invaluable to fine perfumery makers. A little goes a long way with them—but then, very little is ever found.

"At first, as my friend explained to me, ambergris is like a large jellyfish, mostly dark purple in color. If it is washed ashore and remains unfound for a long time, and particularly if it remains exposed to a tropical sun, it shrivels considerably and stiffens and becomes eventually a faintly yellowish white. It looks like a particularly fine piece of coral, perhaps the size of your fist. This is by far the most valuable kind of ambergris, for the sun, through forgotten years, has performed some chemical change in it which makes it so. It has no regular market value, for there is too little of it found to justify this. But the white sort is worth, always, hundreds of thousands of francs an ounce. A piece the size of your fist, *monsieur*, would make you a very rich man."

"And you found one of these?" Kelsing asked.

"I pounced upon it! I raised it, shouting with joy. 'Coral,' snorted my friend Hennessy, and 'Coral' said the owners of the *Tani* who had come up from behind us. 'No, no!' I cried. 'Not coral, but ambergris! I have seen it before, and I know! Hennessy, *mon vieux*, you are wealthy!' Bewildered, he pointed out that I had found the thing. 'But on your property,' I replied. 'So it is yours. You are rich, *mon ami*!'

"WE took it into his little house. We made him bring out wine, and we toasted him as a millionaire, laughing at him, congratulating him on his extraordinary luck. Ramel and Malraux seemed every bit as excited and every bit as happy about the discovery as I was myself. They cheered and laughed and sang.

"We agreed that Hennessy should sail back to Papeete with us the following morning. There was a man in Papeete, a Doctor D'Entrecasteaux, who was an acknowledged expert in these matters and would be able to identify the stuff for us without question. He would know, too, with what French and American firms my friend Hennessy should get in touch in order to get the most for this lucky find. We would start first thing in the morning.

"Just before the party broke up, Hennessy took me to one side and pressed the piece of what looked like coral into my hands. He insisted that it was mine. I laughed and told him that it was his by right. But he was a little drunk and very persistent, and I was tired, so at last, still laughing, I consented to take it for the night. It was simply to keep him quiet, *comprenez-vous?* Before I went to bed I thrust the thing under my pillow.

"Possibly this was the reason for my tossing. I should have slept well that night. I do ordinarily, and especially after I have had much wine. But possibly the thing under my pillow had its own peculiar effect on me that night and kept me awake. This was why I happened to hear the sound in Hennessy's room.

"It wasn't a loud sound and there was nothing notably strange about it—a sort of gurgle, I'd describe it. There was, really, no reason why I should take alarm. But I did. For a time I

lay there, calling myself a fool, listening for further sounds and hearing none. But I was not able to go to sleep.

"You remember, *monsieur*, how when you were a boy and were frightened by shadows in the room where you slept, those shadows became nothing when finally you summoned your courage and went to them and touched them? Your hand went through them, and thereafter to you they were only shadows, nothing more, not bears or robbers, as once in spite of yourself you had believed.

"Well, I thought to do the same thing this night in Hennessy's house. I couldn't sleep, my imagination was troubling me because of a silly chance sound I had heard or thought I'd heard, and the only thing to do about it, I decided, was go and have a look. I didn't expect to find anything wrong. I was simply pampering an overheated imagination. I called it childishness, but I *did* want sleep. So I got out of bed and went to Hennessy's room across the hall.

"There was moonlight streaming through the windows. The mosquito netting over the bed had been torn down. This was the first thing I noticed.

"You know, *monsieur*, that in these parts we do not use much furniture. Nor do we have large wardrobes, most of us. In Hennessy's bedroom, besides the bed itself, were only two straight-back chairs, a small table without any drawer, and a clothes closet, nothing else. There was not even a rug.

"The closet door was open, and Hennessy's clothes were scattered on the floor. But still this did not disturb me so much as the somehow alarming fact that the mosquito netting was not canopied over the bed.

"More than the netting had been violated in that bed, I soon saw. The pillows had been hauled this way and that, and slashed with sharp knives. The sheets had been ripped off. Hennessy himself lay on his back, in the midst of this ruin, and his throat was cut from ear to ear. There was a lot of blood. More blood than I had ever seen before—and I served in the war, *monsieur*."

CAROT the planter shook his head, wiped his face. For the first time his voice was edged with emotion. But he never took his gaze from the head of the cliff path.

"Now comes the part of which I am not proud. But you must understand that I had my daughter to think of, that I could no longer help my friend Hennessy, who was most emphatically dead, and that I was unarmed and dealing with two rascals, either one of whom was powerful enough to break my neck with his bare hands.

"I went back to my own bedroom. I did not lock the door, didn't think of it, and for that matter I don't suppose there was a key in it. Possibly there was not even a lock.

"I took the thing I had found from under my pillow and stood there holding it, trembling a little. Yes, I trembled, I admit it. Then I heard the footsteps in the hall.

"The footsteps of two heavy men. Very faint, a mere scuffle. But in that utter silence there would be no mistaking it. They were approaching my room, Ramel and Malraux. They had killed Hennessy in his sleep and had searched his room. They had gone to the front to search the shop on the chance that he might have left the ambergris there. And now, still with-

out it, they were about to try the only other possibility—me.

"*Chérie—monsieur*, I am not ashamed to say it, I jumped out of the window. What reason was there for me to stay and be cut down like a cornered beast? I have fought in my time and I am ready to fight again. My *croix de guerre, monsieur*, as my daughter can tell you, has three palms on it, and I have been cited for gallantry many times. Nor have I fought only in the war! These pistols you see me holding have been used by me in the field of honor on more than one occasion.

He was most anxious that this fact should be understood. His face was wet with perspiration, but his hands and features were steady. Kelsing nodded a little, instinctively, though of course the planter did not see this.

"I went out the window, making no sound. My thought was that I would see that my friend was avenged in the manner provided by law. Indeed, it was the only way I could be sure of it! I ran to where the tender was beached. I pushed out alone. I rowed. All the rest of that night I rowed, and several hours of the next morning, until at last I came to Tahiti. Not to Papeete, I was still far from there, but I walked to a village where there was a motorcar and I had myself driven to the city.

"I was exhausted by furious rowing, and yet in that time I had had a chance to think. I thought: Ramel and Malraux will know what has happened to me, and they will take advantage of this to throw upon me all the blame for Hennessy's murder. They were scoundrels and known as such, but there were three of them—for though the Solomon Islander had been aboard the *Tani* I was sure they would make

him back whatever story they told. I would be the murderer!

"THE *Messagéries Maritimes* vessel I was to have caught was in dock, and it sailed that night for Suva and Port Vila, and I sailed with it. I did not go to the authorities.

"This was perhaps foolish of me. I realize that now. But I had a daughter to think of. You *chérie*, were on your way to Port Vila by the Dutch ship, knowing of no trouble, coming to these parts for the first time after your schooling in France. I had also my friend on this plantation to think of. If I did not arrive in time he would miss his own leave, and he had looked forward to that for five years. You know that there is only one ship every six weeks from Tahiti to these parts. I could not afford to miss it, I thought. And I did not. Having run away so far, I ran farther."

Carot wiped his face with his sleeve, the long pistols dangling from his little pale hands. He sighed.

"All this happened three months ago. Here we get very little news, of course, only what is brought by occasional trading schooners. I heard far-away echoes of Hennessy's murder, but I heard too that nobody had been arrested. And I began to understand.

"Malraux and Ramel, like me, had hurried away. But they had not reported the killing. They had not set the gendarmes on my track as I had expected them to do. Somehow they had managed to clear themselves of suspicion—how this was done I do not know, but they are a clever pair, those two, and they know those parts. Then what would they do? If I were arrested the piece of stuff from Hennessy's beach would be confiscated as evidence. *This* was what they wanted,

not my arrest, not even my execution! They believed I had it. They had good reason to believe this. They would come after me and get it.

"And this is why, *chérie* and *monsieur*, this is why when I saw the *Tani* drop anchor here this morning I sent the coolies back into the jungle and sent you, *chérie*, to another part of the jungle—where you did not go. And this is why, *monsieur*, when I saw you come up the path with Ramel's topee on your head, I fired at it."

There was a considerable silence. The sun was out again, blasting through the opening of the jalousies, laying bars of furious white-yellow upon the floor. Discouraged drops left over from the latest downpour dripped off the eaves. The bay below, with the little schooner in the center of it, was peaceful and incredibly beautiful.

Kelsing muttered, "And all because a whale was sick."

"Ah, there, *monsieur*, is the strangest part of it. The whale was *not* sick! Though I did not go to the gendarmes in those last few hours in Papeete before the M.M. ship sailed, I did risk a visit to Dr. D'Entrecasteaux, and I showed him the thing I had found. He is an authority; but I could not bring myself to believe him when he laughed and told me I knew far less about ambergris than I'd supposed. I could not believe this. I mailed the thing back to my friend in Paris, who surely would not lie to me. Only the other day, when a native sailed over from Ambrym with mail, did I receive his answer. Well, Dr. D'Entrecasteaux had been right. The thing I had picked up was nothing but coral. An exceptional bit of coral worth perhaps fifty centimes in a souvenir shop."

The girl cried, "Could you not tell the men this?"

"I could have told them," Carot said sadly, "but they would not have believed me. They would think it a trick. They would torture me in an effort to get what they supposed the truth. And eventually they would kill me to shut my mouth. This is why they have come today."

She started toward him, tottering a little, her arms extended. He seemed to feel her approach, though he did not turn. He lifted one hand in signal for her to stay back.

"There may be shooting at any moment," he explained quietly, apologetically. "They will certainly come this way. It is the only way they can get up here without walking half around the island and approaching from the other side of the house."

"Suppose they do that?" Kelsing asked quickly. "They've had time. Wouldn't it be a good idea if I went back there and—"

Both doors of the *kiosque* were open. One was near the head of the path, though it did not actually face this. The other, opposite, faced the house, and it was through this the shots came.

They came a ripping, tearing sound, not notably loud but nasty, persistent, mechanically spaced and very fast. There were many. It would not have been possible to count them.

Carot's legs went out from under him and he fell upon his face, half turning. He made no outcry, he never had a chance. One of the pistols, knocked from his hand by the force of the fall, skithered across the floor.

The girl tried to scream, and couldn't. Grant Kelsing, with no time to be polite, whirled around and struck her with the back of his left arm. She fell through the other door, and Kelsing closed it.

III

RAYMOND MALRAUX stood in the doorway. He had come from around the house. There was a sub-machine gun cradled in his right arm, and a wisp of blue-gray smoke hung, startled, at its muzzle.

The submachine gun was pointed low. Malraux, shooting through the doorway at some distance, had purposely held it that way. He had fired only at the planter's legs, breaking both of them in many places.

It happened very quickly. Carot tried to raise himself on one elbow. It is possible that he was not even conscious as he did so but was acting only on blind physical instinct. It is almost certain that he could not see, could not aim properly, even if he intended to shoot. But Raymond Malraux did not stop to reason this out. Malraux squeezed his right hand, and the sub-machine gun sputtered again. After that Carot was motionless. It seemed a long moment before the blood began to appear in a dozen places about his head and body. Malraux looked at Kelsing. Killer though he was, Malraux was excited. He swung the barrel of the gun in Kelsing's direction.

Jacques Ramel appeared behind him, grabbed his shoulder, hauled him back, cursing. Ramel cursed in French, rapidly, explosively, and though Kelsing could not make out the words themselves the meaning was clear enough. Ramel was wild with anger because of that second volley. They had wanted this man alive, for the present! *Alive not dead!* But only a glance was needed to tell them that Carot was dead. No physician's certificate was necessary, no examination.

Ramel looked at Kelsing, who did not move. Kelsing had two swift

thoughts. One: now I know what was in that sea chest; and the other: I still have a chance if they haven't seen the girl.

"Him, too," Malraux growled, and lifted the gun.

"Wait, you fool!"

Then Ramel said slowly to Grant Kelsing, "Your life depends on how you answer this, American. Did this man tell you what we want here?"

Very quietly Kelsing replied, "Yes, he said you were after the ambergris."

"Ah! And did he tell you where it was hidden?"

"Yes," said Kelsing.

There was no sound from beyond the door Kelsing had closed. Thérèse Carot presumably was lying on the ground out there, not more than a few feet from the spot where Kelsing stood. Had she fainted? Had the fall stunned her, and would she moan or scream when she recovered consciousness? Or did she understand that her one chance lay in silence? At least, neither of the Frenchmen seemed to be aware of her existence. They could not have seen her as they approached the *kiosque*, they could not have seen that Kelsing pushed something outside and then shut the door after it.

"Ah," said Ramel softly.

HE stooped beside the hideously riddled body of the planter and took from the right hand the pistol it held. He did this very quietly, thoughtfully. But when he straightened he moved with extraordinary speed.

The attack caught Kelsing unprepared. He had not known just what to expect, but certainly not this. He saw Ramel spring toward him, saw the clubbed pistol in Ramel's hand. He started to raise his own arms to cover his head, but he was not quick enough.

Something went puffily, blackly. *Boom!*—a hollow, faraway sound. Then through the blackness, languid streamers of crimson floated downward. The streamers curled, began to twist back upon themselves. The black settled, thinned, became grayish.

Though he was unable to struggle at the time, Kelsing was aware of the fact that they were tying him hand and foot. He thought for a while that they were choking him. Something, certainly, was pressing against his throat. Veils of gray slid past his eyes. He blinked, and found that he could see.

However, this was not a great advantage for what he could see was no more than one of Ramel's feet and a portion of wall beyond. He was lying on his side, the floor pressing his left cheek. His hands were tied in front of him. His legs were tied behind, tied together at the ankles and then pulled far back toward his head. The rope that tied his ankles—strong slim rope they must have brought to tie Carot with before torturing him—was passed once around his neck from behind.

When he moved any part of his body in any way, the effect was to tighten the rope around his neck, already so tight that it made spots swim before his eyes. He was as helpless as a trussed pig.

Ramel's voice came. "He told you where it was hidden. Well—*where?*"

It was half a minute before Kelsing could reply. The words felt as though they were fired from a cannon in his chest and obliged to tear their white-hot way up past the cramped muscles of his throat. His ears were ringing. His mouth was appallingly dry. "Buried . . . Buried it."

"All right. Where?"

"Didn't see it myself. He told me—in case you killed him . . . Back of

the house, straight back. One of the first coco palms has a mark shoulder-high."

"Carot's shoulder, I suppose?"

Kelsing did not answer this directly. He gasped on, struggling to disgorge those painful words. "Star-shaped mark, he said. Ten feet beyond that, straight line toward ocean. . . ."

"And dig?"

"And dig," gasped Kelsing.

ONE of them might have stayed there while the other went out to confirm this statement, but they were too eager to get their treasure to think of it. Also they had much to do. It was not well that they should linger too long on this island.

Malraux, probably still hot with the brute urge to kill, lowered the submachine gun and placed its muzzle against the side of Kelsing's neck. Kelsing could feel the thing there. He could not see it.

"*Maintenant?*" asked Malraux.

"No, no, you fool! Not now! Suppose he's lied to us? We've got to keep him this way until we make sure. You start to work on those coolies and I'll do the digging."

They went; and Kelsing waited for what seemed a very long while, hour-long minutes packed with agony while he struggled to breathe. He heard a soft step. A sob. Then someone's hands were busy with the rope that bound his ankles, and though the hands tried to be gentle the strain on Kelsing's neck was such that he must have lost consciousness for a moment or two. His head was banging furiously from excess of blood. His ears rang.

Now the rope around his neck was gone, and the hands were busy upon the other rope binding his wrists.

"*Oh, mon père! Mon père!*"

He whispered, when he was able to whisper at all, "You had better not look at him, *mademoiselle*. Try not to look at him."

He sat up, toppled sideward, sat up again, grimacing in pain. Somehow he got to his feet. He led the silently sobbing girl outside.

"Wait here," he whispered. "It will do no good for you to look at him. There is nothing you can do to help him, now." He squeezed her shoulders a little, shook her gently, made sure that she could stand. "Wait here. I will be right back, *mademoiselle*."

He returned to the *kiosque*, closing the door behind him. The pistol which had fallen from Carot's hand still lay on the floor, unnoticed by the invaders. Kelsing opened it, found it loaded. Grimly, gritting his teeth, he turned to the red mass that had a few minutes earlier been the planter of this island—a mass around which already the flies were busy. Swallowing hard, forcing himself to fight back sickness, he knelt beside it and reached into the coat pocket from which he had seen Carot draw a cartridge. The pocket was empty.

It was hard, one of the hardest things he had ever done, but he made himself search every other pocket of that bloodied heap. He found no cartridges.

Outside, the girl had not stirred. He took her gently by the shoulders, pointed to the cliff path in front of them.

"Come. We've got to move fast. The tender must be somewhere ashore down there, or even if it isn't we can swim. I know the *tani* well. I can sail her alone, and we'll be out of this place in twenty minutes on a breeze like this. Come on. Hurry."

She opened her eyes and saw the boat below. She did not seem to see

anything else. Like a sleepwalker, Kelsing helping her, she took a step or two forward. From the other side of the house came a spatter of machine-gun fire, a shrill confused screaming, another burst of machine-gun fire, then silence again.

THE girl shook her head. "No!" She had not moved her lips to say it, but the word was round and unmistakable.

"Come on," Kelsing whispered urgently. "We've got no time to waste. We can make Ambrym."

"No," she said again.

Hysterical, he thought. And no wonder! He stood to lift her, thinking to carry her down the path. If the tender wasn't to be found he could somehow swim out to the *Tani* himself. She was not heavy.

"No, no," she said hastily, her voice a little louder now. She stepped away from him. "No, it is not that. I am not mad. It is not what you think."

"But we've got to go! We've got to get out to that boat!"

She jerked her head a little, moved her hands. She still stared straight ahead, out over the beautiful little bay where the *Tani* rocked at anchor; but she seemed, now, to have better control of herself.

"Back there," she whispered. "You do not understand. They are killing the natives back there, as father said they would do. They're hunting them down like pigs and killing them."

"Yes, yes, but—"

"We brought those natives here. My father did. They're indentured. Don't you see? Don't you understand? My father made a five-year labor contract with them, brought them here, promised to feed them and keep them well, to send them back to their homes when

the contract had expired. Well, the contract has *not* expired. My father was a man of his word, and the plantation is mine now. I have no sister or brother, my mother is dead, the plantation is mine. I am responsible for those natives now. There are sixteen of them, ten men and six women. These fiends are going to kill them. Do you think I can sneak away and let them do it?"

"But *mademoiselle*—You can't do anything alone against a couple of cut-throats like that!"

"I can try. It's my duty. My father would never have shirked his duty, and I will not either." She put a hand on his arm, even smiled a little. "Go to Ambrym and try to get help, if you will. You have been very kind already, considering the way you were greeted when you came to call upon us. But I'm going to stay here. Please don't think I'm crazy! I'm not! But I simply can't go away and leave those poor people to be slaughtered. They're my responsibility. It's different with you; but they're my responsibility."

She meant it too. Her voice was low and even, her gaze direct. Here was no hysteria. Here was a plain determined purpose. Grant Kelsing stared at her in amazement.

"Well, I'll be damned," Grant Kelsing muttered after a moment. "Excuse me, *mademoiselle*, but it happens I never met anybody like you before and never supposed anybody like you even existed. All right. You're the boss here. Let's go after them."

"But it is not necessary that you—"

"Now don't be a fool. You don't suppose I'm going to let you conduct this suicide hunt alone, do you? Come on. If they're going to chase the natives, then *we're* going to chase *them!*" Let's go back there by way of this hibiscus

hedge to the edge of the jungle. Let's give ourselves that much of a break anyway. Come on."

IV

AFTERWARD Grant Kelsing remembered that of the whole strange business this was the strangest part. Here he was, an American who until a few hours ago had not known of the existence of this island—who did not know its name even now—here he was in the company of a delicately bred French girl pushing through the dank steaming jungle in search of two desperadoes who in turn were seeking out a scattered panic-stricken group of natives. Here they were, strangers to one another, trudging through thick black muck, tearing their clothes and scratching their skins upon spiked creepers, rounding monstrous tropical trees damp and green with parasites, stumbling, slipping, gasping—she with an empty shotgun while he held only a duelling pistol containing a single cartridge—and they sought to meet and to conquer a couple of hardened criminals armed with the most deadly of all modern weapons.

It was unbelievable. Yet they were sane, they knew what they were doing. Kelsing glanced once at Thérèse Carot. Her face was pale and taut.

Perhaps two thirds of this small island was planted, the rest, around the shores chiefly, remained jungle. They stuck to the jungle for cover, circling the compound, the coconut groves behind the house and outbuildings. Once Kelsing peered through this undergrowth and caught a glimpse of Jacques Ramel behind the house between two palm trees, digging with a spade he had probably found in one of the sheds, digging and digging, sifting the earth as he dug, seeking for something that

was not there. Ramel worked fast. In a little while he would know that Kelsing had lied to him, and then he would call his companion and they would return to the *kiosque*—and be warned by Kelsing's disappearance.

Kelsing could have killed Ramel as the man dug there—they were not more than thirty feet apart—but this would mean using the only cartridge he possessed and giving alarm to Malraux who had the submachine gun. They pushed on.

A rattle of machine-gun fire a little ahead of them. It was faint and muffled through thick wet foliage reluctant to permit the sound to pass. A native screamed. The gun spoke again, *rat-tat-tat-tat*. Then there was silence. They hurried on.

Kelsing was ahead, though at all times they kept close together for fear of losing one another. It was impossible, in that jungle, to see more than a few feet in any direction. As the American rounded a small tight clump of wild banana trees he heard a guttural sound, half grunt, half growl, almost at his left elbow. He spun on his heel, raising the pistol.

A native was there, behind him another, both of them half naked and mad with fright, their eyes shining with an insane light, their faces working in panic. They supposed that he had seen them, that they were cornered, and they were going to fight. Each had a machete, a long, heavy, single-edged hatchet-knife. One already had his weapon raised.

Kelsing struck him a backhand blow across the face with the barrel of the duelling pistol. The native retreated a step, snarling, spitting blood. Then he came forward again, his companion with him. Kelsing could not possibly talk to them, try to explain. They were

mad with fright. They were wild animals, apparently beyond all argument.

Should he shoot? He could only shoot one, at best. He stepped backward, dodged to one side. A machete descended angrily, missing him by inches. But in dodging he had stumbled over a tree root. He fell, sliding in black slimy muck. They rushed toward him, jabbering.

THERESE CAROT'S voice from behind stopped them in their tracks. She was the master's daughter, they were accustomed to obey her; they knew her voice. Rapidly, in low, swift, angry tones, scolding as only a French woman can scold, she poured words at them—French words and pidgin English. It meant nothing to the prostrate Kelsing, but it meant a lot to the natives. With their machetes raised, they paused.

Thérèse Carot took a step toward them. Her voice never ceased. She deluged them with words, buried them in words, low, hot, intense. The raised machetes she ignored. Walking directly to the nearest of the natives, she lifted her hand as though to slap a naughty child in the face.

They turned and fled. For a moment or two Thérèse Carot and Grant Kelsing heard them tearing through the jungle; and then there was silence again. Kelsing rose to his feet, grinning.

"Merci, mademoiselle."

She took his arm. "Come. We must protect them. We must not permit them to be slaughtered."

A quarter of a mile or so further the jungle thinned a bit, and they came abruptly upon Jacques Malraux. He was standing alone in a sort of small clearing, his profile to them, his eyes opened very wide, his head raised,

listening, like an alert hunter. The machine-gun was at his hip, his right forefinger caressed its trigger. He had heard something. Had he heard them?

A grotesque figure he made as he stood there, this great bearded Frenchman with his yachting cap, his tattooed arms, holding in this remote part of the remotest South Seas an instrument which seemed a toy in his huge paws.

Ramel's voice, loud, firm, commanding, came from somewhere behind them.

"Raymond, à moi! Au diable avec ces sauvages imbéciles! Come out here to me! *Ce salaud d'un American* has lied to us, there is nothing buried where he said it would be! *Rien!*"

Malraux started, turned, saw them. His mouth fell open.

Kelsing pushed the girl aside, dropped to one knee. Kelsing fired his shot. He had a cold, certain instinct as he fired that one shot. Something from outside seemed to take possession of all his faculties and to guide them, controlling them perfectly. He knew precisely what he was doing. He squeezed the trigger gently, surely, and his gaze was firm along the top of the long blue barrel. He aimed at the Frenchman's heart, knowing that he would hit it. And he did. Malraux probably was dead even as the machine gun started its noise. But he gripped the weapon still, in a dead man's clutch, and his finger remained squeezed on the trigger as he tumbled backward. The thing rattled, spattered spitefully, indignantly. It kicked high in Malraux's grip, and Malraux's fall sent the muzzle even higher.

KELSING waited, the pistol raised, motionless, just as if he had still another shot, or as many more as he wished. It seemed to take a long while

for Malraux to fall. And when finally he struck earth, the machine-gun had ceased its racket, and the *thud* of his body hitting was considerable for he had been a heavy man.

Bullet-clipped leaves floated down past Kelsing's head. Kelsing rose. The girl scrambled to her feet. She screamed. She dropped the empty shotgun and ran wildly toward the compound. Kelsing could hear her stumbling through the foliage, slipping, falling, getting up again, stumbling on. She did not scream again.

From somewhere behind Kelsing, Ramel's voice was raised in a startled, "*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*" Then Ramel too started to run toward the compound. Kelsing could not see him—he could not see either of them—but he could hear them.

He could not know, and at the time could not stop to wonder whether Thérèse Carot had in fact lost her head or whether she had deliberately adopted this means to discover Ramel's position in the jungle and to lead him away so that Kelsing could pursue him. He was to learn later that the girl's act had been prompted by the belief that it would give him an opportunity to capture the machine gun. However, he didn't go for the gun, still gripped in Raymond Malraux's dead hands. Instead he went after Ramel and the girl. She was in danger, and this was his only thought. Strategy was forgotten. *She* was in danger.

V

WHEN he reached the coconut groves, where the undergrowth had been kept cut, he saw them ahead of him, the girl fleet as a deer, Ramel behind her, bounding like some huge prehistoric beast. The girl was possibly twenty-five feet ahead. Neither of them

looked back, though Ramel, who had evidently heard Kelsing's pursuit and supposed that Kelsing was his partner, shouted over his shoulder:

"She will tell us, Raymond! If the American lies, *she* will tell us!" Ramel still thought, as he had thought all the time, of that one thing only—of the piece of worthless coral which he believed was ambergris and which he supposed was hidden somewhere on the island.

The girl showed no signs of panic. She sprinted like a new Atalanta, head up, arms working at her sides. She broke out from under the coconut trees, raced past the smoke shed, past the drying platform and the sacking house, past the huts where the natives lived, around the house. She did not try to enter the house, though she might have done so. She seemed headed for the *kiosque* at the edge of the cliff.

She had almost reached this building when she slipped upon something and sprawled full length, and Jacques Ramel overtook her.

Also, at this moment, another rain-storm overtook the island. Darkness swarmed over everything. The breeze ceased. Grass, the fronds of palm trees, every piece of vegetation, crouched lower, cowering, waiting breathlessly. And the downpour came.

It was as though the heavens, repeatedly baffled by this tiny island, had decided once and for all to swamp it out of existence, to beat and cram it back into the sea from whence it had sprung. There was decidedly something malicious about it, something even diabolic. No thunder was heard, and there was no lightning; the heavens could not be bothered with such petty, show-off tricks at a time like this; but concentrated rather upon the weight of the rain itself, which was terrific.

RAMEL did not reach down to touch the girl. Instead he stood over her, spread-legged, his fists on his hips. He was laughing. Rain lashed him, swathed him, almost blotted his immense body from sight; but he stood there and laughed.

He turned as he heard Grant Kelsing stagger toward him through the weight of the downpour. "Aha, my Raymond! The little one thought to escape us! I wonder where she supposed she was—" Then he saw Kelsing. And Kelsing sprang.

Kelsing leaped with no plan of action, with no thought of how to attack; but without hesitation. They went down, Kelsing scrabbling for the giant's throat. And here the rain saved Jacques Ramel, whose throat was so wet and slippery so that Kelsing's hands slipped off it. Ramel rolled away, got to his feet as lightly as a boy. Kelsing was on him again.

Jacques Ramel was no stranger to fighting, and surely no coward, but the sheer ferocity of this attack sent him staggering backward. He slipped and fell to one knee. Kelsing's right fist smashed into his mouth, his left fist *clacked* off the giant's cheekbone. Ramel's head rocked, and he made a screechy, squealy sound in his throat. He toppled backward, but even as he did so he threw his gorillalike arms around the American's waist.

Probably neither man had realized that they were so close to the edge of the cliff. Probably neither knew, in that first instant of falling, that they were *over* the edge. There was no swift, melodramatic drop. The cliff was not sheer, and since they had started their Catherine-wheel descent at the very head of the path their locked bodies tumbled and bumped into that path, and down it.

Brown water, sometimes lashed white, followed them or preceded them as they fell fighting their way down the zigzag. This path, indeed, had been formed, not by man, but by torrents or rain water eager to find the easiest descent and impatient of such obstacles as stones and dirt and coral. Jacques Ramel and Grant Kelsing, as they punched, kicked, bit, butted, took to the path with no more forethought than the rainwater—and for the same reason—because it was the easiest, quickest way down.

Stones showered them, leaping into the air. Dislodged rocks, chunks of razor-sharp coral, hissed in the hissing torrent all around.

And at the head of the path, just outside the *kiosque* in which her father had been murdered, Thérèse Carot stood with her arms crossed over her breast, her head raised, heedless of the heavens' fury, while she prayed in a voice she herself could not hear:

"Save him! *Que le bon dieu lui sauve!* Do not let him be killed!"

Abruptly, almost as though by mechanical arrangement, the storm stopped, the rain departed like an offended guest, in a solid, malevolent body to shatter itself senselessly against the senseless ocean. A few feeble gray

ribbons of cloud, left behind by the bulk, hung uncertainly like frightened ghosts, wavered, thinned, and dissolved. The sun smashed through in bitter, vengeful triumph. Thérèse Carot, standing with her arms crossed, her head raised, heard the drip-drop from palm fronds and the eaves of the *kiosque*, heard the roaring streams subside into rivulets and cough themselves out. Soon, too, she heard something else. She heard a panting, gasping breath, the uncertain footsteps of a man—one man—ascending the path at the head of which she stood. One man . . . He came slowly, dizzy with bruises, his head clanging with discordant sound. Chin on his chest, his clothes mere shredded rags, he came nearer.

The girl raised her hand to her mouth and against her trembling fingers once more whispered the name of her God.

Then she could see him and with a little cry, ran forward.

Grant Kelsing put a long wet arm gently across her shoulders, and she knew from the touch that her prayer had been answered, and her nerves were still, her heart hummed, her eyes came open.

"I think that it is over now, Thérèse," Grant Kelsing said quietly.

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The Big Wind Blows

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

MARVIN LEE was by nature a quiet and circumspect young man. In fact, his boss at the Miami bank where he was a bookkeeper, had accused him, a little contemptuously, of having an "orderly mind." That was on the day when Mr. Avery had let Marvin know that the bank had plans for him. A promotion to the tellers' cage, perhaps—but not until Marvin had shown that he had the proper stuff in him.

The way Mr. Avery thought Marvin could prove this sounds a little unpleasant. On one of the mangrove islands off the coast, the Tropical Construction Company is putting up a fisherman's hotel. Their debt to the bank is overdue and they have asked for an extension. Mr. Avery, regretting that he ever loaned the company a penny, has begun to wonder if something isn't wrong on the island. So he has decided to send Marvin Lee to investigate.

Marvin barely reaches the island when things begin to happen—violent, upsetting things. Scoop Sloper, the construction superintendent, a burly-chested bully with one gray eye and one gentle brown one, picks a fight with one Granelli, breaks his arm, kills him.

"Granelli talked too much," Sloper explains ominously. "But the sheriff will see that it was just self-defense." He turns to Marvin. "You're not one of the wise guys, are you? Better not be."

LEE was supposed to work as assistant timekeeper—but Sloper assigns him to back-breaking tasks with air hose and shovel. There is a girl, Linda, on the island, the daughter of the regular timekeeper. She's said to be Sloper's girl, and Marvin is warned to stay away from her. But the warning doesn't seem to be necessary because Linda, thinking he is after her

This story began in last week's Argosy

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