

TIGER ISLAND



Ganler whipped out a revolver, and turned it toward Simms

*Haxton's Conflict With the Pearl Poachers of Papua
Takes Place Where No Man Dare Risk Strife—
Fathoms Deep in a Sea Tenanted by Death!*

By CARL JACOBI

THE island came into sight off the *Morinda's* port bow at six bells in the afternoon watch. Haxton was on the bridge when Fail, the first officer, strode out

of the wheelhouse to meet the skipper who had just come up from below.

"There she is, sir," Fail said, eyeing without interest Captain Ganler's drink

reddened face. "Tiger Rock dead ahead. We slide in to the lee of it, same as before, eh?" He awaited confirmation.

Ganler swayed slightly, jerked the glasses to his eyes. He looked a long time, first at the island and the little cove, then at the horizon. Then he nodded.

"Quarter speed. See if you can find the same anchorage. Haxton!" he answered thickly.

Haxton, a frown on his lean face, turned and came forward. He hadn't liked Ganler's looks the day he came aboard. Now that the skipper was drunk, he liked them even less.

"Haxton—" Ganler rubbed a beefy hand over his unshaven face and spat over the rail, "haul that newfangled diving gear of yours on deck and get ready for a dive. Move, damn you! Want to get as many shells as we can before dark. Fail will go down with you."

For a moment while he relit his cigar, Haxton studied the skipper coldly. Then he nodded, stepped to the port ladder and headed below.

Somehow this job, which had seemed such a gift from the gods before, had taken on an unsavory aspect. Not to have accepted would have meant another two months on the beach back in Port Moresby, of course. Pearl fishing was pretty much a closed game these days. A diver out of work couldn't be very choosy.

YET he had known what he was up against when he shipped. The *Morinda* was a dirty, rat infested tramp. Captain Ganler had a blood temper that came to a head on the slightest provocation. Fail, the first mate who was to help with the diving, was a hard faced scoundrel. A nondescript Limey for a Second, Eurasian quartermasters, and a lascar Chinese fo'c'sle didn't improve the picture.

The *Morinda* had come up through the Dampier straits, taking on copra along the

New Guinea coast. But Ganler had discovered something that put copra in second place in his mind. He had outlined the situation to Haxton before sailing.

Just south of the line in longitude 142° 19' E., was Tiger Island. A British possession, uninhabited, with a virgin bed of pearl oyster on the south bank. Outside the Queensland boundaries; therefore open fishing.

"But it's sixteen fathoms and too deep for the natives," Ganler had said. "I need another diver. I'll pay you regular rates and passage back. What say?"

Haxton entered his cabin, opened a chest and began to haul out his heavy diving dress. There was a fly in the ointment somewhere, he felt sure. It was odd for one thing, that a ship of such low tonnage carried a wireless in these seas. Yet that proved to be the one favorable item. For Simms, the wireless op, was the only man with whom Haxton had cared to make friends. There was something about his quiet attitude that inspired confidence.

The diving dress laid out on the floor, Haxton stripped and donned a suit of underwear. He was pulling on his heavy socks when the door opened and Simms entered.

"Hello," the op said. "Understand you want me to handle your lines."

He was a tall man. Clear grey eyes were shining pleasantly under the visor of his blue cap. Haxton nodded.

"Help me carry this stuff out on deck. I'm going down right away."

By the time two Malays on the after well-deck had clumsily helped Haxton into his rubber suit, the *Morinda* had reached a point just within the entrance to the cove. Ganler bawled a command. A gong clanged, and the engines came to a dead stop. The anchor chain shot out through the hawse hole. Beyond, Tiger Island presented its silent, palm-fringed shore.

Fail got into his own suit, a cheap

piece of shoddy that had seen better days, and the two divers stood waiting orders.

“Now listen.” Ganler looked at them with bloodshot eyes. “Fail, you go down first. Three jerks on the line if it’s the right spot, and Haxton follows. It’s sixteen fathoms, but you’re stayin’ below until you get a good load. Remember, we’re after pearls, not button shells.”

The copper helmet was fastened down on the head of the first mate. He went overside in a stream of bubbles. Almost immediately his line jerked three times. Haxton motioned Simms to his side.

“Ganler’s drunk, so I’m depending on you,” he warned. “That pump—”

“Don’t worry,” Simms nodded, as he replied quietly. “If any of these swabs interfere, there’ll be trouble.”

Simms helped the Malays place the helmet on Haxton’s head. He gave it a quarter turn, locked it into position. The lead belt and heavy breastplate were already secured. Haxton seized his electric lamp. Native handlers lifted him overside onto the sea ladder.

For an instant he hung there, the water swishing over his head. Then with a jerk, he began to descend. The water changed quickly from blue to pea green. Air gurgled out the exhaust valve in the back of his helmet. He swallowed several times to relieve the heavy sensation in his ears and throat. Down, down he went, while the pressure against his suit slowly increased.

An eternity, and then abruptly his lead shoes struck bottom.

He jerked his life line once, stood motionless, waiting for that first dizzy feeling to pass. He switched on his lamp and looked about him. Five feet away stood Fail. Magnified by the water, the man seemed twice his ordinary height.

Two large wire baskets settled to the bottom, each at the end of a separate line.

With his lamp feebly illuminating his movements, Haxton seized the nearest. Fail stepped to his side; they pressed their helmets together, a method of conversing under water.

“You work here. I’ll go farther in. Take the big ones, not those that are too young.”

Haxton nodded. He looked down at the oyster bed. No yellow or inferior green edged shells here. They were pure white. Chances were, it would be rich in pearls.

When the basket was filled, Haxton sent it up, watching it disappear like a fat porpoise in the murk. His eyes had grown more accustomed to the depth now, and he stared about him curiously. Funny no one had thought to fish here before. But of course most British islands lay inside the Australian boundaries.

Five more baskets, and Haxton moved slowly in toward the island. He selected shells with an experienced eye. Abruptly he noticed a darker shape lying on the ocean floor some distance ahead. Curious, he hesitated a moment, began to work his way toward it.

An instant later he was standing rigid, staring down. An inert, armored figure lay there, half hidden in the marine growth. The figure was that of another diver, his life line and airhose lying in a twisted tangle beside him.

Dead! For a moment Haxton’s brain refused to act. Then a succession of thoughts assailed him. A dead diver here on the sea floor—The *Morinda* alone had visited these waters in recent months—Then the man was off the *Morinda* on her previous trip. But what had caused the accident, if accident it was?

Unmindful of Fail who had approached and stood glaring at him, Haxton bent down and examined the rubber-clad body. Wide-open eyes stared at him out of the faceplate. But he saw no mark of violence on the suit.

THIRTY seconds, Haxton like a wooden image, remained transfixed to the spot. Then he seized his line, jerked twice in rapid succession.

Immediately the line tightened, and he was jerked upward. He ascended swiftly to the approximate seventy foot level. There he stopped, swayed with the current, while the necessary period of decompression sailed by.

When he finally gained the deck, Haxton waited until his suit was entirely removed before he answered the skipper's sullen glare.

"Ganler," he said, "there's a dead diver down there. Dead and off this ship. I want to know what it means."

Ganler wiped his mouth, clamped his yellow teeth down harder on his greasy pipe. He glared at Haxton sneeringly.

"Keep your shirt on," he snarled. "That diver was a dirty Malay I picked up in Rabaul. Can I help it if his suit was old and rotten? His line busted, that's all."

"His air hose broke?" Haxton repeated unbelievably.

"Sure."

"Why didn't you tell me about it before?" Haxton's eyes narrowed.

"I had reasons. Main one is, you blokes are a superstitious crowd, and I wasn't takin' any chances of you backin' out."

Haxton pressed his lips together grimly. He turned without another word, and headed for his cabin. Simms followed. There, while the radio operator looked at him with puzzled eyes, Haxton briefly described the situation.

"It might be true, of course," he concluded. "These Malays are careless as hell. But all the same, I don't like it."

"Fail's a blackguard," Simms replied slowly. "Ganler's worse. He keeps me at the wireless every minute I'm awake. Wants a report on every ship in the district. And if you ask me, it's funny a ship carryin' only copra

bothers with a wireless. I signed on the day before you did, you know, and only because my last ship was being scrapped by her owners."

HAXTON nodded, finished dressing in silence. He slid into a suit of white drill, then strode across to the locker and took out an automatic.

"You might need this," he said, handing it to Simms. "Won't hurt to have it along at any rate. I'm going up and have a look at our position."

Haxton made his way quickly to the bridge and the deserted charthouse. With a quick glance over his shoulder he bent over the table and examined the chart which lay upon it. Carefully he traced the *Morinda's* course from Port Moresby. Almost directly on the equator a circle in red ink had been drawn around a pinpoint whose marking read: Tiger Island. With the aid of dividers Haxton checked the position.

Frowning, he stood up, drew a cigar from his pocket. The island was in the location Ganler had said, British owned and outside of any restricted pearl fishing ground. Haxton gnawed his lips, went down the ladder and walked aft.

Fail was up now. He had stayed underwater the full time limit, and his face was white and drawn with pain. By the after hatch, five Malays squatted on the planking, busily opening the shells which had been brought aboard.

Within twenty minutes the bed proved its value. The Malays extracted three pearls, then two more. Ganler pawed over them greedily.

"Smooth, eh?" he said, turning to Haxton. "A fortune just waiting to be taken up. Tomorrow you dive full time. I've had enough of your stalling."

A flush rose to Haxton's face, but he made no reply. A few moments later, he

entered the wireless room. Simms was at the transmitter. He looked up at the sound of steps.

“K.P.M. ship off Halmahera,” he said. “Reports a bad typhoon there, but it’ll miss us of course. What’s new?”

“Nothing new.” Haxton dropped into a chair and studied his cigar. “There’s pearls here, which makes Ganler plenty satisfied. The position is right, according to the chart. Open fishing. And yet that dead diver—”

Simms got up abruptly, paced to the door and closed it.

“Listen,” he said. “Couple of minutes ago I was up for’ard, and I heard two of that black gang talking. Those lascars are a bad lot and have a lingo that beats me, but there were a few words in pidgin English that set me to thinking. One of them said something about ‘deep down fellah off when sea fellah come.’ Now what does that mean?”

Haxton smoked a moment, shook his head.

“Search me,” he replied. “Might mean anything. But maybe we’re worrying our heads over nothing at all. See you at mess.”

Haxton slept poorly that night. Sultry heat filled his cabin, and at three bells—one thirty a.m.—he got up and decided to catch a breath of air.

Pajama clad, he strolled out on the for’d well deck. The *Morinda* lay under a vault of blackness. Water slapped rhythmically against the sides. Farther off, waves washed against the island’s shore.

All at once, the diver noticed that the regulation anchor light was not lighted. Not necessary in these waters, of course, but still a ship without riding lights—Haxton turned. The aft light, fifteen feet lower, was not visible either.

With a scowl he made his way slowly toward the poop. What possible reason could Ganler have for keeping the ship in inky darkness? Cautiously, he paced on past the

after main hatch. Then voices came to his ears, and he saw the skipper standing at the taffrail, a darker shadow in the gloom. Ganler had night glasses to his eyes. He was gazing seaward.

Haxton hugged the shadows and watched. The voices he had heard, began again. They were speaking Malay, and they seemed to come from beyond the ship, from a point low down near the water.

A moment later two lascars came over the rail. They mumbled something to the skipper and shuffled off.

Ganler continued his scrutiny of the black sea. From east to west he looked, long and intently. Chuckling softly, he turned and headed for his cabin. He passed within a few feet of Haxton, but the diver made no sound.

When he had gone, Haxton darted up to the rail, and leaned over. Only dark water below. Then a heavier blot in the blackness met his eyes, and he understood quickly.

A bo’sun’s chair had been rigged over the rail. The two Malays suspended in it, had stretched a sheet of canvas across the ship’s stern. Nailed down, the canvas completely hid the name, *Morinda*, from all outward eyes.

“Blind ship, eh?” Haxton whistled softly. Something definitely was in the wind. But what?

He stood there in silence a long time. A quarter of an hour later when he went to his bunk, he was no nearer an explanation. He stirred restlessly until the change to the morning watch, when he fell into a troubled sleep.

Morning, and Ganler was drunk again. He stayed in his cabin, not appearing until noon. Then he staggered into the mess cabin, whiskey bottle in one hand, faced Haxton, swaying.

“You dive right away, see,” he growled. “You go down, and you stay down until I tell you to come up. We can’t hang around here forever.”

WHILE he waited for the Malays to get his diving dress in readiness, Haxton stood with tight lips, staring out over the water. He was more perplexed now than before. A few moments ago, when he was sure he was not being watched, he had brought out his sextant, always a part of his luggage, and taken the sun. Checking the longitude with the chronometer, the result tallied with Tiger Island's location on the chart.

As he stood there, Simms approached. The operator was smoking a cigarette in his calm, deliberate fashion.

"I don't like it," he said in a low voice. "Ganler drunk again, and Fail nervous as a floating cork. Have you noticed the skipper keeps steam up all the time? Funny."

Haxton nodded. "I signed on as diver," he said, "and I suppose I'll have to go down, but—"

Abruptly his words died off. He stiffened, rocked backwards as a thought struck him full force. Turning, he ran up the ladder to the bridge and raced into the charthouse. As he had expected, there was a Pacific Islands Pilot book there. He whipped through the pages. Five seconds later he was staring stunned at the printed words:

An island named Tiger was reported by Captain Bristow in 1817 to exist in latitude 1°45'S., longitude 142°19'E., but in 1894 information was received from the German Government that no island existed in this position, and that the so-called Tiger Island was probably identical with Matty Island, now known as Wuvulu, which was discovered by Cartaret in 1767, and which lies in latitude 1°46'S., longitude 142°56'E. Matty Island is a German possession, leased recently to the Dutch fisheries at Macassar. It is low, covered with cocoanut palms, about four miles in length in an east and west direction and—

Haxton's teeth came together with a click. He saw it all now. Poaching. These were Dutch fisheries. The chart Ganler had left on the table for him to see was an old one, out of

date. The difference in positions was so close, his sextant had failed to show it. Poaching was a criminal action which would be dealt the limit in any court—which would blackball a diver everywhere.

ANOTHER thought came. The Malay diver had been below on the *Morinda's* first visit to the island, when another ship, probably a Dutch patrol craft, had been sighted. Without compunction, Ganler had slashed the Malay's line and raced seaward.

The ruthlessness of the skipper's action was like a shock of cold water. Mechanically Haxton dropped the book, left the charthouse, paced onto the boat deck, abaft the bridge. He could hear Ganler aft now, barking commands at Fail who was getting ready to dive.

Haxton clenched his fists, went down the ladder and headed for the skipper.

"Get in that dress of yours," Ganler roared, catching sight of him. "You damn scavenger, what do you think I'm payin' you for?"

Haxton glanced at Fail, who, helmet off, stood waiting.

"I'm not diving," he said. "For you or anyone else."

"Not diving!" Ganler's sweat stained face crimsoned. "Why you— What do you mean?"

"We're in Dutch grounds," Haxton continued quietly. "This isn't Tiger Island, Ganler. It's Matty Island. Leased fisheries. My papers didn't say anything about poaching."

For an instant the skipper remained silent, eyes slowly closing to crescents. Then with a bellow he lurched forward. His right fist leaped like a mallet, struck Haxton hard in the jaw. He followed with two more lightning thrusts in quick succession. Haxton, taken unawares, staggered and fell.

"Back, damn you!" Ganler whipped out a revolver and turned it toward Simms as

the wireless operator charged forward. Haxton slowly rose to his feet.

"You're goin' down, see," Ganler continued, moving the revolver to cover the two of them. "If you don't, there's a bullet lands straight between your eyes. Into that suit, blast you."

Cowed Malays came forward and helped Haxton into his diving dress. Three feet away, Simms looked on with tight lips. Revolver still in one hand, Ganler slammed shut Haxton's faceplate, gave the order to lift him onto the sea ladder.

Then once more he was descending. Down he went, the current whipping at his air hose.

The water grew darker. Pressure increased against his suit. A school of tropical fish fled before him. He was on the bottom.

Mechanically adjusting his air, Haxton stood motionless, brain in a turmoil. Whichever way he moved, his way was blocked. In a moment Fail and the baskets would be down. He would be forced to continue poaching. Topside, Ganler with his revolver, would be watching Simms' every movement on the line.

The two baskets came down. Fail followed an instant later. The mate diver motioned to one of the baskets, lips snarling something unheard in his helmet. Haxton made no move.

"Come on," Fail said, stepping forward to press helmets together. "One funny move outa you, and—" He waved his knife threateningly.

Haxton stepped obediently toward the baskets, but halfway, a storm burst within him. He whirled, and touched helmets.

"I don't poach," he said. "Not if I have to stay down here all day. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Eyes gleaming through his faceplate as he heard the words, Fail suddenly brought his right hand up through the heavy water, thrust

the knife at Haxton. Haxton had clicked on his electric lamp a split-second before. He caught the movement and heaved his body aside. The knife scratched harmlessly off the side of his suit, just below the breastplate.

In an instant Fail was lunging for another attack. Haxton clawed downward, seized the weapon hand, and tried to wrench the knife from its grasp. They clinched.

Sixteen fathoms down, they were, ninety-six feet below man's natural element. For each foot of that depth, a thousand pounds of water pressed down on them, almost fifty tons in all. Haxton knew that the nitrogen being forced steadily into his blood would not stand much exertion.

Fail brought his knee upward into Haxton's abdomen, struck twice below the breast plate with brute strength. Their helmets clanked together. Heart laboring, Haxton answered blow for blow.

Suddenly, he realized that as he was fighting here on the ocean floor, so Simms must be battling for his life topside. With that revolver Haxton had given him, the young op would not submit long to Ganler's inquisition. Even then Haxton felt the air falter in his helmet. The pumps—

Again Fail attacked him with the knife. Again Haxton managed to drive the blade off. And then abruptly the first mate leaped to the side.

REACHING up, he seized Haxton's air hose, jerked it down, and went at it with the knife. A vague horror came over Haxton as he saw the movement. He lurched forward, grasped the mate by the shoulders and yanked him backward.

Fail made one last attempt. Knife before him, he charged like a striking devilfish, came at Haxton in a fury. Three feet he moved, no farther. His lifeline, trailing slackly from the struggle, caught between his feet. He tripped, fell. Even as his helmet

crashed onto the bottom, Haxton saw an accompanying mass of bubbles shoot upward. Fail had fallen with his knife under him. The blade had penetrated the suit.

But Haxton had no time to look farther. An instant later he felt his line jerk hard, and he was lifted upwards. Swiftly, while he fought to regain his breath, he was taken toward the surface. No decompression period this time. He had not been down long enough, and besides, as he knew, hell must be raging on deck.

Then he was being hauled overside. Malay handlers lifted the helmet from his head. Simms' voice, cold as ice, snapped into his ears.

"Keep away from that gun, Ganler. One step, and I shoot. Look alive there, you black rats. Get that suit off fast. Okay, Haxton, everything under control."

The wireless op stood by the rail, automatic before him. Ten feet away Ganler, the Limey Second Officer, a crowd of lascars crouched like wolves at bay. Two Malays, grinding steadily at the pump, worked only because they were also in line with Simms' weapon.

"You can stop the pumps," Haxton said, his diving dress removed. "Fail is below dead, a hole in his suit. The game's up, Ganler."

"Like hell it is," the skipper said. "Mutiny, eh? Two men seizing the ship against the crew. Well, it can't be done, you damn wharf rat. I'll—"

The captain's own revolver lay two feet before him on the deck; Simms apparently had ordered him to drop it when he brought the automatic into play. Ganler shot his right foot forward, kicked the weapon within his reach, lunged down. On his knees he pumped three shots at Simms, urged his men on.

Simms fired twice. A lascar toppled and fell. The Limey second mate clawed at his chest, screamed.

"On the bridge!" Haxton yelled. "We can't hold 'em here." He spun around as he spoke, slammed a wild blow at one of the Malays who had been forced to haul him. Then with the pack at their heels, the two men raced for the ladder.

On the bridge, Haxton leaped to the wheelhouse, jerked down a rifle which was mounted on the inside wall. A cartridge belt hung below it.

They were safe for an instant. Simms crouched at the break of the bridge and fired at every head that mounted the ladder. Haxton edged carefully around the wheelhouse, searching the well-deck for Ganler. He knew with grim clarity that it was only a question of time before it would be all over. Two against that rabid pack. The odds were too great.

Shots hammered into the deckhouses. Ganler evidently had lost no time in dealing out guns. A bullet splintered the glass by Haxton's head. Below, on the deck a figure moved into his vision. He fired deliberately, missed, fired again. The man fell.

SIMMS' warning shout whirled him about. Two lascars had climbed the port ladder. In front of them, lumbering toward him, face twisted in fury, came Ganler.

Haxton's rifle was ripped from his hands. Two iron fists pounded into his face. The skipper was fighting like an enraged tiger. Haxton, breathing hard, delivered blow after blow.

And then as he stood there swinging his arms, a hollow voice rang out over the water.

"*Morinda* ahoy! Stop firing. Stand by for boarding."

A heavy club came down on Haxton's head a split-second later. Ganler, the ship, whirled out in a circle of colored lights. He felt himself falling down—down into a pit of darkness.

There were two men in Haxton's cabin when he finally opened his eyes. One of those

men was Simms, left arm swathed in bandages, a heavy welt over one eye. The other was unfamiliar, a short, heavysset man in a white uniform with gold braid on his cap.

“How are you feeling?” Simms asked, smiling.

Haxton closed his eyes a moment, then fought to a sitting position. His head still throbbed dully.

“Feel elegant,” he said sarcastically. “What happened? Who—?”

“Meet Captain Schaff of the ship, *Wilhelmina*. That’s a Dutch patrol boat, in case you haven’t heard. He came up here just in time, paid us a visit, much to Ganler’s regret. Ganler’s below in irons now.”

Haxton swallowed hard. “But how

come?” he asked slowly. “I don’t understand—”

“Mynheer Simms talked with us by wireless last night,” Captain Schaff answered. “He reported his suspicions of the *Morinda* and his position. These are Dutch waters, very valuable, and poaching is not tolerated. We’ve sighted Ganler here before, but he’s always managed to slip through our fingers. You are to be congratulated—”

“Never mind that,” Simms cut in. “Feel strong enough to go out on deck, Haxton? Then after we’ve had a good feed, we’ll head this packet back to port.”

And Haxton with a smile nodded his agreement.