



The Moon, Sir!

by

Dixie Willson

WITH the self-possession of a bully among men, Casey rose and turned a defiant back on the five about the poker table. Hal drew in the pot and laughed, then, forgetful of the full length mirror behind them, he jerked a thumb back over his shoulder at Casey and winked at the others.

In a flash Casey wheeled—his hand shot out, and swung head high with a chair gripped in its snarling fingers.

Hal, springing erect, snatched an open jack-knife from the table and stuck Casey in the chest. With senses suddenly befogged, he let the knife fall, thumbed a streak of blood across his cheek, and watched Casey's body double over itself and slide thickly to the floor.

Barker knelt, gingerly turned the Irishman's head sideward, then rose—saying nothing.

"First murder ever in my place!" came King's voice, harsh against the sudden tense quietness; and then Hal, in subconscious calm, gathered hat, gloves, and stick from the table and walked out of the room, the door swinging quietly shut behind him.

But suddenly a sense of the grim reality of the thing broke upon the petrified

group around Casey's lumpish body.

"Don't let that killer get away!" cried Barker with a curse. "Go after him!"

Though scarcely realizing what he heard or did, Hal caught the alarm, and with an animal's instinct for protection, with action quicker than thought, he knelt against the black wall, face toward it, and stretched his full length along the base-board. The door of the room he had just left burst open against his very toes, and in the flood of light it framed along the hall he saw the four men plunge out and down-stairs, after which he rose, stepped back into the room, removed his hat, and brought his handkerchief across his swimming head. So doing—he discovered the still wet blood streak, and faced the mirror quickly for explanation. Then it was, when his eyes caught the wavering reflection of Casey's grotesquely folded body, its shoulders damp in a widening wash of blood, that realization came to Hal of what he had done.

He lurched forward, touched the mirror's cold expression of the horrid thing, and with a sickening contraction of muscles drew himself along the wall, away from the mirror, around the room, and out again.

Six hours later he presented himself on

the deck of Tom Mark's freighter, wishing work, and getting it.

Twelve hours later, his white flesh standing out foolishly against a rough pair of trousers and a coarse shirt, he sat on a keg on a rocking deck, patching a bucket and thinking backward.

The freighter Isadora was bound for a Cuban coast. The tonnage was light, the weather fair, and Tom Marks a good fellow; but hands that are tender—like hearts that are young—will generate blisters despite everything, which fact brought Hal to find his little flier in sea-labor damnably painful, though gentle of its kind.

And besides two constant blisters were two constant haunts—Casey and Carolyn. There was never a time of day when Hal could face either ocean or deck that it didn't mirror a wavering reflection of Casey, queerly folded over himself near a trickling blood-stream; and there wasn't a minute of sky or sea that didn't hold forth its vision of Carolyn, her blue eyes teary with questioning wonder, her lips that drooping, quivering, questioning way.

Over and over in maddening precision of detail paraded all their golden days, but always in maddening unevasion, just one conclusion offered itself—there was no way to help. No way in the world to undo that insane stab! No way to bolster Casey's fallen body into life! No way to bring Carolyn into his arms for even one word of explanation. Nothing to do but to spare the pain of an unavoidable conviction by keeping without the boundary line—and under cover!

After what seemed a long time to Hal, the Isadore brought up in Cuba and unloaded. Tom Marks was an understanding devil—so Hal's duties never took him off ship, and when she was ordered to lay in another month, Hal lay in with her.

But one rough-heeled Jacky went back to New York harbor—went back “with orders”—and two days before the Isadore's month was up there appeared a blue-blooded

yacht in the bay. Hal's still blistered hand shook Tom's calloused one, and, amid a round of cursing and good-natured astonishment, the Isadore gave her ragged, unshaven, sub-under deck-hand into the flannels and silks of the master of the White Bear!

Nataca lay in the shadow of the shore wall, idly watching a lizard in the sun. The village was quiet with the hot hush of midday, and it seemed that the whole world was living along in the gentle, drowsy tone of the ocean's lazy wish-wash.

Her slim, brown legs, still wet from a wading, were fairly glistening against the sand, and in her deep brown eyes was the sweet sleepy light of the yellow bay.

A fair faced English lad of twelve, in fresh duck trousers and jacket, sat beside her, busily marking words and pictures on the sand.

“Sun,” he said distinctly—“Sun—and here is the picture to match. Now say it! Say it!”

But Nataca shook her head and dragged her foot across the word his stick had made.

“I not do what I hate wors' of all,” she replied with a fierce little emphasis, “I not learn more langrige! Ees make my head too trouble! I say 'Sky—sea—feesh—how-do—goo'-by,' five words, tha's 'nough!”

“Well learn just one more,” he teased. “I want to make you really talk. Spanish isn't talk—it's just—Spanish. If you won't learn 'sun'—I'll teach you 'moon.' Moon is the sun at night—and it looks like—like—”

Looking for a more stable pad than the sand, his eyes fell on her skiff drawn up behind them, and, digging a piece of white chalk from his pocket, he carefully made a fat round moon and its four letters on the smooth skiff side.

“Here it is,” he announced. “Moon. Say it.”

But Nataca—eyes closed and arms thrown above her head—had dreamed too far

into the afternoon nap to hear—or care.

The boy threw his cap across the sand with impatience.

“I could learn turtles.” he grunted. “as easy as her!”

“Old woman,” Nataca said in glib Spanish to the wizen brown dame who served her a plump buttered fish and dough cake some five hours later— “old woman, I want to go out to-night.”

Old Vica stopped her service abruptly, and looked with sharp, searching eyes at Nataca’s face.

“Where out?” she questioned.

“Oh—out!” replied the girl. “I don’t know just where, but the night is good and I want to be somewhere. You tell Caris I’m asleep.”

“Tell me yourself,” tartly interrupted a full-shouldered young Spaniard as he bent to get himself under the doorway. “But I sha’n’t let her go, Vica. Now that I have chosen to love her, she must—”

“Conceit!” broke in the girl with scorn as she rose from her bench and walked around the old woman. “Caris, thou’rt all right sometimes, and yes—handsome enough—but—” And with a snap of her fingers she slipped through the door, and even as soon as it took Caris to whirl after her, and old Vica to follow, she was quite lost in the shadows.

It was very quiet out in the night. Here and there a fisherman’s light and now and then the echo of a song, but no real close nor speaking life except the soft slap-slap of the little rolls of water on the sand. Nataca ran along the beach, her head thrown back and her young legs prancing—ran like a shadow having fun with itself; ran until she came to the sheltered bend where she’d spent her afternoon nap, where her skiff lay down side up on the sand.

Panting and laughing she swung it over and ran its nose into the water, and then—as though a gate had opened on signal—the moon, half-high, came pushing

through the clouds, its line on the water shining an open road from Nataca and her boat, straight out across the bay.

Laughing at the event of this path suddenly stretching before her, she splashed out along its shimmering way, then drew herself smoothly into the boat, and picked up her oar. But suddenly, oar poised in mid air, she caught a breath, exclaimed softly, and bent forward to stare at what she saw before her—picked into sight by the other end of the moon track.

Moving gently on the water line were the long-side steps of a yacht—outlined against the side of it! This was an event!

And in twenty minutes more Nataca, dipping her oar with skilled silence, was circling ’round the White Bear, which was easily riding at anchor.

Apparently those aboard were asleep, and with daring curiosity she came closer and closer until her oar could have touched the yacht side. But when she slid past the steps into the path of light again there was a stir above and an exclamation of surprise. A stolid-faced, gray-haired little man in faultless “tuck,” standing by the rail, turned to a white-flanneled second man lounging in a deck chair.

“Some one—some one seems to be calling, sir,” he announced nervously.

“What boat is-it, Becker?” asked the second man, instantly alert.

Becker peered over the side, while Nataca, frightened, yet fascinated, allowed her boat to bump against the steps—its bow, with the round, white letters of the afternoon’s reading lesson, full in the light.

“The Moon, sir,” reported Becker respectfully, “and—and it seems to be a young lady, sir.”

Whistling softly, Hal Moore strode to the stairway, leaned over, and found himself looking into eyes the color of a song of Egypt—set in an olive face of perfect contour—beautiful lips—almost smiling, and

hair a soft, dark brown.

“Did you—want something?” questioned Hal, going down a step, the better to see her.

“I not spik,” she replied, shrugging her shoulders and closing her eyes.

“No matter,” he answered, moving all the way down and catching her skiff side. “You don’t need to speak with a face like that. Won’t you come up?”

“I not spik,” she insisted— “sky, sea, feesh, how-do, goo’-by—tha’s all,” and then she laughed, pried his fingers loose with her oar, and slid noiselessly out of the streak of moonlight.

“How-do, goo’-by—tha’s all,” she called from the darkness; and though Hal cupped his hands around his eyes and looked in every direction, she wasn’t there.

So he went back to his chair, dismissing the brown-eyed sprite of a girl with a laugh; but for the first time in many days he found himself wondering about something besides Casey and Carolyn; and in less than ten minutes Becker, for all the world as though he’d been “listening-in” on Hal’s mind, turned from the rail with a twitching of lips that, for him, meant a smile.

“The Moon, sir,” he announced with dignity.

“What—again!” exclaimed Hal, springing to the steps.

Nataca met him half-way, smiling broadly.

“How-do?” she said, and continued coming.

“How-do?” responded Hal. “Come and sit down.”

She understood his offer of a chair, and took it—leaning back, turning her face side-wise toward him—frankly arranging herself in the most comfortable position to stare.

Hal said nothing. Lighting cigarette after cigarette, he sat beside her, watching alternately the sky and the girl. After an hour

she rose abruptly.

“Goo’-by!” she smiled.

“Good-by!” he replied, offering his hand, in which she placed hers softly for a moment. “Come again!” Then added, half to himself: “If you knew how to talk, by George I’d make love to you!”

“I not spik,” she replied, meeting his eyes squarely. “but I un’stan’. I go learn talk and come ’gain.”

Hal listened till the whisper of her oar was all gone.

“Becker,” he said, “we may stay here—quite a while.”

The next few days were days of great surprise for the little English boy who had tried in vain to make Nataca talk. Her diligence kept him even busier than he wanted to be, and old Vica was busier than she wanted to be, too, trying to keep track of her charge, who, despite all care, managed to slip away mysteriously almost every night. And Caris was more than busy also in watching not only how she went—but where and why.

Two persons—Hal and she—knew how: three—Hal, she, and Becker—knew where: but only one seemed to know why—and that one was himself. She thought Hal should be knowing, but he didn’t seem to!

Hal was very careful about ever being on deck himself, but he had Becker watching for her every night.

“The Moon, sir.” he’d announce, and Hal would laugh and answer: “Let her come!”

“I spik very well now,” Nataca remarked one night as she sat on the floor at his feet. “I un’stan’ everything, and talk everything.”

“Yes,” agreed Hal, “you are quite an Englishman.”

She drew closer to him and rested her head against his knees.

“Once you said,” she proffered slowly, “that when I learned to talk—”

“Yes?” questioned Hal, idly toying with her hair.

A moment her head clung against his knee, and her fingers crept inside his that lay along her shoulder; then she sprang to her feet, her brown fists shut, her eyes flashing.

“Don’t you remember,” she said fiercely, “now when so hard I have learned all English to talk—don’t you remember?”

Hal rose and put a hand on her shoulder,

“Yes, I do remember,” he answered. “I said I’d make love to you and—and—”

And he brought both her tight fists against his shoulder, brought her eyes right up to his and put his arms around her close—close.

“You needn’t have learned to talk,” he whispered. “We didn’t need a language—for this!”

For a long minute her senses were drowned in the sweep of dreams-come-true, and then she began to realize that the arms around her were solid and real, the eyes that held hers alive and speaking.

“You love—me—for—keep?” she dared breathlessly—“for keep?”

“For keep.” he answered gently. “You bring the padre out to-morrow.”

And he kissed her—kissed her until she forgot that she lived at all.

And that was the night that Caris caught sight of her boat coming home in the moon track: the night that he met her at the beach and gripped her wrist till her hand was numb—and pricked her arms with his stiletto and snarled to her that two hearts should wear his mark if ever she went out again!

But after it all, when he let her go, she laughed at him.

“We love just same,” she defied with joy. “We love for keep. You make no difference!”

Caris couldn’t make her afraid! What matter did he, or any of the world at all, make to her! So, with scars on her wrist and blood-drops on her arms, she ran along the beach home like the happiest thing in the world—

which she was—and crept in at her window, and slipped out of her clothes, and took her lips to bed with perfume on them because he had kissed her!

Caris watched her down the beach. He saw the joy in her head as it met the wind and her hair blew wild. He remembered how long he had loved her—and the look in her eyes this night—and then he lay full length on the sand, where the little tide-waves lapping along could cool him.

After Nataca had gone, Hal called for a high-ball and a bath, and went to bed. Carolyn’s baby-blue picture met him on his table, and teased him for the way he’d been playing puppy.

“Well, Carolyn,” he told it, “I can’t come back to you, you know—and a fellow has to have a kiss now and then!”

About two o’clock Becker woke him excitedly.

“Come, sir, come up,” he said, stuttering with the weight of his message. “Barney Lansing is above, sir!”

“Barney Lansing!” exploded Hal; and then, fairly behind Becker, Barney himself, buttoned in an india-rubber jacket, strode into the cabin.

“You’re a slicker!” cried Barney, gripping Hal’s hand and roughing a tuft of his tousled pompadour. “I’ve chased you over the whole damned ocean. Might have told me how you cleaned out!”

“I told nobody,” Hal said, dismissing Becker with a hand. “I sent a fellow up from Cuba to charter the yacht under an English name—and out she came and nobody wiser. But I’ve got to be clearing along, I suppose. South Afric’ for mine, eh? Come for a call—or what?”

“Came to take you home, old man,” beamed Barney. “Casey played funny and got well. Been after you four weeks!”

Nataca wakened in the solemn rose-gray dawn—the time when the day is young,

and the world is young, and life and hope and love are young, when all of everything stretches ahead.

She wakened smiling, tasting the perfume of her lips, and touching the scars on her wrists with tenderness that they had been made because of him. Noiselessly she got up, dipped her face in the bowl, and slipped into her clothes, pinned back her hair, and then from beneath her bed drew red beads, which she tied around her neck for joy. It seemed to her that her heart must waken the whole village. Could it be true—this that she was getting ready for?

The hour was early—but early was best. She had planned it all—Caris had said she should not go another night. He had said it with his stiletto! So, of course, since she was to take the padre this time, she must be very wise about it!

Certainly then the thing to do was to take him early—before Caris was awake! Then Hal and she and the White Bear would skim out safe to the ocean, with life all like this morning, everything stretching ahead, and songs that never were beginning to sing themselves.

Turning the door bolt with her petticoat she managed without a sound, and ran down the dew-wet path, down the road, past the church, into the good padre's gate, and tapped softly at his window.

Four impatient tappings brought his night-capped head to meet her.

"What is it before morning?" he asked with a frown. "I prayed with the dead till midnight. What now?"

"Now it is to bless the living," she laughed, swinging her beads before his sleepy eyes. "I wait to be married. The master of the English yacht sends for you. Make haste. "I will get my skiff and wait on the shore, and if you do not come, then I take my love and go without a blessing! So make haste!"

She drove him with words till she saw him mumblingly collecting his cassock and

shoes, and then raced down the road again to the shore for her boat.

"How-do, lover?" she greeted in gay English as she came around the long fish-house into full view of the bay.

And then she stopped, looked out across the water, drew one hand slowly across her forehead, breathed just one long broken cry, and dropped to her knees on the sand.

The horizon was clear and blue, unlined by mast or deck. The White Bear quite, quite gone!

New York greeted Hal Moore with plenty of fun. Casey shook hands and assured him it was quite all right, just part of a good game.

The club fellows teased him about his poor pig-sticking, and it was all very merry.

Carolyn welcomed him gaily, said she had to be honest and admit she hadn't missed him at all, excepting on the day they had planned to be married, when his absence unfortunately left her without a date!

And when a month had passed everything was going along just as before, and Hal tried to persuade himself that he had really quite forgotten his exile. And his exile in itself doubtless was forgotten: but somehow he began to find his soul alternately either dried up and empty, and so much too small—or cramped with the fullness of being so much too large—that he didn't know himself for himself at all!

Of course he couldn't get away from the fact that he didn't forget Nataca. But, then—who was she? A little island Spanish girl whom he had kissed—that was all! She had loved him—yes—but what of that? To him, she was nobody, and her love was nothing—that he granted.

But he granted it too well—for finally, after all, came the time when his heart broke free—when he knew—when he knew that the love in her heart was but a reflection of that in his own!

Hal Moore plunged across the sand

beach of a certain island one April day, up the sloping road to the village, into the midst of its low, crude dwellings, and began looking eagerly from house to house, from face to face.

He approached an old man crouching in the sun. "Do you know a girl—" he began, but the old man shook his hands and his head that he didn't understand. A young man he asked then, and a girl and a child, and still no one could understand; but the child understood the color of his skin, and so brought the English lad, who joyfully shook hands, but grew serious as he heard the question.

"Why, you know Nataca?" he asked in surprise. "She's gone away. She's—she's dead. Here—Caris will tell you."

In a daze Hal turned to the young Spaniard who was coming toward them, his face set with hatred.

"I knew you," he said in broad English, "and I hate you! Nataca is dead!"

He smiled at the cry and the quick pain in Hal's face. "She is—dead!" he repeated, and walked away.

The boy took Hal's hand. "We'll go to her house," he offered, and led the way.

The doors and windows were desertedly open—the little yard dirty and bare. Mud had washed in over the floor, a red curtain hung limply by a tumbled bed, dishes broken by invading animals and children lay along the table and floor; over the one chair left hung Nataca's little brown skirt, and in the chimney corner a scarlet picore bird peered nervously from the nest she had built in one of Nataca's brown sandals.

Hal had nothing to say. It was too much to understand all at once. Too staringly much to remember, too helplessly much to forget, and after a while Becker came after him and took him back to the boat.

"Do we go out, sir?" the valet suggested respectfully.

"No—not yet," Hal replied. "I've got

to be still—and think—a little while."

All night long Caris watched those three dim lights on the bay—the lights that marked the yacht and the master of it! "This is the chance!" he said grimly—he'd known Hal would come back. "This is the chance. Tomorrow he may be gone!"

He drove his stiletto in the sand to smooth it, into the water to clean it, and shot his boat to the water's edge. But then—he stopped—he stopped, and with a snarling curse at himself flung his knife in the boat, where the point stuck, quivering. He shoved the boat with one sweep back again, and his face turned from the yacht lights to the stars—because his thoughts had turned from himself to that last look he had seen in Nataca's eyes!

"This—this is the chance!" he said again, "to-morrow he may be gone—"

Near noon of the next day Caris peered in at the window of a long-deserted hunting shack in a woods clearing some thirty miles inland from the village. On the floor, a coffee mill between her knees, sat old Vica. She saw him, and motioned him in eagerly.

"It's good to see some one," she said in shrill Spanish. "The girl won't say a word! But she'll never have you. It's no good to keep us away like this."

"The Englishman came after her yesterday," said Caris briefly. "They all told him she was dead. No one suspects. So he'll go away—and—then—that's all."

"You didn't kill him?" she shrilled in surprise.

"No," Caris answered. "Where's Nataca?"

Hal lay on the cool floor of the deck. Like Caris, he had turned his face to the stars, trying to forget himself and remember the look in her eyes.

So still it was—not even a fisherman's call, nor the sound of a night-bird's wing, and he knew that all his heart and all his hope and all his world would forever be just an echo of

this one long hour.

Becker, hovering at a respectful distance near the rail, might as well have been in Greenland, for all his master recognized his presence; but suddenly, leaping all bounds of dignity, he sprang the width of the deck and leaned out over the water, straining his old sight till it hurt, in his hope that it was his eyes and not his heart that saw that rocking little skiff breaking through the waves—that eager

face, white against the night-blue. He watched—he shut his eyes a minute and looked again—then brought forth a wordless exclamation that roused even Hal's weary mind!

Striving hard to keep his calm, but failing utterly, Becker turned to Hal:

“The Moon, sir,” he announced weakly.