



THE PENDULUM OF THE SKULL

By J. ALLAN DUNN

The swinging skull was a sign of danger; but danger comes to any man who invades an island of the savage seas, and matches his wits against the despots of the tropic outlands

BUD BARRETT peered through the stiltlike stems of the pandanus grove that covered the ledge above the waterfall, and saw the weft of canvas flying at the maintop. He was sailor enough to know that this was a signal of recall, to guess that a sudden change in the barometer, prophesying a shift of wind, had decided the skipper of the *Flying Cloud* to get out to searoom and deep water, away from the shallows and coral ledges through which they had worked up to the island in search of fresh water.

The casks were not yet filled. He saw that, by squinting down at the stream where the men labored under the urge of the first mate. But the signal was imperative. In a few minutes they would go.

The first mate shouted his name, cursed it volubly, but Bud lay doggo, wriggling back under the broad leaves of a

ground vine, completely hidden.

He was not going back. He had slipped away just as he intended doing when he learned he was to be in the shore party. He had never been a willing member of the crew of the *Flying Cloud*, and now the skipper, or the owners, could take the wages due him, and welcome.

He was through with a bully mate whose head he ached to punch—believing he could do it successfully—but who fought with kicks and belaying pins, backed by a gun and official authority. He was sick of the stench of the fo’c’sle, of the wrecks of humanity with whom he was quartered and rated—though he admitted several of them were better seamen than he was—tired of the badly cooked food. It would have been different if he had deliberately selected his berth. Then he would have gone through with and swallowed his

medicine, bitter as it might be, but——

The two boats were leaving. There had come a strong and sudden wind from seaward, against the prevailing trades. The reef-set coast had been suddenly transformed from a weather to a treacherous lee shore. James Barrett, not yet accepted as Able Seaman, meant little in the face of that danger. They would not care if he were marooned on the island for the rest of his life, eaten by the natives. He was not the first sailor who had deserted.

Barrett hugged himself. There was not much danger from cannibals, he fancied though the bush tribes were said to be wild and dangerous savages. But there was a trading station along the coast, beyond the lava cape. The creek there was only a shallow one, and the skipper had sailed past, intent only upon replenishing the water that had staled on him and sailing on down south to the whaling grounds. As soon as the *Flying Cloud* was well clear of the land, Bud meant to work his way along the shore to the station.

His plans were hazy. He thought he might be able to get some sort of a job, splitting coconuts, keeping tally, anything—or playing Crusoe. He had acted on an impulse that was based on weeks of ill treatment. The mates were bad enough, the skipper was a hell driver, and what was bad now would become intolerable once they got to whaling.

He had noticed food enough since he had come ashore—fish in the stream, fruit of all sorts, cocoanuts, wild bananas, shaddock, guavas, breadfruit, even orange trees. And freedom. Freedom from dirty weather, and a howling mate cursing him on to unfamiliar tasks, setting him to all the dirty work aboard, making a mark of him, calling him “Dude” while the cringing men laughed at the feeble joke. Freedom from the cockroach ridden bunk, and its moldy mattress of sodden, insufficient straw.

He had his knife for defense against

wild beasts—if there were any. He didn’t believe the tribesmen would bother him before he had got to the station. And he had heard the second mate talking to the doctor—as the cook was called—saying that the island was quite a point of call for whalers watering north and south, and for other ships. He could get away, if the trader wouldn’t use him—any ship was better than the *Flying Cloud*, built like a barrel, wallowing and pitching and rancid as an ancient lard keg.

He stretched out luxuriantly in the warmth, shaded from the sun that filtered down through the leaves. It made him drowsy and, before he knew it, he was napping.

When he woke, the sun had shifted several degrees, the seawind was wrestling heavily with the tropic growth, fronded boughs thrashing, ripe fruit plumping down. The *Flying Cloud* was clawing into the gale, working out through a wide channel among the reefs that now showed white with foam.

Bud came down from the cliff, crossed the stream on smooth boulders, took a drink on the far side, stuffed his stomach with orange-skinned bananas that tasted curiously like Baldwin apples, and, skirting the mangrove belt that masked the exit of the creek, started to work down to the shore where the traveling should be easier and less hazardous than an attempt to strike through the thick bush.

It was harder than he imagined, the belt of mangroves far wider, while the fury of the gale was astounding. Blue sky and sun had disappeared, the clouds were slate colored and lowering, and out of them blew the strenuous wind, that bowed the tops of the biggest trees and sent the palms lashing like whips. Whenever he got into the open it drove him staggering at a tangent back to shelter again, and came roaring through the bush after him. The barrier reef was a white and smoking wall of spume, the ordinarily placid lagoon was sudded with windblown foam, washed up,

flung up in spongy masses.

Bud didn't know it, but it was getting close to the rainy season, to the monsoon changes with swift shifts of wind and furious storms. All the wonder of gold and green and azure had turned into moaning gale, struggling vegetation that had lost its luster, while the light was flat and hard and cold.

Again the sky appeared to close in. A javelin of lavender flame rent it, flooded turbulent sea and tossing forest with its weird levin. He caught a glimpse of the *Flying Cloud* fighting out under eased sail—thankful that he was not punching at the stiff canvas, yelled and sworn at for his clumsiness—and then, as if the bottom had fallen from a mighty cistern, the tropical downpour burst, hissing into the lagoon, thudding on the beach, bulleting the leaves, cutting off light, all sense of location, blinding him as effectually as if he stood in the tumbling spray back of the falls at Niagara.

The wind did not cease. Its force was so tremendous that it angled the streams of water, and sent them with a rush and a roar that blotted out every thing, and rendered him in a moment sodden, beaten; until he felt bruised, floundering about in the edge of the bush, tripped, stumbling, flung headlong by writhing lianas. He found himself at last in the midst of the root stems of a great fig-baniam, whose mighty thatch resisted even such a rain as this. Penetrating its dark maze until he touched the main trunk, he stood cowering, cold, shivering, though the temperature was close to ninety, watching the eerie flickering of the lightning checkering the tangle of the bush, listening to the frightful clamor of the long peals of thunder that went rolling overhead.

It was a nightmare of darkness, of dread, marked by the crash of some great tree, the furious, unceasing battery of the booming surf booming a deep bass to the wild orchestra of wind and rain and thunder. The air was

hard to breathe. It was charged with unleashed statics, that he felt crackling in his hair, that tingled at his shrunken fingertips. Half an hour ago and he had been proudly confident of his own cleverness, his own ability, now he felt like the least of mites, the most helpless of atoms, an ant at the mercy of a whirlpool or crawling over a trench top with a battle at its most awful height—powerless—afraid.

Then—suddenly as it had come—the gale passed. First the rain, sweeping on like a gray regiment, the wind driving after-it, the thunder lunging in sullen retreat, the darkness lifting—lifting, and the sun flinging flashing lances of victory under its blue banner.

Color and warmth coming out. Sparkling, dripping leaves of emerald, ragged banana pennons lifting again, cockatoos screeching, birds calling, the seas slowly subsiding, the pounding breakers on the reef still flinging spray that was now haloed with rainbows.

Bud came out of the baniam to find himself on a narrow trail, less than three feet wide, its floor of dirt packed solid by generations of naked horny feet, the bush on either side wattled with undergrowth, vines, close-set trees. The air blew fresh from the sea, and carried on it the peculiar fragrance of the bush mingled with the salty tang—odors of ripe fruit and heavy scented flowers. He pushed on shorewards, thankful for the path, not recognizing it for a bushtrail until he came to where it ended on a strip of shingle. Here he saw, aswing from a bamboo like a grisly pendulum, a human skull, sign of tabu, warning that the trail was trapped with pits and poisoned stakes, with ambushed spears and arrows triggered for the unwary.

Luck had been with him. The lower end of the path that he had traversed was harmless. He lost no time in leaving the grim vicinity, though he went with the feel between his shoulder-blades of an ever threatening spear flung from cover.

The tide was going out, and he left the bush alone, though his thirst, grew as the hot sun warmed him, dried him, and then threatened to sap his vitality.

Globular bush-fruit tempted him, hanging golden and enticing but, to Bud, they were but apples of Sodom, filled with the ashes of death.

Wading, evading quicksand, making swift traverse over beaches of crushed and tiny shells, clambering over flinty lava promontories, he hurried on, with but one thought—to reach the trading station. The swinging skull was in his mind's eye, that inhospitable signboard of the tropical jungle he had looked upon as an inn where food was for the plucking, and sleep a delight. His imagination, stimulated by all that he had heard and read of the savage isles of the South Seas, began to ride him like an evil hag upon his shoulders, bringing only one comfort, a remembrance that the trading stations were said to be comparatively safe these days—for fear of reprisal—and that so long as one kept to the beach in their immediate neighborhood there was not much to fear.

The mates in charge of the two watering boats had been armed, and they had brought along some rifles in the boats. At the time Bud had thought these precautions perfunctory, though it had been because of the mates' watchfulness against any hostile natives that he had been enabled to slip away as he did. Now he realized that he had been running a far greater risk than he dreamed of, and the mere fact that he had come so far unscathed seemed to triple the odds against his getting through.

But at last he came to the horn of a bay, and looked gladly across its blue and green crescent to where buildings showed among verdure, their iron unpainted roofs looking like brass in the sun—now westering, losing power, but gaining glory, slowly gathering nightrobes of purple for its bed.

There was a long wharf running out into the lagoon, two small boats alongside, a gracefully lined schooner with furled sails at anchor, palms with slender silver trunks and plumes of tender green above clusters of coconuts marching in stately rows down to a narrow strip of beach. Here was civilization and Bud's spirit resumed its mastery. Fear fell from his shoulders like a released bundle at the end of a long trail. He marched almost blithely through the palms, grateful for their shade, looking longingly up at the nuts. He could not climb those slim boles, nor could he even open the nuts with his knife. But he looked hopefully forward to the trader offering him a green nut with the top lopped off, filled with cool, slightly effervescent contents. He had heard the sailors raving about the joy of a fresh coconut.

He was in bad shape after his long trip in the sun, scorched for all his sea tan, his feet rock-bruised, weary after the rough going that had taken him since noon to travel.

A rocky gully cut through the trees as he neared the house. It looked like a petrified cascade with the water turned to gray, porous stone. It was an ancient lava flow. In little earthen pockets guavas grew, with a sort of Spanish bayonet. Screw pine made clumps of cover. He saw a faint path that led from the plantation he was in, and doubtless offered the best crossing of the ravine. Following it, voices stopped him on the edge of the gully. One was a girl's in evident protest, the other's—rough and domineering with a sort of bullying insolence to it—was that of a man. Instantly—like dog to wolf—imaginary hackles seemed to lift on Bud's neck. The girl's voice was sweet, the man's harshly dominant and masterful.

With the approaching sunset all wind had gone. Words came clearly to him as he halted, uncertain where to look for the speakers, since they were not visible on the little path.

“He can’t last out the night, I tell you,” said the man. “Then what you goin’ to do? You can’t stay here alone. You got to come with me. It ain’t as if I warn’t willin’ to marry you, soon’s we git to Suva. I can’t do it before, can I? Don’t be a fool, Thelma. You know what ’ud happen to a woman alone here on a tradin’ station. The bushmen’ll know when he dies inside of an hour—know if you’re alone. The place’ll have to go till we git another agent. Lucky the copra’s aboard. Now you go git yore things together, an’ be sensible. I’m goin’ to look round a bit.”

“No!” cried the girl. “Go with you? Trust you? Marry you? *No!*”

There came an exclamation from the man, another from the girl, stopped almost immediately, a rustling in the bushes, an oath from the man. Then Bud saw them, as the man came out of the cover where they had been talking carrying in his arms a slender struggling figure in blue. The figure writhed and fought, struck and clawed at his bearded face, while he laughed, and forced her higher on his great chest, bending his bull neck until his beard brushed her cheek.

He set her down with a great guffaw, releasing her almost as violently as he must have clutched her and, still laughing, strode off among the guavas toward the buildings. Bud came leaping over the lava rocks, his fists clenched, and his gray eyes blazing.

He had glimpsed scarlet streaks on the man’s nose and the barer parts of his cheeks as his big bulk wheeled and disappeared. The girl in blue reeled, steadied herself, rubbed violently at one cheek, and then her eyes, wild with resentment and fear, dilated suddenly at sight of Bud. He was catapulting toward her with his scorched face, unshaven, hatless, his slop-chest clothing grimed and torn, but, nevertheless, to her woman’s instinct a knight charging to her rescue, or her avenging.

She shook her head at him, and a mass of redgold hair, already disarranged, came

tumbling down far below her shoulders. The beauty of it, the sheer, slender loveliness of her vital youth, held him more than her shaken head, her arm outstretched as if to actually arrest him, her whispered.

“Stop. He’ll kill you! He’ll shoot.”

Bud remembered now the swing of a bolstered gun low on the man’s hip. It would not have held him back—it would not now. Something else held them both entangled—sea magic perhaps. Magic beyond doubt. Gray eyes looking into blue ones. Gazing with a dawning recognition. It was the call of youth to youth.

Bud looked like a beach-hobo, but manhood showed in his height, in a well knit symmetry, the shape of his head, his jaw, his nose, his eyes looking now with frank admiration.

The girl’s color rose till both cheeks matched the one she had rubbed so furiously to wipe out that bearded, ravished kiss. Her young breast rose and fell with her quickened pulse. Like the spark that closes contact between two charged poles, something bridged between them, something rose in their eyes and ran, each to each, along that bridge. For a moment everything else was forgotten except each other. The surf boomed and the sunset deepened, the world rolled on, but they stood still until there came the sound of the man’s voice shouting, “Purdy, Oh Purdy! Where are you, you blighter!”

“I’ve got to go back to my uncle,” said the girl. “He’s dying. There’s nothing much I can do for him, but——”

“I heard what that blackguard said to you,” said Bud. “My name’s Barrett—Cyrus Barrett—Bud Barrett. I deserted from the whaler that put in this morning for water lower down the beach.”

“You don’t talk like a sailor?” There was no real criticism in the words, rather compliment.

“I’m not much of one,” said Bud. “But

you don't have to go with that skunk, whether he's got a gun or not. So don't let that worry you."

She gave him a look that was reward in advance. But she shook her head.

"You'll only get into trouble," she said. "Watterson's killed more than one man, they say. There are the others with him. And—I couldn't stay here alone with you."

"I don't see why not. What's convention got to do with a deal like this? I'm square—you know that." He had no doubt of her conviction along that line, but he saw in the same instant that she was right. He had to protect her that way, too.

"He isn't going to shoot me in cold blood," he said, "though he might have if I'd interfered just now. I'm sorry I didn't get here soon enough to do that. A man that would bully a girl in the fix you're in is yellow, anyway. You go on to the house, and I'll happen along just as I would have anyhow. What's the matter with your uncle?"

"Heart trouble, island fever and trade gin," she said, her voice suddenly hard and bitter. "A combination of the three."

Bud saw, in her young, brave face, contempt, worry, weariness, the lack of sleep, the long trial of nursing.

"I've got to go," she said shortly. "You must be all tired out—hungry and thirsty. It's good of you to want to help me."

"I'm going to. Have you got a gun up at the house?"

She nodded, though she seemed to be listening to something else. A forefinger shot up to her lips, her pupils enlarged again until her eyes seemed black. She looked like a startled deer, Bud thought, remembering Californian days.

The bearded man had stepped silently as a cat out of the guavas, and stood looking at them with a mirthless laugh. It showed his white teeth amid his uncombed whiskers, puckering close the scratches the girl's nails

had scored.

"Who's yore pickup, Thelma?" he asked. His dark eyes flashed in swift anger as he advanced threateningly toward Bud, plainly resenting the intrusion. "Where did you come from?" he demanded. Bud held his ground, looking at him equably, though, what with the need of water, and his leg weariness, his judgment quailed a little at the size and brawn of the man.

"Off the whaler *Flying Cloud*," he answered.

"She's out to sea. Flew the coop, did you? Fo'c'sle too tough for you? Rather shirk than work? Thought you'd hit the beach an' bum yore livin'? Well, you've come to the wrong port, sonny. We don't like sandlice round here. Git!"

"You own this place?" asked Bud. He knew he was inviting a row and, aside from the gun, knew the chances were that he was going to get the worst of it, but the girl's presence, the still keen memory of the man's attack on her, did more than merely bolster him; they charged him with challenge, regardless of consequence. Neither was he going to be entirely helpless. He kept his eye on the holster, he set his stance for a spring. He knew the girl was standing with one hand at her heart, fearful for him, and he knew it was going to come out all right.

Here was more magic—the escape from the watering party, the first glamor of the bush, the wild fury of the storm, the swinging skull and the trapped trail, the girl, and now this encounter.

Swift as the impression of a dream all this projected itself upon the screen of Bud Barrett's brain before the man answered.

"I own half of it, if that's anything to you."

"And the other half is mine," said the girl.

The man's face twitched with rage.

"Then you go 'tend to it," he snarled at

her. "You, you scupper pup, git to hell out of here."

With the roar of a brute, his eyes glaring in his convulsed face, the big man leaped with dynamic force and swiftness. One hand was out to clutch at Bud's shoulder, to spin him about while he kicked him down the gully for the pithless scarecrow he looked; the other was clubbed for a blow, ignoring his gun, a man proud of his bull strength, eager to demonstrate it.

It was a costly mistake in judgment. He had expected the scarecrow to turn and run; expected nothing else from a runaway sailor. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred he would have been right. As it was, Bud stooped a little, his two hands shot out, and clamped on the other's right wrist, twisting and wrenching the arm until Watterson yelled with the pain of it, swinging a flailing blow that Bud neatly ducked. Then, while he let go the tortured arm with his left hand for a moment, he deftly plucked the gun from the holster, as the bearded man wrenched free and rushed him, flinging about him hairy arms that were hard as timber and flexible as rubber.

The gun went flying, and Bud spared a glance over his shoulder as he fought to free himself from the grip.

"Get it, get that gun!" he gasped, and saw the girl retrieve it, then step back with the weapon in her hand, her young face fierce with the look of a tigress, cruel and watchful.

All functioning ceased in him save that of preservation. He was on the defensive, his ribs bowing out of shape, his breath being slowly crushed out of him, his arms pinioned, while the bearded face close to his was gloating, vindictive.

Bud's right hand worked up the other's left by jerks, feeling the great muscles pliant in their sheaves, constricting him; feeling for something else, finding the place, fingers digging fiercely, frantically, in between tendon and nerve, touching a vein, clamping

down.

The triumphant face was again convulsed, this time in sudden agony. It felt to Watterson as if a redhot wire had been inserted below his left biceps, midway of the great muscle, burning, searing, paralyzing. Strength went out of his left arm, the scarecrow sailor tore loose, leaped in. One blow, cushioned by his beard, but jarring him, crashed hard and close to the point of Watterson's jaw, the other landed full on his mouth as he floundered forward, beside himself with rage, his left arm temporarily impotent, numbed.

Bud slipped the rush, panting, his wind broken, his heart pounding, but game and cool. The fruit he had eaten since his meager breakfast on the *Flying Cloud* had given him nothing beyond filling space in his clamoring stomach. Sun and the struggle over the beach had taken full toll. He was in the condition of a tired athlete who attempts to wrest honors from a fresh boxer, after a long program of grueling contests. His two tricks of jujitsu had served him well once, but the nerve paralysis would not last much longer, Watterson would be on his guard against repetition. Bud had weight against him, power, the sustained vigor of a well-fed man. His tongue stuck to the inside of his mouth—the thirst that had gradually augmented all through the afternoon now attacked him viciously, making him a little dizzy, robbing him of all elasticity.

The sun was glaring straight up the ravine, close now to the rim of the sea, turning the gray rocks red as blood. Bud sidestepped, working round to get it at his back. Watterson followed him, rubbing his tingling left arm into which strength was slowly returning, murderous rage flaming in his eyes. Bud found himself backed against a boulder just as the girl gave a cry of warning, and his opponent, with a grunt of content, started a left swing that came down on Bud's guard like a sledgemoor. He used the slowly

revitalizing limb as a club, while he drove hard to the body with his right. It shook Bud hard, and it hurt badly. The vitality seemed suddenly sapped out of him, and he sagged down on his heels, covering, with Watterson stepping back a little, grinning, set to send in the finishing blows. Under one wrist Bud glimpsed the face of the girl, anxious, alarmed. This brute, if he downed Bud, would kick most of the life out of him, would have the girl at his mercy.

Bud saw the right fist start and, with his own anger and hatred surging back, bringing fresh energy on its flood, he crouched suddenly and lashed out while Watterson's blow sickled the empty air above him, and its launcher stumbled forward. Bud was inside the guard, and the smash he sank in the other's plexus—with the second higher and under the heart—were vicious and hard enough to brake the fighting impetus of the bearded man. They left him winded, gasping while Bud slid away from the rock that had trapped him, whipped in a short, lifting uppercut to the hairy, deceiving jaw and, trying for a left hook to the pit of the stomach once more, felt his foot slip under a looping vine. It twisted into a crevice, and gave away under him as he fell sprawling, and saw Watterson, still gasping horribly, his great chest pumping spasmodically as he strove for full lungs, stooping. His face was bestial with triumphal ferocity as he lifted a booted foot to kick Bud in the head, the ribs, anywhere that would maim and hurt, leave him crippled and senseless.

Bud could not help himself, the treacherous vine was still snared about his ankle, and he was on all fours.

There was the bark of a shot, the whine of a bullet overhead, sudden stupid surprise on Watterson's face. The girl's voice sounded clear as crystal, hard as metal.

"I'll hit next time, Watty. You know I can. Now, get out of here. Get off to the

schooner. Get outside the reef as soon as the tide will let you. Go on, down the gully to the beach. Your boat's waiting for you."

Bud freed his ankle from the treacherous loop, and got up painfully. His foot was hurt and wrenched, but it was still serviceable. Watterson's scowling astonishment changed to a leer.

"That's how the land lies, is it? That's why you deserted? I reckon yore ship called here before, mister. Want to leave the two of you together."

Bud hobbled forward, but the girl was ahead of him. Her eyes flared, her jaw was hard set, and there was no mistaking the determination that spoke in her words, her pose, as she stood with the big Colt pressed close against her hip, slanting upward, covering Watterson.

"Wattle, if you say another word I'll shoot the tongue out of your mouth. You've shown yourself what I've always thought you were—rotten. I'm through with you."

Watterson nodded, a bit grimly, yet with the air of a winner for all his ignominious retreat. The girl watched him down the slope, standing poised on a boulder where she could command the gully and Watterson's descent to the beach.

When Watterson had turned toward his boat, Bud helped her down, and noticed that her firm chin quivered. She caught up a trembly lip with her little white teeth. "He'll get all the best of it, at that," she said. "He's got the copra and the schooner, and that's really mine. I'll tell you all about it presently," she went on wearily. "You need food, and uncle——"

A shrill wailing cry started in the direction of the buildings, repeated, augmented by a score of alien throats.

"He's dead," she said in a low voice. "The boys have found it out. I left Tiri, the foreman, with him."

The boys, Bud supposed, were the

plantation hands. The mournful sounds were weird in the dusk that was rapidly sifting down as they walked toward the house. He remembered what Watterson had said about the bushmen learning swiftly of the death, and that she was alone. She was not quite alone now, but he had been forced upon her. Unless he went into the bush they would have to defy the conventions until the next ship called. His presence would embarrass her. And he could not leave her with her black boys, savages themselves, and liable to reversion to the wildest type. He had attempted to rescue her from Watterson's frying-pan, only to compromise her, or leave her exposed to perils not to be thought of.

Plain before him he could see the pendulum of the skull.

Suddenly the wailing was punctuated with something that sounded like distant thunder from the heights that still held a flaring light on their fantastic crags. It was too regular for that. It was the sound of drums—drums beaten by naked cannibals, dancing about their fires and totem images. He glanced at the girl, who was looking at him.

"It doesn't mean anything," she said. "They always start them going at sun-down, and keep it up until after midnight. Whenever they have nothing to do, the natives dance. They tell me they do much the same thing in New York," she added, with an attempt at making light of the matter.

But her face was wan, and Bud felt suddenly the strain of the life she must have led—a drunken uncle for her only companion, the cannibal haunted bush, the treacherous plantation hands, the management of the place in her care. And now this last catastrophe that he had blunderingly brought about.

He braced himself to play the man. At least, Watterson was gone—though she had been the main factor in that. There was no sight of him. His boat had disappeared, the girl said. She had been quite capable of taking

care of herself after all—unless Watterson had caught her unawares. It was up to him to solve the situation. As night swiftly fell, he squared his shoulders while he limped along, shaking off the depression of the darkness, the dead man waiting for them in the house, the black boys working themselves into an ecstasy of mock grief that might swiftly change to something far more fiendish, if they sensed that the white girl was unprotected.

So far the presence of the schooner restrained them. When that left it was up to Bud, inexperienced in such conditions but resolved to find some solution.

The stars were coming out, the wailing hands, naked save for loin cloths, their eyes rolling and their heads flung back like howling dogs, had lit palm torches, where they squatted outside the trader's bungalow. They gaped at the sight of Bud. The girl dismissed them tersely, snapping commands at them in Beach English, and they slunk off to their quarters.

A tall native came out on the little porch and spoke to her.

"Massa Timi *mate*," he said. "Wattersoni, he speak along of you?"

"I saw him, Tiri," she said.

"I hear shot," he replied looking suspiciously at Bud. "Some trouble walk along of you?"

"No trouble. Tiri, you speak along those boys go make one grave—all same in garden. Now."

"I suppose I seem callous to you," she said, "but my uncle has been ill for a long time. He was only my father's half brother, and he was not much of a man."

She was plainly holding on to her self control, and Bud said nothing, wondering at the pluck of her. She left him in the front room with a lighted lamp, while she went in to where the dead man lay. She came out again in a few minutes, her face composed, though she had been crying.

"We shall have to bury him soon," she said simply. "But you've got to eat."

"I'll wait," said Bud. His hunger had left him for the time. He followed her back into the room, and saw the body lying on a bed with the mosquito curtain drawn aside. It was a weak face with a straggling beard that did not conceal the inefficient chin, and marks of dissipation showed on it.

The schooner was still there when they returned from the garden, the grisly task completed.

"They can't get outside until the tide serves, she said. "I don't think he'll bother us. He's satisfied with his bargain. And he'll come back. He knows I can't stay here." She started putting a meal on the table, making hot tea, opening tins, producing bread and fruit.

"We'll eat—we've got to eat," she said. "You must be starved."

She sipped some tea, broke some food, and Bud, after the first morsels, found himself ravenous. Food was necessary for the plan slowly forming in his mind.

"You mean you stand to lose your share of everything?" he asked.

"Watterson was in partnership with my father. My name is Thelma Selwyn. My father owned the schooner. Watterson put in the money for the trading goods. We had a place on Muriti. And we established this station for collecting copra. Afterward we started a plantation here, as well as at Muriti. Watterson was in charge. I used to sail with my father"—her voice broke, recovered—"until he died. There was a hurricane at Muriti. I was at Suva waiting for father to come back for me. I was staying with friends. My uncle—I always called him that—came instead. Father had been killed trying to rescue some of our people.

"Uncle Tom was no sailor. He hated the sea. I could have handled the schooner alone, but he would not hear of it. So he took over the station here, and brought me with

him. Watterson took the schooner, picking up shell and *beche de mer* about the group besides copra. Uncle said father wished it that way. I do not think he trusted Watterson. I never liked him. I know he did what he wanted with my uncle. No doubt he cheated us. There has never been an accounting, I believe. Not for a year.

"I suppose it all seems shiftless to you. Helpless. But I am a girl and legal affairs for a woman under twenty-one are not made easy in this part of the world. My uncle was practically my guardian."

Bud nodded. His face had hardened, but it was not the less attractive to the girl who eyed him frankly. His eyes lost their boyishness, and gained in determination. Lines showed from nose angles to mouth corners; his scorched features became endowed with a stamp of efficiency, and his voice took on character, responsibility. There was little of the deserting fo'c'sle hand in the man who talked quietly and seriously to her.

"The schooner is really your share, then?" he said. "The station and the goods here Watterson's?"

"Yes. Practically that. Wait a moment."

She went out on the little porch, and came back to the open door.

"They are all aboard," she said. "Tiri is watching. He is foreman here, and I can really depend upon him. He is fond of me, and grateful for some things I have done for him. They cannot get out of the lagoon for an hour yet. There is one thing bothers me. Tiri says no one has paid the hands, and their annual wages are due. Watterson knows I cannot do it without money from the copra he has aboard or the ship's money he must have with him. He will claim to have settled with my uncle, of course."

"We'll handle all that, I think," said Bud. "We'll have to work quick, though. We've got an hour, you say. That's what I

wanted to know. How about the crew on the schooner. How many?"

"I'll call Tiri in. He knows."

The native entered, hunkering down on the floor, accepting Bud with a nod, his face with its flat nose, full lips and retreating forehead grave, and his eyes, dark and lustrous, fixed on the girl's face. She spoke to him in native dialect, and he replied promptly.

"There are eight boys in the crew," she translated, "a half-caste cook who is part Chinese, Purdy and Watterson."

"Any of the boys the ones you knew—who sailed with your father and you?"

"Five of them, Tiri says."

"Know you—and like you?"

"I think so. They know Tiri."

"We'll take a gamble on them? How about Purdy?"

"He's Watterson's mate, a Scotch Australian, drunk whenever Watterson lets him be. I was mate for my father. Watterson hired Purdy."

"You could sail the schooner out of the lagoon?"

The girl's eyes lightened as she nodded at him. Tiri listened intently with his head cocked to one side, striving to follow the English.

"As long as the partnership is going to split, that's what you'd rather have, isn't it? Your original share—the schooner?"

"Oh, yes."

"This end of it no use to you—outside of the stores—without capital or without a boat?"

"No use without capital. The hands have to be paid. If they were I could sell the copra to other traders who call here at times. But——"

"I understand. This is no job for a girl. I wouldn't be stuck on it myself." The swinging skull was in his mind's eye, and every now and then, when he listened for it, he could hear the beat of the drums.

"With the schooner you could make out trading, couldn't you?"

"I think so. If I got credit for trade goods. I know a good many of the islanders. I'd like to try it."

Bud almost said, "So would I," but he wasn't ready for that yet.

"All right," he said instead. "How's Tiri as a fighting man?"

"What are you planning?"

"You've got a small boat. I'm going off in it—with Tiri, if he's game—and I'm going to persuade Watterson to take over the station for the schooner. I've muddled things for you so far. I think I can straighten them out. I'm a fair shot myself, and Watterson is afraid of a gun unless he's got the drop on the other man—or girl. I'm going to get the drop on him. What's the crew likely to be doing?"

Her eyes were sparkling now, approving him.

"They'll be for'ard, probably below for a while yet, playing with dice."

"Shooting craps, eh? Civilized that far. How about Tiri?"

"He'll come with us." Again she spoke rapidly to Tiri who rose to his feet and pounded himself on the chest.

"That Wattasoni no good," he said. "That *ehipe* belong along Missy. We take."

"Fine. You'll have to come along," he said to the girl. "Gum things up to leave you on shore. If we make the deal, there's no use delaying a start. Might complicate things. I hope to send Watterson ashore with Purdy and whoever insists on going with him."

"Of course I'm coming," she told him. "Purdy and Watterson will be in the cabin. The native boys may not make any trouble, if we can handle Watterson and the mate."

"We'll handle them. Can you get some things together quickly? You said you had a gun, and there's Watterson's. How about Tiri?"

"Me? I got knife. I got club. No

trouble along of me.”

“Native boys on board armed?”

“They’ll have knives. But Tiri can handle them if they’re below. They can only come up one at a time.”

“Good, that leaves the cook. He’ll be in his galley?”

“If we have luck.”

“Bully.” Bud stood up, and so did the girl. “Thelma,” he said, “you’re a wonder. I didn’t know there were any girls like you. You’re taking me on trust, you know.”

“I know,” she said gravely.

“You can,” said Bud and held out his hand.

She gave him hers. “I trust you,” she said. “I know you’re not a common sailor. I don’t know what I should have done without you. I’ll be back in a few minutes. That gun is the same calibre as mine. Tiri, you go get ready. You savvy what we go along to fix?”

“Plenty I savvy. I go.”

She came back with a strapped valise, a gun belted on, her eyes shining. She handed a box half full of cartridges to Bud, who filled the cylinder of Watterson’s Colt, and slipped the rest into his pockets. Tiri appeared with the bone haft of a knife showing above his loincloth, and bearing a hardwood club that ended in a knob with a beak of shell or bone projecting from it. This was a formidable weapon which he swung with easy zest, his eyes glittering, transformed into the warrior. He had smeared some white stuff on his face and was plainly happy at the role he was to play.

“Those kanaka boy,” he said, “talk too much along their pay. I tell um we plenty fix. Tell um bimeby Wattasoni he come along shore—tomorrow he pay. They believe which way along of me I speak.”

“Watterson will pay them,” said the girl, “if he has the money aboard. I suppose he has. If we take the schooner he’ll have to stay here, and run things until a ship calls. Or we

can send one.”

“We won’t worry too much about Watterson,” said Bud. “Are we set? Let’s go.”

They went down the beach, and along the wharf to where the boat lay. There seemed nothing incongruous to Bud in the adventure they were launching—the girl he had met, himself delivered from the fo’c’sle of the *Flying Cloud*, and the loin-clad native. It seemed only the fitting close of the day that had crammed with happenings. It accorded with the sound of the drums, coming down from the dark purple heights, the waving bush, the breeze, spicy with strange scents, that was blowing off the land, the phosphorescent curl of breakers on the reef, the brilliant stars duplicated in the calm lagoon across which they drifted. With Tiri using a stern oar as paddle and rudder both, they moved slowly down on the schooner, which showed with lights in the after ports and glowing from the skylight. A phonograph was grinding raucously aboard.

Tiri was crooning very softly to himself as he plied the oar—hardly above his breath—yet there was something bloodthirsty, a very lust of killing, in the short phrases that he hummed, as he carefully handled the turning blade, its little wisps of seafire streaking away from it. They were now close up to the schooner, low in the water from its copra cargo, the freeboard easy to negotiate. Tiri brought them up beneath the overhanging stern, round to the starboard quarter. Then he stood up, club in hand.

“I climb um port side,” he said in a noiseless, but audible whisper. “You go sta’board. Suppose some one he look along of you, I fix um.”

It was good strategy. Tiri was a warrior first, and a foreman afterward.

“You no make fix um for dead,” warned the girl.

Tiri grunted, let his body fall away in a curve, and dissolved into the water without

splash, hardly rippling it. They gave him a moment or two, though time was getting a scarce and precious commodity. The tide was slack, and any minute Watterson or Purdy, both probably, would turn out the crew, loosen gaskets and hoist the anchor, which had already been hauled short. But the phonograph still sent out its sugary words, and they could hear the voices of the two men, the clink of a glass and bottle, could even get the reek of somebody's pipe as they crouched, their pulses beating fast, their blood tinkling. Man and woman—not much more than boy and girl—they were committed to the same adventure, their adventure, running the risks together.

She touched Bud on the arm. They rose, Bud with the painter of the shore dinghy ready to take a turn about a cleat, when they saw the glow of a cigarette spark as their heads lifted above the rail. Their hands were already on it, ready to go aboard. A catlike, white-kilted figure, whose slant eyes shone by the lighted binnacle lamp, glided toward them, a long knife coming out of a girdle with swift dexterity. It was the cook.

“Wha’ fo’—?” he began, and never finished that sentence. Tiri suddenly seemed to materialize out of shadow. His club came forward, too gently to hurt a fly, Bud fancied, a stroking blow that braked its own force, and landed at the base of the cook's skull. Instantly the man pitched forward on his hands, and as instantly Tiri stooped, advanced, picked up his victim before he collapsed, and deposited him neatly in the starboard scuppers.

“Plenty quiet he stop,” he said in Bud's ear. “No kill. Him all right bimeby.”

The three of them stood glued to the deck, listened, trying to pierce the gloom forward. They had left a light in the bungalow to allay or prevent any suspicions. The phonograph record ended. A man spoke in the cabin, thickly, with a Scotch burr.”

“It's all right for you, Watty, the way ye plan it. But what do I get out o' it? I'm your catspaw, it seems. I put the lad out o' the way while you get the lassie, an' a' the gear. Suppose I kill the lad? What's it worth to ye, Watty?”

“I don't want him killed, I told you. Not till I'm through with him. You're half seas over now, Purdy, we'll talk it over again later. Tide's close to the turn. We'll go out now, and we'll come back tomorrow night. Make a landing in Turtle Bay, and go ashore. You'll get enough out of it to, keep you drunk for a month. We'll go into details tomorrow. Time to go on deck.”

“There's just two drinks left in the bottle, Watty. Lemme help ye to a dram.

We'll drink standin' an' bottoms-up to you an' the little leddy.”

Even as the cook's sentence had been clipped, so was the drinking of the toast to which Watterson had responded, standing with his back to the companionway. He caught sight first of the astounded look on Purdy's hiccoughing features, taking in the still more astounding fact that the mate was allowing something to come between him and his liquor. He wanted Purdy to keep mellow until his plans had been carried out. The Scot lost his customary caution when properly primed with alcohol, and would be better able to help in the kidnaping which was forward, together with Watterson's plan of a personal revenge against the scarecrow sailor. He had done what few men could boast of, stood up to Watterson in physical contest and not come off second best.

Purdy's jaw sagged, he slobbered some of the gin out of his glass. It was plain to Watterson that the cause of it was back of him, and he started to whirl, his hand at the same time dropping to a gun with which he had replaced the one captured by Bud. But the latter, retrieved and used by the girl, was now, even as Watterson shifted his shoulders,

pressing its hard uncompromising muzzle between them.

“Your own Colt, Watterson,” said Bud’s voice, almost cheerfully, but not jestingly. “Put up your hands, and keep ’em that way. Mr. Purdy, you’re covered from the skylight—so be good.”

The mate’s eyes, pale blue in their bloodshot whites, rolled upward to where Thelma Selwyn looked down through the opening, her gun barrel resting on one of the brass protection rails.

“Sit down at the table, Purdy,” Bud went on. “Stretch your arms out in front of you. Just a minute, Watterson, I want another gem from you. May give it back to you later. All depends on the way you behave. You go sit opposite Purdy. Fix your arms the same way. Now cross ’em, both of you—cross ’em and join hands.

“I heard you two talking about Miss Selwyn,” he added, his voice losing everything but menace. “Outside of your kind intentions regarding me, I’d just as soon shoot as not, Watterson,” he warned. “Just as soon—and a little sooner.” He meant it, remembering the ribald flippancy with which they had planned to pretend to leave, and then return and dispose of both of them. He ached to batter Watterson into a pulp for his rottenness, and his will leaped in his eyes and twitched in his trigger finger.

The pair obeyed, their hands and wrists forming a diamond hitch that left them helpless, though Watterson was raging, and Purdy seemingly stupefied. But Bud kept an eye on the little mate whose eyes held a glint that suggested he was not quite as drunk as he acted.

“We are going to put the partnership on the old basis, Watterson,” he said. “I’m acting for Miss Selwyn. You get back the trading station end of it, and she takes the schooner—also the copra—and what’s in that safe, outside of enough to pay the hands.

“I don’t want a word out of you,” he went on. “Your mouth is too inclined to be dirty. You’ll do just what I say. You’ve probably swindled Miss Selwyn out of a good deal of money, first and last. She’s closing all transactions here and now with this deal. We’ll tow you out to sea a way, and then you can row back on the tide, and run things as you like. You’re getting out of it cheap. What you need is a dog-lash. I don’t want to twit a man who can’t talk back, so——”

He moved round the table, and searched Purdy for weapons, finding none. Now he stood at one end of the table, a gun in either hand. The girl had disappeared. Suddenly he heard a shot, a hubbub forward, one deep voice shouting. Watterson hitched his shoulders as if to rise, but dropped them again as Bud’s right hand gunsight was brought to bear between his eyes. Bud was torn with irresolution. The girl must have fired. She must have been in peril. The cook might have revived, the men forward have—

“Eyah!” That was Tiri, jubilant. Appeals in native, clearly of surrender. The girl, pleading with Tiri.

“That all right, Missy. No can break that kind fella skull. Too much thick. Hi, you black fella, you make um gasket loose, catch um mainsail—catch um jib. Anchor he come up!”

There was the padding of bare feet on deck in answer to the commands. The girl came down the companionway behind him.

“I had to shoot Fong in the shoulder,” she said. “He came to and tried to knife me. We’ll send him ashore. I’ll do the cooking.”

Bud was watching Watterson narrowly. The man’s evil mind itched for some way to express itself, to hurt the girl, to malign Bud. He started a sneering grin, and checked it as his eyes caught the look in Bud’s, coldly malicious as his own.

“Get the money out of the safe,

Watterson," Bud said. "All of it. How much do the wages amount to, Miss Selwyn?"

"Nine hundred and sixty dollars, outside of Tiri."

"Let him include Tiri."

"Ninety more."

"One thousand and fifty. You don't have to pay this to the hands, Watterson, but it will pay you to do it, so Miss Selwyn thinks you will. They are expecting it from you, anyway. Tiri told them you'd come ashore, and pay it with the cash. I imagine they'll be uneasy till they get it."

"I'm going up on deck again to take her outside," said the girl. "There'll be three men to go back with them, besides Fong. The rest will come with us. I'll give Tiri the wheel as soon as we are clear and come below again."

Watterson rose slowly as she disappeared. His eyes were venomous. He looked at Bud like a balked devil, then at Purdy, and went towards the safe, squatting before it, twirling the dial. Bud heard Purdy's hard breathing. He had seen the look pass between the mate and Watterson, and he was on his guard against something, not sure of what it might be.

Watterson turned round with a tin cash-box in his hands, and put it down on the table.

"You can open it," he said sullenly. "There's my keys. But it's plain piracy."

To open it Bud would have to put down one gun, more or less occupy both hands. There was a trick here, but it seemed palpable.

"You open it," he said. "And count off what you need; I'll check it."

Watterson bent his head over his task. But not before there had been another glance between him and Purdy who—too suddenly—showed signs of drunken stupor and drowsiness. And not before Bud fancied he had seen a swift gleam of triumph pass over

Watterson's face.

What was it? Counterfeit money? Or was the cash box empty? The ship's money spent?

Watterson seemed to have trouble with the key. The lid came up suddenly, screening his hands. Bud guessed the riddle as Purely, suddenly sober and alert, flipped up a hand, caught the neck of a bottle, and jerked it straight and hard at Bud's head, while Patterson's right hand came into view holding an automatic he had taken from the cashbox.

Two shots, a crash of glass, then two more shots, blended in continuous sound before the girl came leaping down the companion way. Bud had struck at the flying bottle with his left hand gun, shattering it, even as his right hand pulled trigger simultaneously with the discharge of Watterson's automatic.

A bullet got him in the left shoulder, twisting him with the heavy impact. But he saw Watterson, with a curious look of surprise on his face, fire again, and send the lead through the top of the table before he slid down to his chair seat and then the floor, a leering, foolish grin like that of an idiot's, blood breaking out high above his right eye.

His gun fell on the table. With almost incredible agility Purdy flung a heavy tumbler after the bottle, and reached for Watterson's weapon. The tumbler caught Bud on the jaw, and the cabin whirled in a fog as he convulsively squeezed the trigger—and missed. The bullet flew high while Bud tottered back, slumping to a transom, struggling against unconsciousness.

He came to, with his head in the girl's lap, his face wet with fresh water, the blood-sodden sleeve of his coat ripped out at the shoulder, and his flesh bared to the wound. Her hands were at work, her fingers probing gently but firmly where the lead had torn through. A twinge of pain had brought him back again to see pain of another sort in her

eyes, big in her pale, strained face, to see something else there that was not hard to translate.

“Don’t move yet,” she said.

“I don’t want to move—ever,” he murmured, knowing he was foolish, content to be so before he pulled himself together and glanced round. Purdy sat on the opposite transom with a face the hue of cigar ashes, holding his right forearm that was sopping with blood. Thelma Selwyn had shot him before he could fire at Bud.

Tiri had what seemed to be the dead body of Watterson in his brawny arms, depositing him on the transom beside Purdy, bending over for examination.

“He not dead, Missy,” he said in tones of distinct disappointment. “Too much luck for him. No crack but plenty headache bimeby.”

After all, the casualties were not so serious that they felt compunction about sending them ashore. Blood poisoning was the only thing to fear, and there were plenty of disinfectants in the station kit. Tiri had found it necessary to club two of the crew before a third capitulated, and the rest—original members—recognized him, and joined the cause of the daughter of their former skipper—the girl who had acted as mate and whom they liked and respected far more than Watterson and Purdy. The thick skulls of the natives, buffered by their mats of hair, had saved them from fracture, and they were able—with the third man who, as their fellow tribesman, was left behind, leaving the schooner purged of all possible malcontents—to place Watterson with his gouged skull bandaged, Purdy, with his bleeding stopped with a tourniquet and Fong, with his shoulder given first aid, into the shore dinghy.

In consideration of the wounds Bud and the girl gave up the plan to tow Watterson and his followers to sea. They cast them off, watching them paddle shoreward toward the

beach the wharf and the lighted bungalow, as the schooner, on the first of the ebb, the land wind in her sails, slid through the reefgate to the open sea.

IT WAS three days later before Bud made confession. His shoulder was stiff, but it did not pain him particularly, and the wound was healing at first intention. He took it easy in the cockpit, unable to assist, watching the smart handling of the schooner by the girl who, with Tiri for mate, made no trouble of it. She could navigate also; she could do a lot of things that made Bud feel particularly humble.

The glamor was still over things. They were alone together in a world of sunshine and fresh wind, of blue seas and sparkling foam—man and maid who had adventured together, and who trusted each other. “Is there real money in independent trading, picking up cargoes with a schooner?” he asked her, after he had figured out a hundred ways of working up to his subject—and abandoning them.

“A living,” she said. “It depends a great deal on goodwill. The big firms like Burns Philp have all the best of it, of course. And we only have a short season for copra. You have to make out with pearlshell, beche de mer and sharks’ fins. Through the rainy season you have to lay up.

“Of course if one has capital, and can pay expenses for seven years while the palms grow to maturity, you can lease land cheaply, and then every tree is worth almost two dollars a year to you, if you make oil from the copra. That all means machinery. And it’s a long time to wait.”

“If one was alone—yes,” said Bud. The girl looked at him questioningly. It was the end of the day, and the sea was darkening with sunset, the curving horizon a wavy line of purple, the sky beginning to glow, Tiri at the wheel, his broad back, wealed with tribal scars and fight records, toward them.

“You see,” said Bud, his voice

trembling a little with his earnestness, and with his swiftly growing fear of the outcome now that he was going to put things to the touch, "I don't amount to much, Thelma. I was shanghaid aboard that whaler because I thought it was a clever thing to take in the San Francisco waterfront and try to sample all the rotten booze we ran across. There was a fight, of course, and I believe I started it. I wound up in the fo'c'sle of the *Flying Cloud*.

"But there wasn't a girl mixed up in it. I've petted and fussed, but it always seemed to me that I'd run across the right one some day, and that she'd feel the same way about it—that we'd been on the way to meet each other all the time. That sounds almost crazy, but it's the way I felt about you from the beginning.

"I left a car standing somewhere on Kearney Street—eight weeks ago. I wonder who's got it now? Not that I worry. This schooner's a lot the better boat. And there's quite a bit of money, too, dear. I threw a lot of it away and I'd have got rid of the rest the same way—money that my poor old dad made by bucking the game. I've never earned a cent—so far. I'm not much—but I think I could be—it's different now——"

They had given the raucous phonograph to the delighted crew. Now it suddenly blared out:

And in June—pretty soon
On a long honeymoon
Where the sweet, climbing roses
entwine.

She turned and looked at him, her lips a little apart, her breathing a little hurried, her eyes——

"Would you, could you, Thelma?" he asked her.

Tiri and the native boys did not bother about cooked meals. They had dried fish, green coconuts and fruit. The fact that supper-time passed in the cabin without any preparations did not upset their arrangements and Tiri, munching a strip of sun-cured squid he took from his loincloth, made no objections to the fact that, under ordinary circumstances, his skipper-mistress should have relieved him at the wheel.

Looking ahead into the smoky sunset, Tiri took another dried tentacle and crunched into its crisp, salty sweetness. He knew the two were talking nonsense. Lovers always did. Was he not a lover? Was there not a girl even now who would be waiting for him to come back with wild ginger wreaths for his wide shoulders.

Life was good! Fight—food—mating,
Very good!