

# PEARL HUNGER



**By ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN**

*Author of "Loot Lagoons," "Code of the Sea," etc.*

*There's the song of the trade winds in this swift-moving story of tropic adventure! There's the crack of fist on flesh—the whine of lead—the hiss of flashing steel. . . . All that wild orgy of evil conflict that boils and bubbles in those tiny islands where men go mad in their quest for ocean loot.*

## **Complete South-Sea Novelet**



APTAIN JAMES TRAVERS roused himself with a mighty effort. He sat upright in his bunk sucking at the listless draught of hot air that drifted through the open porthole at his side. The sweat streamed from him in rivulets, his pajamas clinging to the flesh as the bathing suit clings to a swimmer just emerged from the water. Propping himself up with one trembling arm, the captain ran his hand across his forehead, and wiped the salty drops from his eyes. His head was swimming, and the aching at his temples made him almost scream. But driven by a spasm of fierce energy, he struggled upright from the bunk. Once on the carpeted deck, he groped through the darkness. Across the cabin, in

the draw of a tiny writing desk, was a blue-steel automatic—and the captain wanted that weapon.

The touch of the cool metal seemed to revive the captain somewhat. He breathed deeply and started for the door.

The dull hum from the jungle that fringed the shores of the great bay came rifling down through the open skylight to the ears of the sick man. He heard, too, snatches of song, the tinkling of lazy guitars and bursts of drunken laughter from the direction of the Plaza of Lorenzo Marques, a riot of color and hectic pleasure under the sullen tropic stars. The dockside lay in the shadows of the cranes and the cargo sheds, lit only by a solitary hurricane lamp glimmering from the head of the ship's gangway.

The captain flung back the half-open door and swayed into the saloon. He was forced to lean against the bulkhead as his heart commenced its passionate thumping again, and his eyes burned and throbbed. He could vaguely see the stars through the open skylight overhead, and even the dim tracery of the mizzen rigging outlined against the sky.

There was a blaze of light in the dark saloon as a door was flung violently open and a burly, white-suited man came forth, his head turned over his shoulder. A shining nickel-steel revolver twinkled from his right hand, while his left tucked under his arm a black tin ditty box. The low-brimmed sun-helmet the man wore obscured his face. Then the door slammed shut, and the man was gone, walking with stealthy haste up the companion to the poop deck, and so down the gangway to the wharf, where the shadows swallowed him.

He did not see the captain leaning against a stanchion with his automatic leveled. Nor did he see the fever beat fold upon fold on the sick man till he dropped the gun and sank sobbing to his knees.

The burly white-suited stranger saw nothing and heard nothing as he went away to life and to safety.

It was a long time before the captain got to his feet again. His face was streaming and drawn when he finally staggered to the door of the cabin from which the stranger had come. He opened it and looked inside. What he saw stiffened him for a moment. His slack jaw came up feebly and every fever-racked muscle tensed.

"All right, Billy," he whispered hoarsely. "All right. I'll square...."

Then, without warning, the fever shook him and laid him low. He choked and slipped to the deck, and the world faded from his eyes.

When the second mate of the barque *Wanderer* came aboard after a riotous time ashore, he found his captain unconscious in the open doorway of the mate's cabin. The mate stretched inside with his face kicked to a pulp and a bullet wound in his throat.

**M**ELITA'S Hotel, standing near Mulinu'u Point, about two miles from Apia, was the centre of the intricate intrigues that on occasions

swept the Islands to life. Was there a schooner sunk for the sake of the insurance, was there a fine pearl discovered, did someone want someone else's wife or woman? Melita heard of the thing sooner or later, and she heard as well the deep undercurrents that swayed each affair. She knew not only the results achieved, which everyone knew sooner or later, but she also heard the way the results were won, the causes behind and beyond, secret whispered things not for the average islander to understand.

To Melita came the big pearl buyers, the island traders, the schooner captains, and the freelance adventurers whenever they wanted information about some man or woman or matter. And if Melita did not happen to have the information on the tip of her tongue, she had ways and means of soon acquiring it. And for the services she thus rendered she exacted her due, each man paying according to his ability as judged by the shrewd woman.

She was the daughter of an island adventurer, one of those hardy Scotchmen who stormed the savage Pacific in the old days, and tamed it, somewhat, for the younger generation to rule. Her mother had been a Tahitian princess of the blood, and the runaway match between her father and her mother had been ideally happy for both.

The Scotchman had died, as all men died in those days, violently, a spear passing through his throat in a long-forgotten fray on a long-forgotten island. The princess had gone after him into the Shadow with a broken heart soon after. For Melita there was nothing left but the mission school in Apia, where her father's friends accordingly placed her, and then forgot the whole affair.

In her sixteenth year, possessed of all her mother's glorious beauty, the girl had been courted by a notorious French adventurer who had finally induced her to run away with him, which she did, only to be stranded in San Francisco some two years later.

Her history from that time is uncertain. That she saw many people and places is known. She came back to the islands—her native blood made that inevitable—twenty-six, darkly beautiful, and with a refinement that was not to be learned in the home of the average European. Also she brought with her a fierce resentment of mankind that hid itself under a smiling exterior like the leopard's

claws hide under the velvet pads.

She had started the hotel, and she had in time become the pivot round which the island life swung. Her fame ran far and wide, and with it the fame of her beauty.

All island roads led to Melita. If one spent long enough at the hotel, one would sooner or later meet everyone worth meeting between America and Australia. The island traders even made it a practice to purposely miss the tide of an evening, and thus be forced to anchor off the Point for a few hours before they could run into Apia. Not that the hotel was a place for the common sailor-man. There were such places in Apia itself. No one less than a ship's first officer was allowed inside. Melita's hotel, like Melita herself, was select.

## CHAPTER II A BRIBE REFUSED

ONE night an unwelcome guest climbed the pathway of the Point, and stopped at the top to light a cheroot. His fat body was glowing with the unaccustomed exertion of toiling up the slope, and his breath came in short, painful gasps. His height was perhaps five-feet ten; and what with his paunch and his heavy shoulders he looked a formidable man. He was Steinberger, the owner of the brig *Atlantis*, and one of the biggest pearl buyers and traders in the south.

Off the Point his brig was even then laying and swinging at anchor, while her officers cursed their employer at holding them up on the voyage while he went to visit a woman.

The beefy German waited until he had in some measure recovered his breath, and, mopping his brow with a white silk handkerchief, stepped up on the broad veranda of the hotel, pulled aside the heavy draperies that served as the house front in hot weather, and entered the big, dim-lit room beyond.

In three tall braziers incense was burning, the heavy blue fumes shrouding the room and making one cough when entering from the clean night air. Soft mats, cushions of various hues, divans and colored rugs were scattered everywhere in profusion, nearly all occupied by white duck-suited figures. The dozen or more ships anchored

near Steinberger's brig told where they had come from.

Two native girls were plucking gently at some string instruments in a far corner shrouded in shadow, and others were moving softly about carrying trays or pitchers. All were dressed native fashion in girdles, beads, flowers. They wore nothing more.

On a great heap of gaudy cushions, in the centre of the room, reclined Melita. She was dressed in silk of some dark color, and her wonderful shoulders shimmered white beneath the soft glow from the dim lamps overhead. Half a dozen girls, each a beauty, reclined near, though one would rise now and then to execute some languidly given order.

Several men were sitting cross-legged by the pile of cushions, out-doing each other in praises and spinning fantastic yarns of some outlandish adventures for the delight of the laughing half-caste. Other men were lying dreamy-eyed in other parts of the room, sipping drinks or bestowing their attentions on some minor star of the notorious hotel.

The big German picked a careful way across the littered room, and handing his cap to an attendant, he came to a halt before the cushion dais half seen in the red lamp glow. Melita flung some laughing response to one of the men who had caught her hand and kissed it. With nothing but her great eyes showing above her fan she faced the newcomer. The fan was instantly lowered.

"Why, it is Wilhelm," she laughed gaily, and extended her hand to the other. With an attempt at gallantry the German removed his cheroot from his lips and stooped over the slim fingers, but before he could reach them they slipped from his palm. He stood up with a scowl, sneered at the assembled men about, and then looked insolently at the half-caste.

"I want to talk with you," he stated, jamming his cheroot back in his mouth and his hands in his pockets. It was many years since Steinberger had left the Fatherland, and he spoke with no appreciable accent.

Melita looked bored, but she rose just the same. Steinberger was one of the hotel's best customers, and she could hardly afford to offend him. His arrogant manner and insolent contempt

for all women jarred on her, and some day she would send him away and bid him come no more; till then.... She shrugged and with a murmur of apology to the other men attending her she led the way to a room at the back end of the house, as exotically furnished as the big front room was. Steinberger closed the door behind him, and Melita sank easily onto a low divan.

THE room was small, but a cunning arrangement of mirrors gave it an appearance of vast dimensions. On two sides the walls had been removed, for the sake of coolness, and copper mesh substituted. On the inside of this mesh hung flimsy, cloudy draperies that effectively prevented any one on the outside from seeing in.

Indifferently Melita waited for the German to begin. He pursed his thick lips, drew hard on his cheroot and breathed heavily. The butt glowed like an ember in the scented gloom, and then was obscured by the heavy smoke. The man could see the ravishing face of the half-caste turned to the floor and idly watching her little foot tracing circles on the rich matting.

"This is what, Melita," commenced the German, placing his cheroot in a nearby ash tray and dropping to the divan beside her, one of his fat hands covering hers. "I have come here to take your sister away, marry her if you like. I want her, and I've got to have her. See if you can't persuade her.... By the way, I've a present for you here!"

He dived into a side pocket, and brought forth a flat velvet case. Touching the catch he showed the woman the little rope of black pearls that reposed on their satin bed.

"For me?"

The German nodded and his piggy eyes narrowed a trifle.

"Collected by myself. Took five years to match. Worth a few dollars, eh?" he chuckled; and then taking them from her hand he fastened them round her throat.

She permitted him to kiss her once, and then she pushed him away. She did not care for Steinberger's embraces—for any man's embraces for that matter. Considering the fire she played with she got along very well without being burnt. Her beauty was such as to rather awe men.

"My sister?" she observed, as she patted the

pearls into place. "Is she willing to marry you? Would my pleading make any difference?"

"She has a lover amongst her own people," growled the man savagely. "Some flashy young buck working on a plantation near Apia, I fancy. I'll break his neck if I ever catch him. Last time I offered to take her away from this she refused."

"Of course," observed Melita dryly, and reaching over to one side she struck a little gong. Almost instantly a girl appeared from the room they had just left. It was evident to Steinberger that the girl had been stationed outside the closed door. Melita always took precautions. She turned to the waiting man.

"Tia Kua, you say, Wilhelm?"

"Tia Kua," he muttered savagely; and, rising to his feet, picked up the smouldering cheroot from the ash tray and puffed it to life again. Melita gave a message to the waiting girl, who disappeared through some heavy curtains to one side of the room. Melita sank back on the divan, and eyed the flushed face of the man as he paced impatiently up and down.

"You are fond of women, Wilhelm," she murmured, after a while. The man came to an abrupt halt, sensing the contempt in her tone. He scowled and chewed on his cheroot before replying.

"What I want I get. If I take a fancy to a girl I'm not afraid to pay. You know that!"—with a meaning glance at the necklace that hung from her throat. Melita made a little grimace behind her fan, and her laugh was very soft.

"You have not got me, Wilhelm."

The man's eyes narrowed. He even laughed a trifle curtly.

"It is because I do not want you, yet. Some day I may come for you, instead of your sister."

The half-caste's eyes flashed in sudden anger, but she made no reply. The callous certitude of the man disgusted her. But he was one of the hotel's best customers, and it would not do to check him. It was rather amusing, anyway, to hear him wallowing in his own conceit.

The heavy curtains rustled, and a girl stepped into the room, a girl over whom, had she been white, artists would have raved and sculptors sworn away their souls. She was not very tall, but her slender form was perfect, as was every little feature. She was dressed differently than the rest

of the hotel girls, in a sort of yellow silk sarong, caught under the left armpit by a large silver brooch. Her tiny feet were bare, flickering to view under the sarong's hem as she walked.

Her hair was strongly scented and adorned with flowers. The only thing to mar her was the faint blue tattooing that ran from the finger tips to the wrists, and from the soft breasts upward to the base of the throat, but barely visible against the golden-brown skin. Tia Kua was a full-blooded native girl, dark, passionate, lithe and young. Soon, in six or seven years, she would begin to wither and fade. But at the moment she was in the full glory of her seventeen years, a treasure of her sex. Though Melita was her half-sister—they both claimed the same mother—the difference between them was greater and deeper than mere lightness of color.

Steinberger went to meet the girl eagerly, his fat hands trembling and outstretched, a leer distorting his somewhat stubby features. Coolly the girl evaded him and approached Melita. For a moment the two women spoke together in the native tongue, Melita questioning and the other replying and shaking her head. Then the half-caste turned to the waiting German.

**“NO** good, Wilhelm. She does not want you even if you marry her in the white man fashion. She is to be married to her lover the week after next, and they are both returning to their own country. Too bad. But you have a dozen prettier girls on your own island. Why bother about Tia Kua?”

The German swore harshly. He had conceived for the native girl, during his frequent visits to the hotel, one of those inexplicable passions that sometimes sweep men to the oblivion of everything else. As Melita said, there were many prettier native girls who would be only too glad of the chance to marry Steinberger. But perhaps that is why he did not want them, and did want the unobtainable. He continued to swear.

“So she refuses, eh? I’ll take her, anyway!”

“Don’t get angry, Wilhelm. This is apparently one of the things you don’t get. Take your beating with good grace,” laughed Melita, with a touch of mockery in her tone.

With a snort Steinberger turned to the girl and commenced offering her bribes. The gifts he

promised would have turned the head of any girl—would have turned the head of Tia Kua under ordinary circumstances. But just then she was in love with a pair of languorous dark eyes and a broad-shouldered, muscular body that worked on the plantations outside Apia. She shook her head repeatedly. Steinberger ended up by cursing her in German and English and *bêche-de-mer*, until Melita interfered with a flash of spirit.

“Get out!” she snapped. “If you can’t speak decently here, get out! And you’d better stay out. This is not your poop deck!”

With a snarl the German turned to go, but a sudden thought struck him. His eyes sought the black pearls dangling from Melita’s throat, and he held out his hand meaningly. Calmly Melita unsnapped the little gold clasp, and placed the trinket in the fat hand waiting to receive it.

“So,” she sneered, and her voice cut like a whip, “that was a bribe. You must be mad over Tia Kua. Women will be your death, Wilhelm.”

Swearing beneath his breath the German stamped out of the room, and getting his cap made his way down the Point path to the beach, while the assembled schooner captains and mates in the big room nodded to one another and smiled significantly.

### CHAPTER III THE MAN-HUNTER

**T**HE next morning Tia Kua was missing from the hotel, and Steinberger’s brig was missing from the anchorage. He had come out of Apia the previous day, and was bound for some unknown destination. Not one of the schooner captains could or would say where.

A grinning Samoan delivered a note at the hotel about two hours after dawn. With quick, nervous fingers Melita ripped open the envelope, and drew out the single sheet of paper it contained, a leaf from a notebook. In Steinberger’s sprawling hand was written:

*“What I want I get! This time your sister; next time you!”*

Melita’s face went white with passion. There were still four men in the big room who had not yet rejoined their ships, and she read the note to

them. They laughed uproariously, until their eyes were wet and their sides ached. That was Steinberger's way, they explained.

Melita eyed them with disgust. Had it been a white woman who had been abducted she knew that the captains would in all probability have hastened into Apia to inform the authorities. But a native woman! A common native woman! Why, such could be picked up off a thousand and one islands all over the Pacific, and the majority of them were only too anxious to become associated with one of the all-powerful white men. Most likely the kidnapped girl had been half willing to go.

The schooner men were a little puzzled, when they came to talk it over, why Steinberger should have gone to the trouble of abducting the girl at all. He must have been crazy over her. Then they shrugged their shoulders, and told each other that it was none of their business, but that it was a good joke anyway.

And they left Melita to her anger, while they went on board their ships to explain to grinning mates and supercargoes Steinberger's latest folly.

Melita was nearly speechless with rage. She paced her room fiercely, her lips white and her eyes glowing. She refused to be calmed for a long time. That Steinberger—fat, greasy Steinberger—had defied her, treated her like a plaything that waited on his purposes, was intolerable. She who swayed the affairs of all the Pacific treated like a common native, her sister abducted to be Steinberger's mistress!

But she could not move hand or foot to checkmate the German. There were admirers of hers, of course, who would at her word attempt to restore her her sister, but there were only two or three actually powerful enough in the islands to attempt it with any hope of success, and none were handy. Melita could only wait and hope that Tia Kua was not being treated too badly.

**T**WO weeks later a strange ship beat up to the anchorage off the Point and hove to. Melita was frankly puzzled as she watched the beautiful streaming lines and the swan-like grace of the anchoring barque. The tide was yet high, and there was plenty of time to make Apia before it fell. The ship, too, was not a regular caller at the hotel. Melita did not remember ever having seen it

before. Whoever was coming to see her was coming for that purpose alone, and not making just a casual call.

A boat dropped from the barque's near side and sped across the intervening water to the shore. Presently a man came up the winding pathway. Even Melita, who was used to all sorts of men, caught her breath sharply. For this man was not the usual shipmaster. He was not gray and a little bent, with the flesh of the neck lightly grooved into squares and lines. He did not lag in his step, nor did the long climb seem to affect his breath very much. He was young and tall, and well worth looking on. Unlike the usual island shipmaster, he was dressed in a thin uniform of blue serge, with the gold braid of his rank on the cuffs, and a gold ship badge in the center of his blue peaked cap. The cap itself was perched far back on his head, exposing a thick crop of wavy gold-brown hair, and a face as tanned as that of any kanaka. A pair of laughing blue eyes held Melita's for a moment, and then hardened a little. The man rested one hand on his hip, and with the other removed his cap from his head. He bowed a trifle.

"Is this the house where Melita lives?" he asked pleasantly enough, though there was that in his voice—a suppressed hardness—that showed he was a man used to command.

Melita was curious. The stranger interested her. She had never seen him before, and she thought she had seen every shipmaster in the Pacific. He looked clean, too, which was more than most of the men she knew did. He was more of a man to like the sea and the sun and the stars at night than the perfumed rooms of the hotel, or some easy *amour* with native girls in their own villages. He glowed with health, and his lips were firm, which showed that drink had not got him under control. Yes, Melita was curious.

"I am Melita," she said. The man raised his head and smiled, replacing his cap. He came forward a pace.

"May I speak with you alone? My name is James Travers—Captain James Travers. I command and own the barque *Wanderer*, laying out there in the roadstead."

Melita waved away her attendant women, more curious than ever, and motioned the stranger to sit in the swing chair on the veranda beside her. The man nodded and came forward, seated

himself carelessly and, crossing one leg over the other, held his knee with clasped hands, rocking to and fro the while. He eyed the woman seriously, and with not a little interest. He had heard her spoken of from China to Australia. She was a character.

"I am looking for a man," he commenced abruptly. "His name is, or was, Brietmann, and he is, or was, half owner of the brig *Hamburg*, registered at Cape Town. Except that he's big built and inclined to be fat I can give no description of him. Two years ago in Fu Chow the port captain of one of the big lines informed me that a man named Brietmann had been fined the year before for dangerous sailing while anchoring near other ships. From Fu Chow Brietmann took papers for Apia with the intention, it was said, of going on the island trade. I was told you were acquainted with every shipmaster and trader in the Pacific. Can you help me?"

Melita withdrew her eyes with an effort from the man's face, and conned over in her mind a list of the men she knew. She was silent for so long that the man sneered and, reaching in his pocket, drew forth a piece of wash leather. Unwrapping it he held before the woman's gaze a magnificent ruby that sent blood fires dancing and leaping in reflection in her eyes.

"I'll give this to know," he said, thinking she was reckoning what the information would be worth. Melita looked at the ruby, and put out a hesitating hand. Then her eyes grew hard. The sailor, watching keenly, laughed a little, guessing what she was thinking.

**"YOU** can take it. No condition attached, except that you give me the information I need. I just want to know where Brietmann hangs out. No one knew in Suva, no one knew in Papeete. Do you know? I shall not say who gave me the information, if that is what's worrying you."

Melita slipped the stone inside her bodice with sudden decision. It was a princely reward.

"I can't think of anything or anyone right now," she said frankly. "I may later on. There are several big, fleshy men who own brigs in the islands.... But come inside and try my tea. I had it shipped from Yokohama.... Unless you'd prefer whisky?"

The sailor hesitated. He looked down the slope to where the barque lay at anchor, rising and falling to the swell. He looked to the sky away to windward.

"Good wind blowing, and I hate to lose any of it," he muttered to himself. "I'm sailing for Calloa light, to pick up a cargo there," he said aloud. "Nitrates for England. I can't waste much time." Then he looked at Melita, and his decision faltered and died. She *was* beautiful, and even a man who does not care for women cannot but admire beauty.

Besides, she was the famous Melita, and the sailor was more than half curious to probe into her mentality a bit to see how she came to be so. He stood up from the swing chair abruptly, removing his cap.

"I'll take tea," he said, his voice a little more mellow than it had been.

The experienced Melita smiled a little to herself. She could see the sailor was growing interested in her. She was a new type to him. He, who had sailed far and wide, had battled with wind and water and men, was naturally inclined to be carelessly at ease with all women. He had them classified into two great classes—the thoroughly lost and the thoroughly saved—and each class was as bad as the other.

But Melita defied classification. He remembered that men had told him that she had never been any man's since the break-up of her girlhood romance with that early French adventurer. He grew frank as they sat cross-legged in the now deserted big room and drank tea together from tiny fragile cups, with the fumes of the incense wreathing about their heads.

#### CHAPTER IV VENGEANCE TRAIL

**"I** NEVER met a woman quite like you, Melita. Most women who enter this—this sort of thing"—he waved an expressive arm around—"are apt to become coarse. You dress with taste, you talk with an accent that was learned in London, if I am not mistaken, and you have the manners of a wise old society matron. I conclude you have traveled and mixed with good people."

She nodded absently, her eyes on his corded throat, wondering what it would feel like to the touch, warm and throbbing with life, probably rippling as it moved with the muscle-life beneath the clear skin. She had forgotten to be languid and indifferent.

"Then what are you doing here? You can't be broke and unable to get away. If you are, that ruby will put you on your feet."

Melita roused herself with an effort, and tapped him on the lips with her fan. "My friend, you are encroaching on the secret places of the heart. And why should I worry you with my story? It is the usual and the sordid. A young girl, something of a fool, her head turned by flattery, and a man who had no honor. What men have?" she sighed, and was silent for a while. "Rest assured I have reasons for staying here and playing with the fools who come.... Take care, my friend, it is not good to know Melita too much." She finished with a light laugh and looked at him.

He nodded seriously, and then grinned. "The fruits of vengeance, eh? Well, I'll tell you. I believe I'm immune from heart-break, and I don't believe I have a soul to wreck."

Again Melita knew a sudden desire to touch the corded throat and run her fingers through the wavy hair. So strong was the impulse she leaned forward a little, and then caught at her lower lip with her teeth. Travers was busy lighting a battered briar pipe, and when he looked up, noticing nothing, the woman had recovered herself. But she was shaken inwardly. She had never met a man who affected her so.

"Perhaps you would like to look around," suggested the woman, "while I write you a list of the brig owners and captains I know of. The name Brietmann is unknown to me, but—"

"It is possible my man has changed his name. He had cause to," put in the sailor grimly.

Melita nodded. "That was what I was thinking. Perhaps one of the brig captains I know may be your man. The name Brietmann sounds German. There are five Germans who own their own ships. But I'll give you a list. You can make further inquiries as to the length of time each has been in the islands. That's something I'm not acquainted with. Pardon me!"

The sailor nodded, while the woman went off to find a pencil and paper. Left alone in the big

room, Captain James Travers whistled softly to himself. He grinned as he wandered round, inspecting the braziers, quaintly moulded, and the pictures that hung here and there on the walls.

Presently he came to a sort of sideboard set in a corner farthest from the veranda, which could be seen through the curtains that served as a house front, and were tied back in the day time. The sideboard was a long affair of mahogany, richly inlaid and carved, with drawers below the serving shelf and a large square of beveled looking-glass above. There were whale's teeth, purple with age; shark's backbones, polished and varnished and worked into the form of walking sticks; a small whale's vertebra; pearl shells, and other shells of all sorts and colors; a piece of fossilized wood from far-off Guinea; native spears and other weapons; necklaces of babies' skulls, and many other curios the admirers of Melita had brought from the Shining Paths to swell her collection.

But what drew the sailor's attention, what wiped the grin from his face and the warmth from his eyes, was the sight of a neat, bright nickel-steel revolver placed in a far corner of the shelf, half hidden behind a monstrosity of a devil-devil mask from Fiji.

**S**LOWLY the sailor removed his pipe. He did not feel the hot bowl burn his hand. Nor did he hear the swish of skirts as Melita came softly behind him and started as she caught sight of the reflection of his savage face in the glass. His free hand went out and picked up the revolver, and he turned it over and over in his palm. Finally he held it muzzle down and looked at the initials carved on the bottom of the butt. He started violently as Melita touched his arm and swung round.

"What is it?" she asked curiously.

"Who gave you this?" he demanded savagely, his lips drawn back from his teeth. He rammed his pipe in his pocket and caught the woman's shoulder. "Tell me!"

Melita looked at the bright weapon, and then wonderingly at the sailor. "That was given me by Steinberger," she said steadily. "He told me it had a history. I never found out what."

The sailor let go her shoulder with a bitter laugh, and slipped the revolver in his pocket. "History? Yes, it has a history.... Where does



Steinberger live? Where can I find him? Who is he in the islands?"

"Steinberger is a big trader and pearl buyer. He owns and commands the brig *Atlantis*."

"With a Medusa figurehead and scroll work all down the forefoot?" Melita nodded, her eyes wide with dread. "All right, go on."

"...and has a trading station at Funafuti Lagoon in the Ellice Islands."

"That's enough for me," said the sailor with an oath, and he strode toward the veranda, his face flushed with passion. Melita ran after him and caught at his sleeve.

"Sit down for a moment. There's something I want to say." Her voice was cold and commanding. She, too, had a temper.

The sailor halted, looked down at her, hesitated, and then slowly returned to the cushioned dais where the empty tea cups still stood. He dropped moodily down on crossed legs and picked up his cap. He had forgotten it before. Melita sank beside him.

"I presume this Brietmann you spoke of is Steinberger," commenced Melita abruptly, her fan resting on the sailor's arm as though to hold him still. "I don't know what lies between the two of you, but I can guess that Steinberger's been up to some more of his deviltry.... Will you do something for me for the information you've got, in place of this ruby?"

She brought the red stone to light and slipped it into the angry sailor's palm. He looked at it stupidly for a moment, and then back at the woman. He commenced to say something, but changed his mind. He waited.

"Will you?" the woman persisted.

"Depends what it is," the sailor muttered. "What is it? Yes, I'll do it. Do anything out of gratitude for the information."

"Then listen!" And Melita told the other how Steinberger had abducted her sister. Melita could use language that cut like a knife, and the story she told was not pretty hearing the way she put it. The man almost forgot his own trouble. He saw the point at once.

"You want your sister?" Melita nodded, and leaning back she opened her fan and slowly waved it to and fro. Her own cold passion had exhausted her. The sailor looked at her and then held out his hand.

"That's a bargain," he said curtly. "Steinberger will have no use for women after I've seen him. If your sister is alive, you shall have her back. Expect me any time. Good bye!"

He rose to his feet, jammed on his cap, and with a brief handshake was gone, leaping from the veranda in his haste and running down the pathway to where the boat lay waiting to take him aboard his ship. The clank of the anchor cable came up to the hotel through the breeze, and one by one the barque's sails were hoisted. In two hours she was hull down and sailing fast.

Melita dropped to the cushions when the sailor had gone, and she cried—she who had not cried in years. In her heart strange forces were stirring—forces that had lain dormant since her first lover had kissed her over the mission wall in Apia. Then, after a while, she rose and went out on the veranda to watch the barque running from the coast and from sight. Then she cried again and wished she were clean. Who was she to dream of love?

It was not till nightfall, when the lamps were lit and the schooners from all the Pacific began to drop anchor off the Point, that Melita found the ruby Travers had left among the cushions. She wrapped it tight in its washleather bed and snuggled it close to her heart, torn with fears for the safety of the man she had only known for a brief hour.

Not one of the captains guessed what was passing in the mind of the woman who laughed a little too freely, and who seemed to be in such a cynical mood when they jested with her that night.

## CHAPTER V OUTWARD BOUND

CAPTAIN JAMES TRAVERS sat in his saloon beneath the poop deck of the *Wanderer*, and smoked in thoughtful silence. Occasionally he would unclasp his hands from behind his head and, removing his pipe, blow a cloud of smoke up at the lamp that swung uneasily in its gimbals directly above his head.

Now that the first hot rage and exultation of his discovery had died, the sailor was very much at his ease, in spite of the uneasy pitch and chop of the deck as the barque lifted herself over the

somewhat short swell and snorted into the trough and into the teeth of a brisk wind, for she was now close-hauled.

His coat was flung over the bunk that stood against the after bulkhead, his cap was perched on a large inkwell that stood on the table, and near it his feet rested and were crossed. He was tilted back in a swivel chair, and his eyes were dreamily fixed on a point that certainly was not in the saloon. He had been sitting thus, reflectively, since the soft-footed Jap steward had removed the supper things and retired to the pantry, half hidden by the butt of the mizzen-mast that ran down through the forward portion of the poop deck.

Travers was worried. He could not forget Melita. It was preposterous he should so persistently remember a woman he had seen for scarce an hour. He had sailed to Samoa expressly to meet a half-caste adventuress, whom, so men had told him, had knowledge of every sailor in the Pacific at her finger tips.

Travers was usually distrustful of such women, on his guard against them when with them, and he had disliked the idea of enlisting the half-caste's services. But the chance of picking up Brietmann's trail, three years old from Fu Chow, had been very alluring, and the debt he had to pay for the death of the one-time mate of the *Wanderer* was long overdue.

And because of these things Travers had run across the sea to Melita. And he had found not the coarse-lipped woman he had expected, but a passionate, cultured woman, albeit a bitter one. Toward him she had softened somewhat.

He could think of that without conceit. For he had not tried to make love to her, to name conditions for his gifts. He was feeling strangely softened toward her himself. She must have had a hard life, and the world was, after all, a rotten place for a beautiful woman. They rubbed against more of the dirt than their plain sisters. They drew men, and the worst kind.

Melita was beautiful; there was no doubt of that. And her skin was as fair as any white woman's, for all her native blood. Not a trace of the kanaka in her, except for the big, dark eyes. It was her face Travers had been seeing for so many years, since he had been old enough to dream of romance. Such a face had disturbed his sleep time and again. The ideal woman! Every man has his

ideal woman, and the face of Travers' ideal was the face of Melita. Known her for an hour? He had known her for years! He sighed.

He supposed he was in love. And he thought of the daisy-encircled cottage that every sailor thinks of when he thinks of marriage and love. The sea had been a hard mistress, but if she had led him to his woman the service had been fully repaid. He remembered, too, that men had said she had been no man's woman since her return to the islands. Why should not the two of them start again, together? He smiled whimsically, and with sudden decision swung his feet off the table. He was a creature of impulse to a very large extent.

“TOBY!” he called lazily. The soft-footed Jap steward appeared after a while, and stood before his captain. “Send the mate down here.”

Without a word the steward padded away to the poop deck above, and presently the clatter of shoes on the companion that led from the saloon announced the mate's arrival. He was a gray-haired man, very much tattooed about the hands, with a wrinkled parchment-like skin that gave the impression of great age, or a long time spent in the tropics. He was tall and very thin, and the corners of his big mouth drooped in a melancholy fashion under his fringe of moustache.

He had once been the commander of a famous liner, but drink and recklessness had brought him down to take any job that offered among the trading ships of the seven seas. Travers had picked him up in Sydney when he had been broke, and had given him a chance to get on his feet again. He was a wonderful navigator, and knew most seas like a book, wherefore he was a useful man to have aboard.

“Ever heard of Steinberger, Everett?”

The mate thought for a moment, and, removing his cap, scratched his somewhat bald head. He frowned.

“Seems I have. He's a trader or something in these parts, sir.”

“Yes, that's so. We're going to visit him. Mark off the course to the Ellice group, Everett; and then make Funafuti Lagoon.”

“Yes, sir.” The mate turned to go, replacing his cap.

“Oh, Everett!”

"Sir." The mate hesitated with one foot on the companion and turned half around.

"I'm thinking of getting married!"

"Married?"

"Yes. Just thinking, you know."

"Oh, yes, sir.... Is that all, sir?"

"That's all.... Say, Everett, see if there's any book in the chart room with the marriage service in it, will you?"

"Very well, sir." The mate whistled to himself as he went upon the poop and faced the battering wind. He wondered. Travers grinned to himself, swung his feet on to the table again, and went on dreaming.

## CHAPTER VI CAPTURED

STEINBERGER was at home at Funafuti. The *Wanderer* swept into the great lagoon, and came to anchor about a quarter of a mile from the shore. The *Atlantis* lay beached some half a mile away, and a crowd of natives were busily engaged in scraping from her hull the foot-long grasses and the clotted barnacles from her scanty keel. Travers looked at the brig through his glasses and swore harshly.

"Medusa figurehead and scroll work all down the forefoot," he muttered. "Breitmann changed her name, but he couldn't change her markings. Swine!"

The mate came from for'ard after letting go the anchor, and crossed the poop to his captain. "Going ashore, sir?"

Travers nodded as he dropped the glasses back into the rack. He felt in his pocket to make sure he was armed. "Lower away the port boat. And, Everett...if anything happens to me, you'll find a letter in my room that'll tell you what to do."

The gray-haired, wise mate looked at his superior sharply. "Perhaps you'd like to take some of the men with you, sir," he suggested. "They like you well enough to stand by you."

Travers shook his head. "This is a private quarrel, Everett. I'd rather not have witnesses."

"Aye, aye, sir." And the mate touched his cap and turned obediently away to see that the boat was lowered.

The beach was a thing to wonder at, a magnificent sweeping curve, nine miles from tip to tip. Among the groves of coco-palms that fringed the sand could be seen the huts of the principal village. A few frigate birds were lazily sailing above the lagoon. Other life, except for those careening the brig, there was none. Funafuti brooded drowsily beneath the hot breath of noon.

Leaving the boat waiting in the shallows, with orders to push on if he did not return within an hour, Travers walked along the path that led to the trader's house set in a grove of jack-fruit trees, that themselves nestled among a denser grove of palms. His face was set and ugly to look upon, and his right hand rested inside his pocket gripping something hard and cold.

He was still dressed in the light blue serge he affected, disliking the white duck most ship's officers wore, and his peaked cap was still set back on his head, exposing the wavy hair.

Clear to the door of the trader's house Travers went, and with a thrust of his foot swung it open and entered, to find himself in a high-ceilinged room, large and square, with native mats on the floor, an iron bed with the usual mosquito drape in one corner, large square holes in the walls in place of windows, and other doors leading to rooms here and there.

A tall, slender girl was busily engaged in cleaning a large bore sporting rifle to one side of a plain deal table, on which lay cloths and various bottles of oil and jars of grease. She looked up startled as Travers entered and placed her finger to her lips.

One of Steinberger's numerous wives, Travers thought, a trifle grimly. She was a beauty in her way, olive-skinned, big-eyed and black-haired, like most of the island women. Travers politely lifted his cap, though the action was not usual with natives. Sympathetically, he noted the black bruises on the slender wrists, and the angry red weal across the bare breast. It was too plain that Steinberger still remembered some things about his Fatherland.

With a murmured greeting the girl rose from her knees, and again placing her finger to her lips glanced across the room, part of which was hidden from Travers by reason of the open door.

Travers closed the door and looked around. Steinberger was hunched up in a long cane chair,

dressed only in his pyjamas and snoring gently. A two-days' growth of beard colored his pink, big-pored face, and an empty "square-face" bottle on the table near the oil bottles showed how he spent his time.

His hands were clasped across his swelling stomach, and his double chin rested on his chest. Travers looked at him long and intently, for he had never seen the face before, and he could not tell after all the years whether the heavy shoulders were the same that he had seen in the saloon of the *Wanderer* that night of fever, death and of anger in Lorenzo Marques, Delagoa Bay.

Travers savagely kicked the sleeping man's shins, while the native girl moaned with terror. She expected the stranger to be annihilated for his presumption.

With a tremendous start the sleeping man awoke. He sucked in his breath sharply, brushed a fat hand across his eyes, and scrambled to his feet. Travers was an inch shorter than the German, and he seemed completely dwarfed. Steinberger glared.

"Who the blazes are you? Did you kick me?" he demanded wrathfully, half raising his hand. Travers gritted his teeth, and jammed the muzzle of the revolver he had been nursing into the German's paunch.

"Keep your confounded mouth shut and sit down," he grated harshly. "I want to talk with you. My name's Travers—Captain James Travers, brother to William Travers."

Steinberger collapsed back in his chair as though he had been shot. In his agitation he swore in German, and started suddenly to tremble.

"*Gott in himmel!* I...you... why, are you...*What do you want?*"

Travers lowered his revolver and stepped back a little. He drew up a chair and sat down, his eyes never leaving the German's face. After a moment, during which nothing could be heard save the quick breathing of the men and the low moaning of the native girl, Travers laid down the revolver on the table at his side. Steinberger snarled and turned his head.

"Stop that whining! *Gott!* Get out of here!" The native girl shrank back against the wall, but did not speak. Steinberger turned to Travers again. His thick lips were working frightfully, and his fat hands gripped and let loose of the chair arms

alternately, the cane squeaking as it was so kneaded. Travers laughed—not a pleasant sound to hear.

"I need not ask if you are Steinberger," he commenced. "But the time I want to talk to you about is a time when you went by the name of Brietmann. Remember it?"

THE other man controlled himself with an effort, and a crafty gleam appeared in his eyes. The chair arms squeaked under their kneading.

"What are you talking about? Are you mad? Brietmann? Who is he? I am Steinberger, and anyone in the islands will vouch for me."

"So you deny you were once known as Brietmann—Brietmann who had a half share in and sailed the big *Hamburg*, the ship you now call the *Atlantis*?"

"Of course I am not Brietmann! I'm Steinberger, as you'll find out when I have you arrested for pulling a gun on me in my own house."

"Then perhaps you will explain this," said, Travers softly, his eyes narrowing to slits. He motioned towards the nickel-steel revolver on the table. "You'll find the initials 'W. T.' on the butt.... No, you needn't try and look. You're not getting your hands on that gun.... 'W. T.', you understand? You gave that gun to Melita, boasting it had a history. It has. It's going to have a further history. It's going to kill you!"

"*Donner und blitzen!* You are mad!" In his excitement the man forgot his carefully cultivated English. "Vat for you want to kill me? Vat do I know of your brother?—did you not say he was your brother? I mean—*Himmel!* ... Why you look so? Dis is a plot—vat you call a trap, eh? Melita send you to get her sister, an' you make up this excuse. Vat do I know of Travers?"

"Sound like an innocent man, don't you, Brietmann? That night you came aboard the *Wanderer*, thinking all hands were ashore except my brother, I was lying sick with fever in the next cabin. You didn't know that, did you? If you had you'd have come and killed me.... You stole my brother's wife, you swine, and then you had to come and try to get the little money Bill was saving for her. You have nerve all right, Brietmann; I'll say that. To come and tell Bill you

had ruined his wife and wanted her legacy from her father. You banked on Bill being a cripple, didn't you?... Lucky for you I wasn't on my feet that night—and you knew you were the stronger man.

“So you mocked him, and then you robbed him, and when he tried to fight for his honor's sake you knocked him down and kicked his face. He would have shot you, but you were too quick. You shot him instead, with his own gun. There it is—on the table, Brietmann. Sure it has a history.... By God, I could kill you with my naked hands!”

Travers had half risen to his feet in his rage, quivering with passion, his hands opening and closing, his lips drawn clear back from his teeth.

The German rose too, quaking, and shivered back. But his voice blustered and pleaded.

“Ged oud of here! You'll hang—you'll hang for it if you kill me. *Mein Gott!* I call and twenty men run to kill you!”

The native girl crossed the room and laid a restraining hand on the German's arm. Her big eyes were soft and appealing, and she spoke in a gentle tone, not understanding the forces at work within the two men. It was apparent she loved the shaking man; such is the strangeness of women.

Steinberger shook her off with a snarl, and caught her across the mouth with the back of his hand. Like a whipped dog she crept away, a dumb wistfulness in her eyes, her hands covering her bleeding lips.

The incident steadied Travers, and he straightened with a short laugh. He motioned to the German to sit down, and himself resumed his seat.

“I'm not ready to kill you yet, Brietmann,” he said. “I want to tell you first how I've trailed you, port to port, sea to sea, for seven years. I found Mary, my brother's wife, deserted in Australia just two years after you'd stolen her. She was nursing your child then; you'd left them to starve. How many women you've wrecked since then I don't know. But I wager the count's long. As to hanging, there isn't a jury in the world that would convict me. You know it, and I know it. You've got to face it, Brietmann, and try and go out like a man. Seven years I've followed you, and the trail ends right here. It started in Africa, and ends in the islands. I think that's all. Say your

prayers.”

The Germans' hand crept nervously to his throat. He licked his lips and choked a little. The sweat poured from him in streams as the liquor he had gone to sleep with died within him.

“Mein prayers?” he whispered hoarsely, rising slowly to his feet again. He looked monstrous in his loose pyjamas. Travers rose with an air of finality. He stretched out a hand for the revolver, and then the German sprang.

With a cry like a wild beast he came forward, his great hands reaching for a throat hold and his knees driving for the stomach. Without any great haste Travers stepped to one side and sent the huge, flabby body across the room with a smashing right-hand blow. Steinberger crashed against the wall, and shook the hut to its foundations. He slowly picked himself up, bruised all over and panting with the fear of death. He glanced up wildly, and the oaths fell from his lips in a continuous stream.

Then Travers raised his revolver—the revolver that had shot William Travers seven years before—and prepared to do what he had come to do, what he had crossed the world for, without compunction and without haste. He took aim.... A cold muzzle pressed into the nape of his neck, and a harsh voice spoke:

“Easy, sonny, easy. Put 'em up!”

STEINBERGER wiped his bloody lips and laughed as he scrambled to his feet.

“Keep him there, Walters, till I get him tied,” he wheezed breathlessly, and lumbered groggily off into a corner, where he cut a fathom or so of line from a coil of halliard standing there. Coming back he securely tied the raging Travers hand and foot. Then, knocking him down, he beat a tattoo on his ribs with his naked foot, and ground his face into the matting of the floor until the skin was off and the blood ran from the nose.

Travers caught a glimpse of the man who had held him up, a sullen-faced, skinny individual with a heavy black beard and watery blue eyes. From his stained white uniform evidently an officer of the *Atlantis*. He was grinning with amusement as Steinberger tortured his captive.

The German bent and slapped Travers' face. “So, Melita give you the gun, eh? And I suppose she told you about her confounded sister and me?

I'll get that——! I'll break her now.... You, I'll see you later!"

Travers kept his teeth together to prevent him crying out, and the hot rage within him flamed and leaped. He wished he had shot the German and not waited to talk. He scarce gave heed to Steinberger's words about Melita's sister, for he had well-nigh forgotten her. But the mention of Melita herself, of getting even with her....

Travers squirmed and writhed and tugged at his bonds. Steinberger laughed triumphantly as he straightened up and wiped his forehead with a hand that still trembled.

"I'll bring Melita here, and you'll see us married native fashion. Then I shall get rid of you and your talk of Bill Travers."

Steinberger bundled his prisoner into a back room and locked him in, after a few parting kicks. Then buckling on his holsters, after dressing himself, he went down on the beach, talking energetically with Walters, the black-bearded officer, and planning the next few moves ahead in the game that had suddenly broken upon him.

## CHAPTER VII "I AM TIA KUA"

**T**RAVERS lay and ached in every limb, and wondered what was to happen next. He cursed himself for being such a fool as not to let Everett and some of the men guard his rear while he talked to Steinberger. He had been confident of his strength, too blind with his own passions to plan coolly, and this was the result. Himself helpless, and Steinberger off to abduct Melita as he had abducted her sister.

He cursed as the sound of shots drifted through the open window. He guessed that Steinberger had found the waiting boat in the shallows. Would he kill every soul aboard the barque? There were no more shots, and for a long while there was silence, broken only by the lisp of the surf and the roar of the wind through the swaying palms. There was nothing left for Travers to do but wait, and waiting is hardest of all.

A murmur of voices came to the prostrate sailor's ears after a while, and then a body of men came up the path from the beach and stamped into the next room. There were two heavy thuds and a

groan, as some bulky objects were lowered to the floor. Then the party stamped out again with a few coarse jests, and the sound of crunching steps on the coral sand of the path died away.

Travers strained his ears toward the next room and caught a muttered oath. He sighed with relief. He would have recognized Everett's voice anywhere.

"That you, Everett?" he called softly. There was silence for a moment.

"Yes. Is that you, sir?"

"Aye.... Are you hurt?"

"No, not much to speak of. Was rushed by about a dozen kanakas and handled pretty rough. They laid out the boat's crew, and came aboard in the boat. I cut loose with a gun when I saw what was happening, but they were too quick." The mate cursed bitterly again, and Travers could be heard writhing about the floor.

"I suppose you're bound hand and foot?" said Travers hopelessly.

"Yes, sir." The mate ceased trying to loosen his lashings. "Stevens is here, bound as well. He's had a crack over the head, and is still unconscious."

"What have they done with the crew?"

"Last I saw of them was swimming for the beach. The big fat man ordered them pitched overboard. He seems to have taken charge of the barque. Is that Steinberger?"

"That's the man.... Say, I'm sorry you fellows are being dragged into this mess."

"O. K., sir. It's all in the day's work."

No more was said. Travers and the mate bent every energy to trying to free themselves. After a while the captain gave up and relaxed, breathless and sweating, his wrists bleeding from his struggles. A faint cutting noise caught his ear. After several attempts he jerked to an upright position and listened, his eyes roving round the bare-walled room. Then he caught sight of the thin knife blade moving in and out through the wall that separated the room from one farther back in the house.

After a while a sort of slot had been cut in the soft wood, and then a slim brown hand appeared and wrenched off large splinters, enlarging the slot until it was a considerable hole, large enough to crawl through. A brown body appeared and, after some trouble, squeezed into the room. A

native girl crossed to the astonished and wondering Travers.

She placed her finger on her lips and knelt down, so that her mouth was against the man's ear. He felt the tickle as her lips moved.

It was evident from her quivering that she was very much afraid and that she did not know Steinberger had gone. It was also evident she had had dealings with him, for her arms and breasts were bruised, as those of the girl Travers had seen on first entering the trader's house.

"I hear him say Melita send you. I am Tia Kua," she whispered, and then the sailor knew a vast relief. He grinned as much as his shattered face would allow, and nodded at his bonds.

The girl fumbled with the knots in the signal halliard, and in a few minutes Travers was free.

He rose to his feet, stretched his arms above his head, felt himself tenderly all over, and then patted the girl reassuringly on the shoulder. Ignoring her pleas for quiet, he then kicked down the door of the room that confined him, and quickly released Everett.

It was some time before the two of them could restore the unconscious Stevens to life, but eventually they managed it, and prepared to leave. They searched for weapons, and found plenty to their satisfaction. Travers came across a wallet of paper money in a drawer and handed it to Tia Kua, telling her to keep it as some sort of compensation for what she had been subjected to. Then all four of them went out on to the veranda and started down the path to the beach.

They had not gone more than a dozen yards when they met Walters, the black-bearded officer of the *Atlantis*. He had been left to watch the prisoners, and was not dreaming of attack. Rather he was anticipating a fine time alone with Steinberger's girls and private stock of liquor. He looked up as he heard the sound of men's shoes on the sand, and the cigar he was chewing dropped from his suddenly slack jaw. Then he came to a halt with a start. His hand went to his holster.

"That's the blighter who swiped me with a belaying pin," muttered the second mate thickly, still groggy from the terrible blow he had received. Pushing Travers aside, he fired before the other man had time to draw his gun. He dropped like a sack of flour, limply and as

heavily, and lay still. Travers turned him over with his foot and noted the neat hole in the center of the forehead.

"No need to have finished him," he commented indifferently, and went on.

There was no sign of the *Wanderer* in the lagoon. Travers climbed a tall tree and gazed around on the horizon. The barque was running swiftly before a north wind, and only her tops'ls were visible over the sea rim. After a long look Travers came down to the sand and rejoined his officers.

"Steinberger's taken my ship," he said quietly. He looked at Everett, Everett looked at him. Then both men turned and looked at the brig beached for careening half a mile away.

"We could launch her in a couple of hours, sir," suggested the mate.

Travers nodded and tested the strength of the wind with a wet forefinger.

"We'll take her. She can't sail as fast as the *Wanderer*, but with this wind she won't lag far behind."

Followed still by Tia Kua, the three officers went down the beach to where the *Atlantis* lay.

## CHAPTER VIII MAN-BATTLE

IT was night when the brig dropped anchor, some little distance from Mulinu'u Point, after the long run south. The lights of three or four schooners, a long, rakish-looking barquentine, and a barque that was plainly the *Wanderer*, shimmered through the night haze that hung over the roadstead. Three other ships were beating up from the east, and it was evident that Melita would have a full house before dawn.

From the fires along the beach it was apparent that a sort of dance picnic was being held for the pleasure of the men of the sea and the world. Half a dozen red glows dotted the sand, and the sound of singing drifted on the breeze.

To escape the festivities Travers landed some distance below the hotel and climbed round the back of the long, low building. Here Tia Kua took charge and led him down a dark, cool passage to the big room in the front of the place.

It was practically deserted, the majority of

the men preferring the revelries of the beach, under the stars, to the stifling languor of the inside, though four of the older men were in evidence near Melita's dais idly smoking long cheroots and talking in low tones together. Of the half-caste there was no sign.

Tia Kua slipped across the room to the heavy curtains that screened Melita's quarters. She listened at the door, and then beckoned to Travers. The four men near the dais watched this byplay with growing interest. Many strange things took place in Melita's house.

Parting the curtain, Travers stepped inside and laid his ear against the door, Tia Kua tensely clutching his arm and listening, too. Steinberger's voice was loud and arrogant, and he was evidently repeating some old argument.

"I've got this little knight-errant of yours, m' dear, and I've got your little sister. You want them back, both of them. All right. You come with me and we'll call it quits. I'll even marry you. At the mission, if you will."

"Wilhelm," Melita's voice was pleading and very soft, and Travers thrilled and tingled to his fingertips, "I've never had much happiness, and this man.... He already means so much. I had hoped.... But you would not understand. I am not a bad woman.... You would only tire of me in a few weeks. Why not make a few people happy for a change? I—"

"I've heard all that already! You know my terms. Take them or leave them. Either you come with me, or I keep your sister and finish this Travers. I'd sooner do that, anyway. I don't mind admitting that man is dangerous to me. But if you come I'll let him go and give him back his ship. Hurry and decide. I've let you fool and argue with me for two solid days, and I've got to get back!"

There was a long silence, broken only by Steinberger's heavy breathing. Then Melita whispered:

"I have a little money, Wilhelm. If you—"

"I have money, too. I want you, not money. Come!"

"You will swear to let Travers go, and my sister?"

"H'm, seems you're very fond of this—sailor!"

"I am."

There was a quiet dignity in the tone that

quieted the German. It did not sound like the old Melita. Travers set his teeth and kicked open the door.

MELITA was standing before Steinberger, nervously twisting her fan in her hands. The German was sitting on the divan and rubbing his palms together like a man confident of the outcome of his plans. He collapsed like a wet rag as his astonished gaze fell on Travers standing in the dim red square of the doorway. There was sticking-plaster and the stain of iodine on Travers' face, and Steinberger boasted a huge purple lump on his jaw. Under other circumstances either of the men would have evoked a laugh.

Melita stared for one intense moment, and then collapsed to her knees and sobbed with relief. Tia Kua ran to comfort her.

Steinberger reached for his holster, and the sailor was on him like a flash, knocking the drawn gun from his hand and sending him spinning across the back of the divan.

The German charged like a bull when he had recovered his feet, and the force of his weight carried Travers until he fell with, a crash, the other's two hundred and fifty-odd pounds of fat holding him down.

The fat hands reached for the sailor's throat, but he got his thumbs in the pig-like eyes and, with a curse, Steinberger reeled back half-blinded. It was not pretty fighting.

Travers was up and after his opponent immediately, pounding his ribs and working his face to a mass of purple bruises. He did not go unpunished himself. Steinberger's weight and superior reach aided him. The German picked up a brazier and cut Travers' head open, half stunning him and driving him to his knees. Before he could follow up his advantage the sailor had staggered to his feet and gone into a clinch.

The mirrors on the walls were shattered as the two men swayed all over the room. Finally they crashed into the divan and split apart, bloody and breathless.

They rested for a spell, teeth showing and eyes glittering with passion. The centuries and epochs of upward climbing from the primeval slime and forest had been for naught. The martyrdom of a million reformers was in vain. Here stood two men locked in mortal combat,



unaffected by all that had gone before. They were the result of it all.

Travers was the first to recover. With quick, lithe steps he advanced and jabbed at Steinberger's mouth. With a snarl they closed and for a while wrestled again about the room, stumbling over rugs and matting, low tables and cushions.

The German swore continuously, but the sailor fought in silence. Blood flecks were everywhere. Then Steinberger ran his hand behind the sailor and, feeling the automatic reposing in the hip pocket, drew it after some difficulty. Just at that moment Travers broke the German's hold with a mighty effort and, lifting the huge body, pitched it into a corner.

With a broken arm and collar bone Steinberger rocked to his knees and fired blindly. Travers clapped a hand to his hip, realized what had happened, and then cast frantic eyes around for the gun he had knocked from Steinberger's hand in the beginning. He could see it nowhere.

A bullet snickered over his shoulder and tore a hole in the copper mesh of the walls. Another clipped his neck. Dimly he heard Melita scream and then shout something.

He gasped as a numbing, red-hot pang shot through his left arm. He pawed at the air. This was the end. William Travers, his brother, would never be avenged, nor would Mary, the little wife. For one vivid moment the mists cleared from the sailor's eyes and he looked clear-eyed for his death.

Steinberger staggered, panting, to his feet and sobbed with laughter. His sound arm rose and held the automatic steady. Travers closed his eyes

and swayed on his feet.... There came a shot, then a fusillade of shots, and faintly Travers heard Steinberger choke.

He opened his eyes and saw the German go down, fighting for breath, his chest a gory ruin where a soft-nosed bullet had mushroomed.

Melita cried out in a faint voice as she watched the blue smoke curling up from the muzzle of the nickel-steel revolver she had snatched up from the floor. It was the revolver she had given to Travers, the revolver Travers had knocked from the German's hand in the beginning of the fray.

Travers stumbled forward. He was aware of a warm something flowing down his limp left arm, but he took no heed. He halted beside the dead man and looked down. He felt dizzy and very tired.

"That squares things, Brietmann," he muttered thickly. "Billy'll rest easy now. And may...and may God have mercy on your soul."

Then he turned and saw Melita. Her eyes were wide with horror, and with one hand she held her handkerchief to her mouth. She had forgotten to breathe.

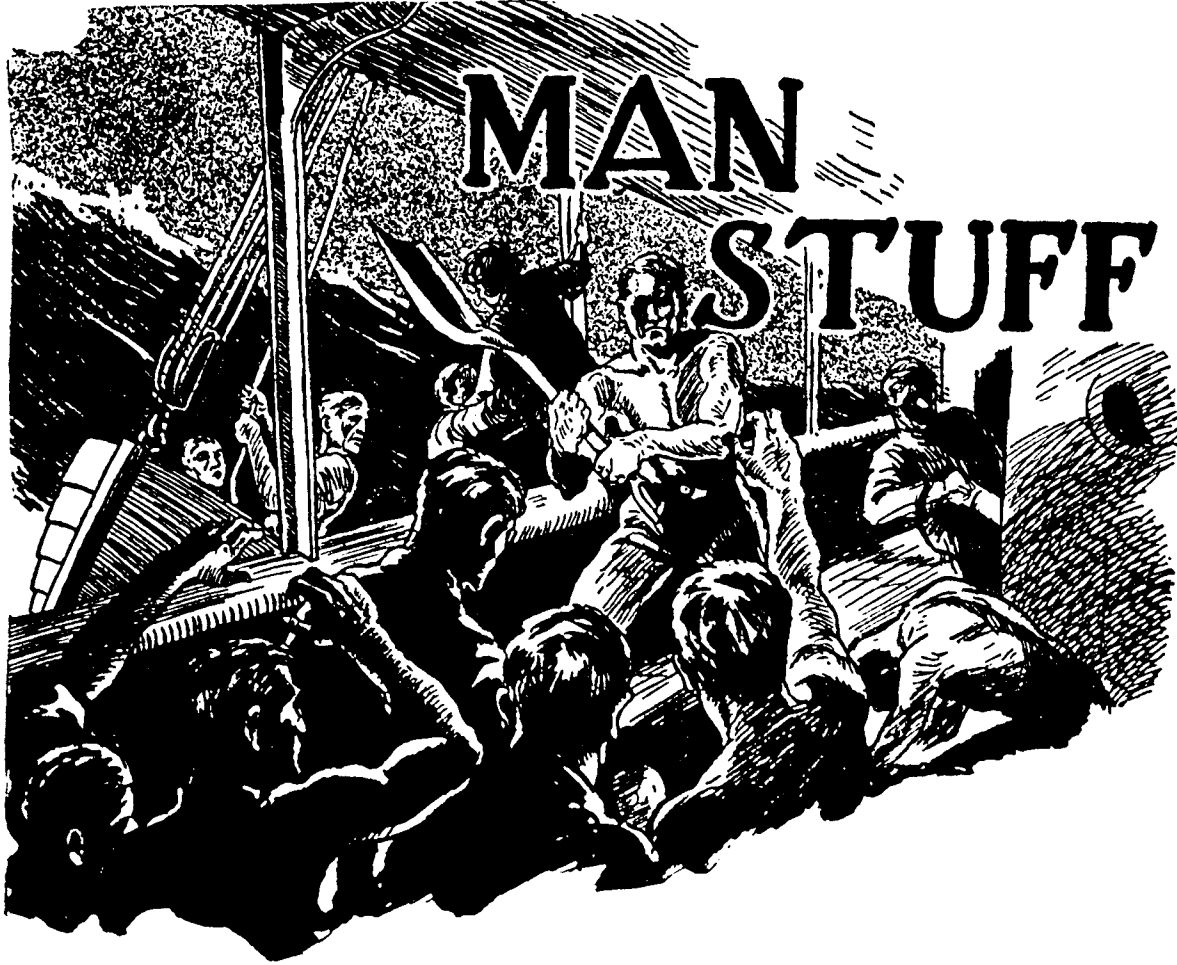
Travers swore feebly and crossed to the motionless girl. At his touch on her arm she shuddered and roused herself. The revolver dropped unheeded to the floor and, swaying against the man's shoulder, she commenced to cry.

Travers raised Melita's face and kissed her lips.

"Melita!" he muttered thickly. "Let's start again...together."

Then blackness came and he fainted.





**I**T ain't wot you signs on for, an' it brings no extry pay,  
 An' it don't exactly enter in th' usual work of day;  
 Nobody says to do it, nobody says to try—  
 You starts in when it 'appens, an' damned if you knows why.  
 Of course, there's lots against it, an' you can't just blame them all,  
 For tossin' down their sidearm and not 'earin' th' recall.

When your stomach's outa kilter, when you don't feel very well,  
 When there's blood upon your tunic, an' th' Colonel's blown to 'ell  
 When th' column's busted open an' you sure to God are beat—  
 You oughta skip—but *some one* 'as to cover th' retreat.



By **ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN**



**I**T ain't found in the articles; you oughta quit 'er cold—  
But, if you're *man*, you does it, like you wouldn't do for gold  
It ain't so much th' glory, an' you don't care for th' fame,  
Th' sitchuation's up to you—you gotta play th' game.

When she's breached an' broadside to it, an' 'ardly even floats,  
When th' rest are stiff with 'orror, an' 'owlin' for th' boats,  
When th' main deck's half-seas under...well, I thinks th' same as you,  
You oughta quit—but *some one* 'as to see th' 'ooker through.



**L**ET it 'appen in th' desert, or in a stinkin' 'old;  
Down Suva way, or Java—or up with th' Gods of Cold;  
In wilderness or city—if it's fire, drowning, wreck,  
Shattered brigade in action, or only a squad in check—  
The sitchuation's up to you, an' it ain't no rosy bed,  
But if you're *man*, you meet it—exactly like I said!

