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Assistant to a Venus in Breeches!*

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The Flaming Skull

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THE FLAMING SKULL

By Hugh B. Cave

A story of perilous adventure amongst the head-hunting tribes of Borneo.

CHAPTER ONE

FOR THE first hour of the journey from Lunda to Kuching, along the Sarawak coast, Carey Black pressed back in the rear seat of the government car and hunched into himself, with his rangy, putteed legs doubled up in front of him. It was November, Borneo's unwelcome rainy season, and the air that whined over the top of the wind-shield was chill and wet, creeping under a man's linen coat and pith helmet with a decidedly shivery touch.

The road was monotonous. Black had been over it more than a score of times in the past six months. His job as government engineer in Lunda, surveying the coastal jungles and laying out prospective roads for future development, had called for frequent trips to Kuching, to Foreign Service headquarters. He knew every twist of the route, every sullen curve. For instance, there would be an imitation cliff most of the way, squatting on the right side, and a rather formidable, sickening drop into the South China Sea on the left; then the Cape Po light off in the distance, and the yellow murk of Kuching's native quarter—and finally the government residency in Kuching proper, where Captain Guy Molert would be waiting.

CASUALLY, Black glanced at the wide, angular shoulders of the man at the wheel. There was a man for you! A Sikh and all that—with a Sikh's inseparable top-heavy turban and long haired drink strainer, and a name that sounded like cold water dropping on hot coals—but a man who didn't know the definition of nerves. A man you could bank on. Even now, a sudden boulder in the road or a patch of unexpected mud under the wheels would be enough to wrench the steering-rim out of his hands and snap the car over the edge; but Sanuk Singh sat there propped up like a king robot, dignified, unemotional, unperturbed.

"Pretty rotten going, eh?" Black proffered.

Sanuk Singh glanced up into the windshield mirror without turning his head. He smiled quietly and said: "Yes, sahib. We'll be there soon. We won't be late."

That reminded Black of something else. He groped in his coat pocket and fetched out an envelope with the end torn off. Fishing out its contents, he spread the letter in his hands. He knew it by rote now; he'd gone over it so many times. But it was so damned peculiar, so damned unlike Molert to be mysterious about anything. Molert was generally a straight-forward, open-handed Britisher. Black had known him for years. Met him some time ago in the States. It was Molert who had suggested to the government that Black was the man for the engineering job at Lunda. Molert who had actually summoned Black to Borneo. Now this thing—this inexplicable note which Molert had sent from Kuching.

"Come to Kuching at once and say nothing to anyone. I have unearthed the greatest secret of Borneo's interior."

Black frowned at it. It sounded like a lot of poppycock, this reference to the "greatest secret of Borneo's interior." Borneo's interior didn't possess any secrets—not for Black. It was an infernal maze of stinking jungle and fever rivers. Snakes and natives and leeches and—

Black folded the paper and put it away with a shrug. The car was nearing the end of its run, droning at slow speed through the filthy, twisting street-alleys of Kuching's native quarter. Black stuck a cigarette in his lips and lighted it, to keep out the stink of sewage. By the time the fag had burned out, the waterfront shacks were a mile behind and the car was pulling to a stop before the government residence, in the European quarter. Black climbed out and tossed his cigarette into the gutter.

"Better come in, Sanuk," he said "I'll probably be a long time."

The Sikh followed Black up the steps. He was taller than Black, and heavier. His turban gave him preposterous height, yet he stood serenely erect without stooping. He was proud of his heritage.

Black pulled the bell, and waited. A Dyak soldier admitted him. Sanuk Singh paced over the threshold behind him.

"Tell Captain Molert that Carey Black is here," Black said quietly.

The Dyak retreated along the corridor. Black leaned against the wall, just inside the door. In a moment he straightened up again stiffly. Another door had opened at the end of the passage and a figure was coming along the carpet toward him. A girl's figure.

Black watched her. He tried hard not to stare, but she was young—not more than twenty, he guessed—and sort of out of place here. Good looking girls were rather scarce in Kuching and scarcer than that in Lunda. He hadn't seen one in months. And this one—well, she was good looking right enough! But her face was pale, white, and her eyes were rimmed with shadow.

She stopped in front of him.

"You—wish to see Captain Molert?"

"Yes. He sent for me," Black said.

The girl hesitated. Obviously she was not quite certain what to say next.

"You are—is it a matter of business, please?"

"Don't know exactly what it is," Black smiled. "Captain Molert sent me a letter of sorts, tellingly to come in a hurry, and—"

"Who are you?"

"The name is Black. Carey is the other end of it."

"Oh!" The exclamation came quickly, sharply, from the girl's lips. She reached out slowly and touched Black's arm. "You're father's best friend, then. He's told me about you."

Black gaped at her. He knew Molert had a daughter, but he'd never had the luck to meet her. So this was the girl Molert was eternally raving about!

"Please come," she interrupted. "I've something to tell you. You'll help me, I know."

She turned heavily. Black walked behind her as she went down the corridor. Sanuk Singh, the

Sikh, stood stolidly by the outer door, watching them as they went into the room at the other end.

Inside the room, the girl stiffened her shoulders and faced Black deliberately.

"I'm Jeanne Molert—Captain Molert's daughter," she said simply. "There is no use beating about the bush, Mr. Black. My father is dead."

"He's—" Black was going to say: "He's *what?*" but she interrupted him again in an even, controlled voice.

"He has been murdered."

BLACK stood and looked at her. He thought of Molert—big, broad-faced Guy Molert, who always talked in a guttural voice that seemed to scrape all the way up from his army boots. Molert—who had a dozen homely, human habits; smoked too much, swore good-humoredly when anything puzzled him, always scribbled on the back of an old letter or something when he was talking at his desk. Molert—good Lord, he couldn't be dead! Every living thing was half in love with him!

And the note—the note Molert had sent only a little more than two hours ago. He'd been alive then, surely. The note was in his handwriting. No mistake about that—

"When did it happen?" Black said huskily.

"Two hours ago," Jeanne replied.

"Two hours—may I see him, please?"

"Are you sure you—"

"Yes, please."

Jeanne stepped across the room and opened the door of the dead man's private office. She did not enter. She stood aside and let Black go in alone.

Black crossed the threshold slowly, still gripped by the unreality of it. Somehow he half expected to find them room in an upheaval—table overturned, chairs thrown about, papers cluttering the floor. Nothing would have surprised him.

But he was wrong. The office was quite in order. There were no signs of conflict, no signs of anything wrong except the quiet form that lay across the table.

He examined it without touching it. No need to turn it over; the death mark was plainly visible. A bullet hole in the back of the head, nothing else. Molert had been sitting with his back toward the

single window. The window looked out on the lawn at the rear. The murderer had crept up unseen—a revolver uplifted—and—

Black walked out again and closed the door. The girl was waiting. He lowered himself into the chair opposite her.

"You say he sent for you to come here?" Jeanne said.

Black showed her the note he had brought from Lunda. She read it frowning.

"What does it mean?" she asked him.

"I don't know."

"But why did he want you?"

"Perhaps you can answer that question," Black suggested, "by telling me what you know."

Jeanne hesitated. Then, choosing her words carefully:

"Father returned only a week ago from an inspection tour of the interior jungles. As soon as he returned, I knew that something was preying on his mind, Mr. Black. I haven't been long in Borneo, but I do know my father. He was worried about something; and it was important, because he would confide in no one."

"That isn't like him," Black said quietly.

"The day he returned," she went on, ignoring his comment, "he went down to the native quarter. During the week, he went there again. Today—only an hour before we found him—like that—he made a third trip."

"Do you know why he went?"

"He would not tell me. But when he came in today, he was flushed, excited. I questioned him. He spoke sharply to me—and he seldom does that—and he insisted that he be allowed to go into his office, undisturbed. Father seldom allowed anything to get on his nerves, Mr. Black. I can't understand it."

Black was leaning down in his chair, his elbows on his knees and his face cupped in his long fingers.

"The native quarter," he said slowly—not to her, but to himself. "Three times—to the native quarter!"

Then he looked up sharply.

"Is that all?" he demanded.

"Yes. Only three times, so far as I know—"

"I mean is that all you can tell me?"

"Oh. Yes. I think so. Except, of course, that I found him in there, two hours ago the way he is now—"

Black stood up, scowling. He turned away from her almost rudely and strode to the door; but at the door he stopped and said quietly:

"I'll see what I can uncover, Miss Molert. Perhaps down in the native hole—"

Then he went out, leaving her to stare after him. Abruptly he paced down the corridor to the outer door.

Sanuk Singh was standing there, patient and unmoving as the bole of a big tree. With one hand Black seized the Sikh's arm; with the other he pulled the door open.

"We're going for a walk," he said curtly. "Think your long legs can stand it?"

"Yes, sahib. Where?"

But Black was already outside, descending the wooden steps. Sanuk Singh, impassive as a shadow, followed him.

THE STREETS of the European quarter were dark now—which meant that the black, ribboned alleys of the native hole would be unquestionably darker. Here, among the white houses and smooth pavements, there were lights overhead. Down there, where wooden hovels crowded against each other like black beetles cringing in the waterfront murk, there would be no lights except the masked, yellow glows that emanated from upper windows. There would be sinister doorways and the mouths of impenetrable black alleys between buildings and litter underfoot—and silent, slow-footed shadows pacing from one sidewalk to the other.

Knowing this, Sanuk Singh said casually:

"It would be safer, sahib, to use the car."

"Don't want it," Black grunted. "We're going to Kemal Sel's opium dive."

The Sikh's eyes contracted ever so slightly. Unconsciously his right hand slid down and fingered the short-bladed *kard* in the belt of his knee-breeches. He knew Kemal Sel's place. He had been there as a soldier, before he had become Black's "boy."

"May the nine *gurus* of Nanak and the Punjabi Jats be with us, sahib," he murmured under his breath.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Nothing, sahib. I was saying that it might be a good idea to have your revolver where you can reach it quickly."

Black smiled thinly, but the humor was of short duration. He, too, knew the nature of Kemal Sel's underground hangout. It was the resort of low-caste natives—waterfront Arabs and Singhalese, and occasional Chinese. Sanuk Singh's suggestion about the revolver was not empty talk.

Black paced on, with the Sikh beside him and a little behind. They had left the European quarter behind. The streets had become alleys, unlighted. Occasional stolid-faced natives shambled past without looking up. Once in a while a square of fallow illumination was visible above the sidewalk, gutting through some second story window. But it was mostly silence and thick darkness—and an unpleasant stench that came from the gutters.

Kemal Sel's was in the very center of the labyrinth. A dozen stone steps led down from the sidewalk level, terminating in a closed door. Black groped down, holding the wall for support. With one hand in his pocket, closed over the revolver that lay there, he pushed open the door and shuffled inside. Sanuk Singh, stooping to avoid the low entry, went in behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DOPE den was empty. At least, the outer room was empty. The inner chambers, divided into opium booths and sleeping quarters, were not open to the inspection of white men.

Black walked toward the nearest table. His heavy boots grated over the rough floor. The chair, when he pulled it back, rasped protestingly—and these sounds were magnified to triple proportions by the restless quiet of the room. Black and Sanuk Singh sat down, staring at each other. Then a door behind the counter opened with a soft screech.

Black turned swiftly—and relaxed again. It was the bar-keep who had come in. An emaciated Chinese, wrapped around with a dirty apron. He scuffed forward, leaned on the counter, and said indifferently:

"Drink?"

"Not now," Black said.

The Oriental busied himself behind the counter, slopping about with a wet rag. Black looked around carelessly to inspect the shadowed corners of the room. He stiffened.

The dive wasn't empty. Not quite. One of the tables in the far corner, half masked in shadow, was occupied—occupied by a single, well-dressed native. Black couldn't see the man's face; it was bent down, studying something. But he could distinguish the fellow's garb—the garb of the high-caste Arab. Long knee breeches—longer than Sanuk Singh's and a deep-colored, silken tunic hung over a tall, long-limbed, muscular body.

The Arab was intent over something. Something that lay on the table between his cupped hands and gave out a thousand little winks of light, even in the shadows. Black guessed that it was a diamond, and a good one.

But that wasn't all. The Arab moved slightly. He was holding a piece of white paper in his hand, tipping it up at an angle so that the light over, the bar would shine on it. The paper must be important, Black thought. The Arab's eyes were glued to it.

Black turned quietly around to nudge Sanuk Singh. But the Sikh had seen it too; his deep eyes met Black's and contracted significantly, as if to say:

"There is something peculiar about that Arab, sahib. Men like him—high-caste—do not usually frequent Kemal Sel's."

Black would have swung about again to continue his vigil, had not the street door opened beyond him. Two men came in. Two white men. And as they stepped to the bar and passed directly under the drop light, Black saw their faces in detail.

One was French. No question about it. His hawkish features and cunningly trimmed mustache, his deep color, were as good as a placard. Moreover, he was as much out of place here as the Arab. He was too well dressed.

The other—well, the other was a waterfront rat. A half-caste. A limp brimmed cap was pulled over his eyes. His clothes hung loose.

They leaned on the bar, without speaking. One of them—the Frenchman—turned casually to glance at the Arab in the corner, then turned back again and motioned to the bar-keep. Three heads went together, whispering in an undertone.

Black watched them, frowning. He watched the Arab, too; but the Arab was too busy with his own interests to notice what was going on. At the counter, the bar-keep straightened up, grinning. The Frenchman gave him money. Then the two white men paced quietly along the floor, opened one of the inner doors, and disappeared.

Black was studying the bar-keep now. He saw the Chinaman take a glass and a bottle, and pour the contents of one into the other. Then a smaller bottle from under the counter—and one drop, two drops, slid into the glass. Stirring it with a spoon handle, the Oriental scuffed out from behind the counter and walked to the Arab's table. He put the glass down, grinning. The Arab paid him. The Chinaman shuffled back to his hole.

Black glanced at Sanuk Singh and got up. He walked quietly to the Arab's table. The Arab was intent on the paper again; did not notice him. Even before Black reached the table, the fellow reached out mechanically, without thinking, and took hold of the glass.

"I wouldn't drink that," Black said softly "It's been fixed."

IT WAS remarkable, the effect of his voice on the man at the table. The Arab's hand snapped back, away from the glass, and scooped up the glittering stone that lay in front of him. The hand slid into his tunic and came out again—empty. Then realizing that the bit of paper was exposed in full view, he tried to conceal that also.

But he was too late. Black was standing directly over it, and had seen enough of it to want to see more. When the Arab's fingers darted out to snatch the paper away, Black's hand locked around the fellow's wrist.

The Arab said nothing. Nothing at all. His oval face was twisted, twitching. His jet eyes bored straight up into Black's defiant, challenging.

"I'll look at the paper, if you don't mind," Black said deliberately.

The answer spit out through white regular teeth. "No!"

"If you feel that way—" Black's left hand, holding the man's wrist, began to turn. The Arab's free hand shot back into his tunic. It slid out again, holding a dirk—and then it froze motionless. Black's right hand had been a full second quicker. It held a revolver now, and the muzzle of the gun was on an even, unwavering line with the Arab's mouth.

Reluctantly, the Arab released his hold on the paper.

"Put the knife down," Black ordered softly.

The knife fell.

"Now fetch out the diamond."

The Arab hesitated. Plainly, he was looking for a chance to get past Black's cool revolver. But the chance was not forthcoming.

"Fetch out the diamond!"

With slow fingers the Arab obeyed. The stone came out of his tunic and rolled on the table. Black picked it up, dropped it in his own pocket without looking at it.

Falling back a step, Black glanced over his shoulder and motioned to Sanuk Singh. The Sikh was waiting. He strode forward.

"Take this," Black said curtly, slipping the revolver into his hand, "and keep this fellow here."

"Yes, sahib."

Black walked to the counter, under the light, and examined the square of paper.

The thing was a puzzle, at best. One side—the side which had first attracted Black's attention—was unmistakably written in Captain Guy Molert's hand. But it was a mess of words and figures—unintelligible.

Black studied it. Frowned at it. It meant nothing to him, except perhaps the repetition of the name *Krinjalilaya*. That had a significance for any man who knew the interior jungles. But the rest—the cryptograms and the half finished word *Matam*—were just so many pen scratches.

He turned the paper over. The other side was a letter, not in Molert's script but in a strange hand that Black did not recognize. It said briefly:

"The stone is finished, sahib. If you will come for it tonight, you may have it. Matamuri."

So far as Black could make out, their only connection between the two sides of the paper was that single word *Matamuri*, in an unknown hand on one side, and in Molert's hand, unfinished, on the other. Frowning, Black went back to the Arab's table.

"Where did you get this paper?" he demanded.

The Arab smiled cunningly.

"I found it."

"Where?"

The Arab would have answered, but something behind Black's rangy body caught his attention. His eyes widened. He stiffened a little.

Black spun around. He was in time to see the door of the inner room click shut. In time to catch a fleeting glimpse of the Frenchman's face; that was all. Automatically he searched the room for the Chinaman. There was no sign of him. Without being told, Black knew what had occurred. The bar-keep, noting the failure of his drugged whiskey, had slipped into the back room to inform the Frenchman and the half-caste. The Frenchman had opened the door silently to make sure.

Black swung around again. He was not concerned with the Frenchman—just now.

"Does the name *Matamuri* mean anything to you?" he demanded, confronting the Arab.

"Matamuri? No—nothing."

"He is lying, sahib," Sanuk Singh threw in. "Every native in Kuching knows Matamuri's shop. It is a little curio store three streets from here toward the waterfront. And Matamuri is a Singhalese who buys stolen things from thieves."

"You sure?"

"Sure, sahib."

Black nodded thoughtfully. Then, in a sharp voice:

"Take this man to headquarters, Sanuk. Hold him there until I return."

"Better take this, sahib," the Sikh advised, holding out the revolver.

But Black was already striding to the outer door.

BLACK turned left along the sidewalk when he emerged from Kemal Sel's basement hangout. It was pitch dark now—no street lights, no signs of movement on either side. Must be about ten o'clock, he guessed. Not exactly late; but late enough for the native quarter—the external part of it at least—to hole up for the night. Black wondered, as he walked along in the shadows of overhanging, bulging tenement-shacks if Matamuri's shop would be also shut up.

At the end of the street he followed Sanuk Singh's directions: "three streets from here toward the waterfront." They were not lovely alleys, especially at this time of night. More than once, as

he paced along, Black caught himself wondering which of the many lurking doorways would spit a knife out at him.

That was the system down here, with white men who were fools enough to prowl the evil quarter. A black doorway—a sudden rushing shadow—descending knife—then a dead white man lying in the gutter with his pockets stripped and half his clothes purloined. The native police would stumble over him the next morning, and send in a report—

Only one more street now, if Sanuk Singh had been correct. Then, if Matamuri had any information to disclose—

It was the sudden scrape of naked feet, coming out of the dark behind him, that cut Black's thoughts into oblivion and brought him around with a lurch. He was too late then. He had no revolver to reach for. All he could do was throw up his arms and lash out against the four gutter rats who fell upon him.

He kept his feet for a while, fighting them with silent fury. Even as they forced him back, he wondered why they hadn't used their infernal knives. But they didn't; they were content to trip him against the wall and drag him down.

He groped to his knees, even as they clawed over him. His clenched fist found more than one fleshy mark and sunk with raking force. But they smothered him, pawed over him—then something solid smashed into his face, across the eyes and he relaxed.

The last thing he heard, before the native faces above him became a blur of darkness, was a voice—with a French accent—saying crisply:

"Take him to Kemal Sel's, to the room on the second floor—"

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN HIS senses struggled back to normal again and he realized the nature of his surroundings, Black was lying on a board floor in the dark, trussed hand and foot. His forehead throbbed with an insistent hammering. His eyes ached. His angular body was wrenched into a contorted position that strained every muscle.

He rolled over, feeling behind him with his manacled hands. His fingers touched a smooth

wall. Rolling in the other direction, he struck the legs of a table. Evidently he was in the room they had mentioned—one of the upper rooms in Kemal Sel's hangout. But why had they brought him here? If they had wanted to get rid of him, why hadn't they killed him?

He realized what they had done. The Frenchman and the half-caste had crept out of the saloon as soon as they had overheard the conversation about Matamuri's shop. Knowing the route Black would take, they had waited for him with a handful of native muck-rats. For a while he leaned back against the table-legs, trying to remember various stories he had heard concerning methods of escape. Then he smiled grimly and settled down to work.

It was a long job, twisting that stiff leather belt inch by inch through its loops, until the sharp-edged buckle was within reach of his wrists. And then a longer job, sawing a single strand of rope back and forth across the metal. Long before it was finished Black's arms and wrists were numb.

But it had to be done, and done quickly. No telling when the Frenchman or some of his gutter rats would come back and open the door there. Black shifted position and went through the motions mechanically.

The rope parted. Even then the bonds could not be jerked loose; they were knotted in such a position that a second strand had to be severed. And in the midst of this second task, Black stiffened and froze motionless. Footsteps were scuffing along the corridor outside, approaching the door!

Black groaned. Curse them—why couldn't they have waited another ten minutes! Why did they have to return just as he was half free—

Outside, a voice said quietly:

"Go downstairs, Sel. I'll guard the door here. Geraux will be back any time now."

Other footsteps shuffled away. Black frowned. So Kemal Sel, the Chinaman, had been on guard outside the door. Been there all the time! And now the half-caste—if it was the half-caste—was taking the Oriental's place. That would make it harder. A lot harder.

But a plan was already formed in Black's mind. He went to work with renewed vigor, until the second strand of rope parted under his efforts. Half a dozen savage jerks, and his hands were free. He waited a moment, until the blood had

begun to circulate; then he leaned over and unbound his legs.

He was on his feet now with the rope held in his hands like a strangling cord. Stepping silently to the door, he took his position a little to one side, where he would be concealed when the barrier opened. Then he reached out with one foot and kicked the panels—kicked them dully as if still bound. And lying prostrate, he had rolled against the door and was struggling to open it.

For a moment nothing responded. Then, outside in the passage, something moved forward. The knob turned slowly. The door opened with a jerk. The half-breed took a single unwary step into the room.

Black was upon him before he could turn. The rope snapped over the fellow's head from behind, burned into his neck, dragged him backwards. His sudden scream was choked before it could reach his lips.

There was no resistance. Even as the man clawed around, groping for a weapon, Black's fist ground into his face and floored him. With swift fingers Black transferred the rope to the fellow's wrists and ankles, and gagged him with a strip of his own filthy trousers. Yes, it was the half-caste. In spite of the dark, Black recognized those repulsive features.

Dragging him into the corner, Black stole quietly from the room and closed the door. When he emerged into the corridor, he held a revolver in his hand. The half-caste's revolver.

But there was no need for it. Ten paces down the passage, Black found a flight of wooden steps. He descended noiselessly to the lower level. There another corridor presented itself, lined on each side with shallow booths. The booths, most of them, were empty. A few of them had occupants; but curtains were drawn across the openings, and the men behind the curtains were too far gone to notice Black as he stepped softly toward the door that led into the outer saloon.

This door opened under his touch. With the revolver ready for service, he stepped into the main hangout.

Kemal Sel was there—but asleep. The Chinaman was sitting on his stool behind the bar, drooped over the counter. He did not awaken as Black tip-toed past him to the street door.

A moment later, for the second time that night, Black groped up the steps to the sidewalk

and turned in the direction of Matamuri's curio shop.

THIS time he was not waylaid. He found the place, with its masked windows and decrepit sign hanging above the entrance. Matamuri would be asleep, of course. But—well, he could be aroused. There was no time to waste, and this was no moment to be considering a man's feelings.

Black hammered on the closed door, and waited. While he stood there, he fumbled in his pocket for the diamonds and for the scrap of paper with the peculiar cryptogram. His fingers came out empty. Scowling, he tried another pocket—tried all of them. The stuff had been removed!

Black cursed himself for a fool. Of course the stuff had been lifted! What else had the Frenchman and the half-breed made him a prisoner for, if not to get the diamond and the paper! What else—

The door in front of him jarred open. A troubled Singhalese face, over a hunched body, stared at him critically, waiting for him to speak.

"I want to see Matamuri," Black said evenly.

"What for?"

"Business."

The Singhalese moved back. Black followed him into the shop and leaned on the narrow counter, under the single hanging light.

"What you want?"

"I want information. You knew Captain Molert, didn't you?"

"I know him. Sure."

"Sure," Black nodded. "He used to come here?"

"Yes, he come here. He bring work for me. He tell me some day he bring a lot of more work, and pay me good money. "

"What kind of work?"

Matamuri's eyes tightened. He peered into Black's face, as if wondering how much it was safe to tell a man who came in the middle of the night to ask questions.

"He brought a diamond here," Black prompted. "That right?"

"He bring it here for me to cut."

"So that's it, eh? He brought the unfinished stone and paid you to cut it. When did he bring it?"

"A week ago," Matamuri supplied.

"And then he returned a couple of times to see what sort of a job you were doing. Today you wrote him a note, telling him it was finished."

Matamuri blinked. Evidently this white man *did* know something; It might be well to stick to the truth and tell him what else he wanted to learn!

"Molert was killed tonight," Black said curtly. "Someone murdered him for the stone. Do you know who did it?"

"No, no!" Matamuri stretched out a trembling hand to touch Black's arm. "You think I did it! No!"

"I don't think you did it, Johnny. But if you'll do some thinking yourself, you may be able to give me an idea who did. Did anyone else see the diamond?"

Matamuri hesitated fearfully. Then, edging forward, he said quietly:

"Maybe I do know something. Today, when Captain Molert come for the stone, there were two men in the shop. There was a Frenchman, a rich Frenchman named Armand Geraux. Maybe you know him. He buys stones from me sometimes; and he goes about ways with a half-breed white named Rossi who is his shadow. And there was a high-caste Arab whose name is Ali Rek. They were here, both of them, when Captain Molert came. And when Captain Molert took the diamond from my hand, and looked at it, he became excited. He became very excited. He laughed at me; and he talked in a loud voice about the stone. He showed it to each of the other two men, telling them; that it was worth thousands of dollars, and that he knew where he could find millions more like it. The Frenchman and the Arab looked at the stone very closely, as if they wanted it. And they told him he was lucky."

Matamuri turned, pointing to the side of the shop.

"Geraux was standing there, " he indicated. "Ali Rek, the Arab, was here. And Geraux asked Captain Molert, in a half joking way, where the rest of the diamonds were. I think that made Captain Molert realize he had talked too much, sahib, because he went out without saying anything else. He did talk too much—much too much—but the diamond was a wonderful one, sahib, and I do not blame him."

Black nodded. He asked more questions, but the information he dragged out was merely a repetition of what Matamuri had already disclosed. Geraux and the Arab had been in the shop—that was Matamuri's main theme. Molert had shown them the diamond and done altogether too much talking in his excitement. Matamuri didn't know any more than that.

"Did Molert ever tell you where he found the stone?" Black demanded.

"No. But he tell me he know where there are many, many more."

"That's all he'd say, eh?"

"Yes, sahib."

"All right." Black dropped a silver coin on the counter and walked to the front of the shop. "Better keep your mouth shut, Johnny," he advised, as he opened the door. "You may get into trouble."

The door closed. Outside, Black turned wearily toward the distant European quarter. He was tired, disappointed. He wondered what time it was. And he wished, half-heartedly, that Sanuk Singh were here with the car. It was a long hike, back to headquarters.

THE DARKNESS was beginning to lift by the time Black reached the government residence. Climbing the stairs, he pressed the bell and waited. He expected to find the place asleep.

He was wrong about that. Even before he took his finger off the button, the door was opened. Sanuk Singh stood there.

"I thought you weren't coming, sahib," the Sikh said quietly. "Even now I was preparing to go after you."

"Where is Miss Molert?"

"In her room, sahib. She has been waiting."

"Call her, will you."

"Yes, sahib. But first—"

Something in the Sikh's voice caused Black to look sharply into his face. Sanuk Singh stood stolidly erect without flinching.

"What is it?" Black said quietly.

"Sahib, my *kes* (*beard*) should be shaved off and I should be made to walk in the street without my *kachh* (*turban*). I allowed the Arab pig to escape."

Black's mouth tightened in a troubled line. He stared at the Sikh for a moment without replying. One thing he was sure of—the man who escaped from Sanuk Singh would have to be possessed with the devil's own ingenuity.

"How did he do it?" Black said finally.

"I was leading him along a dark street, sahib, and he was talking to me like an old-woman, moaning about his fate and crying about the injustice of it. Then suddenly his leg became tangled in my legs and I stumbled. When I stood up again, he was gone. I searched doorways and alleyways. I even searched the buildings near where he vanished but—"

"But you didn't find him, eh?"

Black shrugged. "Call Miss Molert, old boy."

"You don't need to," a voice answered behind him. "I've been waiting for you."

Black turned quickly; Jeanne Molert was standing there, trying to smile.

"Tell me what you discovered," she said eagerly.

"Well—" Black hesitated. Taking her arm, he led her to the room where they had talked before. Sanuk Singh followed, at a jerk of Black's head.

When they were sitting down expectantly, facing him, Black drew up a chair and lowered himself. He told what he had unearthed. Told about Matamuri's shop and the diamond, and the letter Matamuri had written to the girl's father. Then about Geraux and Rossi, the half-breed, and Ali Rek. And about the queer cryptogram on the back of the letter.

"One of those three men," he finished, "killed Captain Molert. I'm inclined to think the Arab did it, because he was the one who had the paper and stone in his possession. But there's more to it than we think, Miss Molert."

"How Ho you mean?"

"Your father's been doing a lot of talking about some hidden fortune in diamonds that he stumbled on. The two men who waylaid me, and the Arab who escaped from Sanuk Singh here—they're all after the secret of your father's cache."

"And what is the secret?" Jeanne said softly.

"That's a hard question. You say Molert returned only a week ago from the inner jungles. Where did he go?"

"To Fort Maiti," she raids "And to the up-river villages."

"Not much help, you see. Now this scrawl on the back of your father's letter. Well—you know your father's habits as well as I do, I guess; but the thing contained pictures of a lot of diamonds, and it contained the name *Krinjalilaya*."

Black looked quietly into the two faces before him; waiting for them to grasp the significance of it. The girl frowned a little, bewildered. But the effect on Sanuk Singh was abrupt. He stiffened and stared at Black. His big hands, resting on the arms of the chair, tightened perceptibly. His eyes widened, and his mouth thinned.

"What does it mean?" Jeanne asked.

"*Krinjalilaya*," Black told her, "is a Dyak village chief. His village is in the heart of the deep jungle country, where white traders and missionaries seldom penetrate. The few traders who have really been there have brought back tales about sun-worship and heathen superstitions—and a mad legend about a 'burning skull' or something."

"A—skull?"

"A skull," Black repeated soberly. "It is some sort of horrible fetish the natives indulge in; but no living person seems to know exactly what. At any rate, *Krinjalilaya's* village is the name in the cryptogram."

"And do you think father found diamonds there?"

"I'm not interested in diamonds." Black shrugged. "And, as I suggested before, you know Captain Molert's little habits better than I do. This cryptogram was probably nothing more than—"

"Yes, I realize that."

"I do think this," Black said, bending forward thoughtfully. "All three of the men we suspect—Geraux, Rossi, and Ali Rek—have seen the paper. They are all bent on finding your father's source of supply. They will come to the only natural conclusion—that *Krinjalilaya's* village contains the secret."

"You think they'll go there?"

"Sure of it. On their way now, more than likely. Soon as Geraux and Rossi discover I've escaped, they'll light out of Kuching as fast as they can move, before the Foreign Service gets after them. As for Ali Rek—well, he knows he's under suspicion for murder. He won't hang around."

"And you—shall you follow them?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"It's a long trip," Black suggested. "I can make the first part of it in comparative comfort, if I can get the use of the government launch. The rest of the way will be a bit dangerous—up-river by sampan."

"You'll go—alone?"

"Yes, unless—" Black glanced dryly at Sanuk Singh, who was leaning close, sucking in every word. "Unless this little shadow of mine cares to risk his neck and come along. What about it, Sanuk Singh?"

There was something strangely passionate about the Sikh's sudden reply. He spit the words out. His face was full of inexplicable lust.

"I *will* come, sahib!"

"And I will come, too." It was the girl who spoke. Her voice, unlike Sanuk Singh's was very quiet and deliberate.

"You?" Black frowned.

"I can't stand it here, after what's happened. Even the jungle will be a relief. "

"But—"

"It is my father who was murdered, Mr. Black," She said. "Not yours."

Then she got up and walked away. Black stared at Sanuk Singh. Evidently the expression of his face was ludicrous, for the Sikh grinned back. Black found a cigarette, lighted it, and puffed smoke between his knees.

"Her father—not mine," he mused. "Well, there's something in that. She's a whole lot like her father, too. Same looks and courage—"

"What? sahib?" Sanuk Singh murmured.

"Nothing."

CHAPTER FOUR

ODDLY enough, it was Sanuk Singh, not Jeanne Molert, who occupied Black's attention when the government launch began its long journey up river at high noon.

Sanuk Singh stood there in the prow of the boat, feet braced and huge body quivering, peering at high jungle walls on either shore. The man's eyes were afire; his face alive with unconcealed emotion. And yet—Sanuk Singh was

a true Sikh, a high-caste member of a silent, reserved race of men who seldom show their emotions.

Black stood ten paces away, watching him. The girl, Jeanne, had gone below out of reach of the throbbing sun glare. Only Sanuk Singh and Black, and a pair of indolent Dyak soldiers, reclined on deck.

And the jungle—it rose massive on both sides of the stream. Not a thing of individual shapes and forms, but a composite, sluggish shadow—made restless by the intrusion of white men. A threatening animal groping into the river with tentacles of gnarled roots and overhanging creepers—to snatch at the man-made thing which dared disturb its domain.

Black stepped forward and touched the Sikh's shoulder.

"What is it, Sanuk Singh?" he said quietly.

"I do not know, sahib. Perhaps the thing I have waited for, for twelve years."

"What's that?"

"Perhaps death, sahib. Who can tell?"

Black turned away, frowning. There were times when he didn't understand the Sikh when he couldn't penetrate Sanuk Singh's characteristic reserve. At such times, Sanuk Singh was grateful for being left alone. Black was wise enough to get out of the way.

Returning across the deck, he pulled open a canvas stool and sat in the shade of the cabin. For a while he watched the jungle, studied the monotonous shores of the river. Then he became conscious of the sweltering heat. Tipping his pith helmet to cover his face, he leaned back and went to sleep.

At sundown the government launch reached Forte Maiti.

At Fort Maiti the resident officer came down to the makeshift wharf with a trailer of half-naked natives at his heels. He chatted eagerly, assisted Jeanne out of the launch, shook hands enthusiastically with Black, and led the way to the residence.

That night, sitting in the cool of the veranda inside a cage of mosquito netting, Black asked a few necessary questions. In answer to them, the resident said that—yes, another launch had come up-river possibly four hours before Black's. It was a trading launch, not a government craft. And it

hadn't stopped except to wave a halloo from the river. Two men? Yes, there were two men in it.

"And have you seen anything of a third man—an Arab," Black suggested, "who travels alone?"

The resident was sorry, but he hadn't.

Next morning before sun-up the launch slid away from Fort Maiti and groped into the sticky river-fog. In an hour the mist dissolved; the jungle on either side became a shimmering mass, every leaf of it reflecting the sun fire. Native villages appeared along the banks—queer collections of huddled, bottle-shaped shanties, stuck up on stilts above shallow water.

Late in the afternoon the launch passed Fort Renang, the final government outpost. From then on the native villages became fewer and farther apart—and smaller. When darkness came, the launch was safely moored at the dugout landing of Chief Magali.

THIS TIME there was no sheltered veranda to make the cool evening comfortable. The huts of these river Dyaks were neither cool nor sweet. Nipa roofs held in the day's heat. Stagnant water, filmed with sewage, cast up a sickly, unhealthy odor. Under the circumstances, Jeanne Molert thought it wiser to remain in the launch; and Sanuk Singh, at a word from Black, stayed to keep guard over her. The Dyak soldiers who manned the launch—six in number—curled up on deck, under insect nettings, and slept there.

Alone, Black sought out the chief's domain. The chief himself could speak English after a fashion. Black, also after a fashion, could curl his tongue around a few syllables of Dyak jargon. Sitting cross-legged on the reed mat in Magali's hut, the two men conversed.

"Two white men," Black prompted, "came up-river a little while ago, Magali?"

Magali nodded. "Yes, two white men came. They came in a launch; but they would very soon have to abandon the launch because the river became shallow in another five miles, and nothing but a sampan or a dugout could creep over it."

"And a third white man, Magali? You saw him?"

"No, *Twan*. There was no third white man."

Black was puzzled. In his own mind he was certain that the Arab, Ali Rek was on the way to *Krinjalilaya's* village. And yet here was the same

report he had heard in Fort Maiti. No sign of a third white man. With a slight shrug, Black pressed for more information.

"You have a sampan, Magali, which will hold six or seven people?"

Magali grinned eagerly. Yes, he had a sampan—two of them. Poles and all, and no leaks. "Did the white *Twan* wish to buy them?"

Black brought out a handful of silver. He wanted *one* of the sampans, not both. Would Magali accept money?

Magali's mouth opened in a toothless smile. Accept money? Sure! Magali's village was civilized. Magali's Dyaks used white man's money all the time, to buy food and clothing from traders—and knives and Chinese gongs. Of course, another day's travel upriver would bring the white *Twan* into deep jungle territory where money was no good at all, but here, in Magali's village? Sure, hell!

Black paid him. Backing out of the doorway, Black descended the reed ladder, stepped into the sampan that lay underneath the hut, in the stagnant water, and took his departure. That night, when Black curled up on the deck of the launch to sleep, the sampan was moored alongside, already provisioned and ready for an early morning get away.

Next morning the launch and sampan parted company—the launch, with two Dyak soldiers to operate her, going back to Kuching; the sampan, with two whites, a Sikh and four Dyaks to man the poles, proceeding up-river into forbidden territory.

For two days the sampan continued. During that time, Black made inquiries at seven native villages; and each time, as the sampan got under way again, he turned with an increasingly troubled face to report his discoveries.

"Can't understand it," he said to Jeanne at sun-down of the second day. "I've a hunch that the way has been prepared for us. Even before I ask questions I get queer glances and significant whispers."

"And no information?"

"Not a word."

"You think Geraux and Rossi have bribed the natives to act that way? "

"That's what it looks like," Black shrugged. "Up here the natives are always hostile, but not exactly treacherous. If they feel like doing murder, they jump on you and get it over with. This matter

of sly whispers and ugly looks isn't their way at all."

THREE hours after that one of the Dyak soldiers laid down his pole and stepped to Black's side.

"We are coming to the narrows, sahib," he said indifferently. "They are dangerous in the dark because the shores are so close. Shall we stop and make camp? "

"How far is *Krinjalilaya's* village?" Black demanded.

"Not far beyond the narrows, sahib."

"Keep going until we get there."

The Dyak nodded and went back to his place.

Soon after, the sampan nosed into the narrow—into that part of the river where the shores were so near together that the jungle held hands over the water, and the sky was blotted out entirely. Trailing creepers scraped along the deck. Hidden tubers rubbed the bottom of the long boat, jarring the timbers under Black's feet. And the jungle was close—too close for comfort. By reaching out on either side; Black could touch the underbrush at the water's edge. Not more than a foot clearance extended beyond the sampan sides.

And then, quite suddenly, the silence of the place was rent open. A single blood-curdling yell went up from the shadows, so close that its high-pitched screech rang through Black's ear-drums: with the intensity of a knife. At the same moment, a long-hafted spear sliced out of the reeds, whined over the prow of the sampan, buried itself in the chest of the first Dyak boatman.

The Dyak screamed, fell back. Others lunged to their feet, groping for the parangs in their belts. Black's voice rang out sharply, rasping an order. Then order gave way to confusion.

The Sampan rocked, dipped perilously. Innumerable naked feet struck the deck, leaping out of the dark. Native spears hacked at Dyak parangs, wringing shrieks of pain, fear, as they cut into exposed flesh. Something soft, trembling stumbled from the protection of the cabin and fell against Black, holding on to him. The girl—Jeanne.

Black's revolver was out, spitting erratically. Hard to shoot in the dark, because these damned jungle blacks were so much like the Dyak

soldiers. Hard to see anyway. But the gun cut down three of the devils as they leaped toward him. Dropped them like puppets.

The girl was showing rare courage. No whimpers—no useless talk. Just standing there, holding Black's arm. Afraid, of course; but holding herself together as well as any of them. And Sanuk Singh—where the hell was he? Where—

Black found him. The Sikh was leaning against the cabin, tearing a spear out of his leg with one hand and holding off a pair of clawing shapes with the other. Black called to him. He straightened up, hurled a native out of his path, and stumbled forward.

"Coming, sahib—"

Then he reached Black's side. Black dragged him up, spoke to him sharply.

"Get out of here, quick! Take Jeanne. Get in the river."

"But you—sahib—"

Black shoved him into the girl.

"Get out!"

Sanuk Singh obeyed. Stiff-legged, Black stood in the stern of the boat and covered his retreat. The girl, caught up in Sanuk Singh's arms, was silent; she showed no mock heroics; she understood.

BLACK'S revolver tore a hole through a savage face. The face gasped, spurted blood, crumpled down at Black's feet. Behind, Sanuk Singh slipped over the sampan's side and vanished. The river gurgled, grew silent again. Black glanced around at the empty deck, smiled grimly, and swung back to his job.

Black retreated. He swung out savagely, in a futile attempt to clear himself. Given a moment's respite, he could suck in a long breath, spin around, and dive—and trust to God that he didn't fetch up against some buried tuber, or get tangled in a maze of hidden roots. But the chance was not forthcoming. A pair of naked arms wound around his knees. He lashed down with the gun. No good—the revolver was hammered out of his hand.

After that his resistance was feeble. He slipped to the deck, under a heaving pile of perspiring bodies. Fingers found his mouth, choking him. He writhed, twisted over. More

fingers locked into him, dragged at his face, eyes... he relaxed.

But he did not lose consciousness. He felt the sampan tremble under him as it was poled into the reeds. Felt the low-hanging creepers brushing across his legs when he was picked up bodily and carried ashore.

And then he was carried, silently and swiftly, along a little used jungle trail. The jungle closed over him completely, utterly blotting out every mark of the outside world. Escape? Not a chance.

For half an hour he was borne along. They thought him unconscious evidently, for they failed to stop, even once, to examine him.

The trail ended in a clearing—a large, dry-dirt amphitheater studded with bamboo-and-nipa huts. Native brats, naked and unwashed, scurried forward to inspect the prisoner. Fat, heavy-breasted women sidled close to poke at Black's clothing. One of them drew a knife and would have cut off some knick-knack that appealed to her.

But Black's bearers moved through at a dog trot, shoving the curious village people aside. They carried Black to one of the propped-up huts and laid him on a reed floor in the musty, stifling interior. And there they left him—with a brace of silent guards outside the entrance.

For a while Black lay still, nursing his bruises. Then, with a shrug of resignation, he sat up, leaned back against the wall, and fished for a cigarette. He was sitting there, puffing peacefully at the fag, when a sudden gleam of light pierced the gloom of the doorway and lighted the interior—shining directly in his face.

Black looked up curiously. The light came nearer. It narrowed into the eye of a flash lamp, held on the level of a man's shoulder. And the face behind it, thrown into relief by the glare, was the face of Armand Geraux—the Frenchman.

CHAPTER FIVE

FOR a single, long moment, neither man uttered a word. Geraux came forward slowly, lowering the light. Standing over Black's prostrate legs, he looked into the captive's face and laughed. Not exactly a pleasant laugh—nor particularly bitter. Rather indifferent.

Black blew a curl of smoke toward the roof, watched it trail past the Frenchman's face, and said casually:

"Hello."

"Expected me, eh?" Geraux said.

"More or less, after what happened."

"Got a rather hard reception, didn't you? It was all prepared for you, Black."

"I thought as much."

"You were fortunate," Geraux said with a condescending shrug. "I might have killed you."

"But you didn't."

"No. You're an engineer, Black. Molert was also an engineer. I need someone who can translate Molert's thoughts for me."

"You want a certain cryptogram deciphered, I suppose." Black murmured glancing casually up into the man's face.

"You suppose right."

"You must tell me first," Black suggested, "how you got into good graces of *Krinjalilaya's* murderers. I understand that this particular part of the jungle was a bit savage."

Geraux laughed—derisively this time, as if he were thoroughly enjoying himself. Reaching into his coat pocket, he brought out a metal flask. He held it up, examined it with mock seriousness, and said suddenly:

"See this? It's magic, Black. The Dyaks in this village are a superstitious lot, full of fear and *tabus*. Maybe you've heard about some of their fetishes and the unholy rites they go through every now and then. At any rate, they think I'm a fire-eater. I spit on a live coal and the coal bursts into flame. I strike a match, spit on the glowing end of it, and it blazes at the touch of my breath. That's why they think I'm an almighty god!"

"What's in the flask?" Black said dryly. "Kerosene?"

"Sure."

"An old trick," Black shrugged. "Didn't think they'd fall for it. And so you convinced them you're a little red devil, eh? They do just as you tell them?"

"Exactly."

"Then suppose you tell them to let me out of here."

"I will," Geraux smiled. "Sure I will. But first—"

"First I do what *you* suggest, hey?"

"That's being sensible."

"Suppose I refuse?"

Geraux took a slow step forward. He wasn't smiling now. His face was twisted unpleasantly.

"You've heard about this village, haven't you, Black? No? Don't know anything about the sun-worship and the thing they call the flaming skull?"

Black merely shrugged.

"Well—that's what is in store for you unless you give me what I want," Geraux threatened. "Either you tell me what Molert meant by the figures on this paper; or you find out, first hand, all the secrets of the flaming skull. No, I won't explain it to you. Horror is a lot more effective when it's mixed with slow suspense. "

Black pressed his cigarette against the floor, and lighted another. He was trying to appear nonchalant—striving to get as much information as possible without inciting the Frenchman's ire. The Frenchman meant all the difference between torture and escape. No one knew it better than Black!

"Let's see the paper," he suggested.

GERAUX groped for it, found it in an inside pocket, and handed it down. He watched Black intently as Black spread it out and studied it.

"I'll tell you—in a minute," Black said suddenly, glancing up. "You think they're here in the village."

"I know they are."

"Where did they come from in the first place?"

"I don't give a damn where they came from!" Geraux snorted. "Stolen from India or South Africa probably. Smuggled into Borneo. Brought up here by some trader. What the hell does it matter?"

But it mattered a lot—to Black. It gave him an entirely new idea—something he hadn't even anticipated when he asked the question. In truth, he had put the question merely to beg for time, while he could find something to work on in the cryptogram. But now—well, it was different. God, what a fool Geraux was!

"You think they're rather worthwhile, do you?" he demanded.

"What do you think!" Geraux countered suspiciously.

"Nothing. I've only seen the one Molert had."

"And that's all I've seen. That was enough. A stone the size of that one is no small thing, Black. And Molert raved about the others—said he knew where he could get half a thousand more. And the cache is here, in this blasted village. A collection of the finest diamonds in the East! What does that crypt mean?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," Black stalled. "Suppose *Krinjalilaya* discovers what you're here for. The stones are his, you know. Think your fire-eating would be heavy enough to pull you through?"

That brought a grim laugh. Geraux glanced scornfully at the door, where the darkness crept in against the puny gleam of the flashlight.

"I came prepared," the Frenchman said coldly. "I'm supposed to be a trader, Black, and the sampan I brought is filled with trade boxes. But the boxes hold a neat brace of Maxim machine guns—and enough gun-powder to blow *Krinjalilaya's* dump straight to eternity. Now make up your mind; either you translate the map or—"

"All right," Black shrugged. "You can omit the 'or'."

"Then do it."

Black leaned forward. He had an idea—a cunning one, based on a little something he had noticed while *Krinjalilaya's* Dyaks were caring him to the village. Back there in the jungle, about a half mile from the clearing, he had been lugged past the entrance of *tabu* trail. He knew enough about Borneo to realize the significance of it.

Such *tabu* trails were the exclusive territory of the village witch-doctors. They were the "trails of the virgins"—forbidden, for religious reasons, to all members of the village except the all-knowing one and the chief. It was death to enter them—death to defile them. They were *tabu*, marked off, tagged with an inflexible "no trespassing" sign.

But it was a God saving knowledge for Black, and he made use of it. Shoving the paper under Geraux's flashlight, he pointed with his fore-finger to the central diagram:

"This figure," he explained, "represents two trees. The criss-cross lines predicate reed ropes; stretched between the boles of the trees to block the entrance to a trail. The little jiggers, hanging on the lines are ornaments, charms—bits of hair or grass or animals hide. Know what that means, Geraux?"

Geraux frowned, shook his head.

"Ever hear of a *tabu* trail? Black prompted.

Geraux's eyes widened thoughtfully. He took hold of the paper and held it close to his face, directing the light upon it. For a moment, he examined it intently. Then he nodded.

"You are—sure?" he demanded.

"I don't have to be. You can see for yourself."

"Yes—"

"Can you think of any *better* place to hide a fortune in gems? Black smiled. *Tabu* trails are forbidden to every black in the village except the witch-doctor and the chief. The best cache in the world!"

"And where," Geraux frowned, "is *Krinjalilaya's tabu* trail."

"Half a mile from here in the direction of the river. "

"How do you know?"

"I was carried past it on the way here."

Geraux grinned with satisfaction. Straightening up, he stepped to the door, turning the light on the floor at his feet. Evidently, he had forgotten the rest of the bargain.

"Just a minute," Black scowled. "You're neglecting something."

He turned.

"Yes? What?"

"My getting out of here."

"I couldn't get you out if I wanted to, " Geraux shrugged. "Be more than my life's worth."

"But, man alive—"

"Besides, I'm not sure I want to. You know too damned much."

"You mean your word is no good?" Black said softly.

"I mean I'm not a damned fool!"

Black thought quickly. He was no fool—he had half expected this conclusion. He had figured out another scheme—a crazy, improbable one, but the only means of escape that was left, if Geraux walked out on him.

He stumbled forward, one hand outstretched to claw at Geraux's arm.

"Geraux—" Black's voice was weak, resigned.

The Frenchman turned, impatiently.

"At least—give me a drink—will you. I'm burning up—"

THE FRENCHMAN hesitated. Then, slowly, an ugly twist crept across his mouth, and he laughed. Dragging the flask of kerosene from his pocket he flung it at Black's feet.

"Sure. Drink this!" he sneered.

Then he went out.

Smiling very quietly, Black picked up the flask and tucked it into his belt. Then he walked to the door, peered out, and smiled again when he saw the upright shadow of the Dyak who stood guard over the hut. Stepping back again, he reached into his pocket.

The smile faded from his lips. His groping hands brought out a half-used pack of cigarettes, a pencil stub, a few grains of loose tobacco. Savagely he turned his pockets inside out, all of them. Over and over again he examined them. Cold sweat gathered above his eyes.

He groaned. The very thing that meant life and death—matches—he had thrown away foolishly by lighting unnecessary cigarettes. Now that they meant everything in the world, they were gone.

A lighted cigarette meant *escape*. The other—meant *death*. With the glowing end of a cigarette, and a mouthful of kerosene, he could have made magic. Without it, he could only wait for the inevitable.

It was noon the next day when they came for him. Remembering the cast-iron force of his fists in the last encounter, the two Dyaks lashed his arms before leading him out. Then they dragged him into the open, where four more of *Krinjalilaya's* men were waiting.

The village was abandoned. Not a soul was there to see the lone white man, surrounded by his escort of six natives, trudge silently across the clearing to the jungle on the opposite side. A moment later Black found himself on a well-beaten trail with the glaring sun overhead and thick, sweet smelling foliage on either side—and the point of an insistent spear in the small of his back.

The trail was short—not more than five minutes from end to end. It led to a narrow, irregular amphitheater in the very heart of the jungle. There in the center lay an oblong stone slab, the shape of a coffin. Beside it, struck atop

an upright stake some six feet above the ground, gleamed—a skull.

It was the witch doctor who leaped toward him now, motioning his escort to fall away. A thin, bony fellow with diseased face and horribly painted body, Black shuddered as the man's hands closed over him and pulled him toward the slab.

But Black wasted no time wondering what they were about to do with him. He knew instinctively that he was destined to witness the "flaming skull" affair which rumor associated with *Krinjalilaya's* village. But there would be time enough for all that later. At present, he sought frantically for an opening of escape.

IT WAS not forthcoming. At a word from the witch doctor, three warriors stepped from the circle, and stretched Black full-length on the stone slab, face toward the heavens. They lashed his arms and legs to the rock, making their reed ropes fast to stakes driven in the ground on both sides. Then they stepped back, and the witch doctor began his insane talk.

Black understood some of it. It was guttural invitation for the sun god to come out and claim his victim. At least, that was the substance of it. But more than that, Black was beginning to understand the purpose of the rock slab and the death's head.

The skull itself was not particularly gruesome. It might have been at one time but the tsetse flies had long ago cleaned it and made it a bleached, empty white thing. But it was bound to the top of the stake, directly above Black's up-turned face; and something glistened in one of its gaping eye-sockets.

For a long while Black could not discover what the gleaming thing was. It was difficult to stare up at it, because the sun directly overhead, was blinding. But as the witch-doctor's harangue continued and the old women in the surrounding circle began to beat, softly and insistently, on brass gongs, Black thought he knew the thing was a bit of glass—just a common bit of round glass, like the outer lens of a telescope or a pair of field glasses. Really, it gave the skull a comical expression. A monocle in a dead face.

A moment later Black realized that there was nothing comical about it. It was torture, and it was fiendishly clever.

The gongs beat louder. The witch doctor's voice climbed to a screech. All eyes in the clearing were staring up at the sun.

And then, very suddenly, a tiny white spot appeared in the center of Black's forehead. The sun had reached its zenith. Its fiery rays shone directly upon the skull—shone through a jagged hole in the pate of the death's head, and focused cruelly on the lens glass.

Black twisted his head and looked up again, frowning. He knew now what lens was there for—to concentrate the entire heat of the sun into a single spot, and focus that spot upon the forehead of the victim who lay below. It was cunning—infernally cunning!

He was writhing now; and they were leaning forward, watching him like a circle of blood-hungry idols. No man could keep still and invite a quick finish, with that spot of fire driving into his brain. The victim *had* to squirm.

But Black was not through—not yet. Not until his brain snapped altogether. Thinking about the finish *would* drive him mad, he knew. He centered his mind on other things—on escape.

STRAINING upward, he tested the strength of the reed ropes that held him. They were tough. It was impossible to break them. But he thought of something else—something more significant. This was the rainy season. The ground was damp, probably. The soil held the stakes—the stakes which the ropes were secured—could be worked loose, possibly, if he had time enough.

But it had to be done cautiously, or else *Krinjalilaya's* devils would divine his intent. And, by God, it *was* done cautiously. Each time he squirmed on the rock, seemingly to relieve the torment of the sun spot, he wrenched all his might against the ropes.

The stakes were loosening. He could feel it, every time he strained on the ropes. His legs were still fast; but his hands would be free in another moment. If he could get up then and fight—and *do* something—

Then, very suddenly, the air above his face vibrated with a sharp whining sound. There was a dull, almost inaudible thud. On the stake, above the slab of rock, the grinning torture skull turned half around with the impact.

A sob of relief came from Black's lips. He knew what had happened, well enough. A bullet,

fired from the jungle out of a rifle equipped with a silencer, had clipped the skull out of position. The glass lens was still intact—still stuck in the skull's eye-socket—but the fire-spot no longer hammered into Black's brain.

The Dyaks had seen it, too. They didn't know what had caused it. They didn't know that the report of a rifle could be silenced. To them it was something uncanny, supernatural. They were standing erect, staring with wider eyes.

Black saw his chance. He called out to attract their attention; trying to make his voice fit their beliefs. Then, as they turned to gape at him, he put forth all his strength and strained upwards. The rope stakes came out of the ground, inch by inch, releasing him. He bent over, took hold of the reeds that secured his feet. In front of their very eyes he forced the ropes loose and stood up.

They fell away from him muttering like parakeets. He stood by the slab facing them in silence, arms folds across his chest. Then he saw they were staring at something else as well—something behind him. He turned, and saw Sanuk Sing and the girl walking toward him.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SIKH held a rifle in his hands. He came forward with slow, deliberate steps, calculated to make an impression on the superstitious minds of *Krinjalilaya's* Dyaks. Beside him, with white, fearful face came Jeanne.

Black stood very still, waiting. His life and the lives of the Sikh and the girl were on a roulette wheel at that moment, and he knew it. There was a bare chance that the Dyaks would stand their ground and allow the three whites to leave unmolested.

For that matter, Sanuk Singh and the girl were mad even to have shown themselves, and yet, Black knew why they were doing it. They knew that he had been weakened by the torture. They knew that if he attempted to strides across the clearing alone, and gain the safety of the jungle unaided, he would stumble. And the moment he did that, his hold on the natives would be over.

But even now the Dyaks were restless. A single man among them could have turned them.

One man, leaping forward, would have brought them all after him!

And it was the witch-doctor who did it. The witch-doctor fearful of his own reputation, took the chance.

He sprang at Black's throat. Black stiffened to meet him. Behind Black, Sanuk Singh froze in his tracks and jerked up his rifle.

There was no report—merely a dull click. The bullet ripped into the Dyak's chest, felling him in mid-air. He screeched once, clawed at the wound, and sprawled face down at Black's feet.

And that settled it.

Against rifles or knives, *Krinjalilaya's* Dyaks would have rushed forward. Against a fire-stick that spoke in silence, they cringed back in terror. Nothing on earth could have rallied them to attack.

Black retreated, step by step. Reaching the Sikh's side, he said quietly:

"Walk backwards to the opening of the village trail. Take it slow and easy."

"You are hurt, sahib?" The Sikh questioned anxiously.

"I'm all right."

"But—"

"Get moving. This won't last forever!"

Sanuk Singh obeyed. Nevertheless, he kept his rifle ready in his hands; and the close presence of that steel barrel gave Black a pleasant sense of security. In single line, with the girl in the middle, the three whites fell back.

It was a wise move, based on Black's knowledge of native psychology. So long as the natives were forced to attack face to face, they would not rush. But let them see, even for a moment, that a man is off guard—let them vision a chance for treachery—and a hurtling spear might find its mark. Such a spear would be the beginning of murder.

The Dyaks were cowering in the center of the clearing. Step by step the three whites backed away from them. Twenty yards lay between Sanuk Singh and the opening of the trail, which meant safety. Now ten yards. Now five.

"A little more, sahib," the Sikh said softly. "And then—"

His voice broke off short. He stiffened and stood still as a cold, hard lump pressed into his

back. Behind him another voice—Geraux's said crisply:

"And then—what?"

Black spun around. He took a step forward, and stopped. Rossi, the half-caste, was standing in the entrance to the trail, leveling a revolver at him. Rossi was grinning.

The girl did not cry out. Black was grateful for that. His nerves were already on the edge of cracking, and her scream would have finished them. She did cringe against him, though, and he put his arm around her shoulder.

Sanuk Singh was more impassive than any of them. Even when Geraux took the rifle out of his hands, the Sikh did not speak.

"Going to walk right out on us, were you?" Geraux leered. "Just as we were coming to see them put on the finishing touches. I don't think so."

"What do you want?" Black said thickly.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. It isn't what we want; it's what they want."

"What do you mean?"

"You killed their devil-doctor," Geraux shrugged. "They don't let a thing like that slide by, Black. They want payment. If they don't pay of on *you*, they'll stretch *us* out on that cute slab of rock. Come on, all of you; you're going back to the village."

BLACK turned, very slowly, to look back at the clearing. The Dyaks were standing there, watching in bewilderment. They hadn't grasped the situation yet—but they would. And when they did—

The girl looked up into Black's face. She was still pressed close against him. Now she spoke, for the first time.

"What shall we do?"

But Black jerked around, confronting Geraux.

"They think I killed their witch-doctor," he said curtly. "There's no reason for turning these two over to them."

"I know that."

"Then let them go."

"Let 'em get back to civilization and tell tales, eh? You know better than that, Black."

Black steeped forward, pleading. "Suppose I promise you they won't talk, Geraux. Will you—"

But Geraux was not inclined to listen. Thrusting Black aside, he strode through the deep grass toward the knot of natives. He talked to them for a moment; then, with an ugly grin, he turned and pointed to the three prisoners. The Dyaks surged forward.

Black stood rigid, waiting for the inevitable. There was no chance for escape—not one in a thousand. The half-caste's revolver blocked the mouth of the trail, removing every trace of hope.

Brown hands closed over Black's arms, twisting them behind him. He was trussed up again. The girl and Sanuk Singh received the same treatment.

Then Geraux's face was thrust into his.

"You'll have to wait until tomorrow for the show," the Frenchman said dryly. "They tell me the effect isn't so good unless sun is directly overhead. They wanted to stretch the affair out—make it a three day celebration with a victim for each day, saving you for the last—but I convinced 'em to make it a three-in-one carnival tomorrow. You're too damned clever at escaping, Black."

Black choked his retort. A moment later he was pushed roughly into the trail and hustled along in the direction of *Krinjalilaya's* village.

An hour later he lay on the floor of the prison hut, beside Sanuk Singh. Hands and feet were roped now, with enough reeds to bind a water-buffalo. The girl Jeanne had been removed to another hut a hundred yards distant.

For three hours Black lay without moving. He had formed a plan of escape, but it required darkness. Meanwhile he needed strength. His head ached savagely from the torture. His body was stiff, lame.

Once he turned over and said to Sanuk Singh:

"Where did you get the rifle?"

"Out of Geraux's sampan," the Sikh said quietly.

"I thought so."

And that was all, until daylight became night. Guttural voices outside the closed door indicated a change of guards. Black waited until the new guard should be less vigilant; then he rolled against Sanuk Singh and whispered something.

"It is good, sahib," the Sikh replied. "But my teeth are stronger than yours."

Black submitted. The Sikh twisted around until he could reach Black's bonds with his mouth. Then, with tireless persistence, he chewed the reed ropes until they were ragged.

Half an hour later Black stood up, free. In another moment, Sanuk Singh stood beside him, also free. Black fumbled in his pockets, brought out a cigarette and the metal flask that, Geraux had flung at him a long time ago, and said simply:

"Got a match!"

The Sikh had one. Striking it, Black ignited the fag. Then, twisting the top off the flask, he sucked in a mouthful of kerosene. With the glowing cigarette in his fingers, he stepped to the door.

There was an even chance that the guard outside, would whirl around and lunge forward as soon as he opened it. He had to take that chance. Flinging the door wide, he stood erect in the entrance.

It was dark out there, but not too dark for the guard to see him. The Dyak whirled, sure enough. Instead of rushing, he stood stock still, gaping. The sight of the white prisoner, unbound and standing on two feet was a little too much for him.

AND THAT was the precise moment for Black's scheme to unfold itself. Flinging his hand out, Black held the cigarette at arm's length, just a dull crimson gleam in the dark. Then, while the Dyak stared at him, he deliberately spat on the glowing end of it. The cigarette burst into a sudden livid flame.

The Dyak's face expanded with fright. Like a ghost he turned and vanished.

Black stepped back. In a quiet, even voice he asked, Sanuk Singh for another match—and lighted another cigarette. Then he waited.

And the scheme worked. The guards returned, and with him came *Krinjalilaya's* chief of the tribe. *Krinjalilaya*—a tawny, shriveled Dyak of questionable age, with black eyes that were decidedly suspicious.

And the chief's eyes widened, too, when they saw that both the prisoners were unbound. In a cutting voice the chief spoke.

He spoke in his own tongue; but Black would have known the gist of it no matter what the dialect. The meaning was evident.

"This utter fool of a guard has reported to me that you are a maker of magic. I do not believe it. Show me!"

Black answered him with a shrug. With premeditated care Black took the metal flask from his pocket and held it to his lips. *Krinjalilaya* reached out for it.

"*Tabu*," Black grunted.

The chief's hand darted back fearfully. Black took a mouthful of the vile tasting liquid.

Then he performed, for the chief's benefit, the same trick he had done for the guard. No doubt of it—*Krinjalilaya* was convinced!

"You have another white man here," Black said curtly, "who claims to be a witch-doctor. He made fire for you by spitting with his mouth. Is that correct?"

"The white man is a liar," Black said. "He cannot make magic without my assistance. He made it before only because I permitted him to do so. Bring him here and I will prove it."

"You have done no more than he did," the chief protested.

"Do as I tell you!" Black snapped. "Or I will breathe fire over the whole of your village! Go!"

Krinjalilaya went.

Alone again with Sanuk Singh, Black went abruptly to work. From the Sikh's belt he took a handful of cartridges. With the Sikh's knife he opened them and removed the powder.

When he finished, he had a fistful of the stuff, and Sanuk Singh's belt was empty. Black dumped the powder into his pocket.

"Now listen," he said tensely. "When I go out there, I've got to go alone. Soon as I'm gone, you hack a hole through the wall here, make a getaway, get Jeanne, and light out for the other clearing. It will take wits, oldboy—and plenty of courage. You can do it."

"And you, sahib?"

"I'm staking my play on luck and superstition. If the luck works, I'll meet you in the torture place. But if I don't get there before daylight, you and Jeanne return to Kuching. Got that?"

"Yes, sahib."

"All right. Now we can wait."

They waited. Outside in the village a fire had been started. They could hear voices and see restless figures passing back and forth in the light. Suddenly Black remembered something.

"Give me some matches," he said. "I may need them."

The Sikh complied. In silence again, the two men continued to wait.

A little while later *Krinjalilaya* returned.

"It is ready."

Black turned, glanced significantly at Sanuk Singh, and followed the chief out.

THE CHIEF had obeyed orders. In the center of the village a fire burned, and *Krinjalilaya's* people squatted around it. Geraux and Rossi stood there, scowling. Evidently they had been reluctant about coming; but *Krinjalilaya* had put the proposition in such a way that refusal meant death. Their only hold on the Dyak was his fear of them.

A murmur of voices greeted Black when he stepped into the firelight. He looked scornfully at Geraux and turned with an abrupt jerk, to the Dyak chief.

"Tell your people to watch closely," he ordered.

Krinjalilaya repeated the message in a loud voice.

"Now order one of your warriors to pick up a piece of glowing wood, and hold it in his hand."

The chief spoke. A young native close to the fire leaned over, secured a bit of wood, with a glowing red end, came forward with hesitant steps.

Black took out the *tabu* flask. He drank from it—at least, they thought he did. Folding his arms, he spit upon the gleaming log. The Dyaks fell back in consternation as the wood crackled into flames.

Black waited until the trick had taken full effect. Then he, said, coldly.

"Tell the other white man to do as much."

Krinjalilaya turned to Geraux. Scowling, Geraux stepped forward to take the flask from Black's hand. Black stood rigid, spoke the word "*Tabu!*" in a voice loud enough for all of them to hear and threw, the metal flask, neck open, into the fire. With a sudden roar the flames leaped out of it.

"The other white man can not, breathe fire," Black said evenly. "If he can, let him do it."

Geraux was silent. "Behind him, the half-caste stared fearfully into the expectant faces of

the natives. But Geraux could not produce fire. He had nothing to produce it with!

Black's hand slid into his pocket, unobserved, and came out again. He bent swiftly to the ground and seemingly scooped up a handful of loose dirt. Shouting to them to watch, he flung the dirt upon the fire. The stuff went up in a spurt of crimson, filling the air with white smoke.

"Tell the other white man to make fire out of the ground, if he can," Black challenged.

Krinjalilaya repeated the challenge. Other voices took it up. The natives surged forward, crowding nearer. As for Geraux, he knew what had produced the fire, but he did not have a convenient pocket full of gun powder! He could do nothing.

He shifted nervously from one foot to the other. He was wise enough to know that his life was at stake, hanging in the weight of his next move. He took time to think.

But Rossi, the half-caste, stared for a single moment into the menacing Dyak faces, and realized that the game was up. There was but one chance left to convince *Krinjalilaya's* people. Rossi took it.

He reached down abruptly and clawed the revolver out of his belt. Black was not watching him. It was murder.

But the revolver failed to talk. Before it came clear something sharp and gleaming whined through the darkness and buried itself to the hilt in the half-caste's back. Rossi pitched forward on his face with the unused gun gripped in his outstretched hand. Sanuk Singh's long bladed *kard* protruded with grisly significance from his body. The Sikh had hurled his knife with uncanny accuracy!

It was finished, then for Geraux. He whirled about and raced into the darkness, away from the fire. His move was so quick and unexpected that the Dyaks had no chance to lay hands on him. The outer dark smothered him—and he was gone.

The whole thing was so sudden that Black could do nothing but stand still and stare. For a full sixty seconds he remained motionless. A dozen naked forms slid past him in pursuit of the Frenchman. *Krinjalilaya* came forward timidly, touched his arm, and looked into his face.

"What does the fire god wish?" was the substance of what *Krinjalilaya* said in a whispering, fearful voice.

"To talk with you alone," Black said.

The chief nodded. Holding Black's arm, he paced across the clearing to the largest of the huts. There, in the feeble reflection of the fire which came through the open doorway, he sat on the reed mat and waited for Black to talk.

Half an hour later Black emerged from the hut, strode casually across the village, and vanished in the jungle.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT LACKED three hours to daylight when Black reached the torture clearings. Sanuk Singh and the girl had arrived there in safety, despite the danger of discovery by the Dyak hunters who were searching for Geraux. And when Black appeared, the girl ran toward him with a little cry of happiness. She did not hesitate about it; she ran right into his arms and clung to him. It was so open and straight-forward that it brought a smile to Black's lips.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Afraid?"

"Do you blame me, Carey?"

"No—not exactly. Nothing to be afraid of now, though."

"We're not out of this terrible place yet."

"We're not going out; we're going deeper in!"

"What?"

"If you'll wait a minute, little lady," Black said, "I'll explain it to you."

With his arm around her shoulders, he walked through the grass to Sanuk Singh. The Sikh waited, grinning.

"You throw a good *kard*, old boy," Black thanked him

"Did it kill him, sahib?"

"Surer than a bullet."

"Then I'm glad. He would have killed you."

Black nodded grimly. Stripping off his coat, he spread it across the torture slab. Then, lifting Jeanne in his arms, and laughing at her

consternation, he set her down on it. He noticed that the natives had moved their infernal skull back into its proper position.

"Better stand out of the deep grass," he said to Sanuk Singh, explaining his action. "Snakes don't sleep at night, old boy. We can thank God we're out of that mess, without inviting a cobra slash."

"But why don't we leave here?" Jeanne protested.

"Diamonds," Black said.

"You mean—you have discovered the cache?"

"What sort of stones did you expect?" Black countered.

"Why, I don't know."

"Some sort of fabulous collection of gems, stolen by a chance trader and hidden hereabouts?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Geraux thought that, too," Black shrugged. "In fact, he was quite fanatical about it."

"Well?"

"He was wrong. If he'd stopped to think a little more, he would have realized the truth. The stone your father showed him in Matamuri's shop was a finished diamond; that's what threw him off. He didn't know that when your father brought it to the shop in the first place it was in the rough—and Matamuri cut it."

"Then the stones here are uncut?"

Black laughed at her bewilderment. Turning, he said to Sanuk Singh:

"What do *you* think, old boy?"

"I think there is no cache, sahib. I think there is a mine."

"Right!"

"You mean," Jeanne said eagerly, "that *Krinjalilaya* has a diamond mine here in the jungle?"

"Not exactly. You see, I talked to him for a while before coming here. I asked him where the diamonds were and he went blank. Didn't know what a diamond was. Then I asked a lot of questions about the stone he had given your father. I described your father to him, and made him remember."

"And then?"

"Well, it seems that the Dyaks here stumbled on the stones by mistake. Being ignorant, they didn't know what the diamonds were—to them, the stones were nothing but convenient bits of hard rock, good for carving ornaments and knife handles and scratching designs on their brass gongs. Even your father didn't inform *Krinjalilaya* that the stones were worth money."

"Where are the stones?"

"According to *Krinjalilaya*, the place is about a mile from here along a jungle trail on the opposite side of the clearing. That's why we're waiting for day light. I don't like the idea of exploring the jungle at night."

DAYLIGHT was slow in coming. When it finally crept into the jungle, and the sun rose in a misty crimson above the clearing, Black stretched himself and yawned. Moving the girl's head from his shoulder, he stood up and looked about him. Evidently the coast was clear. Danger, for once was not lurking in the shade of the nearest clump of reeds.

"Let's go," Black shrugged, lifting the girl up.

They found the trail—a narrow, unused path that twisted farther and farther away from the village, into the jungle. Single file they followed it, with Black leading the way and the girl in the center. In an hour's time they reached *Krinjalilaya's* "place of hard stones."

It was no more than a rectangular park-like opening surrounded by thicket. The trail ran in one side and out the other; but to the left of the trail, twenty feet distant, the ground showed unmistakable signs of having been worked. True, it was overgrown now with sparse tufts of nipa grass; but it had at some time or other been dug up with crude, shallow instruments.

The girl was evidently disappointed. Sanuk Singh said nothing; merely stood still and waited for Black to speak. Black strode to the irregular patch of turf and went down on hands and knees.

Eagerly he scraped the surface with his fingers and lifted the soil to the light. His mouth tightened. Turning he spoke abruptly to the Sikh.

"Bring your knife here."

"I no longer have it, sahib."

Black scowled. No, of course not. The Sikh's *kard* was buried in Rossi's body, back there in the village.

"Round up a piece of sharp stick then," Black called.

Sanuk Singh found one and brought it forward. Standing over his companion, he watched Black tear methodically at the loose soil until a hole; more than three feet deep gaped up at him.

Then, with painstaking care, Black sifted the dirt through his fingers, a handful at a time. When he stood up, he held two ugly, irregular nuggets in his palm.

"Blue ground," he said quietly "Know what that means, old boy?"

"Yes, sahib. Diamonds."

"Know what these are?" Black smiled, dropping the two stones into the Sikh's hand.

"Yes, sahib. Diamonds."

"All right," Black said. "Rig up some sort of a lean-to and see what you can find in the way of food. There ought to be bush-pigs about here, if you can corner them. I'm going to see how far this blue ground extends."

"Yes sahib."

The Sikh went back to Jeanne and told her, in an unemotional voice, what Black had found. Black, turning to wave his hand to them, picked up the sharp stick and pushed into the jungle.

As he hacked through the unbroken brush, Black's thoughts were centered on the two stones he had found. They weren't exceptionally large, either of them, not more than twenty carats at most. Cutting would reduce their weight by a good sixty percent; and at first glance the stones were not regular enough to take a *brilliant* cut—which would also reduce their value.

For half a mile Black continued. Then choosing an open space, he tested the soil. It was the same soft, silty clay—"blue ground." Before he had dug a pit four feet in depth he held another pair of black stones in his hand; one of them large, the other insignificant. Then, getting to his feet, he turned sharp right and pushed on again.

In this manner he learned that the "pipe" was an unusually large one, scattered over a territory of more yards than he dared think. How deep it extended, he had no way of telling. But the stones in his pocket, which he had scraped up at random near the surface, were enough to bring dreams!

The thing rose up in front of him as he turned back to the clearing. He saw it in living reality. A cluster of workmen's houses, over here on the

right. The office building built over the mouth of the hoist. Fifty yards distant, the pump shaft.

Deep below the surface would be the drifts, filled with laborers. Push-cars would trundle along them like ants, to be lifted. to the surface in skips, where the blue ground would be piled up to "weather"—to be ready for the chute. Then the final achievement—the pulverized blue ground sliding down the corrugated iron runway—the "black glitter" sticking to the greased sides. God what a dream!

And like all other dreams, it was smashed wide open. Smashed by an ominous, hellish sound from the direction of *Krinjalilaya's* village. The boom of drums!

Black began to run.

THE DRUMS were louder and more insistent when Black reached the clearing. A cry of relief gasped ours of his lips when he saw Jeanne Molert standing there, in the entrance to a narrow lean-to.

Stumbling forward, he stood beside her, struggling to get his breath. Then, with a little laugh at his own discomfort, he said:

"Guess I've got the creeps. It gave me a scare."

"It frightened us too," Jeanne admitted.

"Nothing's happened?"

"No."

"Where's Sanuk Singh?"

"He went to investigate."

"And left you here alone?" Black scowled.

"He said he knew you would come quickly, as soon as you heard the drums."

"Yes—I guess that's true enough. All right; we'll wait for him."

Black sat down at the girl's feet, hugging his knees. Jeanne touched his shoulder and said:

"What did you find, Carey?"

He looked up, smiling.

"Enough so that we're returning with mining equipment," he said, "as soon as we reach Kuching. Look here."

He took the stones out of his pocket and showed them to her. They numbered eleven. Four of them were larger than the one Captain Molert had found.

The girl's eyes widened.

"And this is what father discovered?" she whispered. "This mine?"

"That's what he did," Black said quietly. "And when Sanuk Singh gets back here, we'll make tracks for Kuching."

But Sanuk Singh did not get back—not until the day had worn away and deep shadows filled the little clearing. Long ago the drums had ceased throbbing. Long ago the jungle had settled into its half restless silence. For hours. Black had been sitting impatiently beside the lean-to, staring at the place where Sanuk Singh would first put in an appearance.

In the end, he came—carrying a limp, twisted body over his shoulder. Striding through the deep grass, he lowered his burden to the ground and turned to face Black.

"Have I been away long, sahib?" he said.

But Black was staring into the face of the other one. The man's throat was bleeding from a knife slash, and he was unconscious. He was Ali Rek, the Arab.

"He is not dead, sahib," the Sikh shrugged. "He is dying, but I think he is not dead yet."

"No. He's alive." Black was down beside him, washing the wound with water from Jeanne's water-bottle.

Rek stirred painfully, but did not resist. The cords of his neck had been cut.

"Better let him die, sahib," Sanuk Singh threw in. "He deserves it. He killed Captain Molert sahib."

"How do you know that?" Black demanded, looking up. Jeanne, too, was staring intently at the Sikh, waiting for him to speak.

"It is a long story, sahib."

"Tell it then."

"We heard the drums, and I went to investigate," Sanuk Singh explained. "I went all the way to the village before I learned the cause of them, sahib. Then I saw a procession of Dyak devils walking in from the river, carrying this man among them. They took him to the prison hut where you and I were secured, sahib. Then I waited."

"Why?"

"I knew that you wished to speak to him."

"Well—what then?"

"When the shadows came, sahib, I crept to the hut and released him. We escaped from the

village, but we had to fight—and the Arab was wounded. I picked him up and carried him over my shoulder; and by running as fast as I knew how, I reached the place in the jungle where they did not find us. But the Arab was dying, sahib. I thought he would die before I could bring him here, so I asked him some questions."

"What questions?" Black said, looking up again while he forced water between Ali Rek's lips.

"The same ones you would have asked him, sahib. I told him about the torture, and threatened to take him back to it unless he told me the truth about Captain Molert, sahib. He told me."

It was Jeanne who stepped forward and gripped the Sikh's arm.

"What did he tell you, Sanuk Singh?"

"He said that he overheard Captain Molert talking about the diamonds in Matamuri's shop. He followed Captain Molert home and watched him through the window of the room, memsahib. He saw Captain Molert examining the diamond and drawing diagrams on a piece of paper. They killed him, and took both the paper and the stone."

"That is all he said?"

"Yes, memsahib. He was unconscious while I brought him here."

"Thank you Sanuk Singh," the girl said quietly. "You did the right thing."

THE SIKH stepped back. At a nod from Black he helped lift the Arab into the lean-to. A moment later Black walked to Jeanne Molert's side and took the girl's hand.

"We can't leave until morning," he said simply. "It isn't safe. Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

She nodded heavily. Sanuk Singh's report had brought back a lot of old thoughts, and she did not feel like talking. But she went into the lean-to and lay down on the soft ground, with Black's coat wrapped around her. In a little while she was asleep;

Two hours later, Ali Rek died. There was nothing terrifying about his death; he simply stopped breathing. In fact; neither Black nor Sanuk Singh knew the moment of his passing; but when Black crept into the lean-to and bent over him, he was dead. As silently as possible, Black

and the Sikh picked him up and carried him into the jungle, where they left him.

It was there, as the two men stood over Ali Rek's body, that Sanuk Singh made a strange request.

"There is something I have long wanted to do, sahib," he said deliberately. "May I go and do it?"

"What?"

"I would talk to the ghost of my brother, Rhej Singh, who died here."

Black looked into the Sikh's face and found something there which he did not comprehend. It would have been useless to refuse; he knew that. In spite of Sanuk Singh's devotion, the Sikh would have disobeyed orders and gone ashtray.

"I have waited all my life to do it, sahib."

"All right. Go ahead."

Sanuk Singh turned, walked stolidly across the clearing and disappeared in the jungle.

Frowning, Black paced back to the lean-to and sat down beside the girl.

The hours passed on, each one dragging itself out of its last interminable second. Midnight came, went, and Sanuk Singh did not return. Black leaned against the wooden prop behind him and tried to think of something else. Tried to think of the stones in his pocket and the possibilities of bringing mining machinery here to *Krinjalilaya's* village. But his thoughts returned inevitably to Sanuk Singh.

He remembered other things then—the Sikh's unholy lust at the first mention of the name *Krinjalilaya*. His persistent silence in regard to his reasons for coming. The many little peculiarities he had shown on the long trek up-river.

And then Sanuk Singh came back. Came with weary, dragging steps across the clearing and sat down beside Black. But he offered no explanation.

The Sikh's clothes were stained with wet dirt. His hands, fingernails, were caked. His boots were thick with the stuff. Yet he said nothing; nor did he attempt to clean himself.

Black noticed that. It was unusual—the first time Sanuk Singh had ever shown indifference. Cleanliness is one of the key words in the Sikh creed. And yet here was Sanuk Singh sprawled full length on the ground, staring with open eyes

at the roof of the lean-to—silent as the jungle itself. Not like him at all.

And the Sikh remained so, even when daylight took the place of darkness. Black glanced at him more than once as the three prepared to leave; and the girl, too, noticed that something was changed in him.

Finally, as they advanced across the clearing toward the jungle, Black took hold of the Sikh's shoulder and said quietly:

"Glad to be going back, eh? Had enough of it."

"Yes, sahib. But I am not going back."

"What?"

"I am going with you as far as the clearing, sahib. Then I leave you."

Black stared at him and frowned

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You will see, sahib. I am going to join my brother, Rhej Singh."

And that was all. Sanuk Singh fell back a step and walked in the rear, to avoid further questions.

IN SILENCE, Black led the way out. It was a mile from the lean-to to the torture clearing. Black's plan was to reach the clearing, circle around it, and push through the jungle without touching the village proper. In that manner he hoped to reach the river and follow the river trail to the next village. There he could procure a dugout and make the rest of the journey down-river by water.

But the plan was rudely interrupted. Sanuk Singh interrupted it.

The Sikh pushed past Jeanne and stood before Black. He held out his hand stiffly.

"Good-bye, sahib," he said simply.

"Not good-bye, old boy," Black murmured. "You're coming with us."

"No, sahib. In a little while I shall join Nanak and the nine *gurus* and the ghost of my brother."

Black took the man's hand and drew him closer.

"Why?" he said quietly, looking squarely into Sanuk Singh's face.

"For vengeance, sahib."

"And why do you wish vengeance?"

The Sikh straightened to his full height. The muscles of his face contracted; his eyes blazed with the thoughts behind them.

"At one time, sahib," he said very slowly, "I had a brother. His name was Rhej Singh; and he was a true Sikh. Then one day when I was still a boy, Rhej Singh went into these jungles with a party of explorers, seeking the feathers of the king pheasant. Only one of the party returned, sahib—and he was not my brother."

The Sikh's gaze passed from Black to the girl, as if he wished both of them to understand the intensity of his hate.

"From the man who returned, sahib," he continued, "I learned the story of the flaming skull. I learned that *Krinjalilaya's* devils put my brother to death upon the stone slab, torturing him to make him cry out. He did not cry out, sahib—that I know. But they killed him."

"And now?" Black suggested softly.

"Last night, sahib, I prepared vengeance. You need me no longer, and now I am free to do what I come here to do. In order that my revenge may be complete, I must give myself up to them. It was my brother's ghost who suggested this, sahib, and who told me the method of retribution. You will see that there could be no method more fitting."

Black took the Sikh's hand in both of his own. There was no use trying to dissuade Sanuk Singh from his purpose. His mind was made up—and he was a Sikh.

"Good-bye, sahib."

"Good-bye old boy," Black said simply.

Sanuk Singh turned to the girl.

"And you, memsahib—I hope you will be happy."

The girl's eyes were wet. She made no attempt to hide it—just stood there and stared into Sanuk Singh's face. The Sikh drew her forward, put her hand in Black's hand, and said quietly:

"You will be happy together."

Then he turned and walked stolidly down the path. Twenty steps he took, while Black and the girl stood motionless and watched him.

And then, with a sudden jerk, Sanuk Singh froze in his tracks. Through the jungle came another sound, startlingly close—the chant of Dyak voices and the hammering beat of gongs!

The girl cried out. Black could have laughed—laughed with relief. Anything—even fighting—was better than standing there and watching Sanuk Singh pace away.

But it was not fighting. The sounds came no nearer. Black realized where they were coming from. It was the torture clearing, straight ahead through the jungle.

He took the girl's arm and pulled her forward. Sanuk Singh was waiting in the middle of the trail.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SANUK SINGH was frowning, bewildered by the sudden frustration of his plans. He stood like a rock, attempting to peer through the jungle walls and discover the cause of the din. Then Black reached his side and said crisply:

"The torture clearing, old boy. Come on you're going with us."

The Sikh nodded. Obediently he fell in beside Black; and with the girl holding Black's arm, the three moved cautiously along the trail.

The shouts increased in volume. The gongs, rising out of their resonance, became fanatic. Black glanced curiously at Sanuk Singh to divine the Sikh's reaction to it; but the Sikh's face was immobile. No emotion was written there.

Then the scene broke upon him. They crouched in the opening of the trail, at the edge of the amphitheater, and watched it.

A double ring of Dyaks surrounded the stone slab, beating the ground with elbows and fists, swaying with the clamor of the gongs. Inside the ring, standing erect, *Krinjalilaya* faced them. Beside him, lashed prostrate to the slab of rock, lay another figure—a figure with staring, fearful face and dilated eyes. The victim was Geraux.

Above his head, the skull grinned down at him. Even higher above, the glaring sun burned down on the clearing. In a few moments more it would concentrate a tiny white fire-spot on the Frenchman's forehead, and the agony would begin.

The girl turned away, sickened by the sight of it. Black closed his eyes and would have retreated. But Sanuk Singh was leaning forward,

watching every movement with his eyes fixed rigidly on the stone slab. And Sanuk Singh reached out to grip Black's wrist.

"Wait, sahib!"

"I've seen it before," Black said curtly.

"You have not seen this, sahib. Watch closely. I had intended to let them capture *me*, in order to bring them all to this place for my vengeance. Now they have taken another, but the result will be the same!"

Black stayed there, and watched. In the middle of the clearing, *Krinjalilaya* had lifted his head to look at the sun. Now his hand went up, to silence the gongs; and he began to speak in a shrill monotone. He talked on and on, seemingly without breath, and the Dyaks listened to him.

"What is he saying?" Jeanne whispered fearfully.

"Something to the effect that Geraux was discovered in one of the *tabu* trails, and must pay the utmost penalty."

"In a *tabu* trail? "

"Yes."

The girl lapsed into, silence. Sanuk was still staring; but now the Sikh's attention was focused on the eye of the skull, waiting for the sunlight to flash on the bit of lens-glass that was stuck there.

A minute passed. Two minutes. *Krinjalilaya* stopped his harangue and turned to the slab. Another minute.

Then it happened.

The bit of glass flashed. For thirty seconds it glistened like a thing on fire. Then—not on the forehead of the victim; but on the ground beside, the sudden blinding flash of flame leaped out of the grass. White smoke shot up in a blinding cloud.

"You see, sahib," Sanuk Singh said softly, "I moved the lens—"

But Black was not listening. He was gaping at the scene before him.

A dozen tentacles of fire were sweeping across the clearing. It wasn't the grass that was burning; it was more than that. The tentacles were racing with uncanny speed toward the rim of the amphitheater, swirling smoke and flame as they went. Nothing but loose gunpowder could have burned with such swiftness!

The Dyaks turned, screaming their fear. Clawing each other, they raced for the safety of

the jungle. Black watched them in fascination. Saw them plunge through the grass, fighting to avoid the burning fuses. Saw them pitch, stumble, crawl—and then Sanuk Singh's hand closed over his shoulder and yanked him backwards.

"Down, sahib!"

Instinctively Black flung himself to the ground, dragging the girl with him. Then, not twenty feet distant, a sullen blast tore up the floor of the clearing.

After that, Black's senses were cut to the quick by the girl's ringing scream. He heard voices—screeching in agony and terror—out there in the amphitheater. He heard stumbling, broken bodies clawing at each other, racing madly through the scorched grass. And above it came the flaming roar of a dozen separate explosions, quaking the ground flinging great lumps of turf into the air. Sometimes the things that went into the air were human shapes—or parts of human shapes.

For three minutes it lasted. Then the screams died into silence and the deafening intonations ceased. Black groped to his feet and stared out.

THERE was nothing left. The torture clearing had been ripped into shreds. *Krinjalilaya's* fiends, who had been squatting there waiting for a man's death agonies, were—still there. They would always be there, but never recognized.

And the rock in the center—the rock that had borne Geraux's prostrate body—was split into separate pieces, half-buried in the ground. The dead skull with its horrible powers of torture—grinned up in the place where the Frenchman's face had been.

"It is justice," Sanuk Singh said quietly. "I stole the powder from Geraux's sampan. Now it has been returned to him—with interest."

Black nodded grimly. Taking the girl's hand, he said curtly:

"Let's get out of here."

There was no need to take the river trail now; Geraux's sampan was a better way, and safer. But Black was not thinking about safety as he picked his way across the devastated clearing and led his companions along the trail to the village.

"It is more than justice, sahib," Sanuk Singh shrugged. "I placed the largest charge of powder

under the torture slab, thinking I would be the victim. I did that so that I should die quickly without burning to death—but I arranged it so that I should be the last to die, after watching the others. Geraux was therefore the last to die."

Black made no reply. It was the girl, walking beside him, who found a question to ask:

"They found Geraux in a *tabu* trail," she said quietly. "Why was he there? Surely he knew the danger—"

"I sent him there."

"You?"

"That is more justice; Jeanne. Think of your father, sitting alone in his room, studying the diamond he has just brought from Matamuri's shop. A piece—of paper and a pencil are lying on the table, in reach of his hand. The paper is Matamuri's letter."

Jeanne paced beside him, in silence.

"Your father picks up the pencil without thinking," Black shrugged. "He begins to draw diagrams on the paper with it an old habit of his whenever he's preoccupied. Just by chance he writes the name Krinjalilaya, because that name happens to be on his mind at the moment. He draws diamonds for the same reason. The rest means nothing; it is just the whim of the pencil."

"I know," she said quietly. "I know father's little habits, Carey."

Geraux's sampan was lying in the reeds, empty. Black waited until Sanuk Singh and the girl had climbed over the side; then shoving the clumsy boat clear of the reeds, he picked up one of the heavy poles. Sanuk Singh, moving to the bow, took hold of another.

Jeanne's hand fell on Black's arm.

"Geraux thought that the diagram on the paper was the secret he wanted, Carey?"

"He forced me to decipher it for him," Black said simply. "There was nothing to decipher. One of the scrawls happened to look like the entrance to a *tabu* trail—and so I sent him there."

She sat down in the shade of the cabin, staring at the jungle. Black watched her quietly as he heaved on the pole and pushed the sampan out into the slow current of the river. Finally, putting the pole down he went to her side and stood over her.

"There's nothing to stop us bringing machinery up here now," he said. "Is there?"

"No, Carey."

"I've been thinking—somehow I don't want to come back alone. The mine belongs to you."

She looked up. Reaching out, she took hold of his hand and pulled him down beside her.

"We'll work it together," she suggested. "All right?"

Sanuk Singh, wielding his pole in the bow of the boat, turned around and turned back again, grinning.

THE END

THE FOOL FETISH

By Hugh B. Cave

A story of Borneo and Weird Magic

CHAPTER ONE

"YOU'RE a heathen, sir," the fat, red faced man said to Joe Meede. "A downright heathen. If I were not restrained by my gospel, I should thrash you at once for your insolence!"

Joe stood wide legged on the rotting hotel veranda, hands on his hips, and looked the fellow up and down with a dry, critical smirk. He had just told Charles Brereton Meager, without emotion and without any particular interest, that he didn't take missionaries into the jungle. They were a damned nuisance, frankly speaking. They made too much trouble and they were too dumb to live with. Evidently Meager didn't relish the free compliments.

Joe inspected the man carefully. He decided that the face was three shades too red, the eyes were too small and colorless, the lips were much too thin, and the whole effect, while being big enough in general, was altogether too fat.

"I don't like you, mister," Joe shrugged. "Nope. Not one bit I don't. Fact, if I had to look at that face too often. I'd go bury my head. I would that. You must have a torment shaving yourself every morning regular with that mug staring at you out of the mirror."

The red-faced man stiffened. He didn't do it gradually, but with a sudden spontaneous jerk, as if all muscles and nerves were outraged at once

"You—you common beachcomber!" he belched. "You dare to talk to me like that! I'll have you run out of Bandjermasin. I'll have you flogged!"

"You," Joe said thoughtfully, sidling toward the steps, "are the kind of guy who *has* things done, hey? Don't like to do 'em yourself. Nope, I don't want your job, mister. Wouldn't walk down

the street with you, let alone take you and your bandy-legged buddy into the jungle. Farewell, feller, farewell."

He ambled to the stoop. The three other men on the veranda were gazing at him curiously and smiling a little. The voice of Charles Brereton Meager fetched him up with an abrupt jolt.

"You half-breed—you—filthy gutter-snipe!"

Joe walked back again deliberately, and reached out his left hand to take hold of the man's thick neck.

"I don't like to be called that, mister," he said coldly. "You should've known better."

His upright fist swung back and came up again. But he stopped it before it made contact with the cringing red face. No, he couldn't smash that bloated map; it was too fat and sweaty; it might break all to pieces and get messy.

"Aw hell," Joe grumbled, shoving away from him. "Go fly a kite."

Then he shuffled down the veranda steps and walked away, while the red-faced missionary picked himself up and leaned back against the wall, mumbling and fuming to himself in furious humiliation. The other men on the veranda glanced knowingly at one another, smiled slightly, and said nothing. They knew Joe Meede very well.

JOE STROLLED down the street toward the nearby waterfront. He wanted a drink, but he'd be damned if he'd drink the stinking rice-brandy they threw up to a man in the native pubs. Later on he'd look up some of his friends in the European quarter and have a mug of real American rye. Just now, after a three months trading march on the Mahakam, the old town looked pretty good to him.

So he was a half-caste gutter-snipe, hey? His eyes tightened at that; he didn't like it. There wasn't—he turned casually to make sure that the slinking figure behind him was really trailing him, and then shuffled on again unconcerned—there wasn't a better trader in Borneo. Nope, and there wasn't another man who knew as much about the interior, or even professed to. The wise men came to Joe for information before going inland, and were mighty glad to pay fancy prices for his assistance.

But this red-faced missionary—hell, even his name was enough to scare a good man away from him. Wanted to go to Kampong Laonda on the Upper Merasi, eh? Well, you couldn't tell him anything; he knew all there was to know. Sure! Only a sap would undertake to guide for him on the march.

Joe glanced behind him again and scowled. This time there was no doubt of it; the man behind him was deliberately following him. Quickening his pace a little, Joe stooped to pick a slab of wood out of the gutter, then continued to stroll along with apparent carelessness down the dock front.

He browsed along for five minutes or so, letting the fellow come closer; then he turned into a deserted street and slowed almost to a shuffle.

The fellow closed up immediately. Came a sudden scuff of naked feet and a sharp suck of breath. Joe lunged around. The flat end of the stick crashed into the man's head, reeling him backwards. Joe dropped it and drove in with both fists flailing.

He buried the fellow against the wall and crumpled him there with a piledriver slam. It was methodical, expedient work. Joe did everything that way. He stepped back and let the man slide down, then looked him over caustically.

Joe's face expanded with surprise. His assailant was a Malay; one of the Malays, moreover, who habitually hung around the Greyley House, on whose veranda Joe had recently conflicted with Charles Brereton Meager! The coincidence put a thought into Joe's head.

"Say!" He gripped the native's shoulders and shook them. "Did that old blizzard send you after me?"

The Malay looked up goggle-eyed and shook his head in all directions at once.

"Did he?" Joe insisted. "Did he pay you to mob me?"

The Malay nodded woozily.

"Well the bleary-eyed son-of-a-gun!" Joe pouted. "I'm properly damned. I didn't think he had the nerve!"

He jerked the native up and looked him over for injuries. The slab of wood had left a pretty bruise all over the left side of the fellow's face. The fists, too, had added a few beautifying mementoes. Altogether, taking in account the fellow's original contributions to homeliness, the result wasn't particularly inspiring; but it would mend in time.

Joe pushed him away roughly and said with a grin:

"Clear out of here. Bump! Skidoo!"

Then he picked up the stick and fondled it lovingly while the Malay scuttled.

"The old hornbill," Joe mused. "I got to look into this."

He turned and retraced his steps to the Greyley House. It took him the better part of half an hour, and when he reached the drab, frame-shack hotel only two men were sitting on the porch. One was Meager; the other was Meager's missionary companion, the lean, raw-skinned, pock-blotched Henry Colloran.

They eyed Joe intently as he climbed the steps and approached them. Meager stood up bristling. Colloran extended his thin head and blinked with open irritation.

Joe sat down on the railing and grinned good-humoredly.

"Changed my mind," he said blandly. "I'll tag along."

When he said that, Meager's red face went three times as red and began to puff out.

"You insolent—" he started to rasp; but Joe cut him off with a shrug.

"Now, now," Joe said, folding his hands together nicely, "you'll be seeing me lots in the next few weeks. There'll be plenty of time to think up names. Good ones, too. Do I get the job?"

It was Henry Colloran who answered. Meager was too volcanic.

"Certainly not! We require a gentleman."

"That's me," Joe grinned. "Blue blood and all. Eton and Oxford and finishing school. You'd be surprised, mister. I'll just mosey along and make the necessary arrangements. Maybe I can get the government launch to take us as far as—"

"We'll have nothing to do with you, sir!"

"No?" Joe slouched off the railing and shoved both his hands in his pockets with mock dejection. "That go for you too, Mr. Meager?"

Meager's garbled reply contained only half a dozen intelligible words, most of them epithets.

"Suits me," Joe smiled. "If you change your mind, you'll find me up at the garrison. Yep! You can't get anyone else, you know. Isn't a soul in Bandjermasin who knows the Upper Merasi enough to chance it. Look me up, gentlemen. At your leisure."

He pulled his topi down a little harder and trudged off. Meager and Colloran gaped after him in genuine bewilderment. Joe's face was one big grin.

MEAGER'S messenger arrived at the garrison about eleven-thirty the next morning, while Joe was playing double solitaire with the *controleur* and moaning about the noon-day heat.

Joe took the message, glanced at it skeptically, and grinned wide. He smoothed it out on the table in front of him, read it through again for sheer enjoyment, and then passed it to the *controleur*; and the Dutchman read it too.

"Ain't it hell?" Joe complained. "I got to go jungling."

"Hmm. Wants to see you right away, eh?" the *controleur* frowned, noting the last line of the note. "Says it's urgent."

"Yep. Those guys are always in a hurry. Tell him," Joe ordered, turning to the Malay who had brought it, "I'll be right over soon as I finish this game."

Two hours later, at his leisure, Joe went down to the hotel to make arrangements. The two missionaries were justly indignant. They accused him of sluggishness. They accused him of a lot of things.

"You are a last resort," Meager scowled unpleasantly. "We could find no one else in town qualified to take us where we wish to go."

"No? That's too bad," Joe sympathized. "That sure is too bad, mister."

Less than an hour after that, with supplies on board sufficient for a month's march, the borrowed government launch took the three men upstream, to begin their strenuous journey by *prahus* up the Barito.

That night the missionaries and Joe Meede camped on the outskirts of the Kampong Menihen. The government launch returned to Bandjermasin. The mosquitoes raised hell and a pair of brain-fever birds, concealed in a clump of lantana bushes outside the tent, turned Meager and Colloran three shades whiter with their yapping crescendo. In the morning Joe arranged with the *kapala* of the kampong to supply ten Long-Glit carry-men and four prahus for the rest of the journey.

During the ensuing days Joe learned a lot about his two companions. In the first place, he made a point of traveling in the same dugout with them as often as possible. He discovered that Meager, being fat, sweated a lot and turned livid red in the sun, like a boiled crab. He learned that Colloran possessed a nasty temper but was most of the time morose and reserved. Neither knew how to use a revolver. Neither was enjoying the trip the least bit.

"What the devil," Joe said one day, as the *prahu* labored through a network of red mangrove roots, "do you expect to do in Laonda?"

"We shall investigate," Meager said curtly.

"Yeah?" "investigate what?"

"You have heard of Thomas Williams?"

"Uh-huh," Joe nodded. "I've met him. He's doing a good job up there on the Merasi, Williams is. Got the Saputans eating out of his hand."

"There are rumors," Meager frowned, "that Thomas Williams has forgotten the purpose of his being there."

"Yeah?" Joe cocked his head to listen to the rumble of rapids far upstream. "He's a missionary, isn't he?"

"Supposedly. There are tales that he has forgotten the meaning of the word. He is no more than a savage."

"Well, some guys get that way after a while," Joe shrugged. "The jungle does it, and the heat. But this Williams feller isn't that sort. Nope; he's clean. He's a father to them. Knows more about the inlanders than I do, and that's saying some."

"He is there to advance the good word," Meager snapped. "Not to make himself one of them."

Joe let it go at that, but he did a lot of wondering. He knew Thomas Williams pretty well. The Saputans called him "Makiki." Not particularly complimentary when taken literally,

because a *makiki* was a funny-looking bespectacled member of the lemur family; but the *makiki* was a creature of good omen, signifying all that was good. Sure enough, the up-river Dyaks liked Williams; and it was a positive fact that Makiki knew more about Dyak philosophy and human nature than any other white man in the district.

Joe didn't argue though. He kept his peace and took Meager and Colloran where they wanted to go. Before long the procession of prahus navigated the long series of rapids and reached the deep interior. The Upper Barito was left behind and the dugouts wormed into the thick, hot jungle of the Merasi.

Three days later the expedition reached Laonda.

CHAPTER TWO

KAMPONG LAONDA wasn't much to look at. The river narrowed at that point, and the village was spread out, helter-skelter, on the right bank. The place comprised about twenty "doors"—twenty nipa-thatched houses stuck up on stilts and not at all fussy about their dignity. A hundred savages more or less—all of them straight-blooded Saputans—inhabited the place. And there at the edge of the jungle, a little distance from the other huts, stood a small, dignified cottage propped on piles and possessing actual steps leading down from the veranda. Joe guessed that it belonged to Williams.

The entire gang lined the shore to greet the visitors, Williams at the fore. Joe was the first to shake the white man's firm hand and glance into that solid, browned face underneath the broad rimmed topi. Then Joe stood aside while Meager and Colloran came forward to offer their slightly reserved salutations.

The three missionaries went straight to the white house. Joe wiped the sweat off his face and set about the business of erecting a camp. It was an hour past noon then. In a little while Williams came across the kampong alone, glanced approvingly at Joe's work, and said quietly:

"I'm going to show my guests around the place, Joe. Want to come along?"

"It's pretty damned hot," Joe said.

"I know it. But I may need you to explain things, old boy. I've an idea these fellows are going to be shocked. They're expecting to find a Bible in every shack and a cathedral and—well, you know them."

"Yep, I know them," Joe grinned. "I'll browse along."

He discovered, in the first half hour of the survey, that Williams' guess was correct. The two men from Bandjermasin didn't say much, but their reaction was written all over their faces in frowning capitals. They stopped in front of the first native hut and looked askance at the notched tree-trunk entrance ladder. They climbed the prop timidly and stared doubly askance at the unkempt condition of the interior.

"Thought you'd find wall-paper and religious calendars, hey?" Joe proffered. "If these chaps ever saw wallpaper they'd make dresses out of it and go on parade."

In the second hut the inspection committee received a rude shock. Directly above the door-frame something leered down at them, and it wasn't pretty. Even Joe wouldn't have called it pretty. However, it was dead and had been that way for a long time. It was a dried, smoked human head, wrinkled and decidedly homely.

"You—you permit this?" Meager said in amazement.

"It was here when I came," Williams smiled. "One doesn't touch such things, Meager; they are strictly *tapu*. Head-hunting isn't practiced in this region any more. Only the Ibans from Sarawak go in for it. These are merely family heirlooms."

"It is incredible," Colloran muttered. "Impossible!"

"What would you say," Joe shrugged, "if some outsider came to you and said, 'See here, mister, you got to throw away that little gold cross you're wearing. It's out, see? Definitely out. It don't jibe with the credo of the great god Mungus-Mungus. Junk it!' You'd break the guy's neck if you could, hey? Well, it's the same system here."

Colloran stared at him, started to say something, and shut up. The committee proceeded again.

But it was the same story all around. Every second hut boasted its grisly memento. Some of them had a whole reception committee of dead heads. Meager's rage increased accordingly and bubbled over.

"Just what *have* you done here, Williams?" he snapped on the way back to the cottage. "Three years you've been in this district—"

"I'll tell you what he's done," Joe growled, thrusting out his neck. "Before he came here the Saputans were savages, see? They were unhealthy as hell. Most of 'em had skin diseases. Up along this river you find beri-beri, and yaws, and even leprosy. Now they're clean. They live decent."

"You are here to teach religion, Williams; not mere health!"

"Yeah?" Joe sputtered. "Well, the Dyaks used to have a lot of silly superstitions, see? If they went on the march and saw a tree fall in their path, they'd go in hiding for a week. If they saw a centipede they'd go plumb goofy with fright. Are they that way now? No!"

Meager ignored him deliberately. He lowered himself into a rattan chair on the veranda and leaned forward.

"What have you to say, Williams?" he demanded.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Have you—" Meager's tone was an accusation in itself—"taught these heathens Christianity? Have you shown them the word of God?"

Williams sat very still, saying nothing. The red-faced man didn't heed the warning signs; he went right on.

"Three years you've had, and done nothing! Nothing! Instead of teaching these savages your language, you've learned theirs. You've sunk to their level—"

"It's a sight easier," Joe threw in, "for one guy to learn something new than for a whole lot of guys who don't even think alike."

"I was no talking to you!" Meager snapped. He was thoroughly warmed up now. "What excuse do you offer, Williams?"

WILLIAMS stood up, holding his temper with effort. He spread his legs apart and stood stiff, towering over the others. "What do you know about the jungle, Meager?" he said quietly.

"I know enough to—"

"Your first trip inland, eh? Then let me tell you something; I've been among these Dyaks for the past eight years. I am converting them to

a good way of living—in my own manner. They are becoming Christians by natural methods. If you expect them to go about shouting "Hosanna!" I regret your disappointment."

Meager choked back his retort. Coloran's eyes were fixed in fascination upon the slow movement of William's mouth.

"These Saputans do not know the name of Jesus Christ," Williams said evenly. "I have never mentioned that name to them. I have never told them of a God other than their own. It would confuse them. But I have talked with them and worked with them. Their *Tupa, their Brua Besar*—call Him what you will, for they have a hundred and one names for their deity—was formerly an unapproachable creature of indefinite form. They dared not speak the name for fear of annihilation. Now they know Him as we know Christ, though they still call him by their Dyak names."

"It is sacrilege," Colloran snorted.

"It is common sense. None but a fool would attempt to undo their legends and beliefs. In fact, most of those legends are too beautiful to be thoughtlessly cast aside. They still have their childish methods of showing allegiance, but they are Christians in spirit."

Meager glowered. His companion rubbed lean hands together and scowled bitterly. Joe Meede, squatted on the railing, said dryly:

"Aw hell, it's too hot to scrap. How about a drink, Williams?"

"Sure." Joe glanced knowingly at the two men from Bandjermasin and winked. "Water for the hornbills here and a mug *oftuak* for me."

Williams laughed softly and went inside. He reappeared presently with four glasses and a gutshi of *tuak*—and he was smiling with appreciation.

"You—drink?" Colloran was gaping at him, gulping foolishly.

"Native rum," Joe told him, "is the best insurance against heat fever that there is, mister. It won't hurt you none."

He and Williams drank, sipping the stuff slowly. The other two refused with much muttering.

"Now that the religion is settled," Joe suggested, "we'll be getting back to the coast, hey?"

"Certainly."

"You really should wait a day or two," Williams shrugged. "The entire *kampong* is turning out tomorrow for tuba fishing. Something you don't see very often these days. Be interesting."

"Tuba fishing?" Meager frowned.

"They collect tuba root," Joe explained, "and beat it to a pulp. When they throw it in the river, the water turns white. Fish get stupefied and come to the surface. Course they have to build a dam first and—"

"We cannot stay," Meager said curtly. "A report of conditions up here must be put through at once."

"Well, you'll have to wait," Joe grinned. "You couldn't get your carry-men to go down river for love nor money—not until the big feast is over. Right, Williams?"

"Quite right," Williams agreed.

"But I insist—"

"Go ahead. Blow on your trumpets and stomp your feet, mister. See what good it does you!"

Joe drained his glass, emptied one of the full ones, and walked away.

"Hell," he mumbled as he trudged across the *kampong*, "those guys are plumb ignorant. I was a fool to chip in with them."

BUT HE WAS right about the tuba fishing. When Meager called the boss of the Long-Glit carry-men into the tent that night and gave orders to prepare for an early departure in the morning, the fellow looked stupid for a moment and then began to howl his native jargon at the roof. He was so excited at such a preposterous thought that he even forgot to hitch the customary "Tuan" on the end of his harangue.

"What's he saying?" Meager growled impatiently.

"He says," Joe grinned, "it can't be done. If he and his men go away before the feast it will anger the fish and they won't come up to be caught. Nope. It's out of the question."

"Tell him I order it!"

Joe told him. They Long-Glit let out an unending stream of words without stopping for breath.

"He says," Joe grinned wider, "that it's *stapu* to go before the big time. In other words, mister, he's telling you to go to hell and melt. And he means it."

And that was that. Meager and Colloran did a lot of talking, both to themselves and to the natives, but it resulted in nothing. Night came while they were arguing, and Joe sought his cot without further ado.

He was tired, but he didn't go right to sleep. First of all there were mosquitoes in the tent, and they were vicious. They got under his mosquito bar and raised merry music. Then *atok-tok* bird began chugging on the river shore a hundred feet distant and varied its note just enough so that Joe lay awake waiting for the next skip. And an unseen beetle was making a noise like a ticking watch somewhere close to the tent wall.

In spite of that, Joe might have slept. He was used to such jungle mutter. But presently there was another sound. Meager and Colloran were whispering together just outside the flaps. Joe listened but heard nothing more than the subdued murmur of voices. It went on for a long time—half an hour at least.

Then the two men came into the tent and turned in, and Joe went to sleep.

In the morning, Meager was sick. Said he had a belly-ache. Joe examined him critically, even sat on the edge of his cot and talked to him.

It was hard to tell, Joe considered, just how sick Meager was. The fellow's face was so red anyhow that a fever might have passed unnoticed; and complaining was a habit of his most all the time, so a little additional yowling didn't mean much.

But Meager refused to get up. Even when the *kampong* awoke and came to life outside, he would not stir to join in the festivities. When Williams pushed through the tent flap a little while later, decked in clean whites and a *tarrai* hat, Meager was moaning for the twentieth time.

"Something wrong?" Williams frowned.

"Says he's feeling tough," Joe shrugged.

"You too, Colloran?"

"Me?" Colloran stood up straight and shook his head. "No, I'm quite all right."

"You're coming to see the fishing?"

"Yes, surely. That is—if you don't mind being left alone, Meager?"

"I'd rather be alone," Meager groaned. "Clear out. Let me be."

Joe glanced at him suspiciously, but said nothing. Colloran trailed out of the tent behind Williams, and presently Joe followed.

The kampong was deserted. Every man, woman and child had gone down-river to the shallows a quarter mile below. When Joe and his two companions arrived, the crude dam was already half constructed — merely a hastily thrown-together lattice of bamboo sticks and debris. Many of the Saputans were even then in the jungle gathering the tuba root.

For the rest of the morning, Joe was an interested spectator, despite the fact that he'd seen the thing enacted half a dozen times before. Williams was the considerate host, explaining to Colloran each detail of the proceedings. The beating of the tuba shoots. The creamy water. The shouting and stamping of the Dyaks who plunged in with wild abandon and made a terrific din.

And then the feast. Joe didn't bother with that part of it, except to lie down under a convenient sago palm, puff on a pipe, and look on with a dry smile. He didn't care much for fish in the Dyak manner of serving. He liked his fodder cooked.

Late in the afternoon it was finished. Colloran, thoroughly saturated with atmosphere and entertainment, allowed himself to be led back to the kampong. The natives returned to their huts. Joe ambled into the tent, looked sidewise at the reclining Meager, and flung himself down on his own cot. It was too hot to be running around.

"Feel better?" he asked listlessly.

"A little," Meager grunted heavily. "Not much."

"Be cooler when it gets dark," Joe shrugged. "Better lie quiet."

Then he turned over with his head in the crook of his arm, and dozed off. He heard Colloran come into the tent. Then he slept.

CHAPTER THREE

A HEAVY, rasping voice awakened him. He sat up with a jerk, rubbing the sweat out of his eyes. Thomas Williams was standing in the tent entrance. Every single thing about the man's attitude evidenced violence.

"Meager!" he thundered again.

Meager rolled over and raised his bleary face. Colloran was already erect, standing back on the defensive.

"What—" Meager began.

"You blind, empty-headed blunderer!" Williams said vividly. "Do you know what you've done?"

Joe sat up, gaping. The air was thick with tension. He sensed the savage anger behind William's thrust.

"What's he done?" Joe mumbled. "What—"

"Listen," Williams said curtly.

Joe listened. The kampong outside seemed to be restless with muttering voices. A drum was beating somewhere. The entire village was alive with a continuous rumble that was half whisper, half whine.

"While we were away," Williams snapped, "this fat idiot went the rounds of the native huts. You understand? He took down the native's prized heads and did away with them. Every one of them!"

"My God," Joe whispered. "My good God. There sure will be hell to pay!"

Meager got to his feet with a jerk. Evidently he was frightened, but his fear revealed itself in assumed anger.

"It was your duty to remove those horrible things long ago," he said blackly. "I was merely doing your duty. You are no better than the Dyaks themselves."

Williams stiffened, controlling himself with an obvious strain. Then he stepped forward and gripped the other man's arm with unmerciful pressure.

"What did you do with the heads?" he demanded. "They've got to go back."

"They'll not go back!"

"Where are they?"

"Beyond your reach. I put them in the river."

"You—" the words choked in Williams' mouth— "you fool!"

"So that's why you were sick, hey?" Joe spit out. "Playing dead, was it? What are the natives doing, Williams?"

"Talking. Fuming."

"And threatening, eh?"

"They still believe in me," Williams said wearily. "The *kapala* came to my house to talk. I promised to get the heads back. Now what can I say?"

"Nothing," Joe shrugged. "They'll say it for you. You might just as well have cut their eyes out, Meager. Yep, you'll pay for it. Next time you play dead it'll be the real thing— and it'll be damned soon."

Meager's face lost its redness and went chalk-hued. He licked his lips and sat down heavily. His eyes rolled from one man to another and back again. He found no consolation in the faces surrounding him. Colloran's was as frightened as his own. Williams' was stiff and bitter. Joe's was just indifferent.

"What—what will they do?" he whispered.

"Hear the drums?" Joe replied.

Meager listened tensely. There was more than one drum now. At least three of them. Beating with a significant monotony.

"What— do they mean?" Meager said weakly.

"*Sabali*," Joe nodded. "Witch drums. That means they've called in the *blian*, the devil-doctor. You better go see what's up, Williams."

Williams turned abruptly and pushed through the flaps. Joe glanced at the other two with an ill-concealed sneer, then got up and followed. Williams was striding across the village toward the white cottage, where a little knot of Dyaks waited beside the veranda. In a dozen steps Joe caught up with him and paced beside him.

"Bad business, Joe," Williams said dryly.

"Yep. Talk won't do any good."

When they reached the veranda Williams said something to one of the natives— the *kapala*, evidently— and climbed the steps. The Dyak followed with set face. Joe mounted the stoop last and leaned on the rail.

"I can't return your possessions, Laonda," Williams said quietly. "The white man has thrown them into the river."

There was complete silence for a moment. The *kapala*'s fingers knotted and opened again. His lips split open and curled over betel-stained teeth. Then, with a sudden step forward, he exclaimed:

"It is *tapu*, Makiki!"

"I know. The white man thought he was doing good. He is a fool. He does not know."

"Aiii! Can I tell my people that?"

"I am sorry, Laonda. Very sorry. I could not help it."

The Dyak spread his hands out in a gesture of bewilderment.

"What can I tell my people, Tuan?" he pleaded. "They are very angry. I have never seen them so angry before! They want to kill all the white men but you."

"Want to kill me?" Joe said quickly.

"You brought the evil men here, Tuan."

"Mmm. Reckon I did," Joe admitted ruefully. "Damn fool me."

Williams leaned forward and touched the *kapala*'s arm gently.

"Go and tell your people that I am sorry," he suggested. "Tell them the white man is sorry also. Say that he will go away at once and never return. Then come back and tell me what they say."

"Is that all, O Makiki?"

"I guess it is," Williams said heavily. "Not much good, is it?"

"I will try, Tuan," the *kapala* promised. "But I am fearful."

He went down the steps slowly. Williams turned, stood up, and said to Joe:

"Come inside. It's up to us, Joe."

INSIDE the house, he lowered himself into a cane chair and stared for a long time at the reed mat on the floor. When he looked up, Joe was waiting.

"What's to be done, old man?" Williams said resignedly. "I'm not a god to these fellows, you know. They'll obey me only just so far."

"In a case as bad as this," Joe mumbled, "even a god couldn't appease them. Of all the damned thick-headed things to go and do—"

"It's done, Joe."

"Yep, it's done. And a god couldn't undo it, let alone a couple of dumb whites like us."

Williams was silent. Joe stared at him and felt sorry for him. It was a rotten mess. Everything Williams had done with these natives in three years was smashed completely—busted

up by a single fat-headed act on the part of a know-it-all missionary.

Joe's thoughts went round in circles. He couldn't think of anything new. He could only remember Meager's bloated face and Colloran's sullen temper. And snatches of words that wouldn't leave him alone. "What—what will they do?" That was Meager, scared out of his wits. "Only a god could do anything—"

Joe sat up suddenly and let out an exclamation.

"Say! Do these devils think much about God?" he demanded.

"Do they—what?"

"They're superstitious as hell, aren't they?"

"Well, in a way—" Williams frowned. "What are you driving at?"

"I got an idea," Joe grinned. "Yep, a big one. In a little while the *kapala's* coming back here, see? He's going to say that it's no good; the Dyaks want the affair settled their own way. And what are you going to tell him?"

"I wish I knew, Joe."

"You just talk to him a while, see?" Joe sputtered. "Then you spill the idea that, since the Dyaks want vengeance, the *greattupa* will settle it in his own way. Get it?"

"I think I do," Williams said, shaking his head. "It won't work. You want me to interpret God's wishes to them and tell them to let the white man go, eh? They won't accept it, Joe."

"Nothing of the sort, mister," Joe denied. "You tell them to wait until it's dark, see? The *tupa besar* only comes at night. Have them build a fetish fire in the middle of the kampong. Tell them you'll lead the wicked white man to the fire and let God settle it, while they all look on. See?"

"Joe—"

"Good, eh?"

"You mean that you'll take—"

"I sure do," Joe grinned. "And do I know how to do it? Say!"

He got up and took a cigarette from the table.

"I'll mosey along," he said lightly. "You can talk to Laonda yourself."

He went out puffing happily on the cigarette. Stumping down the outer steps, he passed the *kapala* coming in.

THEY WERE an impatient lot, the Saputans of Kampong Laonda. Probably it required a lot of convincing talk on the *kapala's* part to assure them that Williams' plan was a good one. But it was undoubtedly more than that. It was the idea of the thing, the weird element of it, the fetish concerned, which took ahold of them. At any rate, they had the fire going almost before the village was dark.

And they were a curious bunch, gathered about the fire. Many of them wore white men's discarded rags. Others wore brilliant sarongs made of cheap cotton, procured on occasional trading trips to the garrison at Long Iram. Still others were rigged out in their natural dress—sirats or breech-clouts of animal skins, and baggy sarongs.

They were all there, too. Every native in the village was present. They chattered like a flock of macaques, gibbering and chirping among themselves. There were no drums, no chimes or gongs, not even a single gutshi of raki or tuak to drink. Curiosity did away with all that.

When it was really dark, and the muttering had become quite insistent and impatient, Williams appeared on the veranda of the cottage. A shout went up then. Williams walked to the fire, stood still for a moment while he peered into the rings of faces, and said easily:

"All here, Laonda?"

"Everyone, O Makiki," the chief answered eagerly.

"Then I will bring the white man."

Turning, Williams continued on to the tents. The Dyaks watched him in respectful silence. Presently he came out again, with Meager pacing beside him.

They Dyaks pressed forward then, but Williams motioned them back. Meager was a strange sight—strange enough to harmonize with the situation. A cowl of *sambir*, woven from thick, opaque palm-leaves, hung over his head like an upturned basket, draping all the way to his shoulders. His whites were wrinkled and dirty. His arms hung lifelessly at his sides, and he walked like a man already dead.

The Dyaks made way for him. They didn't touch him. They formed a ring around both men as Williams led his prisoner into the firelight.

The whispering was continuous then. Thick and eager. The Dyaks muttered and moved uneasily. They watched every movement.

Meager paced slowly to the rim of the fire and stood motionless. Evidently he'd been told to do that. At any rate, he offered no resistance. The natives watched him like cats.

Then Williams began to talk. "This man stole your possessions," he said quietly. They respected that voice of his. It was calm and easy-going, not the least bit dramatic. "He did not do it maliciously—" He was talking in their own tongue now. Only the *kapala* knew enough English to understand the other. "He was ignorant of the *tapu*, and very foolish. I don't know how to judge him; neither do you. So I called you here, all of you to let the great *tupa besar* make the decision. The great *tupa* knows what is right, no doubt. Isn't that so?"

"That is right, Makiki," the *kapala* nodded.

"Do you wish to dance?"

"If we dance, Makiki, the great *tupa besar* will be sure to come."

Williams nodded. For reasons of his own he wanted them to dance, otherwise he wouldn't have suggested it.

THEY WERE willing enough. And they had a fixed routine for that sort of thing. The *blian*, crouching back in the shadows away from the fire, sent up a yell that came from the bottom of his feet. Other voices took up the song and made a living, vibrant thing of it. They Dyaks caught hold of their bellies and stood up. Presently they were all in motion, circling the fire in a long line.

The sing-song that came from them wasn't exactly music. It was a prolonged discord. And the words—jargon to Meager, no doubt, but half understood by Williams—were ghosts out of the dim past. They revealed legends that had passed down from mouth to mouth for years on end. Sapatan lingo for the most part, intermingled with bastard formations of Long-Glit and Murut talk—telling of murder and blood, of heroes and cowards, and of big *tupa besar* who would soon pass judgment on the mistaken white man who stood with head bowed near the fire.

They put all they had into it. The drone wailed louder, became a tense, high-pitched buzz. Arms were lifted in curious motions. Accusing

faces glowered into Meager's *sambir* mask as they encircled him.

They watched him every minute, waiting for their supplications to have effect. Williams stood a little to one side, smiling dryly.

Eventually Meager began to move. Had he been a Dyak himself he could not have judged the hearts and emotions of Laonda's people any better, or picked a more advantageous moment.

His big body trembled violently, began to quiver as if the heat of the glowing fire had started the blood bubbling inside him. He kept it up for a moment, then slid to his knees moaning heavily, clutching his head with both hands and swaying from side to side. His top-knot, smothered in its funny-looking veil of palm leaves and spliced bamboo, lifted to the heavens in a gesture of supplication.

Then while the Dyaks stood very still watching him, he writhed to the ground.

They didn't do any singing or chanting after that. The clearing was quite hushed. Williams stood erect over the missionary's prone body, holding up one hand for silence.

The great *tupa besar* had certainly made his decision. There was no question about it. The man on the ground twisted about like a crushed beetle. Hideous groans came from beneath the head-covering, revealing his agony.

"He will be changed to dust!" Williams cried out suddenly. "Look!"

They were already looking; they didn't need to be told. Meager, twisting over on his belly, had reached out with both hands and was dragging himself feebly away from the fire, sobbing and moaning pitifully. Williams made way for him, clearing a path. The Dyaks in the outer circle fell back to let him wriggle through. Some of them would have followed. Half a dozen long-bladed *parangs* appeared in clenched fists. But Williams confronted them stolidly.

"The *tupa besar* has spoken," he said evenly. "Do not interfere. The wicked white man is crushed, broken, dying. It is not for you to hasten his finish and cut short his rightful suffering."

The vicious fellows stepped back again, convinced that he was right. Meager, unhindered, wormed like a broken snake across the unlighted *kampong* and vanished in the thick darkness near the tents.

Williams turned to the *kapala* and said lazily:

"It's all over Laonda. Go ahead with your celebration."

The Dyaks were eager enough. They'd have danced for the next ten years if he commanded it. But this time their dirge changed to a song of triumph, and the old women at the edge of the fire scuttled away to fetch *tuak* and *raki*. It was a good time to get plastered!

Williams, staying only a moment to watch them, finally stepped back into the dark and turned away abruptly.

He went straight to the tents.

There, sitting idly on one of the empty cots, with a big grin all over his face, Joe Meede was waiting for him. And Joe laughed a hearty, appreciative laugh as he took a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it.

"Lord, that damned *sambir* was hot," he choked. "I thought I'd stifle to death before I got it off me."

"Everything is finished?" Williams said quickly.

"Yep. Just like clockwork. The two damned fools are gone back to their roost—and I bet it'll be a heap long time before they go jungling again, mister!"

Williams sat down smiling. All the anxiety wasn't gone out of his face, but it was leaving rapidly.

"The Dyaks will come here presently," he suggested.

"And they won't find anybody but me," Joe smirked. "That was sure a good line you spilled about the big *tupa besar* changing the bad white man into dust. When they come in here to look for the body, I'll point to the floor here and say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, this little speck of grey stuff here is all that remains of Mr. Meager. Yep, that's all there is.' Funny part of it is, Williams, they'll believe me."

"I wish," Williams stood up slowly, listening to the throb of the drums outside. "I'd taken just one poke at Meager's face before he left. It would have atoned for everything."

"Yeah," said Joe. "Well, I fixed that, mister. You see, back in Bandjermasin the old baboon hired a Malay gutter-rat to beat me up for him. Well, an eye for an eye say I. So before you came for me tonight to lead me out there, I had a little talk with one of Meager's Long-Glit carriers. I

picked out the biggest one in the bunch and gave him two packs of cigarettes. 'First time you get a chance,' I says to him, 'you just black one of Meager's eyes in good style. That's for me, see? And the next time you get a chance, you just black the other one. That's for Williams.'"

Joe blew out a curl of smoke and grinned from chin to forehead.

"And did he take those cigarettes, mister?" Joe gurgled. "Man, he just snatched 'em out of my hand and said to me, 'Tuan, it will be a pleasure!'"

THE END

TWO MAKE A TEAM

By Hugh B. Cave

Alec Maintained He'd Come Back to Be Game Warden—Not Fourth Assistant to a Venus in Breeches!

FROM someone with shoulders and a man-sized chin, Alec Britt might have endured the bombshell with equanimity. At the least, he could have kept his temper stoppered until the office door was shut behind him. But to be told off by a lispng young upstart who obviously wouldn't know mink tracks from those of a skunk—that was too much. Alec's ears flamed.

"Mr. Palmer," he shouted across the desk "I came home to be game warden, not fourth assistant valet to a Venus in breeches!"

Young Mr. Palmer stilled his trembling hands by fumbling with his tie. "D-don't you mean Diana?" he timidly suggested. "Diana, not Venus, was the goddess of the hunt, you know. And you wouldn't be *fourth* assistant, really—"

"I'll work for Cready at the logging camp!"

"B-but I've already informed the warden that you—"

"Then tell her I changed your mind for you!" Alec retorted on his way to the door. And the glass panel in the door, marked Fish & Game Commission was still quivering when he reached the end of the hall.

The gall of them! To be sure, there was some small excuse for their naming a new warden during his eighteen months' absence, but to turn the job over to a woman and expect him to take orders from her on his return—! Did they expect him to sew buttons on her breeches while she served afternoon tea to poachers? Hadn't they learned yet that the game-law violators in this border county would as soon shoot a warden as jack a deer?

The air was as brittle as his temper, and the hard-packed snow squealed under his boots as he hiked across the street to Moose Landing's block of business establishments. The restaurant

into which he strode was empty of customers, but its proprietor, a puffing woman in a vast white apron, came from the kitchen when the door clapped shut behind him.

"Alec Britt!" she exclaimed. "How long have you been back?"

Alec straddled a stool and put his elbows on the scrubbed plank counter. "I got in last night, Ma. Think you can fix me a meal of something while I use your phone?"

"Ma Liscomb chuckled. "One thick steak, rare. French fries. A dish of peas swimmin' in gravy. A slab of apple pie."

"And coffee."

"*And* coffee. Seems like you left only yesterday, Alec. Were you game warden out there in the west?"

"I worked for the government, searching out special kinds of timber."

"Will you be game warden again in these parts, Alec?"

He slid off his stool, glowering at her. "You won't be the last to ask me, I suppose," he grumbled. "What you'd better do, Ma, is take a crayon and write 'no' on the back of my jacket, so I can save wear and tear on my blood pressure." Alec strode to the phone and gave the crank a vicious turn. "I've done a lot of fool things in my time, but I draw the line at partnership with a female game warden. Hello? This Jenny MacAndrews? Jenny, this is Alec Britt. Get me Matt Cready at the logging camp, will you?"

It took a while to put a call through to the camp on Racing River. While he waited, Ma Liscomb went to the kitchen to prepare his meal. But she was in the doorway, listening, when Cready answered.

"Matt?" Alec said. "About those letters you wrote me this spring.... If the job is still open, I'll take it. What? Well, I know, but the situation is some different. I'll be out tomorrow."

"Are you living out at your cabin, Alec?" Ma Liscomb asked when he returned to the counter.

"Me and eighteen months' dust," he said wryly. "But not for long. You heard what I told Cready."

"It's a no-good shame you can't take up where you left off," she declared indignantly. "At heart, Alec, you're a game warden. Up there at Cready's place you'll be eatin' venison that would never be killed if your were back on your old job."

Alec reached for the newspaper on the counter. He hardly knew what he read—something about a pair of convicts breaking out of the near-by state prison—but the paper sheltered him from Ma Liscomb's questions while he ate. Not until he was on his way out the door did she get a rise out of him.

"Alec," she said then, "do you know *who* the new warden is?"

He turned deliberately, his jaw out. "No." he thundered, in the voice he had used on young Mr. Palmer. "And I damn well don't care!" And before Ma could recover from that, he was gone.

HE HAD not exaggerated about the dust in his cabin at Crazy Lake. The place was thick with it. The curtains had absorbed so much weight that they scarcely stirred in the breeze.

He had meant to put things in shape after picking up his old job. But now, working for Cready, he would not be using the cabin.

Up early in the morning, he threw some clothes into his duffel, tossed his bedding into the storage chest, and went out to his car.

He was behind the wheel, gazing glumly at the frozen lake and waiting for the idling engine to cast off its morning chill, when another car bumped into the cabin clearing. A girl stepped out of it and spoke before she reached him. "Hi, Alec!" she said.

Alec stared at her. He had known Ruth Daniels a long time. Her father, old Tom Daniels ran the best sporting camp in the county. Alec had hunted, trapped and fished with her more times than he could remember. He'd taken her to Saturday night dances in Moose Landing.

Normally he would have grinned at her eager welcome and the warmth of her smile. But after the ultimatum he had been handed in the commissioner's office, he saw only the badge on her black and red wool shirt. "So you're the one," he growled. "I might have known!"

She put her hands on her hips and met his scowl with one of her own. "That's a fine welcome after all these months, Alec Britt! Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Should I be?"

"Alec," she said, "what's eating you? The way you talked to poor Mr. Palmer. And now me."

"I don't like Mr. Palmer."

"You don't know whether you do or not. He's new in the department. Besides, *he* isn't responsible for the new system. You said yourself, before you went away, that if wardens worked in pairs—"

"I'm all for it," Alec retorted.

"Then why on earth—"

"When I pumped for a partner, we didn't have female wardens."

That stopped her, and the flush that colored her face gave him a moment of satisfaction. At the same time, being fundamentally honest, he knew himself for a first class heel. With Palmer, and now with her, he had made the woman-warden thing the paramount issue in his revolt, when what really burned him was the fact that he was expected to take orders.

"You've been away so long," Palmer had said, "that of course for the time being, you will be in a somewhat awkward position."

Awkward was right!

Alec lit a cigarette and flipped the match out the window. He was stuck now with his rebellion, and any change of attitude would only make him look ridiculous. "Well, thanks for dropping in," he said. "I'm on my way to Cready's."

"You—you won't even talk it over?"

"Can't." He shrugged. "I phoned Cready yesterday." And because something more than professional pride was eating him, he added unnecessarily, "Give my regards to Palmer." That seemed to end the conversation nicely.

But as he ground out the thirty-odd miles of road to Racing River, Alec found himself brooding over that last remark more than he wanted to. "You think of the damnedest things to say," he

told himself. He knew, though, why Palmer's name had come so glibly to his lips. At sight of the badge on Ruth's shirt he had discovered a new significance in some of the remarks made yesterday at the office. Yesterday he hadn't known whom Palmer was talking about.

"What difference does it make?" he asked himself angrily.

But he had one mighty virtue—he had never tried to kid Alec Britt. Scowling through the car's windshield, he recalled the times on end, out west, when his thoughts had wandered back to the North Woods. Almost any little thing—a queer shaped tree, a bit of sunlit water shining in a purple valley—had been enough to take him home in his mind. And on practically every one of those nostalgic excursions he had wound up in the company of the girl who now had his job.

He'd never written to her. He just wasn't the writing sort. But time and again he had thought of her, remembering the sound of her voice, the look of her, her love of the woods. Now she probably thought him a full-fledged skunk, and with reason.

He swore at himself until his breath ran out, then turned on the car radio. The rest of the way to Racing River he listened to dance music and a news broadcast, the latter filled with talk about the hunt for the two escaped convicts. It kept Alec's mind from his troubles.

THE job at Cready's was good enough. Under contract to make a rush cut on leased land, Cready had put together a camp on the river bank, assembled fifty so-called loggers from a depleted labor pool, and was doing his best to get the work out. He was the man for that job—huge, bull-headed, savagely efficient. "Show the fools what to cut," he said to Alec. "I'll see they cut it!"

His duties kept Alec on the prowl from dawn till dark in a wilderness half buried under snow. It was hard, cold work. But he knew the woods, liked to be in them, especially alone in them, and had no desire to hang around camp where Cready's temper bit like a buzz-saw on the slightest pretext. When restlessness rose up to plague him, he simply worked harder.

Ma Liscomb was right, though; he had not been with Cready a week before he faced his first meal of out-season venison. Mysteriously, enough deer meat to feed the entire crew had found its way into camp. Alec ate his share without protest, aware that Cready, warily watching from the

opposite end of the long plank table, was poised to strike back at any comment.

Well, why should he protest? Regardless of game laws and conservation programs, independent loggers for years had been killing deer to supply their camps. Some went so far as to employ professional poachers. It was up to the warden, not Alec Britt, to stop such illegal slaughter.

Alec had a mental picture of the new warden daring to challenge Matt Cready. He put it from his mind quickly. *You keep out of this, mister*, he told himself. *It's not your business.*

Maybe it wasn't. But when, a week or so later, he found the carcasses of two young does in a clearing near camp, the Britt temper flared. Deer killing was one thing; gross butchery was something else again. He strode into Cready's office, slammed the door behind him and thrust out his jaw. "Who's doing your gunning?" he demanded.

Cready looked up, scowling, from some paper work. Any kind of paper work came hard to Cready. Interruptions enraged him. "What's it to you?" he snapped. "You quit being warden eighteen months ago."

"Matt, when a deer is killed for meat, there's some excuse. When it's hacked up and left to rot with fifty-sixty pounds of good venison still on the carcass, no man is going to keep his mouth shut."

The logger put down his pencil. "You're crazy. I wouldn't hire that kind of hunter and you know it."

"I know what I saw."

"Then someone else must have done it. Some outsider."

"No outsider would hunt within gunshot of a logging camp," Alec retorted. "I want to talk to your man, Matt. Who is he?"

"You leave that to me."

"Then I hope I don't find any more half-butchered deer. You tell him that."

"I've already told you—"

"Because I'll sure as hell report the next one." Alec turned to open the door.

He heard the other man rising from his chair, and swung back to face him. He knew Cready's capabilities. But Cready's big hands, though white at the knuckles, were not raised.

The threat was all in his twitching mouth and smoldering eyes. He just looked.

Alec walked out.

He kept his eyes open after that, curious to know which of Cready's men was responsible. But the fellow, whoever he was, was a shrewd operator; Alec was no nearer a solution when he found his third slaughtered deer a few days later. All but a few pounds of choice steak meat were spoiling on the abandoned carcass.

Cready's office was empty. Alec strode to the wall phone, cranked it and said, "Get me the office of the Fish & Game Commission at Moose Landing." It was Mr. Palmer of the lisp and the bow-tie who answered.

"Palmer, this is Britt at Cready's camp. It's none of my business any more, but you ought to know what's going on here." Without inviting an interruption, he went into details, then hung up and walked across camp to the bunkhouse. There was nothing to be gained by hanging around until Cready fired him. He threw his duffel into his car and drove down the road.

"Some day, mister," he told himself glumly, you'll learn to tend to your own business."

The road followed the river, and he had driven about a mile and a half when he heard shots. No sound could have angered him more. He stopped the car, got out, and stood listening. Long after the echoes had died in the woods on the far side of the stream, he stood with his hands clenched. Then he turned, took his revolver from the car and struck out across the ice.

Maybe the new warden would not thank him for delivering Cready's deer-killer to Palmer's office. Maybe she would resent being deprived of an opportunity to thrust her pretty head into a wolf's den. But he considered the loss of his job a fair price of admission. Besides, he was sore.

IN TWENTY minutes he had covered half a mile of wilderness and found footprints of both hunter and deer in the snow. Spots of blood told him the animal was wounded. A lifetime of prowling the woods told him, surprisingly, that Cready's deer-killer was not well versed in stealth. Before another ten minutes he had spotted both man and deer.

He watched as the man knelt and fired, saw the deer leap and collapse in a quivering heap. It was good shooting. Alec shifted his own gun from his mackinaw pocket to his hand, and waited.

Time enough to make his presence known after he had obtained, for Palmer, eye-witness evidence of the fellow's crude butchering methods.

One thing puzzled him—he didn't recognize the man, though at one time or another he had dealt with nearly all of Cready's crew. Alec stared, trying to place him. Watched the fellow hack a chunk of flesh from the slain animal and rise from his knees. And then the killer turned and trotted away—not toward the river and Cready's camp, but in the opposite direction.

He's heading for North Creek, Alec thought suddenly. The cabin there—. That meat's not for Cready.

He followed. Even though the fellow disappeared once or twice, trailing him was not difficult, the snow was soft and every footprint was distinct. When Alec arrived on the wooded knoll above the creek, his quarry, below him, was crossing the ice toward the dilapidated cabin on the far side—relic of a timber survey made years ago. A plume of smoke rose from the cabin chimney. Alec scowled at it.

Behind him a businesslike voice cradled in the cold air. "Mister, I got a rifle aimed square at your head. Don't you move."

The fellow came from the edge of a poplar thicket, holding his rifle at the hip in both hands until he was close enough to reach out for Alec's revolver. Then without shifting his gaze he stepped aside and shouted, "Jon'than! Come back here!" And to Alec he said again, warningly, "Don't you move."

From the creek, the deer-killer could see what had happened. Dropping his burden, he trotted back up the slope, stopped in front of Alec and peered into his face. "Who're you?" he demanded.

"I work for Cready."

"He was trailin' you, Jon'than," the taller one declared.

"Why?" Jon'than said sharply. "Why were you trailing me?"

Alec shrugged. He had encountered poachers before but never any as unique as these two. Both wore ill-fitting city clothes and were shivering in the cold. Both were bearded and unkempt. "I wondered who was shooting deer out of season," he said.

"Well—now you know."

"That's right. Now I know."

"Minding your own business would have been healthier," Jon'than said, nodding. "You come along to the cabin. You're not the harmless one you pretend to be. You know who we are."

"I don't. Nor do I care."

"Maybe. Maybe not. You people listen to radios, even here."

Alec shrugged again and began walking. He had told the truth; he didn't know who they were. But he could guess, after seeing that newspaper on Ma Liscomb's counter and hearing the news broadcast on the radio.

He hadn't paid much attention to names, but his mind had automatically soaked up the descriptions—and these men fitted the descriptions.

He tried to make talk as he went down the slope, but they were silent, suspicious of him. Crowding him between them, they kept him off balance, and once, when he stumbled and fell headlong in the slippery snow, they froze in their tracks and waited, offering no help, until he had freed himself from a tangle of red-stemmed berry bushes and found his feet again. They would shoot him readily enough, he supposed, if given an excuse.

At the cabin, the short, ugly man named Jon'than opened the door and his companion pushed Alec inside. "Sit down," Jon'than ordered.

Alec walked across the single room and sat on the lower tier of a three-decker bunk while the tall man frowned at him and Jon'than went back to the creek for the venison he had dropped there. Nothing was said until Jon'than returned. Then, seating himself at the table, he frowned at Alec and said, "What's your name, mister?"

"Alec Britt."

"Do you know these woods?"

"Well enough," Alec admitted.

"Do you know the way to the border, and across it?"

"I suppose so."

"You hear that, Lester?"

Lester, too looked thoughtful. "How far is it to the border?" he demanded, taking over the interrogating.

"I'd say about thirty miles."

"Hard going?"

"On foot, in winter, thirty miles is no pleasure trip."

"But we could do it? In a night?"

"I Suppose so. Unless you got lost."

"That's just it," Jon'than said, fingering a corner of his mouth. "That's why we haven't tried it. We got this far without trouble, but from here to the border is tougher. Much tougher." He scowled at the smoke from his cigarette. "Other hand, we can't hang out here forever. The way I see it, Britt, you could guide us. Hey, Lester?"

"Tonight," Lester agreed, nodding as he got up. "That gives us two-three hours to get to know each other, Britt. Relax. Take it easy. How will you have your steak?" At the sink he stood over the slab of venison with a knife in his hand, an ugly weapon with a spring-controlled blade that snapped in and out like a snake's tongue.

Alec winced. According to the news broadcast this one, Lester, had killed a guard in escaping. With a knife.

"Make mine rare," Alec said wryly.

IT WAS a long afternoon. The two men moved about the cabin, getting their few possessions together, readying their departure, yet the chair by the table was seldom empty and Alec was watched every moment. The rifles lay side by side on the table with their muzzles pointing at the bunk on which he sat. His revolver lay in Lester's pocket. The knife with the snake-tongue blade was almost never out of sight.

Darkness, Alec thought, would never come. And he wondered uneasily if Palmer, back there in Moose Landing, had acted on his phone call. "We ought to get started," he said. "Thirty miles is a long way." But when the two men showed no indication to take the hint, he was reluctant to press the point lest they be suspicious.

The cabin filled with shadows and Jon'than placed a candle on the shelf above the wooden sink. Alec fought his tongue to keep it quiet; gripped his knees to still the restlessness of his hands. Once the cabin lay behind them and they began the long hike through the wilderness, he would have a chance. Especially at night. But not if they guessed his thoughts.

"All right, Britt. Now listen." Jon'than stood before him, grim and purposeful. "We know there's a lot of tricks you could try on us, you being an old hand of these woods. But if you're

smart, you won't. We're not dumb with guns. You remember that, hey?"

"I'll remember it." Alec stood up. "Let's get started." He picked up Jon'than's pack, shouldered it, and turned to the door.

The door clattered open in his face. On the threshold, with a gun in his hand, stood Matt Cready.

"Watch it!" Cready warned.

To get out of the way, Alec threw himself against the wall and took the table—and the rifles on it—with him. He moved fast then. He had one of the rifles in his hand before Lester, first to recover, made any move at all. And then Lester's move dissolved into an abortive, half-hearted gesture toward his pocket. Lester's hand never reached the pocket. Matt Cready's gun spoke once, with authority, and the convict's arm went limp.

Jon'than, snarling, flung himself at the door—a foolish move because the doorway was blocked then by two of Cready's loggers. He didn't reach it anyway. Alec's foot shot out. Jon'than tripped over it and went the rest of the way on hands and face. And then Ruth Daniels stepped in.

She knew what she was doing, Alec had to admit. Calm and purposeful, she stood by the door and gave order—orders which Matt Cready and his loggers seemed more than eager to carry out. When the two dispirited convicts were disarmed and trussed up, Ruth turned to Alec. "Thanks, Alec," she said quietly.

She seemed to mean it. On the way through the darkening woods to Matt Cready's camp, she kept glancing at him, as if she wanted to say more if only he would thaw out enough to let her.

At last, reluctantly, Alec said, "If you like, I'll ride back to town with you. Not that you'll need any help with your prisoners, but" He wouldn't look at her.

"It *would* be lonesome, riding back alone," she said.

LEANING on his broom, Alec scowled through the mist of dust at the girl perched on the window-sill of his Crazy Lake cabin. "I wasn't sure you'd remember," he said. "I was pretty certain Palmer would send you, of course, and that you'd find my car and follow the trail without any trouble—but it's a long time since we did any trapping together. I couldn't be sure the sign

would warn you." He scowled at her. "Did you run a trap line while I was away?"

"Uh-huh. Of course."

"And marked your trap locations the way we always did—with a looped branch?"

Ruth finished polishing the window and made a face at him. "All I know about the woods," she said, "I learned from Warden Britt. When I saw you'd fallen—in a clump of berry bushes where there was absolutely no reason to fall—I stopped to find out why. The looped branch plainly said "Trap here!" so I went the rest of the way on guard and looked in the cabin window before announcing my presence."

"And then?"

"You were obviously in a jam. But those men appeared to be waiting for something—probably darkness and there was time for me to get help.

She grinned at him. "We make quite a team, Alec."

"We do at that," Alec admitted. "Daniels and Britt, poachers pinched, convicts collected. Phone Crazy Lake-one-three-two any time for prompt service."

Ruth slid from her perch and looked the room over with a woman's critical eye. It was clean now. Eighteen months' accumulation of dust had vanished. She took off her apron and shook the dust from her hair. "Alec," she said, "why be so stubborn?"

"Well—Britt and Britt would sound better. What do you think?"

"I think," she said, "Mr. Palmer will be delighted. And it's about time."

THE END



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