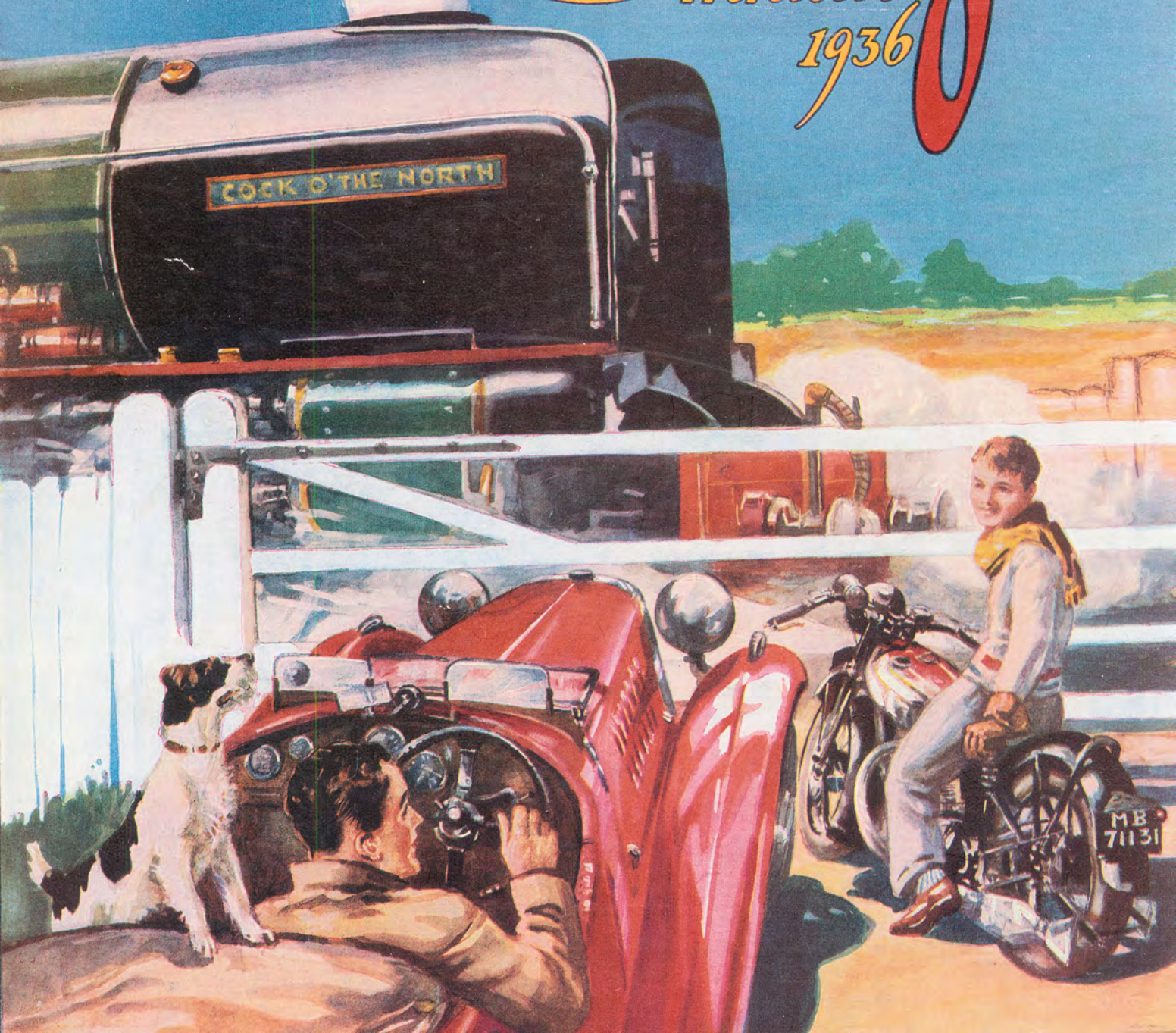


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Keeping back in cover, the ruffian of Tonga raised the rifle to his shoulder Hot lead poured down on the deck of the retreating ketch.

The Pearler of Madman's Reef

Ken King, boy skipper of the South Seas, and his chum, Kit Hudson, find grim and unexpected drama on a lonely Pacific reef

by Charles Hamilton

Mad as a Hatter!

"**M**ADMAN'S REEF!" said Kit Hudson, mate of the Dawn. "A cheery name!"
King of the Islands smiled.

Standing by the binnacle of the trading ketch Dawn, Ken King, the boy trader of the Pacific, had his eyes fixed on a dark blur that showed over the blue waters.

The ketch, leaning to a stiff breeze, was reeling off seven knots. Koko, the brawny Kanaka boatswain, was at the wheel.

The Hiva-Oa crew were all on deck. Lompo and Lufu, Tomoo and Kolulo, all looked curiously towards the lonely reef at which their white master was gazing. Even Danny, the cooky-boy, had come out of the galley forward, with a saucepan in one fat

brown hand and a polishing rag in the other, to stare at Madman's Reef.

That reef was known to all men, white and brown, on all the beaches between Lalinge and Tahiti—by name! But few eyes had seen it, or the lone man who dwelt on it in the vast solitude of the Pacific. For it lay a hundred miles from the nearest island, out of the track of trade. And any skipper who, driven by contrary winds, found himself within sight of it, gave it the widest berth he could. The sharp teeth of the coral ran for miles under the sea, breaking the Pacific rollers into ridges of white foam.

"You've been here before, Ken?" asked the mate of the Dawn, watching the reef as it rose more clearly to view, and picking out a bunch of palms which crowned the highest point.

THE PEARLER OF MADMAN'S REEF

"Once!" answered King of the Islands. "Every six months some craft runs down from Lalinge with stores, and I've made the trip once."

"Then you've seen the man on the reef? What's his name?"

"Morrison!" answered Ken. He pointed to the palms, tiny, fan-like in the distance. "We shall raise his house soon—a bungalow in the lee of the palms. He built it himself."

"Suffering cats! And he lives there, all alone, with a ship twice a year! No wonder they call it Madman's Reef! Is he really mad?"

"They say so on the beaches," said King of the Islands, with a smile. "But I found him sane enough when I made the trip a year ago. Although anything may have happened in the meantime. You can never tell what the effect of solitude may be on a man, and he's been on the reef for five years or more. They call him mad on the beaches, for locating on that lonely reef to hunt for pearls."

"Pearls!" repeated Hudson. "Has he found any?"

"About enough to pay for his stores. He sends back a little packet by the skipper who brings the stuff."

"Plenty feller pearl stop along that reef, sar!" said Koko. "Plenty Kanaka feller savvy, sar, altogether too much pearl stop along that feller reef, spose findee."

Ken laughed.

"Morrison has been looking for them for five years," he said. "They say on the beaches that a native once found a rich pearl-bed on that reef, Kit, and carried away a fortune in his canoe. Where there was one, there might be another. More than one pearler has given it the once-over, in the hope of making a big find. Not since Morrison located there—I fancy he would pull a gun if any pearler came nosing round his reef. He believes in the pearls, if nobody else does."

"He's had time, in five years, to comb the reef with a small comb!" remarked Hudson. "He must be a bit of a hatter to stick it out so long. Hallo! Is that the house?"

"That's it—and Morrison on the veranda with his spyglass! He's sighted us!"

The ketch was running swiftly down to the lonely reef. It rose clearer and clearer to the eyes watching from the deck of the Dawn.

East and west the long, low reef stretched, running for miles—here under the water, there jutting in coral teeth from the sea.

Only in one spot it rose to any height—forming a rocky islet, spurred with coral. But the highest point of the islet was not twenty feet above the level of the Pacific.

On the rugged islet was soil, mingled with powdered coral and rotten seaweed. A bunch of palms grew there, with slanting trunks and nodding fronds. Here and there was a straggling patch of bush.

But most of the islet, like the uncovered portion of the reef, was bare coral rock.

Close by the palms a house had been built—a

bungalow of rough-and-ready description. The walls were of coral blocks; the woodwork partly of cut palm poles, partly of wreckage gathered along the reef. The veranda in front, facing the sea, was floored with old ship's planks, gathered from some craft piled up on the reef long ago. The shutters of the windows were made of boards from old packing-cases, with stencilled black letters still visible on them—in one place the whole word "SOAP." The chimney was a section of iron piping. The thin spiral of smoke rising from it showed that the bungalow was inhabited.

On the veranda a figure showed with a telescope lifted, bearing on the approaching ketch.

The glass was lowered after a time, and the man continued to stare with the naked eye, his hands grasping the rail of the veranda before him.

The sun was sinking to the west, but it was still bright broad day, and the shipmates of the Dawn had a clear view of the man of Madman's Reef.

He was tall, rather gaunt, with a shaggy, bearded face burnt dark by tropic suns—dressed in ragged khaki shorts, and a cotton shirt, with a big grass-hat on his shaggy head. A Winchester rifle leaned on the rail beside him.

He stood motionless, regarding the ketch with a steady, fixed gaze. Once his hand made a motion towards the rifle.

The shipmates watched him curiously.

"That's Morrison?" asked Kit.

"That's the man!" said King of the Islands, with a nod.

"That feller no likee this hooker comey along reef belong him!" remarked Koko. "He no likee plenty too much, sar."

Koko's keen eyes had picked up the dark, lowering, suspicious expression on the bearded face.

"Of course, he doesn't know that we're bringing stores!" said Ken, with a smile. "He gets his stores twice a year—but at very uncertain dates. It depends on the weather when a craft can run down to this reef. Not many skippers are keen on it in the best weather, either."

"I should think he'd be glad to see company, any company, on that lonely reef!" remarked Hudson.

"Not a rival pearler! He makes a bare living there, scraping a few pearls up along the reef. But he lives in hope of making a big find," said King of the Islands. "May have made it since a ship was last here! But he ought to know the Dawn—he's seen it before. If he knows the hooker, he'll guess why we're here—"

"Looks as if he does!" said Hudson. "Look!"

The lone pearler had lifted a hand and waved to the ketch.

Ken waved back to him.

For two or three minutes longer the pearler of Madman's Reef stood watching the ketch as she shortened sail and drew in. Then he went back through the open door at the back of the veranda into the house, taking the rifle with him.

"Suffering cats!" murmured Hudson. "I'm glad he hasn't taken us for a rival pearler, Ken!"

He looked as if he might have handled that rifle."

"Likely enough he would, if some skipper like Dandy Peter of Lukwe ran in, to see whether he had found any pearls!" said King of the Islands, laughing. "But it's all serene—he knows the Dawn all right."

"Unless he's gone cracked on that lonely reef!" said the mate of the Dawn. "Perhaps it's not called Madman's Reef for nothing."

Ken shook his head and smiled. He had seen the lone pearler only once before, and that was a year ago: but he did not believe that the man was, as they called it on the beaches, a hatter.

The ketch was drawing close in now.

Ken's attention was taken up with conning the ship; but Kit Hudson continued to keep an eye—not wholly easy—on the lone house by the palms. Many a case he knew of men who had become crazed by long solitude on lonely specks of land in the Pacific: and he rather wished that the pearler had not had a repeating-rifle quite so handy.

He could see the opening of the doorway at the back of the veranda, but the pearler had not reappeared in sight. But suddenly Hudson caught a vague glimpse of movement in the dusk within the doorway, and there was a flash.

"Suffering cats!" yelled the mate of the Dawn. "Look out!"

Koko gave a roar of alarm.

"That feller shootee along gun, along this hooker! My word, brain belong that feller no walk about any more."

A bullet whizzed through the rigging of the Dawn. The report followed the shot, rolling with a thousand echoes over the lonely reef and the sea, startling a host of sea-birds along the reef.

"What——!" panted King of the Islands.

"Look out!"

Bang, bang, bang! came the roar of the repeating-rifle, from within the doorway of the pearler's bungalow.

There was a wild cackle from the Hiva-Oa boys on the deck of the Dawn. Danny, with a howl, plunged back into his galley for cover. Ken stared almost in stupefaction at the smoke of the rifle curling out of the distant doorway. Bullet after bullet whizzed on the ketch, one grazing the whaleboat, another cutting a guy-rope, and another taking a splinter from the cedar of the tall mainmast. From the rocky islet, the ketch was an easy mark.

Bang, bang!

"My sainted Sam!" gasped King of the Islands. "He's mad—mad as a hatter!"

Bang!

Without waiting for orders, Koko swung over the wheel. And the ketch, like a frightened sea-bird, shot away from Madman's Reef, a last bullet from the rifle crashing into her taffrail as she flew.

"Drop that Gun!"

BARNEY HALL, the trader of Tonga, stood in his little, grimy lugger, shading his eyes with his hand against the glare of the red sunset, the other hand on the steering-oar. His eyes were

fixed on the rocky islet jutting up from the long, low reef ahead to the north. No sail was up on the lugger—the wind came from the north, across the reef, dead against the trader of Tonga. His crew of four Tonga boys, brawny, brown-skinned Kanakas, were labouring with the sweeps, and the lugger crept in slowly among the jutting fangs of coral. Barney's eyes scanned the reef—eagerly, almost fearfully. But there was no sign of life to be seen there, save the innumerable sea-birds fishing in the hollows of the reef.

"Tokalaloo!" Barney called to his boat-steerer. "You no see feller belong that place, eye belong you?"

"No, sar!" answered the Tonga boy. "That feller, brain belong him no walk about, stop along house belong him, other side feller reef, sar."

Barney Hall nodded and grinned.

"Maybe he's along the reef, scratching for pearls!" he said. "Or maybe asleep in his bungalow. Anyhow I reckon he won't be looking for visitors on this side."

The lugger crept on.

The landing-place on Madman's Reef was on the northern side, where, though Barney Hall did not know it, King of the Islands' ketch was coming down before the wind.

On the southern side miles of broken coral ran in all directions, and no ship could have approached the reef. Even so small a craft as Barney Hall's thirty-foot lugger faced perils at every sweep of the oars. Little water as it drew, more than once the keel grated on hard coral. A rough sea would have meant destruction, without hope. But the day was calm—Barney Hall had carefully picked his weather for his uninvited visit to Madman's Reef.

He watched like a hawk, as the lugger crept in among the fangs of coral. He could see the bunch of palms that crowned the little islet, but the house was hidden from him, as the rocks rose higher behind it. That, however, was all to the good, from Barney's point of view. He did not want to be seen as he came.

The Tonga boys, as they worked the sweeps, cast every moment uneasy glances towards the bunch of palms.

They knew, as everybody knew on the beaches, that the lone pearler was reputed mad. But mad or sane, he was not likely to welcome a visit from the most lawless ruffian in the South Seas. Barney Hall was a trader at Tonga, and in white men's ports—but in lonely waters he was more of a freebooter. Skippers of small vessels, far from land, were glad to hand over stores without payment to a brawny ruffian who asked for them with a revolver in his hand—glad to get rid of him at the cost of a few kegs of water and a case of biscuit. Lonely pearl-ers, on solitary atolls, had reason to be uneasy if they raised Barney Hall's patched sail in the offing.

Hall and his crew were well aware that, if the man of Madman's Reef sighted them coming, they would be warned off—from behind a levelled rifle; and that if they did not go, the rifle would talk. It was not only from the jutting teeth of coral that they were in danger, as they crept closer and closer to the rocky islet.

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But, to the relief of Barney and his crew, there was no sign of the pearler. Likely enough he was pearl-hunting somewhere along the broken, irregular reefs; likely enough, inside his bungalow. He was not likely, at all events, to be looking for visitors on the side from which Barney Hall was coming. That was why Barney was approaching from the south under the steering-sweeps, instead of running down from the north before the wind as he might have done.

"By hokey!" said Barney, with a grin that displayed his tobacco-stained teeth. "By hokey, we're putting it through!"

The lugger stopped at last in a narrow channel between banks of coral. Tokalaloo made fast with a rope, and Barney Hall stepped on the rock.

He paused there for a few moments to examine his revolver. The four Tonga boys watched him with idle curiosity.

Why their master had come to Madman's Reef, creeping in secretly from the south, they did not know—but they could guess. They had taken part in a good many wild and lawless proceedings with Barney Hall. It could only mean that Barney believed that the pearler had found the rich pearls of which he had been so many years in search. His fixed faith in the existence of that rich pearl-bed caused him to be called a madman on the Pacific beaches. But it seemed that Barney Hall shared that faith now.

"You feller boy, you stop along boat!" rapped Barney. "You keep mouth shut along you. S'pose you makee that feller Morrison hear you, ear belong him, me kill you plenty too much along boot belong me."

"Yes, sar!" answered Tokalaloo.

Leaving the Tonga boys resting after their weary labour with the sweeps, sprawling in the lugger and chewing betel-nut, the brawny trader tramped away across the reef.

It was hard going. But he kept doggedly on, and, reaching the rocky islet, stopped to breathe in a ragged patch of bush.

Before him was the high ground on which the house was built, and he could now see the back of the building.

Save for the thin spiral of smoke curling from the iron chimney, there was no sign of life.

But Barney was watchful as a cat.

He left his cover at last and clambered, silently and carefully, up the rising rock. He stood at last on the rugged level behind the bungalow.

A back door stood wide open. He approached it on tiptoe, and stared in. The front door, on the veranda, was wide open also, so Barney could see clear through the building to the veranda in front.

He caught his breath at the sight of the gaunt figure, with its back to him, leaning on the veranda rail staring out to sea.

Beside that figure a rifle stood against the rail.

It was the man of the reef—the lone pearler!

What he was looking at, out at sea, did not come within Barney's range of vision.

Morrison was utterly off his guard so far as the trader of Tonga was concerned. Evidently he had not the faintest suspicion that a stranger had landed.

Barney Hall breathed hard. This was better fortune than he could have hoped.

Brawny and bulky as he was, the burly trader of Tonga made hardly a sound as he tiptoed into the building.

Had the man on the veranda looked round he must have seen him. But he did not look round—his eyes were fixed on something out at sea. What it was Barney Hall did not know, and did not care.

The Tonga trader posted himself just inside the front doorway, at the side. There, he lost sight of the man on the veranda. But he could not fail to hear him, when he came into the house, across the creaking boards of the veranda floor.

His revolver was in his hand now.

He waited.

How long the pearler was going to stay there, at the veranda rail, staring out to sea, he did not know. But sooner or later he would step back into the house—and then Barney was ready.

There was a heavy creaking of the old boards. Barney's eyes gleamed. The pearler was coming.

A shadow darkened the open doorway. The man of the reef stepped in, a rifle under his arm. Not the faintest suspicion had crossed his mind that anyone was in the room.

But he knew the next moment as Barney Hall closed in on him, grasped him, and pressed the muzzle of the revolver to his ribs.

"Drop that gun!" said Barney Hall grimly. "Drop it, and keep cool, Jim Morrison, or you'll lose your life along with your pearls. Sharp's the word!"

The bearded, bronzed face of the pearler stared round at him in utter amazement. His starting eyes met Barney Hall's—gleaming and menacing. There was a clatter as the rifle dropped to the floor.

The Man who Fired!

"YOU scum!" breathed the man of the reef.

After the first shock of surprise, he pulled himself together. His hands clenched, his teeth shut hard, and he braced himself as if for a struggle.

"Cut it out!" Hall's stubby jaw jutted savagely.

"You're a dead man if you lift a finger. You know me, Jim Morrison, I reckon! You don't want to make me pull trigger."

"You scum!" repeated the pearler.

But he did not resist. He was as strong a man as the burly trader of Tonga, as good a man in a fight. But the revolver muzzle was grinding into his ribs and he had no chance. Hall was not the man to shoot a white man if he could help it, but neither was he the man to let a life stand between him and his booty, and there were no tongues to tell of what might happen on that lonely speck in the Pacific. The arm of the High Commissioner at Fiji was long, but it did not reach to Madman's Reef!

Under the revolver, Hall forced the pearler to the rough palm-wood chair by the trestle-table in the living-room of the bungalow.

"Sit down!"

Morrison sank into the chair.

"Keep quiet or——"

Hall did not need to finish the sentence. With his left hand he took a tapa cord from a pocket of his cotton shorts and, keeping the revolver in his right jammed to the pearler's body, bound his hands. Again the man of the reef seemed to brace himself for resistance; again he dismissed the idea. Desperate as the chance was, he might have taken it, but he knew what Hall evidently did not know. He knew that the Dawn was running down to the reef.

It was clear that Hall did not know that a ship was in the offing. His whole attention was given to his prisoner.

Having secured his hands, the ruffian from Tonga put the revolver back into his belt. Then he ran the cord round the pearler, fastening him to the chair.

He stepped back a pace or two, surveying him grimly.

"I reckon I got you, Jim Morrison!" he said.

The pearler nodded.

Seated in the chair, he was facing the doorway to which Hall had his back. By the ruffian's brawny shoulder, though still well out to sea, a sail flashed in sight for a moment. Looking past Barney, the pearler had a momentary glimpse of the Dawn, tacking down to the reef.

But his face gave no sign—only a glimmer came into his eyes. Hall did not know! The longer he remained in ignorance, the better. The ketch had to approach the reef under shortened sail with care, but it was only a matter of minutes before she would drop anchor and the whaleboat would be lowered to pull ashore. There was help at hand for the pearler of Madman's Reef, little as his captor thought of it. Hall, his back to the doorway, stood looking at him.

"Where have you stacked them?"

"Stacked what?" asked Morrison.

Hall laughed gruffly.

"The pearls! You've found them; I know that! You've been combing this reef for years on end, looking for them, making about enough to pay for your grub. On all the beaches they say you're mad to fancy you'd pick up a fortune here! I reckon



"You'll let on where you stacked the pearls before I'm through with you," snarled Barney Hall. The Tonga boy grasped the sting-ray whip, just as Ken and Kit leapt through the doorway.

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I thought so as much as anybody else, or I might have dropped in to see you before this. But, mad or not, you've found a pearl-bed, and you've found it rich. What?"

The pearler shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not saying," he answered doggedly.

Hall took a step nearer to him. His eyes glittered under his knitted, shaggy brows.

"Mind, I'm here on business, Jim Morrison!" he said. "I'm after the pearls. I took the chance of you getting a pot-shot at me as I came. I reckon you'd not have let me land alive if you'd known I was coming."

"You can bank on that!" said the man of the reef coolly.

"I reckon so! But I got you napping, and I'm here for the pearls. Where do you stack them?"

Morrison shrugged his shoulders again.

"You're welcome to all the pearls you can pick up here," he said.

Hall glanced round the room. It did not look as if its owner had made a rich find. The floor was of bare, half-rotten ship's planks; the furniture was knocked together out of old packing-cases. The place seemed to ache with want and hardship. But Barney gave only one glance round, and then his eyes returned to the man bound in the chair.

"That means that you've got them cached safe," he said. "You're going to tell me where!"

Another shrug.

Hall's rough hand dropped to the butt of his revolver, but he did not draw it. He went on speaking in low, concentrated tones.

"Mark my words, Jim Morrison, I know you've struck it rich! You've combed this reef, picking up a handful of small pearls—rotten little seed-pearls that hardly paid your keep. Every man on the beaches, from Tahiti to Tonga, calls you a madman for sticking here years on end, but you've proved them wrong. You've hit the pearl-bed you've been looking for."

The pearler eyed him curiously. Again, past the ruffian's brawny shoulder, he had a glimpse of the sail out at sea.

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"I don't think so; I know!" said Hall. "For years you've sent away packets of little ten-cent pearls by the skippers that brought your stores. You've never let any other sail come near the reef, if you could help it. But a month ago you signalled a copra schooner to take a letter from you to the Pacific Company's agency at Tonga."

The pearler started.

"That gets you, does it?" grinned Hall. "Well, it's leaked out that the Pacific Company's steamer, next trip, is going sixty miles out of her way to call at this reef. That costs money—more money than you've made scraping up pearl-oysters on this rock in years, I reckon."

Morrison made no answer.

"The Pacific Company doesn't do business for its health," went on Hall. "You've paid for that steamer trip, Morrison, and paid in advance. And how'd you pay except by a pearl in that letter?"

You've got no money; I reckon it's years since you saw an Australian sovereign. Twice a year you get a few pounds' worth of stores, carried by some skipper of a windjammer who runs out of his course to land them out of good nature. That's all you've been worth for the years you've been combing this reef. Now you can afford to order the steamer to make a special call."

The pearler was still silent.

"And that ain't all," went on Barney. "If you only wanted to be taken off the reef, why couldn't you step on the copra schooner that took your letter? I reckon the skipper would have given you a passage. You didn't want to trust yourself on a copra schooner—with what you'd got! More than the rags you stand up in, I reckon. Only the company's steamer, with a pukka captain and a white crew, is safe enough for you—now! And you've paid for it—how? You've struck pearls!"

Hall broke off.

"Now I've told you how I know!" he said. "I reckon I've got it O.K. You're going to tell me now where you've stacked the pearls."

"I'm going to tell you nothing."

"I keep a sting-ray tail in my lugger, for the boys' backs when they're saucy," said Hall grimly. "If that's what you want before you put me wise, I reckon you can have it. I'm here for the pearls! I—"

He broke off again. The gleam in the pearler's eyes, as he stared past him through the doorway, made him suddenly suspicious.

The burly trader swung round and stared through the doorway, across the veranda, out across the reef and the sun-reddened sea.

A cry of rage broke from him.

Full in view, tacking down to the reef under shortened sail, was King of the Islands' ketch.

In the dusk of the interior of the bungalow Hall could not be seen from the ketch. But the vessel on the sea, in the glare of the crimson sunset, was plain as a picture to his eyes.

He stared at it blankly.

He was days ahead of the steamer that was scheduled to leave Tonga at a fixed date. He had calculated on that. He had not given a thought to the island windjammer that brought stores to the reef at long intervals. The date of its call was too uncertain to be calculated upon, even if he had thought about it. And here it was! As soon as he saw the ketch, Hall knew why it was there. King of the Islands was exactly the skipper to lose time running out of his course to land stores for a man who could not afford to pay their freight—barely afford to pay for the stores themselves.

"King of the Islands!" breathed Barney. "So you thought you'd catch me!"

In savage rage, he shook a clenched fist at the ketch.

Ken King was coming—with stores for the outcast of Madman's Reef. He was the kind of soft lubber, as Barney considered it, to waste time on a good-natured action like that. And he was also the kind of man to deal, very promptly and very effectively, with

a ruffian whom he discovered robbing the lone pearler!

The trader of Tonga ground his teeth.

His hand went to his revolver! From behind him came the pearler's voice.

"Don't try that, Barney Hall! Two can play at that game! You'll find King of the Islands too much for you."

Hall answered him with an oath; but he let go the revolver. It was useless. There were two white men on the ship, and half a dozen Kanakas. The odds were too heavy if it came to a fight.

For several long minutes Hall stood back from the doorway, watching with savage eyes as the ketch sought her anchorage. Then he turned and picked up the rifle that the pearler had dropped when he was seized. There was a cunning gleam in Hall's deep-set eyes.

"The madman of Madman's Reef!" he jeered. "They don't know I'm here; they've seen you on the veranda, I reckon, but they ain't seen me. They know you're said to be cracked. I reckon King of the Islands will jump to it, that it ain't safe to land on this reef with a madman blazing away at him with a rifle!"

Keeping back in cover, the ruffian of Tonga raised the Winchester to his shoulder. The pearler gave a cry.

"You villain! You——"

"Not me—you!" grinned Hall. "They'll jump to it that you're shooting, Morrison—what else are they going to think?"

The pearler panted. From the rifle at Hall's shoulder came bang after bang. Looking past him, the pearler could see how the hot lead rained on the ketch. He could see the startled, amazed faces of the shipmates—the scared, dusky faces of the Hiva-Oa boys. And he saw the ketch swing round, and race past the reef, close to the wind, speeding away from that sudden and unexpected danger.

Like a startled sea-bird she fled, and was gone from the pearler's sight in a moment more. But Hall, cautiously putting his head out of the doorway, watched her further—watched as, close to the wind, she flew into the red sunset, and became a speck, and vanished.

"Gone!" said Hall.

He turned back into the room.

"Gone!" he grinned. "King of the Islands has no fancy for landing stores with a madman blazing away at him. You've seen the last of King of the Islands!"

The man of the reef gave a groan.

"And now," said Barney Hall, "you're going to tell me where to lay hands on them pearls, and you're going to tell me quick!"

To the Rescue!

"**M**AD as a hatter!"

"What an escape!"

"My word!" said Koko. "Brain belong that feller along reef, no walk about any more."

"My sainted Sam! That was a narrow shave!" said King of the Islands, staring back at the reef on the port quarter.

With the wind abeam on the starboard side, the ketch tacked away from Madman's Reef.

Well it deserved that name, in the opinion of the shipmates of the Dawn.

Not for a moment did a suspicion cross their minds that there was a stranger on the reef.

Barney Hall's lugger was hidden from sight a mile away across the reef, with endless rugged rocks between. Barney had not been seen.

But Morrison had been seen—Ken had recognised the pearler as he watched from the veranda. The man had gone back into the house, and then the blaze of sudden rifle-fire had come from the doorway.

Barney had calculated well. King of the Islands and his mate thought—as they could only think—that it was a madman they had to deal with—that Madman's Reef merited its name.

They had heard it told, among the islands, of the lone pearler loosing off his rifle as a warning to strange ships to steer clear. But he knew the Dawn—he knew King of the Islands. If he had fired on them there was only one explanation—the solitude of the reef had crazed him, and they had narrowly escaped the wild shooting of a madman.

Already the bungalow on the high ground had dropped from sight, though the tall tops of the bunch of palms could still be seen. But these were fading from view, as the ketch ran on into the west.

Ken King's face was clouded and thoughtful.

His first thought had been, when the blaze of rifle-fire came, to save his crew from the wild shooting of the pearler. Landing in the face of the roaring rifle was not to be thought of; neither could the ketch anchor within range. If the man was mad, there was no arguing with him; and still less arguing with whizzing bullets from a repeating rifle. But now that the islet in the reef was dropping to the sea-line other thoughts were in the mind of the boy-trader of Lalinge.

"Mad as a hatter!" he repeated. "But——"

"Cut it out, Ken!" said Kit Hudson, quietly. "I'm as sorry for the poor beggar as you are. But getting within range of a madman's rifle is throwing lives away."

"I know! But——"

"We could never make it, if we tried!" said the mate of the Dawn. "We could drop the hook out of rifle range, but that would mean a long pull in the whaleboat to get ashore. He could knock out every man in the boat, twice or thrice, before we made it."

King of the Islands nodded.

"We've done all we can, Ken! We've come a day's sail out of our course to land stores for him. We can't land them. The man's a hatter, and he will loose off that rifle again if we get in his range."

"No can, sar!" said Koko.

"Not in the daylight!" said King of the Islands.

"But——"

"Big feller moon stop along this night, sar!" said Koko.

Hudson smiled faintly.

"Nothing doing, Ken. It would be suicide to run up against a lunatic's rifle in bright moonlight. Even

THE PEARLER OF MADMAN'S REEF

in the dark we should have to take our lives in our hands to land."

Ken sighed.

"You're right, old man! There's nothing doing. But—it goes against the grain to leave the poor wretch to it."

"It does, old bean! But what can we do?"

"Nothing."

The Dawn ran on. On the port side, at a distance now, the Pacific was creaming over the sunken rocks of the long reef. King of the Islands stared back, but the palm trees had vanished, and the islet on which they grew.

Ken's heart was heavy.

It seemed that nothing could be done. To land there, in defiance of an armed lunatic, was out of the question. It went sorely against the grain to leave the hapless man to his fate, yet it seemed that there was nothing that the shipmates could do but resume their course to Tahiti, once they were round the extremity of the long reef.

The sun dipped and dusk spread over the sea. In the east came the glimmer of the rising moon.

The reef was dropped astern. The Dawn swung to the south-westward of the last rock.

With the wind astern she boomed on in the rising moonlight.

King of the Islands paced the little after-deck in troubled thought. His course was clear before him, southward to Tahiti. But the thought of the man on Madman's Reef haunted him more and more.

"Look here, Kit——" said Ken at last.

"Go it!" said Hudson. "If there was anything a man could do—goodness knows I feel as bad as you do, Ken, at leaving that poor, cracked wretch on the reef. But——"

"We can't land where he could get us!" said Ken, slowly. "We couldn't get back to the north side in this wind, anyhow. But——"

"There's no landing, and no anchorage, on the south side of the reef, Ken. You'll pile up the Dawn."

"We can stand well off the reef, and take the whaleboat. It will mean a long pull, in perilous waters, but we can do it, Kit. If that poor, insane wretch is looking for fancied enemies, he will be looking where he saw us—anyhow, he can't watch the whole reef. If we get safe ashore——"

"If——" said Hudson.

"We shall have a good chance of taking him by surprise, and getting hold of him! Kit, we can't leave him to it, while there's an earthly chance. We've got to get him, pack him on the Dawn, and take him to a white man's port."

Hudson shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll have to stand a good mile off the reef. A mile's pull in a boat, by moonlight, in the most dangerous waters in the Pacific. With the best chance in the world of running into an armed lunatic ashore, and getting filled with lead. Ken, you're a prize ass."

"If you're against it, Kit——"

The Australian mate of the Dawn laughed.

"But I'm not!" he said. "I'm another prize ass,

Ken! We're going to do it—if we can! We're going to try, anyhow."

"We'll make it, Kit!"

Nothing more was said. The ketch slanted to the wind, on the south side of the long reef that ran east and west. Once more, on the port side, Madman's Reef loomed into view in the moonlight.

No ship could approach the reef on that side. The Dawn had to be hove-to, and the trip made in the whaleboat.

The boat was lowered. Koko was left in charge of the Dawn, his eyes anxiously following his white masters as they stepped into the boat. Lompo and Kolulo, Lufu and Tomoo, took the oars. The ketch was burning no lights; a light on the sea might have caught watchful eyes on the reef and given alarm. Koko was to burn a guiding light when he received a signal that the boat was returning.

The whaleboat pulled for the reef amid the surges that creamed white in the moonlight among the cruel teeth of coral. King of the Islands and his mate were on their way to save, if they could, a man who had gone crazed on the lonely reef—little guessing what was passing on Madman's Reef!

"You're going to talk!"

"YOU feller Tokalaloo!" growled Barney Hall.

The burly trader of Tonga came tramping down the reef in the gleam of the moon. It was a good distance from the high rock on which the bungalow was built down to the coral channel where the dingy little lugger was moored. In the moonlight the way was strange and uncertain, and Hall stumbled and slipped many times on smooth rock and in tangled seaweed. His rugged, stubbly face was darkened by a black scowl when he reached the lugger at last.

Only a snore from the lugger answered him. Hall stood on the rough coral, stared into the craft, and scowled more blackly. The four Tonga boys were sprawling on their tapa mats, fast asleep. The weary pull to the reef had tired them out.

Barney stepped into the lugger and awakened his boat-steerer with a savage kick in his bare ribs. Tokalaloo started out of sleep with a howl.

"You feller boy, you open eye belong you!" snarled Hall. "Jump, you scum, before I knock seven bells out of your hide!"

Tokalaloo was on his bare feet in a twinkling. The other three awakened and stared up at the brawny figure of the Tonga trader towering over them in the moonlight.

"Yes, sar!" gasped Tokalaloo. "Eye belong me plenty too much open, sar."

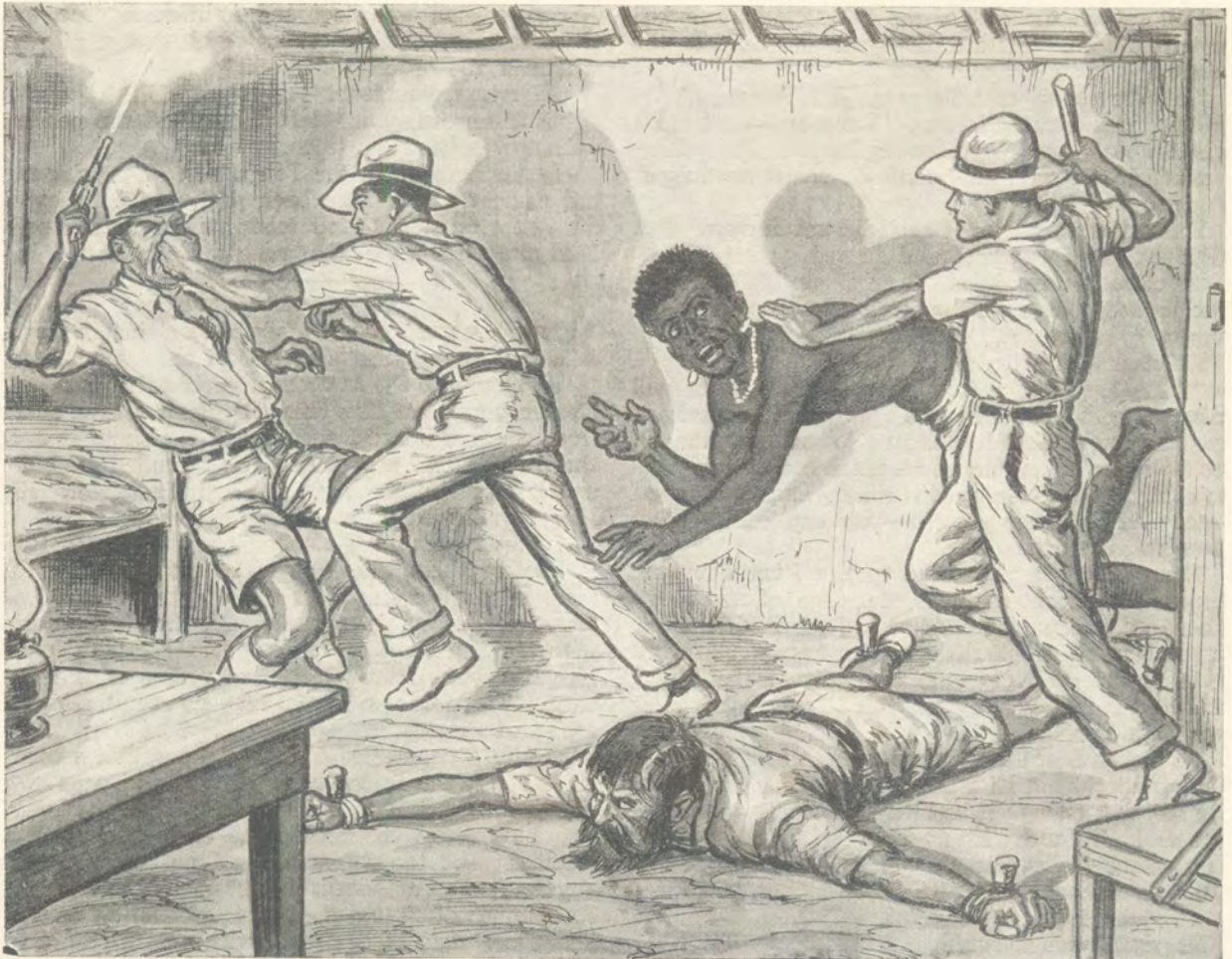
"You savvy feller tail belong sting-ray?"

Tokalaloo trembled.

"Oh, sar, you no kill this feller Tokalaloo along tail belong sting-ray!" he gasped. "This feller plenty good boy along you, sar."

"You shut up mouth belong you!" snarled Hall. "You get feller tail belong sting-ray, you follow along this white master."

"Yes, sar!" said Tokalaloo, relieved. He understood that that fearful instrument of punishment,



As Barney Hall pulled the trigger, Ken King's clenched fist struck full in his face, and the bullet crashed through the roof. Kit Hudson sent the Tonga boy crashing to the floor.

the sting-ray tail, was not intended for his own brown back.

The boat-steerer sorted the sting-ray tail out of a locker and stepped from the lugger. Hall tramped after him.

The other three Tonga boys stared after them, muttered together for a few moments, and then settled down to sleep again on their mats. They were fast asleep before Barney Hall and Tokalaloo disappeared in the glimmer of the moon on the reef.

Hall tramped back the way he had come with a set, scowling brow and an evil glitter in his sunken eyes. Tokalaloo followed his savage master, the sting-ray tail in his hand, his bare feet padding over corals and sea-shells and tangled seaweed.

Half-way to the pearler's bungalow the Tonga boat-steerer stopped and looked back over his shoulder, bending his head to listen.

Barney stared round at him savagely.

"What name you stop, you scum?" he barked. He could see that the Tonga boy was listening.

"What thing you tinkee hear, ear belong you?" said Tokalaloo. "Tinkee hear feller boat, sar, ear belong me!"

Hall rapped out a savage oath.

"You plenty big fool! You tinkee boat stop along sea, along reef a hundred miles from land? Get on!"

"Yes, sar," said Tokalaloo submissively.

Hall tramped on again, followed by the Tonga boy. The incessant boom of the surf on the reef made continuous sound. If some other sound, the scrape of an oar or the rattle of a thole-pin, had reached the native's keen ear through the boom of the surf, it had not reached Barney Hall's.

A gleam of lamplight came from the open doorway at the back of the bungalow as the Tonga trader clambered up the rock, with Tokalaloo at his heels. Hall had left the lamp burning there.

He panted as he reached the building and wiped a bead of sweat from his scowling brow. It was hard going on the rugged reef.

Tokalaloo stared round him in wonder as he followed into the bungalow. He did not need telling that his savage master was engaged upon some lawless business there, but he stared at the sight of a white man bound to the chair.

The kerosene lamp stood on the trestle-table, dim and smoky, its light falling on the pearler's bearded face and glinting eyes. The man of the reef gave Barney Hall a black and bitter look. His glance fell at once on the sting-ray tail in the native's brown hand.

THE PEARLER OF MADMAN'S REEF

Hall sat on the end of the table, which creaked under his bulk. His scowling gaze was fixed on the pearler.

"You're going to talk now, Jim Morrison," he said, in concentrated tones. "I reckon I ain't made the trip here from Tonga for my health. I'm pulling out at sun-up, with the pearls on board my lugger. You get me?"

The man of Madman's Reef did not answer. But his bearded face set hard and dogged.

"You're in my hands," went on Hall. "The Pacific Company's steamer won't be along here for four or five days yet. You savvy that?"

Morrison nodded.

"You don't fancy that King of the Islands will raise the reef again when he figures that a madman was pitching lead at him from a Winchester rifle. I reckon he beat it as fast as his ketch could move, and he's fifty miles away by this time. Look out to sea—the moon's clear enough—you can see whether there's a sail in the offing."

The pearler's eyes turned to the front doorway. Across the veranda, down the slope of the rocky islet, he could see a great space of the Pacific, silver in the moonlight. Perhaps a faint hope yet lingered in his heart of seeing the tall sails of the Dawn, making the reef once more. But the glimmering sea was bare of sail.

"I reckon I put the wind up that crew!" grinned Hall savagely. "King of the Islands would make the reef fast enough if he knew how matters stood—but he don't know. He figures that there's a lunatic here, blazing away at all comers with a rifle—and that's good enough for him. You lubber, you know you've seen the last of him."

Morrison nodded again.

"Now, come down to brass-tacks!" said the Tonga trader. "You've struck pearls, and you've got them hidden away. You're going to talk now. That or the sting-ray tail! You'll talk fast enough when my nigger has taken the skin off your back! Talk first."

"Not a word!" said the pearler, gritting his teeth. "Not a word, Barney Hall. You can leave me dead on the reef, but you'll go back to Tonga without the pearls."

Barney Hall's sunken eyes glittered at him under his knitted brows. Brute and ruffian as he was, he was unwilling to carry out his fearful threat, if he could have gained his purpose without it.

But he was there to gain his purpose. He had searched the bungalow from end to end—rooting in every corner, in every crevice, within and without, and had found—nothing! The pearls were there, but they were safely hidden. Then he had gone back to the lugger for Tokalaloo and the sting-ray tail. Still he seemed to hesitate. There was a long minute of silence, and then the Tonga trader rose from the creaking table.

He snarled orders to the Tonga boy.

The pearler was taken from the chair and stretched on the coral floor. His wrists and feet were tied to pegs jammed into crevices in the coral.

Tokalaloo took the sting-ray tail in his brown hand.

His expression was cool and indifferent. He was there to carry out the orders of his savage master, whatever the orders were.

"Morrison, you fool!" muttered Hall.

"Not a word, you thief!" breathed the pearler.

Barney gritted his teeth.

He made a sign to the Tonga boy. The sting-ray tail came down on the back protected only by a flimsy cotton shirt. And following the lash came a loud and terrible cry that rang over the reef.

A Cry in the Night!

KING OF THE ISLANDS stepped on a shelving rock. In one of the "fingers" of the sea, that ran deep into the reef, the whaleboat had stopped. Broken coral, gurgling channels of salt water, spray from the endless surf surrounded the shipmates of the Dawn. But the whaleboat was pulled safely in, and Lompo tied the painter to a jutting point. Kit Hudson followed his comrade on the reef.

A black mass in the moonlight, Madman's Reef lay before them, the rocky islet rising against the moon at a distance. To reach it, there was a long clambering scramble over the rugged reef. Standing with the water lapping his feet, drenched with spray, Ken King stared through the dusky glimmer of moonlight. There was no sign of life—no sound, save the sound of the sea.

Hardly a cable's length away, moored in a rocky channel, lay the Tonga lugger, with three Tonga boys asleep on board, if he had known it. But the lugger was hidden by the rocks, the crew were fast in slumber; and the shipmates had no suspicion that any craft was at hand. No suspicion had crossed their minds of strangers on the reef. So far as they knew, they had to deal only with a man crazed by solitude—a man dangerous to approach, but whom they were going to save if they could.

"Heave ahead, Kit!" said the boy trader.

He led the way, and Hudson followed, leaving the Kanakas in the whaleboat. In silence, the shipmates tramped and clambered over the rugged reef—slipping sometimes, and sinking to their armpits in pools and inlets, stumbling in the dragging seaweed, and receiving more than one unpleasant knock from sharp points of coral.

But they kept on steadily, and drew closer to the high rock on which the pearler's bungalow was built.

"Suffering cats!" breathed Hudson suddenly. "He's burning a light, Ken! Look!"

There was a glimpse of a winking light in the gloom. It was evident that it came from an open doorway at the back of the building.

"Then—he's awake!" muttered King of the Islands. He had hoped that, after nightfall, the madman of Madman's Reef might be caught asleep.

"Mind your eye, old man!" grinned Hudson. "If he's on the watch with that Winchester——"

"We've got to risk it."

"You bet!"

More quietly and cautiously now they clambered over the rough rocks. They reached the level behind the building.

As they did so, there came a sudden, startling, terrible cry from the bungalow!

The shipmates halted, while the blood ran cold in their veins. In the silence, broken only by the eternal murmur of the surf, that sudden fearful cry was startling, unnerving.

"Ken!" breathed Hudson.

Ken caught his breath.

"Come on," he muttered. "Mad—mad as a hatter! But we've got to help him."

Almost on tiptoe, the shipmates crept on towards the open doorway from which the lamplight glimmered, their senses alert, taking advantage of whatever cover presented itself.

Then, in dumb, utter amazement, they halted again, as a deep-throated, savage voice was audible from the building.

"That's to begin with, Jim Morrison! Will you talk now?"

The shipmates stood rooted to the ground with amazement. They knew that rough, harsh voice, which they had heard many times before. In utter wonder they listened to the voice of Barney Hall, the trader of Tonga.

"You swab! You figure that you'll keep your secret, when Tokalaloo gets going again with the sting-ray tail! You'll talk fast enough when the skin's taken off your back!"

"Never!" came a panting voice.

"That's a long word!" jeered Barney Hall. "You swab, you'll let on where you've stacked the pearls before I'm through with you. By hokey, I'll make you talk!"

King of the Islands and his mate exchanged one look. Utterly amazed as they were, they were beginning to understand now how matters stood on Madman's Reef.

With clenched teeth King of the Islands stepped up to the open doorway. Hudson followed him, his eyes gleaming. A moment more, and they could see into the room. Barney Hall's savage voice was barking:

"You'll talk! I reckon I'll make you talk! You feller Tokalaloo, you givum white feller plenty strong-feller sting-ray, along back belong him."

"Yes, sar!" said the Tonga boy.

He grasped the vicious sting-ray whip.

But the blow did not fall.

Two active figures leaped in at the open doorway. Kit Hudson grasped the Tonga boy, spun him back, and sent him crashing to the coral floor. King of the Islands was leaping at Barney Hall.

Barney's eyes almost started from his head as he saw him. For a second he could not believe his eyes.

"King of the Islands!" he stuttered.

"You swab!" roared Ken, as he leaped at him. "You scum!"

Barney Hall leaped back, dragging at the revolver in his belt. He tore it out, his finger on the trigger.

But even as he pulled trigger, Ken's clenched fist struck full in the stubbly face, and Barney Hall went backwards as if he had been shot. The revolver

roared, but the bullet flew upwards as he fell, crashing through the palm-leaf roof.

The next moment Ken had kicked the revolver from his hand.

Barney Hall rolled on the coral, spluttering with rage. He scrambled furiously to his feet—only to meet another sledge-hammer drive that sent him crashing again.

"Lie there, you scum!" panted King of the Islands.

He caught up the revolver. His eyes blazed over it at the trader of Tonga, as Barney lifted himself dizzily on his elbow.

"Keep where you are, Barney Hall, or, by gum, I'll drive a bullet through your carcass!" shouted King of the Islands.

The Tonga trader panted out an imprecation. But he remained where he was.

Tokalaloo scrambled up, backing into the farthest corner of the room, his black eyes dilated with fear. Hudson was bending over the bound man on the coral floor. The man on the reef twisted his head to look up, with amazed eyes, at his unexpected rescuers.

"It's you, King of the Islands!" he panted. "I reckoned you'd steered clear—that villain reckoned you had, when he blazed away at you with my rifle to make you believe you'd a madman to deal with—"

"So that was it!" said Ken. His eyes gleamed at the furious face of the Tonga trader.

"Suffering cats!" exclaimed Hudson. "So that was the game! It was Hall who was firing on the ketch—"

"That swab!" panted the pearler. "To make you believe—"

"Well, we believed it," said Hudson. "What else were we to think, when we thought you were alone on the reef—"

"Yet you're here—"

Hudson chuckled.

"We came here, thinking you'd gone cracked, to collar you, and take you to the Dawn, and look after you. We landed on the south side of the reef from the whaleboat."

He was cutting the pearler loose while he was speaking. Morrison staggered to his feet.

Ken beckoned to Tokalaloo.

"You feller boy, you takee that piecee rope, you makum stop along hand, along foot, belong master belong you."

"Yes, sar!" stammered the Tonga boy.

Under the muzzle of the revolver, Barney Hall was bound hand and foot by the Tonga boy. He lay on the coral, grinding his teeth with rage and disappointment.

The Pearler's Secret

"BUT what was the game?" asked Ken. "Why—"

"Pearls!" said the man of the reef.

Hudson whistled.

"You've struck the pearl-bed you've been combing the reef for, for five years?"

"I've struck it, and struck it rich. That swab

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found it out, through my getting word to Tonga for the Pacific Company's steamer to call here and pick me up."

King of the Islands turned to the pearler.

"Your pearls are safe with us, Morrison. But you know that, I reckon."

"I'd never have sent to Tonga if I'd known the Dawn was coming. But I never knew. I'm not waiting here for the steamer if you'll give me a passage in your ketch."

Ken smiled.

"That's why I'm here—though I feared I'd have to take you aboard tied hand and foot. And you've struck it rich?"

"I've found the pearl-bed, and cleaned it out—I've got five thousand pounds' worth of pearls cached under a rock in an old tin can! I'd waited for weeks for a chance to signal a sail, and get word for the steamer to call. Five thousand pounds isn't to be trusted on every South Sea trader. But"—the pearler of Madman's Reef paused—"you've saved me, and saved my pearls, King of the Islands. You'll take a share—you and your shipmate—"

"Forget it!" said Hudson.

"Not the smallest seed-pearl of the lot!" said King of the Islands. "We'll give you a passage down to Tahiti, where you can sell your pearls. Barney Hall can wait here for the steamer."

"Wait here for the steamer?" roared Barney. "I've got my lugger on the reef, and my boys waiting in it. You're mad, King of the Islands—madder than that swab! I reckon—"

"Your lugger and your boys won't wait for you, Barney Hall," said King of the Islands, coolly. "You're going to be marooned on this reef till the steamer comes along from Tonga, and you can thank your lucky stars you're getting off so cheap."

He turned to the staring Tokalaloo.

"You feller boy, you go along lugger belong that white feller Hall, plenty quick. You and all feller boy, you go along sea, you go along Tonga. S'pose you no go altogether too quick this feller King of the Islands knock seven bells and a dog watch out of you."

"Yes, sar!" gasped Tokalaloo.

He whipped out of the doorway and vanished. A roar of rage from Barney Hall followed him.

Koko the Kanaka, aboard the Dawn, stared at the lug sail that was racing southward from Madman's Reef before the wind. His keen eyes picked up four brown boys in the lugger, before it vanished, but there was no white man on board.

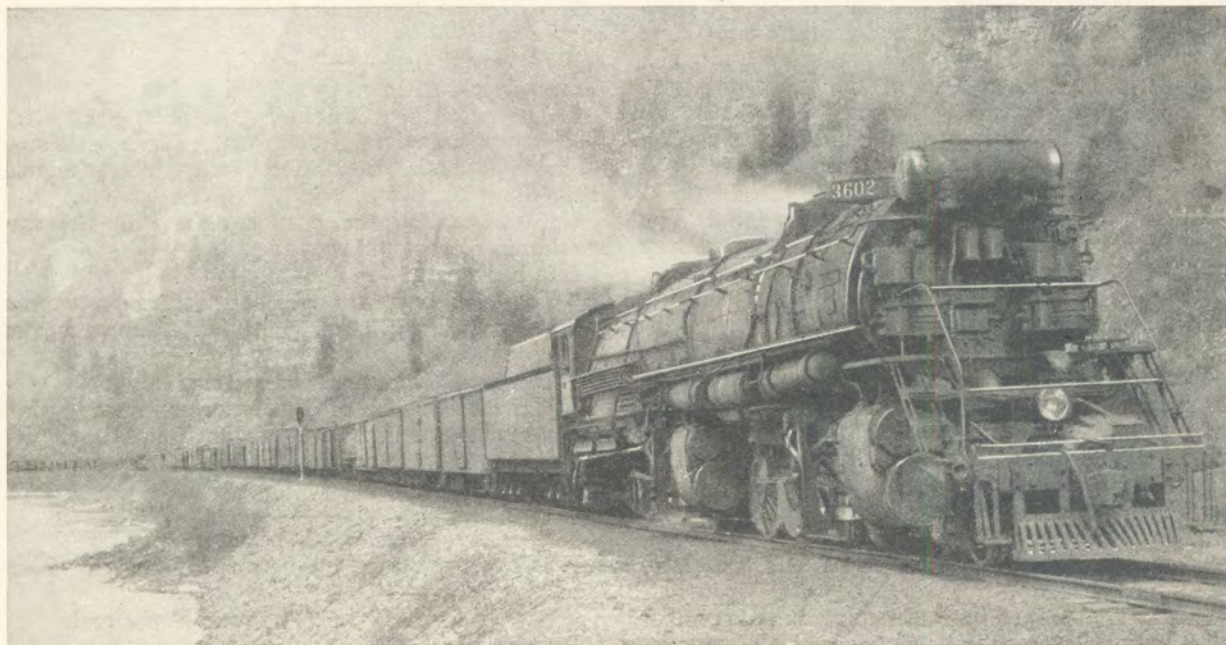
It was an hour later that a signal shot rang from the reef, and Koko burned lights to guide the returning whaleboat. There was a dash of oars, and the boat came under the rail of the Dawn. Koko stared uneasily at the bronzed, bearded pearler who sat in the whaleboat, with his few possessions in a dunnage sack, his hand lingering on a leather bag of pearls fastened to his belt.

"That feller Morrison belong reef, sar?" said Koko. "Brain belong that feller no walk about, sar."

King of the Islands laughed.

"Brain belong that feller walk about plenty too much, Koko," he answered. "It's all right, old coffee bean. Up with the boat!"

THE END



HEAVYWEIGHT OF THE RAILS

This freight train on the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad in the United States is being hauled by one of the world's largest locos—a giant "Mallet" type, 118 feet from front of engine to back of tender. The lighter and faster locos used in Britain would be useless on this line, where very long trains have to be hauled up severe gradients