

Terror Island

by *Albert Richard Wetjen*

On a massacre island, these two end-of-the-earth enemies clashed.... Stinger Seave, quick-trigger lord of the South Sea trade routes, and the bleeding, gray stranger—the one man in the world that the Stinger feared!

THERE can be no doubt that Stinger Seave was a cold and ruthless killer. He had no nerves and no sense of humor. There must have been something warm in his make-up, however, because of his few but iron-hard friendships, and because of the affection and money and time he lavished upon Betty Stevens, she whom the Stinger adopted and who fell heir to all his immense fortune when he was killed on Manoa by Big Bill Gunther, his best friend and the father of young Gunther, whom Betty married.

The story of the coming together of Betty Stevens and Stinger Seave is one of the few in all the annals of the Stinger that reflects entirely to his credit. And it is one of the rare exploits that came to him out of his past, that mysterious dim past of which no man knew; those twenty-odd years of life at least that were his before he landed at Apia in the Islands, friendless, frail, unknown and broke. This is the tale:

It was some eight months after an affair at Sangata when the Stinger had rescued his three friends, Cassidy, Chang and Gunther, from the stockaded village of Suliman the raja. Cassidy had gone south to Apia and his business. Chang was in a Batavian hospital recovering from terrible hardships and tortures. Big Bill Gunther was with the Stinger and they had been on a six months' trading cruise through the Java Sea.

The Stinger's ship was foul with weed

and barnacles, so he put in to the little island of Kebato, south of the Carimata Strait, for careening and overhaul, not caring to return to Batavia or Singapore until Sangata was forgotten. The Stinger had wiped out a tribe and a village at that place and he had heard rumors that the Administration was looking for him to ask him certain questions. So he chose out-of-the-way Kebato for his careening and beached his ship there one hot December day.

They had been there nearly a week when Gunther and Seave decided on a hunting trip into the interior of the little island, leaving the work to go forward under the eyes of Seave's mate, a man named Severn. They started on the trip, spent a successful day and, returning to the little bay where the schooner was beached, they halted on the edge of the jungle with exclamations of surprise.

Coming in from seaward, badly waterlogged, under jury masts and with decks littered with spars and canvas, was a small gray-painted schooner. Perhaps half a mile astern surged a big three-masted bark, under full canvas and overhauling the schooner by leaps and bounds. From the stern of the schooner eddied puffs of smoke and the two watchers on the jungle edge could hear the faint and far-away reports of rifles.

"Well," said Gunther, hitching up his belt, "that looks like trouble. Wonder who it is?"

"Strange ships to me," said the Stinger

quietly, shading his eyes with his hand. "And, anyway, it's none of our business."

Gunther spat and grunted as they started down the sand for their own beached vessel. He knew the Stinger's iron-clad rule never to interfere in anything that did not directly concern him. Gunther was differently made. If there was any slight trace of a prospective fight or excitement going on, he wanted to be in on it.

But when with the Stinger he kept such feelings under control. One could not argue with Seave, could not plead with him or persuade him, and he ruled always with an iron hand on his own vessel, so there was no prospect of Gunther's wandering off alone to see what was happening. In a somewhat surly frame of mind, then, Big Bill tramped behind the Stinger.

THEY reached their vessel, boarded her and started for the main cabin.

Seave's mate, Severn, asked the Stinger as he reached the poop, "Any orders, sir?"

"About what?" the Stinger wanted to know. Severn scratched his unshaven jaw and looked uncertain. Then he jerked his head toward the fighting ships, now well in the bay.

"I thought maybe we'd better arm the men, sir."

"It's none of our business," said the Stinger coldly. "Trouble comes soon enough without looking for it." He strode on past the mate, who grunted and went midships.

Gunther said, "Well, say, Seave, you never know now. It might be someone we wouldn't want to be caught unawares by. . . ."

The Stinger turned and stared at him, his eyes a little icy. Big Bill licked his lips and looked away.

The Stinger washed and changed. He sat down to the table and looked surprised to find no dinner ready. He struck the gong and the steward came bustling out of one of the

cabins where he had been staring through a port.

"What's the matter with you?" snarled the Stinger with a spasm of anger.

"Well, that first packet's beached and her crew's running up to the jungle, sir, and firing back," answered the steward nervously. "Looks like a woman with 'em, too."

"Dinner!" snapped the Stinger coldly. "And let me hear no more of it. Women have no business in the Pacific, anyway."

The steward fled. Big Bill Gunther lighted a cigar and grinned.

"You're sure tough, Stinger," he said at last. "Damned if you don't give me the creeps at times. How you can sit there and talk about eating when there's bloody murder abroad, I don't know."

The Stinger shrugged but did not answer. The steward was a long time coming with the food, and when he did return the Stinger's eyes were beginning to grow cold.

"I suppose the cook was too busy looking at the play-acting to get on with his work?" he asked icily. The steward nodded and licked his lips. Just then Severn, the mate, came below to eat and the Stinger halted him with a crisp word.

"Does the whole routine of my ship have to be thrown out because a lot of fools are running along the beach?" he demanded. "If this crew can't mind its own business, I'll have to take it in hand."

"I can manage 'em, sir," stammered the mate. "'Cause they're interested an' . . ."

"That will be all!" said the Stinger. "Sit down."

They ate in silence. Occasionally through the open ports and the skylight they could hear the whiplike crack of rifles and the shouts of men. Gunther and Severn moved uneasily in their chairs and ate little. Stinger Seave ate tranquilly and apparently quite oblivious to the fact that men were fighting and dying not a mile from where he sat. It was

none of his business and he had no intention of making it his business.

As soon as they could reasonably get away, Gunther and Severn went up on the poop, Gunther rather shamefacedly buckling on his cartridge belt and revolver. The Stinger finished his meal, drank his coffee, lighted a cigar and settled back with a sigh to complete a book he had half read.

NEARLY an hour later, just after darkness had fallen and the firing and shouting had died away, Severn, the mate, came below and halted uncertainly at the foot of the companion.

"Sir," he commenced nervously. Stinger Seave lifted his eyes from his book. "Sir," said the mate, "there's a man wants to see you. Got a woman with him. They're from that ship."

"What ship?" asked the Stinger, as if the news there was even another ship was completely a surprise to him. Severn nodded toward an open port through which was coming a vague, red flickering light against the background of the velvet darkness.

"She's afire, sir. The schooner. The bark looted and burned her. This man's wounded."

The Stinger shrugged.

"It's none of my business," he said irritably. "Will you never understand that I do not choose to be drawn into some trouble that is none of my concern whatever?"

"But the woman, sir?" pleaded Severn, his face pale because it was dangerous to argue with the Stinger. "There's a party of men coming down from the jungle now with torches, looking for her and the man."

Shoes sounded on the companion and Gunther appeared. The big man was visibly distressed.

"For God's sake, Seave," he choked, "don't act like a cold-blooded snake! There's a man on the beach wounded and there's a

woman with him. He wants to come aboard. This is your ship, Seave, and it's for you to give orders, but if you don't do something for the woman at least, I'll quit you and join them."

For a moment there was a tense silence except for the heavy breathing of Severn and Gunther. Stinger Seave stared at them both and blinked. At last he sighed, and lifted his brows in a manner that for any other man would have been slightly humorous.

"Gunther," he said gently, "the way you run around looking for trouble, you should have been killed long ago. I'll come and see what's the matter."

He rose languidly, yawning, and stretching his arms, the book still held between the fingers of his left hand. He seemed very gentle then, very patient. Reserved and distant as he often was with Big Bill Gunther, sharply as at times he spoke to him, he yet held for him a very real affection. Seave knew that Gunther was quite capable of going down on the beach and protecting the wounded man and the woman from the party that was obviously looking for them. Big Bill was a fool that way. He went more than halfway to find trouble and excitement.

"By the way," said the Stinger absently, as he turned to look for his cap and to lay down the book, "by the way, did you find out who the man is?"

"Carsen, sir," blurted Severn. "Says he's Captain Carsen of the schooner Arabelle!"

There was a crash as the Stinger's book dropped to the main cabin deck. The Stinger whirled, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his face gray in the lamplight, his eyes icy with something very close to terror. Gunther and the mate fell back a pace as the Stinger's hand flashed to his coat.

"Liar!" choked the Stinger, his voice thick. "You liar! I shot Carsen in Dawson City. . . ." He seemed abruptly to recover his

self-control, to realize what he was saying. He straightened, took his hand from his coat and wiped the sudden sweat beads from his forehead.

“My heavens, Seave,” choked Big Bill Gunther, alarmed, “are you ill?”

With a tremendous effort the Stinger smiled. He stood rigid for a moment, then crossing to the locker did something he had never before done to Gunther’s knowledge—he took a stiff three fingers of whisky before meeting a problem.

“All right,” said the Stinger, gently, when he had done. “Get up on deck.”

He pushed by the other two men and went up the companion. Severn and Gunther, after a puzzled look at each other, stumbled up after him.

The stars were bright above. There was a cool, soft wind blowing from seaward. For’ard on the schooner’s fo’c’s’le-head some of the men were holding lanterns over the side and peering down. Quite close to the ship and advancing down from the jungle were red splotches of torches, sending flickering inky shadows before and behind a group of armed men.

Far to port of the beached schooner, right at the water’s edge, the schooner that had been fleeing from the bark glowed with tongues of flame leaping around her stumps of masts. Astern of her showed the lights of the anchored bark and a few boats seemed to be pulling back and forth.

With a slight straightening of his shoulders, Stinger Seave went down from the poop and along the main deck until he reached the pilot ladder swung overside near the foremast. Taking a lantern from one of the seamen, he dropped down the rungs until he stood on the sand, the water washing about his shins. He looked up, before advancing, to peer at the two dim figures nearby, and he said to the anxious, puzzled Gunther, who was looking down at him, “Arm the men,

Gunther.” Just that; no more. Gunther was old in the Islands and would know what to do.

EXACTLY what happened between Stinger Seave and the badly wounded and dying Captain Carsen and the woman will never be fully known. The woman—she was really only a girl of seventeen—was too hysterical to remember. Carsen never told and what few comments the Stinger made only reached the ears of Cassidy, Chang and Gunther.

Watchers say that when the Stinger approached the two drooping figures he held high the lantern so that the light fell on his face and the big, burly, gray-bearded man who was Captain Carsen took his hand away from his bloody side to flash it to a gun at his hip.

“They just seemed to stand there and snarl at each other,” said Gunther afterward. “I tell you the Stinger was as near to being afraid as ever I’ve seen him. He had the lantern held up in one hand and his other inside his coat. This Captain Carsen had his gun half out of his holster and was leaning forward, just like a killer. All his left side was running with blood and he could hardly stand, but he had the Stinger bluffed, I do believe. I heard him say, ‘So it’s you, eh? You always did turn up at the wrong time. If you draw I’ll kill you!’ Seave said something about, ‘Once being enough,’ and then Captain Carsen collapsed, pitched sideways to the sand. The girl flopped over and started to cry. Seave knelt down and I could hear him talking, but what about I don’t know. After a bit he yelled for some men to come and take the captain aboard and he helped the girl up himself. Captain Carsen died about an hour later.”

Once he had seen the two castaways safely on his ship, Seave turned to face the oncoming band of armed men with torches. He had Gunther by his side this time and about four of his own seamen, so what happened was plain. The leader of the band was a big fat man with drooping black

mustaches and evil black eyes. He wore a cartridge belt and holster, carried a Winchester and was dressed only in a singlet and old duck pants.

“Well,” he said throatily when the torches revealed Stinger Seave, “who have we here? I’m Cap’n Maul and I’m looking for a girl that belongs to me and a man she got away with. Seen ’em?”

“No,” said the Stinger coldly.

“Liar!” The fat man became convulsed with sudden rage. “We’ve been chasing ’em through the jungle all the afternoon and we saw ’em make a break for your ship.”

“That’s too bad,” said the Stinger, blinking.

“Are you trying to be funny?” snarled the other.

“I’m never funny,” answered the Stinger. “And I think you’d better go.”

The other laughed at that and ran a contemptuous eye over the Stinger and his small band. He had with him about eight men and they were all rough, surly-looking characters and ready for trouble.

“Get out of my way!” snapped Captain Maul, thrusting out a fat hand and taking a step forward.

Stinger Seave did not move but he whispered icily, “Stand still!” His blue eyes were frosty in the torchlight and the fat man, gazing into them, shivered for no accountable reason and reached for his gun.

It was as if the Stinger was glad of the chance to go into action, as if some terrific shock had left him tingling and he rejoiced in this chance to let off steam. He was all the cold, cool killer. His hand was inside his jacket before the fat man’s gun was clear of the holster. Then there were six explosions—first one, then a slight pause, then a rapid tattoo of five.

The fat man’s gun thudded to the sand and he gripped a bleeding hand with a yelp and backed off. Two of his men who had

lifted their rifles dropped in their tracks. Another staggered sideways and almost fell, but managed to regain his equilibrium and nurse a shattered arm. The other two shots nicked a fourth man because the wavering torchlight was deceptive in the Stinger’s eyes.

THE untouched survivors backed off and fled, dragging their dead and wounded companions, their flight hastened by two six-guns roaring in Big Bill Gunther’s hands as that bearded adventurer went into action with the excited shouting of a boy. One or two of Seave’s seamen started to fire their rifles but the Stinger turned on his heel and snarled, “That’ll do!” as he reloaded his smoking gun.

He jammed it into the holster, then jerked upright as the fat man, halting perhaps fifty yards away in the darkness, roared back something about cleaning them out after a bit. The Stinger merely shrugged at that and walked calmly back to the ship despite a few bullets that came whizzing back from the retreating party.

“Set a watch, Gunther,” said Seave as he went below. “Keep flares ready as usual for night fighting. We can’t launch the ship with the tide ebbing, so we’ll have to stay and wait a better opportunity.”

It was more than an hour before Gunther tramped below, curious now to find out what it was all about. He discovered the main cabin untenanted except for Stinger, who was moodily standing by the table and staring at a piece of washleather holding a large pile of drab, gray-looking stones. Of Captain Carsen’s body and the girl there was no sign.

“Well,” said Gunther, breathing heavily and mopping his forehead, “that was quite a scrap.”

“Sit down,” said the Stinger somberly, without looking up. “I want to tell you something.”

Gunther sat down, uncorked the gin bottle, sloped out a drink, tossed it down and

remarked, "I've got a strong watch out. . . . Go ahead!"

"I'm a hard man," said the Stinger slowly, fingering the drab stones. "I've led a hard life and I was raised in a hard country. It doesn't matter where. Captain Carsen I knew . . . a long time ago. . . . He's dead now, so we won't discuss him much. From what I can gather, he was coming down from, his usual haunts in the North Pacific to try the South when he ran across some clue to a diamond mine. These things are diamonds." The Stinger dribbled the stones through his fingers. "Worth a fortune, Gunther. More than you'd dream. . . ."

"Anyway, Captain Maul got wind of the mine or the stones, I haven't learned which, except it was when Carsen was drunk. That was in some Chink port where Carsen was trying to sell some of the stones. Maul was a beachcomber there. He went and told a Jap named Hiroto, who owns that big bark yonder, and they agreed to loot Carsen's ship. . . . The girl told me most of this before I got her to sleep. . . . She learned a lot from the Jap, who wanted her.

"Carsen got away . . . somehow." The Stinger paused for a moment to look at Gunther and the big man shivered because of the icy eyes. "He always did get away somehow!" the Stinger snarled.

Then, recovering himself, he went on. "Maul and the Jap chased them clear south to here, losing them sometimes and then picking them up again. Carsen was in trouble too much with the law to ask for aid. He had only a few men with him and did not dare chance a fight. But he kept ahead of the bark by some miracle and good seamanship and was trying to make Batavia, where he had friends, when he ran into a hurricane and was dismayed. You saw the schooner. She was sinking, and this island was the first land he'd sighted since the hurricane. He had to make it and chance a fight at last.

"Maul and Hiroto had too many men. They took the schooner and looted her and then burned her. There was a lot of diamonds hidden in her main cabin, so I understand, but all Maul got away with was these . . . a fortune, at that. He was desperate, and wounded by a rifle bullet. He took the girl with him, intending to shoot her at the last for fear of the Jap.

"That's about all of it, Gunther. We've got to save the girl and stones. They'll be hers now. Maul won't go back without taking another crack at them after the long chase, and Hiroto, if the girl's telling the truth, is too crazy for her to quit. We'll fight until we can get launched and then we'll make a break for the sea."

BIG BILL GUNTHER sat and blinked and wondered.

"You seemed to know this Carsen chap," he ventured at last. The Stinger smiled his little frosty smile.

"Yes. He's dead now—kicked in just before you came. I knew him quite well. Too well. He taught me how to shoot. He is the only man I knew who was a better shot than I am, and as fast. If he had not been wounded he would have killed me."

"Don't talk about it if you'd rather not," protested Gunther, who was burning up with curiosity but trying hard to remember the old Island tradition not to ask of another's past. Stinger Seave shrugged and lines appeared in his face that Gunther had never seen there before.

"I never have talked of it," he said slowly, and somewhat bitterly. "It's an ugly tale. Carsen fell in love with the girl I was to have married. He was bad, bad as I am, and quite as much a killer. He took everything he wanted. He carried the girl away. I followed him. I found him in Alaska many years later. He had never married her, and she was dead, but he had a little daughter she had given him.

I shot him in a saloon in Dawson City. It was the first time and the only time I ever took advantage of a man to draw first. He was a better shot and would have got me. I thought I killed him. I had no regrets, but it was like a ghost to see him tonight, here of all places, so far away from the North. The girl is Betty Stevens. She was named after her mother.”

Gunther whistled and stared at the Stinger. Eventually he said, “Carsen must have been a notorious character, all right, if he was better with guns than you.”

The Stinger smiled again.

“I told you he taught me. He was my father!”

“What?” cried Gunther, startled and shocked.

The Stinger looked at him and held him motionless with his icy eyes.

“That’s all, Gunther. You will never speak of it again. Neither shall I. Betty believes her mother was married to her father. I shall adopt her and the Islands must not know.”

“No,” said Gunther, when at last he could speak again. “The Islands must never know. You can trust me.” He got up and for the first and last time during their long friendship he gave a sign of his affection. He put his arm around the Stinger’s shoulders, squeezed him for a second, then walked for the companion to the poop.

Stinger Seave dropped to a chair and Gunther said afterward that he spent the rest of the night staring blankly at the pile of diamonds.

Neither the Stinger nor Gunther knew that Severn, the mate, had overheard most of the story through the open skylight as he kept watch on the poop, and though Severn did not talk much he let fall enough in the years that followed to give the Islands some idea of the whole story. The real truth did not come out until Gunther killed the Stinger on Manoa, only to die himself of his wounds a few years

later, when his son read his secret diary.

THERE was no attack that night, but when the dawn came it disclosed two boatloads of armed men grimly lying astern of the beached schooner and another party of men gathered on the beach so that the schooner was surrounded. Stinger Seave came on the poop when Gunther informed him of this and examined his foes through the glasses. Those to seaward were commanded by a Jap, evidently Hiroto. Captain Maul was with those ashore, his hand bandaged and a scowl creasing his fat face. The men were of mixed nationalities, Japs, Chinks, Latins and Anglo-Saxons, too evidently the scum of the Chinese waterfronts.

The Stinger’s position looked precarious. He had only ten men, all tough and used to fighting, it was true, but a pitifully small number against Maul and Hiroto’s thirty or forty. Gunther and the Stinger himself made an even dozen, or perhaps it should be said this made the odds even, for the Stinger alone was an army with his uncanny shooting and his unshakable nerve. Perhaps Captain Maul remembered that uncanny shooting from the night before, for as soon as the light was strong he waved a white flag and came down to the water’s edge to bargain.

“We don’t want no trouble with you,” he called to the Stinger, who stood near the main deck rail looking down at him. “You jest hand over the girl and the stones the old man’s got and you can beat it. The old man you can have.”

“He’s dead,” answered the Stinger coldly. “And I’m keeping the girl and the stones.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Maul urged. “I can wipe you out in a day. I can wreck your ship with dynamite so you’ll never get to sea, and pick your men off one by one. Better be reasonable.”

The Stinger smiled his little wintry

smile, then made an offer that caused Gunther to rock back and gape. It was the first and the last time the Stinger ever offered to compromise, ever gave way before a foe. But, as Gunther afterward realized, it was for the girl's sake and not for his own that the Stinger did this, which in itself was remarkable, for the Stinger never considered anyone else's safety or feelings. As he admitted himself, he was cold and ruthless, a killer to the core.

"I'll make you a bargain," said the Stinger to Captain Maul. "I've got two thousand pounds in gold in my safe below. I'll give you that and my draft on Burns, Philp for three thousand more if you beat it. The stones belong to the girl."

"Five thousand quid!" choked Captain Maul, his jaw dropping. "Say, who are you, anyway? There ain't many traders got that much."

"I'm Stinger Seave," said the Stinger gently. "You may have heard of me."

"Oh," said Captain Maul and stared, unable to speak for a moment and wiping sudden beads of cold sweat from his brow. "So you're Stinger Seave," he whispered. He realized then how close he had been to death the previous night. Stinger Seave's reputation ran north and south and at this period it was something to conjure with. Five governments wanted the Stinger for crimes running from manslaughter to piracy, and Kanaka mothers scared their babies with his name. Even Maul, from the coast of China, knew of the man.

He licked his lips and backed off slowly with a hoarse, "I'll see my partner about it. I didn't know you were the Stinger."

Gunther chuckled at Seave's elbow. "I wish I had a rep like that. Turn 'em white and make 'em shake when they talk to you."

The Stinger kept grimly silent.

Captain Maul walked along the beach and hailed one of the boats. It circled around out of pistol shot, landed near where Maul stood and a short, stocky figure that was

evidently Hiroto scrambled to the sand. Captain Maul and he talked a long time, Maul evidently urging something and Hiroto disagreeing.

"It's a lot of cash," Gunther said to the Stinger as they waited. "I'm surprised at you making the offer. Do you think they'll accept?"

"They may," answered Seave, unperturbed. "I don't care particularly if they don't. Hiroto wants the girl and he'll hate like hell to give her up. Maul may persuade him."

AFTER perhaps an hour Captain Maul returned down the beach and the boat pushed off and took up its old position. "Noting doing," Maul shouted. "We want the stones and the girl, Stinger." It was noticeable that this time he kept well out of range and seemed very nervous. The Stinger laughed softly, lifted his hand to show him he understood, then walked aft to his poop.

Firing commenced almost at once. Lead whined through the rigging, spattered against the stout wooden hull. Gunther got the men well hidden behind bulwarks made by raising hatches against the rails, and the fight was on. Stinger Seave quite coolly went below and Gunther for a moment wondered if he was mad enough to go on reading or sleeping at this time. He should have known better, of course, but the Stinger had broken so many precedents in the last day that no one could tell what he was going to do next.

Once in the main cabin the Stinger coolly loaded half a dozen repeating Winchesters, carried them to a spot near a port that overlooked the stern and, picking up one, commenced firing slowly and steadily.

It was nothing but a slaughter, of course. The morning was bright and sunny, with the light in the eyes of the boat crews and the Stinger was completely hidden. He riddled one boat so that it began to founder, then riddled the other. He picked off four men

before the rest jumped into the water and swam frantically for the shore. Two others he killed as they swam. He might have wiped them out completely but for the fact his Winchesters now were empty.

He reloaded them, giving the swimmers time to get out of sight, and turning to go on deck he discovered Betty Stevens standing beside him, pale and wan and drawn. He had decided to call her Betty Stevens after her mother, though she believed she was Betty Carsen. She had not the faintest idea who the Stinger was, but as she hated her father she later grew quite willing to accede to the change of name as proposed by one of the first men to be kind to her. Eventually, of course, she became Betty Seave when the Stinger legally adopted her.

"Oh," she cried now. "Are they fighting again?"

"It's nothing," said the Stinger gently, his eyes softening because she looked so much like the girl he had known long ago "Stay in your room and you'll be all right. We're all friends."

He spent several minutes calming her and persuading her to lie down again, then he went up on deck to discover Gunther jubilant and the men laughing and chuckling and watching the survivors of the attacking party drag themselves from the surf and join Maul's retreating men.

"Nothing to it," declared Gunther, slapping the Stinger on the back. "If we could all shoot like you we'd lick any nation under the sun."

"I was in good trim this morning," the Stinger admitted gently. "Now what's this?"

Captain Maul was coming toward the ship waving a white flag again and moving with extreme caution. Seave laid aside the gun he held and went down to the sand to meet him.

"I guess we'll take the gold and drift," he said as the Stinger drew near. "You're a

wizard with guns all right."

"I don't see why I should pay now," said the Stinger coolly, "seeing I've got you licked."

Captain Maul ventured to sneer a little.

"I wouldn't say that, Stinger. We can stop you kedging off your ship and we can dynamite the channel from the outside so you won't be able to get to sea."

THE Stinger was silent for a moment, A weighing the chances. At any other time he would not have even considered the proposition, but now he had with him a girl he wanted to keep from harm.

"All right," he said at last. "You get your men on board and keep them there. I'll sail this afternoon with high tide. But I warn you I'm paying under protest and I'm a very impatient man when I'm threatened."

Captain Maul grinned.

"Oh, you're tough all right. But you won't worry us once we've got the gold. You whipped us this time because you're a wizard with guns and because you were under cover. It ain't so easy to attack in the open. We've got enough men t' stop that."

The Stinger shrugged.

"All right. Go and tell your men to get aboard. I'll have the stuff on the beach here for you to take away in an hour."

Captain Maul nodded and wiped his lips with the back of his uninjured hand.

"Fair enough. I'd have taken it in the first place if it hadn't been fer Hiroto. He's nuts on the girl. But you winged him pretty bad in the boats there and he's flopped out from loss of blood. I expect I'll be leaving him here." He winked and backed off.

The Stinger returned to the schooner.

"Maul's taking the cash," said the Stinger quietly. "We'll be able to get to sea without much trouble, I think. From what I gathered he intends double-crossing the Jap and taking his ship. A fine bunch of robbers."

That afternoon the schooner was kedged off and stood out for the sea. The money and the draft had been handed over, Maul quite confident about the latter, for he could reach a port before the slower-sailing schooner. As the Stinger cleared the bay he saw through the glasses what looked like some sort of scuffle going on the bark's deck and eventually a boatload of men went ashore, landed and ran up into the jungle, followed by a scattering rifle fire. One man, evidently Hiroto, crawled on his hands and knees up the sand, the lead spurting around him. Whether he reached safety or not the Stinger did not then learn.

The Stinger went first to Batavia, chancing trouble with the authorities over the old Sangata affair, and he discovered that Maul had outsailed him there, cashing the draft and departing up the China Sea for his old haunts. In Batavia the Stinger left Gunther and Betty with instructions for Gunther to take her to Ponape to the Catholic mission for education and safety.

"I'm going north," explained Seave gently. "There's a little business I have to attend to."

"I didn't know you had any business in those waters," said Gunther, a little puzzled. The Stinger smiled frostily.

"Well, our friend Captain Maul sailed north with five thousand pounds of mine. As it happens to be about all I have at present, apart from this ship, I expect to need it."

"I see," said Gunther, tugging at his black beard and laughing. "I had a hunch you wouldn't give up five thousand to Maul without figuring on getting it back."

TWO months later Captain Maul sat in the main cabin of his stolen bark as she lay anchored in an obscure river far up the Chinese coast. He was dressed in new whites and wore a diamond ring. In spite of the fact that he looked bleary-eyed and unshaven, he

looked also contented. A Chinese girl was perched on the table near him, smoking a cheroot and holding a glass for him to sip from. Another girl leaned against his chair and fanned him.

There were two or three other men present, one a Mandarin, the others white companions of Maul whom he had won over while on the venture with Hiroto and whom he had made his officers. They were all more or less drunk and chatting with women, for the bark had just returned from a successful raid upon a rich village to the south and the loot was enough to make a man's mouth water. The rest of the crew were carousing ashore and Maul and his friends had settled down for a night-long revel.

Along toward midnight there was a light step on the companion that led to the poop and there appeared in the brightly lighted cabin a frail, little figure with icy eyes and one hand gently rubbing his throat as if an insect had bitten him there. For a while no one noticed Stinger Seave, but presently a woman, giggling, turned her face from Maul and saw him standing there motionless.

Then she cried out sharply and pointed. There was a tense silence. The men in the cabin stared at the Stinger. Maul tried to get up from his chair, his jaw slack with terror, but he was too drunk and could only weakly paw the air.

"Sit still, gentlemen," said the Stinger gently as the others endeavored to rise also. His icy eyes dropped them motionless to their seats again while a strange, chill fear crept about their hearts.

"What in hell do you want?" choked Captain Maul thickly, the sweat running down his fat face and his left hand caressing a livid scar that ran across his right, a memento of that red night on Kebato.

"Five thousand pounds," replied the Stinger, still gently and still rubbing his throat. "I believe that was the amount you took from

me.”

“You offered it,” choked Maul, sobering abruptly. “I let you go because you paid it.”

“I’m afraid you don’t understand,” murmured the Stinger, as if apologizing. “I’m a very strange man. I paid under protest because of reasons which do not concern you. You threatened and I paid, but you should understand that I do not allow men to threaten me and get away with it. I need five thousand pounds before I go.”

“You cheap double-crosser!” snarled Maul, getting to his feet at last and brushing aside the frightened women. “I haven’t got that much, anyway.”

“That’s too bad,” sighed the Stinger. “I was hoping you had the money. I’ll have to take your ship, then.”

With a furious oath, Captain Maul forgot himself. He snatched for his gun. There was a sharp explosion, and his gun struck the table. Maul screamed and clutched at his shattered right arm and fell back in his chair. The Stinger still stood motionless, rubbing his throat, and except that there was a small spiral of smoke lifting before him there was nothing to tell it was he who had fired.

With a guttural exclamation the Mandarin shot a knife from his sleeve and at the same moment one of the white men flung himself sideways from his chair, ripped a gun from under his armpit and fired upward.

They all saw the Stinger draw now, for they were all watching him. His hand snaked from his throat to his jacket and steel glittered in the light. There were three spurts of orange flame. The Mandarin fell forward with a neat hole between his eyes. His knife stuck upright and quivered in the table. The white man who had fired cried out abruptly and dropped to the deck with a holed shoulder and a crimson ripping streak where his right ear had been. His own shot splintered the woodwork in the companion behind the coldly smiling Stinger.

The icy eyes ran around the main cabin but there was no further attempt at fight. Everyone shrank back. Maul huddled in his chair and groaned.

“Five thousand,” said the Stinger at last, his voice like a whiplash. “I’ll give you two minutes to get it, Maul!”

THE fat captain groaned out something to one of the women and she turned, after a frightened hesitation, and returned from a side cabin with a black japanned box. Maul groped somewhere in his clothes for the key, unlocked the box, took from it another key and a thick bundle of banknotes. These he pushed on the table toward Seave, who did not move.

Then Maul spoke again to the girl, who took the key the box had yielded and knelt before an old-fashioned heavy iron safe that stood against one bulkhead. Maul groaned out some instructions to her and she turned the knob as he ordered, then inserting the key unlocked and swung back the thick door. From the safe she brought Maul another box, which he opened to disclose more banknotes and some gold. All this he placed on the table.

“Bring it here, to this end,” snapped the Stinger and one of the women obeyed. Seave stepped close and riffled the notes with the fingers of one hand. His eyes seemed intent on them, but no man dared to make an overt move. Finished with the notes, Seave counted the gold.

“You’re short close to a thousand,” he snapped. “Give me that ring!”

Maul weakly tore off his ring and it joined the notes and gold.

“Still short,” snapped the Stinger. His icy eyes roamed the cabin. He did not particularly care how or from whom he collected. He made each man there unburden himself of jewelry, made them turn out their pockets. The dead Mandarin was wearing a magnificent pearl in the front of his brocaded

jacket and this the Stinger took also.

When he was satisfied he swept up the loot in his pockets, smiled his little wintry smile and backed up the companion.

“Don’t bother me again, Captain Maul,” he said gently as he went. “Next time I shall kill you.”

THEN he was gone, and so great had been the shock of his presence and his icy eyes that it was fully five minutes before anyone there dared to move or even speak. Once the tension was broken, the main cabin was pandemonium. The women ran hither and thither; the men still un-wounded wrenched out their guns and ran up on deck. And on deck they met, not Stinger Seave, but a little band of savage, determined men that had just boarded the bark from a whaleboat which had been launched by a Chinese junk which, in its turn, had been anchored in the river from the south for just one hour.

There was a fusillade of shots that brought the sick and wounded Maul to his feet again. Shoes and bare feet scuffled on the deck above.

“They got him,” said Maul thickly. “They stopped him and got him!”

Then he went rigid and a groan escaped his lips. Coming down the companion, a press of men behind him, was not Stinger Seave, shot and captured, but a deadly, smiling Hiroto, a revolver in each hand.

“So,” he purred. “Was someone before me, Captain Maul?”

“Hiroto,” choked Maul, then glanced stupidly down at his shattered, dripping arm.

“You took my ship and the gold,” purred the Jap, coming forward quietly as a cat. “But I have returned. Who was that I passed in a boat as my boat came alongside? The crew, I hope. I should dislike to kill such men as I can use them to work.”

“No, damn you!” snarled Maul, with a sudden access of rage and courage. “That was Stinger Seave! He came for his gold and he took it.”

The Jap laughed bitterly.

“So I lose both the woman, the stones and the gold, eh? Through your attentions. I am very sorry for you, Captain Maul.”

Maul commenced to cry out because of what he saw in the Jap’s eyes, but a spasm of sheer rage crossed the little brown man’s face and he lifted his guns and began firing. When he had finished the main cabin was a shambles and Captain Maul had ceased to worry about the affairs of this world. Every man was dead and the women were screaming and huddled in one corner.

“Clean up this,” said Hiroto to the men who crowded behind him. “We will go south and redeem the treasure—the gold or the stones or the woman. And when I meet this Seave again I shall take payment for the wound he gave me.”