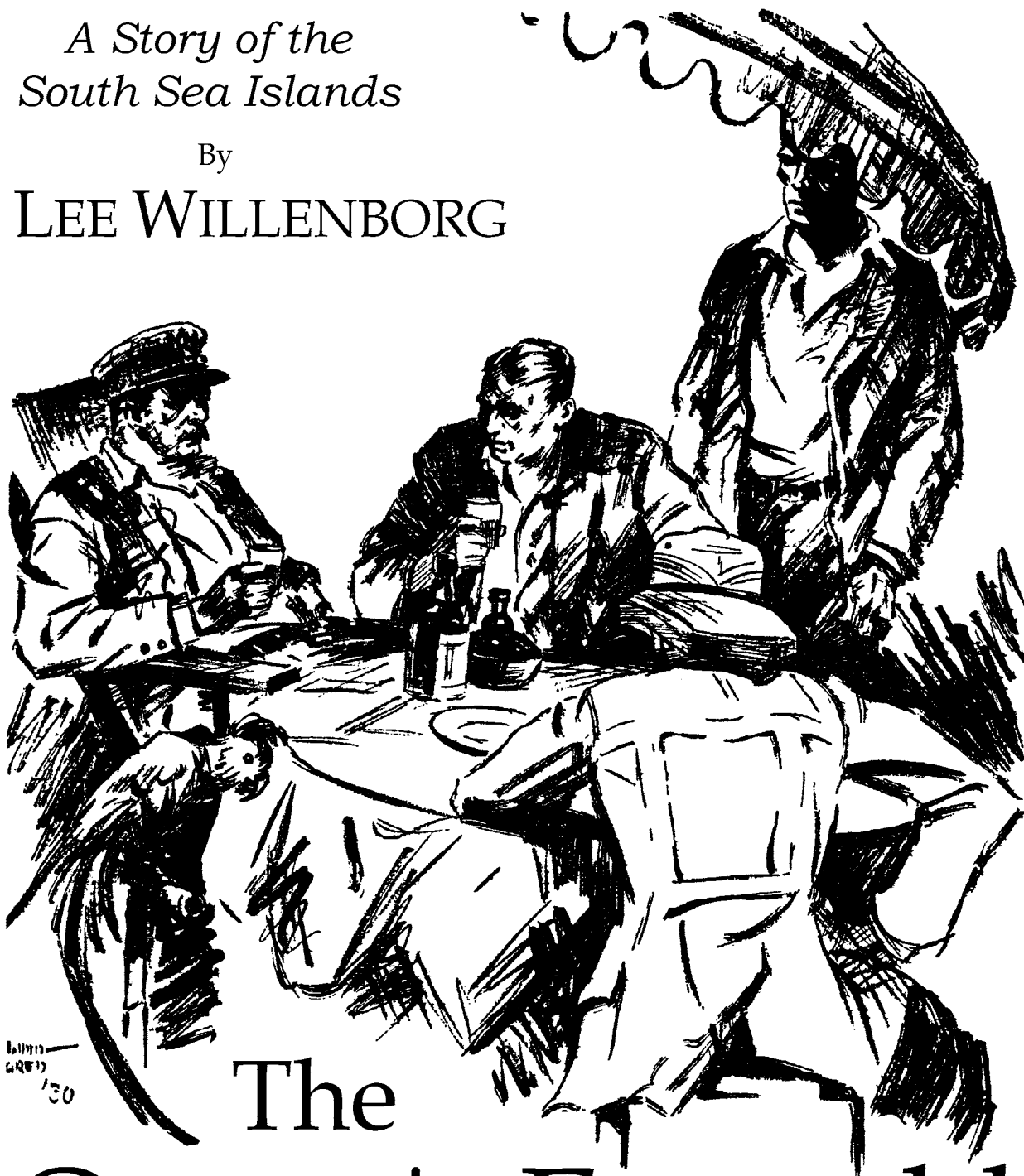


*A Story of the
South Sea Islands*

By

LEE WILLENBORG



The Queen's Emerald

THE rattle of the anchor chain thru the hawse-pipe came across the water of Nangu harbor, and caused Tondo Sam to glance up from his glass with a look of surprise. It was second drink time. He lurched to his feet with more

ease than his huge bulk would lead one to expect. The windows gave out over the harbor; but Sam could not read the name of the strange vessel thru the mosquito netting. He went behind the bar and got a field glass. Horace Manly followed him out

upon the veranda; and, while Sam gazed and gave utterance to an occasional grunt, Horace stroked his walrus-like mustache, and waited.

Horace was used to waiting; not the waiting that is a part of strategy; but the waiting of failure and futility. Life had not been kind to him. Nor—it might be truthfully said—had he done particularly well with Life. It had painted a record of, hopelessness on the wrinkled brow, and the leathery pouches under the eyes. The only thing Horace didn't wait for was the chance to buy rum or gin when his quarterly remittance came. And his next remittance wasn't due for six weeks; therefore, his waiting this morning had a tinge of chronic boredom in it.

"It's Ben Curry's old hooker, Sea Queen," Sam vouchsafed finally. "Tricked out in white paint, huh! I'll bet she still stinks of shell and copra. What the hell is Ben up to now, I wonder."

"She's an awkward old tub, spite of enamel and brass trimmings," said Horace.

"Yeh," Sam answered, "and she's been in plenty awkward situations, if you ask me."

A LIFE boat with a crew of five Kanakas and two white men lowered smoothly from the davits. The crew caught the water like a racing eight, and came toward the wharf of the South Sea Trading Company, Inc.

Sam remained on the veranda long enough to convince himself that one of the white men was a stranger, and the other one was Captain Ben Curry. Then he went inside. Horace followed; he could wait in Sam's tap-room as easily as anywhere.

Five minutes later, Captain Ben entered.

"This," said he, "is Mr. Roper."

Mr. Roper shook hands with Sam and Horace in turn.

"What's the idear of the white paint and fixin's on the old Sea Queen, Ben?" Sam demanded.

Ben laughed.

"She don't belong to me no more," he explained. "Syndicate of Australian money took her over and remodeled her for passenger service."

Sam snorted contemptuously.

"Passenger service! In this outa-the-way corner of the world? Huh! I reckon you have the pick of the women passengers set at your table, eh? Well, you could tell 'em some things that would make 'em go pale clear thru the paint on their cheeks, and no need to stretch the facts."

"Stow that!" the captain ordered.

His tone was low, but deadly; his eyes gleamed like amber ice.

"Did you get my letter?" Sam demanded.

"I'm here, ain't I?"

"Yeh, tricked out in a fancy rigged boat, with captain's papers, and all that!" Sam sneered. "I don't like it!"

"You damned dumb land-lubber!" the captain retorted. "I been in a dozen deals with you, and you never yet showed a spark of sense. You said, in your letter, that this job meant some travelling, didn't you?"

"Yeh."

"Well, there's your transportation," Captain Ben answered, with a gesture toward the anchored Sea Queen. "And be damned thankful she's a seaworthy old hooker in spite of her white paint."

"But your friend here?"

"He's going on to Friday Island," Ben explained. "I gave him a lift this far. If your business takes us to Friday, I'll carry him there. Now, let's get all the facts of this here venture of yours."

"That's for me and you only, Ben," Sam said evenly.

"Nix!" Captain Ben retorted. "Horace here is in on it; that would make you two to one. That's why I brought Roper along."

"I don't know Roper, nor nothing about him."

"You don't need to know," Captain Ben replied. "I vouch for him; if that ain't enough, we'll be on our way."

"I could get any one of a half dozen reliable men that I know."

"Get 'em, then."

"Oh, all right!" Sam said wearily. "Horace, broach a bottle of rum from the ice chest, and a coupla clean glasses."

He led the way to a tiny cubicle of a room with two windows six feet above the floor. A thousand cock-roaches walked hither and yon over the scarred paint of the woodwork; and a coconut palm scratched its fronds irritatingly against one of the windows. In the subdued light, Sam seemed a grosser organism. His bulk was the heritage of a Polynesian mother; his bullet head and pig eyes, he got from his father, a beach louse of somewhat scrambled white blood. Captain Ben, a smooth and jolly villain, black haired, swarthy skinned, was a man of great physical power. The chest and neck of a wrestler; the legs of a runner. But, to Sam, the stranger, Roper, was the focal point of interest. His weedy body was common enough in the tropics;

but the pale skin above the sandy beard was not. His eyes were cold blue, and, so far, no flicker of interest had showed in them during the interview between Sam and Captain Ben.

"Some three weeks ago," Sam began, "we buried a feller here. He had a touch of black water fever, I guess; but he was sane, all right, before he checked out. He came here to my hotel; no baggage; no anything. Nothing but the rags he stood in, and they were filthy. He had a few pounds in good notes. He drunk that up in two days. Two days more, and he was dead. Off and on, he'd ask about Lonely Island. How to get there, and how far it was, and things like that. One day, I asked what was the idear, getting to Lonely Island. He said he's seen a emerald there bigger than a pigeon's egg. It belonged to old Queen Mahar. Well, I figgered it was moonshine, this stranger's talk. They ain't a beach comber from here to New Guinea that ain't heard of old Mahar's emerald. She's about the last of them old line Polynesians that used to lord it over the whole South Seas. She set more store by this bleedin' emerald than her right eye. And, if it was as big and pure first water as reports said, I ain't blaming her much. This here stranger's talk, though, had a little different slant to it. She'd lost it; and he was there when it happened. He said there was a hell of a rumpus when the loss was discovered.

"Sam," he says to me, 'I'm done for, and I haven't a cent to pay my bed and board. But you been good to me, and I give you this tip. That emerald is in the skull of a red haired man in the canoe house on Lonely. It's a well-cured head. No wrinkles. Red hair and beard. You couldn't mistake it. You know how those head hunters can cure 'em. I seen Barung, old Mahar's medicine man, place it there. He stole it from the Queen. He got the head from the hunters over at Mahatta; how, God knows! That's why I wanted to get back to Lonely Island. That emerald is worth a king's ransom.'

“WELL, there was a lot more. What he would do with the stone; fix up some poor relations, and build a hospital, and all that. I asked him how come he left Lonely in the first place. Simple enough. He was the only white man on Mahar's island at the time the emerald was missed. Suspicion was on him from the first, so he beat it. I guess he got into the jungle back beyond old Mahar's settlement and got himself plenty lost. Between starvation and mosquitoes, he damn near

died. He lost track of the days, and wandered thru that moist, steaming hell of a jungle until he came out on the north shore. A trading schooner picked him up. There was a doctor on board, and he shot this poor devil full of quinine. He recovered some; and they put him ashore down at Billow Island. He'd heard of me, and beat it up here—to die.”

Tondo Sam gulped a swallow of rum and looked questioningly at Captain Ben. But the Captain remained impassive.

"Now, my idear," Sam went on, "is to get a flock of the usual trade junk aboard, and set sail for Lonely. Give old Mahar a line about hearing that her emerald was lost and how she was advertising a reward for its return. You, Ben, can tell her you have come to help her find it. I'll take care of this medicine man; he won't have any chance to change hiding places. Then we find the real stone; substitute a phony one and claim the reward. She'll tumble at once that it's phony. Well, we blame the medicine man because we find it in his particular lair. That will settle him, and the secret dies with him, see?"

"What was the beach comber's name that gave you this tale, Sam?" Captain Ben asked.

"He called himself Randall," Sam answered. "That don't mean nothing; them kind are always changing their monikers. Why?"

"Nothing particular," said Captain Ben. "You say he left nothing, no clothes or letters or pictures?"

"Yeh," Sam replied, "there was a handful of letters, all water soaked; and a picture of a handsome gal. A rusty jack knife, and odds and ends like that. All junk and not worth a damn."

"H'm," said Captain Ben. "We're playing for a big stake. This emerald is a whopper; I've seen it myself. It's a first water stone, you can lay to that."

His eyes flashed in the dim-lit room. Roper passed his tongue over his lips; and Horace's face took on a sudden wolfish look. Tondo Sam made a queer noise in his throat; a noise like a swine makes at feeding time. Sam watched Roper; Horace watched Captain Ben; Roper looked straight ahead. Captain Ben's glance swept from face to face, and he laughed sardonically.

"Plenty of time to think of knifin' each other when we've landed the swag," he said, and got to his feet. "But your plan about using a lot of trading junk on the old Queen is no good. You'll get a heap further with a case of champagne. She likes it; gets drunk on it whenever she can. Well?"

"Me to furnish the champagne, eh?" Sam

questioned.

"Sure; I'm furnishing transportation, ain't I?" Captain Ben countered.

"Well," said Sam, "we might as well get down to how we split. I want a third; you birds can fix the balance any way you like."

"A third suits me," Captain Ben answered.

"I want none of it," said Roper, the first words he had spoken.

His voice was cold, repelling.

"Too lily white, eh?" Sam sneered. "That changes the cut. Suppose we split it half and half, Ben?"

"How about Horace, here?" Captain Ben asked with an insolent grin.

Horace was used to that. Most white men sneered at him; he didn't mind—much.

"He'll take what I give him," Sam growled.

Captain Ben laughed.

"Mebbe he'll slit your throat for that, Sam, and serve you right," he said. "Be ready in an hour; I'll send the boat. And, if you don't have the champagne with you, I'll go on to Lonely and lift the bloomin' emerald myself."

Fifteen minutes later, Sam found Horace rooting about in a junk pile behind the house.

"What you doing there?" he demanded.

"Captain Ben said something about this Randall chap's effects," Horace mumbled. "Keen fellow, Ben, what?"

"I get your drift," Sam said. "Mebbe Randall had the emerald hidden somewhere about, eh? Well, I went thru what little he left with a fine toothed comb."

Horace rolled and lighted a cigarette with the expert dexterity of long practice.

"Roper refusing a share in this venture struck me as being a bit odd," he said.

"He looks like a bleedin' missionary to me," Sam replied, dismissing the subject. "Lend a hand with this champagne."

BUT Horace's hint about Roper stuck in Sam's thoughts; and sinister ideas were taking shape in his mongrel, crossbred mind. This thought had many ramifications. A loose tackle-block swaying in the wind might connect with Captain Ben's head. Or a slight push might easily heave him overboard. The sharks would have him quickly; and that would be that. Sam was not subtle. Plots were not his forte. He could execute, with a sort of brutish efficiency; but strategy in him was only the embryo of low cunning. Being all animal, he

reacted to Ben's suggestions as a beast to a master. He felt Ben's power, but resented his own respect for it. The thought of the emerald bit into his brutish imagination like acid. Visions of himself in every conceivable bestial indulgence, sated with pleasure, filled his consciousness like a foul serum. He scarcely heard Captain Ben's discussion of the emerald.

The four of them sat under a gay striped awning on the aft deck; it was a gorgeous blue-gold day. A turquoise sky flecked with tiny clouds, white as cotton wool. The Sea Queen lumbered over a sea shot with amethyst, and topaz and unbelievable green-blue. Wind hummed in the rigging; the queer, alluring smell of the South Seas bit pleasantly into their nostrils. But none of this riot of beauty entered their souls; unless it was Roper's. He sat with averted eyes sipping a brandy and soda and taking no part in the discussion between Horace and Captain Ben.

"It's Amsterdam cut, this emerald," said the Captain. "A jewel sharp told me that years ago. How old it is, and how and where old Mahar got it, God only knows."

"Where would we sell it?" Horace asked.

"There's a chap in Melbourne, personal friend of mine, would buy it like a shot," Captain Ben replied.

"Queer no one thought of lifting it before," said Horace.

"They have; plenty," said Captain Ben. "This Randall that Sam told about was one. You know his finish. It's no easy trick we're at, son. Getting on to Lonely is easy; getting off—with the emerald—is damned hard."

He turned to Sam, suddenly.

"How about it?"

"Yeh," Sam admitted, rousing himself from his pleasantly vicious day dream. "I been waitin' ten years for this chance. Stealing it was no good. Them damn soldiers of Mahar's would track you to hell. But a *lost* emerald is something else."

Captain Ben took a sandlewood box from his jacket and dumped its contents upon the table. Fake jewels of all kinds and sizes glowed weakly in the half-tempered light.

"The trade junk," he explained to Roper, who nodded absently.

"Pretty clever fakes," he said.

"Fair enough," said Sam. "Wouldn't fool old Mahar for a minute; but it'll fix the medicine man, and he's the bird we got to get," and he selected a green "gem" from the lot. "This looks about the

size and weight."

"All right," Captain Ben said. "Now pick out three more like it."

"Three *more*?" Sam asked stupidly.

"Sure; one for each of us," said Captain Ben. "Any one of us may get a chance at that red haired skull, and we've got to be ready to make the exchange on the second."

"Clever—what?" said Horace, smiling wolfishly.

And Roper looked off across the lovely, treacherous sea with tired eyes.

The wind eased as the sun sank; it was almost a dead calm when a great orange-colored moon marched up over the horizon. Then the wind quickened, and the Sea Queen slapped along at a good seven knots—a fast clip—for her.

"We ought to make Lonely about daybreak at this pace," Captain Ben remarked.

No one ventured a reply.

Sam, heavy with food and his normal sullenness, re-enforced by a pint of rum, stirred in his deck chair, and turned toward Horace. Horace returned his belligerent stare with a mild look of innocence. Captain Ben shrugged; he knew the murderous moods rum worked in Sam. Horace upset things by rising and stalking off with a brief, mumbled good night.

"Some day, Sam, you'll go a step too far with Horace," Captain Ben said softly.

"Bah!" Sam spat over the rail. "He's a rat!"

"Sure," the captain agreed, "but rats fight when they're cornered."

Day broke in a clear glory of perfect weather. Dead ahead lay Lonely, looking for all the world like a profile of a partly submerged whale except for its color—a lavender blue. As the Sea Queen neared the island, a coral reef disclosed itself, marked by a thin line of surf-rip. Beyond lay a lagoon, still as glass; beyond that, a strip of milk-white beach bent like a crescent. The Kanaka crew, nimble as monkeys, had the Sea Queen's canvas close-reefed in a few seconds under the urge of Captain Ben's clipped orders. But, before the anchor had paid out, Lonely Islanders in out-rigger canoes were swarming across the lagoon toward the Sea Queen.

A GALLEY boy lugged a box or two of trade junk—knives, beads, plug tobacco, gay colored cloths—up to the forward deck. The four white men retired to their favorite spot—under the aft deck awnings—where the Chink cook served

them with breakfast. The clever boatsman-ship of the canoemen climbing the reef-breakers was old stuff. Nor did they show any interest in the bickering forward, in which the Kanaka mate was accumulating piles of plantains, nuts, bananas, and bread-fruit in exchange for the trade junk. But, when a villainous-looking islander came padding toward them, their interest leaped to activity.

"The medicine man!" Sam muttered. "We're in luck!"

In elaborate language, he invited the strangers to visit Queen Mahar's island, grinning viciously between sentences, and showing teeth stained tar black from betel chewing. Captain Ben answered in *bech de mer*; but Barung understood, and nodded solemnly. The Captain rose to extend the island salute. Then suddenly his iron-hard fist shot out and caught Barung a terrible blow on the jaw. The medicine man collapsed upon the breakfast table, rolled half over, and fell unconscious to the deck.

"You've killed him!" said Horace, and giggled mirthlessly.

No one paid any attention to his hysteria.

"Some twine and a bit of canvas, Sam," Captain Ben ordered. "Look over the side, Roper, and see if there's a much painted canoe with a single paddler in it."

"The canoe is there," said Roper, "but it's empty."

"Good!" said the captain. "We're getting the breaks."

In a few minutes, Barung was tied and gagged and covered with a tarpaulin.

"Get him into my cabin, Sam."

To search thru Barung's scanty and grotesque clothing—if one might call it such—was the work of a few seconds.

Very deftly—and unnoticed by the rest — Roper picked up a small ball of twine. It was a light-weight fish-line, and rolled from a greasy leather pouch which hung from Barung's belt. Roper stuffed it into his own trousers with a quick gesture.

"H'm," Captain Ben grunted, "I guess we're licked."

"How so?" Sam demanded.

"Do you figure Barung has left the emerald in that red bearded skull Randall babbled about?" the captain countered. "Word got back to him that Randall was alive; and Barung guessed that Randall knew of the hiding place. This Barung is clever; he's fooled old Mahar for years."

Sam spat coarsely and rapped out an oath.

"You been acting queer thru this whole damn business," he said. "But I didn't reckon you'd show yellow. This here partnership is off. I tell you straight, I'm gonna lift that emerald myself unless you beat me to it."

"Go ahead," Captain Ben urged. "You'll get no opposition from me; I know when I'm licked."

Sam and Horace went ashore, the case of champagne between them. From the deck, Roper and the captain watched them land and disappear among the leaning palm trunks beyond the sliver of milk-white beach.

"How long shall you wait for them?" Roper asked as they turned from the rail.

"Oh, three, mebbe four hours," Captain Ben replied. "By that time, Mahar should be drunk; tho what good that would do Sam is past me. She may spill something, of course. But it's a thousand to one shot she won't. This Barung is the problem. Sam may want to torture the medicine man to make him disgorge; he's a cruel brute, this Sam. As I think it over, I was a good deal of a fool to come on this errand. And more so, to drag you along."

Roper looked away across the lonely flashing tropic sea. But he said nothing.

It was near noon when Sam and his jackal, Horace, returned, a little the worse for champagne. Sam, sullen as usual in drink, grunted in response to Captain Ben's questions. Horace giggled fatuously. Luncheon was nearly over before Sam spoke his mind.

"You was right, Ben," he growled, between puffs of a long cheroot. "Horace drank with the old hag, Mahar, until I got a chance at that head with the red beard. The skull was empty."

"Might as well heave anchor, in that case," Captain Ben observed; "and turn loose old Barung."

Roper followed the captain into the cabin. He pressed something into the medicine man's hand; something that caused Barung to gaze at Roper with incredulous joy. Then he broke into a flood of Polynesian. Captain Ben looked at Roper questioningly; Roper shook his head.

"We might have sweated that old fakir," said Sam, as Barring paddled off in his much-painted canoe. "But I guess he'd have lied to us."

The sails filled, and the Sea Queen moved off awkwardly.

Roper laid a glowing jewel on the deck table.

"The Queen's Emerald," he announced

soberly. "It was in that innocent-looking fish-line Barung carried. I unwound it, took out the real stone and substituted one of those phony bits of glass. He'll never know the difference."

Captain Ben gave Roper a sharp glance.

"Damned clever of you, Roper," he said.

SAM stared at the jewel for a moment. Then he leaped forward, a fat hand extended to clutch it. But a lean, yellow one was a shade quicker. Horace tore loose from Sam's grip, and backed off a pace.

"Not so fast, old thing," he said, in a high, cracked voice.

Sam's rush was immediate. At the last split second, Horace shuffled awkwardly aside and drew a blunt, wicked-looking automatic. Sam never had a chance. He staggered when the first shot took him, fear blanching his purple-blotched face. He fell at the second shot. Horace fired twice more into the prostrate carcass of Tondo Sam. Then he turned to Ben and Roper.

"You fellows don't care to take it up, what?" he said.

"Put up your gun, Horace," Captain Ben advised in a cool voice; "unless you mean to shoot Roper and me as well."

Horace giggled.

"Not till you fellows give me your word you don't ask a share," he replied. "I'm going to my cabin, and if either of you fellows try to lift the emerald—" he shrugged, and glanced down at Sam, grosser in death than he'd ever been alive.

"You got my word we'll stay off, Horace," said Captain Ben.

Roper nodded agreement. And Horace shuffled off toward the cabins, trembling a little as the first reaction of his desperate act began to take him.

"He'll be dead drunk in another hour," Ben prophesied. "Then I'll lock him in. Meantime, I got to give old Sam the last rites."

Roper watched the ship's sail-maker sew Sam neatly within a rusty length of canvas, and lash weights to his feet. Captain Ben came back as this service was completed. He had a written report of the late murder; he handed it to Roper, together with a fountain pen.

"You were the only witness," he said, "so sign up, and we'll give old Sam to the sea. I can't find anything in his effects that mentions an heir to his property; but that's government business."

Captain Ben repeated such snatches of the

Burial at Sea service as he could remember. They were few, and pathetically brief. Sam's shrouded body slid into the sea with a sharp splash. Roper leaned over the rail. He saw long, sinister shapes dart at the sinking bulk. He turned away from the rail a little sick.

Captain Ben smiled and sent the galley boy after a bottle of rum.

"Don't worry about Tondo Sam," he said. "He was a cheap louse and got nothing but his due from Horace."

He poured a drink and took a swallow of it.

"Far as Horace is concerned," he went on, "there's plenty of time to clear up his little problem later. And that brings us up to you."

"To me?" Roper repeated stupidly.

"Sure," Captain Ben agreed. "You didn't think I was dumb enough to take that silly piece of glass Horace killed Sam over as the Queen's emerald, did you?"

Roper wet his lips with a nervous tongue; he made no answer. The crew of Kanakas were singing, a dull, monotonous chant that fretted Roper's nerves. He poured out a measure of rum and gulped it wolfishly. Then he said:

"Well, what's your proposition?"

"I have none," Captain Ben replied. "You've got the emerald, I suspect. You won it because you had the quickest eye and the coolest head. You can declare me, and that poor sot, Horace, out of it if you like. But I don't think you will."

Roper laughed, a bitter mirthless cackle.

"Funny thing," he said slowly. "I came down here to find Horace. He's likely in a title by now. His uncle, Lord Thorpe, was near his end when I left Londorf six weeks ago. Horace won't need any part of the emerald. Old Lord Thorpe is a very wealthy man. Made a pile in beer."

"Your idea being to make known your errand to Horace, and send him back home, with his precious bit of green glass. Then you and me divide the loot, eh?" Captain Ben asked.

Roper nodded.

The captain got to his feet.

"I'll have Horace up at once," he said. "I'm kind of curious to see how this news hits him."

Horace blinked as he stood in the reflected light under the aft deck awning. He took Roper's announcement of his succession to the name and fortune of Lord Thorpe stupidly. As if he heard the words but was too little interested to even try to guess their import. He made no answer to Roper's inquiry as to when he would start for London.

Roper repeated it.

"I'd like to wire my firm of your plans, sir," he urged. "They would want someone to meet you, of course."

"I'm not going to London," Horace snarled with sudden heat, "nor to that damned stuffy old castle of Thorpe's. I've no friends in London, nor anywhere else."

He turned to Captain Ben.

"I was kicked out of England for stealing a handful of pearls from a silly old swine called the Duchess of M—. I suppose you will give me up to the government, at the first port of call, for shooting Sam, what?"

"Well," said Captain Ben, "that depends. I've got the authority for that. But I'm not obliged to do it, unless I see fit."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that old Lord Thorpe's estate will set you up handsome without this emerald you shot Sam for," Captain Ben explained. "Me and Roper mean to split the emerald's price without you. You don't need a cut of it, Horace; you're heir to a good deal more cash than the stone'll bring. Give up the emerald and Sam's death will be set down as an accident."

"And if I don't?" Horace asked.

"Then it goes down as murder," said Captain Ben. "Suit yourself."

Horace helped himself liberally to the rum. With the bottle still in his hand, he started back to his cabin.

"Let you know in an hour," he said.

"Did you know him in England?" Captain Ben asked, when Horace disappeared.

"Not personally," Roper answered. "I used to see him now and again. He ran with a fast set, and it did for him. He told the truth about being kicked out of England. That was ten years ago. He's only forty now; but he looks sixty."

"Yeh," Captain Ben agreed, "that's what the tropics do to you. Take yourself, for instance. Six weeks ago, a respectable barrister in London. Today, conniving in a jewel robbery. Yeh; you got to have plenty moral guts to live under the equator and stay straight."

THE sun sank in an unbelievable glory of crimson and violet and topaz. The sea grew suddenly dark and sinister-looking. The swift tropic twilight deepened into a velvety, soft darkness; and presently a great full moon shouldered up above the east rim of the sea. Roper

still lingered under the aft awnings with Captain Ben, waiting for Horace. A galley boy set up a dinner table, furnishing it with linen and plated silver that gleamed wanly in the thin moonlight. Captain Ben sent him to call Horace to dinner. He returned with the news that Horace was not in his cabin.

"Wandering about drunk somewhere," the captain growled. "We might as well eat, Roper; no use waiting for him."

They were well along with dinner when Horace lurched toward them from the shadowy deck.

"Little late," he mumbled. "Sorry."

He laid a jewel on the cloth. Roper picked it up.

"So this is the famous emerald of Queen Mahar, eh?" he sneered.

With a quick motion, he flipped it overboard. But his scornful laugh died suddenly. He found himself looking into that blunt, ugly pistol that had done for Tondo Sam. And the hand that held it was not the hand of a maudlin drunkard; it was steady, steady as death.

"Search him, captain," Horace ordered in a cool voice.

In another moment, the real jewel lay under the deck-lights, flashing with subtle fire. Captain Ben sucked in his breath at the sheer beauty of it; but Horace's pale eyes never left Roper.

"The irons for this lying swine, Captain Ben," he went on.

The captain took one look at Horace; he was crazed with drink, no doubt. And dangerous. He sent for the irons. The mate led Roper off, cursing bitterly. Captain Ben breathed easier when Horace pocketed his gun. For a long time, silence lay upon the deck. Except for the gentle drone of the night wind in the rigging and the soft gurgle of the tiller wake, there was no sound.

"Roper!" Horace said at last, and spat over the rail. "I wonder how many aliases he's had in the last ten years?"

"You knew him, then, back in England?" Captain Ben asked.

"Too well," Horace answered, "and I knew him here. He knew me, too. He lied that pearl

necklace thing on me. I could have cleared myself; but there was a girl. Roper's sister. She was all white. God, it's funny how he could be her brother! What a silly fool I've been, I know well enough. Well, that's past. How he knew about Tondo Sam's scheme is a mystery; we'll probably never know the truth about that. I wasn't fooled by that piece of glass he laid down this morning. But Sam was; and I saw my chance to even up a long score there. I've no regrets. Sam was a filthy, treacherous rat. That talk about Lord Thorpe decided me that Roper was trying to cross you up. I'm kin to Thorpe. But he isn't ill; nor very old; nor like to die soon. I heard from him less than a month ago. I was a fairly decent sort ten years back, Captain. Before rum and the tropics got me. Why didn't he make known his errand at once? Why did he wait till I'd killed Sam? Because he had no errand. But, with Sam's killing on me, he could bleed me white, d' you see?"

Captain Ben nodded.

"What are you going to do about me for sending Sam over?" Horace demanded suddenly.

"I guess it's up to you," the captain said, at last. "You've fallen pretty damned low. I don't know whether you can climb back. But I'll give you a chance. This boat need a purser. Do you want the job?"

"Yes, sir," said Horace promptly. "I'll do my best, which isn't very good. If I pull up to a decent place, I'll thank you. If not—well, I'm no worse off."

"Then to Australia to market the emerald, I suppose?" said Horace later, glancing at the green, flashing jewel that still lay upon the table.

The captain picked it up, turning it slowly in his hand.

"A lovely thing, eh?" he said, staring at Horace.

For a second, Horace gazed wistfully at the emerald. Then he turned and walked to the rail. Presently the captain slipped the jewel into his pocket and moved up beside Horace.

"We ain't going to Australia, purser," he said gruffly. "We're going back to Lonely and give old Mahar her blinkin' jewel!"