

SHIP OF THE GOLDEN GHOUL

A PULSING NOVELET OF DEATH'S
MOST DESIRABLE ENCHANTRESS

by LAZAR LEVI



Aboard that ghoulish sin ship, Thyra, mistress of maddening allure, wooed Bruce Howell to passion's bondage . . . for a lust-mad carnival of pagan love—a carnival that would begin by turning Howell's ravishing Julia into a leprous monster!



*"See how much you love her,"
Thyra laughed, "when my slaves
have finished carving her living
body into horrible welts!"*

BLOOD-DRENCHED twilight crept stealthily over the wind-rippled waters. Bleak islands lifted skeleton ribs to hide the ocean from the bay. Craggy cliffs, darkling at the base and peaked with gore, hemmed in a foaming welter of surf. A narrow channel led through toothed rocks to the doubtful shelter of the cove.

The small boat with its single mast drove furiously through the incarnadined sea. The white sail fluttered like a wounded bird.

The helmsman swung his tiller with a practiced hand. His keen tanned face was strained and anxious; his eyes were all for the tortuous stretch of still water ahead. On either side lay death. He dared not look behind.

But the girl, crouching aft, peered fearfully back at the islands they had just rounded. Her oval face, enshrined in windswept, blue-black hair, was drained of blood, her eyes were wide and staring, her curved red lips parted. The spray roared over the boat, drenched her slacks and close-fitting jersey. The wool clung to her young form, and lifted into prominence the tumultuous heaving of her firm breasts.

"There it is again," she screamed suddenly.

"What?" Bruce Howell flung into the wind.

"The schooner!" Julia Hunt forced through clenched lips.

"You've got a bad case of jitters, Julia," Howell said with an attempt at lightness. "After all, that boat has as much right on the seas and in this bay as we have. Ten to one it's a yachting party."

But his face, carefully averted from the girl, belied his words. He swung heavily on the helm to catch the last ounce of wind. The craft heeled, righted itself, and went on with a rush.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Julia moaned. "It's been chasing us for half an hour. If it catches us! *A ghost ship with a dead man for a pilot!*"

Bruce set his teeth. He, too, had caught that dread glimpse when the strange schooner seemingly materialized out of thin air to bar their path to the outer sea.

Only skillful handling avoided imminent collision. Howell shouted angrily as the gaunt hull slid noiselessly by, a boat's length away. The words gurgled in his throat, died suddenly.

For the two-master, every sail set and bellying in the wind, was deserted. Not a man leaned over the rail at his shouted objurgations. Not a man? Had the ship been entirely deserted, Julia would not

have screamed and cowered; he lost momentary control of his boat.

FOR, standing stiffly at the wheel, grasping the spokes with rigid fingers, staring straight ahead with hideous eyeless glare, was a corpse.

The clothes that covered his bony frame were dripping and slimy with mold, as though they had rotted in the depths of Davy Jones' Locker. Lank, straight hair plastered close against the shapeless face of one who had been drowned a long time. The flesh was ripped away from the gaunt stark arms.

A dead man steering a dead ship!

The sinister ship swerved, swung in a foaming circle as no sailship manned by human hands had ever been able to do, and bore down swiftly on them again.

The dead man at the wheel leered hideously ahead as he missed, this time by inches.

Then began a nightmare chase through narrow rock-filled channels, around one island and behind another, a game with death. Only Howell's superb seamanship had kept them thus far ahead. It was a gruesome ending to the pleasure sail they had joyfully planned.

Now they were in open water again, the shore ominously in front, barred by foaming reefs, and the schooner driving headlong behind.

On it came, every sail set; black, funereal, sinister, cleaving the water with silken deadliness. The corpse pilot grinned at them with eyeless sockets, his shapeless features bloody in the last darts of the sun.

"It's gaining on us," Julia moaned.

Bruce raced for the safety of the channel. The surf caught and lifted them high. It dropped them struggling into a trough.

Julia shrieked. Half a length away, driving down on them with the blackness of doom, was the ghostly schooner. The corpse grinned with shapeless laughter. Bruce saw death approaching with express speed, flung the boat wallowing to one side.

It was too late!

Crash! C-r-r-ash! A ripping, rending sound. Bruce felt a violent blow on his leg, and went down into an angry welter of waters, down until his lungs were bursting with pressure.

With a violent effort he heaved against the sucking whirlpool, shot gasping to the surface.

White caps, snarling and foaming at his first escape, lapped at him. He fought them off, breasted a billow.

"Julia!" he called, pounding anguish in his veins. Where was she? What had happened to her? The welter of foam, the slash of tumbling waters, brought back no encouraging cry. The dark was heavy on surf and rocks. No sign of their boat, no sign of anything. He swam desperately in circles, calling, seeking.

Suddenly there was an answer. High above the roar of the surf it came. Laughter, full-throated, mocking, fled over the waters. Laughter from a woman's throat, melodious with strange overtones, yet sinister, horrible.

A wave slapped Bruce around, raised him high, facing the ocean. Then it dropped him into wallowing fury. In that instant he had seen.

Far to the northwest, driving for the islands, was the schooner. Its black hull and blacker sails were silhouetted against the last agonies of the expiring sun. Red dripping gore filtered through gossamer canvas, framed the ghost ship in a bloody frame. The corpse pilot was hidden by cabin and masts.

But in the stern, arms outstretched, stood a woman!

The last shafts of frame bathed her curving, voluptuous figure, penetrated the single thin black garment that made little pretense of covering her.

Her face was beautiful and white, the drained white of snow and paper and death's grim mask. Her long, free hair was yellow with the yellow of molten furnaces, and lit with glinting red. Her rounded arms were bare, and the lines of her body, white, yet glowing behind the filmy covering, made sensuous, provocative allure.

It was from her lips that the siren, mocking laughter came.

A vision—of hell, or of heaven, Bruce did not know which. Dark came with a rush, the stars pricked out, and it was night! The schooner was swallowed up in blackness.

Bruce shook his head to clear his bewildered brain, struck out again, crying: "Julia! Julia!" Despair clutched at him.

A huge wave reared high, swarmed at him. It caught him, struggling, gasping, smashed him over pointed rocks and foaming reefs, further, further, until, *crash!* thought and feeling went out with a rush. The last thing he heard, or thought he heard, was a voice faintly calling for help.

BRUCE groaned, and put his hand to his head. It came away sticky; there was a lump on his temple that dripped. The universe seemed to revolve in ceaseless gyrations about him, but gradually it slowed. He looked around.

Frowning cliffs made blacker masses against the night; glimmering white marked the line of beating surf. He was lying on a beach. Anguish tore at him. Julia was dead, drowned. That solitary fact beclouded the vision he had seen, the ghastly vessel with its ghastlier crew.

Faint weeping came to him, drifting through the night. He sprang to his feet, hurts, pains, disregarded. "Julia!" he shouted frantically.

"Bruce!" The sobbing ceased, unbelieving joy in the exclamation. "Where are you?"

He ran stumbling over shifting pebbles to the dim white figure. He caught the girl in his arms. Her supple form, drenched, molded by jersey and slacks, lay limp for a moment, then she gently disengaged herself.

"I thought you were dead!" he said.

"And I was sure I'd never see you again," she answered. "I was flung into the quiet channel, and it was easy to swim to shore." She clung to him again. "What was that horrible ship that ran us down, and that dead man at the wheel?"

Howell stroked her dripping hair, laughed uneasily. "I suppose we've seen the *Flying Dutchman*," he tried to jest, "and we're the first mortals to get away alive."

He said nothing of that final vision of the siren woman.

Julia looked around. "Where are we? How shall we get back?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "There may not be a village within twenty miles."

"And our boat?"

"Sunk—without a trace."

She stood close. "I'm afraid of this place," she shuddered. "I feel as if we're being watched."

"Nonsense!" he said with forced lightness. "There isn't a living person within miles." But he, too, had felt the impact of invisible eyes. A strange dread swept over him. Something was terribly wrong with this beach.

Julia let out a startled cry. "Did you hear that?"

Bruce whirled. "What?" he demanded.

"A slithering of pebbles, as if someone were creeping stealthily. Oh, Bruce, I'm so afraid!"

"It's nothing," he said, and knew that he lied.

For now, unmistakably, came the soft slow grind of stone against stone. Someone was moving out there.

He tensed, cursing the fact that he had no gun. Nothing could be seen. There it was again, that grinding noise—nearer.

Bruce catapulted through the darkness, arms outspread. A flailing left arm contacted solid form, whirled his own body around. He smacked into the ground, right hand swinging.

A startled cry, a savage oath, and he was grappling furiously with a man. A blow thudded in his face. He lashed out with his fist. It crunched solidly into bone. A grunt of pain was the response. A hand broke free, slashed along his side. Fire seared his flesh. The hand held a knife. Bruce clutched blindly, caught the wrist, and twisted. There was a clatter of steel on stone and a curse.

“Okay, brother,” Bruce said coldly. “Who the devil are you?”

A scream blasted the night, a scream of terror. It was Julia’s voice, choked off into horrible silence.

Howell flung his captive from him, sprinted toward the sound. Someone was running ahead, padding with sure feet over the loose terrain.

“Halt, or I’ll shoot!” Bruce shouted. The moon tore the obscuring clouds to shreds, flung its wan light down on the beach. A dim figure, bowed over, humped gigantically in wavering white mist, fled before him. It dropped its hump with a dull thud to the ground, and melted into deep-pooled shadows.

BRUCE checked his fierce pounding. He could never catch the fugitive now. That shapeless bundle, flung from shoulders to the beach, lying limp, immovable, brought him to a stop. He dropped to his knees, caught a white, wan hand.

“Julia, are you hurt?”

The girl opened her eyes, terror-filled. There were bruises on her throat, where fingers had choked off screams; one white shoulder gleamed through a rent in the jersey.

“He—he’s gone?” she whispered.

“Yes,” Bruce nodded.

“He came on me—suddenly. He almost strangled me; his grip was like steel.”

Bruce helped her to her feet. Her slim form shivered, and her naked shoulder pierced the semi-darkness disturbingly.

“You’re all right, now,” he assured her.

“But—but what does it all mean?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out,” he said grimly. His mouth was a hard line. He retraced his steps, looking for the man he had knocked out.

The man was gone!

Bruce circled around. There was no trace of the prowler. He had melted into nothingness just as Julia’s assailant had done. Even the knife had disappeared.

The cliffs vaulted them on three sides, beetling, terrifying. The fog was thicker on the sea; only the surge of the breakers could be heard. But something like a blob against the precipice, one hundred yards back from the beach, caught his eye.

“That looks like a house,” he said. “We’re going there, Julia.”

The girl shrank back. “Who could live in a spot like this?” she whispered fearfully. “It might be—”

“It might be anything,” Bruce said with a certain tightness.

Together they stumbled over rocks and sank into wet sands. The mist swirled and played tricks on their eyes. At last, the house loomed solidly before them.

In the wan, fog-distorted light it looked gigantic. A rough-timbered place three stories high, with rambling wings that faded indistinguishably into the cliffside. Heavy wooden shutters barred the windows.

Bruce marched boldly to the blank-eyed door.

Julia said in hushed tones, “Don’t go, please. It looks deserted, but I feel eyes watching us from inside.”

His balled fist thudded heavily against solid panels.

“Open up!” he shouted.

“Come away,” Julia cried, tugging at his arm.

Bruce slammed against the timbers.

“I know there’s someone inside,” he commanded. “Open up, I say.”

Strange padding noises within, the creaking of bolts. The door swung slowly open. A man stood silhouetted, holding a lantern. His other hand clutched a huge revolver.

He scowled. He was of medium height, but powerfully built, and his dress was the dress of the Maine woods—khaki shirt and khaki pants tucked into heavy boots.

“Stand where you are,” he growled.

“Lower that gun!” Bruce snapped. “There’s a girl with me. Our boat was sunk out in the bay, and we just managed to make the shore.”

THE man seemed startled. His gun hand jerked. "You came from the bay side? Then, by God . . .!"

A peevish voice shrilled from above.

"What's all the palaver about, Jerry?"

Jerry's face went respectful. "There's a couple out here, Mister Stapleton, man an' woman. They claim t' come from the bay."

The unseen voice went shriller.

"Don't let them in, Jerry. Bar the door—quick."

Jerry thrust out his gun hand. But Bruce was too fast. He shoved his foot inside the door, backed against the door lintel.

"No, you don't," he said calmly. "We're not murderers. We've been cast ashore, I tell you, and Miss Hunt can't sleep out in the open."

A new voice spoke from within the house. It was genial, hearty.

"Don't let your crazy fears get the better of you, Cuthbert," it boomed. "I'll bet these folks are normal humans like ourselves."

Light flooded the interior, illumined the great main room with stone fireplace and luxurious equipment of a millionaire's hunting lodge. It also etched out the huge curving staircase, and the two men peering down.

They descended together; one with confident thumping stride and the other cautiously.

The big confident man was ruddy of face and cold of eye. He flicked his gaze appreciatively over the girl, rested a second too long on the half-disclosed breast, and boomed humorously:

"Welcome to our humble dwelling. I'm George Kober, owner and stuck with this hunting lodge. I bought it sight unseen from Stapleton here, and would sell it back to him for half the price. But he's smart; he had the nerve to offer me just a quarter of what I paid him."

Stapleton flushed angrily. He was small and wiry, with a predatory nose and a shrill voice.

"Damn you, Kober!" he said thickly. "I wouldn't take it back as a gift now. It was you who came to me with the proposition to buy it. I hadn't been near the place for two years."

The big man eyed him curiously. "You knew about that ghost ship? Maybe that's your game; selling the place to honest folk at fancy prices and then scaring them off so they'll give it back to you for a song. Better'n the jewelry racket, eh?"

Stapleton laughed shrilly: "Honest, folks! That's a good one. Retired bootlegger, or maybe not so retired, ha! ha!"

The false geniality fled from Kober's face. Murder peeped from his unwinking eyes. The men glared at each other.

Jerry shifted his revolver slightly. It held a bead on Kober's belly.

"We still ain't heard what brought these here two to Sutter's Point."

Kober swiveled, saw the carelessly pointed gun. He took a deep breath. He said quickly: "That's right, Dunn."

Bruce, dripping wet, said calmly: "You haven't given us a chance." Julia clung to his arm. "I'm Bruce Howell and this is Julia Hunt. We were spending our vacation sailing along the coast. We saw this bay and thought we'd explore. But someone else thought differently. A black schooner with black sails and a dead man for a pilot deliberately ran us down."

Stapleton let out a groan. Kober's jaw went slack; he took a step backward.

Dunn's face was a bitter mask. "The Black Ship!" he breathed. He swerved on the others. "I told you I saw it again, sailing down the islands without a breath o' wind stirring. Mister," he said to Bruce, "you're lucky. Ain't anyone ever escaped the Black Ship afore?"

Stapleton moaned softly. "I'm going back to Boston."

Kober snarled: "You sold me a bill of goods, Cuthbert, an' you're staying as my guest."

Bruce stared slowly from man to man. There was strange tension here. Nor had the mystery of the double attack been explained. He had been careful not to mention it. Yet, none of them could have been the man with whom he had fought.

"What about the Black Ship?" he asked.

Jerry's brows were a straight gash. "Once, mister, this here cove was a fishing village. Mr. Stapleton had this place built five years ago for a huntin' and fishin' lodge. I was his caretaker an' guide. I kinda know these woods pretty well. Then the Black Ship came, last summer. No one on board, only a dead man. It ran down our boats, one by one. Not a man ever got away to say how. An' each time the dead pilot changed. The body of a fisherman what had been drowned from the last boat. So those what was left quit cold. Ain't another soul within twenty miles of this place."

"You remained," Bruce pointed out.

Jerry's face twitched. "Not me," he said emphatically. "I wrote Mr. Stapleton an' lit out

with the rest. Only came back now 'cause he wired me he sold the place, an' was coming out with the new owner. Wanted me t' fix things up a bit. But I'm a going."

KOBER fixed him with a cold, fishy eye. "You're staying, Dunn."

The woodsman turned on him snarling; relaxed suddenly.

Another man entered the room, a pasty-faced, gaunt individual. His hand rested in his coat pocket, and a suspicious bulge snouted directly at Jerry.

"Okay, Mr. Kober," said Dunn.

Bruce started. His eyes and the eyes of the newcomer clashed. There was baleful hatred in the other's glance.

The left side of his face was puffed up, and one eye was rimmed with black and half-closed.

Kober grunted with a satisfied air, "That's fine. You can go now, Slim." Then, for the first time, he caught sight of the man full-faced. "For the love o' Pete, Slim, what happened to your mug?"

"Fell down stairs," the man answered unwillingly.

Bruce thought it was time to interrupt. "Miss Hunt is soaked through; so am I. Suppose we get a chance to dry our clothes and get some sleep."

Kober said: "Sure! Jerry, get these folks comfortable, and I mean *comfortable*, see?"

Dunn's face twisted into a mask.

Kober tapped his teeth thoughtfully with a pencil. "And to make sure you don't get ideas, you or Cuthbert, your old boss, let's have your gun."

The guide's eyes flamed. Without a word he turned his weapon over.

Kober pocketed it, and spoke jovially to Bruce, the while his eye fastened on Julia with a speculative luster. "Good fellow to have around, Slim is. As a matter of fact, he's to blame for my buying this joint Was up here last year—on private business of his own."

Slim's face, puffed as it was, went white.

Bruce was abnormally wakeful on that night. He lay quietly, listening. Julia, exhausted from the terrors of the day, lay asleep in the next room. Their clothes had been dried before a log fire. Some faint precautionary instinct caused him to go fully clad to bed.

Each of the four men who occupied this house had something on his mind, something that boded no good for the other three, nor, for that matter, for

their unwilling guests. And Kober's eye had lurked too long on Julia's beauty, so had Slim's slinking side glance.

Slim, without question, was the man who had followed them on the beach. Who, though, was the other, the one who tried to abduct Julia? He determined to stay awake. His last thoughts were of the murderous Corpse Ship and that strange, seductive yellow gold woman. Then fatigue and anxiety claimed him.

He awoke to a woman's terrified scream, to the scuffling of bodies. He cleared the bed, raced to the door, flung it wide, slammed down the darkened corridor, crashed heavily against the door of Julia's room. It gave way with a splintering sound.

The moon cast ghastly shadows on the rumped, unoccupied bed, the papered walls. A great fear pounded in Bruce's veins. Outside, silhouetted against the dull gleam of the night, was a face, half-turned to peer inside. One instant it was there, grotesque, mustachioed, broad, thick lips bared back from fang-like teeth, then it was gone.

Bruce leaped forward, only to swivel at a repetition of the scream. Julia, white and scantily clad in the dim shadows of the farther corner, crouched with arms upthrust, as if to ward off a horrible vision.

Feet pounded down the corridor, smacked into the room with a jitter of scared tongues. Stapleton, spare body faultless in bright silk pajamas, Jerry in khaki pants and shirt, Kober in a long dressing gown beneath which Bruce, for all his tension, did not fail to notice the peeping trousers. Kober had not yet gone to bed.

"What's the matter, Julia?" Bruce cried.

She pointed with fear-trembling arm to something that made a dark blob on the floor. Then her eyes went wide, to see the clustered men, her own bareness. With a moan she plunged for the bed, dragged the sheets up around her chin, and sat there, shuddering.

Jerry said: "Good God!" Stapleton leaned against the bedpost as if his knees were giving way. Bruce and Kober reached the sprawled body.

It lay in a splash of silver moonlight, but the widening pool around it was a dark, frightful red. A man stared sightlessly up at them, flat on his back. He was gutted open. From chin to navel the huge slash carved through breast bone and ribs, to reveal a bloody heart that pumped feebly with expiring life and geysered bubbling, gurgling spouts of

blood.

“Slim!”

Kober, legs astraddle, ruddy face knotted into a ferocious mask, stared down at the horrible remains of his henchman. Then he turned, with a speed surprising in a big man, and an ugly automatic muzzled at Bruce.

“You did this, fellow?”

Howell shook his head.

“I heard Miss Hunt scream, and I got here an instant before you did.”

Kober swerved on Julia, half-fainting against the heaped pillows, her wide-open eyes clinging as if fascinated to the dead man.

“Speak your piece, girlie,” he snarled.

“He—he crept into my room while I was asleep,” she faltered. “He—he caught hold of me. I tried to fight him off, but he was too powerful. Then I cried out.”

Kober took in the outlines of her slender figure through the revealing sheet, and licked his lips stealthily. “Slim tried it once too often, eh?” he grimaced.

Julia shuddered. “He had dragged me half out of bed when someone—something caught him by the shoulder and pulled him away. There was a great swish and a thud; then I must have fainted. When I came to, he was lying there, like—like that, and someone was hammering at the door. There was no one else in the room.”

Kober towered over her. “Who did it?”

“I didn’t see.”

“Look here, Kober,” said Bruce, stepping forward. “I saw a face disappearing through the window when I broke in. It wasn’t anyone of us; it was a savage, horribly distorted face.”

“A swell story,” Kober sneered. His gun covered them all, his eyes were watchful. “I don’t give a damn about Slim. He had it coming to him. He tried to doublecross me. But I take care of my own jobs. Don’t think, Stapleton, I’m not wise to you.”

THE small spare man shrank back. “What do you mean?” he quavered shrilly.

Kober’s laugh was hard and rasping.

“Just this. Slim dug it out of a jane last time he was up here. A jane with yellow hair and a face like nobody’s business. She fell for him, the flossie did, and she put him wise to Mr. Cuthbert Stapleton, the big Boston jeweler. How he was sneaking

diamonds in through this God-forsaken hole without taking the trouble to divvy up with his Uncle Sam.

“That’s why I bought this dump and got you to come up. I checked up on you and your mysterious trips half a dozen times a year—on business south, you told your wife.”

Stapleton fell back. His face was the color of ashes.

“I did go south,” he said desperately. “I—I had another establishment in Richmond. I didn’t come here, I swear. I had nothing to do with that yellow devil. She lied if she said—”

Kober hit him with the gun barrel across the mouth. “I want the jewels. Where are they parked? Slim knew, and held out on me. He’s dead now.”

Stapleton raised a silk clad hand to shield his face.

“It’s all a lie; I never—”

Jerry said brutally: “That yellow-haired girl disappeared right after Stapleton and Slim left the village. She ain’t been seen since. She ratted with them both. I had my suspicions about the boss’s racket. He usta visit the cellar a lot.”

“Okay,” Kober grinned triumphantly. “I’ll give you a cut for that, Dunn. Come on, Stapleton, show me.”

He shoved the wretched man out of the room, turned, said in threatening tones: “None of you move till I get back.” He slammed the door. They heard the key turn in the lock.

Bruce looked at the woodsman with loathing. “You sent Stapleton to his death,” he said coldly.

Julia feverishly dressed herself underneath the sheet.

Jerry smiled queerly: “Stapleton’s safe enough. Kober won’t dare kill ‘im until he finds the jewel cache. An’ that’s what I’m gunnin’ for. I’m a Federal Investigator; been after this diamond smuggling fer quite a while.”

“Oh!” Bruce gulped. “Then you’d better give the orders.”

“Right!” Jerry snapped. His gaze flicked to Julia, who, fully dressed now, except for the torn jersey, was standing beside Bruce. “You two stay here, while I trail ‘em. Stapleton will tell Kober sooner or later. Then I’ll grab ‘em both.”

He took a key out of his pocket, and unlocked the door. His black-browed, weather-beaten face peered back at them. The door shut, there was a faint click, and the sound of retreating footsteps.

Julia clung to Bruce. "He locked us in."

Bruce frowned. "Wants to keep us out of harm's way, I suppose," he said, masking his thoughts. He went to the window, looked out. A wisteria vine clambered up from the soil beneath, flung leafy branches past the casement. It would have been easy for an active man to reach the room and drop back to the ground.

Something moved in the mist-swollen moonlight, something shadowy and sinister. In an instant Bruce was out on the vine, making his way swiftly down. That, he had no doubt, was the killer, dark-skinned, mustachioed.

Julia ran panic-stricken to the window, leaned out.

"Bruce! Bruce!" she cried softly. "Don't leave me."

He looked up at her pale, lovely features. "I'll be right back," he assured her. "You're safe enough in the meantime."

The mist swallowed him up. He dropped lightly to hard earth, ran in the direction he had seen the figure disappear. The trail led around to the extension right wing of the sprawling house, to an open cellar door.

A horrible strangled screeching lanced through the dark, a man's voice bursting with agony. Then it guttered out. It came from the dank reaches of the cellar.

BRUCE dived headlong down the stairs, slammed through weltering darkness toward the last echoes of that screech. Other feet clattered in broken step with his.

A stream of radiance split the solid black, bobbed up and down over the cement floor. Bruce slithered warily to a halt.

"Who's that?" he demanded sharply.

The flash caught him full in the face, blinded him. Then a voice, edged with impatience.

"Hell! I thought I left you upstairs."

It was Jerry Dunn.

Bruce exhaled. "I saw someone skulking outside and climbed out of the window to investigate. Then I heard that screech."

"So did I," Dunn said grimly. "Come on; we'd better trace it." Together they went cautiously over the cement, the beam of the flash showing whitewashed walls, around an angle into the cellar underneath the main house.

There they found the body.

Sprawled on his back, staring sightlessly into the yellow flare, split open from chin to navel, heart and lungs exposed and ebbing away in a welter of bright, bubbly blood, lay—George Kober!

Of Cuthbert Stapleton not a sign. A wall safe, set in the cement-block wall, its door camouflaged to resemble concrete, swung open. Nothing was in it.

Jerry swore bitterly. "Stapleton had confederates. They did Kober in, an' then they all lammed with the diamonds. That was their cache."

He turned suddenly, and went slamming through the cellar, out into the mist-laden night. Bruce, with the light withdrawn, was left groping. He hesitated. Should he follow Dunn or get back to Julia? The thought of her loveliness exposed to the hideous prowlers left him sick. He cursed himself for a fool.

Just as he bumped his shins against the upward-leading stairs, he heard the last departing shriek of this crowded night of terror. It sent him crashing recklessly up the rickety steps. Horrible anguish held him in a vise.

Julia had called his name in an ecstasy of despair! Then sudden silence.

"I'm coming!" he shouted and crashed into her room. The moonlight, irradiated by the driving globules of fog, made pearly opalescence on the bed, dissolved the terrible travesty on the floor that had once been a man.

Howell brought up short. Julia was gone. The casement window, wide-open, mocked him with its knowledge of what had happened.

He sprang to it. The fog rolled in from the sea. He shouted despairingly. No answer but the muffled echoes of his own voice. Then, far off, as if from an unfathomable distance, so faint it seemed more like the pounding of blood in his own veins, came laughter—mocking, luscious laughter.

Bruce started and swore at himself. In the blind swelter of events he had forgotten about the Black Ship, and its dead pilot and yellow gold siren. He went rapidly down the vine, padded across the rubby beach. At the water's edge he kicked off wet shoes, clothing that was still damp.

The moon was an obscure shadow. The thunder of the breakers came to him, but they were invisible. Nor was there any sign of the Ghost Ship.

Yet he staked everything on his intuition that the solution to this devilish night lay outside the reef. He plunged into the cold water, clad only in

shorts, and swam with long powerful strokes; an unarmed man pitting himself against desperate killers, against the lure of a yellow gold unearthly woman.

WITH the last embers of his strength, Bruce caught feebly at the anchor chain. For almost an hour the wild surf had buffeted and pounded at him; jagged rocks of the reef gouged long slashes in his aching sides; whirlpools plucked at him with irresistible fingers. Then, with leaden weights for arms and every stroke a nightmare, he caught sight of the sinister loom of the Black Schooner.

He rested, fighting for breath, allowing strength to flow sluggishly through sodden, weary limbs. The Ghost Ship was silent as a grave.

He swung his cramped body up the chain, hand over hand, until he stood on the gently pitching deck. His legs were weak, and he grabbed at the nearest object for support.

It was cold, clammy, yielding to the touch, nauseating. He snatched his hand away with a shudder of repulsion. There, horrible, fetid, staring crazily at him out of eyeless sockets, was the dead pilot, upright, lashed to the wheel with strong lashings.

Bruce staggered away. The deck was bare, black. Then momentarily the fog lifted, and eerie moonshine flooded the ship. The two masts rose starkly into the sky, the black doomful sails idle on the poles.

Some instinct caused him to tilt his head sharply. A low smothered gasp escaped him.

High up, dangling from the outstretched yardarm, treading nothingness with desperate fantastic steps, was the dark figure of a man. A man with a noose around his neck, and a lolling, gaping head at a broken angle to the stretched-out neck.

One quick terrible glance and then the fog rolled in soft billowing folds to shield the racked eyes from the sight. Bruce groaned. There had been something familiar about that half-seen shape. Was it Jerry Dunn?

He took a tentative step forward, and whirled. His ears had caught the stealthy slither of feet. But it was too late. He felt his neck clutched in a strangling grip. Fog gave way to exploding stars.

BRUCE HOWELL moaned and moved uneasily. His head ached and his tongue was a

furred animal. He opened his eyes. He blinked unsteadily, wonderingly, closed them again.

Laughter floated to him in his unbelieving daze; luscious, mocking laughter.

“You’re not dreaming, man out of the sea,” said a throaty, overripe voice.

He opened his eyes again, and stared. His shorts had been removed and a dragon robe of flaming red, silken, soft to the skin, enveloped his otherwise nude body. He was fastened to a chair with shackles that held hands and feet.

He was in the cabin of the Ghost Ship, of that he was certain, yet it seemed more like a scene out of the Arabian Nights. Fantastic silken coverings hid the wooden walls, damask couches of rarest workmanship, piled high with soft voluptuous cushions, were scattered in careless profusion, and the gilt figure of a writhing snake-like god sat in a little shrine to one end. The single eye of the god was a flaming, blood red ruby of gigantic size.

Two men stood, straight and stern, on either side of the enshrined god. Swarthy of hue, sullen-browed, broad thick lips curled back from long yellow fangs, mustachioed, wearing black turbans on coarse black hair, inhuman in the cruelty smoldering in their eyes. Each held in sinewy hand a broad-bladed, razor-edged curving weapon. Bruce recognized it with a shudder; the terrible *kris* of the Malays, that could slash a man open from chin to navel with a single powerful stroke. The weapon that had killed in fiendish fashion Slim and his boss, George Kober.

But it was the woman who claimed his immediate and fascinated attention. She sat on a gorgeous damasked couch, supporting herself with one perfectly molded arm against the cushions.

Her hair, flowing free over half-bared shoulders, was a glittering cascade of spun yellow gold. Her face, white, devoid of any tint, was a lure and a snare. Her blood-red lips parted voluptuously to disclose tiny regular teeth, and the slumberous, smoldering eyes, heavily lashed in black, invited and mocked simultaneously.

But it was her body that made the blood rush faster through his veins. A thin transparent gossamer enshrouded yet did not conceal her voluptuous charms. Whitely glowing, every warm curve a desperate seduction to the glance, thighs rounded and creamy, breasts like ripe melons, smooth legs whose bare toes matched fingers in the dark red of their manicured tints.

She stirred sensuously under his gaze, and little ripples traveled over her tinted flesh. Her Mona-Lisa-like smile lingered approvingly on his lithe sinewy figure, the chiseled handsomeness of his face.

"I am glad they did not kill you," she purred. Her gossamer robe drooped from one bare shoulder. She did not try to replace it.

"Who are you?" he asked hoarsely.

She rose from her couch in a single sinuous movement and came close to him. Her eyes bored unfathomably into his, her breasts heaved with slow seductive movements, the perfume of her amorous body enveloped him, made him dizzy with its fragrance.

"Call me Thyra," she said slowly, parting her luscious red lips. She swayed toward him. "I like you," she breathed.

The blood pounded in his eyes at her nearness; for the moment he forgot where he was, everything. Her warmth enfolded him, made him feel . . .

"You and I—" she murmured throatily, "we'll leave this little hole, we'll leave that stupid fool gaping vainly on the beach, and sail to the East. There, with jewels enough to buy a kingdom, you will be emperor, and I an empress."

Howell's head cleared. She had talked too much. He twisted his face away from the sight of her glowing, semi-clad body.

"What have you done with Julia—Miss Hunt?" he demanded harshly.

Thyra moved sharply back. Her dead-white features, a moment before suffused with tempting allure, snarled into venomous fury. Her dark eyes lashed fire, her ripe red lips retracted to show sharp white teeth. Her very hair writhed and glittered like whipping snakes.

"You—unutterable fool," she screeched. "I offer you myself—wealth beyond your dreams—and you ask for that whey-faced chit, a mere bag of bones, a milk and water whimpering baby. Very well, she is here. Muhammed and Ahmad saw to that. And you shall see what I, Thyra, do to my rivals."

She clapped her hands. The immobile Malays sprang to life, moved forward. The deadly *kris* glittered wavily in their hands. She spoke rapidly to them. The tongue was Eastern.

They bowed and left the cabin.

"Don't you dare harm her," Bruce cried frantically.

She smiled at him mockingly, her eyes heavy-

lidded. She moved undulatingly back to her couch.

THE two Malays returned, dragging between them the stumbling, half-limp form of Julia Hunt.

Her face was drained to paper whiteness, her eyes were round with terror. They went wider at the sight of Bruce, shackled to the chair. She gave a little gasping cry. Howell strained with every muscle against his bonds, his heart hammering in his bosom.

"If you hurt her; just one little hair of her head, I'll—I'll kill you," he said thickly. "Even if I have to come back from the dead!"

Thyra said contemptuously: "You love that little chit, that bit of ice, enough to pass me by, do you?" Her smoothness changed, her face distorted. She rose like a spitting, snarling cat arching on a backyard fence. "I'll mar that precious body of hers until you'll shudder away from it with loathing. Muhammed! Ahmad!" She clapped her hands. "Strip her to the waist!"

Bruce cried desperately: "No! No! Leave Miss Hunt alone. Let her go—safely, unharmed; and I'll do anything!" His voice lowered. "I'll go with you—to the East."

Thyra laughed—and there was only the fury of a woman scorned in that devilish laughter. "Too late!" she mocked. "I do not take leavings, the scum of another woman's party. But she shall suffer for being more desirable to you than I. Strip her, I say!"

The Malays, bestial faces smirking cruelly, reached simultaneously, ripped downward in a single flowing motion.

The torn jersey gave with a rending sound, came apart in pieces that were flung into a corner. Julia's firmly molded body emerged, quivering and mantling red in its exposure to alien eyes.

The poor girl turned mute imploring gaze on her bound companion, clapped covering arms over her breasts, and stood, head bowed, waiting, bravely waiting for whatever was in store for her. Not a sound, not a whimper, left her clenched lips.

Thyra laughed insanely. "A bag of bones!" The blood dripped from her lip, where she had bitten through in the violence of her passion. "Run your *kris*es over her shameless skin, slash her up and down and sideways, leaving marks that will heal to hideous scars. But do not kill her. Oh, no! do not kill her. I want her lover to see her hideous,

deformed. Then he will realize what he has missed.”

With stealthy licking lips the Malays lifted their sinister wavy weapons. Bruce did not know it was he who yelled imprecations, commands, implorements, oaths, at the yellow gold woman, her Oriental minions. He strained every muscle to the bursting point; a red haze clouded his vision, but the shackles held.

The cruel *kris* flashed in air, descended. Julia, head still bowed, unmurmuring, awaited the first slicing slashes. Thyra watched, gloating, avid. Bruce locked eyes tight.

Hot words lanced his shrinking flesh, brought his eyes wide again, unbelieving.

“Drop them, you black sons of . . .”

The wavy-edged swords went down with a thud into the soft-piled rug. The Malays swerved, saw who it was that stood in the doorway, and swarthy skins went sallow with fright. They groveled on the floor, ejaculating streams of foreign syllables.

Thyra froze where she stood, shrank against the couch, stumbling.

“You!” she breathed.

Bruce cried out: “Jerry! Jerry Dunn! I thought you were hanging from the yardarm.”

The Maine woodsman, Federal Investigator, whatever he was, bent bitter black brows in a solid line. He scowled sardonically: “Not I, though no doubt pretty Thyra would have been willing.”

He advanced slowly into the room, eyes all on the voluptuous figure of the yellow-gold woman, gun snouting at the whole room. She fell on the couch, shrieking, bare arm upthrust to avoid a blow.

“Jerry!” she cried. “I didn’t do anything; I swear I . . .”

“Stop your damned lying mouth,” he said brutally. “I heard enough back in the lodge, and I heard enough outside the cabin before I came in. Your ratting days are over! Can’t keep your filthy paws off any man what comes along, can you? You ratted to Slim, trying to make him. You ratted to this guy, this Bar Harbor dude. You betrayed me with Ahmad and Muhammed—don’t tell me, I know. Yuh figured to get all the diamonds on board and beat it, leavin’ me on the beach to take the rap. But when yuh stole the boat, you didn’t know I had another one hid under the cliff a ways, did yuh? Me, what made a queen out of a village streetwalker!”

Thyra rose from her couch, faced him defiantly. Two red spots shone on her dead-white cheeks. Her eyes had a baleful, half-mad glare.

“Okay, Jerry, you called the turn.” She laughed shrilly. “You’re right; I never had any use for you, a cheapjack backwoodsman, a guide, a caretaker. Bah! You were only a tool—for everybody. For the syndicate in Amsterdam that hired you to run the smuggled stones from Sutter’s Point to their man in Portland. This ship was *their* idea, not yours. It picked up the stones from their yacht on the high seas. Its Diesel engines that made it sail as no schooner could, its dead black color, the touch of the drowned corpses for pilots, scared all the superstitious oafs out of the cove, and made it easy to run in the jewels.

“And whose idea was it to win over Ahmad and Muhammed and get away with the whole swag ourselves. Not yours! You didn’t have guts enough to think that up. Of course I was going to doublecross you. Why not? You tried to two-time me too, didn’t you? Grabbing that skinny girl on the beach. With the jewels in my hands, what did I need *you* for; a poor fool of a country yokel! Look!” She reached feverishly behind her, pulled out a casket, snapped open the lock in a single movement. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds, millions in precious gems cascaded out.

SHE was mad now. She plunged her hand in, sent the coruscating jewels tossing in the air, scattering in a shower of broken light. Her mouth was wide and her eyes glared. Her red lips foamed with mingled spume and blood. The robe had fallen to her waist. She looked like the goddess of madness.

Bruce forgot his situation in the sheer insanity of it all. Julia stood as one sculptured in marble. The Malays lifted their heads stealthily, awed, afraid. Dunn stared with the stare of a bird hypnotized by a snake. He did not seem to know he had a gun in his hands. He licked his lips with unconscious movements.

“Mine, all mine!” she screamed. “Not yours, dupe, yokel! You an emperor! Bah! Rather a chambermaid to pigs!” She swerved suddenly. “Ahmad, Muhammed! Kill! Kill!”

They had been waiting for that signal. They were on their feet as if steel springs had pushed them. Dunn started. The hypnotic sway of Thyra’s assumed madness vanished. His thick brows bent in

savage snarl; he mouthed indistinguishable oaths. He raised his gun. Its muzzle roared flame and steel.

Thyra took a quick step forward and her eyes went wide. A round red hole appeared suddenly under her right breast. The red widened. She staggered and fell sprawling. Julia shrieked and fell fainting across a couch.

The Malays were already upon him, *kris* slashing downward. Dunn pivoted like lightning. His gun spat death for a second time. The bullet ploughed through Ahmad's cheek. Face a gory mess, the Malay dropped like a stricken ox.

Dunn pivoted again. But fast as he was, Muhammed was faster. The *kris*, a wavy snake of steel, chopped down. Jerry screamed shrilly. His left hand fell with a hideous plop to the reddening carpet, and blood geysered from the severed wrist. The bullet smacked into a tapestry.

Muhammed raised the deadly *kris* for the finishing rip from chin to navel. Dunn gathered all his strength, heaved his gun across the Malay's snarling countenance. The high-bridged nose caved in and smeared in sodden pulp. The *kris* whistled aimlessly into the carpet.

Animal sounds came from Muhammed through squashed lips. He leaped tigerishly upon his prey. Jerry, still clutching his gun in his good hand, went down, the Malay rolling over him like a cat. Over and over they went

Blood splattered over couches, over walls, over Bruce himself. Whoever won would kill him, would do worse to Julia.

Jerry's good hand rose suddenly, came down with a thud of steel upon the Malay's smashed-in nose. An inhuman screech followed. Muhammed sagged. Dunn half-rose to his knees, and smashed blow on blow into the shapeless face. He had eyes only for his victim.

He did not see the slow, torturous, writhing progression of Thyra, her magnificent body half-nude, across the carpet. It was terrible, like the convulsive movements of a dying snake.

Bruce watched her progress, fascinated by her will power, shrinking from the hate in her pain-swept eyes. She was at his shackled feet, raising her head with infinite effort. Life was leaving her fast.

"You—" she mouthed with difficulty, "are good looking. Never mind—your Julia. Kill that—Jerry. He—killed me. Here!"

She fumbled with uncertain hand in a fold of her dress, brought out with stiffening fingers—a key. It fell with a plop to the rug; her eyes glazed, and she dropped back—dead!

WILD hope surged through Bruce, gave him superhuman strength. Dunn brought his gun down smashing for the last time. Muhammed quivered and lay still. Bruce jerked himself over, chair and all, squirmed his fingers toward the precious key. He caught it just as Jerry, aroused by the noise, was turning slowly.

Snarling, Jerry raised the gun. Bruce saw the slow movement, worked with frantic haste. The click of the key in the lock was heavenly music. One hand was free. He went for the other. Dunn, eyes aflame with the lust to kill, staggered to his knees, swayed, his gun describing an arc.

The other hand went free just as there was a crashing concussion of sound. Bruce's shoulder rocked with a searing fire. Unmindful of the pain, he clawed desperately at the locks on his legs.

At last he was a free man. But the muzzle was this time unwavering, centered on his heart.

Bruce sprang, and Dunn, half-dead, pulled the trigger. As he did so, the smeared mass beneath him stirred suddenly; a corpse-like hand reached up, pushed. Jerry stumbled, fell back against the upright edge of the *kris*. His shriek lanced through the cabin, as his skull sliced in twain against the wavy steel. The bullet smashed into the snake-like god, brought him crashing. The Malay collapsed again.

Bruce ran for Julia and picked her up in his arms, stumbling over the gory dead out into the clean sweet air of the night. The mist had cleared, the moon was a kindly disk of silver, and death and madness and lustful cruelty seemed far away. Until his eye went up, toward the mast, toward the body that jittered in the gentle breeze. He recognized it now. Cuthbert Stapleton, Boston jeweler, and, unknown to Dunn, but not to Thyra, respectable fence for the smuggled fortunes in gems.

Bruce covered Julia's semi-nudity with a strip of sail; he gently massaged her arms and cheeks. His thoughts were busy. That fabulous sum in jewels must be turned over to the Customs authorities. There was a substantial reward in the offing. Enough for marriage.

Julia opened her eyes, saw him bending over. Her arms went up, closed with shuddering embrace about his neck.