



SINNERS IN PARADISE

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Part 1. Decision

"YOU KNOW, Robert," said Jane Morte reflectively, "I think there's something very odd about this ship."

Her husband, stretched out on a gaily coloured mattress on the sports deck, turned lazily.

"Odd, my dear?"

"Definitely. Don't you agree?"

Morte sat up, thin hands clasped about his knees. "I suppose you're still thinking of that poor invalid?"

"Surely," persisted Jane, "you must be curious about her?"

Robert shook his head. "Not me! I'm on holiday. I'm finished with mysteries."

"Ah!" Jane pounced on the word. "Then you do admit that Miss Harland is a mystery?"

Morte shrugged. Rising, he crossed to the ship's rail. From this elevated position he could see the folds of softly hissing foam, curving back in long furrows from the prow of the *Medusa*.

How different, he mused, from the setting of their first sight of Miss Harland, twenty-four hours ago.

August had ushered in a winter of blue skies and warm sunshine, but with the first days of September the weather had changed. Then came the rains, deluging and buffeting the city, converting the streets to shining mirrors and laying a leaden dullness over the waters of the harbour. It said much for the M.V. *Medusa* that even on such a day she contrived to look like a newly painted toy as she lay at anchor in Darling Harbour. A ten-thousand-ton freighter, fitted with every possible comfort, she was taking twelve selected passengers. At their first view of the ship, so clean, so trim, so obviously disdainful of the weeping skies she was so soon to leave, any qualms Robert may have held about this sudden enterprise vanished.

His publisher, Hammond, was there to wish them farewell. A personal friend of the *Medusa's* skipper, Hammond had been able to arrange almost last-minute bookings for the Mortes. Robert and Jane were early arrivals; it was almost an hour before the first of the other passengers made their appearance.

Then a long black car, luxurious to the point of ostentation, nosed its way to the wharf gates. A uniformed chauffeur alighted and held open the door. First to appear was a young man, broad of shoulder, lithe of step, and belted into a camel-hair overcoat. Raising an umbrella, the stranger assisted his

companion from the car. This was a woman, befurred and bejewelled, a woman whose heavily made-up face merely emphasised her middle age. She walked stiffly on high-heeled shoes, clinging tightly to her companion's arm as they negotiated the gangplank. As they moved along the deck, Jane had turned to Hammond.

"Do you know those people?"

"Only by hearsay," the publisher had replied. "Mrs. Harriet Sheerlove and her nephew. Canadians— filthy with money and doing a world tour." Then, noting the expression on Jane's face, he added, "They won't worry you, Mrs. Morte." Robert remembered he had the impression Hammond was about to add something more; instead, he seemed to swing off at a tangent. "Captain Robertson tells me we're waiting for Miss Harland and Dr. Kingsley. This woman's a convalescent, I believe. Some months ago she was mixed up in a rather nasty car accident. It's played the very devil with her nerves. The skipper tells me she's taken the private suite with the glass sun-balcony."

It was then that the second car made its appearance. Leaning on the rail, closing his eyes against the glitter of the sun, Robert could recall every detail of their first glimpse of Leila Harland.

Leaning on the arm of a middle-aged man, a figure walked the dock slowly and hesitantly, as though every movement was painful. A small grey figure buttoned into a thick coat and muffled about the face with a silken scarf. Dr. Kingsley— for even at this distance the man's profession was stamped upon him— guided his charge solicitously up the gangplank.

They had cleared Sydney Heads two days later. A very quiet sailing.

That was twenty-four hours ago. Twenty-four hours in which their world was transformed from grey to blue, and soon the Queensland coast lay shadowy and vague on the far horizon. Robert had retired early that night. Next morning he rose with a feeling of freedom such as he had not known for years. He was on holiday, with nothing in his surroundings to remind him of the tedium of the typewriter.

But Jane, knitting industriously on the sun-deck on their first morning out, was not to be rebuffed by silence.

"Robert..."

He sighed a little. "Yes, dear?"

"Do you really believe Mr. Redmond is Mrs. Sheerlove's nephew?"

"I've never given it a thought, Jane."

Mrs. Morte wound a strand of wool in her fingers. "He's almost absurdly decorative, isn't he?"

Robert turned toward the far end of the deck, where Earl Redmond lay sprawled in the sun, naked except for a pair of abbreviated shorts. Even at that

distance, the young man seemed conscious of scrutiny. He stirred, then, waving a brown hand, rose to his feet. This sudden friendly salute surprised Robert. Since coming on board, Redmond had made little effort to cultivate any society other than that of his aunt.

Now he was walking toward them. Morte noticed he was carrying a book, the dust-cover of which was very familiar.

Redmond grinned as he approached. "So we've got a real live author on board?" He waved the volume. "That steward guy down in the library gave me this. You know, it's kinda interesting."

"I'm glad you like it," Robert said civilly.

"Why not? I'm no highbrow," said Mr. Redmond candidly. "Me, I'm a sucker for this cheap blood-and-thunder stuff."

Jane said sweetly, "My husband has a very wide lowbrow clientele, you know."

"Guess I just can't wait to tell Hattie about this," Redmond said. "She collects celebrities. Back there in Toronto, our place was always knee-deep in them."

A shrill cry cut into the conversation. "Earl! You foolish, headstrong boy! Just you come and put on your robe at once. Do you want to catch your death by sunstroke?"

At the top of the companionway stood Mrs. Harriet Sheerlove, a thick towelling dressing-gown over her arm. Mrs. Sheerlove, her plump, aging body encased in green slacks, with a vivid yellow sweater outlining her ample breasts and thick arms.

"Earl!" she squeaked. "You come right here this minute!"

Redmond smiled with a flash of white teeth. "No, Hattie. You come *here*. I've made a swell discovery." Robert watched as Mrs. Sheerlove pattered obediently across the deck. The brilliant semi-tropic light dealt harshly with this woman, revealing the obviously dyed golden hair and pitilessly outlining the mask of rouge and powder.

Redmond thrust out an arm and drew her into the group. "What d'you know, Hattie? Mr. Morte here's written fifteen books."

"Really, now!" But the ejaculation was mechanical. Jane, watching carefully, had the impression that the woman was abruptly disconcerted. Then she smiled, and her next remark came a shade too quickly. "There, now! I always said you were a Personality, Mr. Morte! I said it to Earl the first few hours out— didn't I, Earl honey?"

Redmond was smiling. "You said you were sure the Mortes must be important, because they were so almighty high-hat to everyone."

"Earl!" His aunt wheeled on him. "You just love to embarrass me, Earl! I could have died right there and then about what you said to Dr. Kingsley last night."

"Gosh! When I was trying to be sociable— "

"Sociable!" Mrs. Sheerlove's plump face was pink. Again she faced the Mortes. "Do you know what he did? Went straight up to the doctor and asked if Miss Harland would join in a game of progressive ping-pong!"

Robert said mildly, "Scarcely a remark in the best of taste..."

"There— you see?" She flung this remark at her unabashed nephew, then addressed the Mortes again. "But the doctor took it so nicely. Just smiled and shook his head. But Earl should be downright ashamed, making fun of a poor invalid like that!" Abruptly, Mrs. Sheerlove veered off at a tangent. "Have you seen her this morning?"

Jane put down her knitting. "Only for a few minutes. As I came out on deck she was sitting behind the windows of the sun-balcony. But the moment she saw me she moved away."

Redmond said casually, "Kinda elderly dame, isn't she?"

"I can't tell you," Jane said levelly. "Her face and head were covered entirely by a grey silk scarf."

No one spoke. In the pause, the gentle throb of the engines and the rush of water beat strongly in their ears. The silence was broken by Mrs. Sheerlove, who held out the bathrobe almost appealingly.

"Earl, dear, do put this on," she begged.

"Nuts!" snapped her nephew. "For Pete's sake, Hattie— don't fuss so! If you want to nurse someone, get yourself a post with that Harland dame."

"Now, honey..." began Mrs. Sheerlove, but the young man cut her short.

"What's wrong with her, anyway? No one should be stuck away behind glass like a goldfish in a bowl. What that dame wants is open air and sunshine— and plenty of it."

A voice spoke from behind them: "Perhaps I am more qualified to judge than you, Mr. Redmond."

Dr. Ralph Kingsley had approached the little group so quietly that his appearance remained unnoticed until he spoke. Jane smiled and Robert nodded toward an empty deck-chair. Their acquaintance with this thin-faced, soft-spoken physician had begun on the previous evening, when they found him seated at their table. Kingsley apologised for the error, and later, in the lounge, this introduction led to further conversation. The Mortes had liked Dr. Kingsley on sight. There was about this man a quiet assurance that commanded respect, an authority leavened with gentle humour and good breeding.

Kingsley was smiling as he seated himself.

"I'm rather glad you brought up the subject," he said genially. "Because there's nothing at all sinister in my patient's seclusion. Quite recently she was concerned in a car accident which scarred her face. In consequence, she has had to undergo plastic surgical treatment. All this has left Miss Harland in a highly nervous condition. I prescribed this journey as a means of recuperation. Under the circumstances, a crowded passenger ship was impossible."

The Canadian coloured; then abruptly he rose and ran his fingers through his thick hair. "I'm hot as a bride's breath!" he announced. "I'm taking myself into the pool."

They watched him as he moved down the companionway. Mrs. Sheerlove, after a quick, nervous, almost apologetic nod to the others, followed him. Jane broke the silence.

"This trip takes five weeks, I believe?"

Robert looked at her in surprise. "Yes, but— "

"Oh, I'm not being irrelevant," she assured him. "But I'm just wondering if I can take five long weeks of Mr. Redmond!"

Kingsley produced a pipe and tobacco-pouch. "You're going to be spared that, Mrs. Morte. Those two people are leaving the ship at Paradise Island, in the Barrier Reef. They're staying a month before completing a tour of Australia."

Robert frowned. "Then this freighter is stopping off the Queensland coast?" And, as Kingsley nodded, he went on, "But surely that's most unusual?"

"Not with the *Medusa*." The doctor puffed for a moment. "Ever heard of Arthur Burton?"

"Of Burton and Skinner?" Robert nodded. "Of course. They're the largest firm of manufacturing engineers in this country."

"They also happen to own the *Medusa*. At the moment, she's laden to Plimsoll line with Burton cargo for Liverpool." A gust of wind scattered sparks, and Kingsley cupped his hands around the bowl of his pipe. "Burton and Skinner are holidaying on Paradise Island with Burton's daughter, his secretary, and some kind of foreign man-servant. We're laying off to pick them up." He paused and glanced at Robert in a half-puzzled way. "But surely you know all about these arrangements?"

Morte said drily, "My wife and I left in rather a hurry. I was writing up till the last minute. I was literally a writing-machine, geared to turn out so many thousands of words each day. Each hour of my time was planned to produce the maximum of writing energy— until a week ago."

"And then the machine broke down?"

"Oh, no," said Jane Morte suddenly. "Margaret Vane did that."

Kingsley's tone was puzzled. "I seem to have heard that name somewhere..."

"One of the best-known radio actresses in Australia," Morte explained. "Margaret Vane was playing lead in my serial, *The Golden Serpent*. A week ago the studio rang me to say that she'd had a complete mental collapse and had to rest for six months in a nursing home. As the serial was tailored for this woman's personality, it had to be stopped." Robert smiled. "It also meant that, for the first time in years, I was free from my most binding commitment."

The ship's bell chimed eight times and the sound roused the doctor.

"Ever been up this way before?" he asked.

Morte shook his head. "There's never been time. A visit to the North Queensland coast and the Barrier Reef Islands was something that was always just ahead."

The doctor shook his head slowly. "Don't expect too much, Morte. Oh, yes— the islands were glamorous enough once. But that was long before the place became a fashionable tourist resort."

Jane Norte asked casually, "You seem to know the coast, doctor?"

"Pretty well. I was stationed at Cairns during the war." He rose and picked up his sun-glasses: "And now I really must take a look at my patient."

The first of what was later— much later— to become known as the Curious Incidents in the Case occurred shortly after the conversation on the sports deck.

Robert had returned to their cabin alone to change for lunch. When Jane entered, she found her husband engrossed in a map of the Queensland coast, mounted behind glass on the wall. He turned at her approach.

"Have you noticed this, Jane? It's a regular pirate chart! Just look at these names. Silversmith Island— Anchorsmith— Blacksmith, Anvil, Hammer, Forge and Bellows! It's enough to make one believe in the stories of buried treasure-chests!"

"Talking of pirates and unpleasant people like that," said Mrs. Morte tartly, "we've had an invitation from Mr. Redmond. He's asked us for drinks in his cabin." She sat down on her bed. "I'm not going!"

"Why not?"

"First, because liquor before lunch always makes me sleepy, but mainly because I don't like the young gentleman's company."

Morte grinned at his reflection in the long mirror.

"In that case, I'll skip the invitation, too."

"You'll do no such thing," she retorted. "It's going to look much too pointed if we both ignore the man. After all, we are passengers on the same ship." She crossed and, rather surprisingly, kissed him.

"Run along, my dear, and enjoy yourself."

Morte found Redmond's cabin more or less a replica of their own comfortable quarters.

He was last to arrive. Mrs. Sheerlove, Dr. Kingsley and Captain Robertson were gathered in a group near the table. They nodded at his entrance. Redmond, in his dressing-gown, was surprised to find Morte alone.

"Where's your wife?" he asked. Robert murmured excuses regarding a headache and tried to ignore the sudden glint of malicious amusement which flickered in the Canadian's brown eyes. "Guess that's bad luck," he said casually. "Now, mister. What are you drinking?"

"A small whisky," Morte said. "And I mean small."

"And what do you want to kill it with?"

"Is there any soda?"

This request caused a mild complication. The host delved into the cabinet and clattered bottles impatiently. Then he straightened.

"Hattie, pet. What d'you know? I'm clean out of soda..."

"Make it water," began Robert, but the solicitous Mrs. Sheerlove gave a sharp squeak of protest. "No, no, no! There's *plenty* of soda. It's all in my cabin." She moved toward the door and they heard her pattering down the corridor.

An expression of impatience crossed Redmond's face. He reached for the water-jug and splashed Robert's glass. "Have this while we're waiting," he invited, and then raised his own drink.

"To crime!" he said.

He gulped the liquor almost in a mouthful. Captain Robertson, by contrast, sipped at his glass in a manner almost ladylike. In appearance, the skipper of the *Medusa* was a small, pink man, bald as an egg. As if in compensation, Nature had endowed him with the bushiest pair of eyebrows Robert had ever seen.

It was Kingsley who gathered Morte into the conversation. "We're still on the subject of the Barrier Reef Islands," he explained. "The skipper was telling me something about Paradise— the island we make some time tomorrow."

"Charming spot. Quite unspoilt. Well off the beaten track."

Later Robert was to become accustomed to Captain Robertson's staccato conversation, but now he had to strain to catch these telegraphic monosyllables. He drew his brows together and squinted at Robert.

"Paradise. Very well named. Wish we were staying there longer!"

"And just," inquired Morte, "how long do we stay?"

"That depends. Three days. Maybe a week. Owners' wishes, you know. Not mine." He turned to Kingsley. "Been there yourself, I believe?"

The other shook his head. "I know of the island only by hearsay. There was rather a nasty fatality there during the war. They flew the victim to Townsville for treatment. Unfortunately, he died on the way."

"Died?" It was Redmond. "Was this guy taken sick?"

Kingsley's answer came reluctantly. "Well, yes and no. He was poisoned. He trod on a stone-fish."

Behind him, Earl Redmond hooted in open scorn.

"Say, Doc— what the heck is this? Another fish story?"

Kingsley turned slowly. "No," he said clearly. "It happens to be true. During the war, Army Operations established a radar base on the island. This young chap was an operator. The personnel were warned about roaming the reefs barefooted. This lad ignored instructions... for the last time."

Captain Robertson cleared his throat. "Fact!" he grunted. "Stone-fish. Devilish things. Put your foot on it. Up come its spines. Pours poison into the wound."

Redmond said unsteadily, "What kinda dope is it?"

Dr. Kingsley shrugged. "Pathology has yet to find out. So far, we only know its effect. A paralysis of the entire nervous system which is proof against even powerful opium injections." His voice slowed. "And which kills within four hours."

And at that moment the telephone on the table shrilled abruptly. Earl Redmond took up the receiver.

"Yeah?"

With the ringing of the telephone, a silence had fallen in that sunny cabin, a hush threaded through with the living sounds of a moving ship. Robert, who was closest, could hear very faintly the thin metallic voice at the other end of the wire. Actual words he could not distinguish, but their effect upon Earl Redmond was alarming. He gave a sudden choked-off gasp and his mouth hung open, foolish, witless.

"No," he whispered, "it can't be... No..."

The colour had drained from his face. Then abruptly his knees folded under him.

The receiver, dangling from its cord, swung slowly backward and forward.

Dr. Kingsley leapt forward, with Captain Robertson half a step behind. As they bent over the unconscious man, some instinct prompted Morte to put the receiver to his ear. But the line was dead. Barely had he replaced the receiver when Mrs. Sheerlove entered. Several bottles were clasped firmly to her breast, and under one arm she hugged a carton of cigarettes.

"I just thought I'd step down to the bar— " The words died suddenly on her lips.

"Earl!" Her voice was shrill with anguish.

She had dropped on her knees, cradling the dark head in her lap, smoothing the chiselled features with trembling pudgy fingers. The tears streamed down her cheeks, furrowing the powder so that the face she turned to them was tragically ugly in its grief.

Harriet Sheerlove rose and stood with fingers pressed across her mouth, so that her next words were muffled. "It's sunstroke," she said huskily. "I knew it would happen."

"Yes, yes." Kingsley straightened. "But I can assure you that the sun had nothing to do with this. Judging by the way your nephew's pulse is racing, he's had a very bad shock." He spoke over his shoulder to Morte. "See if you can find any brandy in that cabinet."

Mrs. Sheerlove cried out impatiently. "Of course there is! Everything he wanted is there. I've never stinted him a single thing." Abruptly she seemed to realise the significance of the doctor's first words, and she stared at him with reddening eyes. "A nasty shock? But that's just plain silly!" She wheeled on the captain. "You said he was talking on the telephone!"

Robertson nodded. "Right! Most odd thing I've seen—" Then he stopped at a gesture from Kingsley. Robert, feeling among the stacked bottles, turned. Redmond had stirred, the head lolling drunkenly. A tongue flickered across his full lips and he swallowed.

"Where... Where is she?" he whispered.

Harriet Sheerlove was by his side in a moment. "I'm right here, honey-lamb."

Abruptly Redmond's white teeth flashed in a snarl; he thrust out an arm and almost pushed the woman out of the way.

"For God's sake leave me alone!" he snapped. "And stop pawing me!"

"Earl!" The woman was on her feet, brushing the tears from her face so fiercely that mascara smudged one cheek. "Earl, darling, you just don't know what you're saying! You're not well..." But the young man was struggling to his feet, ignoring her outstretched hand. He steadied himself against the table and faced the three men.

"Guess I made a prize monkey of myself." He essayed a tight smile.

"Reckon I've been hitting the bottle too much."

Mrs. Sheerlove did not speak. Morte was suddenly conscious that his companions felt their presence an intrusion in that cabin. Kingsley broke the silence with a slight cough.

"All right now, Redmond?" And as the other nodded impatiently, he added, "If I were you, I'd rest up this afternoon. And I'd lock the liquor cabinet for a few days."

Captain Robertson grunted something about duties and the other guests took the cue rather thankfully. Morte, who was last to leave, closed the door firmly behind him, but not before they caught the beginning of a tearful tirade front within.

"Earl, darling— how could you? To speak to me like that... and right out in front of all those men..."

When Robert returned to his own cabin, he lost no time in retailing his story. By the time her husband had finished, however, Jane was sitting up and frowning.

"Of all the extraordinary things!" she announced. "Whatever do you make of it?"

"I'm waiting to hear your theory."

"Obviously some stupid practical joke."

"Stupid practical jokes don't cause men to faint," Robert pointed out.

"Anyway, who'd be likely to do such a thing?"

"One of the officers, perhaps. Even one of the crew."

Somewhere the ship's bell beat out a single stroke. A water-glass vibrated in its container with the motion of the ship. As Robert did not speak, Jane prompted him. "Don't you agree?"

"No." His tone was sombre. "There's something you don't understand, Jane— something I don't understand myself. I haven't mentioned it to anyone else..." He had taken a cigarette from his case and he turned it over in his fingers. "You see, when Redmond answered that telephone I was closest to him. And I could hear the voice on the other end of the line. Not words— just the pitch of the tone." He raised his eyes.

"I'll swear that it was a woman."

Jane digested this information. "Could it have been Harriet Sheerlove's voice? She was out of the cabin at the time."

"If it comes to that," said Robert testily, "so were the entire ship's personnel." He snapped a lighter under his cigarette. "I tell you, Jane, that woman was almost beside herself with panic. And, in the name of fortune, why should Harriet Sheerlove want to play such a senseless trick?"

"All right," said Jane shortly. "Who else could it have been?"

Morte blew a thin spume of smoke. "Possibly Leila Harland."

"Oh, no!"

"Jane— have you ever heard of a well-to-do family in Sydney named Harland?"

"No," she replied. "But that doesn't mean a thing." Her face lightened and she jumped from the bed. "Robert— we've both been so stupid! There's one certain method of tracing that telephone call."

"How?"

"Ask the switchboard operator," cried Jane triumphantly.

Morte grunted. "On this ship the inter-cabin phone service is automatic."

"Oh," said Jane, rather dashed.

From down the corridor, the musical chime of the dressing-gong rang clearly. Mrs. Morte padded across to the wardrobe and began to change.

"Jane..."

She turned from the mirror to see that familiar humorous twist to his mouth.

"I've been thinking," he went on. "A woman made that telephone call. Make no mistake about that! So if it wasn't Mrs. Sheerlove or Leila Harland, there's only one other person it could have been. You!"

"I almost wish I had thought of it," she confessed. "Mr. Redmond is so very keen on shocking people that it's more than time someone gave him a dose of his own medicine."

NEITHER EARL REDMOND nor Mrs. Sheerlove made an appearance at lunch. Scarcely had the meal began, however, when Dr. Kingsley appeared. He paused at their table and suggested that the doctor might care to join them. Kingsley seemed pleased at the suggestion. The meal over, Jane returned to her cabin to write letters. When Kingsley left, Robert, feeling drowsy, wandered on deck.

On that lazy, sun-drenched afternoon, everything should have been conducive to slumber. Yet, curiously enough, Morte found himself suddenly clear-minded and alert. It was inevitable that his mind should revert to that perplexing incident of the morning.

On a cargo ship ten miles from land, a ship with a passenger-list composed of a handful of strangers, some unknown person had rung through on a telephone and shocked Earl Redmond into unconsciousness. Robert was equally certain of two things— first, that it was a woman's voice he had heard on the wire, and, second, that unless a sane world had turned topsy-turvy, there was no logical reason why it should have been Mrs. Sheerlove. This aging and foolishly devoted woman seemed the last choice on the ship to play such a senseless charade. Because, although he would never have admitted it to Jane, Morte was becoming increasingly certain that there was between these two a much more sentimental attachment than mere relationship.

So, with Harriet Sheerlove dismissed, who else remained?

Leila Harland?

Again why? Robert moved restlessly. Why should a convalescing invalid play such a completely insane joke on a stranger she had never even met?

Insane?

Robert sat up with a jerk that set his chair rocking. In that moment his questing mind fastened on a chance phrase of Kingsley's, uttered earlier in the day. "All this," the doctor had said when referring to his patient's unfortunate accident, "has left her in a highly nervous condition." And then that remark of Hammond's, muttered on the wet dock twenty-four hours ago. "It's played the very devil with her nerves..."

Could this be the work of a mind sick and unbalanced by neurosis following shock? In execution, the motive was, perhaps, feasible, but it was the result that made such a theory untenable. The chance ramblings of a partially demented female would never have inspired that scene in Redmond's cabin.

He rose, pushed aside his deck-chair, and walked to the rail.

Dinner that evening found Mrs. Sheerlove and Earl Redmond at their table in the saloon. And, while the woman seemed rather subdued her companion had obviously recovered his ebullience. Over coffee, he regaled his fellow passengers with tales of his prowess with the lasso. The Mortes gathered that Redmond's relatives owned wide tracts of land in his native country and that the young man was considered an expert with the rope. The promise of an early demonstration, however, met with such a marked lack of enthusiasm that the young man retired to his cabin in a mood bordering dangerously on the cantankerous.

Shortly after this, the first officer and Dr. Kingsley joined the Mortes at bridge. They played until close on midnight, when Robert, who had been stifling yawns throughout the last rubber, called a halt. They sought their cabin, where he fell asleep almost at once.

Jane was not so fortunate. She lay and stared into the darkness, listening to the throb of the engines.

Her thoughts, shuttle-like, spun to and fro, spanning the past and the future.

How would she find her home when she returned? Was she foolish to have let it to those tenants? Yet, at such short notice, decisions had to be made rapidly. If the war had spared their son, he would be married now and he and Vivienne could have taken the place over. For a moment her thoughts dwelt on Peter, lying alone in a New Guinea jungle grave.

Ten feet away, in his comfortable bed, Peter's father muttered something, turned restlessly, and settled again.

And, quite irrationally, Jane felt a sharp twinge of resentment. Really, it was too bad of Robert! Surely little good could come of this ruthless severing of threads so carefully woven over the past decade? And why did Margaret Vane have to fall sick just at this particular time?

She never knew just what had brought this woman into her mind. But the image of this middle-aged actress, having come unbidden, refused to be banished, and she found herself brooding on a portrait of this woman, hazily sketched by certain details Robert himself had mentioned.

"A delightful person, Jane. Not only has Mrs. Vane considerable talent, but the charm and poise that comes from genuine breeding."

"Mrs. Vane?"

"Oh, yes— she's married. With an eighteen-year-old daughter, I believe. I don't know her name, but I think they have a home somewhere in Vacluse. And I rather fancy the husband is dead."

Jane had said, "For a professional actress, this woman's background seems rather indefinite."

And Robert had nodded. "She's reserved almost to the point of being reclusive. About her private life, I mean."

It was some months later, Jane recalled, that the spotlight of notoriety had fallen, blindingly if temporarily, upon this woman, and then in a manner pitifully tragic. Her daughter had been found, dead by her own hand, in a cheaply furnished flat in Kings Cross. Yet even this sad occurrence was somehow veiled in partial obscurity— its news value being confined to a small newspaper paragraph. Its only lasting effect was that Margaret Vane made fewer public appearances.

With a jerk that set the bed creaking, Jane awoke. She was trembling and her nightgown was damp with perspiration. It was almost five minutes before she turned her head to the illuminated travelling-clock on the table between their beds. It was close on three.

And then she heard the sobbing.

Jane sat up. She could no more have ignored the disturbing manifestation than she could have stopped breathing. Peering into the darkness, she strove to locate the sound. Then, softly, she rose, took dressing-gown and slippers, and moved out on to the deck.

Here the sobbing was nearer, clearer.

She listened again.

Jane's first assumption had been that this sad wailing came from the cabin of Harriet Sheerlove. Out here on deck she knew she was wrong. It seemed to emanate from the stern of the ship, and it was here, she remembered, that Leila Harland had her secret apartment.

She was almost abreast of the balcony before she noticed Miss Harland. And such was the woman's attitude that Jane was no longer in doubt as to the source of that sound. Kneeling on the floor, arms outstretched across the

window seat, head buried face downward in its velvety texture, Leila Harland's attitude was the very epitome of grief and desolation.

Jane's first impulse was to step forward and address the woman gently. Yet she hesitated— first because it seemed almost indecent to intrude at such a time, and secondly... Jane blinked and looked again. What was so unusual about that crouching figure with the outstretched arms? She took a half-step forward; then her breath caught in her throat.

Hands...

Mrs. Morte drew a deep breath. It was not possible, yet to confirm her impression she forced herself to complete the pace to the window. Now she could see quite plainly the white gown stretched across the shaking shoulders, trailing down in billowing sleeves to the small tucks and ruffles about the wrists...

But of hands and fingers, of normal digits and joints and sinews, there was no sign— nothing except the blackness of the window-seat velvet on which those missing hands should have rested!

JANE COULD NEVER remember very closely how she got back to her cabin.

Vaguely, she seemed to recall that the commonplace surroundings suddenly took on some tincture of her terror. She entered her cabin, groping like a blind person.

Robert was still asleep. His regular breathing and the cheerful ticking of the clock soothed her, so that she had almost stopped trembling when she slipped into the still-warm bed and drew the sheets about her. Two convictions were strong in her mind: now she was assured that, of all people on the ship, the author of that telephone call could never have been Miss Harland, so cruelly mutilated in the motor-car accident that even her personal physician had glossed over the details. Her other resolve was that this must be her own secret.

It was after seven o'clock and Robert's empty bed a tumble of sheets when she woke.

Then his voice sounded from outside.

"Jane... Jane! Are you awake?"

She sat up and pushed aside the curtains of the window. He was turning from the rail, a dressing-gown over his pyjamas.

"Come and look at this," he invited, and when she joined him it was to find that they were among the islands.

Jane nodded, drinking in the beauty of the scene, letting it flood into her mind, washing away the murky outlines of another, darker image which lay

coiled there all night. Beyond the first island lay another, and beyond that a third, far off, dim-seen, hazy and unreal as a fantasy.

KINGSLEY HAD LEARNT it was possible they would sight Paradise Island in the late afternoon. Redmond, stretched out on a deck mattress, reached out a tanned arm for his cigarette-case. He spoke as he lit up.

"Anyone care to brief me on this new landing party?"

"They're very important people," Kingsley remarked.

Redmond stared at the sky. "So what? Everyone's important these days. That's democracy."

Kingsley merely pressed his lips together and turned away. When he spoke again, it was to address Morte.

"Did you know that we're staying for a few days on Paradise?"

Robert looked up. "I don't mind the break. But surely it's unusual? Isn't there a certain time schedule?"

"Not for freighters. And particularly for a freighter carrying its owners as passengers."

"Does this mean we stay on the ship?"

"It's a matter of choice," Kingsley assured her. "If you feel like a break, you'll find Paradise very comfortable. It's one of the few islands with individual bungalows— all very modern and up-to-date. The island lessee— chap named Ferrier— brought back the idea from Florida. That's probably why Arthur Burton and his daughter chose Paradise for their holiday."

"A daughter?" Redmond sat up. "What's her age?"

Kingsley said clearly, "Her age is twenty-two. Her name is Patricia. She is heir to half a million pounds."

Redmond winked. "Beat the drums," he announced. "Brother, it's a celebration— real sex-appeal coming on board at last!"

Harriet Sheerlove said gently, "Now, Earl, don't you be so tiresome." Then, in a valiant effort to change the subject, she added, "I'm most eager to see this Mr. Skinner." She raised her wide, grey eyes. "But he's so very, very old, isn't he?"

Kingsley nodded. "Old..." — there was so long a pause they believed he had finished until... "Old, and rather horrible."

Heads turned in his direction. "Horrible?" said Jane. "In what way?"

The doctor flushed almost as scarlet as Harriet Sheerlove. He said quickly, "That was a foolish remark. Please forget it."

But Redmond's dislike of the doctor was too keen to allow such an opportunity to pass. "Oh, no," he drawled. "You can't shy off like that, Doc. What's so horrible about this old character?"

The other said almost harshly, "I asked you to forget the remark..."

The latent animosity between these two, like a banked-down fire, threatened in that moment to flicker and flame into open conflict. Morte saw the doctor's hands tighten about the rail. Next moment they relaxed and he shrugged. His tone was quiet.

"It's no guilty secret, Mr. Redmond. I knew Eli Skinner some years ago. It was in a purely professional capacity. He suffers from a chronic cardiac condition."

Robert said, "What is he like?"

"Any other old man. Thin, a little shrunken. Anyhow, you'll be seeing him for yourselves very soon now."

He turned and stared fixedly across the water. A smudge on the horizon had resolved itself into a ship. The feather of smoke from the funnel rose straight and unwavering to join the thickening haze through which the sun gleamed redly. The atmosphere was becoming as oppressive as the silence, when Mrs. Sheerlove spoke brightly.

"Just fancy, Doctor! I didn't know that you attended millionaires!"

"Thank you for the implied compliment, Mrs. Sheerlove. But Skinner wasn't a millionaire then." His lips twisted slightly. "He was governor of one of our most dangerous jails!"

Earl Redmond gave a sudden throaty gasp and almost leapt to his feet.

"What pokey did the old guy run?"

Kingsley said imperturbably, "A prison named Greycliffe." He spaced the next words carefully. "No person ever escaped while he was in charge."

A polite cough took his attention. Kingsley turned. Mr. Rodda, first officer of the *Medusa*, stood at his elbow. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "But Dr. Sweetapple would like to see you in his surgery when you're disengaged."

This was the ship's doctor, a medico of such extremely youthful appearance that Jane, on seeing him, had immediately offered up silent prayers for a trouble-free voyage.

Kingsley nodded. "I'll come along right away." With a murmured apology, he moved off.

"That bird's going to run me ragged," Redwood muttered to no one in particular. But, surprisingly, Mrs. Sheerlove snapped at him.

"Oh, for pity's sake. Earl, behave yourself!" She stood up, balancing herself carefully. "I declare that I've developed a most agonising headache. If you want me, I'll be lying down in my cabin."

Turning, she gathered up her cushion, her unopened book and sun-glasses, her jar of sunburn cream, took up a cigarette-case and a silver lighter with her initials engraved, and, thus burdened, looked down at the young man.

"You'd better come inside, too, Earl."

Redmond did not move. "Go take an aspirin, Hattie," he grunted.

The woman stiffened. She wheeled away from him, an absurd defiant turn ignominiously defeated when the heel of those most inappropriate sandals slithered suddenly on the scrubbed deck.

Harriet Sheerlove tottered perilously, grabbed at thin air, dropped the cushion, tried to catch it, and lost her grip on the glass jar.

It crashed to the boards and a white froth spread wide across the planking.

"Oh, *bother!*" she exclaimed. Robert and Jane were on their feet. "Give me the cushion," Mrs. Morte said gently, and as the other made a weak protest she added, "I'm going in myself now."

She assisted Mrs. Sheerlove down the companionway and kept a firm hand on her arm until they reached her cabin. There Jane passed over the belongings. "You're sure you have everything?" and paused while Harriet made an inventory. Suddenly she gave a little squeak of dismay.

"Oh, dear! I've taken your cigarette-case."

She held it out, a slim silver object. But Jane shook her head. "It isn't mine. And Robert's case is tortoiseshell."

"Mine is of gold." Even in that moment, Mrs. Sheerlove could not keep the note of pride from her voice. "It was one of the first presents Earl gave me. He bought two of them," she added. "One a little larger, which he kept for himself. He was using it out there this morning."

Jane nodded. "This must belong to Dr. Kingsley. I'll return it to the doctor." She pushed open the cabin door. "Now, is there anything that you'd like? Can I call the stewardess?"

"No. She'd only fuss me." She entered and Jane followed, replacing the cushion on the chair, laying the book and sun-glasses on the table near the telephone. Mrs. Sheerlove kicked off her sandals and lay back on the bed. She closed her eyes and her reddening face contracted with a spasm of pain.

"Don't blame me too much about Earl," she said. "It isn't what you think at all."

"What I think?"

"He's not my lover." Oh, God! thought Jane. Why do I get myself in these situations? The voice droned on. "You've seen him. Do you think he'd take the slightest interest in me... that way? Perhaps, in the beginning, I thought that he would..." She sighed deeply.

Jane looked down. Harriet Sheerlove lay with closed eyes.

BUT THERE WAS one other task to perform before Jane Morte could retire to her own suite.

Intent on returning the cigarette-case, she made her way to Dr. Sweetapple's cabin, where she hoped to find Kingsley. The half-open door revealed an empty apartment. She walked out on deck on her way to the smoke-lounge. Ahead she located her quarry.

Dr. Kingsley was moving in the direction of Miss Harland's private suite. She quickened her steps, treading the path of her previous expedition, and reached the edge of the cabin where some hours before she had taken shelter. Directly ahead was the glassed-in balcony. Now the sliding panes were tightly closed.

She saw that she was too late. Dr. Kingsley was already inside the room, talking with Miss Harland. The silken scarf was no longer swathed about her face; now it was wrapped turban-like about her head. The woman stood with her back toward the window, facing her companion, and, although the shuttered windows cut off every sound of their voices, the doctor's tight stance and serious expression hinted at a colloquy both earnest and important.

Now Kingsley was shaking his head, an obvious negation of some point in the discussion. Then Leila Harland moved— and Jane's head jerked back as surprise and a great secret relief flooded through her.

For in that sudden action the enigmatic Miss Harland had thrust out arms and laid urgent, demanding hands on the doctor's shoulders. Hands! Hands and wrists covered in long white gloves from elbow to fingertip, but hands, undeniably and with strong fingers that bunched the material of Kingsley's jacket in their tight, possessive grip. Jane watched as he shook his head for a second time, saw the woman's shoulders droop despondently as her hands fell away. The doctor moved out of her field of vision and Miss Harland followed.

But Mrs. Morte was scarcely conscious they had gone. The explanation was suddenly so simple and so natural that she marvelled at her obtuseness. The hands and fingers that the grey invalid had donned overnight were artificial—mechanical products of war-time ingenuity!

Thus relief and sympathy warred in Jane Morse's heart, and she was inside her cabin and crossing to her bed before she realised that she was still holding the cigarette-case.

WHEN HIS wife had left the deck with Mrs. Sheerlove, Robert's first impulse had been to follow.

"Just stay put for a minute," Redmond said. "I've been waiting for a chance to get you alone, Morte. There's something we ought to talk about."

"Indeed?" said Robert, with sinking heart.

"Yeah... You're a kinda detective guy, aren't you? Even if it is only book-work. How would you like to untangle an honest-to-God, real mystery?"

"I'm listening," Morte said quietly.

"It's a damned odd business. That little show-down in my cabin yesterday. It just about scared hell outa me..."

"So you *did* recognise that voice on the telephone?"

Redmond nodded moodily. "I'm not kidding when I tell you it was the last person in the world I expected." He paused and chewed at his lip. "You see, it was my wife."

Robert said sharply, "Then you're married?"

"I was."

"Divorced, then?"

The other shook his head. "No, mister. It isn't as easy as that. There's so much here that doesn't make sense. It's crazy, I tell you. Such a thing just can't happen..."

"Then you must have been mistaken."

Redmond said darkly, "Not me, sir! You can't mistake a voice you've lived with for twelve months! Not Monica's voice with that cuts little lisp. And she called me Sailor." He tapped a tattoo-mark on his thick forearm. "No one else in the wide world knew that name. No one but Monica."

"I don't suppose it's possible your wife could have somehow followed you... stowed away in this ship...?"

And Earl Redmond said harshly, "I'll tell you why not!" Something choked in his throat so that the next words were husky and dry. "There's no such person as Monica Redmond now. Because she died... out in Canada... just six months ago!"

A flying-fish skittered across the water, turned from gun-metal grey to shining silver, and disappeared with a splash of foam. The sweat gathered on Redmond's chest.

"Well?" he panted.

Robert said in slow disgust, "Of all the damn-fool nonsensical jokes..." He jumped to his feet and began to walk away; but with a quick, cat-like spring Redmond barred his path.

"Listen, Morte! So help me, I'm telling you the truth! The plain, honest-to-God facts! Okay, it's crazy! That's why I haven't had the guts to mention it before. But I've gotta tell someone... before, maybe, I go nuts myself over this!"

Morte's cold eyes raked his companion, taking in the heaving chest, the twitching mouth, the sweat that dewed the forehead and the face suddenly sallow, lined, and old.

"Come over here," said Robert.

On the open deck the heat was unbearable. But near the rail a suggestion of a breeze stirred. The ship moved through a sea of grey oil, and, watching

that thickening haze, Robert kept his eyes averted from Redmond's face as the man began to speak.

"We were married in Montreal— Monica and I. I'd known her quite a while— boy-and-girl sweethearts sorta stuff. You know the Gaspé Peninsula in the Gulf of St. Lawrence?" He paused as the other shook his head. "Well, there's a cute kinda fishing village there— place called Perce.

"And about half a mile out to sea there's a landmark. It's mighty well known in that locality. Huge steep rock jutting up, big as all get-out— they called it Rocher Perce. Well, we're having ourselves a little picnic one day down on the beach near here— and nothing will satisfy that girl but we get our pictures taken up on that old rock. Naturally, I do my best to talk her out of such a crazy idea... I talked to that girl till I was darn well tongue-tied, but it didn't make a scrap of difference. That was the way Monica wanted it and nothing would budge her. Told me I was too yellow to try the stunt."

Morte stole a side-glance at his companion. There's something wrong, he thought, something that doesn't ring true. But before he could analyse the fleeting impression, his companion was speaking again.

"I guess that morning is one of the things I'll always remember. We walked back to the village and I borrowed a coil of rope and a grappling-iron. I wasn't worried— not for myself. In the Rockies I'd climbed around with less equipment than this. Anyhow, we took a boat and rowed to the foot of the rock. I went up the easiest side— it took me quite some time and it must have been half an hour before I topped the rock and fixed the rope tight. I snaked it over the side and called to Monica.

"When she began to climb, I realised I'd been dead wrong to worry. She had guts and skill— she came up that rope, hand over hand, like the cute monkey she was. That's why I'll never fathom how it happened. She was about half-way up! I could see her face all sorta shining and happy. Then suddenly she screamed out something— screamed and fell. I couldn't believe it. I just stood there dumb watching her as she turned over and over, to land on those rocks fifty feet below."

The voice low and husky, choked and was silent. Morse said quietly, "I'm very sorry, Redmond..."

The other made a quick gesture. "Okay— okay— it's all in the past now." He stopped abruptly, peering up into Morte's face. "Or is it? That's what I want to know, mister! Is it?"

"That depends on whether your wife's body was ever recovered."

"Recovered?" The Canadian blinked at him. He said harshly, "What kinda guy d'you think I am? Think I'd just let her lie there?" The tone was impatient. "I told you, mister. On to the rocks below. I shinned down and picked her up.

She was dead. I took her back to the mainland in the boat..." His mouth twitched suddenly. "That was swell! Bringing her back like that when we'd been married about a week before..."

Robert said gently, "Where was your wife buried?"

"Montreal. St. Stephens. Her parents came down after the accident."

The silence lengthened between them. Morte said at last: "Have you any enemies? People who might possibly have put through that telephone call, simulating your wife's voice, perhaps to upset you?"

"I've thought of that." The reply was moody. "First, it'd have to be someone on board this ship. I'd never seen or heard of anyone outside of Hattie." Redmond added: "And you've gotta remember that all this happened in Canada— thousands of miles away!"

He went on, with a soft savagery that made Robert glance at him quickly. "That god-damned telephone! It rang again; you know..."

Morte's glance became a stare. "You mean...?"

"I'll wager it was the same voice. It was early this morning, just after three o'clock. I just didn't have the guts to answer it. Just lay there sweating while it rang and rang! I couldn't take it any longer; so you know what I did?" The voice rose. "Cut the bloody cord with a pen-knife! That fixed it!"

Robert considered. "Wasn't that rather foolish? It might have been a passenger ringing you."

"At that hour of the morning? Who'd be likely to do that?"

"Your friend Mrs. Sheerlove."

"Hattie wouldn't ring. She'd come tapping at my door like always before."

Morte said, "So you want my advice?"

"Mighty badly!"

"Very well. Go straight to Captain Robertson and put all the facts before him."

The other laughed— a short, ugly sound. "Are you just playing dumb? Guess we don't need a crystal ball to know what would happen then? Either I'd finish up in the brig as a racing nut or else they'd trot out that guy Kingsley to psycho-analyse me. No, mister— if that's the best advice you have, I guess it's all been just a waste of breath."

"I'm sorry," repeated Robert, but the other waved a hand.

"Okay! You're just not as smart as I figured, that's all."

A spot of rain, large as a two-shilling piece, plopped audibly on the deck. A breeze sprang up suddenly, a chill breeze that caused Redmond to shiver. He began to massage his naked chest. "Between you and me, mister! Private information— top secret— get what I mean?" He turned and began to lope across the deck toward the companionway.

Robert made his way below.

DURING LUNCH the sun broke through again, glinting experimentally on the wet deck, flashing on steel and paint with a sheen that dazzled the eyes.

But the storm left a humidity that even the electric fans failed to alleviate. Robert and Jane went to their cabin, where she blamed her husband's restlessness on the atmosphere. He paced the floor, finally to fling himself down in an easy chair and reach for cigarettes.

"Robert..." Jane's voice, very quiet, cut into his thoughts. "Why not talk it over with me?"

"There's nothing much to talk about."

She came across and sat on the arm of the chair, ruffling his hair again. Presently she said, "Very well, I'll tell you. You're worried about Mr. Redmond."

Robert sat up. "Jane! Don't tell me you were eavesdropping?"

"Certainly not."

"Then how could you possibly know what he told me—"

Her eyes were bright with comprehension. "So this man told you something!"

Robert was silent.

"So it was something queer?" Jane sat down again on the arm. "So strange that you'll imagine I'll rush from one end of the ship to the other, shouting the story to everyone I meet?"

"Don't be absurd!" said Robert.

At that she sighed a little. "All right, darling. Be a stubborn mule."

Robert crushed out his cigarette and reached for another.

"All right," he said. "Let's see what you make of all this!" And, crossing to the window, hands thrust into pockets, he retailed the story heard from Redmond's lips. When he had concluded, she was silent for so long that he prompted her.

"Well?"

She said carefully, "The story might have been manufactured, but Redmond's fear was very real— too real to have been simulated?"

He snapped his fingers. "That's it exactly."

"So real, so very sincere, that the voice on the other end of that telephone was someone Redmond believed dead and buried." Jane saw him nod quickly. "But, darling, don't you see? That takes us right back to where we started. Even further back."

Jane Morte moved to the couch. "Just like twenty questions," she murmured. "Except that it should be so much easier. Because there are only three."

"Three questions?"

"No, no. Three women." She looked up. "Or, rather, four if you count the stewardess."

"But why should the stewardess want to scare Redmond?"

Jane shrugged. "Why should I? Or Mrs. Sheerlove? Or Leila Harland...?" But Robert saw her eyes narrow suddenly. Then she spoke very softly, almost to herself. "I suppose the woman really is dead?"

"Redmond saw her buried."

"Yet queer things can happen." Jane spoke slowly, her mind obviously two steps ahead of her words. "Fake burials— substitution of bodies. I've read about such things."

"No, Jane, it isn't ridiculous. But if we presume a fake burial in Canada, then we must accept the rest of the story. The expedition to the rock, the attempt at climbing, and the girl's disaster..."

"I agree."

"We must also accept the fact that she sustained certain injuries..."

Jane nodded, "Quite so."

He wagged the match-end in her direction. "Then you believe that this girl, recovering completely from these injuries, has somehow managed to stow herself away on this ship...?" He paused as Jane shook her head.

"I don't think she has recovered from her injuries. Nor do I believe that she stowed away." She contemplated her long fingers for a moment. "I think she came on board quite openly, just as you and I came."

Mrs. Morte was silent, so silent that Robert was about to regret his question. But she spoke a moment too soon. "Suppose when that poor girl fell, she took the force of the impact on her hands and face? Supposing she wasn't killed but shockingly mutilated? And supposing a skilful surgeon could restore her face, giving her an entirely different appearance, making her totally unrecognizable...?"

The match-stick snapped in Morte's fingers. "Leila Harland! But, Jane, the face perhaps... yes, it's possible! But there's nothing wrong with her hands..."

And Jane Morte said quietly, "Those hands are false, Robert. Artificial digits that can be removed overnight."

There and then she outlined her adventure on the moonlit deck and the surprising sequel of the morning. Robert shook his head. His voice was very gentle.

"A tragic thing, Jane— a bitterly tragic thing. And you say she seems a young woman?"

"Just a girl. That was what was so horrifying, I think. I'd pictured Miss Harland as a middle-aged spinster— yet I can't think why. But she isn't."

"You didn't see her face?"

"Only her figure," said Jane. "But she's young, Robert— I'm certain of that."

A tap on their door cut the sentence short. Jane gave her husband a quick, questioning glance, then crossed. As the door swung wide, Mrs. Sheerlove stood revealed.

"Is Earl with you?"

In answer, Jane gestured her inside and swung an arm around the room. Harriet Sheerlove blinked. "He's hiding, that's what it is. Just because I snapped at him this morning."

"I suppose you've tried the most obvious place— in his suite?" said Robert.

"Oh, of course!" She lowered her voice, glancing conspiratorially at the open door. "When he didn't come down to lunch, I *knew* what was the matter. I went straight to my cabin and rang through to him. But the line seemed dead." She blinked again, almost defiantly. "I thought, 'He's taken the receiver off the hook, I know'; so I went straight down to his cabin. It was empty. And, would you believe it, the receiver was on the telephone all the time! That wilful, foolish boy had cut the cord!"

Robert said, rather lamely, "The cabin steward will have something to say about that, surely?"

The plump chin set obstinately. "I don't care if he never speaks to me again... never! And I won't address a single word to him unless he *apologises*! I'm not even sure whether I'll pay for that telephone— "

From outside a deep voice hailed. "Paradise Island to starboard!"

There came the sound of quick footsteps in the corridor, and Robert said briskly, "Come up on deck, Mrs. Sheerlove. You'll probably find Redmond waiting for you." With a pettish toss of her head, the woman walked from the cabin, tossing a final remark over her shoulder.

"If he is out there, you tell him just what I said!"

IT WAS A few minutes later that they joined Second-Officer Willis on deck and followed the direction of his pointing finger. In the amber glow of the afternoon, it was a smudge of purple shadow. Then Willis passed his binoculars to Robert, and through the lenses the island took on colour and shape.

The dinner-gong took them to the saloon; but the Mortes, who had a table near the window, could watch the island swim closer. Now they could see the white strip of sand marking the beach and dotted with small figures.

A few minutes later, Captain Robertson entered with Chief-Officer Rodda. Morte caught his eye and the skipper halted at the table.

"When can we go ashore, sir?"

Robertson grunted. "Whenever you please. Prefer you to stay, however. Burton party coming aboard. Matter of half an hour. Might like to meet them."

Robert and Jane moved out on deck, where three sailors were releasing the coil of wooden laddering from the rails.

Now the fringe of the island was twinkling with lights and muffled by distance, they could hear the regular thudding of an electric generator. Beyond the tracery of the tamarisks, bungalows shone as a string of bright windows. Faintly across the water came the sound of voices and a girl's light laugh.

Half-seen against the glow of the bungalow windows, Robert noticed a small knot of people advancing across the sand. Obviously the "Burton party" were on their way.

Jane plucked at her husband's sleeve. "We mustn't be caught peering," she said.

It was some ten minutes later that Second-Officer Willis tapped on their door.

When they reached the skipper's cabin, Mrs. Sheerlove, Dr. Kingsley, and Earl Redmond were already there. Robertson was conversing rather awkwardly with a big, florid-faced man whom they recognised as Arthur Burton. Both men glanced up as they entered.

"Mr. and Mrs. Morte," murmured the captain, in introduction.

Burton nodded and took Robert's outstretched hand in strong, soft fingers. The man behind the vast enterprise of Burton's Incorporated Industries had a massive head and the shoulders of a weight-lifter. His hair, greying, waved back from the broad temples in a thick mop, and beneath it the features, on the verge of being blurred by fleshiness, were still regular and well formed enough to mark him as both handsome and distinguished. The authority in that jutting chin and the bland assurance of wealth and success stamped him as individual in that tiny cabin.

"May I introduce my daughter?"

Patricia Burton was not beautiful—the red lips were a shade too thin, the chin dominant to the point of arrogance. But she had her father's colouring, eyes of deepest violet, and black hair that shone with secret and exciting lights. Her smile was delightful, full and frank and friendly.

"Stephen," she said.

He acknowledged their greeting rather unwillingly, Robert thought. Stephen Hawke was as blond as a newly minted coin, with butter-yellow hair, eyebrows so fair as to be almost indistinguishable against his pleasant tanned face and the suggestion of a moustache on his long upper lip. Morte liked him on sight. There was something about his compact, stocky body, some

expression on those serious, regular features, that suggested a stubborn dependability.

"This is Father's right-hand man," Patricia was saying. The young secretary gripped Robert's hand and muttered something to Jane. He seemed unnaturally shy and dropped into the background the moment introductions were over. A short and slightly awkward pause. The first officer was handing around drinks. The silence was broken by Earl Redmond.

"Miss Burton..."

She looked at him, eyes cool and appraising.

"Where's the rest of your party?"

A voice spoke from the doorway. "Here I am."

Every head turned. Elihu Skinner stood blocking the entrance, leaning on an ebony stick gripped in clawed and crippled hands.

He was old. That was their first impression. Old and yellow and lined. And thin to the point of obscenity, shrunk in his dark, rumpled clothes like a chrysalid prematurely dead in its cocoon. The face was a mask of protuberances— brown, cheekbones, chin— and over these, tightly drawn, the parchment of his skin glistened faintly in the light. Under those jutting brows, sunken deep, were small, shrewd, acquisitive eyes, the coldest, bleakest, dearest eyes Robert Morte had ever seen.

He stood there, purpling fingers clawed, head thrust forward like some aged vulture. And his scrawny vulture's throat worked as he spoke.

"I don't like my cabin, Arthur."

Burton said civilly, "What's wrong with it?"

"I asked for a deck cabin. I find that I'm amidships." Those small toad-like eyes had never left his partner's face.

"But you have a deck cabin, Arthur— so I've changed places with you. I'm having Vincente make the change now."

Burton said suavely, "Do just as you like, Eli."

The heavy stick scuffled, seeking hold on the polished floor. Without the slightest sign that the other people existed, the old man turned and limped away.

Very deliberately Arthur Burton took a pigskin case from his pocket and extracted another cigar. He pricked the end with careful fingers, keeping his eyes lowered as he spoke. "That was my partner." The tone was detached, a board-meeting voice underlining dull but necessary details. "He is far from well and often in considerable pain. Since we are all to be passengers on a long voyage, it might be well to keep this in mind."

Captain Robertson stepped forward and struck a match. Cigar in mouth, the big man leaned forward.

"Stephen and I are going ashore, Daddy. Are you coming with us?"

"Not yet, my dear." Burton's eyes rested for a moment on the secretary.

"And I'm afraid you can't have Stephen for a while. I need him here."

"But it's quite late—"

Hawke turned. "Run along, Pat. I'll join you just as soon as I can." He faced his employer. "Mr. Skinner wanted to see that Blandings correspondence, sir. I've brought it along in my briefcase. It's in my cabin."

Miss Burton's lips set mutinously. "Stephen," she said, "you promised—" She stopped as though realising they were not alone.

Earl Redmond spoke into the silence. "Reckon I'll go ashore myself tonight. I'll just slip up to my cabin and pack a few duds." He brushed past Harriet Sheerlove as though she did not exist and threw open the door, almost colliding with a man who stood waiting, on the threshold.

"Martino!" exclaimed Hawke.

The newcomer jerked his head. He was a swarthy, powerfully built man, with a wide mouth that was too ready to break into a mechanical smile. Servility cloaked him, plain in the stoop of his shoulders, the quick, indecisive movements of his hands, the shuffling feet. Stephen Hawke's voice was sharper this time.

"What is it, Martino?"

"It is Mr. Skinner— he sends me to talk to Mr. Burton." The averted head showed only a glimpse of white eyes and whiter teeth. "He waits in his cabin. And he says to tell you it is business."

Arthur Burton ground his cigar carefully into an ash-tray. "We'd better go, Stephen. The sooner we get this over, the quicker we can get ashore." His glance took in the room. "My daughter's using the launch, but there's room for several others."

Robert looked at Jane, who shook her head. "I think we'll wait until morning." But Mrs. Sheerlove, her eyes on the stocky Mr. Hawke, took an eager step forward. "If there's a tiny corner for me," she said archly, "I'd be ever so grateful." She moved to the door. "I won't be long. I've been packed all day!"

Patricia Burton followed her out, her father and his secretary close on her heels. The door closed behind them.

IN THEIR CABIN a few minutes later, Jane began to pack a suitcase. Robert himself lounged near the window, staring out across to the island. The tropic night had enveloped it, thick, warm, and soft.

He looked up as Jane, who had been roaming the cabin and doing a last-minute inventory, halted with an exclamation. "Oh, dear! This cigarette-case!"

She was holding it in her hand. "It's Dr. Kingsley's," she added, and went on to explain the incident of the morning. "The poor man is probably searching everywhere for it." She passed the case across. "Take it to his cabin, Robert."

"You'd better come with me, Jane. After all, you found it."

The door was standing ajar as they approached. Robert gave a tentative tap which set the door swinging wider. It revealed an empty apartment.

"We'll go in and wait for him."

It was a cabin much larger than their own. Under the window a small aquarium had been built, laced with sea-grasses.

On a small table beside the bed, books leaned against the telephone, but these were half-hidden by a large framed photograph. It showed a handsome woman of middle age sitting in a garden chair. Behind her, lawns and flowering beds stretched to the walls of an old half-timbered cottage with low doorways and diamond-paned windows.

"That's an English cottage, surely?" Jane said.

Robert crossed to her side. "Yes. I wonder who the woman could be?"

"Wife... a sister... a friend, perhaps." She leant closer, studying the face. The broad forehead, the steady wide-set eyes, the repose of the mouth. "Robert, she reminds me of someone we know."

He shook his head. "A complete stranger to me, Jane."

"Yes, but..." She frowned. "It must be some chance resemblance somewhere. Perhaps if we knew her name..."

"Her name was Linda."

They turned. Dr. Kingsley stood in the doorway. As though sensing their embarrassment, he went on, "Please don't feel you are intruding." He came in and closed the door. "I only wish you could have known my wife when she was alive. Linda was a charming and lovely person..." He gestured to a chair. "Do sit down, Mrs. Morte."

Jane obeyed. "Actually we came to return some of your property," she said, and glanced at Robert, who produced the cigarette-case and handed it across. "Mrs. Sheerlove found it on deck this morning."

Kingsley turned the case over in his fingers. "It's a lovely thing," he said, "but honesty compels me to admit it isn't mine." He paused and snapped open the case, glancing inside the lid. He held it up. "You see?"

Robert leaned forward, peering at the inscription engraved inside the lid. Seven words:

"To Kathie with love and affection. Ronald."

He straightened. "We never thought to look inside. It must belong to one of the crew."

Kingsley shut the case and handed it to Jane. "You say Mrs. Sheerlove found it?"

"This morning on the sports deck. Just after we sighted the islands..." Jane pondered for a moment. "It seems rather a valuable thing to belong to a seaman."

Morte took the case from his wife. "I'll hand it over to the purser in the morning."

Kingsley seemed anxious to detain them. He sat down on the wide settee. "Well, what do you think of the Burton party?"

Jane Morte said cautiously, "The girl seems very nice. And the young man very shy." She hesitated before her next words. "I don't quite know about Mr. Burton."

"And Mr. Skinner?"

"Horrible." Jane nodded. "Like a bird of prey."

Robert looked at Kingsley. "I notice he didn't recognise you, Doctor."

"Why should he?"

Robert said mildly, "You said you knew him."

"That must be close on ten years ago now. During that time the old chap has probably had a dozen doctors. It's too much to expect that he'd remember one obscure G.P. Ten years..." he said softly. His eyes moved to the photograph. "That was when I met Linda. I had a practice in a Melbourne suburb. One day I felt I could stand it no longer. On an impulse, I wrote for an appointment of ship's doctor— and a week later, somewhat to my surprise, I was accepted. The ship travelled from Melbourne via Cape Town and Las Palmas..." He paused momentarily and his eyes softened. "On that ship was a passenger returning to England. We formed a strong friendship and I learnt that her home was near Sevenoaks, in a tiny village called High Weald. I was invited to call on her. That was in early April..."

"You see the garden in that picture? It was there I asked her to be my wife. We were married three weeks later. Then came the war. Linda and I came back to Australia, and, like so many other men in my profession, I found myself in the Army. I became Major Kingsley..."

"But I knew that Linda's heart was back in England. Not that she was unhappy in Australia— she was content to be wherever I was. You see, we were still very much in love with each other— that was why her death was such a sad and bitter blow to me."

Jane said gently, "Was it a war accident?"

"No." The doctor's voice was very steady. "She contracted an illness..." They had the impression he was about to add something more; but he was silent, contemplating the burning tip of his cigarette. Then he spoke again. "I

must catch Mr. Rodda," and he glanced at his wrist-watch. "There are certain arrangements I'd like to make regarding my patient."

"Then Miss Harland will be joining us on the island?" asked Robert.

"I'm afraid that's quite out of the question. The chief officer has a portable radio. If I could borrow it for my patient, she could listen to the concert broadcasts."

"She's fond of music?"

"As a young girl, Miss Harland studied in Paris. Before the accident she gave a series of quite successful concerts in London."

Jane said, "I didn't realise that she was a singer."

"Oh, no." The doctor crushed out his cigarette. "She was quite an accomplished artist on the piano."

"Piano?" Jane's voice was high. "Oh, but how terrible, Doctor!"

"Terrible?" Kingsley's expression was puzzled. "It isn't as serious as that. Naturally, she'll resume her studies when she's recovered. The injuries were confined to her face. The hands, mercifully, were completely undamaged."

ROBERT CLOSED the door of their cabin and stood with his back against it. "So there we are, Jane. Right back where we started!"

"Assuming, of course, that Dr. Kingsley was telling the truth!"

"Why should he lie?"

"Because," said Jane firmly, "this so-called patient is Redmond's wife."

Robert shook his head. "You haven't an atom of proof..."

"There was the telephone call."

But her husband was following out his own line of thought. He spoke with decision. "No, Jane. I'm certain Kingsley wasn't lying."

Jane paused and looked up. "But, Robert... what other explanation can there be?"

He crossed and patted her shoulder. "It was night when you saw Miss Harland. You were over-tired, nervy."

Jane was silent, her mind reviewing each small detail of that clearly etched passage along the deck. Could he be right? Had she been deluded by some mirage induced by half-light and raw nerves? She rose and pulled the suitcase toward her.

"I'm going to finish this packing," she said shortly.

Robert grinned and moved out on to the deck. He felt unaccountably restless—restless and suddenly depressed.

The desire for company, for human companionship which could banish this dark discontent, was strong upon him as he mooched, hands thrust into pockets, along the deck. Unconsciously he found himself moving in the

direction of Kingsley's cabin, with its lighted window shedding a bar of bright amber across the water. And where the window-light stained the deck he halted and peered through.

He had expected to find the cabin empty, but beyond the window a shadow moved to and fro. Then the doctor came into view, crossing to an overnight-bag opened on the bed, obviously engaged in a similar task to Jane's. And he had almost finished, for even as Morte watched, Kingsley stood irresolute, giving a last final look around the cabin. His roving glance rested on the framed photograph on the table by the bed— the smiling woman in the English country garden.

Ralph Kingsley moved forward and took up the picture with gentle hands. Carefully, almost reverently, he removed the print from its frame and pressed it to his lips. Then, holding the print between thumb and finger, he produced his cigarette-case, ignited the lighter, and held the flame to one corner of the photograph.

Part 2: Dilemma

ROBERT MORTE stood on the beach of Paradise Island.

Two hours had passed since the Mortes had left the *Medusa*. Breakfast over, they had climbed down into the waiting launch. On arrival, Mr. Willis, who had accompanied them across, had shown them to their bungalow. This was a twin-roomed unit, sitting-room, small bedroom and shower annexe. It was all as spotless as a Dutch interior and Jane had pronounced herself as delighted. From the sitting-room she could see a number of such dwellings, spaced some fifty yards apart and shadowed by the giant mango trees which fringed the island.

While his wife unpacked, Robert took his first stroll on a coral island. Within the reef that would be bared at low tide, he saw Miss Burton and Stephen Hawke. Both were in swimming costume, brown as berries and stretched out on a painted raft which undulated with the gentle swell.

Suddenly Robert felt a chill. He turned slowly.

Not a dozen feet away, Elihu Skinner, dressed from head to foot in thick black serge, stood watching him.

"Good morning," he said civilly.

Eli Skinner did not move. "Come here."

Morte hesitated, not so much questioning the command as surprised at the tone. Ice and steel were in that cracked voice. He approached the old creature. Skinner spoke again.

"Take off those glasses!"

For a long moment, Robert stared unblinkingly at that mottled, shrunken mask.

"I think you've forgotten two things, Mr. Skinner. My position and your courtesy!"

Abruptly the lean throat worked as he gave a rusty chuckle.

"No offence meant, my friend. And I never had any manners. But I like to see a man's eyes when I'm talking to him." He waved a veined hand. "Keep your glasses on— I've got my answer! You've got guts, Morte. Guts... and honesty!"

Robert did not speak, for the simple reason he could think of nothing to say. Eli Skinner nodded.

"I summed you up last night, my friend, back there in Robertson's cabin. Judgment of men— I've risen by that quality. And I pride myself I'm never wrong."

Robert said quietly, "If I'm listening to you, Mr. Skinner, it's because I'm trying to fathom what the deuce you're up to."

Those obsidian eyes had never left his face. "I want you to come to my bungalow in an hour's time."

"Ridiculous!" In the desire to take a stand against this peremptory old despot, Robert made the first excuse that came into his mind. "My wife and I plan to explore the reef this morning."

"The reef isn't uncovered until late this afternoon."

Those two men, so dissimilar in every way, faced each other across the blazing sand. The thought flashed through the younger man's mind— What is it that runs through those clotted and twisted veins? Not blood but ice-water, surely? Those twisted lips curled. The stick dug deeper into the sand as Eli Skinner put full weight on it and turned away.

"In my bungalow. In one hour's time. I'll expect you."

"OF COURSE," said Patricia Burton thoughtfully, "there's always murder."

She paused. Stephen Hawke, stretched on the raft beside her, his yellow head cradled in his hands, grunted something as the girl continued.

"He's got a weak heart, you know. It wouldn't be very difficult to bowl him over."

Stephen Hawke sat up. "Don't talk like a fool, Pat!"

She did not move. Arms around her knees, she stared unseeingly over the glittering water. "I know exactly where it is. During the daytime he wears it on a silver chain about his neck. But at night it goes into a little box on the table by his bed..."

"Pat— listen to me!" The young voice held a note of sternness. "Put any ideas like that right out of your head! Burglary, I mean. But the thing's impossible."

Patricia Burton said moodily, "The whole situation's impossible! Look what it's doing to Daddy. Last night he could scarcely stand up. But for you, he'd never have got off the ship. Stephen— what are you going to do?"

He answered readily, "Call the old devil's bluff! Tell him to go to hell!"

She turned away and, chin on her knees, stared darkly out to the green island with its curve of sand. Two figures were clearly silhouetted against that shining surface and she recognised the newcomer Morte and the shrunken outline of her father's partner. Her pencilled brows drew together in a wrinkle of distaste. Then Pat Burton sighed and dropped her head. So utterly despondent was her attitude that Stephen's sudden pique withered and died.

"Pat... I'm sorry."

"No, Stephen. I'm the one to be sorry. Not only for what I said just now, but for the whole miserable business. Because I am entirely responsible. For my father's drinking. For that silly document locked away in the Chinese puzzle-box. For the very fact that this wicked old man is here with us on this trip..." She faced him. "If the positions were reversed, Skinner would use every dishonest trick in his catalogue to get that key!"

"Certainly he would."

"And yet you refuse to help me?"

"I think there's a much safer way out."

"How?"

The young man's tone deepened. "I happen to love you very much, Pat. If we were married..."

She turned away, her face frigid. "No, Stephen! I was married once before, to a man who meant the whole world to me. And what I thought was an earthly paradise has turned into this hell of uncertainty." She laughed— a hard, brittle sound. "My experience has made me very wary of fascinating males!"

"Has it?"

The tone brought her eyes seeking his face, that tanned, dogged young face whose level gaze held her own steadily. "I was thinking of Mr. Earl Redmond," continued Stephen Hawke.

Pat Burton stretched almost insolently, leaning back her head and staring at the sky. She drew her fingers slowly down her slim throat. "When it comes to choosing between a bounder and a coward," she said, almost thoughtfully, "some people might even prefer the bounder..."

"Now you're being deliberately unpleasant!"

"It takes courage to face the worst. My worst enemy could never say I lacked courage."

"I don't enjoy being classed with a fortune-hunting bounder!"

Now anger flashed like a drawn sword. "I think we've talked quite enough about Mr. Redmond!"

Very deliberately, Stephen Hawke rose and balanced himself on the swaying raft. "I think we've talked enough— period!" He braced himself, dived cleanly, and began to swim.

"Stephen..." But the yellow head cleaving the water did not turn.

What an irritable swine I am, she thought. Of course, Stephen was right. She must discipline her mind as Miss Fenchurch of Hill Green had taught her. That expensive finishing school had instilled everything it thought necessary to fit the only daughter of a wealthy businessman to face the world. Miss Burton had left Hill Green girded and armed for everything... except men like Martin Graham.

Yet she had been happy enough, strongly armoured in her love which had given her the courage to ignore her father's frank disapproval, the ominous head-shakings of her friends, the unspoken yet eloquent dismay of her social set. Three glorious weeks until that knock on the door had shattered the bubble-coloured existence and left her alone to face a barren, grey world...

The vision of Martin Green faded, to be replaced by the tanned face and white-teeth smile of Earl Redmond. They were of a type, these two— and for the hundredth time Pat wondered at the subversive devil deep inside her which responded to such men's attraction. Earl Redmond. A boulder, Stephen had called him.

Another wave slapped the raft, setting it rocking. Pat grasped the rope supports to keep her balance as a dark, rippling head rose out of the water at her side.

"Hello, there!" said Earl Redmond. "Mind if I join you?"

Pat moved to give him room as he stretched out.

"I thought you were swimming with your aunt..."

"Hattie got tired. Didn't I see you with that guy Hawkes?"

"Yes."

Redmond grinned. "Don't tell me he got tired, too?"

"Could be."

"Some guys don't know when they've got the world all wrapped up shiny in cellophane!" He blew an inch of ash from his cigarette. "Are you in this party exploring the reef this afternoon?"

"You forget we've been here some weeks, Mr. Redmond. One can look at coral gardens just so long."

"Maybe we could make up a little party of our own?"

She considered a minute. "Last night you mentioned something about a portable gramophone..."

"It's Hattie's."

"If you could borrow it, I have some new records. We might take the machine out under the trees."

"This afternoon, then?"

Pat nodded. "Let's make it about three o'clock."

ROBERT MORTE stood before the door of the Skinner bungalow. He knocked loudly.

In acquainting Jane with the interview on the beach, he had skated over details, saying merely that the old man wished to talk to him.

The Skinner bungalow huddled under a large mango tree with foliage so thick as to shut out even a glimpse of the sky beyond. Robert waited for a few

moments, then knocked again. There was no answer. Frowning, he touched the latch and the door swung open under his hand.

He was looking into the sitting-room. The furnishings, he noticed, were of a much better quality than his own bungalow. A divan bed was made up in one corner— probably, Robert guessed, for the man-servant Vincente. Against the wall was a small iron safe some four feet square. Next to this the folding table had been opened, and on it, carefully graded as to size and colour, were dozens of shells.

Entranced by the sight, he advanced to the table. In that moment a voice spoke from behind him. "Don't touch!"

He swung around. Vincente stood just inside the doorway. The Portuguese came forward, walking carefully on the balls of his feet.

"Why do you come in here?"

Robert stared. "Mr. Skinner is expecting me, Martino. Please find him and tell him I'm waiting."

Except for the slow clenching of his hands, the servant did not move. He said very softly, "You get out of here."

Robert snapped, "Don't be so damned insolent!"

The blood poured into Martino's sallow face and he took a half-step forward. "I take no orders from you," he began. "I break you in my hands— "
"Vincente!"

The name cracked like a whip through the room. The Portuguese sagged like a pricked balloon. As Skinner hobbled forward, the servant swallowed and passed a tongue over his lips. The old man halted.

"What's the trouble?"

Vincente clasped his hands. "I... I found this man here— "

"Found?" Skinner bit on the word. "You 'found' him? Where were you when my visitor arrived?"

The servant swallowed again. Robert could have sworn the man's face was green with fear. Skinner turned.

"Was he here, Morte?"

"No."

The old man said slowly, in a voice that was little more than a whisper, "Where were you, Vincente?"

"Out... out..." The words were choked.

With the swiftness of a snake striking, Skinner's hand leapt and slapped the servant across the mouth.

"Now get out! I warned you what would happen last time you left your post."

The words held a chill malevolence that prickled the short hairs on Robert's neck. Vincente raised a hand to his purpling lips. Then, with a little sob, he turned and stumbled through the door.

"Sit down, Morte."

Robert blinked.

"Do you always treat him like that?"

"Whenever he needs it."

"But aren't you afraid he'll clear out?"

Skinner said grimly, "Martino served a prison sentence under me for manslaughter. He was driving his wife when she was killed in an accident." Skinner lowered himself carefully into a chair and placed his stick within reach. "Only, I happen to have found out it wasn't an accident. It was murder— and I've enough evidence to spring the trap under that fellow's feet... tomorrow!"

A BREEZE SPRINGING up suddenly rustled dryly among the coconut fronds and quivered the leaves of the mango tree overhead. The aquamarine glow which filtered into the sitting-room flickered so that, for a moment, the old face swam hazily like a death-mask seen beneath running water. Robert pulled a chair opposite the old man.

"So that's his background!"

"Don't waste your sympathy, Morte— he's rotten to the core! Long before he served sentence with me, he was in and out of the courts. Downright fraud! Fortune-telling, reading the crystal— all that mischievous tomfoolery. You'll see some of his damned trickery tomorrow night. He's giving a kind of performance for that simpering female with the dyed hair."

Robert was surprised. "Mrs. Sheerlove? And you're going to allow it?"

Skinner raised his eyes. "Why not?"

"But if you know the man's a fake— ?"

The old man made a curious constricted movement of his shoulders. His voice was full of dry, sardonic amusement. "My friend, what's one fake among so many? It doesn't interest me, because I won't be here."

"You're leaving the island?"

"I'm spending tomorrow on the ship. But, before I go, there's something I want you to keep for me."

With some difficulty he raised both hands and fumbled at his neck. Then a length of chain gleamed in his fingers— tiny silver links running through a small key. Then he held it out.

"I want you to keep this for me. And you're not to mention this transaction to another living soul!"

Robert did not move. He sat, hands in his lap, trying to frame the curt refusal on his lips. Then Skinner made a gesture and something cold and light slithered across his fingers.

Robert said firmly, "If you're going on board the ship tomorrow, you'll find very competent purser on board."

Motionless was the old man, so motionless than again Morte recalled Jane's simile of the lizard. His hand remained outstretched, the key dangling. Skinner raised his head slowly.

"You refuse?" he snarled.

"Absolutely!"

Skinner leapt to his feet, stick tossed aside and arms flailing, so that Robert was reminded of some ancient and twisted tree whipped by a hurricane. He tensed his body for the attack, but abruptly the arms dropped. Then the bent shoulders shook and he realised that the old man was laughing, deep, gusty mirth which shook him from head to loot.

"By God, Morte— I like you!" He panted the words. Without a change of inflection, he added, "Did you know that I was a foundling?"

With the flat remark, Robert was conscious of a complete shifting of the balance of power.

"No."

"A foundling," repeated Skinner, and he seemed almost to savour the term, "My parents I never knew. When I was just two hours old, they flung me, helpless and naked, into a bush by the roadside. I was found, so they told me, by a labourer on his way to work."

Such was the silence that they might have been two people alone on some lunar landscape. Slowly, lest he break the spell, Morte resumed his seat. But the old creature caressing the argonaut-shell seemed not to notice the movement.

"Because I was small and undernourished, they called me Skinny. But that was no name to carry through life. So I became Skinner— Skinner the foundling. Elihu was, I believe, an inspiration of the matron, a woman of deeply religious principles. I was adopted by a couple who I can only hope are at this moment burning in the everlasting fires of hell."

The fingers closed around the delicate shell with such force that Robert expected to see it crumble.

"He was a farmer, working a small holding with his miserable slut of a wife. And I was theirs, body and soul! They worked me— I wonder if I can make you understand just how they worked me! I tried to run away. The third time they used a stout paling on me. That's how I got this damned limp. After that they locked me up at night. I stood it for four years, then one morning I broke the

door of the bark hut where I slept and begged a lift from an Afghan camel-driver...

"It was the time of the Sudan War and they were eager for recruits. So I had my first taste of war. It taught me a lesson I've never forgotten. I learnt then that there are only two kinds of people in the world— the weak and the strong. I went into that regiment as a nervous private. I came out of it as an officer, a man of confidence and authority, determining that what had worked so well in war would be equally successful in civilian life."

Robert said quietly, "And was it?"

"Yes," said Skinner grimly.

"Nothing occurred to make you change your opinion?"

The old man dropped the shell on the table and turned. "Not in my new post." He leaned on his stick, head thrust forward, staring sombrely down the avenue of the years. "They were having trouble at Greystone Prison. So I became head warden— and by pain and fear and blood I had such iron discipline in that prison that the authorities were amazed.

"But I was far from satisfied. I wanted something more than limited authority. I wanted power! So in my spare time I began to study— legal jurisprudence, Method and Order, the laws of crime and punishment. I took very good care that the authorities should learn of my zeal, and so I began to climb."

Abruptly, the bell near the community dining-room tolled the summons for lunch. Robert saw his aged companion blink and relax.

"And then?" Robert prompted.

"And then— what?"

Because he suspected this abrupt conclusion, Robert said impatiently, "The rest of the story. The other factors involved."

Parrot-like came the response. "What other factors?"

"Friends..." Morte eyed him steadily. "No man can go through life without some kind of love or affection."

"I married Rosella Daverston."

Robert had heard of the Daverston family, as he had heard of the Scott-Bulmers, the Grant Ellimanns and the Forbes-Raneleighs, old, wealthy, cultured families whose members constituted the very core of Australian society. If Skinner's recital was true— and Morte did not question as much as a syllable of it— it would have needed more, so much more, than iron resolve and the flagellating whips of ambition to elevate a prison governor to these rarefied heights. Something of these thoughts must have shown on his face, for the old man chuckled.

"And it wasn't a question of love or affection, Morte. It was part of a pattern, planned over the years."

Robert asked, "Was there a family?"

Into the old face came that blank shuttered look. "One child."

"Boy or girl?"

Reluctantly the words came. "A girl... Roselind."

"She didn't come on this trip with you?"

"No," said Skinner. "Nor on any other. She was her mother's daughter... When my wife died, young Roselind and I drifted apart. She didn't approve of... certain things..." He turned toward the door as if to terminate the interview.

"Just one moment, Mr. Skinner." And as the other paused, "When did you retire from that post of governor?"

"Ten years ago."

"For what reason?"

"Ill-health." The old man glanced down at his twisted fingers. "You're keeping me from my lunch, Morte."

Robert said, "I'd much prefer to hear the rest of the story. I'm sure the most interesting part is yet to come."

"And why should you think that?"

"Because," replied Morte, "you've described one very difficult ascent. From foundling to prison governor. But surely the second climb must have been infinitely more hazardous... from governor to... millionaire!"

"Some other time."

"Why not now?"

"Because I don't approve."

"Or was it," said Morte, "that your daughter didn't approve of certain things happening during this part of the climb?"

"Damn your eyes!" Skinner snarled. "You go just a step too far! For some reason I'll never know, I let my tongue run away this morning. But don't pry too far, my friend!"

Robert said angrily, "Because you're afraid—"

"Afraid?" Skinner stepped back. "Not any more, my friend. After this, you're the person to be afraid!"

Robert shouldered past the old man, reached for the door and flung it wide. The glitter of sand and sea poured in blindingly, setting him dazed and blinking, standing on the first of the four steps leading from doorway to shingle. He stumbled slightly and flung out a steadying hand against his companion's chest.

"Skinner!" he cried in surprise. But with a crablike movement the old creature slithered sideways from his touch, stepped inside, and the bungalow door slammed. Robert drew a deep breath and stared at that painted barrier.

Under that linen shirt, next to his whitened skin, Elihu Skinner was wearing a bullet-proof vest!

FROM WHERE Earl Redmond stood in the shade of the mango tree, he could see the flat-bottomed punt taking to the water, tethered behind the chugging motor boat. Even though it was some distance away, he could distinguish the various members of this party, organised to explore the coral gardens of the reef.

Mrs. Sheerlove was there, and Dr. Kingsley and Stephen Hawke. They were sitting with a retired geology teacher named Hamblett. On the other side of the punt he noticed Morte and his wife, with the Carmichael twins and the gaunt Miss Lamprey, with her deaf father. At the far end was Mrs. Gertrude Dodds, a militant female who was president of some feminist league in Townsville, the Reverend Henry Honeywax, pink and cherubic and clinging to his clerical collar in an atmosphere that called for shirt and shorts, and the island guide Jim Vestry, an incredibly wrinkled, weather-beaten man.

Redmond turned and started in the direction of Pat Burton's bungalow. But barely had he taken three steps when the girl appeared, carrying an album of records under her arm.

"So you managed it?" she greeted him.

His eyes dropped to the album. "You've got the discs?"

"Yes. Now we need the gramophone. Did you ask your aunt?"

"About what?"

"Borrowing her portable."

Redmond shook a dark head. "Not this boy! Hattie wasn't in any mood to grant favours." He paused, letting his eyes slip insolently over her brown body, just adequately covered in shorts and a brassiere top. "I'll get the machine from Hattie's shack."

With long, easy strides, he loped toward the bungalow. Pat Burton watched him go, burrowing a sandalled foot into the sand and frowning. In deliberately exciting Redmond's emotional interest, had she already started something she might find it difficult to end?

Yet what else could she do?

Earlier in the morning, she had almost decided to ask the advice of this newcomer, the novelist named Morte. It was a good impression she had retained from their first meeting. She liked the candid but shrewd grey eyes.

Yet the man's apparent friendliness toward Skinner vetoed the half-framed resolve at once.

A hail broke into her moody thoughts.

Earl Redmond was emerging from Mrs. Sheerlove's bungalow, carrying a square leather-bound box. Seeing her eyes on him, he hefted the portable high in unspoken triumph, and thus, with face obscured, he did not notice the mango-root which snaked across his path until his running foot snared it. Redmond gasped, stumbled forward, lost his balance, and threw out both arms in an instinctive attempt to save himself. The portable flew from his grasp, curved through the air, and thudded against an outcropping of rock.

"Hell!" Redmond grunted.

Pat Burton had run to his side, but already he was rising unsteadily.

"Earl— are you all right?"

His expression was ugly. "Only just!" Suddenly he looked down at his empty hands. "What happened to the music-box?"

Mutely the girl gestured to where the gramophone hung drunkenly on the ledge of rock. "We've broken it," she said.

"Yeah..." Redmond stood back and surveyed the machine. "Guess Hattie's going to need a new portable." He spat on one finger and rubbed the saliva along his grazed chest. "Sorry, Pat. Looks as if our little concert's gonna be postponed for a while."

One hand to her mouth, the girl said, "What are you going to say to Mrs. Sheerlove?"

"Sweet nothing!" He bent and picked up the portable, snapping shut the lid. "I'll put this right back where I found it."

Pat took advantage of his absence to return the records to her own shack. When she reappeared, Redmond was waiting for her, a coil of thin strong rope in his hands. She said in amusement, "What's that for?"

He ran the coil through strong fingers. "Rope tricks."

She laughed now. But Redmond frowned. "Think I'm shooting the bull, eh?"

"Well, it's rather different from what I expected."

He drawled slowly, "And just what did you expect?"

She did not answer, but stood alert, hands clasped behind her back so that her small, cup-like breasts were prominent. Redmond grinned suddenly.

"Like the guy from Missouri, you want to be shown, eh?" He hung the looped rope across his shoulder. "Let's take ourselves down to the coconut grove."

Coming from the blazing sunshine to the cool softness of the grove was like entering a room with the shutters down. Pat felt the gooseflesh rising on her bare awns and she gave an involuntary shiver. Redmond, glancing down,

slipped an easy arm about her waist. She suffered this for a few moments, then freed herself with a gentle movement.

"Here's a patch of sunlight."

"Let's just sit," he suggested.

Fibre from the coconut husks spread a brown carpet on the sand. Redmond gave the girl his arm as she sank to the ground, and when her face was a few inches away from his own, kissed her full on the lips, crushing his mouth almost violently against her own. She broke away and sprang to her feet, cheeks scarlet and eyes glinting with anger.

"You damned bounder!" she snapped. "Must you be so... so *high-school*?"

He lay back, hands behind head, and the sunlight gleamed on his white teeth. "You're the one being high-school, baby!"

Braced against the tree, her slim body rigid as the trunk which supported it, Pat Burton felt a sudden surge of anger. In that moment she hated Redmond, lying there with such studied indifference, every line of his body so superbly sure of the coming conquest. She would have sacrificed every penny of her wealth to turn and run from that sun-dappled grove; but run where? The dark phantom of Eli Skinner lay over the island as it lay over her life. Redmond, loutish, brutal and selfish to the last degree, at least gave some promise of her deliverance.

Her eyes moved to the coil of rope flung carelessly on the sand. And, as though the sight sprang a tiny trap in her troubled mind, the first glimmerings of an idea came, growing and taking shape as she stood. Dangerous, terribly, horribly risky, reckless beyond words, yet perhaps succeeding by the sheer impudence of it.

"Earl..." she said softly.

"Yeah?"

"Ever tried green coconut milk?"

"Guess not." He spoke without moving, his tone as indifferent as his attitude. "But I guess I'll live."

She did not reply to this, but, stooping, took up the coil of rope and walked a few paces, halting under a palm, looking up to where the greenish-gold of the ripening nuts caught the sunshine. She tossed the rope high into the air, again and again. At the third try she was aware that Redmond had stirred, was sitting up and watching, with lazy and slightly contemptuous amusement.

"What cooks?" he inquired.

Pat tossed the rope again, deliberately misjudging the distance. "I want to bring down a nut..."

Now he was on his feet, coming toward her, stretching out a hand. "Give it here!" He flicked his fingers and she passed over the coil of rope. Redmond

began to slide it through his hand; then abruptly the rope hissed into the air. A nut plopped heavily at Pat's feet, followed by another, a third and a fourth.

"Say when," the man grinned.

"When!" She picked up a nut, her fingers caressing the smooth surface.

"You're very clever with that rope..."

"I've had plenty of practice."

She avoided his eyes as she spoke.

"That trick you just did...? Could you rope a man like that— silently— unexpectedly— and hold him helpless for ten minutes?"

Redmond nodded, his face very serious now. "For ten hours, if need be." The dark eyes narrowed and his mouth went thin. "What's the pay-off, baby? You mean you want me to rope some guy on this island?"

She nodded without speaking.

"Why?"

Hands behind back, fingers gripping tightly, she came to him. She had to raise her head to look into his eyes. "I'm in trouble, Earl... serious trouble. And you're the only one who can help me."

Slowly Earl Redmond's eyes went over her from head to foot and back again. "Depends what I get in return, honey... See what I mean?"

Behind her back, Pat's nails dug deeply.

"Yes," she whispered.

She saw the blood rush into his face. He put out a hand and drew the girl to him. Together they sank on to the soft mattress of fibres.

"And now, baby," said Earl Redmond softly, "suppose you tell Papa all about it?"

THE EXPLORATION to the coral gardens on that first afternoon enlarged Jane's store of knowledge in more ways than one.

But after the first half-hour, she began to develop a headache from the glare. Robert was some distance ahead with Harriet Sheerlove. Jane was talking with Stephen Hawke. She turned to her young partner.

"I'm going back to the beach. Go on and join the others."

But Stephen shook his neat head. "This is old stuff to me," he said. "I'll come with you."

Side by side they squelched their way back to the punt. When they reached the sand, Stephen helped to pull the clumsy waders from Jane's feet.

Removing his own, he tossed them into the punt and lounged against the painted side. When he did not speak, Jane glanced at him. He was staring out across the reef, now dotted with figures dwarfed by the distance. Covertly she

studied his young, serious face and wondered what sort of smile he had. He produced a cigarette-case.

"Smoke?"

"Too much," Jane admitted wryly, and then stopped. She was staring at the case. There was no doubt about it— the same size and shape, the same delicate pattern of filigree-work beaten into the lid. She looked up. "So it was your property, Mr. Hawke?" Then, at the puzzled expression in his face, she added, "Did you get that case from the purser?"

Stephen Hawke turned the case over in his hands.

"I've had this for some years now. It was sent to me from Malaya by a friend of mine. Chap named Ronnie Forbes-Raneleigh, from Sydney..."

("To Kathie with love and affection. Ronald." That had been the inscription engraven inside the case— the identical twin of this one— the mysterious case found on the boat-deck two days previous, owned by no one, claimed by no one...)

Into her mind came that absurd couplet she had once heard...

"The Forbes-Raneleighs are very odd;
They'll talk to nobody but God!"

... Wasn't that the rhyme which had once circulated throughout Sydney regarding this proud, blueblooded family, living their secluded lives tucked away behind the high stone walls of that crumbling mansion at Point Piper? And surely there had been a son...?

"Ronald Forbes-Raneleigh," she said slowly. "I seem to remember a newspaper report..." She looked up. "Wasn't he killed in the war?"

"In Malaya." Stephen Hawke's voice was tight, repressed. He snapped the case shut almost viciously. "Ronnie was one of the finest chaps that ever walked the earth until they interfered!" He stared at Jane defiantly. "Oh, yes, I know that toward the end he was a drunkard and a gambler, maybe even worse! But you can blame Eli Skinner for all that."

"Mr. Skinner?" It was Jane's turn to stare. "What did he do?"

"Sent Ronnie Forbes-Raneleigh to hell in the quickest possible way!"

Knowing that this young man would tell the story in his own way, Jane strove to keep the perplexity from her face. "You knew this Forbes-Raneleigh boy quite well?"

Hawke said bitterly, "Rather! Not only was he one of my best friends, but he wanted to marry my sister."

Mrs. Morte thought she had found a loose end in the tangle. "And your sister's name was Kathie?"

"Kathie?" The other looked surprised. "No. Her name was Anthea. When Ronnie was killed, Anthea and he weren't even engaged. By that time Skinner's poisonous suggestions had started to work. A hint here and a whisper there..."

"What kind of whispers, Mr. Hawke?"

"If you know the Forbes-Raneleighs, you knew how they worshipped the family name. It was an absolute fetish with them. Skinner knew how vulnerable they were in this direction. So the little insinuations began. Was this girl an entirely suitable match? Was she of the same social level? Could they be perfectly sure in their minds that Ronnie wasn't taking a step *down* the ladder? You know the kind of thing."

Jane nodded.

"Well, that's how it went on. It didn't take Skinner very long to convince the Forbes-Raneleighs that Ronnie was making the greatest mistake of his life by teaming up with Anthea. Then the breaking-off process began. The old couple chose a time when Ronnie was away with his unit. Little snubs and subtle insults. Receptions to which Anthea was not invited, or, if she was, completely ignored. Messages from Ronnie that were held back, letters which were not delivered. She'd spoken to Ronnie about this a number of times. But he'd merely laughed at her fears and promised that when they were married he'd take her right away to live somewhere else."

He tossed away his cigarette and Jane took the opportunity to ask, "And you say the engagement was broken off?"

Hawke said grimly, "It was."

"By the family?"

"No, no! They were much too clever for that. Anthea broke it off herself— of what they called of her own free will! There was one final shocking incident— one last final humiliation. It was too much for my sister. So she wrote to him, returning the ring." Hawke paused and raised his steady eyes to Jane's face.

"Three weeks later, she threw herself under air electric train near Hornsby."

"Oh, no!" cried Mrs. Morte in dismay.

"Mercifully, she wasn't killed. But the resulting publicity stirred even the Forbes-Raneleighs into action. It was probably remorse, but they put Anthea into a nursing home and gave her the very best of treatment. It was, you must remember, during the war, and plastic surgery was receiving a great deal of attention. During her convalescence one of the doctors fell in love with my sister, and six months later they were married." He added grimly, "So the story has a kind of happy ending, after all."

"And what of the boy?"

"Ronnie?"

"Yes. Surely he just didn't accept the broken engagement without asking questions?"

Hawke said grimly, "He didn't have a chance to ask questions. The Malayan campaign was too hot to worry about personal problems. When he got leave, months later, it was to find Anthea already married. He found out where she was living, went to see her, and so the whole wretched story came out. Ronnie went back to his family— and there was a scene that must have put ten years on to the old couple's lives.

"And it concluded by Ronnie making a solemn vow. He swore that he would take the family name— the name that they revered and worshipped— and drag it so low down into the mud that they would never again raise their heads."

Jane was silent. Suddenly she gave a little shiver and turned to see Hawke watching her.

"As you know," he said quietly, "Ronnie was killed in action about three months later."

"There's one thing I can't understand, Mr. Hawke..."

"What's that?"

"You believe it was Mr. Skinner who engineered this wicked scheme?"

Hawke's jaw set. "I haven't a shred of proof. Yet I'm as certain of it as I'm standing here."

Jane frowned. "But why? Surely no one could be evil enough to do a thing like that without cause?"

"Oh, he had cause enough! And opportunity, too! Don't forget he was very thick with the Forbes-Raneleigh set. He'd married Sir Hugh Daverston's daughter."

"But the cause?" she persisted. "Why should he want to do such a thing?"

"Because," said Hawke simply, "he'd persuaded the Forbes-Raneleighs to marry Ronnie off to some other girl. Someone Skinner considered much more suitable..."

"Who was she?"

Hawke said quietly, "It was Skinner's own daughter. Rose..."

THE PARTY OUT on the reef were retracing their steps now. The echo of their splashing progress carried clearly in that quiet atmosphere. But Jane was only vaguely conscious of this procession.

Stephen's lip twisted. "And I think that the wily old devil would have brought it off, but for one thing."

"What was that?"

"Rose Skinner was already married!"

"Married?" Jane's tone was high. "Then what was the use...?"

"Skinner knew nothing about the wedding. The whole thing must have been a staggering, earth-shaking surprise to him. Rose Skinner and her father had lived apart for some years— from the beginning there had been a mutual dislike. It was for this reason that the girl had kept the news of her marriage from him."

Hawke paused and his eyes were candid.

"As far as this part of the story goes, I'm relying on hints and gossip," he continued. "But there's not the slightest doubt of the girl's marriage. And it upset Skinner to such a degree that he'll never as much as mention the subject— nor, if he can help it, his daughter's name."

Jane said quietly, "She seems to be a remarkably brave young woman."

Stephen nodded. "No doubt she's inherited some of her father's iron determination. And she was quite financially independent of Skinner in every way. I believe her mother settled quite a large amount of money on Rose before she died."

"Whom did she marry?"

"Rose?" Hawke shook his head. "I'm not quite sure."

"Oh, there you are!" cried Harriet Sheerlove.

She waddled toward them, face of boiled lobster hue and hair clinging stickily to her forehead. In one hand she carried something wrapped in a silken head-scarf. With a glance over her shoulder at the remaining party on the reef, she turned and thrust the bundle under the edge of the punt. Her manner was so conspiratorial that Jane demanded, "Whatever have you got there?"

Harriet lowered her voice. "I've been a naughty, naughty girl," she simpered, and, sitting down, began to struggle with her waders until Stephen came to her rescue. "You remember how that odd little Mr. Vestry said that we weren't to take anything from the reef?" She paused as Jane nodded. "Well, I simply could not resist the temptation, my dear!"

She bent and removed the silken bundle. Untying the knotted ends, she revealed half a dozen conical shells some three to four inches long. They were beautifully ornamented with dark stripes waving against a surface of cream polished porcelain. Harriet took one between podgy fingers.

"Drop it— *quickly!*"

It was Stephen Hawke, and his words, urgent and fraught with alarm, sent the shell flying from Harriet's fingers.

"Why... what...?" she stammered.

"Do you want to kill yourself?" the young man snapped. "They happen to be cone-shells! And that particular species is just about the most poisonous on the reef." He gestured to the sand.

"Look at that!"

From the open end of the fallen shell, a sickle-shaped fleshy proboscis had protruded some inches, striving to lever the covering over on its side. Mrs. Sheerlove's eyes widened.

"My stars! It's alive!"

"You bet it's alive," grunted Hawke. "That creature has a venom gland and a barb potent enough to cause a very painful death."

Stephen Hawke was still stamping the cone-shells into the loose sand when Robert and Dr. Kingsley joined them.

THE ILLUMINATED hands of Pat Burton's wrist-watch pointed to nine-thirty as, she stood at the door of the recreation-hut, looking out into the thick, moonless night.

Glancing backward over her shoulder, the girl began a deliberately casual stroll toward the beach. Once away from the hut, however, she broke into a run, so that when she tapped on the door of a lighted bungalow she was panting.

"Earl!" she called softly. "Earl, it's Pat!"

The door opened and Redmond's tall figure stood silhouetted against the light.

"Ready?" he grunted.

"I've been watching," she said. "Skinner left for the ship about half an hour ago."

"What about that Dago servant?"

"Vincente's gone, too. Across to your aunt's bungalow."

Redmond nodded. "Hattie's fixing some kind of spiritualist bunk for tomorrow night. They're probably both in conference about it." He stopped as a sudden thought struck him. "But he wouldn't mosey off and leave that shack wide open, surely?"

Pat shook her head. "The door's locked. I've tried it. But the window's still unlatched. I can slip through quite easily." She paused. "Earl...?"

"Yeah?"

"You know your part, don't you?"

For answer, he turned back and took a coil of rope from beneath his bed. He said lightly, "I'm just aiming to do a little practice roping tonight. If anyone... Martino or anyone else... sort of gets tangled up— well, it's just one of those little accidents easily explained away."

The big Canadian watched her as she sped away, seeming very small and resolute against the ebon background of the island. Then he stepped into a pair of rubber-soled shoes and, switching off the bungalow light, made his way to the giant mango-tree which spread itself widely near the Skinner bungalow.

Redmond paused at the knotted trunk, measured the distance to the first bough and leapt, pulling himself up. From this vantage-point he had a panoramic view of the beach and the habited portions of the island. He turned his gaze landwards. Some distance away, the Sheerlove bungalow stood out, a brightly lit patch against the prevailing gloom.

Earl Redmond began his soft humming.

It seemed to Redmond, straddled on his swaying perch, that the darkness of the island was lifting slightly. He raised his eyes. The rounded shoulder of the hill was ablaze as the first yellow segment of the rising moon pushed its way into the sky. The man cursed softly. He glanced at his illuminated wrist-watch. Pattie had been in the bungalow about five minutes. He would wait a similar length of time, before—

The sound of footsteps on the path below jerked Redmond from his reflections.

Vincente was approaching!

The weak light of the rising moon was sufficient to show the dark outline of a moving figure coming from the Sheerlove bungalow.

Silent as a shadow, the big man hitched the slack of the rope around the bough, then, holding the noose carefully, leaned forward...

The figure was directly underneath.

Soft, gently as a failing leaf, the noose dropped front the tree and settled around his shoulders. In that second it began to tighten. But some premonition of danger caused him to glance upward, so that he jerked one arm free of the construction. But it was too late. The noose caught the right arm and body, jerking the man almost off his feet. Up above, Redmond's muscles tensed as he gripped the rope, no easy task now that the tethered individual was flailing and twisting like a hooked marlin. Then suddenly the figure below spat the words:

"Let me down, you damned jackanapes!"

Redmond gaped in open-mouthed surprise. The rope slid through his fingers, burning the skin, jerking him forward on his precarious seat. He lost his balance, clawed desperately at branches which snapped in his fingers, and fell almost at the feet of Eli Skinner.

The old man spoke, very quietly but with such iron menace that the other blinked.

"Come to my bungalow."

Redmond stammered. "Guess I made one fool mistake..."

"You gutter-bred jail-bird! If you try that fake Yankee accent on me, I'll swear I'll break this stick across your filthy hide!" And as the young man's eyes widened with sudden fear, Skinner snarled, "Go to my bungalow. I want to talk to you!"

Herding the other before him, he limped along the path.

In the light of the risen moon, Redmond's face was paper-white, and he stumbled as he walked.

Eli Skinner paused and, taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, unlocked the door. Throwing it open, he gestured his unwilling companion inside. Then he kicked the door shut and switched on the light.

The old man said slowly, "You're getting careless, my boy. Dyed hair needs very careful attention."

The other stammered. "Dye..."

"Then," Skinner continued, "when I saw your attentions to Pattie Burton, I got your measure at once. So I had a check made on you. Radio can do it very quickly these days. And that tattoo-mark on your arm helped a great deal. Mark Godfrey, the roué who marries attractive women for their money. You must be very low on the list to take up with this Sheerlove hussy." He paused and barked the words. "What game were you playing tonight?"

The other licked his dry lips. "Pattie... Miss Burton asked me to... to help her..."

"How?"

"She wanted... wanted something from this room. A key... a key on a chain. We knew you were on the ship, but the servant... Martino..." Something choked in the man's throat and he was silent.

Skinner nodded his head. "So you planned to keep Vincente out of mischief while Pattie robbed me, eh? And," said Skinner, his tone almost a purr, "did she tell you just why she wanted this key?"

"No, Mr. Skinner. I swear she didn't! All I know is that it was something to do with her father's business."

Skinner's eyes searched his face, noting the sick terror in the dark eyes.

"All right, Redmond. Because you're still going to use that name, along with that fake accent..."

Hope dawned in the other man's face. "Then... you're not going to the police... You're going to give me a second chance?"

The old man said slowly, "I've never given anyone a second chance in my life. Let alone a fortune-hunting crook who's changed his name and identity to escape a police investigation." He paused to let the next words sink in.

"You're not getting off that ship, because I need you on it. From now on, Redmond, you're going to work for me."

His companion said sullenly, "What do you want me to do?"

Eli Skinner took a step forward. His voice dropped a key. "There's a passenger on the *Medusa* called Leila Harland. What do you know about her?"

"Precious little."

"Then find out! Because I want every possible piece of information about that woman."

"Why don't you ask her doctor?"

Skinner thrust out a hand and gripped the other's sweater in a tight bundle. "Because I'm asking you! That's your job, Redmond. I don't care how you go about it, or what gutter experience and rat-brained cunning you use to get results. But remember two things! First, I want a full report on that woman brought to me before we leave this island. Second, if you attempt to involve me in this business, even by implication, I'll have you back behind bars before you can raise a curse!"

IN HER BUNGALOW, Pat Burton was facing her father, who sat, swaying slightly, on the wide divan.

"It wasn't there, Daddy," Pat was saying. "I searched everywhere— even in the most unlikely places. He must have been wearing it." In her distress, she reached out and shook the elder man gently. "Daddy, do you understand what I'm saying? I've been searching for the key... in Skinner's bungalow..."

The mainspring behind Burton Incorporated Industries caressed a faintly stubbly jaw. He regarded his daughter owlishly and shook a reproachful head.

"Very silly, Pat... very silly. Get yourself into serious trouble..." The last word splintered in a drunken hiccup.

Pat stared at him with twitching lips. Suddenly her face crumpled like a child's and she began to cry... .

THE BRIDGE GAME in the recreation-room broke up shortly before eleven o'clock. Jane, accompanied by Miss Lamprey and her father, came away, leaving Robert yarning with Kingsley. It was almost half an hour later before he said good night to the doctor and set out for the bungalow.

Robert pushed open the door, to find Jane, still fully dressed, standing in the centre of the room.

"Robert," she said carefully, "why did you lie to me?"

He stared at her. "Lie to you?"

"About this!" Jane's hand came out. Dangling from her fingers was a tiny silver key hanging on a thin chain.

"Where the deuce did you find that?"

As he continued to stare at her, she went on. "I was folding your shirt when this fell out."

"Skinner must have slipped it into my pocket..." His voice trailed away.

Jane said sharply, "Robert! You're not going to keep it?"

"For a while— yes."

Her lips set. "I think," she declared, "that you're perfectly insane."

"Why?"

"Why?" Jane echoed the word almost shrilly. "Surely you know better than to mix ourselves in Mr. Skinner's shady business!"

Robert said quietly, "I'm afraid that, quite against our will, we're very much mixed up in it already." He closed the door and leant with his back against it. His face was very serious.

"And not only us, but everyone else on board the *Medusa*."

"Nonsense!" said Jane half-heartedly.

He ignored the interruption. "What's more, you sensed it on the very first day out. Perhaps there is something in feminine intuition, after all. An odd ship, you called it. Remember?"

She nodded. "I suppose it was seeing Miss Harland come on board like that. And your publisher making that absurd remark about a muffled figure..."

Robert shook his head. "Can you think of a more accurate description of this woman? She's positively swathed in obscurity! Who is she— what is she? And what possible relation does she bear to Ralph Kingsley?"

Jane said unexpectedly, "She could be his wife!"

"Wife?" He was staring at her. "Whatever makes you suggest a thing like that?"

"Something I heard today from Stephen Blake." Then she was telling him the tragic story she had heard on the reef. "The mention of the plastic-surgery operation set me thinking. Is it possible that our passenger was once Anthea Hawke and the doctor she married is Ralph Kingsley?"

"No."

"But," Jane persisted, "surely it explains the origin of that cigarette-case? It seems obvious that the Forbes-Raneleigh boy gave it to Hawke's sister. Isn't it possible that she may have passed it on to Kingsley— or he may have borrowed it. But he disowned it because his claim might reveal the girl's true identity!"

Robert was silent for a moment, frowning at the floor. Then he shook his head.

"I can give you at least four major objections. First, if Kingsley is married to Anthea Hawke, then the story he told us regarding the Englishwoman Linda was a complete pack of lies."

"You said you saw him destroy that photograph..."

"That doesn't prove the story false. In fact," said Robert, "it rather substantiates the truth of it. The emotion which accompanied that act certainly wasn't simulated, since Kingsley was quite unaware that I was watching."

He ticked off a second finger.

"If that cigarette-case is the property of Anthea Hawke, why is it engraved, 'To Kathie'?"

"It could have been a nickname."

"If so, then surely Hawke would have known? Yet you say that the name conveyed nothing to him."

A third finger.

"Again, according to your story, Miss Hawke underwent that plastic-surgery operation during the war. Any scars must have healed years ago. Why, then, does she keep her face veiled now?"

"Possibly because the operation wasn't a success."

"So she means to go through the rest of her life wrapped in a silk scarf?" He smiled. "Oh, no, Jane. Remember, we're assuming that this woman is married to a doctor. She would have had those hypothetical scars treated— and treated successfully— years ago."

Jane said reluctantly, "Perhaps... Anyhow, what's the fourth objection?"

"Assuming this woman to be Hawke's sister, what's the reason for her being on board at all? She'd know before sailing— as, indeed, we all know— that the partners of Burton's Incorporated Industries were to be our fellow passengers. In which case, in view of the bad feeling between her father and daughter, the *Medusa* would be just about the last ship in the world that the girl would choose!"

"Unless she had a special motive?"

"Such as?"

Her face was thoughtful. "This young woman must hate Skinner very bitterly. And if, by sailing disguised on the same ship, she could work some mischief on him..." Suddenly she looked up. "Robert, could she have made that phone call to Redmond's cabin in mistake for— " Then her face fell. "No, that won't do. Skinner wasn't on board during that scene in Redmond's cabin." Jane was silent for a few moments, her eyes on the clasped hands. "It's a proper tangle, isn't it?"

Robert nodded without speaking.

IT WAS LATE in the afternoon on the following day. The party were returning from an excursion to the butterfly valley on the other side of the island. They reached the bungalow, where Mrs. Morte's first movement was to

kick off her walking-shoes and collapse on the divan. There was a silence. Then Robert sighed. "Thank heaven we can turn in early tonight!"

"That depends on what time the séance ends."

"Séance?" He opened his eyes. Without moving, she explained Mrs. Sheerlove's arrangements with the Portuguese. "And you accepted this stupid invitation on my behalf?" he snapped.

"Mrs. Sheerlove buttonholed me just after breakfast. In front of the other guests. I couldn't be rude, because they're all going. Mr. Hamblett and Pat Burton and Miss Lamprey—"

"Oh, my God!" groaned Robert.

"I can't possibly see how you're getting out of it."

Robert said firmly, "I'm simply going to say that I forgot."

But he had reckoned without Mrs. Sheerlove's enterprise. No sooner had they entered the dining-room that evening when she pounced upon them, her plump face beaming.

"I'm expecting you at eight o'clock," she announced.

Robert put aside the menu. "I should warn you, Mrs. Sheerlove, that I must be included among the rank unbelievers..."

She waved a beringed finger at him. "Perhaps now, Mr. Morse; but just you *wait!* All I ask is that you keep a perfectly open mind. I was just the same in the beginning."

When the Mortes arrived, the other guests had already assembled, and, although only six in number, the small sitting-room was crowded. Mrs. Sheerlove in the act of setting a chair for the sallow Vincente, hovering in the background.

"Oh, there you are!" she announced, greeting him with a preoccupied wave. "Can you find room?"

There was a general re-shuffle. Jane wedged herself between Kingsley and Stephen Hawke, while Robert sat on the edge of the divan.

Redmond, on the other side of the room, seemed unusually quiet. His comely face was set in sullen lines and the dark eyes were brooding and furtive. Once he made a little gesture with his open hand, and Robert was surprised to see the fingers scarred with what looked like a newly acquired burn.

From the recreation-hut came a burst of laughter, followed by the tinkling of a piano, and suddenly half a dozen voices were raised in song. Vincente frowned and whispered to Mrs. Sheerlove, who, quick to catch his disapproval, nodded. "I'll slip right across and close the door. Then we won't be disturbed. Now, don't anyone move..." With some difficulty she picked her way across

hastily-tucked-in feet, to disappear into the gathering dusk. Their hostess reappeared, flushed but triumphant.

"They were very nice about it," she announced.

Gesturing to Vincente to take his place in the centre, she surveyed her guests with resolute face. "Vincente has explained," she began, "that we can only hope for results if we *all* co-operate. Thoughts are *things*, you know. A kindly wish sent out collects other good motives, and so gathers impetus until it is quite an irresistible *force*!"

"Rather like chain letters," murmured Jane to Kingsley.

"Now," continued Mrs. Sheerlove impressively, "I'm going to put out the light. But first we must form a sympathetic contact by all holding hands..."

Mrs. Sheerlove put her hand on the light-switch. "Now, remember— no laughing!" A click and the room was plunged into darkness, bisected by a spear of reflected light from the open window. She fumbled her way across the floor and settled beside Robert, taking his hand in her soft, plump fingers.

A hot, restless silence fell. Robert turned his head. With eyes adjusting themselves to the gloom, he saw his companions as formless shapes topped by the pale blurs of faces. Only the Portuguese sat apart, plain in the reflected light from the window. He was slumped forward in his chair, head lolling, breathing deeply. It seemed so studied an attitude that Morte found himself gripped with rising impatience.

Robert wondered what would happen if suddenly he laughed outright— if he rose to his feet and—

"Gas!"

It was Harriet Sheerlove. She spoke in a trembling whisper, and he felt her fingers tighten. "Smell it?" she breathed. "The odour of cooking gas... It's all around the room!"

A wave of uncertainty, tangible as a caress, ran through the group. Whispers took up the suggestion, assenting, denying.

"Yes! That's it, Mrs. Sheerlove... Cooking gas. I can smell it from here. Oh... definitely!"

"Well, I can't!" Was it the darkness that made Earl Redmond's voice sound unnaturally harsh. "I've had enough of this monkey-business. Let me out of here..."

Pat Burton spoke, her cool tone edged with ironic reproach. "Sit down, Earl. You're spoiling the fun for other people." Then came Mrs. Sheerlove's voice, tight with exasperation.

"Now we'll just have to begin all over again!"

Silence.

Then someone near him was breathing heavily like a man under a physical strain.

The first soft, moaning cry followed a few seconds later. It took Robert by surprise so that, involuntarily, his fingers twitched in Harriet's hand. Her whisper, charged with solicitude and understanding, tickled his ear.

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Morte. It's only Vincente. The beginning of the trance..."

"Mark! Mark, darling..."

Harriet Sheerlove broke off with a tiny wheezing gasp as a new voice floated into the room. A girl's voice, young, vibrant, and with a note of suppliancy in its tone. But what brought Robert bolt upright, dropping his companion's hand and peering forward into the darkness, was the curious but unmistakable stutter which trembled the words.

"Darling, don't send me away. I've tried so hard to come back to you..."

Now the atmosphere in that sitting-room was electric. The people in the group seemed turned into stone, and in Robert's other hand Kingsley's fingers were as icicles.

"I want you to know, Mark, sweetheart, that you mustn't be unhappy. I forgive you because I understand so much—"

Then Earl Redmond screamed.

"Turn on that bloody light!"

The naked terror in his tone brought the company to their feet. Robert never knew who had clicked the switch. He had eyes only for the burly young man swaying near the divan, ashen-faced, glaring around the room with trapped, bloodshot eyes. They came to rest on the Portuguese, already stirring from what seemed a heavy sleep. Redmond drew his big body together.

"You swine!" he panted, and his fingers doubled into fists. "Skinner put you up to this! Skinner told you..."

With a bound that took them all by surprise, he cleared the distance, one hand reaching for Vincente's throat. The impact of that sudden lunge sent the chair crashing, and the two men tangled on the floor. Only when Redmond's fist thudded into the swarthy face did Miss Lamprey's wild scream galvanise the other men into silence.

"Earl!" cried Harriet Sheerlove. She stood trembling from head to foot, fingers to lips, her plump face suddenly pinched and shrunken. Pat Burton stood as white and as still as a figure hewn from marble. Redmond jerked himself free, wheeled, and almost ran from the bungalow.

Stephen and Dr. Kingsley stepped forward and helped the Portuguese to his feet. Vincente stood, swaying uncertainly, automatically wiping the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. Harriet Sheerlove stood as one

paralysed, staring through the open doorway into the blackness beyond. Her eyes had a queer, swollen look as she spoke.

"I wish I'd never set eyes on him! It's a dreadful, wicked thing to say, but I wish he was dead! Yes... dead and buried and out of my life... forever!"

MRS. SHEERLOVE'S "séance" and its extraordinary sequel gave the island visitors their main topic of conversation on the following day.

Neither Harriet nor Earl Redmond made their appearance at that matutinal meal, but the Mortes were at their usual table. The third day on the island had been set apart for a cruise to one of the neighbouring atolls where the native boys were giving an exhibition of turtle-fishing. It was close on six o'clock when the party returned to the wharf of Paradise.

The Mortes scarcely had time to shower and change for dinner before a tap sounded at their bungalow door. On Robert's bidding, Dr. Kingsley put his head inside.

"I've been restraining my curiosity all day."

"What about?" asked Robert.

"That curious affair last night. Just what did you make of it?"

The Mortes exchanged a quick glance. Kingsley caught the look and added wryly, "I'm sorry. Have I said anything out of place?"

"Not at all," replied Jane. "But Robert and I are rather tired of the subject." Then, because this sounded brusque, she went on, "I believe the explanation to be quite simple."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Our Mr. Redmond would be just the kind of person to have a doubtful background. Martino apparently unearthed some old scandal and used this method of letting Redmond know."

Kingsley sipped his drink. "Very likely, Mrs. Morte. Particularly as Martino suggested the séance to Mrs. Sheerlove."

Jane looked surprised. "I thought it was the other way around?"

"Indeed, no. I was talking to Mrs. Sheerlove this afternoon. She's still very upset about the whole thing and blames herself for letting the Portuguese persuade her into it."

Robert was lighting a cigarette. "What about the voice we heard?"

The doctor shrugged. "Ventriloquism...?" he suggested.

Smoke curled into Morte's lean, scrubbed face. "If it was ventriloquism, he's perfected a brand-new technique."

"Still, it's possible..."

Robert said slowly, "Remember the voice which spoke to Redmond on the cabin telephone?" He paused as Kingsley nodded. "We heard the same voice last night."

Very deliberately, Ralph Kingsley placed his glass on the small table. "Knowing you, Morte, there would be solid proof behind that statement?"

"Oh, yes," said Robert, and, to Jane's dismay, he began to sketch the essential details of Redmond's story. He concluded by saying, "I don't have to emphasise the point that all this was told to me in confidence, Doctor." His grey eyes rested for an instant on his companion's face. "I'm passing it on because I feel there are far too many secrets among our passengers."

The jarring clamour of the bell near the recreation-room cut into his last word.

Now the lights in the dining-room were dancing like fireflies. A group of guests, dinner-bound, waved to Kingsley as he hastened to his own shack. The search for a comb took him to the dressing-table, and so he noticed the envelope. Very slowly he reached out, slit the gummed flap, and took out the sheet of note-paper, unfolding it. The message was printed in the same precise hand.

"Mr. Eli Skinner is very curious about Leila Harland. Since this man's curiosity is always dangerous, you should not ignore this warning."

On this their third night on Paradise Island, the Mortes had planned to retire early. In the bedroom Morte could hear Jane moving around, clicking cupboard doors and sliding drawers. Yet the effort to move was too great and he was half-dozing when a soft tap sounded at the door. He must have answered automatically, because Pat Burton entered and stood before him.

"Could I speak to you, Mr. Morte?"

Robert stared, and, mistaking his silence for disapproval, the girl made an appealing little gesture.

"I know I'm frightfully late and you must be very tired. But what I have to say will only take a few minutes..."

Robert rose to his feet. "Sit down, Miss Burton."

"No, no." She made a little, indecisive movement and paused. "You... I... think you have some property of mine... a tiny key on a silver chain..."

Robert said gently, "My dear Miss Burton, what makes you think I have such a thing?"

"You might possibly have found it... somewhere..." The last word limped out.

"In which case," returned Morte, "I would most certainly have turned it over to Mr. Ferrier."

Pat Burton flushed slightly.

"Naturally! Of course; but then well... you might not have known. Someone else might have found the key and handed it on to you, thinking it was yours, or Mrs. Morte's or..."

Robert said slowly, "Who would be likely to hand over your property to me...?"

She shook her head as though unable to trust her voice.

He continued the question, watching her carefully. "... unless it was Mr. Skinner."

Her body went rigid. "Then you have got it!" She took a step forward. "Mr. Morte, I beg of you, give it to me... please! Skinner must have told you it was valuable. And valuable things have their price. Is it money you want?"

"No. Miss Burton."

"Then what...?"

"Only the truth," said Robert soberly.

She stood there, hands at rest now, head nodding as though she had come to a decision. "The truth," she murmured. "Why not? So much easier." She said simply. "It isn't anything wicked or complicated or shameful. But he's made it like that."

"Patricia!"

They both wheeled. Arthur Burton stood in the doorway.

"I think you'd better go, Patricia."

Suddenly her features seemed to dissolve. She turned and, plucking at her long skirt, almost ran from the room. Arthur Burton stood by to let her pass. When he turned back into the room, those smooth pink features held no more expression than a paper mask.

"I must ask you to forgive my interruption. My daughter should know better than to waste your time with idle gossip. I can assure you it won't happen again." The man in the doorway swayed a little. "And, since we are all to be fellow passengers on a long trip, for the sake of unanimity it would probably be as well to forget this scene entirely."

The door closed and Arthur Burton had gone.

Robert said, almost incredulously, "Well, I'll be damned!" He turned. "Jane..."

But she was four-square in front of him. One hand was thrust before him. "Give me that key!"

"My dear— "

But she waved his words aside angrily. Little pink spots were danger-signs in her cheeks. "Skinner and that Burton man— I don't know which is the worst! And to think we must spend another four weeks with them, cooped up in the

same small ship! Well, I'm not going to do it! I'm getting off at the first available port."

She thrust her small hand further under his nose. "Give me that key, Robert. It's going back to Skinner tonight."

Robert took the chain from his vest pocket. "Jane..."

"Fiddle-faddle!" snapped Jane. She glared at the dangling chain. "Well, who's to return that object! You or I?"

He said irritably, "Oh, all right!" He slipped the key into his pocket and, stooping, felt for his shoes.

Although it wanted an hour to midnight, the entire island seemed wrapped in a vast velvet pall and sleeping. And as he walked, the loneliness of the previous night possessed him anew; again it was borne on him how isolated was this tiny community.

With every forward step, his sense of uneasiness grew. He quickened his pace, anxious to conclude the business of the night and return to his own quarters. The Skinner bungalow was an amorphous shape, the half-open door a darker patch into the blackness beyond. A blackness so intense that Robert, his foot on the bottom step, hesitated.

Then he heard the sound of breathing in the room beyond. A curious respiration, with its rise and fall accompanied by a soft, bubbling gasp that made him narrow his eyes and cock an alert head. It came again, a long, painful sigh ending in a shuddering grunt. Robert mounted two steps and called softly.

"Skinner, it's Morte! Are you all right?"

Mounting the last step, he thrust open the door, fumbled, and clicked on the light.

Almost at his feet, sucking in air through lips swollen and blue, a man lay writhing on the floor, contorting his powerful body in the last extremity of agony.

"Redmond... !" cried Morte.

He took the lolling head in his hands, glancing wildly, helplessly, around the room. A soft scrape directed his attention to the floor, and there was a cone-shell, miraculously alive, jerking and twitching, the sluggish inhabitant half-emerged. Something clicked in Robert's mind— he snatched at Redmond's outflung hand, turned it over, stared at the red tuckered incision in the fleshy palm...

Lowering the sufferer's head gently, Robert sprang to his feet and ran for the open door.

"Dr. Kingsley!" he cried. "Dr. Kingsley... !"

There was little sleep for the guests on Paradise Island that night.

Looking back, Robert remembers the ensuing events as a blurred record. Jane soothing a hysterical Harriet Sheerlove... was that before or after they carried Redmond's twitching body from the Skinner bungalow to his own room? And the sudden appearance (almost as though they had materialised from the shadows) of Eli Skinner and the servant Vincente— how long was that before the arrival of the small plane, hastily summoned by radio from the Townsville hospital?

Shortly after eight o'clock next morning, the plane returned with Dr. Kingsley. He reported no change in Redmond's condition. Kingsley then went in search of Harriet Sheerlove.

She had returned to her own bungalow, a swollen-eyed, haggard-faced figure, now wearily calm as if the emotional storm of the night had drained her dry of suffering. She received the doctor's scanty news almost with apathy, seemingly prepared for even grimmer tidings. She displayed animation only when she questioned Kingsley on the possibility of joining Redmond, to be told that no purpose whatsoever could be served by her leaving for the mainland.

Kingsley added gently:

"I'd advise you to stay on board the *Medusa*, Mrs. Sheerlove. As soon as he can be moved, your nephew will be taken to a much better equipped hospital in Cairns."

The inquiry into the accident, held later on that fourth morning, produced barren results. Partly because Mr. Ferrier, torn between respect for his wealthy guests and anxiety to clear the island's reputation, fumbled the investigation and confused any likely evidence. And partly because Eli Skinner, cantankerous and rockily uncommunicative, would say nothing more than the bare statement that he left for the *Medusa*, accompanied by Martino, shortly after nine o'clock. Each of the guests denied having seen the unfortunate young man until Morte's grim discovery.

Part 3. Death

"ROBERT, are you asleep?"

"No, dear. Just thinking."

It was noon of the day following Redmond's accident, and the *Medusa*, still anchored in the lagoon, was getting up steam to sail that afternoon. After the inquiry in Mr. Ferrier's office, a conference had taken place between Skinner, Burton and Captain Robertson, and their edict had been delivered to the Mortes' bungalow by First-Officer Rodda.

"Under the circumstances, the Old Man thinks the sooner we touch Cairns the better," he explained. Then he added, "Some of the passengers are going out from the ship in a tender to explore a submarine reef this morning. You might care to join them."

The Mortes embraced the suggestion of leaving with avidity.

Meanwhile, the ship kept in constant radio communication with the Townsville hospital where Redmond, drugged against pain, lay fighting for his life. Latest news told that the patient's condition now permitted him to be moved, and as soon as possible he was being flown to a larger institution at Cairns.

Jane lost no time in packing, and an hour later found them back in their familiar ship's cabin.

"Robert..."

"What is it?"

"I'm really worried about Mrs. Sheerlove. I'm sure one of the doctors on board should see her."

Robert spoke. "She's taking it very hard."

Jane said gently, "It must be tragic to love a person so deeply and to realise that he's completely worthless. She was nothing more than his banking account."

"You think this woman's distress is due to unrequited love?"

"What else could it be?"

"Remorse," said Robert. He caught the quick glance from Jane and went on: "Don't you think there's something damned odd about Redmond's accident? And I'm recalling something else. That night of the so-called séance, when Harriet Sheerlove wished Redmond was dead..."

Jane grasped the implication at once. "So that's what you meant by remorse?" Her tone showed her opinion of the idea. "No, Robert. You're on quite the wrong track. I doubt whether Mrs. Sheerlove would have the

intelligence to plan such an idea." Her voice slowed. "But there are two other people..."

"Who might have laid such a trap?"

She nodded, staring out to sea, eyes thoughtful. "That Portuguese servant, Martino."

"Just a minute," Robert interrupted. "Perhaps you've got the whole thing by the tail, Jane. It might well have been the other way around." He swung his legs over the chair and sat upright. "Let's assume that Martino discovered this secret of Redmond's and gave the man a clue by faking that medium act at the séance. Redmond might well consider ways and means of preventing Martino spreading the story. What more logical reason than that he went there to lay the trap for Martino?"

"And fell into it himself?"

"Of course!"

Again Mrs. Morte shook her head. "No, Robert," she said stubbornly. "I can't see it happening like that. The very fact that Redmond was setting this deadly trap would make him doubly cautious of the shells." He nodded reluctantly. Then something else occurred to him. "You spoke of two persons," he said.

Jane nodded.

"Who is the other one?"

She said slowly, "The owner of the voice that scared Redmond so badly. And I'm certain it's the nut and kernel of the whole problem!"

Now he turned, staring at the windowed sun-deck aft. Behind those curtains, what... who...? He sat back.

"I've half a mind to put an end to the riddle here and now..."

"In what way?"

Robert said impatiently, "Going to Kingsley and demanding an explanation."

Jane said calmly, "My dear, just how far do you imagine you'd get? The doctor would look at you in that quiet, well-bred way and remind you he'd given you an explanation the first day out. And you couldn't very well call a man like Kingsley a bare-faced liar!"

"That's the point!" cried Robert, in exasperation. "Is he?"

"Excuse me."

Second-Officer Willis stood by their chair, immaculate in shining white drill.

"The tender's just about to leave with the party for the sunken reef."

Jane said firmly, "Not for me!"

Robert asked, "Who is going?"

"Miss Burton and Mr. Hawke, with Dr. Kingsley. And some of the officers." Mr. Willis waxed suddenly confidential. "As a matter of fact, this will be the last opportunity. This evening we're going lickety-split for Cairns."

"All right," said Robert. "Count me in."

"I MIGHT HAVE a little nap," Jane Morte said. Some hours had elapsed since Robert had returned from the diving expedition. They had finished lunch in the saloon and were returning to their own suite.

Robert thrust open the door and Jane entered, to halt abruptly. Her sharp eyes were flicking around the cabin.

"Someone's been in here!"

Robert said grimly, "Indeed, yes." It was obvious that the entire apartment had been subjected to a hurried search.

Jane turned.

"Really, this is too much! I'm going to speak to Captain Robertson!"

"Wait, Jane." Robert stepped inside and closed the door. Jane watched him cross and dive beneath the bed. He straightened, holding a delicate wisp of silk. She saw the initials embroidered in one corner. "P.B." He shook his head.

"She's certainly a persistent young lady!" He slipped the handkerchief into his pocket. Then he took out the silver key and held it in his fingers. "This is why she didn't come down to lunch, Jane."

For answer, Mrs. Morte crossed, and threw open the door of the cabin. "Come along," she said tightly.

"Where are you going?"

"Where else," snapped Jane, "than Mr. Skinner's cabin! Unless you want me to do this errand myself?"

Elihu Skinner had a suite amidships. They found the old man finishing his lunch in the living room.

Skinner jerked his head to Vincente. Without a word, the servant came forward, picked up the tray and left the room. "What's worrying you, Morte?"

"This," said Robert. He opened his hand and dropped the chain on the table. The other stared at it, his features hardening. From beneath craggy brows, he shot Jane a pale cold look.

"Just what do you know of this?"

She said crisply. "Enough to suggest you hand that chain and key to the purser! We're very tired of being pestered by Miss Burton."

"Pestered?"

She nodded.

"How did Miss Burton know that you had it, Morte?" Eli Skinner asked.

Robert flushed at the tone. "I didn't gossip about it, if that's what you're hinting! Probably she saw us talking together and guessed."

The old man was coatless and wearing a long-sleeved shirt with breast pockets. Into one of these he slipped the chain. Now he buttoned the flap with fumbling fingers. "All right, Morte," he announced. "You've served your purpose." He looked up and Robert was surprised to see the expression on his face almost amiable. "She searched my shack, too, you know."

"I didn't," said Robert coldly.

Now Skinner leaned back in his chair. "It was during your first night on the island. She'd talked that young fool Redmond into using his rope on Vincente, to keep him trussed up while Pattie went through my bungalow. Unfortunately for him, the fellow got me instead." He slid back his shirt-sleeve and the Mortes saw that his scrawny bicep was marked with a small, angry-looking weal. Skinner nodded. "But I've taught that young cockerel a lesson he won't forget in a hurry!"

Robert stared at him. "I think you're lying! You're trying to establish a justifiable excuse..."

"For what?"

"Something," said Robert slowly, "that will be called murder if Earl Redmond dies from that injury." For a moment, the glances of the two men locked, then he continued. "It could be that you expected another search of your bungalow. So you contrived a deliberate trap by substituting a live cone-fish for that empty shell on your table..."

"Stick to your scribbling, Morte! You wouldn't earn a crust as a real detective. I try to kill Redmond?" He sniggered again. "Good God, man—you're looking at the whole picture upside down! Redmond planned to kill me that night!"

Robert blinked and Jane gave a little gasp. "Then he changed the shells...?"

"Of course, he did!"

Jane said: "That's an extraordinary statement to make... Just why should this young man want to kill you?"

Skinner leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "Because, dear lady, I had this fellow taped. I discovered him to be a liar, a cheat and a jail-bird!"

He glanced from one to another of his listeners, but there was neither incredulity nor even surprise in their faces.

"Mind you, I'll say this for the fellow. At least he had the nerve to strike back! And there are at least five people on this ship who would be willing to see me dead!"

Somewhere on the ship, far below this sunny room with its three people, a hand touched a lever and the engines of the *Medusa* throbbed into tentative action.

The door opened and Arthur Burton walked into the room. Robert stopped abruptly. Burton was first to recover. He gave the Mortes a cool nod and addressed his partner.

"I'll come back..."

"Oh, but we've finished," said Jane with suspicious cheerfulness. "Mr. Skinner was just telling us that five people on this ship wanted to kill him!"

The old man jumped to his feet, directing at Mrs. Morte such a look of concentrated malevolence that she stepped back a pace.

Without a word, he limped across to the bedroom, entered and slammed the door behind him. A soft chuckle sounded and they looked at Burton to find him smiling.

"That was too bad of you, Mrs. Morte. I fear you have annoyed my partner. Nothing irritates the practical joker as much as having the fun turned back on himself."

If Burton had thawed, Robert did not. "It seems a rather extraordinary kind of joke..."

The big man turned, addressing him directly for the first time. "My partner is an extraordinary man. His sense of humor, I fear, borders on the sadistic."

Robert was watching the pink, scrubbed face closely. The smile had gone but the bland expression told him nothing.

"Your partner wears a bullet-proof jacket," Robert said. "Isn't that carrying the joke a little too far?"

And then they were walking back along the corridors, Robert leading. Jane said, "This isn't the way back to our suite."

"We're not going to our suite," Robert said shortly.

One knock on the door of Pat Burton's apartment was sufficient. A cool voice bade them enter. She turned as the door opened.

"Oh..."

Robert came straight to the point.

"Back on the island, Miss Burton, you asked me to return some of your property. I'm going to oblige you."

At the sight of that fluttering silk the light died from her eyes. She went pale, then flushed scarlet.

"Where... did you...?" she faltered.

"It was found in our cabin shortly after you searched it during lunch."

"All right!" she said and her tone was high. "I did search your cabin! And I'd do much more than that to get my hands on that key! I... I'd even tell you the

truth! Mr. Morte, if I give you my word of honour to tell the truth about that key, will you let me have it?"

He shook his head. "It's too late for terms, Miss Burton. I returned that key to Mr. Skinner only a few minutes ago."

The voice came choked and muffled. "No friend of Eli Skinner can help me."

Jane said. "We're not friends. We never were."

"You sided with him... against me... and Daddy. You kept the key..."

"No," said Jane. In a few words she explained Skinner's sleight-of-hand. Pat Burton's fingers dropped from her face. The girl was speaking now.

"You see, the whole thing is really tragically simple. Twelve months ago, I was married to a Communist agent."

Robert said quietly, "How did that happen?"

Pat Burton shrugged. "I met Martin Graham at a fashionable party. He was good looking and had a charm that shone like a flame. When he asked me to marry him, I was the happiest girl in the world. But Daddy was flat-footed against the idea. I won't bore you with details, except to say that three months later, Martin and I eloped. We were married in Perth. I wrote Daddy a letter breaking the news. When I mentioned this to Martin, he seemed rather upset. I couldn't understand this at the time, just as I was bewildered about other things...

"You see, Daddy had received a contract from the British Government to construct certain experimental machinery used on the rocket range at Woomera. He fulfilled this contract so well that the British Government gave him a further batch of orders. Actually, that's why he's on board at the moment— on the way to London to discuss details of this new assignment."

As she paused, Robert asked.

"Mr. Skinner is also attending this conference?"

"No." Pat's jaw stiffened. "The British Government is giving Daddy this second contract only on the understanding that Mr. Skinner is excluded from the deal. My father was taking steps to dissolve the partnership. He would have succeeded— we would have been free from this man's domination, except..." her tone grew husky, "I had to ruin everything."

"I had my first faint suspicions of Martin when he began to question me about Daddy's connections with Woomera. About a month after our marriage, Martin was late returning home. When he was still absent at midnight, I grew frantic and was on the point of ringing the police. But it was the police who came to see me. They arrived to ask me if I would come around to the station and identify the body of my husband, killed in a motor car smash half an hour before.

"At the station they gave me the contents of Martin's pockets. A bunch of keys was among them. Martin had a private drawer which he always kept locked. He said it contained letters I had written to him. I opened the drawer. There were letters, certainly. But they were not mine. They were undeniable evidence that my husband was an influential agent in the pay of the Russian Government."

Outside on the deck, orders were being barked and the muffled rattle of a steam winch was heard.

"In desperation," the girl continued, "I thought of Stephen Hawke. I pulled myself together and wrote him a letter, giving him every detail of what had happened.

"Stephen arrived the afternoon of Martin's funeral. He took charge of the situation at once. We destroyed my every link with Martin Graham— my marriage certificate went into the fire, my wedding ring into the river. Two days later, I returned to Sydney by plane. But we had overlooked one thing.

"In the hurry to join me, Stephen made the one mistake of his ordered life. He had mislaid the letter I wrote him, giving the details about Martin."

She paused and Robert uttered one word.

"Skinner?"

Pat Burton nodded. "He keeps the letter in the Chinese puzzle box. Skinner demands a substantial share of the new contract or the letter goes to the newspapers. You realise what that would mean? Daddy, Stephen and I have deliberately hushed up details of a nest of subversive agents! And Skinner knows that scandal would only be the beginning. With such a powerful weapon, the extortion could go on until the time comes when it's no longer the firm of Burton and Skinner. Just... Skinner."

"I'm sorry..." the voice was very small. "I seem to have made a fool of myself in more ways than one. But Daddy and I were so sure... Skinner has friends in the most unexpected places, as we know by bitter experience." The attempt at a smile was not very successful. "I can only apologise..."

Her control was slipping again. She said almost passionately. "He goes through life creating mischief, sowing evil, destroying happiness! Almost like a person possessed of devils. But that's fantastic! Yet why does he do it? What's his motive?"

"Fear," said Robert. "The bogy of fear. You say you knew something of his childhood, Miss Burton?"

She nodded.

Robert went on. "Skinner doesn't trust life an inch! And the only way he can defeat this fear is to acquire power and more power. He goes on adding wall after wall, until now, I'm afraid, it's become second nature..."

Pat Burton cried out. "Second nature to torture a living soul?"

Robert shrugged. "Appetite thrives on what it feeds upon. And power is very palatable..."

TEN FIFTEEN P.M. on board the M.V. *Medusa*.

Robert Morte, lounging in a deck-chair behind the life boat winch-box, lit his third cigarette and stared across the rail into the night.

The *Medusa* had sailed that evening.

At ten o'clock Jane declared she would bath and retire. Robert announced he would take a turn on deck. It was cooler outside.

The winch-box suggested an ideal position. It gave adequate cover for his deckchair yet allowed an uninterrupted view of the deck beyond. He pulled his chair into position, thrust his feet on to the rail and lit a cigarette.

Then he was conscious that a sudden swathe of light had cut the gloom at the lee end of the deck. Inclining his head around the angle of the winch, he saw the servant Vincente emerging from the sitting room of the Skinner suite. The old man's stringy body wrapped in a faded dressing gown followed the Portuguese to the door and Robert caught the end of a snarled command. "And don't come back without it!" Then the door slammed shut blurring the retreating figure of the servant as it vanished into a corridor ahead.

The sudden click of a closing door cut into his thoughts. Robert's first impression was that Martino had returned. He glanced along the deck.

Harriet Sheerlove!

She was carrying something wrapped in what appeared to be a length of towelling. But it was not this that brought Robert bolt upright. About this woman moving soundlessly along the deck there was a subtle difference that marked her walk, the carriage of her body, the very tilt of her head. Had she not passed the safety-light and afforded Robert that familiar glimpse, it might well have been some complete stranger that approached him.

She was not six feet from his hidden vantage point when she halted and cast a quick glance right and left. There came a soft clinking as of broken metal as she raised the bundle and flung it across the rail. As it splashed with a fine glow of phosphorescence, a sudden swell tilted the deck and Robert's chair slid forward. He halted the movement but he could not prevent the slurring scrape. The woman at the rail heard it, wheeled with a stifled cry and almost ran back to her cabin.

The slam of her door and the wild scream came almost simultaneously.

Robert leapt to his feet, premonition setting every nerve tingling in his body. The cry sounded again, weaker this time, almost lost in the hissing of the water, but it was enough to send him pounding down the deck. He had almost

reached the entrance to the corridor when the door of the nearest cabin was flung open and a dripping, naked figure sprawled through, clawed the air with taloned fingers and fell at his feet.

"Skinner!" cried Robert. He was on his knees before the naked figure, his hands on the boney shoulders. "Skinner! What happened...?"

The scrawny throat worked with the effort of speech. "Morte listen! The Portuguese... Vincente... he... I..."

"Yes?" cried Morte. "Vincente... yes?"

The purpling lips worked feverishly. "Bath... you... look..." but the words fizzed out in a bubble of spittle.

Now the deck echoed with running feet and Ralph Kingsley stood beside him.

"I heard the scream from my cabin! What happened to him?"

Robert said curtly. "I don't know. Help me get him inside."

Together they carried the attenuated figure through the lighted sitting room to the bedroom beyond. Kingsley bent over the body, fingers on the limp wrist.

"Coronary occlusion." Abruptly the doctor looked down at his hands then wiped them automatically on his jacket. "He's sopping wet..."

"He must have been in his bath." Robert paused, eyeing the figure on the bed with ill-concealed distaste.

If in life Eli Skinner had been unprepossessing, naked and dead he was repulsive in the extreme. The gaunt ribbed torso was marble white except for a long scarlet weal. Robert, recognising a replica on the right arm, knew that this was where the rope had bitten so cruelly. "You'd better wait here, Morte. I'll bring Sweetapple and the skipper along." Kingsley went out.

The half-open door of the bathroom caught Robert's attention. He felt for the light-switch and pressed it down. Nothing happened, but there was sufficient reflected light from the bedroom to show the reason. The light socket under the bathroom window was minus a bulb.

This same reflected light revealed other details— the bath filled almost to the brim with salt water, the slopping trail into the room and on through the sitting room door... Details enough to build in his mind the scene of an old man screaming and clawing his way through the suite.

Obvious. Logical. And yet something was out of place, something that even as it whispered a warning was gone.

A sound in the bedroom brought him round.

Vincente Martino had returned. He was standing by the bed, staring down at the body, one hand gripping the edge of the woodwork, the other clutching

a light-bulb carton. And on his face was such an expression of wolfish triumph that Robert cried out sharply.

"Martino!"

The Portuguese wheeled.

"He is dead...?" The servant was recovering from the shock of Robert's summons.

Robert walked into the bedroom. "It happened a few minutes ago," he said curtly. "Pity you had to leave him alone."

Martino's dark eyes burned. "But he sent me away," he protested. "The globe in the bathroom is burnt out." He turned.

"It was the heart sickness?"

Robert nodded.

The Portuguese said slowly. "Always he had so much. Now when he dies there is not a rag to cover him." Abruptly he chuckled. "I think there will be much happiness tonight..."

Robert's head jerked up. But before he could speak there came the sound of agitated voices outside. Then it seemed that the room was full of people, led by Captain Robertson.

IT WAS CLOSE on noon the day following Skinner's death and in his stateroom, Captain Robertson sat behind his desk facing three people. The *Medusa* had run into bad weather. Arthur Burton occupied an easy chair a little to his right, Robert Morte had taken a seat on the divan, and Dr. Eric Sweetapple had pulled a hard chair up to the desk, where he sat fingering his medical report.

Dr. Sweetapple blinked through his thick glasses. "This medical report..."

"Yes, yes! Go on, doctor," Burton said.

"... Summoned by Dr. Kingsley, I came to Mr. Skinner's cabin to find him lying nude on the bed. The body was still warm and there was rigor. I took the temperature then made an examination. The pupils of the eyes were equal and their axis parallel, the lips cyanotic. My findings are perfectly consistent with the previous diagnosis of coronary artery disease with angina pectoris."

Arthur Burton nodded. "In plain terms, you corroborate Dr. Kingsley's diagnosis of death from heart failure?"

"Absolutely!" said Dr. Eric Sweetapple.

Captain Robertson nodded. He held down the official log and began to write.

"You'll enter that report in your own log-book, doctor?" Arthur Burton was saying. "Naturally, a fatality like this will have to be reported to the Ministry of Shipping when we touch Cairns. Mr. Skinner was a very important person..."

Then Burton rose, balancing himself carefully. "There's nothing more we can do here, captain." His eyes rested on the man on the divan. "Could you spare me a few minutes, Mr. Morte? I'd like to have a talk with you."

Robert said. "I think I've told the skipper all I know..."

The corridor heaved under Robert's feet so that he clung to the guide-rail. But they had reached the Burton suite.

"Sit down, Morte," said Burton.

A pause but not a silence followed.

"Imagination is a wonderful thing," Burton said. "But like fire I feel it could be a good servant, but a bad master."

Now we're coming to it, thought Robert.

"What makes you say that, Mr. Burton?"

The big man stretched his legs, bracing himself in the chair. "Some years ago, I had a draughtsman— a brilliant man. Some of his designs were really remarkable. Unfortunately I had to get rid of him..."

"Indeed?" said Robert.

"One day he went too far and the law of slander and libel were invoked. In self-defence I had to take steps which involved a police investigation..."

Crash! It was crockery being swept aside in the galley.

"... and the fellow was sentenced to twelve months imprisonment."

"Just what did this man do?"

Burton said quietly, "Took ordinary trivial incidents in the factory routine and embroidered them into events of the most dastardly nature." The tone lightened. "Naturally, it's a thing that would happen only once in a blue moon. The fellow was an exception. But I thought you might be interested."

"No doubt," said Robert.

The other man nodded. "It was a repressed desire to call attention to himself. It is an urge, apparently, which comes to all classes of people— even those very much, as one might say in the public eye.

"In fact, it is really extraordinary the lengths some professional people will go to, get their names in the newspaper! Needless to say, such cheap publicity stunts might easily ruin a person's career..."

"Daddy... ."

They turned. Pat Burton stood in the doorway, clutching at the jamb for support.

"Hello, Mr. Morte," she said and smiled. "Will you please tell me why they call this the Pacific?"

Her eyes sparkled. There was about her, Robert observed, a radiant happiness that made her face really beautiful. Now he glanced at his wrist watch and rose. "I must get along..."

"Oh, don't go for me," said Pat quickly.

He smiled in turn. "I must! It's almost lunch time."

As the door closed behind him, Pat turned.

"Daddy! They've locked the suite..."

He looked at her. "You haven't tried to get in...?"

"Of course I have!"

He said impatiently. "My dear child, I wish you'd leave these things to me! The suite was locked by my orders. But the key is there whenever we need it."

A soft tap on the door interrupted his last word. Arthur Burton frowned, glanced at his daughter and called.

"Come in."

Vincente Martino entered.

"May I speak with you, sir?"

"What about?"

The servant's lips, still bruised and disfigured from Redmond's attack, were smiling. "Last night, sir, after Mr. Skinner's sad accident, I was tidying his clothes..." Martino's hand moved quickly and in his fingers a tiny key dangled on a silver chain. "I was wondering, sir, what I should do with this?"

Pat Burton's voice came clearly.

"Give it to my father!"

"Certainly, miss, but—"

"But what?"

"When an article of great value is found and returned," the tone was silky. "Usually there is a reward."

Arthur Burton said slowly:

"And why should you imagine that article to be of any particular value?"

Vincente shrugged. "Sir, a personal servant sometimes cannot help but overhear little things... fragments of conversation, perhaps, about a letter in a Chinese lacquer box..."

"How much?" said Arthur Burton.

"I thought... five thousand..."

"One thousand!"

Vincente took one look at that frozen face and spread his hands. "The poor can never bargain," he said and tossed the key and chain on to the table. "In notes, sir."

"Very well. At Cairns."

The door closed. Pat Burton said almost passionately. "That man... he knows..."

Her father had not moved from his position. He was still staring at the door. "Yes. Obviously he has opened the box and read your letter. It means

that we are right back where we began at." He sighed. "So much planning... and all we have done is to exchange one yoke... for another..."

BACK IN HIS bedroom, Robert braced himself firmly against the washbowl.

"Eli Skinner was murdered," he announced. "And if Arthur Burton didn't actually commit the crime, I'm certain that he planned it."

"Robert, give me another tablet," said Mrs. Morte faintly.

He sidled across to the bed, sat down and took her hand. "Jane dear, I'm sorry. But you won't get better by lying in here brooding. What you need is something to take your mind off the sickness. Now if you'll only listen to me..."

Jane said pallidly. "Oh, Robert, do go down to lunch."

"Jane, do listen to me. I'm bursting to talk to you. I need your advice so very badly." As she sat up, pressing her fingers to her temples, Robert eased the cushions behind her shoulders. At the same time he recounted the scene in Burton's living room.

"Robert, why can't you mind your own business? The press will make enough of Skinner's death as it is, but if you start spreading the rumor that he was murdered, there'll be an immediate police investigation..."

The ship rocked again and Jane closed her eyes. "And what will happen if it's proved that Skinner's death was perfectly natural? You'll be in a fine situation! You know the newspapers as well as I do, Robert. As Burton hinted, you'll be accused of trying to create a lot of cheap publicity for yourself. They wouldn't leave you a single shred of reputation!"

Robert was silent for a moment.

"I'm not sure that I trust Kingsley. He may be mixed up in the business himself."

"Granted! But there's Doctor Sweetapple..."

"Oh," said Jane. "Then you concede the heart attack?"

"Certainly! That's where young Sweetapple— and probably Kingsley also— are quite sound in their diagnosis. I don't doubt for an instant that Skinner died of heart failure. But why should it happen last night?"

"Robert..."

He did not look up.

"You believe that this heart attack was brought about in some way?"

Robert said slowly: "By Vincente Martino, acting under instructions from Burton."

"So you're thinking of those words Skinner muttered just before he died?"

"Not only those words, Jane." He looked up. "Just after I left the Burton suite, Martino went into Burton's sitting-room."

"Five minutes later he came out. And he was literally rubbing his hands with delight. Isn't it possible that he'd just been paid for his dirty work?"

"You don't agree?"

She said thoughtfully, "After all, Robert, there are other people on this ship. Our friend Kingsley..."

"But he was practically on the spot last night."

"Of course. Leaving Martino to do the actual job." She saw the wavering doubt in her husband's face and added. "That foreigner would work for anyone who could pay him. Even Harriet Sheerlove. You told me that you saw her on deck last night."

He nodded.

"Behaving very oddly," continued Jane. "Tossing bundles overboard—bundles that rattled. She must have known all about Skinner's accident."

Robert said sharply, "How can you say that?"

"It's commonsense," Jane told him. "According to your story, Mrs. Sheerlove was barely inside her cabin when Skinner screamed for help. Why didn't she come out? She should have been on the spot even before you. Then why skulk in her cabin..." her voice slowed... *"unless she was expecting that scream and knew just what it meant."*

Robert was looking at her with reluctant admiration. "Go on, Jane. Elaborate..."

She said simply: "Is it possible that in some way they're all in it?"

"Yes," said Robert. "They all hated him." He rubbed his smooth chin. "But where can I start, Jane? I'm no policeman!"

"Exactly," said Mrs. Morte. But Robert ignored the finality in her tone. He was staring past her through the window. Then he nodded. "I'm afraid it must be Harriet Sheerlove," he said almost to himself. "Yes— I think she'd be the easiest nut to crack. I'll see her straight after lunch."

Jane Morte shook her head, wincing a little as the throb returned. "Oh, no you won't," she said. "Mrs. Sheerlove just isn't receiving company today. I had it all from the stewardess. Harriet is feeling so seasick that they've had to call in young Dr. Sweetapple— "

4: Discovery

A SHIMMERING world of cobalt blue and living gold greeted Robert Morte as he walked the deck on the *Medusa* on the following morning. The air had been washed clean and transparent, the sea flattened to millpond smoothness. Less than a mile away, Green Island floated aloof and romantic. Behind it, away on the mainland, the Bellender-Ker range which enclosed the town of Cairns was a smoky backdrop of peaks.

"Mr. Morte, sir..."

He turned. Mrs. Emily Pepper stood at his elbow. The stewardess of the *Medusa* was a small plump Scotswoman, clear-eyed and capable.

"Mrs. Sheerlove would like to talk to you, sir."

Robert's surprise was in his tone. "Now?"

Mrs. Pepper nodded. "Right noo, sir."

Morse's hesitation was purely automatic.

"Take me along," he said briefly.

As they trod the deck, he realised that with the exception of the shuttered apartment of Leila Harland, Mrs. Sheerlove's suite was the only one on the ship he had not entered. Now Mrs. Pepper halted before a door and tapped gently. From inside a querulous voice called out.

"Oh... who is it?"

"Mrs. Pepper, ma'am, with Mr. Morte."

"Come in," cried Harriet Sheerlove.

So dark was the living room, so tightly drawn were the curtains across the windows, that for a few moments Robert could see nothing. Then a stray shaft of sunlight tangled in dyed yellow, curls and he made out the figure of the woman standing in one corner of the room. Mrs. Pepper broke the silence with a nervous little cough.

"Shall I draw the curtains, ma'am?"

"No, no, no!"

The stewardess said, "Aye, ma'am." Exchanging a significant look with Robert, she backed from the room and closed the door behind her.

Silence.

Robert cleared his throat and said rather lamely. "Are you feeling better, Mrs. Sheerlove?"

The face in the shadow was indistinguishable and slowly there grew upon Robert that same feeling he had experienced when looking down at the nude body of Eli Skinner. Something was wrong here. The premonition was so strong that, had it not been for those shrill, complaining tones still echoing in his ears,

he would have been prepared to swear that he was in the presence of a complete stranger. And with this sense came a flooding of irritation.

"What's the game, Mrs. Sheerlove?"

Then a most extraordinary thing happened. From somewhere a voice spoke, a voice throaty, velvet-soft, vibrant and warm.

"The game's finished, Mr. Morte. So is Harriet Sheerlove..."

Robert had the sudden conviction that the room was spinning around him.

"No," he whispered. "No... it isn't possible..."

Then the woman walked to the window and threw back the curtains, so that the light which flooded in was blinding. Then she turned. With a gesture of relief she tugged at the pendant ear-rings, dragged the bandana from her throat and tossed it on the divan. She raised her face to the light.

"Yes, Mr. Morte. I'm Margaret Vane."

THERE WAS A long silence. Then Robert said weakly— "Do you mind if I sit down?"

The actress nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise it would be quite such a shock." The suggestion of a smile touched her lips. "I must have played the part better than I imagined."

He was still staring at her. "Mrs. Vane... I still can't quite believe it..." Despite the dyed and curling hair, there was little trace of Harriet Sheerlove in the woman who stood before him. Gone were the false eyelashes, the caked make-up, the coy beauty spots on cheek and chin; vanished the jangling bracelets, the vulgar rings, the necklaces of jade and coral.

And that voice.

He watched the actress as she walked to the door, shooting the bolt on the inside. Then she was at the liquor cabinet and then by his side, handing him the glass. She took her place on the divan now. Studying her afresh, he saw that her face was grave and troubled.

"Mrs. Vane. Just why did you ask me here this morning?"

She replied, "To tell you the truth. The truth about my so-called nephew. You can't possibly think that I was ever— ever in love with that young man?"

At the expression on Robert's face she gave a little helpless gesture. "Even to me now, the whole thing seems ridiculous— something so wildly sensational that it couldn't possibly be true." Her hands were trembling and she locked them together. "Yet somehow I must convince you... I must!" She paused as though searching for the most impressive phrase. "Love him? There was nothing there to love. Irene discovered that. He was a shell, a fake, a masquerade."

Robert nodded, "I knew he was a cheap crook..."

Margaret Vane said passionately. "Worse. Much worse. He was a murderer."

That brought him bolt upright. "Redmond...?"

"Or Mark Godfrey. That was his name when he married my daughter Irene..." the level voice leapt harshly. "And by his callousness, his cruelty and neglect, drove her to suicide in a King's Cross flat."

MORTE SAID quietly, "So this man was your son-in-law?"

"Yes," said Margaret Vane.

The woman took her seat. Now she had control of herself, sitting with one hand resting lightly on the other. "I must tell you the whole story, Mr. Morte," she said. "The first part is ugly and sordid and tragic. The second part is, perhaps, so fantastic that you may not accept it."

She paused and looked down at her hands.

"I shall be as brief as possible with the first part of the story. You may possibly know that I was slavishly attached to my daughter; when my husband died, she was the one thing left to me. I watched her grow into a very lovely young woman. A few weeks after her twenty-first birthday someone gave Irene a lottery ticket. It won her the first prize of twenty thousand pounds.

"As a celebration I persuaded Irene to take a holiday on a ship touring the Australian coast. She went alone, since my radio commitments made it impossible for me to accompany her. During that voyage she met the man we know as Earl Redmond and fell head over heels in love with him. She came home with the news that she wanted to marry this man.

"I met Redmond only once, but it was enough to convince me that this fellow was a soulless fortune-hunter. Then I made inquiries, to find that what little background the man had seemed most unsavory. Very soon after that, I had to leave for New Zealand to fulfil a radio contract made some time before. When I returned, it was to discover that my daughter had married this man."

Robert said quietly. "What did you do?"

"Irene was of age and financially independent. What could I do but plead with her again? But marriage had brought her so hopelessly under this man's spell that the only result was another quarrel, even worse than before. I determined that the only course was to leave her completely alone, praying that she might, in time, come to her senses. Finally came the news that he had left Irene. As soon as I could escape from studio, I went around to her flat..."

Robert watched the long fingers tighten in her lap.

"... to find it locked and bolted. But there was the unmistakable smell of gas."

The husky voice faltered.

"After the inquiry the police brought me a letter which my daughter had written a few hours before her death. It was not pleasant reading, Mr. Morte. Irene had begun to suspect Redmond's true nature when the man tried to persuade her to give him complete control of her money. There's no need to dwell on the details. Only two items in that letter are necessary to this story. My daughter wrote that the news she was to bear Redmond's child caused the final break. And that she was leaving the balance of her fortune to me. That's the first part of the story."

Robert said quietly. "I can understand why you found it hard to tell."

"But not," said Mrs. Vane, "nearly as difficult as the second part. For now I must try to convince you, Mr. Morte, that I, a simple ordinary woman, embarked on an adventure so fantastic, so sensational that I cannot quite believe it myself. My only excuse can be that following my daughter's suicide, I was far from well. Instead of resting, I took on more and more work in the hope that the rush would give me no time to think and so blunt the pain. You know what happened..."

He nodded. "A nervous collapse, yes."

She said slowly, "I don't think I could have been quite sane when I planned this extraordinary thing..."

"But what was it?"

"A campaign, Mr. Morte. A series of subtle persecutions to break a man's nerve!"

"So it was your voice on the telephone that morning?"

The actress nodded. "My daughter's intonation was so very easy to impersonate."

"But the séance...?" He stared at her. "You're not suggesting ventriloquism?"

"That was how I explained the incident to Martino," she confessed. "But it wasn't nearly as fantastic as that." She placed her burning cigarette in the tray and crossing to a cupboard, took out a square leather-bound box. Opening it she displayed a portable gramophone.

"I had this hidden under the floor of my bungalow," she told him. "On the turntable was a record I had made in Sydney, a recording of Irene's voice. You'll have to take my word for this, Mr. Morte. Last night I smashed that record, wrapped it in a towel and threw it overboard."

"Yes..." but he did not tell her how he knew. He was staring at the portable. "But gramophones must be started! You were sitting beside us in that shack for quite fifteen minutes before the voice spoke."

"The record was a Vinylite..."

Vinylite! The long-playing record with grooves compressed so that it gave an uninterrupted hour of music.

"You set the machine running when you left on the pretext of shutting the door of the recreation room."

He nodded. It was all so clear, so simple and yet so ingenious. That much, at least, he understood. He said:

"The actual impersonation, Mrs. Vane...?"

Now she seated herself on the divan. "Though you may not believe it, Mr. Morte, in the beginning this was the easiest part of all. As you know, I am an experienced stage actress and Harriet Sheerlove was a simple role to undertake. Irene's money gave me entree into the shoddy circle in which Redmond now revolved. It was only necessary to give out that I was an extremely wealthy Canadian widow, rent a luxurious house and plan a series of extravagant parties. This outward show of wealth drew Redmond as steel to magnet and remember, he had only seen me once before in his life and then as Irene Vane's mother."

"And this trip?"

"Was my suggestion. Redmond's anxiety to leave the country was so pronounced that I made inquiries, to find that he was wanted by the police. This was the first upset to my plan. The second complication occurred just after we came on board."

"What was that?" asked Robert.

"You," said Margaret Vane. "You might have recognised me."

Robert said, "If that young fellow was wanted by the police, why not just report him?"

"For two reasons," the woman replied. "I did not learn of this until a few hours before we sailed. Again such an action would have meant inquiries and this was the last thing I wanted. I determined to give Redmond the shocks I had planned and then leave the ship at Cairns. What happened to the man after that I no longer cared."

Margaret Vane paused again, passing her hand across her forehead with a gesture of infinite weariness.

"After Redmond's accident on the island, I could bear the impersonation no longer. And here is a curious and inexplicable thing, Mr. Morte— I found I no longer hated Earl Redmond. Irene's tragic death and its motive seemed to have faded into the background. My feeling toward her husband was one of indifference. That was the reason I kept to my suite these past few days. Yesterday's sickness did nothing to restore my morale and this morning, Dr. Kingsley brought me the latest bulletin from the Cairns hospital..."

"About Redmond?"

"Yes." Mrs. Vane's voice was very quiet. "He's going to live because they've arrested the poison." For just a second the level voice halted.

"He's going to be totally blind."

WITH THE suddenness that set their nerves tingling, the siren of the *Medusa* screamed. The ship was entering Brown's Bay.

Robert said steadily.

"Mrs. Vane, you are not responsible for Redmond's affliction."

Now she looked at him. "I brought him to the ship, to the island. If he had died, I would have been to blame."

She walked past him to the window and stood gazing out.

"Cairns," she said softly. "And the end of Harriet Sheerlove. Once we land, I can take back my own personality. Until then, Mr. Morte, I must ask you to respect my confidence."

"If you, in turn, will respect mine."

Her head came around. Her voice, her face held surprise.

"What do you mean?"

He said: "Mrs. Vane. You have just told me a very curious story. Now I am going to tell you something which may sound equally strange. I am going to tell you I'm convinced that Eli Skinner was murdered..."

She drew in her breath sharply but did not speak.

"... and I'm determined to find the person responsible for this crime."

Margaret Vane nodded. "I think you will, Mr. Morte."

"Then you must help me."

"I?"

"Yes. Just what do you know about Miss Leila Harland?"

"No more than you do." The simple truth in the words could not be doubted. Then she added. "But Redmond..."

"Yes?"

"On the night of his accident, just before dinner, we had a quarrel. During it he snarled something about the only woman he dare be interested in, thanks to Skinner, was Miss Leila Harland."

Robert's eyes narrowed. "What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know. But ever since meeting Skinner, Redmond had changed. He'd become moody, sullen. I wondered if that old man had recognised Redmond in spite of his changed appearance. With his new name, he'd dyed his fair hair dark and assumed an American accent."

"If this was true," said Robert, "then Skinner had a very strong hold on the man..."

Mrs. Vane said. "Why not ask Redmond? You'll find him at the Hospice of the Sacred Heart. But please don't go this afternoon."

"Why not?"

"I'm seeing the man myself then. I'm leaving Cairns by plane for Sydney. But before I go, I'd like Earl Redmond to know the whole truth."

Robert said quietly, "Mrs. Vane, may I say I think you're a very fine woman."

SIX BELLS were sounding as Robert Morte left Margaret Vane's suite and walked along the deck.

He was whistling softly when he entered his own suite a few minutes later.

He found the sitting room deserted. The bedroom was likewise empty, but when he called Jane's voice she replied from behind the open bathroom door. He entered, to halt in surprise. The small sash window above the bath had been slid up and Mrs. Morte's head and right arm were protruding through from the deck outside.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"Experimenting," gasped Jane. Her head and arm disappeared abruptly. A few moments later she entered the sitting room.

"I've been talking with Martino," she began. "He told me something rather curious. The globe in Mr. Skinner's bathroom wasn't faulty after all. He screwed the bulb back into the socket and it lit at once."

"That's very odd," Robert mused. "Vincente assured me that when he left the bathroom last night to call Skinner, the light was on..."

"Yet," said Jane, "when that old man entered the bathroom, the globe was out. But when the servant tried it this morning, it's perfectly all right."

The reason for his wife's gymnastics was suddenly clear. He said slowly. "Someone could possibly have tampered with that bulb by opening the sash window and unscrewing the globe a trifle. Obviously to darken the room while Skinner got into his tub..."

"And why," inquired Mrs. Morte, "should anyone want to do that, unless...?"

"Unless my theory that Skinner was murdered is correct, eh?"

She nodded, "It's beginning to look that way." She shook her head. "But we're still very far from the truth, Robert. Five potential criminals..."

"Four," he told her. "We can exclude Margaret Vane."

He took her arm and led her into the bedroom. She watched him a little dazedly as he closed the door and stood with his back against it.

"Now," he said. "You just listen to me..."

TEN O'CLOCK on the following morning saw Robert Morte at the wheel of a hired car. With Jane at his side, they were bowling along a road lined with coconut palms. The nose of the car pointed toward the suburb of Edge Hill where stood the Hospice of the Sacred Heart.

The *Medusa* had berthed shortly after lunch on the previous afternoon.

Only one of the passengers— the servant Vincente— elected to stay on board the *Medusa*. The Burton party followed the Mortes to Hides. Dr. Kingsley had arranged accommodation for himself and his patient at a hotel overlooking the blue waters of Trinity Bay.

The departure from the ship of the enigmatic Miss Harland was attended by the same haste and secrecy with which she had boarded it almost a month previous.

And Margaret Vane?

That same afternoon she had driven out to the Hospice of the Sacred Heart. On her return she sought Robert in his apartment.

"It was so much easier than I expected," she told him. "He's still a very sick young man and, for the first time in his life, he's learning what suffering really means." And she added, "I've told him about your visit in the morning."

There was a touch of enchantment in that early drive. Despite the dark business on which they were engaged, Robert felt his spirits rising. He was almost on the point of whistling like a schoolboy when Jane's voice broke the silence.

"The day after tomorrow is your fiftieth birthday. I think we'll have a little dinner party at the hotel."

"Eh?" said Robert blinking. "A dinner party? What for?"

"Your birthday," said Jane patiently. "I'd like to have Dr. Kingsley and Captain Robertson. And Pattie Burton and that nice Hawke boy." She paused and frowned. "I suppose we'll have to ask Mr. Burton?"

"Naturally."

"I don't for one moment suppose that he'll come. What about Margaret Vane?"

"She won't be here," he answered.

He shrugged and twisting the wheel, turned the car into an avenue of jacaranda trees hung with early blossoms like bunches of purple temple bells.

"That must be the hospital on the rise ahead. You can just see the roof among those trees. Wish me luck, Jane."

The man they knew as Earl Redmond was sitting up in bed, braced by wide pillows behind big shoulders. A bandage covered his eyes; beneath it the face was lean and shrunken. Redmond did not speak until the click of the closing door signified they were alone.

"I've been expecting you all the morning. What's the time?"

"Just after eleven," Robert replied.

"It's all the same to me now... .", they watched as the man pressed his hands to the bandaged eyes. "Bit of a change since the last time we met, eh?"

"We're very sorry..." began Jane. But a gesture from Redmond cut her short.

"I know all about that. The more I think of it, the more I'm certain I'm lucky to be alive at all."

"The prompt treatment—" but again the young man interrupted.

"I'm not talking about all this." He waved a hand around the room.

"It's Irene's mother— she was here yesterday. And what she said scared me plenty. And if she felt so bad about what I did to Irene to plan that stunt, she might just as well have bought a rifle and waited down some dark lane for me."

Robert said quietly, "I take it you've learnt your lesson, Redmond."

"You bet I have," Redmond paused, "now you can do something for me, Morte."

"In what way?" asked Robert.

"By finding out the swine that put me here."

Jane said quietly, "You put yourself here, Mr. Redmond."

"What d'you mean?"

"Since we're being perfectly frank, my husband and I believe that Mr. Skinner knew the truth about you..."

Redmond nodded. "That's right."

"And," continued Jane, "it's possible that you may have changed those cone shells—"

"But I didn't." The young man's tone was shrill with denial. "I swear I didn't."

"Any proof of that?"

"Yes," snapped Redmond. "Because I watched them do it."

Morte was staring at the man on the bed.

"Is this another of your fairy tales?" he demanded, "like the mythical wife killed in the Canadian fishing village?"

Redmond shook his head, "No."

"You actually saw a person playing around with those shells in Skinner's bungalow that night?"

"You bet I did. At the time I thought it was Leila Harland..."

"*Leila Harland?*"

It was almost a cry from Robert, dying away as the invalid shook his head. "But it wasn't. It couldn't have been because she'd never left the ship." He

eased his shoulders back on the pillow and they noticed that his forehead was dewed with perspiration. Jane, recalling Mrs. Vane's warning of the previous day, said quietly:

"You need to rest..."

Redmond said doggedly, "I've had plenty of time to rest— and think, too. Now I just want to talk." He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. "You guessed right about Skinner an' me. What you don't know is that he said he'd keep 'is trap shut on one condition— that I get back on the ship and find out the truth about this sheila with the covered face.

"And while I didn't like Kingsley, this was a bit over the odds. So I tried to tip off the doctor by leaving a note in his bungalow. The very next day, that dago servant told me that Skinner wanted to talk to me in his shack that night.

"Skinner wanted me there at ten o'clock. When I got to the bungalow, it was all dark. And there was someone inside the living room, monkeying about with the shells. I couldn't make out whether it was a man or a woman— all I could see was two white smudges moving about on the table. This had me tricked for a time. Then I knew that whoever it was in there was wearing a pair of long white gloves...

"Naturally, I thought of this Harland sheila," he continued. "But how had she got off the ship? I leaned forward to get a closer view when that window creaked loud enough to wake the dead. The figure inside turned and bolted for the door. I shot after it, but I tripped on a root and went sprawling. When I got up, whoever it was had gone.

"I took my torch and went inside and crossed to the table to take a look at those shells. I picked one up— it seemed just the same to me. I didn't suspect a thing, not even when it jabbed me in the hand. And then my eyes started to blur and I remember feeling weak in the legs... next thing I know I'm tucked up in this bed."

The silence lasted so long that the man on the bed swung his heath from right to left.

"Morte— where are you?"

"Still here," said Robert gently. He paused, framing questions in his mind. "You're quite certain you can't identify this person?"

Redmond made a helpless little gesture. "No more than I could now. You know what it was like at night and under those trees."

Jane said: "Even so, you could have seen how this person was dressed..."

"In something dark," the other said readily. "That's why those white gloves stood out so plain." He paused, running tongue over his dry lips. A soft tap sounded and the nurse entered. She spoke to the room.

"I'm afraid the time's up."

Morte rose and nodded.

"We must go, Redmond. But is there anything you'd like— anything we can do?"

The man sucked in his breath. "Yes," he said. "You can go to Kingsley and ask for the truth. Find out who this Harland woman really is— and where she was on the night I was stung by that shell. That's all I ask. Will you do this for me?"

"Yes," Robert assured him. "I'll do it."

AFTER DINNER that evening, Robert set out to talk with Ralph Kingsley.

A lift took him to the third floor of the hotel, and a few steps to the doctor's suite. He knocked and Kingsley's voice bade him enter.

The doctor greeted him by saying, "Downstairs they told me you had rung this afternoon. I'm very glad you came." He motioned to the suitcases.

"Another few hours and you might have missed me altogether."

"You're moving from here?"

"Captain Robertson tells me we may have to stay in Cairns for the best part of a week. I don't want to keep Miss Harland shut in a hotel room for so long. I've decided to take her up to my bungalow on the Atherton tableland— the one Linda and I bought at Lake Eacham."

But Robert arrested the movement to the cabinet. "Not now, doctor." As Kingsley turned, he went on. "First I must tell you why I've come here. Then, perhaps, you may not want to drink with me."

There was no mistaking the surprise in Kingsley's voice. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"You see, doctor, I'm here to find out the truth."

"What about?"

Robert said very simply: "This patient of yours, doctor. The woman you're calling Leila Harland."

RALPH KINGSLEY was first to speak.

"I'd rather not discuss my patient. There are certain ethics— "

"Surely you'd rather discuss her with me than with the police?"

Kingsley's face went a shade greyer. "The police?"

Robert nodded, "This morning I went to see Earl Redmond in hospital. He swears that on the evening of the accident, he saw someone inside Skinner's bungalow, tampering with those cone shells. And that person was wearing a pair of long white gloves."

The other said steadily, "And you suspect Miss Harland?"

"I don't know whom to suspect. But now that Redmond is well enough to talk, there's bound to be an inquiry into his accident. And if that young man tells the police the same story..." Robert paused, letting the implication hang.

Kingsley did not speak.

The doctor's tone was warmly polite. "Really, Morte. Surely you know better than to take that fellow's stories seriously?"

Robert said patiently, "If it was Redmond alone— yes. But there was Skinner, who, according to Redmond, was also interested in Miss Harland."

"An old man's opinion proves nothing."

"I think it does. This particular old man made it his business to know every influential and wealthy family in Sydney. He knew that any such family by the name of Harland didn't exist."

Kingsley shrugged, "I shouldn't actually call that evidence to the contrary. This is a very big continent, you know."

Robert did not move.

A slight sound drew his attention to the other side of the room. A door was opening and as he saw the figure framed in the entrance, the words froze on his lips. It was a slim girl dressed in those familiar grey clothes, gloves covering her hands. But Morte's glance was riveted to the girl's head— a head covered with kinky black hair framing a shining ebon face in which the eyes, wide and questioning, seemed enormous.

"Leila Harland" was a full-blooded native girl.

Kingsley's voice sounded again.

"It would seem that Kathie has decided for me. Morte— may I present Mrs. Ronald Forbes-Raneleigh, formerly of the Ku Ku Ku Ku tribe, New Guinea."

Kingsley addressed the girl:

"Kathie, my dear. Get your scarf and go along to your own room. Quickly now— that's a good girl."

The closing of the door eased the tension. Kingsley dropped into a chair.

"You asked for the truth, Morte."

Robert was still staring at the closed door. "The wife of Ronnie Forbes-Raneleigh. So that was how he kept his vow? By passing the proud family name on to a New Guinea native woman."

Kingsley went rigid. "Who told you about that?"

Morte turned. "Stephen Hawke; he gave one part of the story to my wife that day on the reef... ." and he began to outline Jane's conversation with the young secretary. The man opposite listened without comment. Nor did he speak at the conclusion and it was Morte who had to prompt him.

"The cigarette case we found— obviously it was this woman's property?"

An inch of grey ash dropped to the doctor's knees; he wiped it away before he replied. "I had to take it from her. She was warned against bringing anything on board even remotely connected with the Forbes-Raneleigh family. I must have dropped the case on the deck that morning. With that inscription inside, I could do nothing but deny all knowledge of the thing."

Another pause.

"I suppose you're wondering how I came to be mixed up in all this?"

Robert nodded and the doctor went on. "Since you know so much, I suppose there's no harm in telling you the rest. Ronnie hadn't been dead more than three months when rumours of his marriage in New Guinea began to seep through to his parents in Sydney.

"They ordered that if this marriage could be proved, no expense was to be spared in the tracing of the wife. I think the old couple hoped in some way to make amends to their dead son by bringing his wife into their home, by having her take the place of the boy they had lost. Perhaps they even secretly prayed for a grandchild."

The doctor shifted his position.

"I come into this for the reason that Lindsay Holford, head of the solicitor's firm, is a close friend of mine. During the war I had made several journeys through New Guinea from my army base in this town and even had some small knowledge of the tribal tongues. When Holford asked me to undertake the investigation, I was only too willing to oblige. You can imagine my feelings when I learnt the truth."

"But why bring the girl back?" Morte inquired.

"Several of the girl's brothers were mission educated. When I proposed washing my hands of the wretched alliance, these young men threatened to go to the mission station and demand their sister's matrimonial rights."

"But surely you could have paid them money to keep quiet about the affair?"

Kingsley shook his head. "It would have been too dangerous. You don't know those natives— a smattering of education makes them as cunning as monkeys. The bare fact that I consented to pay blackmail would make them realise they held a very valuable secret. It seemed much safer to separate this girl from her family. So I wired Holford that I was bringing back the wife of Ronnie Forbes-Raneleigh and told him to prepare for a shock.

"And when I stepped off the plane at Mascot with a New Guinea native girl, he almost dropped in his tracks."

Kingsley moved restlessly.

"Fortunately Forbes-Raneleigh's parents had gone to Melbourne for a few weeks' holiday. This gave us the breathing space we needed. But fate had a

shock in store for us. The girl, you should know, is mission trained and has a reasonable command of English. Unknown to me, she had gossiped among the passengers on the plane— had even produced that cigarette case with its bitterly ironic message of affection. The very name of Forbes-Raneleigh was enough to set tongues wagging. Three days later, the editor of one of Sydney's newspapers rang Holford, asking for my address. To keep that girl anywhere in the city was courting disaster. She had to be smuggled away— far away— until rumours of the scandal had died down."

Robert said quietly, "So this journey on a ship carrying a small passenger list was your idea?"

"No. It was Holford's suggestion. My contribution was the fictitious Leila Harland, victim of a car accident."

Suddenly the reason for Jane's mistake was clear in Robert's mind. He recalled how she had described the girl's attitude on that night, kneeling by the window seat in her white nightdress, arms outflung across those black velvet cushions.

"I'm telling you these facts for two reasons, Morte. First because I've come to trust you. But mainly to show you how completely fantastic Redmond's charge is in connection with the girl being in Skinner's bungalow that night. Kathie would never have sufficient intelligence to plan a crime like that. And certainly not involving Skinner, a person whom she never knew existed until he set foot on the ship at Paradise island."

It came to Robert that this man was very near breaking point and he rose to his feet as the other went on.

"Under the circumstances, I don't know how much longer I can keep this girl's identity a secret," Kingsley was saying. "You're an expert on problems, Morte. Once we get back on board you might give me some advice."

THEY BURIED Eli Skinner at eleven o'clock on the following morning, in a graveyard incongruously gay with flaming coral trees.

Once the ceremony was over there was no lingering. Robert was interested to see how Margaret Vane, still in the trappings of Harriet Sheerlove, would take her leave of the party. She handled the situation very well, shaking hands and making her final farewells with the excuse of returning to Sydney to arrange hospital accommodation for her "nephew."

Robert and Jane she approached last of all. Then she entered the waiting car and they were watching it turn and head for the town when a voice spoke behind them.

"Spare a moment, Mr. Morte?"

Robert turned. Captain Robertson stood at his elbow. "Seen anything of Martino?"

"Martino?" echoed Robert and shook his head. "We left him on the ship." He glanced at the dispersing couples. Dr. Kingsley was approaching and as he came up, Robertson turned to put the question to him.

Kingsley's hunted expression of the previous night had disappeared; the sparkle had returned to the tired eyes. Kingsley was saying:

"Vanished, captain?"

Robertson shrugged. "Missing twenty-four hours."

And Jane, glancing over her husband's shoulder, noticed that Arthur Burton had paused in the act of entering his hired car. There was something in the angle of his head that gave her the impression he was listening...

"But I saw him just before dinner last night," Kingsley was saying, "in Abbott Street."

"You saw him in the street?"

Kingsley nodded. "Standing in a shop entrance, He was talking to someone inside. I could see the other person, but I had the impression—"

He broke off as Arthur Burton's car roared into life.

"You got the impression...?" Morte prompted.

"Oh, yes," the doctor turned back. "He seemed involved in some kind of wordy argument. I noticed Martino shrugging and wig-wagging all over the place."

Robert addressed the skipper. "When was he last seen on board?"

"Ten o'clock yesterday morning. Went off talking about an appointment. Didn't return. Bed not slept in last night."

As the captain nodded and moved away, Robert addressed Kingsley. "Can we drop you anywhere?"

The doctor thanked him. "I'm going back to my hotel."

Once inside the car, Kingsley mentioned the Atherton tableland.

"I'd like very much if you could both find time to visit me at the bungalow before we sail."

Jane glanced at her husband for a lead. To her surprise he replied with alacrity. "We'd like to, indeed, doctor. How about Saturday afternoon?"

Robert drew the car to a halt before the hotel entrance and the doctor, again expressing his thanks, smiled and moved into the hallway. Scarcely had the door closed behind him when Jane turned to her husband.

"Why on earth did you accept that invitation for Saturday?"

"Why not? This morning you told me that Kingsley had accepted our invitation to dinner tomorrow night."

"That's different," Jane argued. "They all accepted— even Arthur Burton. Which means we won't be alone with the doctor. There'll be all the others to cover the embarrassment."

Robert said patiently. "What embarrassment?"

"You don't think it's embarrassing to be with the doctor, knowing the truth about that native girl, and having to pretend everything is the same as before?"

Robert said amiably, "But they aren't secrets any longer, Jane. We've brought them out into the open..." his voice slowed. "All except one."

"What's that?"

"The murder of Eli Skinner!"

"Rubbish." Jane was staring straight ahead, hands linked in her lap. "And I might as well tell you this, Robert. I'm heartily sick and tired of the whole business. I honestly don't care whether Mr. Skinner was stabbed more times than Julius Caesar. I never want to hear his name mentioned again."

Robert said meekly: "So you won't be coming with me to see Redmond this afternoon?"

"I will not."

"What are you going to do?"

"That," said Mrs. Morte stiffly, "is my business."

IT WAS SHORTLY after three o'clock when Robert entered Redmond's room at the hospital. The young man's greeting was eager.

"Well, Morte," he managed without preamble. "Was I right about Leila Harland?"

"No, Redmond," Robert said calmly. "You were completely wrong. I'm perfectly satisfied with the inquiries I've made about Miss Harland. I'm convinced that she had no reason at all for wanting to injure Mr. Skinner. You, on the other hand, had the strongest of motives. He'd threatened to expose you. Isn't it true that you threatened Skinner?"

"Maybe I did."

"With actual violence?"

Redmond shook his head. "I never went as far as that. I was too scared of the old beggar. Only once I tried to answer back— that was the night I slung the ol' beggar up with my rope, when he put this proposition to me about spyin' on Leila Harland. Skinner warned me not to be too smart an' told me what happened to people who got cheeky." The speaker gave a short bitter laugh. "Skinner just looked at me for a moment with that sneering grin. Then he unbuttoned his shirt. And believe it or not, Morte— he was wearing a bullet-proof vest of steel!"

Now Morte was on his feet. "Are you certain that on the same evening you roped Skinner with the lasso, he was wearing a steel vest protecting his body?"

The other said impatiently. "I've just told you that— "

"Oh my stars," said Robert and his tone was husky. There came the creaking scrape of the cane chair and a silence lasting so long that Redmond cried out.

"Morte— what are you doing?"

"Why the sudden excitement?"

Robert said quietly: "I've just uncovered a superb example of... the blind leading the blind."

THE LAMENTABLE episode of Robert's birthday present occurred later that same afternoon.

It was shortly after four o'clock when he returned to his empty sitting room. He had been disappointed to find Jane still absent on the apocryphal "business," since he felt himself to be in possession of all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which obstinately refused to take the right shape.

The clock ticked on and the collection of cigarette ends in the ashtray at his elbow increased.

Redmond's flat statement had opened up a completely new field of speculation. Since the strongest hemp cannot bite through steel plating, the scarlet weal Robert had seen on Skinner's naked torso was obviously not caused by the constricting lasso. What other explanation was there?

There was in Robert's mind not the slightest doubt that something had been deliberately introduced into the bath a few minutes before he had found the dying Skinner on the deck. Something that had burst that ailing heart and left evidence of its presence in the scarlet burn on the withered chest. It was, he recalled, almost as though a red hot wire had been laid across the skin— and his mind leapt back to the curious behaviour of the light bulb in the bathroom. Could it be possible that in some way a wire had been connected, lowered into the water and charged with power when the old man clicked the switch? And removed while Kingsley was assisting him with the body?

It was at this moment that the doorbell rang. He opened the door and a lad was saying:

"This Mr. Morte's apartment?"

"Yes."

A freckled hand thrust out a small parcel. "Sign please." Robert had taken the package, scrawled his name and was back inside the room almost before

he realised what had taken place. Ripping the paper free, he stared down at the coloured jacket.

It was a large thick book with the title "Our Marine Wonderland" in scarlet lettering against a background of a coral grotto. Robert's frowning face cleared. Surely this was a copy of the work Dr. Kingsley had mentioned that afternoon in Redmond's cabin when Captain Robertson was describing the stone-fish? Had one of these men sent it to him? He opened the covers.

Sitting there he made acquaintance with the devil-ray, the striped cat fish and the dugong.

He turned another page...

The next moment he was sitting bolt upright. Robert was staring at a photograph, clutching the book with fingers that trembled.

Then he rose, placed the book on the table, lit a cigarette and began to pace the floor. After some deliberation he crossed to the telephone and put through a long distance call to Sydney. Replacing the receiver he sat smoking and waiting.

The door opened and Jane came in.

"Sorry I'm so late, Robert," she greeted him and crossing, kissed the top of his head. "By the way, did a little parcel—?" she stopped abruptly as her eyes fell on the volume on the table. "Robert," she cried accusingly. "You've opened it."

He blinked at her. "What did you say?"

Jane dropped her parcels and swooped on the book.

She swung it high out of his reach. "You'll get it at the proper time— in the morning," she cried.

Comprehension dawned on her husband's face. "So *you* sent it here?"

"I did."

"Why?"

She placed the book on the table and leaned on it, facing him. She made her words impressively deliberate. "Tomorrow, Robert, is your birthday— your fiftieth birthday." She tapped the volume. "This was to have been one of your presents— a special surprise! The other is a full-day outing that I've arranged."

"No, Jane. Not tomorrow. You'll have to go alone."

"Alone?"

"I'm flying down to Townsville tomorrow. But I'll be back in time for your dinner party in the evening."

SHORTLY BEFORE ten o'clock on the following night, nine people were taking coffee and liquors in the private lounge of Hides' Hotel in Cairns.

Captain Innis Robertson, with first officer Rodda and second officer Willis were grouped around one of the lounges, their white uniforms a bright splash against the sombre, old-fashioned furnishings of American cloth and horsehair. To the right of them Pat Burton sat in one of the deep chairs, with Stephen Hawke perched on the wide arm. Near the empty fireplace with its opening concealed behind a large paper fan, Dr. Ralph Kingsley leaned on the marble mantel, his coffee cup within easy reach. Robert and Jane were just a few paces away. Arthur Burton occupied another divan alone, his liquor glass poised between smooth fingers. All eyes were turned on Robert Morte.

"I'm doing just one more crime novel," Morte said. "But it won't take me very long. The plot has been handed to me almost ready-made." He glanced around the room. "I intend using only two characters based on actual people. One is an elderly gentleman with a chronic weakness of the heart, the other a young man skilled in the use of a lasso. Both these characters are passengers on board a mythical freighter, sailing even as we have sailed, from Sydney to the tropical town of Cairns.

"I have, perhaps, over-dramatised my elderly gentleman to the extent of giving him a rather murky past from which emerges a number of enemies, some dangerous and inimical enough to have threatened the old man's life. And as a precaution against possible violence, he wears next to his skin a vestment of bullet-proof steel. But first I must mention our third character—perhaps the most important person in any crime novel— the murderer who has planned the old man's death and has joined the passenger list in the guise of a normal and quite undistinguished personality."

Stephen Hawke asked, "Male or female?"

"Let us," suggested Robert, "use murderer as an epicine term and leave it at that. Now, in my story, this bullet-proof vest gives our murderer considerable food for thought. This can be no crime of the furtive knife-thrust or the concealed automatic. Recall that our aged victim, canny in the extreme, has anticipated such lethal attacks and it is quite possible that he even sleeps in this protective armour. Yet," continued Robert, "in evolving this plot it seemed to me that there must be at least one time when, of necessity, this steel vestment must be removed— that is when the old man takes a nightly bath in the privacy of his suite.

"Here, then is an opportunity. But the means for murder presents no small difficulty to my fictional killer. For one thing, it is impossible to enter the victim's suite during his ablutions since the old man slips the catch on the living room door, the only entrance from the deck. For another, it is customary for the victim's servant— ", Robert paused and nodded— "Oh, yes, he has a servant and this fellow stays in the bathroom to assist his master whom I have

made crippled with arthritis in one of his hands. Therefore, it is impossible for my murderer to enter the suite and administer the *coupe de grace* in person.

"So our killer enlists the aid of a most unusual ally..."

"I now propose to give you a complete description of the murder weapon. It is copied from a most interesting volume called 'Our Marine Wonderland'."

Doctor Kingsley said quickly, "That was the book I mentioned to you..."

Robert nodded, "Yes, doctor. A copy of the volume which vanished from the ship's library just after we sailed. Vanished never to return." He waited for comment but the group was silent. Morte inclined his paper to the light and read slowly.

"One of the least known and certainly one of the most dangerous of all marine creatures haunting the Northern waters of the Australian continent is the Medusoid jelly-fish, believed to be a Carybdeid or Sea Wasp. Up to the present, this highly-lethal creature has been confused with the Portuguese Man o' War, but the Sea Wasp has no float and is a tough rather box-like jelly fish. It has four reductable tentacles attached to its body and unlike the Man o' War does not float on top of the water, but swims just below the surface.

"When the Sea Wasp comes into contact with a larger body, one of the extending tentacles encloses with the speed of lightning, at the same time injecting a neuro-toxin or nerve poison which is extremely deadly. A case is quoted of a strong and healthy twenty-one year old male who, on entering the water, was stung on the left wrist and forearm. Although able to stagger to the beach, he collapsed and died within three minutes. A mild convulsion was noted associated with a frothing at the mouth. Up to the time of his burial, the victim carried the mark of the Sea Wasp tentacle plain upon his arm and this resembled a thin red weal or burn..." [*]

[A full and comprehensive account of the Medusoid jelly-fish can be found in an article written by Frank McNeill and Elizabeth C. Pope M.Sc., in the Australian Museum Magazine, issue June 30th, 1943, pages 127-131. The above description is merely a condensation of this interesting and highly-informative article.*

Robert folded the paper and returned it to his pocket.

Jane was looking at Arthur Burton, looking at a face so blank and expressionless it might have been carved from stone. And something of this stony poise had infected his daughter; Pat sat rigid in her chair, head slightly tilted, like one awaiting a call to spring to action. The first comment came from Mr. Rodda and his words came cautiously, insinuating into the silence.

"How was this swimming thing used, Mr. Morte?"

"It was introduced into the bath-tub just after the victim stepped into the water."

Kingsley spoke.

"The plot, as far as it goes, seems highly ingenious. But if you'll pardon the criticism of a medical man, it has one very bad flaw. Surely, if murdered in this way, the body of your fictional victim would bear the mark of this creature's tentacle? Surely this would arouse suspicion?"

Morte smiled. "Not in my novel, doctor. Because a few days previous, my elderly gentleman had been lassoed by the fictional young man. I have it assumed that the scarlet weal across the victim's body is a mark left by the tightening rope."

"And what disproves this point?"

Robert said clearly, "The discovery that on the night of the roping, my victim was wearing his bullet-proof vest. Since this would give protection from the noose the mark on the naked skin cannot, I point out, possibly have been caused by the rope."

"But, sir, how does your murderer get hold of this sea wasp?"

Robert looked at him. "By patience, a pair of sharp eyes and a butterfly net—"

"*Butterfly net?*"

Morte said patiently. "Such things are not nearly so old-fashioned as you seem to think, Mr. Willis. These articles were, in fact, kept in stock on Paradise Island for use of amateur lepidopterists visiting the butterfly valley. And in my novel, the problem of keeping the creature alive is simply solved. I've already mentioned taking the liberty of patterning my fictional ship on the *Medusa*—and in each of our living-rooms, you will remember, there is a large salt-water aquarium... ."

Arthur Burton spoke. "And the actual crime, Mr. Morte? Have you— er— " the words slurred faintly... " worked that out in your mind?"

"Oh, yes," said Robert and stood up. "Each person here is familiar with the lay-out of the bathrooms on the *Medusa*. So there is no need for me to describe the sash-window over the bath-tub nor the screw light-socket nearby.

"On the night of the murder, I have my killer wait outside the old victim's bathroom window which, for the purpose of ventilation, his servant has lowered a trifle. The murderer hears— perhaps even sees..." Robert made a little deprecatory gesture... "I haven't completed small details— sees the servant fill the bath, switch out the light and then go to call his master. While he has gone, the murderer thrusts the window further down, inserts an arm and unscrews the globe in the socket just sufficiently to break the connection.

"To return to the suite, fish the sea wasp from the aquarium with the butterfly net and return to the position by the window takes our killer only a few minutes. Meanwhile the victim has entered the bathroom, clicked down

the switch and when the bulb failed to light, he believes it faulty and sends the servant for a new globe. Then, stripping by the reflected light from the bedroom, our victim climbs into the tub. At the same time the murderer drops the sea wasp in beside him."

"Yes?"

Someone was on their feet. It was Stephen Hawke and through the haze, Jane had the impression that his fists were clenched.

"And while our victim, clawing at his poisoned body, staggers through the living room to collapse on the deck, the murderer scoops up the floating creature and drops both net and sea wasp overboard. Thus our clever friend has ample time to make an appearance with the innocent passengers gathered around the body."

ARTHUR BURTON rose suddenly, shot back a cuff and looked at his wrist-watch. "After eleven!" he announced. "Mrs. Morte, you look so very tired! Pat, my dear..."

She rose and took a step forward, then hesitated. "Mr. Morte— You haven't told us the most important thing in every detective story. The name of the murderer."

He considered her gravely. "I'm afraid you must buy the novel, Miss Burton."

Quiet-spoken Mr. Rodda said. "Is it going to be the most unlikely person, sir?"

"I'll give you just one clue," replied Robert. "Father Ronald Knox once said that if the author is to play fair with his readers, he must allow the murderer to be suspected at least once during the course of the story."

Near the doorway, Arthur Burton called for the third time. "Pat!"

"Coming..." Then she was wishing Robert good-night and then joining Hawke and her father, exchanging farewells with Jane at the door. Then Robert was aware that Ralph Kingsley was shaking his hand and saying:

"A grand evening. And don't forget I'm expecting you both at the bungalow tomorrow."

"It depends upon Jane..."

"Try to persuade her." Kingsley moved aside as Captain Robertson and his officers approached. Rodda and Willis muttered conventional thanks and crossed to the entrance, but the skipper lingered so obviously that Robert asked:

"Is anything wrong, Captain?"

Robertson cleared his throat. "It's Martino," he grunted. "Still missing."

Morte started to say something, changed his mind to, "What are you doing about it?"

"Reported it. Police Department. This afternoon." The skipper coughed again. "Quick on the job. Went over his cabin."

"Did they find anything?"

The skipper shrugged. "Can't say. Locked me out." He made as if to pass but Robert detained him.

"Does Mr. Burton know you've reported this disappearance?" Robertson looked doubtful, even a shade guilty. "Not from me. Police may contact him."

KINGSLEY'S BUNGALOW on the tableland was a compact, four-room dwelling painted with the scarlet and purple of flowering bougainvillea and built so close to the lake's edge as to give an impression of insecurity.

It was close on noon of a hot and sultry day, with every suggestion of an approaching storm. Morte had been the doctor's guest for more than an hour and during that time, they had explored the rim of the lake, treading the jungle paths, shouldering through the massed undergrowth which seemed to give way, with an almost sullen reluctance.

Now the doctor was mixing drinks. He crossed the room and spoke over the proffered glass.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Morte couldn't make the trip." The doctor sipped his drink. "By the way, Morte, how is the novel progressing? The one you were telling us about last night."

"Oh, that...?" Robert paused. "You found it interesting?"

Kingsley nodded. "Very much so. Only one thing left me rather disappointed."

"What was that?"

"You hadn't worked out the identity of the murderer."

Robert said levelly. "Oh, yes I have. I've known it for the past twenty-four hours, doctor."

There was a scraping of feet on polished boards as Kingsley changed his position. He leaned back in his chair.

"So you honestly believe Skinner was murdered?"

Robert nodded. Then the doctor spoke again. "How did you find out?"

Robert shrugged. "First by having my wife select one book out of thousands as a birthday present. Second by remembering Skinner's account of Redmond's attack and seeing the mark of the rope on his arm— a scarlet weal which, incidentally, we took for granted as extending across his body. At that same interview, Skinner told us another highly significant thing— that on board the ship were five people who would willingly see him dead!

"Five people," said Robert slowly. "Skinner would not divulge the names, but I was perfectly satisfied as to their identity. They were Earl Redmond, Stephen Hawke, Arthur Burton, his daughter Patricia and the servant, Vincente Martino. So that when the old man had this extraordinarily convenient heart attack in his bath, I was justifiably suspicious. Suspicious, but helpless. Both Doctor Sweetapple and yourself had diagnosed the death as being from natural causes. I therefore had no hesitation in accepting the verdict that Eli Skinner had met his end through a heart attack, but— and this was a very big 'but'— had that attack come about naturally or had it been deliberately contrived?"

"I called upon Redmond in hospital. It was then that I learned that, on the night of that young man's attack, Skinner was wearing his steel vest..."

Kingsley stirred and opened his eyes. "And as you pointed out last night, it was therefore quite obvious that the weal we had both seen on Skinner's body was not caused by the rope." The eyes came to rest on Morte's face. "And then you suspected the sea-wasp?"

"Not then," Robert told him. "I was not to learn about the sea-wasp until later. But that simple statement of Redmond's brought the murderer one step closer to the gallows, because we must bear in mind a most important point." He leaned forward to emphasise the words. "The whole nut and kernel of the scheme— the very cornerstone which supported the carefully-built plan— was the fact that no one must even faintly suspect the presence of any foreign creature in that bath-tub! Because if such a creature was suspected to have been present, doubts must inevitably fall on this diagnosis of natural death from natural causes!"

The doctor nodded, "Obviously!"

"Now," Morte continued. "I must ask you to follow the next piece of analysis rather carefully. It was on the following day that I discovered the information about the sea-wasp. And with the knowledge that it had been used as a murder weapon came another realisation. That the murderer must be someone— man or woman— who knew, even before Eli Skinner stepped into that bath, that no rope-mark was present on the old man's body.

"Because if the murderer believed, as my wife and I firmly believed, that a rope-mark already existed, he or she would never have used the sea-wasp as a lethal weapon!"

Kingsley was frowning with concentration. "Why not?"

Robert said slowly, "Because the murderer would have realised that, in striking, the creature's tentacle would have *left a second weal*! And since the single noose of a tightened lasso cannot possibly leave *two separate weals*, this double mark on Skinner's torso would undoubtedly have aroused suspicion.

"So the fact that the murderer used the sea-wasp proved to me beyond all doubt that he or she knew that there was no rope-mark on the body. And that when the creature struck, the tentacle mark by its very close resemblance would come to be identified as the single rope-mark which my wife and I, two completely independent witnesses, remember, already believed existed."

KINGSLEY HAD changed his position.

"Ingenious, Morte. Very ingenious. What next?"

Robert reached for his drink and drained it.

"A simple process of elimination, doctor, since only three people could possibly have known that there was no rope-mark on the old man's body.

"One was Earl Redmond, already aware of the fact that Skinner was wearing his steel vest on the night of the attack. But when the murder took place on board the *Medusa*, Redmond was lying helpless in hospital here in Cairns.

"The second was Vincente Martino. The very nature of his duties demanded that Skinner's servant dress and undress his master. But I had the evidence of my own eyes that Vincente was absent from the cabin during the murder. Again, it was Martino who first reported the curious behaviour of the light-globe to my wife— the last thing a guilty person would be likely to do.

"Finally, I have known since yesterday that Vincente Martino is no longer alive. He was our murderer's second victim, killed for the very purpose of preventing him divulging that highly important piece of evidence— that there was, before the old man took that fatal bath, no mark or weal on the body.

"And so," Robert said quietly, "we come to the third person. The only possible person. The murderer of Eli Skinner and his servant, Vincente Martino."

A long streamer of cloud had reached the sun, blotting out the light, plunging the room into a green twilight which was almost a projection of the jungle outside. The heat, thick and humid, weighed like a physical burden. Beyond the window, the lake had turned leaden and the massed undergrowth of palm and vine seemed to have moved in closer, secretive as ever, but now watchful... waiting...

Robert ran his finger around the edge of the glass.

"Let us, doctor, examine this third person with some care. Our murderer must be someone who knows the Queensland coast fairly well; must have had prior knowledge of the sea-wasp, of its poisonous properties and must have known that the tentacle mark would closely resemble a red weal by a rope. He or she would have to be someone sufficiently in Skinner's confidence to have seen the old man stripped to the waist and must be possessed of certain

technical knowledge not only with which to kill Vincente but also to dispose of his body in a manner arousing no suspicion."

The words slowed, became spaced. "A person in authority on a ship— a captain or a ship's officer— has some of three requirements..."

"But..."

"Our particular murderer must have one other important attribute. He must have the specialised knowledge that, taking into consideration the state of Skinner's health and the fact that he hoped the tentacle mark would be explained as innocently inflicted, *the symptoms of neuro-toxin poisoning and genuine heart failure are so similar in every way that, even after the most detailed autopsy, no doctor on earth could possibly fault the original diagnosis,*" Robert's tone hardened suddenly. "Thus one person and one person alone meets all these requirements— "

"Yes," said Doctor Ralph Kingsley.

It was not so much a word as a long sigh.

"Yes," he said and closed his eyes again. "I killed them both. I'm your murderer."

The thunder which marked Doctor Kingsley's last word was more than a clap. It was a crashing detonation which seemed to burst the ear drums by its suddenness so that for a few seconds, senses were numbed and confused. Thus Robert had, momentarily, the absurd impression that the sky had split to rain people, for abruptly the living-room seemed crowded. Then he saw that no more than three men had joined them, springing into focus as they came from the rear of the house. One he recognised as Captain Robertson. His companions, stocky, thick-set individuals, were so plainly marked by their profession as to make introductions superfluous.

The doctor was first to speak. He addressed Robert as though they were still alone in the room and his tone was heavy with reproach.

"I scarcely would have expected this from you, Morte..."

Before Robert could reply, the elder of the two plainclothes men stepped forward. He was thick-necked, with small cold eyes and a bristling moustache under a pig's snout of a nose. His accent was vile, flat, nasal and without a trace of expression.

"Doctor Ralph Kingsley?"

The other inclined his head.

"I'm Detective-Sergeant Mason. I'll 'ave to ask you to come down to 'eadquarters."

Kingsley's sensitive mouth curled in distaste so that Robert cried out defensively.

"I had nothing to do with this!"

"Nothing at all," substantiated Detective-Sergeant Mason flatly. "Followin' a report made yesterday by Captain Robertson of the *Medusa*..." Robert could almost hear him reading the typewritten lines..." we made inquiries, regardin' a certain Vincente Martino. 'E was traced to your hotel, Doctor but no one saw the person in question emerge. A search of your rooms revealed traces of cottonwool soaked in anaesthetic, later revealed by 'eadquarters to be— "

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried Kingsley impatiently. "So you came up here, having discovered my address from the hotel, to make further inquiries. And while waiting, you happened to overhear a private conversation. Is that it?"

Mason nodded.

"So I am under arrest?"

The reply came doggedly. "Followin' certain statements over-'eard, that's 'ow it is."

Ralph Kingsley turned. "I owe you an apology, Morte. Now I can only say that this interruption is unfortunate, since there is so much more I have to tell you." That gentle tired smile was on his face. "You have supplied two points of the triangle— the How and the Who. I was hoping to be allowed to contribute the third point. The Why of it all. The motive."

Robert turned to where the bull-necked man stood regarding him with impassive suspicion.

"I would like ten minutes alone with Doctor Kingsley..."

Detective-Sergeant Mason said brusquely, "Not on your life!"

A crash of thunder, louder if possible than the first, drowned the remainder of his words. With it came the rain, sudden, torrential. The steady, relentless drumming of rain continued unabated, so that Kingsley, when he spoke, had to raise his voice to be understood.

"Detective-Sergeant..." Mason screwed his head around from the streaming window. "The object of taking me to headquarters is, I believe, so that I can make a statement?"

The other nodded.

The doctor gestured. "Surely it would be much more convenient if I made it here?"

Mason glanced through the window at the leaden sky.

"Please yourself about that."

Robert noticed that the second detective had produced a note-book and a stylo pen. Both men retired to the far corner as Kingsley turned.

"Might be as well to begin by saying that Eli Skinner was my father-in-law."

Robert was staring at him.

"But surely that's impossible?"

"Why so?"

"If you had married Rose Skinner, surely her father would have recognised you on board?"

"He had never set eyes on me before."

"But your name? He would have known that!"

"No," replied Kingsley quietly. "You may remember from Hawke's story that Rosalind Skinner had only one interview with her father after her return from England. Pressed as to the identity of the man she had married, she gave a completely false name. Linda had a good reason for this— knowing her father's bitterness, she feared he might try to nullify the marriage. The wrong name would have confused any attempt at investigation, particularly as the wedding took place in England..."

"Stephen Hawke has told you that, following this one and only meeting, Linda and her father became as strangers to each other."

The doctor paused and passed a hand across his lean face.

"It all began with a series of bad investments," Kingsley went on. "In the effort to forestall disaster, the brokers demanded more and more money." He shrugged. "It's the old familiar story, Morte and I won't bore you with details. Except to say that from comparative comfort and ease, we found ourselves very nearly penniless. Again, we were not greatly concerned— people have gone bankrupt before. It merely meant a re-adjustment of our lives to fit a dwindling budget. We took a smaller cottage in Tasmania which Linda managed while I took on the appointment of a ship's doctor on a coastal boat.

"I was away for three months and it was only on my return that I realised my wife was far from well. Linda had contracted leukaemia, a cancerous condition of the blood which might well cause an agonising and premature death!" Robert watched the speaker lick his dry lips.

"Then I discovered that my wife had carried this condition in her blood for years. Worry, caused partly by the scene with her father and the subsequent loss of money, had caused the dormant complaint to flare anew."

The rain was easing now. The living-room had lightened a little so that as Kingsley raised his head, Robert could see clearly the lines of passion and pain that etched his face.'

The doctor stared across the room. "Then, out of the blue, came what seemed like a last-minute reprieve. A clinic had been opened in New York and advanced cases of the hitherto fatal leukaemia were being treated with amazing success! But the cost was high, far beyond our slender means. It was then that Linda wrote to her father for help.

"The first letter was ignored. So was the second and the third. By this time, my wife was too sick to write again. In desperation, I flew to Sydney to make a

personal appeal to my father-in-law. I didn't get past the servant at the door. Three weeks later my wife died. It was not a very pleasant death."

He was silent for almost a minute before he looked up to meet Robert's eyes.

"In an effort to forget the pain of Linda's death, I took, on another appointment as ship's doctor, this time travelling the Queensland coast. It was during this voyage that I made the acquaintance of the sea-wasp. A young sailor, one of the crew, was stung while swimming near Double Island beach and despite all efforts to save his life, died a few minutes later. Returning to Sydney, I found myself at a loose end when Lindsay Holford asked me to undertake the mission I've already mentioned. So I joined the *Medusa* with my charge."

Robert put a question. "You say, Doctor, that Skinner had never set eyes on you at all?"

"Never."

"Then what of your story of having treated him for a heart condition years before?"

Kingsley's pale face flushed. "Isn't it one of the principles of any detective story that the murderer may always legitimately lie? However, I had a strong motive for that story. It was just possible that Skinner had made inquiries about me and may recognise me from descriptions he had heard. In which case, I hoped to keep my true identity secret by letting the old man believe he had met me in a professional capacity. Fortunately, such a contingency did not arise." He paused a moment, then added.

"And so we reached Paradise Island where I had my first glimpse of my father-in-law in the flesh."

"And so the scheme for murder began?"

The doctor shook his head. "Not even then, Monte. I will admit, however, that on the first night I lay awake thinking how very simple such an act of murder could be. On the second day on the island I received through Martino a summons to the old man's bungalow. It was on a mission which I will explain later. While there, Skinner showed me his collection of shells, going to some trouble to explain the toxic qualities contained in the living replicas of his dead cone shells. At once the idea of a substitution passed through my mind— only to be discarded. Nor did I dwell at all seriously on it until the following day."

"What happened then?"

Kingsley said slowly. "I returned to my bungalow just before dinner. There, propped up against the mirror, I found an envelope. An envelope bearing the anonymous message that Eli Skinner had become interested in the woman known as Leila Harland!

"I remember sitting down, sick and shaken. For I had learned enough about Skinner to realise just what his curiosity must mean. Exposure— not only for me, but for Sir Charles and Lady Forbes-Raneleigh, that aged and ailing couple whose lives had already been shadowed by the old creature's perverted scheming."

"That anonymous letter tipped the delicately balanced scales. One life or two?"

A silence followed into which the rain hissed unceasingly. Then Robert said. "So you were the person Redmond saw in Skinner's bungalow that night?"

Kingsley nodded. "I wore a pair of white gardening gloves to protect my hands against possible stings from the live shells I had brought from the reef," he explained. "And, as you know, I was interrupted in the task of substitution by Redmond who, to my dismay, fell a victim to the very trap I had set for his tormentor."

"Doctor," he said gently.

The hands fell away, the drawn face was turned to him as he went on.

"What gave you the idea of using the sea-wasp?" Morte asked.

Kingsley said slowly, "I have already explained how, in my mind, I had turned over methods of murder. One of these involved the use of the sea-wasp. But even in theory, I discarded this plan since I realised that the mark of the tentacle would betray the presence of the creature. Unless I could evolve some perfectly natural explanation for the disfigurement..."

"When Martino asked me to come to Skinner's bungalow that second day on the island, I discovered that the old man wanted me for a consultation. He had stripped and showed me a small red weal on his right arm. At the same time he mentioned Redmond's attack and when I asked why no such mark appeared on his torso, he explained that he happened to be wearing a steel protector.

"It was not until we were back on the ship that the full significance of this remark struck me. Here was the logical answer to the problem which, until that moment, had rendered the use of the sea-wasp impracticable!"

The doctor paused again and was silent for so long that Robert had to prompt him.

"Where did you find the creature?"

"On the afternoon of the crime, you may remember we were members of that diving party. I suspected that we were in the creatures' vicinity and sure enough, we were not submerged more than a few minutes before I noticed a specimen floating among a swarm of jelly-fish. Later that same afternoon, on the pretext of gathering tropical fish for my aquarium, I had one of the crew take me astern. There I waited for the running tide when the creatures rise to

the surface. There is no need to go into the details of the actual crime, since you explained it all so lucidly last night.

"And after the execution, I had every reason to feel confident. But I had reckoned without two important factors. One, Morte, was your intelligence, trained in complexities such as I had planned. The other..." the tone, heavy with defeat, ended in a sigh.

"The other was the servant, Vincente Martino.

"Martino, who was very suspicious of the light-globe's behaviour, who was present at my examination of his master and knew that there was no rope-mark on his master's body, and who came to my hotel on that first afternoon demanding money to keep silent." The doctor's hands moved restlessly. "Curarine works very swiftly. The disposal of the body was not difficult. I thrust it into one of the cabin trunks and had it delivered up here with my other luggage. I sank the box in the lake last night... They say it is bottomless and that everything sinks like a stone..."

Steps dragging, he moved across to the latched window and stood looking out. The next words, gentle, steeped in irony, issued from a blurred and featureless mask.

"Didn't you once tell me that Morte was derived from the Latin for... death?"

At the moment, premonition was so strong upon Robert that he shuddered as though a chill wind had blown upon him. But the three men at the far end of the room were taken completely by surprise. Even before Mason could complete that step across the floor, the shadow by the long window seemed to contract and tighten. There was a crash and splinters of glass, caught by the sun, gleamed brighter than raindrops. Ralph Kingsley flashed through the shattered panes, fell and struck the surface of the lake below with scarcely a splash. Leaping forward, Robert had a last fleeting glimpse of a face, ashen, resigned, as the water closed after it.

The End