

# Short Stories

ANC

January

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*Worth \$150,000  
When It Was  
Stolen; Paste  
When the Millionaire  
Got It Back—*

**“Diamond!  
Diamond!”**

**A COMPLETE  
DETECTIVE  
NOVEL**

by

**GEORGE ALLAN  
ENGLAND**

# Short Stories

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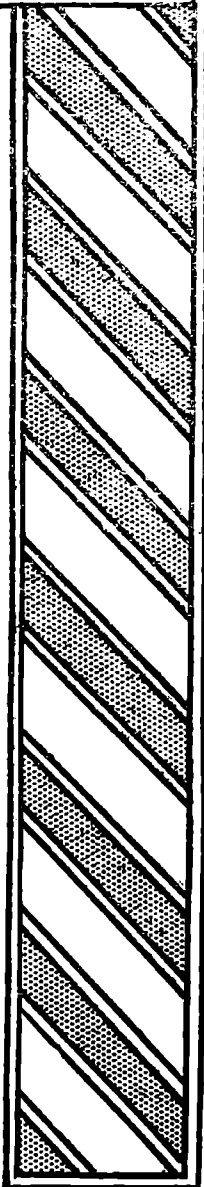
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# DIAMOND! DIAMOND!

By GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

## CHAPTER I

### THE LUCK STONE

**B**Y TEN-THIRTY on the night of January 17th, there in the luxurious Coquina Towers Hotel at Martello Key, Florida—the night when events so incredible, so shocking and yet heroic were desumed to commence—the most brilliant ball of the season was already in full swing. It was a grand affair.

Beyond the screen of vivid tropical flowers and of tubed fish-tail palms that divided the vast lobby from the even larger

ballroom, the scene was a dreamland of beauty.

Soft and many-colored lights from the huge-beamed ceiling revealed a shifting kaleidoscope of evening gowns like a flower-garden in drifting motion. Here and there a Tux, or even the formality of full-dress, mingled with white flannels. And to the tempo of a New York jazz orchestra, hundreds of very expensively-shod feet kept rhythmic measure.

"Expensive!" was the word that fitted everything. "Money!" stood proclaimed. Old Man Depression had apparently never been heard of, at Coquina Towers. Good pickings here, one might say, for the Un-





***It Was a Real Diamond When the Millionaire Lost It; Paste  
When He Got It Back. What Had Happened in the Meantime?***

derworld. But what possible contact could the Underworld have with these aloof, correct, secure and brilliant folk?

**I**N FRONT of the huge fireplace in the lobby—where hung a thin blue haze of tobacco-smoke—a little group of non-dancers, all men, were sitting quite at ease on an immense leather divan or in overstuffed chairs. There they were taking their ease, talking about golf-scores, deep-sea fishing, or the "million-dollar climate" of Martello Key.

Six men comprised this group, five Americans and one gentleman of darker complexion who—so he let it be known—

hailed from the southern republic of Costa Verde; a retired coffee-planter or something of the sort. On all this little gathering shone light from shaded clusters and from leaping driftwood flames in the fireplace.

"Biggest sailfish ever caught in *these* waters!" boasted the oldest of the men. "Even bigger than that one, up there!" He blew a cloud of smoke from his cigar, which had cost him a dollar; he nodded with proud satisfaction, and with his right eye—the left being glass—blinked at the fish mounted on a varnished board over the mantelpiece. "If my catch don't establish a record round these diggin's, I'd like to know, by Judas!"

"Guess you're right, Colonel Valentine," assented one of the other plutocrats—thin-faced and thinner-haired—on the divan beside the old man. "And to judge by the battle that fellow put up—!"

"Yes, sir, I may be gettin' on in years," chuckled the millionaire, his glass eye now a little out of plumb; at times, according to how it slipped, this optic made him look cross-eyed, again, wall-eyed, "I may be a bit in the sere and yellow, but I can still land 'em, eh?"

It seemed to be the consensus of opinion that Colonel Valentine—sometimes called "Jimmy Valentine" because of certain business deals and methods—surely could still land 'em. His forty million dollars made people eager to agree with him; even willing to give ear unto innumerable and long-winded accounts of his fishing adventures.

"I think Colonel Valentine deserves great credit for his skill," observed another man; a much younger man, not more than thirty-five or six. Hard-shaven, lean and tanned, although he didn't have a million dollars he looked like one. His flannels fitted to perfection. Every detail of dress was quietly and assuredly right, even to the small but excellent diamond in the only ring he wore. "If I had half his skill, I'd think myself the luckiest man in Florida."

"Good of you to say so," puffed Valentine, his brown-mottled and thin hand brushing cigar-ashes from his Tux. An untidy old fellow he was; but then, at nearly seventy even a multimillionaire may slip a trifle, despite all his valet can do. "I think though, Hargreaves, part of the credit belongs to you."

"By no means," the younger man disclaimed. "Not at all!"

"Ah, yes," insisted Colonel Valentine, clacking his false teeth in a way he had. "If you hadn't been aboard my cabin-cruiser with me, I might never have got that fish. You hooked him, didn't you?"

"Oh, that was just a fluke," smiled Hargreaves, blowing pipe-smoke. "But you notice I damn soon handed over my rod to you, for the real job of landing that baby!"

"Yes, yes," the Colonel admitted, flattered beyond all words. "Dare say I *have* got a certain knack. But it's partly luck, too." He twisted up his waxed mustache. "Luck, sir—that's partly the answer."

"Luck? Pooh!" returned Hargreaves. "Why, nobody believes in luck, these days."

"Well, I do—and I've had plenty of proof!"

"Nonsense," cut in another man, fat and red-faced, as he lighted a fresh cigarette. "This luck stuff is all bunk!"

"It ees w'at you call the hot air, no?" put in the Costa Verdian coffee-planter, Señor Gumersindo Martínez.

"Hot air, nothing!" old Valentine fired up, while the little group roused its bored self to unusual interest. When the Colonel got going, fireworks sometimes exploded. "I'll prove to you whether luck is all hot air, or not!"

Speaking, he slipped a thumb and finger into his waistcoat pocket, and from that pocket extracted something. He held out this something on his extended palm. There before them all he exhibited it—a diamond.

A diamond, indeed. Good Lord, what a diamond!

FOR a moment, silence fell upon the little group. Silence, through which the music still moaned, the dancing feet still slithered with verve and abandon. And well might silence have greeted the appearance of this gem. Even in so money-soaked and so sophisticated a gathering as this about the immense fireplace, such a jewel was by no means an ordinary sight.

Not only in size—all of twenty-five carats—was it extraordinary, but also in cut and coloration. Its hue was almost pure white, save for a faint bluish cast that filled it with beauty indescribable. And as it lay there in the crabbled old millionaire's hand, while vaingloriously he turned it this way and that, prismatic hues sparkled in its depths.

These colors played with tiny and lambent flames—scarlet, rose and crimson, mingled with greens and blues so keenly cutting as almost to pain the sight.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the thin-haired man, Maxwell. He leaned forward, to study this amazing gem. "You—you don't carry that thing around loose in your pocket, do you?"

"Why not?" chuckled Valentine. His puffy face, its bulbous nose cross-hatched by tiny arteries, seemed to swell with arro-

gant pride. "Is that too much of a risk to take, for good luck on a fishin' trip or in a business deal?"

"I'd think it too much of a risk for about anything in this world," said Hargreaves—the man who had been out fishing that morning with the Colonel. "Why, this diamond of yours is as big as the 'Star of the Este,' and can't be worth far from \$150,000!"

"Correct," the Colonel nodded. "How'd you guess?"

"Oh, it's no guess. I used to be in the business—had offices in the Rand, and Antwerp." He knocked out his pipe-ashes on the smoking-table near by, and pushed the table away from the divan. "Briolette cut, eh? And a blue Jaeger stone. A fine gem, Colonel. But looks to me more like a museum-piece than one to be carried around loose, for a lucky-stone."

"Ah, but that's what I use it for, all the same," boasted Valentine, as he made its colors dance. "And so long as it gets me what I go after, isn't it worth the risk?"

"Well, I don't know. You mean to say you had this diamond out with you today? Out fishing?"

"I certainly did. And didn't I land the biggest sailfish ever caught anywhere round here?"

"But, Colonel," protested a square-built man in full evening-dress, who till now had kept silent. "But suppose the damned thing had fallen overboard?"

"Or *you* had?" Hargreaves laughed.

"Ah, what a loss my death would have been to Art, as Nero said when he was dyin'," the old millionaire chuckled, with half-senile boasting. "But I didn't fall overboard, and I couldn't, with this stone on me. So long as I have it, nothin' can happen to me—nothin' but good luck. And that's flat!"

"What's flat? The luck?"

"No, my assertion. This diamond is one hundred per cent efficient. Of that I'm positive!"

"It ees w'at you call the bunk," asserted Señor Martínez from Costa Verde, flipping his cigarette-butt into the fire. "I have no faith in sooch child-play. Only the bunk, sir."

"Bunk, nothing!" Colonel Valentine fired up. Opposition was a violent poison, to

him. "You'd be surprised, the number of times I've won with this stone in my pocket!"

"Won, how?" asked Maxwell.

"Every kind of way. Half my fortune, I dare say, is due to this very diamond." And caressingly he stroked it. "I've made half my money, anyhow, in the past eight years—since it came into my hands. It's helped me at roulette, in Monte Carlo and Havana and Biarritz, and no end of other casinos. And it's given me the upper hand in plenty of other deals. More than that, it's proved useful—invaluable, I might say—in lots of personal matters, like landing this prize fish."

"Or w'at you call the prize chickens?" mocked Señor Martínez.

"Well, I wouldn't deny that, either," smirked the old man, with another twist at his waxed mustachios. "I tell you, when I'm goin' after anythin'—money, property, a concession in any of those Spig countries," (and he glanced with his one good eye at the Señor) "or a fish or a rival or what have you, I'd as soon think of leavin' this diamond behind as I would of leavin' my—my—"

"My right eye," thought Hargreaves, with a satirical twist of his lips, but he took good care not to voice the idea.

"May I look at that stone, please?" asked Maxwell. "I must admit I've never seen one quite this size, close-up. I would really like to examine it, if you don't mind, Colonel."

"Mind, mind? Why should I mind?" the millionaire demanded, blinking. "All of us bein' friends together, here. Friends—and gentlemen. Why the devil *should* I mind? Here, sir—here it is!"

## CHAPTER II

### A DROP IN DIAMONDS

AS HE spoke, he handed the diamond to Maxwell. This gentleman, putting on a pince-nez that hung from his neck by a ribbon, studied the gem, watching the fairy play of colors as the firelight leaped among its facets.

"Magnificent!" he nodded. "First-water stone. Never saw finer cutting. Little too rich for my blood, though. I'd rather not

take chances carrying such a piece of 'ice,' these days."

"Nor I," remarked Edwards, as he took the wondrous gem from Maxwell—old Colonel Valentine meantime keeping his one good eye sharply fixed on it.

Although this little group of men were all "friends and gentlemen together," none the less Valentine showed no disposition to let his lucky-piece get out of his sight for even so much as a second. Such queer things happen in this funny old world, eh? And you never can tell!

"No, sir, I wouldn't want to carry this round with me, especially at night," judged Edwards. "If I owned it, I'd hire the strongest safe-deposit box in New York, and lock it up there, and then worry myself sick for fear somebody else might know where it was. You next, Señor?"

"*Muchas gracias,*" murmured the Costa Verdian, who kept the jewel only a few seconds, then passed it along to Gifford, the fat and red-faced individual. Gifford, sitting in a deep chair at the end of the divan farthest away from the Colonel, seemed uneasy at having it in his possession. With only a grunt, he handed it to young Hargreaves.

Hargreaves, taking it in strong, steady fingers, for a moment studied it by the mingled light of chandeliers and fireplace. And all at once the music in the ballroom stopped with a dissonant crash. The *shuff-shuff-shuff* of dancing feet ceased. Applause broke out, demanding an encore.

"Nice little pocket-piece, all right," nodded Hargreaves, his somewhat humorous blue eyes crinkling up into a pleasant smile. "Congratulations, Colonel Valentine! Only, I'd much rather have you pack this thing around—not I. Got too much regard for my health, to be running round the U. S. A., toting a rock like this!"

**L**EANING forward, he was just about to give it back to the old man, when his elbow struck against Maxwell's arm.

The diamond, escaping from his fingers, fell to the rug in front of the divan. It rolled in a small, fire-winking spiral, and came to rest there.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Hargreaves exclaimed, bending quickly to reach for the fallen stone. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars

mustn't be left lying around loose on the floor, just like that! But Hargreaves failed to connect with the diamond. His right heel slipped, struck the magnificent jewel, spun it beneath the divan.

In a second he was down on his knees, groping for it.

"Be careful, there!" snapped the crusty old millionaire. "That's no common pebble!"

"Jove! I should say not!" Hargreaves answered in a muffled tone, sweeping under the divan with his left hand. "Ah, here it is!"

Relieved, he got up, with a sparkle of tiny lights between his left thumb and forefinger.

"Take it, please!" he exclaimed. "Whew! This damned thing makes me nervous. Here!"

One of the millionaire's hands was outspread. Hargreaves dropped the sparkle of lights into it. A second later, that sparkle was eclipsed in Valentine's waist-coat-pocket.

"Hell!" he growled. "That gave me the jitters, a moment. First time my diamond's ever been dropped, since I got it. Hope this hasn't busted my luck!"

No one answered. A sort of heavy bodiness seemed to hover round them all. Once more music surged, as the encore started. That music eased the strain.

On the broad leather divan and in the huge chairs, the men leaned back with tensions lessened. They began to smoke once more. But still, a certain restraint now possessed them all; a lack of ease that not even the return of the jewel to Colonel Valentine's pocket could quite thaw.

Tangible wealth like this that they had just seen, all in one small lump—well, can even men whose bank-accounts permit them to winter at Coquina Towers, be totally unaffected by such?

**N**OW the frank good-fellowship which hitherto had seemed to possess the little group had been subtly troubled. Maxwell ground out his cigarette in a brass tray, got up, and with the remark that it "was getting late for an old fellow," slowly drifted off down the lobby toward the office of Miss Joie Reynolds, the hotel's public stenographer.



Edwards knocked out his pipe and refilled, but did not light it. He only sat there brooding, staring into the fire. And when Colonel Valentine presently arose, grunted "Good-night!" in rather an ungracious tone, and departed toward the billiard-room, Edwards soon followed.

Robert Lee Hargreaves betook himself to the dance-floor. Gifford's fat face, ruddy as a full moon through smoke, looked rather anxious as he still remained there on the divan with Señor Martínez. Suddenly he growled: "You wouldn't catch *me* carrying a thing like that!"

"Nor me, either," agreed the Central American. "Not for much money. You have in thees country so many—w'at you call—hijacker, *verdad?* To carry richness in the pocket, it ees to open the door and say 'Come in!' to death!"

"Guess you're right," Gifford assented. "Makes me nervous just to even think about it. Well—I'll be toddling along."

"Toddling? W'at you mean, toddling?"

"Oh, toddle means to beat it, clear out, skip, skedaddle, step on the gas, blow, vamoose—"

"Ah, *now* I understand! To go away, eh? W'at a language, the English—so rich in expressions!"

After Gifford had departed, Señor Martínez still sat there all alone in front of the fire, studying its lights and colors as he enjoyed a long, moist Flor de Cuba. In the leaping flames of the driftwood piled there, he seemed to be glimpsing visions of enthralling interest.

"Rich, ah yes," he murmured to himself in Spanish, smiling blandly as he squinted through his cigar-smoke at the fire. "A rich language, a rich country. But all these *Yanquis* are a trifle mad. Imagine it, to carry a \$150,000 diamond loose in the pocket, like a common pebble! So many things might happen! *Quién sabe?*"

### CHAPTER III

#### STARLIGHT AND BUSINESS

YOUNG Hargreaves didn't stay very long in the ballroom. Although so personable a fellow met plenty of feminine welcome, none the less he seemed to find dancing a trifle boresome.

His roving blue eyes sought one certain girl he most particularly wanted to see. Hargreaves might very well have known she wouldn't be there. At some of the lesser affairs, yes; but not at this *de luxe* occasion. For the public stenographer of a hotel—even though she has a university degree—must expect to find herself snubbed in such an environment. Has not poverty always been punished as a crime?

Twenty minutes of dancing were more than enough for Hargreaves. He made discreet excuses, then drifted out to the wide, dim-lit and colonnaded piazza overlooking the gardens and the glimmering sea. On that piazza couples were a-stroll, or sitting in deep wicker chairs. Hargreaves lighted a cigarette and took a turn up and down. Perhaps Joie Reynolds might be somewhere about? Alas, not so.

"To hell with all this snobbery!" growled Hargreaves.

He wandered down the broad path of crushed coral, that led between clumps of gorgeous hibiscus and nodding coconut-palms, and so came to the beach, dim-seen in that tropical starlight. Vague lines of surf were rolling ghostly-white up the shimmering sands.

Near that surf, Hargreaves now faintly perceived a slim, familiar figure; a girl sitting on the warm sand with her hands clasped about her knees—a girl, silently gazing out over the dark, star-brooded waters.

"Joie! Is that you?"

She turned and looked at him, as he went toward her.

"Oh, Bob, I'm so glad to see you!"

"Same here!" He sat down beside her. "Devil of a bore—all that gang, in there. In less exclusive circles, it'd be called a 'hog-wrestle.' Thousand per cent better out here, with you."

"You say the nicest things, Bob," she laughed, her voice singularly appealing. "Long practice, I suppose."

"Cynical tonight, eh?"

"Not very. But I *do* need a smoke, Bob. However," she added: "After all, the main thing is to be nice, whether you're sincere or not."

"Now I *know* you're cynical tonight! Overworking again, young lady. And remember the truest things are sometimes the

nicest. And what's more, two's company, three hundred's a crowd."

TO THIS she made no answer, but sat there dreamily watching the flash and stab of American Shoal Light, far out over the sea with its long, murmurous surfs ever rolling in and in from the Cuban coast. Ripe stars, soft and big and apparently almost within reach, hung over that black abyss of ocean. And silence between the girl and Hargreaves seemed perhaps more eloquent than any words.

"What's been the overwork, today?" he finally broke that silence.

"Oh, had to get out a long realty contract for a fussy promoter named Thompson, and—well, a lot of other things. You've been out sailfishing, I hear."

"That's right. With old Glass-eye, there. Jimmy Valentine. Your fussy promoter has nothing on *him*, as a nuisance. If there ever was an egocentric old pest, it's the Colonel. I wonder why just because a man has forty million, he thinks the entire universe revolves around him?"

"Human nature," she laughed. And he, scenting the elusive perfume of her, which blended with saline aromas of the sea, felt that—Colonel or no Colonel—life was very good.

Far off, the town clock tolled eleven measured strokes.

"Dear me!" Joie exclaimed. "I'd no idea it was so late. Must be going home. Got another hard day, tomorrow."

"Too bad they can't let you stay here at the hotel."

"Oh, that's hardly to be expected, Bob. Not in mid-season, with people parked even in the hallways. And I don't mind living out at Mrs. Ellison's."

"I'll take you out, Joie. Can get my car in a couple of minutes."

"No, that would hardly pay, for only half a mile." She dropped her cigarette in the sand, and abstractedly piled fine coral-dust on it. "I'd much rather walk."

So Hargreaves helped her up—their fingers showing some disposition to cling a bit longer than strictly necessary—and together they walked out Wisteria Road in the darkness. Sea-breeze warmly caressed their faces; a breeze of June, although King Winter reigned in the far-away Northland.

From the distant reef, long-sighing murmurs told where surfs were tumbling over. At Mrs. Ellison's bungalow, almost smothered in bougainvilleas, Joie gave him a half-regretful good-night.

"Shoot a little golf with me, tomorrow P. M.?" he asked, seeking to keep her yet a moment longer.

"Love to, Bob. But with this work on hand—sorry!"

Walking back alone to the hotel, Bob did some rather earnest thinking.

"See here, *hombre*," he communed with himself, "You're not in Florida to get tangled up with the eternal feminine—not even a one-in-a-million girl like Joie. You're here to do one certain, definite, specific job, and no complications or sidelines wanted. Snap out of it!"

NEXT day was even harder than Joie had predicted. For something unforeseen took place; something that tremendously upset her, that brought her more dramatic stress than she had ever yet experienced in all her twenty-four years.

This something started at about ten o'clock, while she was busily hammering away at a real-estate contract. For into her little office came barging the important old Colonel Valentine, his immaculate white suit making rather a ghastly contrast with his sunken, wrinkled and brown-spotted face, his waxed mustache and the glare of his vitreous optic—now slightly wall-eyed.

"Take some dictation, young lady?" he demanded.

"Well, I might." She looked up from her keyboard, with brown eyes now a bit troubled under the long-curved lashes.

"You might, eh? Might? Does that mean yes or no?"

"It means yes."

"Well, why the devil couldn't you say so, in the first place?" he bullyragged her, sitting down and clacking his dentures. "It's some letters. Quite a number, in fact. Some of 'em to a few Cuban friends. You know Spanish, I hear."

"Yes, I can handle Spanish." She picked up her notebook and pencil, and pushed back the lustrous hair from a forehead that young Hargreaves had for some time considered a work of sheer artistry. "Any time you're ready, Colonel."

Colonel Valentine was ready right then, and he continued ready for two hours. During all that time he poured forth a stream of letters to an astonishing number of people. All the letters dealt with the same topic—his amazing sailfish. The Colonel's pride swelled mightily as he narrated his victory over that prize-winner.

Not only had he an inflated ego, but he also possessed the cash to indulge it, in at least two languages. Joie Reynolds surely had her work all cut out for her.

**S**TEADILY she wrote, pounding away, vigorously when the old tyrant warmed to descriptions of his piscatorial feat, then slacking her speed when he got up and paced the office to collect his thoughts—which recently had taken to wandering a bit.

Heat increased, there in that little room. Joie opened her handbag, took out her vanity-case and powdered her nose, which was a straight-bridged nose, with just the suspicion of a piquant little up-tilt at the end.

"And don't forget," exclaimed the Colonel, "that I want a carbon-copy of each and every letter."

"I'll remember," she asserted, shoving back the opened handbag on her desk. "Now, as you were saying—?"

The Colonel stuck his thumbs into his belt, which—now that he wore no waist-coat—showed itself tight around rather an absurd bay-window. He fell once more to pacing.

"Damnation, but it's hot!" he grumbled, and hauled from his breast pocket his large silk handkerchief, with something of a flourish. Swabbing his bald head, he once more fell to dictating.

Just then the office door opened. A dark, mustached face peered in.

"Ah, busy, Mees Reynolds?" asked the Señor Martínez, from Costa Verde. The Señor's eye rested a moment on Colonel Valentine, "Occupied, eh?"

"*Si, señor, muy ocupada.*"

"Very well, I come again more late." And the door, closing, eclipsed the señor.

Smoking one of his long, moist cigars, he wandered casually out into the patio, and with hands in pockets strolled down to the hotel garage. There, among many

other beautiful and glistening machines, stood the Colonel's. Giving this machine a bit of a polish, the Colonel's chauffeur glanced up at Martínez.

This chauffeur's name was Pedro Varela, a Cuban that the Colonel had picked up in Havana a couple of years back; a most competent driver and mechanic, quiet, respectful; in short, a very jewel of a chauffeur.

The jewel of a chauffeur deferentially returned Señor Martínez's good-day, in Spanish. The Señor looked over the car, praised it, approved it. He and Varela had a few words together; then the Señor moved on. Varela continued polishing metal that already shone like diamonds.

Back in Joie's office, the Colonel was growing ever more peevish and over-bearing.

"Where in Tophet am I, now, in my story?" he demanded. "That damned Spig buttin' in, threw me off the track. I wish people—'specially foreigners—wouldn't interrupt me when I'm dictatin' important letters! Oh, yes—go on, now—Just at this moment the monster fish broke water with a most tremendous leap, and—"

Once more the bombastic, self-glorifying narrative continued.

It ended almost on the stroke of noon. Old Valentine paid for the work, and added a tip—one dollar, which for him was astonishing liberality. Then, highly pleased with himself, he buzzed off, leaving Joie nervous and exhausted to face a long hot afternoon. An afternoon when she'd have given much to motor out to the Coral Island Country Club with Hargreaves, but when she simply *had* to do Thompson's real-estate contracts.

"Some life!" she murmured, closing her desk for the lunch-hour. "Lord deliver me from millionaires. Of all the impossible, cantankerous, nerve-destroying people in this world—!"

## CHAPTER IV

### LOST!

**C**ANTANKEROUS was a mild word for it, indeed, when late that afternoon the Colonel found he could *not* find his lucky diamond.

This distressing discovery took place just after he had come back from a drive over the keys, or sea-islands, and now with the help of his valet was changing into dinner-togs.

"Give me my diamond, Edwards," he directed. "I'm goin' to play bridge tonight with Hargreaves and a couple of other crack players. So, by Judas, I'll need all the luck I can get."

"Diamond, sir?" asked Edwards, his long, pale and expressionless face a mask of correctness. He felt in all the pockets of the clothes Valentine had just discarded.

"Yes, damn it, diamond! Even though you *are* from London, maybe you understand English!"

"Sorry, sir. No diamond 'ere, sir."

"What? No diamond? But—then—"

The old squid of a plutocrat brought his one eye to bear on the bureau, there in the bedroom of his elaborate suite. He peered into his collar-box, opened and closed drawers, and began to sweat somewhat more freely than even the heat would warrant. Edwards ventured:

"May I ask, sir, where you 'ad it last?"

"Why—I thought I had it in the breast-pocket of that coat."

"You thought, sir? Not sure of it, sir?"

"Of course I'm sure of it, damn you! What d'you mean, disputing me? That diamond—you find it quick, or by—!"

**EDWARDS** did not find the \$150,000 lucky stone, either quickly or any other way. It was nowhere to be come across in any of Colonel Valentine's clothes, nor elsewhere about his apartment. Though both the valet and the crabbed old millionaire searched the entire suite minutely, even on hands and knees poking under the bed, beneath dressing-tables and behind all sorts of things in rooms and closets, not one single sparkle of the gem rewarded them.

At the end of half an hour, the Colonel was pale and very badly shaken. His glass eye was cocked in a horribly grotesque cross. Even though you may be rated at forty million, you do not with equanimity lose a jewel of such rare price—especially if you most firmly believe that all your good luck and maybe your very life itself may be wrapped up in it.

"Well, by Judas Priest, this beats *me!*"

finally gulped the old man. "I could swear blind I had it in my coat pocket this mornin'. Maybe it's fallen out in the car. Go look in the car!"

Edwards left his master in a state of the most profound agitation, and hurried to the hotel garage. There he and the impeccable chauffeur, Pedro Varela, gave the Colonel's machine a thorough raking-over. Two or three other chauffeurs looked on, with interest, and asked questions—which Edwards answered by telling them the millionaire had dropped a fifty-cent piece and was frothing about it.

Electric flashlights illuminated every nook and corner of the Colonel's huge gray machine. Vain quest. No diamond.

When Edwards had thus reported, Valentine called the hotel manager, Mr. Dennison Clark. He phoned down to the office that Mr. Clark's presence was urgently desired—and please bring Mr. Tyson along, too.

Mr. Tyson, Judson C. Tyson, was the house-detective. All this by no means escaped the notice of Miss Lillian Cassidy, on the switch-board. Lillian was Pedro Varela's sweetie, pro tem.

"Right away!" the Colonel insisted. "I want you two men up here, P. D. Q.!"

"Very well, Colonel. We'll be there immediately," promised Clark, who had the coldly calculating eye of a shark and the suave manner of a fashionable physician. When a man worth forty million says P. D. Q., it means something. Inside of five minutes, Messrs. Clark and Tyson were in the Colonel's suite.

**V**ERY carefully they went over the situation, and helped the distressed Valentine to review all the activities of the day.

"Maybe you dropped your diamond somewhere in Miss Reynolds' office," suggested Clark, "when you were dictating letters."

"Oh, no, I couldn't have done that!" Valentine rebutted, while the impassive Edwards listened with a face like that of a wooden joss. "I'm sure I've had my diamond, since then."

"You're positive, eh?" asked Tyson, a jolly-looking and rubicund fellow, who seemed more like a prosperous businessman than a dick.

"Certainly I'm positive. I'm always positive!"

"You've seen it, since you were dictating letters?" insisted Tyson.

"Well—hm—no, I can't say that I've actually *seen* it. But I'm sure I've felt it in my pocket. If I'd dropped my diamond there, I'd surely have known it!"

"Well, anyhow, it's worth trying the public stenographer's office. Let's all take a look round, there!"

**T**HE very puzzled and irate Colonel accompanied Clark and Tyson to Joie's little establishment. Joie had already gone home, tired out, the hour being now 5:45. Everything in her office was just as she had left it. The negro servants had not yet emptied the wastebasket or touched a thing.

But the most painstaking search failed to disclose any diamond, even though the three men examined all the desk drawers, shook out the waste-paper on the floor, hunted through the wire baskets on the desk, poked and pried in every nook and cranny. With the door locked and all lights burning, they gave the place a thorough overhaul. Nothing!

"Well, sir, your diamond is evidently not here," said Tyson at last, lighting a fresh cigar.

"No, I didn't think it would be," the Colonel groaned, in deep distress. "Maybe out at the Country Club? I stopped there half an hour, this afternoon."

"In that case, with so many people coming and going—"

"Yes, yes. Employees and all," assented Valentine. "But still, what could anybody do with it? A perfectly well-known gem. Nobody could even try to dispose of it, without gettin' caught."

"They might cut it up," suggested Clark. "If they did, couldn't they sell the pieces, one here and one there?"

"Oh, Lord!" the Colonel exclaimed, more agitated than ever. He swished out his big handkerchief, with a characteristic gesture, and mopped his brow. "My good-luck stone broken up and sold! Damnation, what a calamity!"

"Don't unnecessarily distress yourself, sir," the manager purred. "We'll find it for you, yet."

"But—with all these servants—?"

"Exceptionally reliable people. We've never had a guest lose anything of value. And with a proper reward—"

"Reward? I've got to offer a reward for its return?"

"Well, it's rather customary, sir. And it certainly might facilitate the return of your jewel."

"Always a shakedown, damn it!" fumed the millionaire. "Hundred dollars be enough?"

"Oh, Colonel Valentine!" protested Clark. "A diamond of that value! Five thousand dollars reward should be the minimum remuneration."

"The hell you say! Five hundred is my outside limit!"

**T**HEY argued the point, Clark smooth as oil; the Colonel getting very hot under the collar; the house-detective enjoying his cigar. Valentine was at last jacked up to \$2,500, where he stuck like a broken-down tractor in Georgia gumbo mud.

"I'll typewrite the reward notice, myself," offered the manager, "and post it at once."

"Make a copy for the Country Club, too," directed Valentine. "But wait, hold on. I've got an idea!"

"An idea, Colonel?" inquired Tyson, with a tinge of sarcasm. "No!"

"This is all wrong! If I advertise such a damn big reward, for a genuine diamond, I'll never get it back. The finder—or the thief, or whoever the devil's got it—will be sure to keep it. But if I give out that it's only an imitation, a paste jewel—"

"Paste?" exclaimed Clark. "Why—"

"Of course! Don't you see?" the Colonel explained, more and more wrought up. "Not one person in a thousand would ever know the difference. Make it a small reward, for a phony gem—thousand times more chance to get it back, that way!"

"I can't see it at all, sir," objected Clark; but the house-detective nodded comprehension.

"Damn'd if it *isn't* a clever idea!" he approved. "It's a whale of a good one—diamond cut diamond!"

"Of course it's a clever idea!" chuckled the Colonel, clacking his false teeth. "All my ideas are like that. Here, Clark, you write what I dictate. We'll have my lucky



piece back in jig-time—and what's more, it'll only cost me twenty-five bucks!"

In complete disagreement, but offering no more opposition, Clark wrote as Colonel Valentine dictated:

### LOST!

BY GUEST OF HOTEL, LARGE PASTE DIAMOND, VALUED ONLY AS A LUCKY POCKET-PIECE. REWARD OF \$25.00. NO QUESTIONS ASKED.

J. W. CLARK, *Mgr.*

AND at this same moment, in her room at Mrs. Ellison's bungalow out on Wisteria Road, Joie Reynolds was with the most profound amazement staring at something.

When she had just now got back to her room and had opened her handbag there, to get her vanity-case, a twinkle of unusual light had caught her eye.

Wondering what on earth this twinkle might be, she had taken out the sparkling object.

Now she saw it was a translucent, crystal thing, about one inch and a half in length—a thing the like of which she had some few times seen in jewelers' windows, but most assuredly had never yet held in her hand.

"Good heavens—what—what's *this*?"

Joie's brown eyes widened, as she stood there beside her bureau. Uncomprehendingly she stared—there by the faded daylight through the western window—at this amazing scintillation of many-colored and prismatic wonder that now lay in her white, soft palm.

## CHAPTER V

### REAL OR FALSE

FOR a moment the girl was completely stunned by the astonishment of this incredible happening. But very swiftly she reacted, and began to realize what had most probably taken place.

"Why, this must have fallen into my bag, at the office!"

A fantastic idea flicked through her brain. Perhaps this magnificent jewel had been purposely dropped into the bag, as a silent

message that the fatuous old Colonel—who fancied himself something of a lady-killer—wanted to get acquainted with her. But no, no; not even so colossal an idiot as Colonel Valentine would try to bait her with a diamond worth—well, how much? Joie hadn't the slightest idea, but it must be a huge fortune.

"Of course that's all nonsense!"

Then another notion struck her, an idea that filled her with an uneasy sense of some lurking peril.

"Maybe the Colonel hadn't anything at all to do with this." As a matter of fact, though she had heard about his lucky-stone, she had never seen it; could not be certain this was it. "Perhaps this is a stolen diamond, planted in my bag. And what then?"

Disaster might even now be casting its shadow over her; who could tell? She felt a sudden clutch of terror at her heart.

Of course her only possible move, for safety as well as to protect her reputation for honesty, was to hurry off at once to Coquina Towers and report having found the gem. So she dropped the lustrous thing back into her bag, and started downstairs. But in the lower hall she paused, brow knit and mouth tight.

Only half a mile to the hotel, but dare she walk it? What might not happen on the way? A hold-up seemed more than possible. No longer carefree and glad, she felt the weight of a heavy oppression. Turning, she went into the kitchen.

"Oh, Mrs. Ellison!"

"Yes, what is it?" And the excellent landlady glanced up from the stove, where she was getting supper.

"I've got to go right back to the hotel. And I'm so tired. Would it be asking too much, to have Walter take me in the car?"

"Why, bless your soul, no!" smiled Mrs. Ellison; a good creature if there ever was one. "I know he'll be only too glad to!"

Walter proved, in fact, only too glad. An odd stick, this Walter, of no perceptible occupation. Queer rumors were afloat, about Walter—hints that he was consorting, nights, with rum-runners and alien-smugglers. Some folks even whispered that he was mixed up with a mob bringing in dope from Central America.

Withal, he was a lad with an observant eye for petticoats; a ne'er-do-well who by

no means overlooked the presence of Joie Reynolds in the Ellison home. Now, given the chance to do her a favor, he leaped at this opportunity to put her under obligations to him.

"Sure, more'n glad to! Fine evenin', ain't it?" he proffered, as they started in the family flivver. "How 'bout a little drive tonight, out along the Keys?"

"Oh, thank you, that's awfully kind. But—well, I've got a headache. I really couldn't go, tonight."

"Sorry. Some other time, maybe?"

"Perhaps."

Beyond this, no word passed till they reached the huge, creamy-white hotel, where—again with thanks—she left him.

"Wait fer you, Miss Reynolds? Take you back home?"

"Oh no, thank you. It's not necessary. Good-bye."

Scowling, Walter drove off, while Joie hurried on into the hotel. More agitated than she ever remembered having been, she made her way quickly toward the desk. In place of her usual light-heartedness, now worry and self-conscious anxiety possessed her. She felt that all these sleek, rich, well-

groomed people lounging about, chatting and smoking, must know her secret; must guess what her handbag contained.

Now for the first time in her life she knew tensions and shame that made her face burn. Suppose any suspicion of theft were laid upon her? Of having been light-fingered with the old Colonel's diamond; of having accepted any of his advances? Her story of having merely found the jewel in her bag—a most unlikely tale!—suppose it were not believed? What then?

For a moment the girl was tempted not to declare her find. After all, who could know she had this precious thing? And *was* honesty always the best policy? Slyly Satan whispered in her small and exceedingly well-formed ear:

"Hold your tongue, fool, and you're rich!"

But Joie only hastened her step, toward the manager's office. As she approached it, she saw a little knot of people looking at a notice posted near the desk. She heard somebody remark: "Phony!" Two or three guests were laughing.

Joie felt very shaky and queer. Good heavens, was she in for a lot of publicity

and trouble? Already she could foresee newspaper headlines, maybe the loss of her job that she so desperately needed. Her heart began to thump with painful acceleration.

**L**OOKING neither left nor right, she quickly entered the manager's office. Through the door of an inner, private room, she saw the manager himself. With him, Tyson—the house-dick—was in conference. And, too, the old Colonel. Joie heard his scolding, uncoiled voice.

Shaky in the knees, breathing fast, she forced herself to knock at the door of the inner room. At Clark's summons of "Come in!" she advanced. The three men fell silent and fixedly regarded her.

"Ah, good evening, Miss Reynolds," Clark suavely greeted her. He looked puzzled and expectant. The Colonel frowned; Tyson drew at a fat Londres.

"I—I've come to—" Joie began, flustered and with heightened color. "I mean, I—I found it in my handbag."

It sounded baldly improbable. No Munchausen yarn was even more absurd. Joie didn't in the least expect them to believe her. How could she? What did it feel like to get arrested, charged with grand larceny? And how long did you get in jail, for it? She heard the old Colonel:

"You mean, you—you've got the lost article?"

"Yes," she nodded. She opened her bag, and with trembling fingers took out the lustrous jewel. "It must have fallen in here, some way, when you were dictating letters. You whipped out your handkerchief two or three times, remember, and—"

"Never mind! Let's have it!"

The aged millionaire's eagerness was positively indecent. He almost grabbed the diamond from her, with a hand that shook. "Whew!" he ejaculated. Paying not the least attention to anything the girl was trying to say, he squinted at the gem, by the light of a green-shaded incandescent. Sweat beaded his hairless cranium; his one eye blinked; his costly teeth clacked audibly.

The manager carried things along, made the situation at least endurable for Joie.

"Ah—hm!—you found this, Miss Reynolds?" he queried.

"Yes, Mr. Clark. Just now, in my room,

when I opened my bag to take something out. The bag was lying open in my desk at the office, while Colonel Valentine was dictating. Some way or other, his diamond must have fallen into it, without having been seen by either of us."

"Of course," assented the manager; but Joie saw that he believed not one single word of her story. Neither did Tyson. *They* hadn't been born yesterday! Clark's eyes bored at her like gimlets. Her job—oh well, that was gone, anyhow. And her reputation—? Clark turned to the Colonel, with:

"Well, sir, you've got your diamond back, anyhow. And this young lady has certainly earned the reward."

"Reward?" asked Joie, her eyes widening.

"Of course!" snapped the Colonel. He hadn't even thanked her. Now he laid the diamond down on Clark's desk, hauled out a very fat pocketbook and began extracting bills. "Twenty-five dollars. And," he crassly added, "no questions asked. Here you are!"

Some of the color drained out of Joie's cheeks. Her face hardened. A look of mortal hurt crept into her brown eyes.

"Oh no, no," she refused. "Really, I couldn't!"

"Go on, take it," the Colonel urged, glaring at her like an ogre. "You've earned it, and I'm a man of my word, damned if I'm not!"

"Thank you, no!"

Then with no further word, Joie swung round and whipped out of the manager's inner office. She slammed the door, too. Good and hard.

**"TEMPERAMENTAL, eh?"** commented the millionaire. "Well, that's like women, confound 'em. And honest—unlike most of 'em. You'd say she was honest, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," Clark agreed, without conviction. Already he was figuring on where to get another public stenographer.

"Show me a perfectly honest woman," said Tyson, "and I'll show you a blue moon." He took up the diamond and fell to examining it. "Sorry she didn't take the reward. It was little enough, even if this rock of yours is a phony."

"Hmmm! Hmmm!" from the Colonel, in a tone intended to be jocular.

"Good imitation, though," continued the house-dick. "Must have been made by a real expert. Hot stuff, eh?" And he exhibited the diamond to Clark.

"Well, I'm bound to admit it would have fooled the average man," Clark passed judgment, as he keenly looked at the gem. "It certainly would have deceived *me*, if I hadn't had a lot of experience with imitation jewels."

"I'll take that stone, sir," exclaimed the millionaire, "if you don't mind!"

"Here you are, Colonel." And Tyson handed it over. "It's a really wonderful piece of slum. Just look at the luster and sparkle of it! It would sure get by with anybody but an expert."

"Of course, of course," nodded the Colonel, a glint of uneasiness in his sole optic. As he now once more began to study his diamond, with more precise attention, this uneasiness increased. The Colonel's sense of malaise was not wholly due to a suspicion that Clark and Tyson were probably poking fun at him. No; more than this, a thin and flying needle of doubt had penetrated his vitals; a cold touch of fear that possibly something was wrong. That something was under way, which might prove damnably serious. But the old plutocrat held steady, and managed a sour smile as he remarked:



"Yes, gentlemen, it *is* a good imitation. Of course I wouldn't think of ever carryin' the real stone around with me. Too damned risky, what?"

And all the time, Valentine was thinking, with swiftly-growing panic:

"But, by Judas! If this really is a fake, where in the name of heaven is my real one? The genuine, \$150,000 diamond I had last night, in front of the fireplace? And where the hell did *this* one come from?"

**T**HE agitated Colonel was tempted to pocket his jewel and walk out of Clark's office; but the alarming uncertainty in which he now found himself would not permit it.

Instead, he urgently felt that he must get still more information, and at once. So, again holding out the diamond to Mr.

Clark, on his palm, he tried to carry off a jaunty indifference as he asked:

"Yes, sir, it really *would* fool almost anybody! Wouldn't it, now?"

"It certainly would, Colonel, as I said just now. But of course it doesn't deceive me, for a moment. I've had enough bum rocks offered me in the hotel business, by dead beats and con-men to know one when I see it. I'll admit, though that as a counterfeit diamond, this one of yours is one of the best I've ever laid an eye on. A real work of art!"

"Yes—yes, of—course," stammered the old millionaire, death in his shriveled soul. Oh, agony! For now his suspicions were fast becoming certainties, that some scurvy trick of Fate had been played on him; that he had become meshed in some clever and diabolical conspiracy. But still he had to hold a poker-face, and bluff through. He gulped, "This is certainly my lucky day. Please take the reward notice down. And—and thanks, ever so much, for what you've done, both of you. I'll see that each of you gets a box of cigars—same brand I smoke, myself."

"Oh, you needn't bother," Tyson refused.

"And I don't smoke," added the manager. "Glad to do anything for you at any time, Colonel."

"Well—good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

As Colonel Valentine departed, walking rather queerly and with the mysterious diamond in his pocket—

"Damned old crab!" growled Tyson. "I wouldn't smoke one o' his cigars, by gad, if it was the last one in the world. Crab, tightwad and grouch. The very least I hope will happen to him is leprosy!"

"Forget the Colonel," said Clark. "Sit down—I want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"That girl! Just how far is she mixed up with what looks to me like one of the slickest games ever pulled?"

"Ah, that's what *I* want to know, myself!"

And under the smoke-blued drench of light from the hooded incandescent, they fell to discussing matters heavy with portent for the now homeward-walking and indignant Joie.

## CHAPTER VI

## TANGLED SKEINS

**T**ORTURED by the most anguished uncertainty, still convinced that his diamond was genuine—and yet not quite sure of it, either—old Colonel Valentine made his unsteady way out to the long, colonnaded piazza.

There, as darkness fell across the serene loveliness of the tropic sea beyond the gardens, he paced and smoked and pondered. And sweat trickled on him, too; not from the heat, though, as much as from a large and growing fear he could not put away.

"What the hell am I goin' to do? How am I goin' to get at the bottom of all this? That's what I want to know!"

Should he drive downtown and apply to some local jeweler for an appraisal of his gem? No, he dared not. Did his diamond turn out to be a fraud, it might bring him into ridicule and discredit, after all his boastings about it.

But, really, *would* he be ridiculed? Hadn't he, like a poor simpleton, already advertised that the diamond was only an imitation? What an idiot he'd been, to do a thing like that! Now he wanted to kick himself for it. And yet—it had helped get the diamond back. Or had it? Lord, he felt entirely confused and at a loss. A total loss. What to do?

All at once he had an inspiration, a brilliant idea. He'd consult young Hargreaves.

"He's been a jewel-expert," exclaimed the Colonel, pausing in his walk. "He'll know, at a glance. The very man!"

Without delay he ordered Hargreaves paged, the bell-hop presently returning with news that Hargreaves was in the bowling-alley and would come as soon as he'd finished the string he was busy with. In fevers of impatience the Colonel waited, gnawing an extinct cigar and pulling at his waxed mustache.

While he was thus occupied, the Señor Martínez just happened to stroll by—Martínez the retired coffee-planter from Costa Verde. Martínez, who had read the reward notice and had seen it taken down, observed Colonel Valentine's agitation but said nothing to the old millionaire. He merely drifted out of the hotel and down the palm-lined

street to the big white building used as servants' quarters.

Here it so happened that Edwards, the impeccable valet, was sitting on the piazza enjoying a quiet pipe. Martínez nodded to the Londoner, loitered a couple of minutes by the piazza-rail, and had a few words with him. Then off down the street he casually betook himself, stood a few minutes looking at the lazy surf that creamed along the sea-wall at the street end, and so—after a little while—returned to the hotel, where he settled down to a cigar and a copy of "*Carteles*."

Just about the same time he saw Hargreaves put in an appearance. Hargreaves had by no means hurried, to meet the Colonel.

"Let the old fossil wait a bit," he had said to himself. "It'll do him good!"

But now at last it appeared he was ready to find out what Valentine wanted of him. Pipe in mouth, white-flanneled and quite at ease, he looked like a man entirely at peace with himself and all the world.

"Good evening, Colonel. You want to see me?"

"Yes! Can you give me ten minutes of your time?"

"Why not?" smiled Hargreaves.

"Let's go up to my rooms."

"Something important?"

"Maybe."

"All right, Colonel. I'm at your orders."

**SO** THEY went up to Valentine's suite. "Well, what's on your mind?" Hargreaves asked, blowing smoke.

"Give me an opinion."

"About what?"

"About my diamond. The lucky-stone, you saw last night."

"Oh, the one you lost, and just now found again?"

"That's right," the Colonel assented, trying to keep cool. He made rather a bad job of trying to keep cool. "That diamond—I mean—you see—"

"Well, what about it? You seem agitated. You *ought* to be delighted, getting it back again so soon!"

"The fact is," stammered Valentine, "I've been told it's not genuine."

"Well, what odds? You advertised for a phony, didn't you?"



"I know—but really it wasn't! That ad was just a little subterfuge of mine. I really *did* lose a perfectly good diamond, worth \$150,000. And now—well, damn it all, both Clark and Tyson say the one that's been brought back to me is a fake—a worthless imitation!"

"You don't say? Whew!" exclaimed Hargreaves. "But who on earth could have—?"

"God knows!" groaned the millionaire, his glass eye cocked up at rather a surprising angle. "But as you're a diamond-dealer—"

"An ex-dealer," Hargreaves smiled. "I've retired from that game, you know."

"Never mind. Anyhow, you know all about precious stones. And so—"

"You want me to pass my opinion and appraise your jewel? But, Colonel, I saw it last night. And it was genuine *then*, I assure you. And how could anybody have switched diamonds on you, since then? Have you noticed any difference, yourself?"

"No. The damned thing seems to be the same size, shape, cut and all. It's incredible that I've been gum-gamed, like this! Here, for heaven's sake have a look at this, now, and tell me what's what!"

With shaky fingers the Colonel took the diamond from his pocket and laid it on a reading-table, directly under the light of his living-room chandelier.

"There it is now, Mr. Hargreaves. And for the love of God, what *is* it—real, or a phony?"

**I**N STRONG brown fingers, Hargreaves took up the mysterious jewel. He very carefully fell to studying it, with narrowed eyes and contracted brows. In keenest anxiety the Colonel watched him.

"Hmph!" grunted the younger man, jaw tightening on pipe.

"You mean—?" quavered Valentine.

Hargreaves rubbed the jewel, and looked serious.

"What's the verdict?"

"I don't like the feel of this, Colonel."

"What do you mean, the feel?"

"Genuine diamonds are cold to the touch, and feel greasy—if I can express it so. This stone feels too clean."

"So it's a counterfeit?"

"Have you got any kind of a magnifying-glass here?"

Valentine opened the table-drawer and took out a reading-lens.

"Of course this isn't a jeweler's loupe," he said, "but it's all I've got."

Painstakingly Hargreaves scrutinized the diamond through the lens, turning it this way and that. The Colonel watched him, in growing dismay. Finally Hargreaves shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Colonel."

"Sorry?" gulped Valentine, his mouth fishlike, a sickly pallor spreading over his vein-mottled face. "So you mean I—I've been—?"

"Yes, this is only paste—or one of those new composites—worth at most a few dollars. Somebody's been putting something over on you."

"Putting—something—you mean, I've been robbed?" Heavily he leaned against the table, staring as if at an apparition of evil destiny. "But, my Lord—how—?"

"Ah, that would embarrass me to say, Colonel. All I can swear to is this, that last night you *had* a genuine, blue-white, 300-carat Jaeger. A first-water stone, without a pinpoint or chip, and worth all of the \$150,000 you mention as the price. Whereas tonight, here, you have—well, only a piece of slum!"

"Robbed!" choked the old man, turning positively greenish. "Gum-gamed, gypped! That girl, damn her—that little hell-cat—!"

"**G**IRL!" demanded Hargreaves, his eyes darkening. "What girl?"

"Why, that damned little public stenographer, of course! Miss What's-her-name—how the devil should I remember? I—I'll fix her!"

"What d'you mean, fix her?" Hargreaves fired at the Colonel, his face suddenly like a thundercloud. He laid the jewel down, and faced the venomous old millionaire. "Look here, Valentine, what's the idea? Are you accusing her of theft?"

"Certainly I am, and what the hell about it? I had the genuine diamond when I was dictating some letters to her, this morning. I lost it in her office. Put up a reward notice. Inside of no time from then, she brought it back. Brought back *this*, I mean!" With senile rage he gestured at the mocking sparkle of the imitation on the table.

"No wonder she refused the reward! Twenty-five dollars. What the devil is twenty-five dollars to a light-fingered crook that's got away with a Jaeger worth \$150,000? But—the thief—the little minx—I'll fix *her*—!"

He caught up the phone from the table.

"Hold everything, there," commanded Hargreaves, his voice like a whip-lash. "What are you going to do?"

"Call the police, of course!"

"Nothing of the kind! Your accusation is absurd. How could a girl like Miss Reynolds—?"

"How could she?" snarled the old man, his face clay-colored, mottled and venomous. "How could a little crook like that pull such a game on me? Ah, that's exactly what the police will grill out of her! She's not goin' to get away with this, or—switch diamonds on me, without—"

"You mean, Miss Reynolds had a phony diamond just like yours, all ready and waiting to—? Nonsense! She—"

"Of course she did, you idiot! As if it was true, what she said about havin' found my diamond in her handbag. Likely story! She picked my pocket, that's what she did, when I was bendin' over her desk to sign those damned letters. And then—but I tell you she can't get away with it. Neither can the gang I'll bet a million she's workin' with. I'll land *her*, and the gang too, or—"

"Look here, Colonel!" Hargreaves menaced. "If you call the police, it'll be the sorriest moment of your life!"

"Will, eh? Maybe you're sweet on the young lady?" the millionaire sneered. "Well, well, well!"

"That's enough, Colonel!" Hargreaves' fist was hard, his eye like blue steel. "My personal feelings are no concern of yours. All I say is this—if you've been such a blundering old fool as to let somebody switch diamonds on you, it's your own fault for being moron enough to carry such a jewel loose in your pocket!"

"Oh, so you're—?"

"And I'm here to tell you that you're not going to start anything against that girl. I'll get busy with this case, myself. And I've got a hunch that by tomorrow I can locate the genuine diamond for you."

"Hunch, eh?" The old man was quivering all over with rage. "Well, say that's

interestin'! Maybe you're in the gang, yourself?"

"Why, damn you! If you weren't a senile old mummy that it'd be murder to even hit—"

"I'm a mummy, am I? Well, by God—! Say, get out of my rooms!"

"Oh, you don't have to ask me to. The very air is rank poison, here! But listen—just for that, now, I *won't* help you find your infernal lucky-stone. And a damned unlucky one it'll be for you, before you're through with this!" He turned, strode to the door. "It'll be hell, for you!"

The Colonel went even a shade paler. Through all his rage, the old man's extraordinary superstition welled up. Now that his talisman was lost, and this piece of glass had been left in its stead, he felt utterly lost, helpless and undefended.

"Wait, hold on!" he gasped. "I retract—I apologize. Only—help me!"

"Not a chance, now!"

"If you don't, I—I'll—"

"No you won't, Colonel. You won't do one blessed thing but swallow your loss and like it. And see here, you venomous old crocodile, if you dare breathe so much as a single word against Miss Reynolds, it'll be the sorriest day of your whole disgraceful, devious, cheating, lousy life! Mind now, I'm telling you. *Good-night!*"

**H**E JERKED the door open, strode out—and nearly knocked down Edwards the valet, with a couple of freshly-pressed linen suits over his arm.

"Beg—beg pardon, sir!" stammered Edwards.

"And listen, you too!" Hargreaves exclaimed, seizing him by the collar and shaking him till every tooth rattled, "Listen, you eavesdropping skunk! One word out of you, about what I damned well know you've been spying in on, and you'll wish you'd been born at the bottom of the sea with a millstone round your neck!"

With a muscular fling that sent valet and clothes flying in different directions, he hurled the terrified Edwards into the room and banged the door shut.

"Damned swine, both of 'em!" he growled, as he strode off down the long, dim-lit hotel corridor. "One grunt out of 'em, though, and—Lord, what *won't* I do?"

**B**ACK in his own rooms, with the door locked and all the shades carefully drawn, Hargreaves sat down in his biggest easy-chair, filled and lighted his pipe again, and then from his pocket produced a small pasteboard box.

This box, when opened, revealed a bed of softest cotton, on which reposed Colonel Valentine's \$150,000 diamond—the real one.

Hargreaves studied this jewel under the light of his reading-lamp.

"To hang on to this, or not to hang on, that is the question," he mused, with fading anger. "Wasn't I the idiot, to tell him the truth? If I'd only said his phony diamond was genuine, everything would have stopped right there—for a while, anyhow. Of course I'd have lost the pleasure of seeing the old shark squirm in torment, but haven't I paid too high a price for that? I wonder!"

He brooded a moment, admiring the wonderful sheen and sparkle of the gem.

"Even as much as that old hellion owes me, maybe I *have* gone and put my foot in it, now," thought he. "If I'd only given him a wrong steer, I could have been thousands of miles from here before he might have ever got wise. Getting even with an enemy is sometimes pretty damned expensive. Yes, but—if I'd kept mum, and made my getaway, how about Joie? What a mix-up! The lady or the tiger—I mean, the diamond. Let me see, now, if there's any possible way out of this? Now let me think!"

## CHAPTER VII

### DIRECT ACTION

**A**S A result of his thinking, Hargreaves presently got up, unlocked a trunk and took out a brief-case. Opening this, he produced a file of letters and documents, from among which he chose a certain paper dated a few years back.

With this he sat down again, for a little careful study. The diamond, once more in its box of cotton, lay securely in his pocket. Hargreaves gave the paper a few minutes' undivided attention. His brows creased with concentrated thought. At last he grimly nodded.

"It's good," he judged. "It's quite enough to stop him with. Statute of limitation applies, of course. No legal action possible against the old gorilla. But he couldn't stand the gaff of having this made public. And if he starts anything against that girl, by God it *will* be made public! First thing in the morning, I guess I'll have a little heart-to-heart with the Colonel. And if he doesn't drop dead, first, I reckon he'll soon change his mind about going after Joie!"

With the major portion of his problem now apparently ironed out, Hargreaves put the invaluable document back with the others, and restored them all to the safe-keeping of his trunk. Then, smiling, he once more inspected the magnificent jewel. Even more wondrous than before—now that he felt the ground safer under his feet in the matter of protecting Joie—the diamond appeared to him.

"Ah, my beauty!" he murmured. "With a diamond like this in his pocket, and a girl like Joie to try and win, a man can go far. As Sancho Panza said, now 'Patience and shuffle the cards!'"

**I**N VALENTINE'S luxurious suite meantime, the Colonel had been furiously pacing the floor, shaking his brown-mottled fists and swearing that, by hell he'd soon see about all this, soon fix all this!

"Me, robbed by a cheap little fly-by-night stenographer? Huh! And not all the smart-alecks in the world, like that damned Hargreaves, can stop my getting justice. I guess *not!*"

Edwards, the letter-perfect valet, having recovered something of his ordinary aplomb and having picked up the scattered clothes, had impressively hung them away in a closet. Now he was in the bedroom, laying out his master's evening-dress. But whether Colonel Valentine would want any such, remained problematical. Still highly incensed, vengeful and shaken by superstitious dread, he was pacing up and down as he tried to formulate some plan of action.

"Local police? That's a joke. See a lawyer? Another joke—a worse one. Lawyers! As if I hadn't had enough o' *them!* By gad, I know a trick worth ten of that!"

A trick worth ten of that had indeed begun to develop in his muddled old brain. A trick that seemed bound to get results,

and that—better still—might be put over without incurring the vengeance of the redoubtable Hargreaves.

"More than one way to skin a cat," the old man grimaced. "Reckon I can fix *her* without showing my hand. Once I get the goods on her, with proof—proof, mind you.—I guess that young squirt won't go at me quite so hammer-and-tongs. I'll have him eatin' out o' my hand, yet. And as for the girl—!"

HE SWUNG back to his reading-table, where he began thumbing over the Miami telephone directory, classified section. To himself he mumbled:

"C, C, C, no—D—here we are—Decorators—no, I've been decorated enough, already. Denatured Alcohol—Dental Supplies—I'll show 'em some teeth!" Savagely he clacked his own. "Dentifrice—Department Stores—Desks—ah, here we are, now!"

He brought his one good eye more accurately to bear, and with his gold pencil copied out several names and addresses on a paper, which he shoved into his pocket. To make sure he had missed none of the names in the directory, he read them over again, one by one checking them with his pencil. Then he glanced at his watch.

"Edwards!" he called arrogantly. His valet, at least, was one man he could with impunity take out his spite on.

"Yes, sir?" And the pale-faced Londoner emerged from the bedroom.

"What's the quickest way to get to Miami?"

"Miami, sir?"

"You heard me, damn you! Are you crazy, or deaf, or just a plain everyday idiot, or all three? I said, Miami! Has the last ferry gone, from Pequeño Key?"

"Yes, sir. You can drive up to Miami tonight, sir."

"No train out of here tonight, either?"

"No, sir. No way to reach Miami, sir, till tomorrow. That is, unless you phone up for a plane to come and fetch you, sir."

"Hell, no! No flying for *me!* When do we have to leave here, to catch the first ferry in the morning?"

"Not later than 6:30, sir. It's a two-hour drive up the keys, to the ferry."

"All right. I'm glad you know *some-thing!* Tell Varela to have the car ready at

6:15, sharp. Now you can go. And keep your damned mouth shut, too! Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Edwards never so much as flicked an eyelash of resentment. He had long been used to verbal castigation. Was he not well-paid for enduring such? On his way out, however, he cast a much-seeing glance at the open phone book on the table.

He by no means missed the penciled check-marks on the directory page. These marks, he saw, stood under the classification: "Detective Agencies." Once more the old Colonel—venomous as a cobra—was pacing the floor and muttering to himself as Edwards took a silent departure.

The valet's lips were tight, his eye hard as he went to tell the chauffeur about having the car ready at the unheard of hour of 6:15—and to tell him more than that. Far more than that, Lord knows!

NOT more than twenty minutes later, Varela the chauffeur swung into action at a telephone pay-station downtown on Jubal Street. Even though in a booth at the dim end of a drugstore, he spoke cautiously when the Miami operator announced:

"Here's your party."

"Hello there, Knucks?" Varela asked, with a strong Spanish accent. "That you?"

"Yeah, it's me," came the answer. "You, Pete? What's the good word?"

"Listen, keed. You got that plane handy, where you can use her, quick? O. K.? Fine! An' how about Blackie an' Twister? Get hold of 'em, right away? That's jake. Now, listen!"

For about three minutes he spoke in a tense, low voice, using a debased jargon that would have been incomprehensible to the operator even had she been listening—which she wasn't. The far-off Knucks now and then cut in with a word, but for the most part hearkened in silence. At last—

"So that's the story," Varela summed up. "There's me an' the Alacrán at this end." (Alacrán, in passing, is Spanish for "scorpion.") "The Alacrán, he can drive up ahead o' time, an' be on hand there. You guys come on down, an' that don't mean maybe! This here can be played two ways. First, there's the skirt an' the rock. An' then there's a chance to snatch the old guy, too, *sabe?* He'll be good for several bushels o'

potatoes. Sure we can use the hideout on the island?"

"Sure!" said Knucks. "It belongs to Blackie, don't it?"

"O. K. Well, get set! See you in the mornin', about eight, on Cayo Tortuga bridge. Little fishin'-trip, eh? An' say, even the phony ice might pan out pretty good, too. But remember, I ain't supposed to be in on nothin' that the old guy can pin on me. I wanta hold my job!"

"Ah, ferget it! You won't need no job, after tomorrow. But you'll be alibi'd, O. K. We'll all be on hand fer the fishin'-trip, with bells on. S'long!"

Hanging up, Varela emerged from the phone-booth. A grim smile tautened his dark, Latin features.

"Maybe Knucks is right, at that," he pondered, as he lighted a cigarette. "Maybe I won't need no more job, at all—*mañana!*"

A SENSE of giddiness, of inexplicable repression, brought Joie Reynolds vaguely up from the depths of dreamless sleep.

Still hardly half-conscious, she knew she was lying in some strange place—a place that moved, shook and vibrated in the surrounding dark. Then a dim light won to her. She felt that she was wrapped in blankets. In front of her she perceived two vague figures—the heads and shoulders of two men.

A third man, merely the hint of a one, was sitting beside her. She could dimly see a puffy, sensual face, by the glow of a cigarette. Where could she be, and why—and what might all this mean?

As full consciousness returned, the girl felt strange sensations, as of some stupefying drug now being thrown off. The last thing she could remember, she had been drifting off to sleep in her airy little bedroom, on the second floor of the Ellison bungalow. Then all at once, this! What kind of a fantastic nightmare might this be?

Her wrists and ankles, she now perceived, were fast-bound. She heard the hum of a powerful motor; knew she was in a speeding car. The cry she struggled to utter, the effort to start up, were fruitless. Joie could neither move, nor make any sound but a choked mumble.

She knew she was bound, gagged, a captive in a closed auto steadily on-rushing through the darkness of an overcast and sinister night.

For a moment she struggled in the grip of a devastating panic. Terror swept all the cobwebs from her mind. Kidnapped! Yes, but why? And how?

Impossible to understand how anybody could have got into her room without waking her; how they could have carried her away; how it all could have happened. Perhaps if she had thought of Walter Ellison, she might have had some clew as to the inside cooperation that had made it possible. But Joie did not think of him. And after all, in face of an accomplished fact, what mattered the details?

Steadily the car whirled on out along the interminable, narrow and winding road across the islands and bridges of the far-scattered Florida keys.

HELPLESS and in mortal terror, Joie lay there in the tonneau, with fast-pounding heart. A certain measure of comprehension as to the why of this kidnapping had begun to develop. It must bear some relation to her having found that accursed diamond. This road—which might well be the road of death, for her—she knew she was traveling because of the fatal chance that had caused old Colonel Valentine to swish out his diamond from his pocket, with a flourish of his big silk handkerchief, and that had just happened to drop the diamond into her open handbag on the desk.

Then, swift as a homing bird her thoughts flew to young Hargreaves, the only real friend she had in the whole state of Florida. God, if she could call to Hargreaves, now! She made another frantic effort to free herself. A heavy hand pushed her down; a rough voice ordered:

"Easy, kid! If you know what's healthy fer you, you'll take it easy, now!"

She sank back, in a whirling mist of panic. And now she more clearly sensed the swift, rocking flight of the car; the miasmatic odor of swampy pools; the occasional sharp flirt of flunk waters as the tires sputtered away little deluges, from a shower that had recently fallen.

Then the car slowed. It swung sharp



right, after having boomed over a long bridge. And now, apparently off the main highway, it bounced and tossed as if negotiating hardly more than a trail through swamps.

This bouncing brought her to full consciousness. Her head was aching dismally, her mouth tasted like dust and ashes. Yes, certainly she knew she had been doped some way or other. Very cruelly the gag hurt her, but she was helpless to ease the pain.

Thus, suffering and in torments of fear, she presently felt the car swing again—this time to the left—and brake to a halt.

The dim figure beside her got out into darkness. So did the two men on the front seat. She heard low-pitched voices in conference; recognized that part of the talk was in Spanish, but could catch no word. Some sort of disagreement seemed arising. The voices grew louder, more emphatic. Now Joie could cull a few phrases:

"Oh, she'll come through with the right dope, O. K., or—!" "*Buen negocio, eh?*" "Yeah, but how many of us can make our getaway in the plane?" "Refuse to talk? Not a chance!"

THE car door opened, and into Joie's eyes darted the beam of an electric flashlight. A foreign voice sounded, suavely and with subtle mockeries of courtesy:

"Come, señorita, do us the honor to wake up. For now you are almost—home!"

She tried to voice some protest or appeal, but only once more made a mumbling noise. Another voice exclaimed:

"Ah, chop all the soft soap an' bring her along!"

She felt herself dragged out of the car, in her swathing blankets, then carried by a man whose muscles were steel and whose breath reeked garlic. His footsteps grated on coral rock, then slithered in mud. A rank odor of rotting vegetation filled the night. Dimly coconut-palm fronds stretched their tense fingers against a sky here overcast, there starlit.

The little party stopped. Water splashed. Joie knew she was being lowered into the bottom of a boat. A blanket was tossed over her head. These snatch-men certainly had no idea of letting her get the slightest hint

as to where she was going or how far it might be.

The boat pushed off. Water swirled, driven by powerful oars. Out, into night and mystery—whither away!

## CHAPTER VIII

### TERROR AND DEATH

"NOW, señorita," some half hour later one of her three captors addressed her, in excellent though strongly-accented English, "now that you are free and dressed again, perhaps we can come to the affairs, no?"

He stood there before her, in a small and dismal room of what looked like a very primitive fishing-camp. By the light of a hurricane-lantern hung from the roof, Joie saw him as a dark, saturnine figure; a man not over thirty-five, slim and cool and hard-eyed, in aviator's togs. The fellow had a sort of low-bred and mocking handsomeness. His hair was sleek, mustache a narrow line. And the cigarette he smoked was in an ivory holder.

Joie peered at her captor with anything but heroic defiance. The fact is, she was frightened half to death, and showed it. Beside looking terrified, she was greatly amiss as regards her personal appearance; her lips bruised by the gag just recently removed, her wrists red and chafed from the cords that had only now been cut away. Even her clothes—that the mob had brought along in a hastily-gathered heap, and that they had told her to put on in the back room of the camp—were all wrinkled and mussed. Joie looked far from her usual attractive, cool and efficient young self. Pale and shaken, she answered:

"Affairs? Business, you mean? But I don't understand!"

"Nah, she don't understand nothin'!" cut in another man—a fat, red-haired and unshaven man, who was lolling in a broken chair. "Course not. *She* wouldn't!"

"Quiet, Knucks!" ordered the aviator, while the third one of Joie's captors—heavily-built and with hair and eyes that sufficiently explained his moniker of "Blackie"—leaned against the rickety wall and picked his teeth with a brass pin. "You keep out of thees. I am runnin' thees show.

Now señorita, it ees useless, you pretendin' you not know w'at we talkin' about. Weel you answer my question—please?"

From where she sat on a rough bench beside the plank table of the shack, she only shook her head in negation.

"How can I answer, till I know what you want? Business? What possible business can I have with you?"

"Ah, well," the Latin smiled, "let us 'ave a smoke, and get along with thees matter." He offered her a cigarette, which she most gladly took. Lord, how she needed one! As the aviator held a match for her to light with, she noticed that his hand was terribly scarred and cicatrised—doubtless in some of his many evil venturings. "That ees better now, so?"

She blew smoke toward the hurricane-lantern, and nodded.

"Very well, we can proceed," said the aviator. "If you prefer that we tell you very plain, it ees one large diamond w'at you have. We weesh to have that diamond. The queeker we get that diamond, the sooner you go back to your friends. Ees it not fair exchange and no robbery, like you say? Well, w'at ees your answer?"

"But I tell you I haven't got any diamond!" she retorted, flushing with sudden anger, through all her fear. "Won't you believe me?"

"Unfortunately, no. You had thees diamond?"

"Yes, but—"

"Pardon to me, and listen, please!" He raised his mutilated hand. "You had thees diamond. A very large one, and so costly! You obtain it from the Señor Valentine. How? That does not interest us. Beautiful young señoritas have many ways to obtain large diamonds from old, foolish señores, and—"

"Just what do you mean by that?" Joie flared.

"Never mind. Where ees the diamond now?"

"How do I know? Colonel Valentine's got it, I suppose. And you—you—" She stood up suddenly, confronting her captor. "You'll all go to prison for this, or—"

"Again, pardon to me, but do not wander from the business. We insist on having thees diamond!"

"I tell you, the Colonel's got it!"

"Ah, no, not the Colonel! You are very clever in hiding things, señorita, but we are even more clever in finding them."

"And it wasn't a real diamond, after all! It was only a—"

"Of course," he dangerously smiled, though still with outward courtesy. "We are knowin' all about *that*. The diamond you took back was only a false one. Ah, such a clever señorita! Your game, it ees worthy of even me," the aviator approved, while Knucks scratched a red head and Blackie growled on oath. "We are clever, too, and we understand your leetle game. We know you switch the diamonds. And now, you knowin' where the real one ees. It ees this real one we will buy from you."

"Buy from me?"

"*Si*, señorita. In exchange for your liberty."

"But—oh, damn it—there!" And she stamped her foot, now too angry to be afraid. "I tell you I haven't got it!"

"But you knowin' where it ees."

"No! Except that Colonel Valentine's got it!"

"The hell you say!" exclaimed Knucks, growing red-eyed with hate and bafflement. "Now, you see here—"

"Shut up!" the aviator flung at him. "I regret to disbelieve so beautiful a señorita, but business ees business. So—I am sorry—but no diamond, no liberty. It ees up to you."

Grimly the Latin nodded, his eye brooding evil things. His moniker was "Twister," a tribute to his talent for twisting information out of unwilling persons. Joie's fists clenched as she faced him.

"This is outrageous!" she cried. "How long do you think you can keep me here?"

"As long as necessary to find out about thees diamond."

"And if I never tell?"

"Ah, then—I regret it so much—then it will be w'at you say, just too bad for you. And there you are, *no es verdad?*"

**D**AWN found Joie lying in a bunk fitted with marsh-grass and blankets, in the back room of as rough a fishing-shack as can be found on any of the low-lying mangrove keys that lie thickly scattered along the Florida reef.

These marshy islets, far from all control

of law and order, are a paradise for rum-runners, poachers, dope and alien-smugglers, lawbreakers of every sort. The devil never created, for his own private business, any more ideal hideouts than these.

Through the close-shuttered windows of the cabin, in front of which Blackie was now sitting on a fallen palm-log with a rifle across his knees, light was beginning to seep from one of those gorgeously-flaring sunrises to be seen only on that tropical coast.

Breakfast had already been offered the girl, and not at all a bad breakfast, either—bacon and eggs, Cuban bread and coffee—but she had refused it. After her anger, fear had come again; fear now too keenly gnawing to let her take anything but a few cigarettes.

With devastating clarity she saw the kind of deadly trap into which she had fallen. Only too completely had her forebodings of evil been realized. This infernal diamond, even by its merest contact, had snared her into peril too ominous even for contemplation.

"These crooks mean business, all right," she realized, lying there and trying to steady her nerves with tobacco. "God knows, if I only *could* give them the diamond, and get out of this, I'd do it. What's even \$150,000, in a case like this?"

But, alas, Joie had nothing to barter for her liberty. And nothing remained for her except just to wait—for what? How could any rescuer ever find her here, in this intricate wilderness? She might better have been held by Manchurian bandits. Utterly and fatally she had just dropped clean out of the world.

And now, yes, all she could do was lie here in this filthy shack on this pestilential swamp-island, waiting for—for death?

**A**T THIS same hour the enraged Colonel Valentine was already speeding up the road over the keys toward the car-ferry that connected with the Miami turnpike. There he was sitting in his huge gray car, with the sinister Pedro Varela at the wheel.

And as the Colonel sat beside this man of evil possibilities, he chewed a fat cigar and darkly brooded on the many highly unpleasant things he intended to do to Joie Reynolds—yes, and to young Hargreaves.

too—once he had some good, live detectives on the job.

"Damn 'em, they'll learn to go monkey-in' with *me!*"

Swiftly the car rushed up the keys road, deserted at so early an hour. It whisked over islands where palms nodded in the glorious morning trade-wind, where tall sisal-plants held their branched shafts on high, and where bay-cedars mingled with sea-grape trees along the gleaming beaches.

Already pelicans were wheeling and diving for fish in shallows of iridescent hue. Already, far aloft, buzzards were volplaning and banking—harbingers of death. Here or there the calm waters off-shore were troubled by dorsal fins of hungry sharks. Already, death itself, so unexpected an undreamed-of by this arrogantly hateful old tyrant, was like a venomous serpent coiling its loops to strike.

"Huh! *I'll* show 'em a thing or two!" the Colonel grunted. "What I won't do to *them!*"

For an hour the car drummed on, here or there whirring across frail bridges, short or long, connecting the keys; bridges straight as taut cords. From these bridges, wide expanses of sea were visible, dotted with mangrove islands; sea showing no traces of human life save the drifting smoke of some oil-tanker on the horizon, with here or there the sail of a sponging-schooner or a fishing-boat afar.

"Makin' the best time you can, Pedro?" growled the Colonel. "If you miss that ferry, you'll surely wish you hadn't!"

"Don't you worry none, Colonel," sardonically the chauffeur answered. "I'll get you where you goin', sir, all right."

"Well, you'd better, or—! Hello, what the devil, *now?*"

**W**ELL might the Colonel have demanded what the devil, now. For a man in such a hurry as he was, could hardly have been expected to enjoy the sight of a car parked right across the roadway of a bridge out on to which the Colonel's machine had just hummed; Cayo Tortugas bridge, to be specific.

This car, now absolutely blocking the way, might have been only turning around. But who ever heard of trying to turn round on a narrow bridge like that?

"Crazy idiots!" cursed Valentine, as Pedro jammed on the brakes and came to a stand not twenty feet from the other machine—a dark-blue coupé. "Here, you!" the old man shouted, leaning out and waving a brown-mottled fist. His one good eye glared at the impeding vehicle; the glass one was cocked up rather amazingly at the morning sky. "What *in* hell do you mean by blockin' the bridge? I'll report you! I—I'll—damn you, get out o' my way, there!"

Out of the dark-blue coupé issued three men, men we have seen before. One of these men was the Señor Martínez, the señor who had been known at Coquina Towers as a retired coffee-planter from Costa Verde. Martínez had driven out to this rendezvous, some time before; had parked in a side-road some distance back, and had awaited the arrival of the other two in the blue coupé, from further up the line.

These other two had only a few minutes before come down from the mangrove island hideout, and had carefully stationed themselves in their strategic position. There, Martínez had joined them, for a final conference and check-up of the situation—which, so far as they could judge, was perfect.

The aviator was one of the two from the hideout. Blackie was the other.

Now the precious trio walked to the Colonel's machine. With a mocking smile, Martínez greeted Valentine:

"Good morning, Colonel. You are out early, no?"

The Colonel stared and sputtered, "Martínez! You, here? Well, by God! But, say—look here, sir, you can't block the bridge, like this! I'm in a hell of a hurry, man. Get that machine out o' there, will you? And—"

"W'at ees your hurry, Colonel?" smiled Martínez. "As we say in Spanish, tomorrow ees another day."

"Say, look here! Damn your Spanish! I've got to catch that ferry, so—"

"Ah, no," the coffee-planter shook his head. "It ees too early to be thinkin' of ferries. Are you not hungry? If so, you are just in time for breakfast. And my friends here, they join me in the invitation to honor us weeth your presence at our table."

"Say, are you crazy, or what?" demanded

Valentine, while his chauffeur sat impassive as a mud joss, playing his assigned rôle. "If this is a joke, it's a damn bad one. These men with you—who the devil are they, and what's this all about?" Perhaps some glimmer of peril had begun to penetrate the old man's egocentric mind, but anger swamped all caution or diplomacy. "I tell you, I want to pass, and—"

"Sorry to detain you," the aviator now cut in. "But we are needin' you, now, for one leetle business conference. So we are invitin' you—"

"Who the blazes are *you*, anyhow?" roared Valentine, with a burst of passion. "Get out o' my way, or by—"

"Do not get yourself excite, Colonel," purred Martínez, the coffee-magnate. "It ees bad for a man of your age, with the high blood-pressure, and we do not weesh to be oblige to reduce that pressure." Martínez laid a hand on the old fire-eater's arm, as it projected over the edge of the car door. "All we weesh is to talk a leetle business with you. So if you weel honor us by comin' to breakfast—"

**WHOM** the gods would destroy, they first make mad.

They must have driven Colonel Valentine suddenly and completely mad, in very truth. Swift conviction that Martínez was after all only a gangster, with these others, and that a trap was opening, closing, must have exploded a bomb of temporary insanity in the old man's brain.

For now, instead of yielding, as they had all anticipated, he snatched from the pocket of the car-door an exceedingly ugly-snouted gun.

Point blank he fired.

Only the swift up-stroke of the aviator's arm deflected death from Martínez. Never in a life of exceeding deviousness on three continents had the coffee-planter grazed annihilation by a narrower margin. Even as it was, powder-burns blistered his olivertinted cheek. Blood spurted from a mangled ear.

Before Valentine could pull trigger again, Martínez struck.

No time for him or for either of his fellow-gangsters to draw a gun. Action had to be instant. With all his force, Martínez drove a crushing blow.

It went home, squarely on the Colonel's right temple. Behind it lay the full strength of a man in deadly peril.

A dull sound crunched, as of crushing bone. The gun dropped from Valentine's mottled hand. His arm pendulumed limp over the edge of the door. With only a single groan he slumped forward, sprawling like a grotesque old mannikin.

Pole-axed, struck as by a lightning-bolt, there the Colonel collapsed—stone-dead.

## CHAPTER IX

### TENSE MOMENTS

**T**HE silence of a vast dismay gripped the chauffeur and his trio of precious friends. Aghast they stared at this unexpected and disastrous tragedy; not that a man's death struck them as in any way tragic, if it served their ends. No, just now it was fear that leaped out. Fear and confusion—a complete overturn of their plans; a bitter jest of Fate.

Twister—the aviator—was quickest-witted of the four. He reacted first.

"You idiot, Alacrán!" he flung at Martínez. The coffee-planter, his neck now crimsoned from his perforated ear, stood open-mouthed and dumb. He did not even heed his wound. A scorpion indeed, his sting had been fatal. "See now, you have ruined—"

"Shut up, an' overboard in the water with the old boy!" snarled Blackie. "If we're caught here now, with *him* on our hands—!" He shoved Valentine's body back into the car, where it lolled grotesquely against the cursing chauffeur.

"Wait!" cried this worthy. "Maybe he ain't dead, yet?"

"Well, he will be," Blackie spat, "when the sharks get him!"

"The car and all—" gasped Martínez. "Everythin' must be thrown in the water!"

"Wait one minute," the aviator cried. "He surely have moch cash in hees pockets—an' look at these rings. First we weel frisk him—"

"You're a hell of a guy, Alacrán," Blackie cursed, "to bump off a prospect that'd come through with thick ransom money!" He scooped up and pocketed the Colonel's gun, from where it lay on the



bridge-planking. "Say, you Spig!"

"Hurry!" the Alacrán panted. "We must act fast, before any other car come along. Our only chance, it ees to make thees all look like an accident!"

"*Por Dios!*" swore the chauffeur, scrambling away from the limp weight of the body, and out of the car. Colonel Valentine now collapsed down into the seat. "I hate to see this bus go. She's worth twelve thousand. Why not just heave the old guy in the water, an' keep the bus?"

"No!" commanded the Alacrán. "W'at ees twelve thousand, w'en we may all get the electric chair? Come on, *chicos*—we must break the bridge railin', and push the car over!"

"*Bueno!*" the aviator assented. "But first, I weel be damn if I let go the Colonel's money and his rings!"

Swiftly he robbed the body. Watch, chain, two costly rings and a thick pocket-book constituted the harvest. Wolf-faced, the gangsters stuffed these things into their pockets. Deadly evidence, if discovered—but take a chance outweighed caution.

Twister even started dredging small change from the dead man's pockets, but Martínez bitterly cursed him, and the chauffeur cried:

"Lay off, that. No time now for chicken-feed!"

"Look!" exclaimed Twister, staring at a sparkle of light he had just extracted from the Colonel's waistcoat pocket. "The ice!"

Martínez the Alacrán snatched it from him.

"*Demonios!*" he mouthed. "It ees only a piece of slum!"

He made as if to fling it into the water, but Blackie clutched his arm.

"Yuh damn fool! Might be the real one. Here, gimme!"

The Alacrán sent him staggering back, with a blow to the jaw.

"Hands off!" he snarled. "Now, we break the bridge rail, dump the car and the old man. *Vamos!*"

**P**OCKETING the diamond—whether real or false none of them now could be certain—he turned to the rail. The others followed. All four of them exerted desperate efforts to smash this barrier, but it defied them.

Far stronger than it looked, it resisted their combined attack. But something must be done, and at once. For every moment now was vital. When might not some car heave in sight; when might not disaster overwhelm them?

They very quickly realized it was worse than useless to waste time and effort trying to demolish the railing. And even were they to succeed in crashing it by hand, the sinister quartet of gangsters were running a grave risk, for the rail might suddenly give way; it might precipitate them into the swift tide, all of thirty feet deep, swirling out to sea.

"Wait a minute, *chicos!*" suddenly exclaimed the chauffeur. "I got a better idea."

"Ah, you an' your ideas!" giped Blackie. "You're a smart gazebo, ain't you? Not even knowin' the old man had a gun in the car with him!"

"Shut up, an' listen! Let the car itself bust this damn rail down—that make it more natural!"

"W'at you say?" Alacrán demanded, smearing blood from his jaw. "How you mean, let the car do it?"

"I'll show you!" Varela began. "What we gotta do is like this—"

"Hold on!" cried Blackie. "Car comin'!"

They fell silent, listening with panicky intentness. Only too true, a car *was* coming. From far off to the southwest drifted a faint waft of sound—the hooting of an auto siren. Somebody, bound for the ferry, was signalling before he entered one of the bridges.

With a blistering curse in Spanish, and paler now even than his wound had made him, Alacrán shook Varela by the shoulder.

"Come on, *cabrón!*" he ordered. "Eef you have some way to break this damn rail, out with eet!"

"Sure I got an idea! But first, overboard wit' the old man—*pronto!*"

**T**OGETHER, cursing and sweating with effort and a most deadly terror, they hauled the millionaire's body out of the machine. Very good care they took not to let it touch the planking of the bridge, or drag anywhere.

"Keep the old guy up, boys!" commanded Blackie. "Mustn't leave no marks now, or some dick'll maybe give us the

works. *Now* we got him—come along!"

They poised old Colonel Valentine a second on the rail. The Colonel, horribly limp, ghastly-faced and with his glass eye still open—an eye that most dreadfully stared with blind vision at the lovely tropic day—still even in death seemed clinging to the life he had lived so brutally and cruelly; the life in which he had wrought so many evil deeds; the life he had so greatly loved. Scant ceremony the gangsters wasted on him.

"Now, over with the old what's-this!" grunted Blackie. "*Over!*"

They gave him a powerful heave. With a tremendous splash he struck the tide; sank, surged up again, was swept away.

Bubbles broke and trailed. As the murderers stared a moment, old Valentine seemed waving a derisive arm of farewell. Or was the Colonel, with prescience of events even now impending, only beckoning them as if to say:

"So long, boys! I'll see you soon again, in hell!"

Suddenly a swirl took the body. It was sucked down again, and vanished—gone to the abode of shark and scavenger crab. The millionaire, only a few moments ago puffed up with life and wrath and pride, with greed and hate and plans of vengeance on Joie Reynolds, now had utterly and forever vanished from the world of living men.

**T**HE evil quartet wasted no precious second in musings or good-bye. Hard-boiled, yet for all that now none the less terrified, they ran back toward the car. And once more Varela repeated:

"We make the car herself bust down the rail, see?"

"How?" demanded Blackie.

"I'll show you. But first, you others get in the coupé an' move her ahead. I got to have a clear run, 'ere!"

"Eef you're puttin' over any monkey-business," growled the bleeding Alacrán, "you'll weesh you been born one clam!"

"Ah, forget it!" Varela snarled. "This is straight goods. Go on, clear the bridge!"

"Yeah, but how about *your* car, Alacrán?" demanded Blackie. "If she's found—that'll hook you, an' mebbe us?"

"No, it weel only hook one very respectable man at the hotel, named Maxwell!"

Despite the tension of the moment, Alacrán managed a laugh. "It ees his car I have borrow, for thees little trip. *Vamos!*"

While they were scrambling into the dark-blue coupé, and—with Twister at the wheel—running it forward a hundred yards or so, Varela leaped into the seat of the Colonel's machine. He backed several hundred feet, then started ahead. As the speedometer marked "30," he got out on the running-board, still holding the wheel.

Clinging there, suddenly he gave the wheel a quick twist—and jumped.

He hit the roadway just as the ponderous gray car struck the rail. Stumbling, he fell catapulted in a heap, and rolled. The shock might easily have crippled, even killed, a man older than the chauffeur, a man less tough.

With a tremendous splintering, the Colonel's machine crashed through the railing. It reeled, leaped clear of the bridge, disappeared. From below, brine jetted higher than the bridge itself.

Varela, all dust and splinters but only a trifle lamed, gathered himself up and ran toward the waiting coupé. Down below the bridge, the swirling tide was silvered with a nebula of rising, bursting bubbles.

"Atta baby!" exulted Blackie, as the chauffeur reached them. "Some head you got on you, boy. Jump in, an' let's get goin'!"

"Wait—my cap!" It lay back there on the bridge, where it had fallen off when Varela had jumped. "I gotta get my cap!"

"No, leave eet!" commanded Twister. "That cap weel be identified as yours, and weel make the bulls think you 'ave die also weeth your boss, no?"

"Hot stuff!" Blackie exulted. You're dead, Varela, only you don't know it, see? Must ha' blown a tire, or somethin', while you was burnin' the road over the bridge—an' zowie, through the rail. Cinch! Come on, fellers, let's go!"

Twister gave the blue coupé gas, as Varela scrambled into the rear seat with Blackie. The car surged ahead. From much nearer now, once more raucously sounded the motor-siren they had already heard only a few moments before.

"That damn bus is comin' like a bat out o' hell!" cried Blackie. "Step on it, Twister."

THE blue coupé swiftly gathered speed—thirty, forty, fifty, over the long bridge where the speed-limit was twenty-five. Sixty, seventy—seventy-five! Lord, if a tire really should blow—!

Eighty, and then a trifle more. The coupé was just a blue streak.

It shot from the end of the bridge out on to the hard marl road, like a runaway meteor. A curve, banked by mangroves, loomed ahead. Off power, on brakes—easy, easy! The road still showed muddy spots, from last night's shower. A skid now might land them all-ends-up in a fetid ditch full of bog-water. Easy, all!

For a second the car seemed about to slew. She canted over almost on two wheels. Oaths and snarls burst from the fugitives as she ripped the very edge of the road with hardly an inch to spare.

But Twister held her. His whipcord muscles dominated the machine. She righted, straightened on the tangent; whirled along.

Just as she levelled for the last two miles before reaching the side-road that led down to the hideout, another car hove in sight of the bridge, though not as yet in view of the fleeing coupé.

This other car, once more blowing its siren, was clipping off a desperate pace toward the ferry. As it neared the bridge, the gangsters were already slowing to turn into their hideout road. Once there, they felt all danger would be shaken off. For who could trail them to their island, only one of many low-grown and mangrove-tangled keys? Who could ever find their hut, so safely hidden among the swamps of that pestilential lagoon where Knucks still guarded their prisoner?

"Things is sure lookin' up, fer us," grinned Blackie, with a show of crooked and yellowish teeth. "The old Colonel, that might ha' throwed a monkey-wrench in our works by ringin' the private dicks into this here racket—well, *he's* gone where he won't throw nothin', nowhere!"

"Yes, an' ain't we got his watch an' chain, his rings an' his leather wit' God know much in it?" added Varela.

"An' a rock that might not be phony!" put in Twister.

"You are forgettin' the best of all," the Alacrán laughed, now with his handker-

chief mopping most of the blood from his jaw and neck. Already the blue coupé had turned into the side-road, and was making the fastest time it could along that rough and tortuous way. "The very best, you are all forgettin'."

"You mean—?" asked Blackie.

"I mean, of course, the señorita! Eef this diamond we now 'ave ees no good, she know where the real one ees—the \$150,000 diamond. An' weel she tell us? Ah, *madre santísima*, leave that to me, boys."

## CHAPTER X

### HARGREAVES GETS GOING

BACK at Tortugas bridge, the onrushing machine stopped with a sudden screech of brakes as its driver sighted the broken rail. This driver, leaping out, stood revealed as Robert Lee Hargreaves.

Very early that morning he had phoned up from the hotel, to get in touch with Joie at Mrs. Ellison's. He had wanted to see Joie at the very soonest possible moment, to warn her of impending danger, to assure her he would avert it. But Mrs. Ellison, highly agitated, had given him an earful of news that for a minute had stunned him. Joie had vanished, disappeared—bedding, clothes and all.

Swiftly rallying, Hargreaves had dived for the hotel garage, noted that Colonel Valentine's car was gone.

"So then, the old devil's out looking for trouble, already?" Hargreaves had bitterly realized. "God! I ought to have sprung my little document on him, last night. Time enough though, even now. When I catch him—!"

Stopping only to hurry up to his room for his automatic and a box of cartridges—just in case!—he had jumped into his car and stepped on the gas.

A babble of laments from the distracted Mrs. Ellison, out at the bungalow, had only briefly delayed him.

"Oh, Mr. Hargreaves, whatever will I do, now? Me, a poor widow, an' if I get mixed up with the police—and my son Walter, he's gone, too, an'—"

Hargreaves brushed the poor widow aside; had a look at the grass under Joie's second-story window; noted a peculiar pat-

tern of tire-tracks in the mud of the driveway beside the bungalow; saw that these tracks turned into Wisteria Road in the direction of the Miami highway—and then was off like an arrow from a taut bow-string, in pursuit.

A very great and thriving fear possessed him. Only too clearly he realized that far greater peril was threatening Joie than even the venomous old Colonel could bring about. For a second there flashed to him the idea of calling in the police, but only for a second. To ask their help meant publicity, loss of time, many complications. And now every instant was priceless. Now there must be no complications. Hargreaves' job was simple and direct.

"Police? Hell!"

**N**EVER had the Miami road been burned, along the keys and over the bridges, as Hargreaves had burned it. He had driven at such a desperate clip that the gangsters' machine had barely swung round a sheltering curve, when Hargreaves had hauled to a sudden stand by the smashed rail, with a cry of—

"What the devil, now?"

A very poignant fear assailed him as he peered down into that green and swirling tide-rip. Vaguely outlined against the coral bottom spotted with masses of sponge, he could just make out a confused dark mass.

"That's a car, down there!" he realized. "But what car?"

The question gripped him with fateful boding. What if the car that had been used in kidnapping Joie had plunged there? Hargreaves gulped something unintelligible, and smeared a forehead beaded with sweat. His eye caught an object on the roadway. He snatched it up. A cap—a chauffeur's cap!

The morning sun revealed a name inside it: "P. Varela."

"Why—Varela—that's the Colonel's chauffeur!"

So then, it was the Colonel who had taken this deadly plunge? And with him, the chauffeur?

Through all the tension of it, Hargreaves sensed a vast relief. The old Colonel, anyhow, had been wiped out. One less peril for Joie. He felt a stab of elation. As he stood there in his white flannels, with the

chauffeur's cap in hand, he perceived fresh blood-drops on the roadway. Kneeling, he examined these telltale marks left by the Alacrán's wounded ear.

"By Jove, there's been a scrap here. This was a holdup, and that car must have been shoved off the bridge, to cover it!"

His mind was sharpened to rare acuity; he sensed that the mob which had committed this crime was in all probability the same that had kidnapped Joie. To swing into his campaign of action was but a matter of seconds.

Tossing his own cap into his car, he jammed the chauffeur's hard down on his head. From his machine he yanked out an old gray sweater, that he hastily pulled on. A moment later he was roaring in pursuit.

At the bridge exit, though, he braked again; he jumped out and like a questing hound examined the marl roadway. Yes, there he saw those same tire-tracks he had already noticed in the bungalow driveway. An odd, unmistakable pattern.

"Fresh marks, too. I'm stepping right on their tail. They're my meat, by Judas!"

**O**NCE more he sped away. He saw no possible means for the gangsters' car to leave the high road. On both sides, swampy ditches bubbled in the tropic heat. But all at once he spied a lateral road. He stopped, knit his brows under the vizor of the chauffeur's cap.

"Here's where they turned, all right!"

Hard after them he pelted. What a road! Despite his burning haste, he had to moderate his speed. Couldn't afford now to cripple his machine. Ruts, holes and mud, stumps, logs laid corduroy-fashion made the road a motorist's nightmare. On either hand stretched marshy hummocks, with palmettos, coconut-palms, sea-grape trees. Plenty of rattlers and moccasins out in the everglade morass.

"Some place!" he growled, "And they've got Joie out in this hellhole, eh?" Murder-just gleamed in his eyes.

For about three miles he trailed the mob, now or then picking up their tire-tracks in the mud. But of their car itself he saw nothing.

"They've got to come to an end of this, sometime, though," he knew. "The whole Atlantic is out there, ahead."

Suddenly he glimpsed blue water through deep-tangled thickets. The road ended abruptly at a path that led down through mangroves a-sprawl on spider-legged roots in black and slimy mud.

Hauling to a stop, Hargreaves for a moment intently looked and listened. But he could perceive no indication of life, other than a couple of pelicans fishing in a broad lagoon.

Where the devil could that other car have gone? Hargreaves got out. Gun in hand, he scouted, looking closely at the mud. The tracks—ah, yes, here they were, leading into a sort of little clearing at the left. Hargreaves followed along, squinting in the half-light there among the bushes. And all at once he saw a dark-blue coupé.

Cautiously he advanced toward it, gun ready. At what moment might not some one open fire on him? He noted footprints as of several men leading away from the car.

"Fresh trail, all right," thought he, his heart surging at realization that Joie was not far off.

He looked into the car, saw that the switch-key was still in place, and removed it, throwing it away into the swamp. Then he raised the hood, ripped off the wires from the six plugs.

"This 'll give 'em plenty to do, if it comes to my making a quick getaway!"

He turned back to his own car, swung it round and headed it for the main road.

"This 'll help, too!"

Now, ready for his attack on forces he could hardly even guess at, he stood for a moment pondering his next move.

**T**HIS led him down along the narrow path through the mangroves to the shore of the lagoon. A crude little wharf of palm-logs, and marks of a keel in the mud, told him where a boat had been shoved off. Footprints here were plentiful and varied. Hargreaves realized he was going to have his hands full.

Yes, if he could only locate the mob! But how?

Wherever the mob had gone, they seemed thoroughly well protected. No boat was in view. Nothing offered any means of transportation out across the lagoon, where a stiff current was running to southward.

Here, there, low and raggedly-overgrown islands dotted the blue and jade waters a-sparkle under the morning sun. Hargreaves felt absolutely certain the lurking-place of this gang lay on one of those islands. He would have gambled his life—as indeed he was already gambling it—that Joie was being held captive somewhere out there in that maze of swampy keys.

Yes, but which key? And where?

Suddenly his eye caught something tawny-yellow that projected from behind a clump of coconut-palms at the edge of an islet perhaps a thousand feet off-shore. This object was the aileron of an amphibian 'plane lying at anchor there.

Hargreaves laughed. "That's good enough for *me!*"

He felt certain at least four men, perhaps even more, were encamped out there. And he had heard all about sting-rays and sharks. The only weapon he had was just his one automatic, against how many? Never mind. His answer was a laugh.

A sudden thought struck him. From his pocket he took a pasteboard box, and frowned at it. What an idiot he had been to have rushed off in such a hurry that he'd forgotten to leave the genuine diamond locked safely in a trunk, in his rooms at the hotel!

Should he conceal the diamond in his car, before starting for the island?

"Damn it, no!" The risk was far too great. "No—this bit of crystallized trouble has been to blame for everything. Now it's going through with me, to the finish!"

Once more he pocketed the \$150,000 gem.

**W**ITH no further delay he sat down on the crude wharf, took off his shoes and socks. Knotting the laces together, he slung the shoes round his neck. He kept his sweater on, also the chauffeur's cap. True enough, they might hinder him somewhat in swimming; but they were essential for purposes of disguise. And powerful as he was in the water, with not more than a thousand feet to go, he felt little uneasiness about the sweater and cap.

His automatic, though, might take serious damage if too long submerged. The cartridges in his coat-pocket could stand a deal of soaking, but sea-water would be

very likely to harm his invaluable gun. What to do?

Only one expedient offered. With the gun gripped by its blue barrel, in his teeth, Hargreaves slid off the wharf into water and mud. He sloshed forward, knee-deep, waist-deep—then plunged in and away.

Head well up, silently and with vigorous strokes he began swimming toward the island of peril, the key that only too easily might prove for him a place of death.

## CHAPTER XI

### INTO THE ENEMY'S CAMP

**I**N SPITE of being so heavily weighted down, Hargreaves at first made excellent headway toward his goal.

Everything now depended on his reaching the island before any hostile eye should sight him, for in the water he would make an easy target. And at what instant might not one of the gangsters spy him out?

Good fortune kept the enemy somewhere out of sight. No human figure appeared anywhere on that jungle shore ahead, as Hargreaves swam toward it.

But another enemy than human very soon began to attack him. For almost at once Hargreaves found he was being carried sideways by the out-running tide. When he had left the shore, only a wing-tip of the plane had been visible. Now the whole machine had come to view. In the grip of the current, Hargreaves realized he was rapidly drifting seaward and away.

He put on more steam, and for a few minutes gained a little. But the weight he carried was now commencing to oppress him cruelly. Beginning to pant, he fought his way along.

Now, not far from the plane resting there like a giant gull on the lagoon, he could make out a wharf with a boat moored to it. Beyond, from impenetrable thickets coiled a wisp of smoke. Hargreaves' objective point was surely in view. But ever with a more deadly grip the current was tugging at him, sweeping him away to sea.

The strain of this battle—for all his stout heart and whipcord muscles—was commencing to tell on him. The way he had to hold his head far back in order to keep the gun out of water, tired him.

"Maybe I'll have to chuck that box of cartridges," he thought. But still he kept them, to be abandoned only as an emergency measure.

A few minutes more warned him he would have to lighten cargo or die. First he sacrificed his shoes. Slipping them off his neck, he let them sink.

This helped a little, but Hargreaves' strength was failing. The cartridges would have to go, also the chauffeur's cap and his own sweater and coat.

Treading water, he transferred the diamond to his trousers' pocket, then shucked off all superfluous weight, even abandoning his shirt. Only underwear and trousers now remained; these, and the automatic. Just a few shots, for attack on a mob composed of how many he knew not.

Now stripped for action, he got on faster. But while he had been shedding his handicap, the tide had been working strongly. Hargreaves found himself almost due south of the island, instead of west, as when he had started.

He saw only too clearly that he never could reach the island now, without resting first. The plane—there lay his only hope. An almost intolerable ache tortured his strained neck-muscles, and the breath had begun to saw in his throat as he struggled toward the machine.

It was a real battle, a nip-and-tuck fight, but Hargreaves won out. Pretty far spent and with a triphammer heart, he gripped a pontoon. He clung there to the metal cylinder, under the wide-spreading wings of the immense water-bird.

Now he could take the automatic out of his cramped jaws and hold it in one hand, while the other clutched the pontoon. Blessed relief! He made the most of it.

But eagerness to be at grips with the enemy spurred him on. The distance now remaining was only a few hundred feet. Very plainly he could see the sagging wharf, the flat-boat there, the thread of smoke updrifting from palmetto tangles. He managed something like a laugh as he tautened his courage for the final lap to the gangsters' island.

**O**NCE more gripping the gun in his teeth, he shoved off. He had made perhaps a third of the distance when, cut-

ting slowly across the sunlit waters at his right, a small dark object grew visible—a thing not unlike a moving periscope.

This object drew the swimmer's attention, sent a tingle of very well justified fear shooting from head to heel. Hargreaves quickened his stroke, using up whatever reserves of strength he still had. And as if in answer to that move, the V-shaped ripple that trailed out behind the tiger-shark's dorsal fin grew longer.

Had the shark known just where to find its prey, a moment would have ended the hunt, leaving only a lather of blood-stained foam. But the dull-witted brute, not yet having picked up the direct scent of its victim, was still blindly seeking.

Hargreaves' eyes were wide with terror. It seemed sheerly impossible that he could put forth any greater effort. But deep in his subconsciousness remained still another stratum of energy.

Pulses hammered in his ears. Every panting breath became a torment. Aching muscles, pounding heart protested as he drove ahead.

Now the shore was almost at hand. But the man-eater turned a bit. It had caught the spoor of its choicest delicacy—human flesh.

In a swift rush it charged. Hargreaves' jaws sundered in a rictus of soul-destroying panic. The automatic escaped from between his teeth. It sank, vanished.

The man flung himself aside—half-glimpsed a huge dark form that suddenly whitened as it rolled belly-up for the kill.

With an extremity of terror, Hargreaves kicked at the shark. He felt a rasping pain along his right leg. A patch of skin had been wiped clean off by that sandpaper hide. His trousers had been thrust upward by the kick. The sea-tiger's shagreen skin had left a bleeding rawness on its victim's leg. But the kick had for a second disconcerted the shark. The second saved Hargreaves' life.

For now, as the tiger checked and swung round, then once more charged, Hargreaves felt mud beneath his feet.

Flailing water with both hands, his legs and his whole body, he thrashed up a tumult that made the shark hesitate an instant.

In that split fraction of time, Hargreaves staggered forward through mud and water.

He flung himself ashore. Green with the horror of death, gulping for air and barely half-conscious, he dragged himself in among a tangle of fetid, slimy mangroves.

Prostrated, fainting, he dropped like a corpse.

AFTER how long a time he could not know, the strong heart in him rallied, and he began to take cognizance of his situation. One problem at any rate had been solved. He had reached the island where he felt positive Joie Reynolds was being held prisoner. Yes—but what now?

He realized that his right leg hurt. Struggling up from the mud in which he lay, he saw his trousers were crimsoned in a wide patch. He pulled up the trouser-leg, discovered the injury.

"Damn that shark—he got away with something anyhow!"

With a piece of flannel torn from his trousers, Hargreaves bandaged his injury. Lucky it was no worse!

And now, his mind and nerve steadying, some measure of strength returning to his strained muscles, the invader of this hostile island pulled himself together for action.

The first move must be to block any possibility of the gangsters' getaway. Whatever battle might be fought, must be right here on the island. Thus, the next matter at hand was the concealment of the boat.

Hargreaves blinked about him. Nothing gave any hint of life, save a host of leprous scavenger crabs scuttling in and out of their burrows, or sliding over the black mud. And yet—what was this? The invader thought he heard a faint grumble of voices, that sounded quarrelsome and angry. He smiled with satisfaction.

"Go to it!" he nodded. "Fight and be damned to you—that all helps!"

Now he crawled toward the wharf. Nobody could have recognized him. The well-groomed and immaculate Hargreaves had become a repellent figure in underwear and torn trousers, shoeless, hatless and with his hair plastered flat, his whole person beslimed and clattered with mangrove mud.

He reached the wharf, cast the boat off, threw its long painter into the bottom of it; then with an oar poled his way along the bushes. A hundred yards or so to eastward, he found a deep indentation in the

shore. Into this he shoved, ran the boat aground on the mire, and clambered out.

A thought as to possible needs made him untie the painter and wind it round his waist, where he securely tied it. Then he hid the oars in a clump of mangroves, listened a moment, and with his plan already formulated pushed through the undergrowth. Risking the peril of rattlesnakes and moccasins, he advanced.

With infinite care to make no sound, forward he crept toward the stronghold of his enemies.

## CHAPTER XII

### WAR

**A**RMED now only with a stout drift-wood club that he found wedged among the bushes, he presently caught sight of the shack.

He saw the main portion of it had been improvised from the deckhouse of a schooner wrecked on the reef. To this portion a crazy lean-to had been added, built of flotsam planks, corrugated iron and miscellaneous junk. Every window was closely shuttered with boards nailed across it. A ribbon of blue smoke lazied up from a sagging stovepipe thrust through the bottom of a tin pail on the roof. And from within sounded angry voices in a bizarre mixture of Spanish and English—voices that argued, expostulated, accused and threatened.

Mumble-mumble-mumble went those voices. Then all at once Hargreaves heard another voice—Joie's!

He felt his heart turn over and kick. Peering out through a palmetto screen, his blue eyes hardened. His lean brown face, grotesquely smeared with mud, snarled into a grin of hate. Tensely he gripped his club.

"And how the hell am I going to get at 'em?"

There seemed no way to get at them. Four or five men—as he estimated the number—all presumably armed and all entrenched in a building, would appear hopelessly to outclass a single enemy provided only with a club.

One thing was certain. Any direct attack would be sheer suicide. Not only would it inevitably cost Hargreaves his life, but it

might prove fatal to Joie. If anything at all could serve now, it must be strategy.

Very clearly understanding this, Hargreaves wormed his way nearer the shack. Unseen, creeping through the bush on hands and knees, he reached the front of it. And now he stood up boldly, walked right to the door and began hammering loudly on it with his club.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, in the toughest gutter-accents. "You guys, beat it out o' here!"

Instant silence muted the wrangle in the shack. Again Hargreaves pounded.

"Get goin'!" he vociferated. "Scram!"

"Who's that? What the hell?" sounded a muffled voice—a voice Hargreaves recognized as that of Varela, the Colonel's chauffeur. "Who're you?"

"You know who!" Hargreaves took a chance. He swung his club for business, in case of a sudden rush. "The bulls is comin'. Be here any time, now. P'lice-boat comin', from Martello Key. Blow!"

"Police-boat?" cried another voice. "It ees comin'?"

"You heard me! That fake wreck off the bridge—it's been 'phoned to town, from the ferry. You birds better jump and land runnin', or you'll all burn. *I'm leavin', see?*"

Hargreaves turned and flung himself at top speed into a winding path through palms and thickets, down to the wharf. Close by that wharf he leaped aside into the bush. There he fell and lay hidden, tense as a coiled cobra.

**A**ND he had not long to wait. In less than a minute he heard cautious footsteps. A single figure appeared, one man sent out to spy the situation. The cleverest member of the mob—Twister—had smelled a rat in this alarm. He had not wholly fallen for Hargreaves' ruse. Now he had dispatched a scout to investigate.

This scout was Pedro Varela, the Colonel's Judas chauffeur. Cautiously he approached, in his uniform and his leather leggings, bareheaded and with a gun in hand.

"Hey, you!" he guardedly exclaimed. "Where you gone? Who was it, an' what the hell?"

As he passed, to step out on the wharf—where he had already noted the absence



of the boat—Hargreaves surged up behind him.

*Crack!*

The smash of the driftwood club was like a piledriver. Varela collapsed, as an empty grain-sack falls. Without so much as a single groan he sprawled in the path. His gun skidded out upon the wharf.

Hargreaves leaped for the gun, jammed it into his hip-pocket, then grappled Varela and dragged him aside into the thicket. More than a hundred feet he hauled the chauffeur, who might be dead—for all Hargreaves cared. It was a heavy task, slipping in deep and fetid mud, but he was boiling with strength that recognized no obstacles.

In a safe hiding-place he knelt and applied his ear to the chauffeur's chest. Rather to his regret, he heard the heart still pumping away.

"Humph!" he grunted. The man's thick skull was probably not even cracked. Except for a little seeping blood where the skin was broken, Varela had taken no real harm. "Too damn bad!"

**N**OW Hargreaves unwound the coiled painter from his waist. Without a knife, how the devil was he going to cut this rope? He remembered an old tin bailing-can in the boat, made his way thither, fetched the can, and presently with its rough and rusty edge sawed off enough rope to gag the chauffeur with.

This he accomplished with a piece of mud-slimed mangrove root. Then he dragged the fellow's hands behind his back, lashed his wrists and ankles securely, and anchored him to a mangrove. He sawed off the remainder of his rope, and once more was ready for business.

What might happen next he did not know. All he felt sure of was that it would not be long delayed, and that it menaced with deadly peril.

Hargreaves prepared to meet this peril at once. Without delay he crept back to his hiding-place beside the path, near the wharf. There he crouched and waited. Two minutes passed, then three, four—

Voices sounded from the shack. These voices seemed puzzled and uncertain. Two men were speaking, their words growing louder as they scouted cautiously down toward the shore. Hargreaves caught:

"Where the hell did Pete go?"

"Search *me!* Look a' there—boat's gone, too!"

"He's beat it—double-crossed us—"

"The lousy bum!"

Suddenly footsteps broke into a run, down the path. Two figures passed in front of Hargreaves, and out upon the wharf. One of the two men was fat, red and unshaven. The other, of slighter build, had jet-black hair.

Angry and alert, they both held guns ready for instant business. No hope of tackling any pair like this, with a mere club! Hargreaves drew the gun he had just now frisked Varela. He levelled careful aim at Blackie and fired.

As the report crashed, Blackie lunged forward and fell contorted, creased by the bullet. Hargreaves scrambled aside as Knucks, the fat red-faced gangster, poured a rain of lead into the bushes at the point whence the shot had issued. Clipped leaves spun away. Untouched, Hargreaves fired once, in reply. He heard a curse, a groan.

From up the path a shout echoed:

"*Demonios!*" Feet came running. "W'at ees it, now?"

**H**ARGREAVES knew his only possible chance was to vanish before reinforcements should arrive. Silently he slipped away into the jungle, that received him like a wraith. Back there at the wharf he heard Knucks howling:

"The dicks is on the island! One of 'em just plugged me in the leg, an' downed Blackie!"

"How many of them?" cried the running man—Twister, the aviator. "Where are they?"

"Search *me!* Somewheres in them bushes. Must be a whole bunch of 'em!"

Through all the peril of it, Hargreaves silently laughed. He already had them up in the air. Was that not half the battle?

"Two down, already!" he rejoiced.

But premature exultation was merest folly. At least a pair of armed thugs, that he knew of, remained afoot. And up at the shack there might be others. Careful, now!

He crawled toward the hut, his club thrown away, and wanted to cry out: "Joie, Joie! Here I am!" But caution still silenced him.

Scrambling out of the jungle, he ran toward the door, and—

**T**HAT door was violently jerked open. Confronting him he saw Señor Martínez, the retired millionaire coffee-planter from Costa Verde!

For a second the two men, equally amazed, stared at each other.

Martínez, "El Alacrán," beheld a scarecrow figure of rags and mud, with a crimsoned bandage round one leg; a figure which none the less, for all its nightmare disguise, he instantly knew.

And Hargreaves saw a pale, sweating and dishevelled Martínez with a powder-burned face, a mutilated ear that had deeply blood-stained his collar and shirt.

"For God's sake!" gasped Hargreaves. "You here? *You?*"

"Sí, señor. I come, with great danger, to save thees señorita," Martínez began. "I reesk my life to save her, and—"

"It's a lie, a lie!" cried Joie, from inside the shack. "He killed Colonel Valentine! He—"

Martínez snarled an obscenity in Spanish. He snatched a blunt gun from his hip. Hargreaves' own weapon flashed up. But—

*Snick!*

No explosion followed. A dud!

Something swift and heavy caught Martínez on the back of the skull, just as his finger tensed on the trigger. His shot crashed wild.

The rusty hammer that Joie had hurled and that had found its billet on Martínez' bullet-head, skittered away.

Out of the gloom of the shack, Hargreaves saw Joie running toward him. A second, and he had her in his arms.

## CHAPTER XIII

### RETRIBUTION

**H**IS heart leaped gladly as she cried:

"Oh, Bob, I knew you'd come!"

"Joie! You're all right? They haven't hurt you?"

"No! And you—?"

"O. K., and rarin' to go!" he laughed. And in this moment Robert Hargreaves could have fought the world!

The moment, though, was not one for world-fighting. Hargreaves released Joie.

"How many in this mob?"

"Five!" she answered.

"Two left, then. I've got one crook tied up and gagged, in the jungle—knocked cold with a club. Another one, down and out, at the wharf. And here's this rat of a Martínez—got to fix *him!*"

Hargreaves dragged him into the hut. With Joie's help, Martínez was immediately trussed up and securely bound.

"And that's that!" exulted Hargreaves. "What's their game, Joie? The diamond?"

"Yes. That's part of it, though they had a side-line of holding the Colonel for ransom."

"Swell mob! And to think this retired coffee-planter—some joke, eh?—was making the high-class contact for them! He's the one that killed Valentine?"

"Yes, and started the whole plot about the diamond."

"Well, he'll get *his!*" laughed Hargreaves. "How in the world did they ever kidnap you?"

"My landlady's son helped them. I've found *that* out. They used some kind of a drug on me, wrapped me up in the bed-clothes, carried me down a ladder—and away."

"More debts to be paid! But you've squared one of 'em, anyhow! As a hammer-thrower you're tops. They thought you had the diamond? The real one?"

"Yes! They were ready to murder me, to make me tell where it was. But how could I, Bob, when I didn't know?"

"How, indeed?"

"It's lost? The real diamond's lost?"

"Hardly!"

From a pocket of his torn and mud-caked trousers he hauled a watersoaked pasteboard box, ripped it open, and—there in his palm glowed and sparkled the precious gem.

"**BOB!**" cried the girl. "You've got it!"

But you—you're not—"

"The thief? Never! Unless you call a man a thief for going after his own property and recovering it!"

"Your own property? You mean—?"

"Listen, Joie. This diamond belonged to me, out in Milwaukee, eight years ago. I

got into a financial jam, and borrowed some money from the Colonel, on this stone—far less than it was worth, but still, a good bit. The time ran out. Almost at the last gasp I managed to raise the amount. I started to drive down to Chicago, where he had his office, to redeem the stone—had only just barely time to get there—and—

"Something happened?"

"Rather! The last thing in the world that old skinflint wanted was the money. It was this stone he was after. He had everything all planted, to sink me—he'd bribed my chauffeur to ditch the car, and maybe kill me. Just south of Racine the smash came. Busted two of my ribs and a collar-bone, but—though I've still got some scars for souvenirs of the Colonel's handiwork—I wasn't knocked out. I kept going, in another car I hired. Got to his office—"

"Too late?"

"By eleven minutes."

"And he insisted on his pound of flesh?"

"The guy certainly did, to the last ounce. We had a pretty heated interview, and the old jackal had some kind of a fit and fell in it. I frisked him, for my diamond—was going to take it, and leave him the money—but he didn't have it on him. Had it locked up in his safe, I reckon. So—"

"And you had to leave, without it?" breathlessly asked the girl.

"Yes. But rummaging round, anyhow, I found some evidence, a paper—"

"Involving him in something?"

"I should say so! In the frame-up with my crooked chauffeur. I got hold of *that*, at all events, and cleared out. Figured some-time or other I might be able to use it, and—"

"But he never recognized you?"

"No, he didn't," affirmed Hargreaves, with a grim smile. "That one eye of his wasn't any too good, even then, and it's been getting worse ever since. I've changed a good deal, too, these past eight years. Especially since I began this present campaign. You'd be surprised what a fellow can do by way of altering his appearance. And then too, with another name—"

"Another name, Bob? So then, your name really isn't Hargreaves?"

"After all, what's in a name? I knew he still had the diamond, as his lucky-piece. And when at last I had money enough to

swing my plan, I had a paste replica made, came on down here, and laid for the old hyena. Well—"

"Oh, Bob, what a plot!"

"Well, my chance came night before last, in front of the hotel fireplace. It was a cinch to drop his stone and switch my

counterfeit on him. But the best-laid plans of mice and men, you know—and when *you* got mixed up in this, Joie, when *you* were accused of theft—”

“As if I cared, now you’ve got your diamond again!”

“Well, I cared! When that venomous old reptile got after you, I did some pretty tall thinking and wasn’t long in deciding to give him back the diamond and call it a day.”

“You’d have done that for me, Bob?”

“Why ask? And if he hadn’t let up on you then, I still had that paper, the proof of his conspiracy with my chauffeur. *That* would have smashed the Colonel and made him lay off his accusations of you. I was going to have the show-down, this morning. But he beat me to it. He rushed off like mad, to get private detectives in Miami. And on top of all that, I found you’d been kidnapped. So—well, all I could do was grab a gun and burn the road, to try and find you. And—you know the rest, so—”

The sound of angry voices, down by the wharf, suddenly muted him. But Joie, all exultation, seemed to have no thought of any dangers still impending.

“Oh, Bob,” she cried, “it’s like a fairy tale, and—”

“Never mind fairy tales now, with a couple of gorillas still to be settled with. Are you game?”

“Try me!”

Hargreaves swung toward the door, picked up the gun with which—save for Joie’s hammer-throw—Martínez would have ended his life, and thrust it into the girl’s hand. Then he hastily examined the automatic he had captured from Pedro Varela. Only three cartridges remained in it.

“Ammunition on that shelf,” said Joie, pointing.

Quickly he reloaded both guns.

“Come on, Joie, let’s go!”

“I’m with you, Bob—or whoever you are!”

She followed as he strode out into the cutting sunlight. Together they scouted down the path through the jungle; she flushed and eager, he torn and muddy and with a crimsoned bandage on his leg; bare-footed, shirtless, an amazing parody of himself,

What mattered anything, though, except just they were still together? Together, and hunting an enemy that lusted to shoot them down!

Near the wharf they could hear snarls and curses.

“Easy,” warned Hargreaves. “Take it easy, now!”

Guns ready, they advanced. Suddenly they saw Twister and Blackie, half-hidden by palmettos. Hargreaves let out an exultant yell, as of command to a party of attackers:

“There they are, boys! Elden, you and your men swing round from the right. Forster, bring your crowd in from the left. We’ve got ‘em blocked, *this* way. Now then, let ‘em smell hell!”

Firing, he charged, closely followed by Joie who added a couple of bullets. Staking all on sheer bluff.

ONLY three or four random shots zoomed at the attackers. None of these did more than clip jungle foliage. Then, as Hargreaves and Joie kept running, shooting, two splashes told that Twister and Knucks had taken water.

They dived like a couple of frogs and struck out furiously for the plane. Better risk getting shot in the water than be captured for the hot chair! By the time Hargreaves and the girl reached the wharf, both gangsters were well away and going strong.

On the wharf, the skull-creased Blackie was beginning to revive, groaning and with his neck a smear of crimson. A Luger was lying near him, where it had fallen from the terror-smitten Knucks’ hand.

Hargreaves laughed as he dropped his now empty gun and caught up the Luger. He levelled it at Twister’s head slashing along through the current, but held his fire.

“Don’t look, Joie!” he cried. “For God’s sake, don’t look!”

But she had already seen the fatal rush of a triangular fin. The ravenous shark, once already balked of its prey, made no mistake this time. Swifter than a speeding torpedo the messenger of death trailed its long wake. Waters boiled in a rushing swirl.

Then as both watchers on the wharf stared with horrible fascination, a bubbling scream echoed along the island shore. The

gangster's hands shot aloft. For a second his blazing red head emerged. It shook, as in a ghastly dance of death; was snatched under, vanished in a lashing flurry of bubbles where blood-stains rose and widened.

**F**OR a moment the girl shuddered against Hargreaves. He patted her shoulder in a clumsy attempt to buck her up.

"He had it coming to him, Joie."

"Yes, I know, but—"

A moment's silence. Then she asked, "You swam out here, Bob?"

He nodded.

"Took a chance on sharks and all?"

"I didn't see any sharks—lucky, that way. But look—that other fellow! He's almost at the plane!"

Hargreaves pointed out across the lagoon. There, saved from annihilation by Knucks' death, the last effective member of this devil's-gang was already reaching the amphibian.

Now, spent and pale, he was clambering aboard. Painfully he dragged himself up on one of the pontoons and lay there a moment, to catch his laboring breath. Then he crawled forward and cast off the moorings.

With about his last ounce of his strength he hauled himself up to the cockpit and slumped into it.

Over the marvelous beauty of those tropical waters drifted a choking blasphemy hurled against the two watchers on the wharf—one of those unprintable curses peculiar to Spanish. Then the prop began to flicker, as the self-starter engaged. On varnished blades the sunlight spun into blurring webs of brilliance.

*Pop-pop-pop-poppety-pop-pop!*

The plane eased forward, gathering speed as her motor steadied to a drone. Out of the lagoon she began to taxi.

Even now the fool of an aviator might have made his getaway, had not his passion of rage and hate betrayed him. For all at once he leaned out of the cockpit. Metal gleamed in his hand. Fire spat—once, twice and again.

Near the wharf, mud and water jetted.

Another shot. This time a splinter leaped almost at Joie's feet.

"Say, this is getting to be a bore," remarked Hargreaves. He thrust the girl behind him and blazed away with the Luger. Only three cartridges were left in it. None seemed to take any effect, beyond a couple of water-spruts near the plane.

"I'm a rotten shot, all right!" he growled. "Couldn't hit a flock of—"

It ended in a grunt, as Hargreaves felt a violent shock in his right forearm. One final detonation echoed from the speeding plane. The Luger dropped from a hand grown suddenly numb. With astonishment Hargreaves saw his fingers were dripping crimson.

Like an angry wasp, the plane droned off and away. A mocking laugh drifted across opaline tides. The gangster waved a hand of derisive farewell.

The amphibian lifted. She skimmed in a wide circle, black against the sun-dazzled sky, and straightened out toward the north.

Hargreaves gripping his forearm, was trying to grin.

"Bob! He got you!"

"Just a nick. Forget it!" Then his eyes widened. "But look at the other fellow!"

A glint of flame, a trail of smoke spun out behind the swift amphibian. The machine reeled, yawed off and plunged. In a swift nose-dive she whirled down like a runaway comet.

The sea took her. Against that glory of morning sunshine drifted only a veil of thinning smoke. This smoke faded and was gone.

Hargreaves laughed. "Last shot of mine punctured his gas-tank. A fool for luck, eh?"

Already the girl was ripping up her skirt, tearing it into bandages.

"Only one man in a hundred million could ever be a fool like you!" Then, as she started binding his wound. "But tell me, Bob Hargreaves, what's your really-truly name? Honestly now, what is it?"

"Oh, my mysterious name? And if I tell you, will you promise to share it, just as quick as the law'll let us?"

"As if you had to ask me that!" she answered, with a joyous laugh.