

MAR. 30

FOSTER-  
HARRIS

JACK  
BYRNE

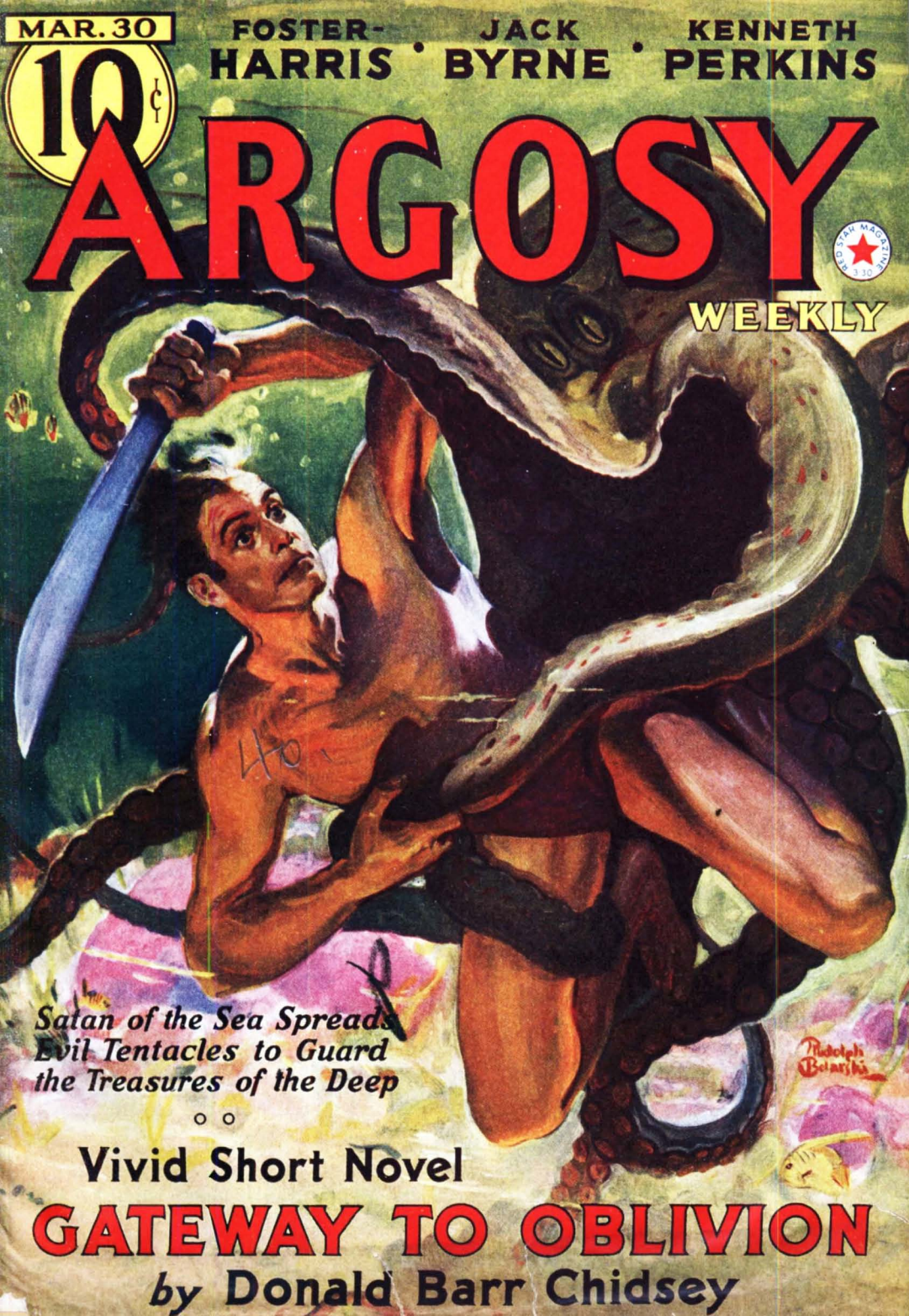
KENNETH  
PERKINS

10¢

# ARGOSY



WEEKLY



*Satan of the Sea Spreads  
Evil Tentacles to Guard  
the Treasures of the Deep*

o o

Vivid Short Novel

## GATEWAY TO OBLIVION

by Donald Barr Chidsey

Rudolph  
Belarhis

# ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 298      CONTENTS FOR MARCH 30, 1940      Number 1

Gateway to Oblivion— <i>Short Novel</i> . . . . .	Donald Barr Chidsey	4
<i>Seventy-one carats of perfect white diamond, the best omelette in Marseille—and a knife in the back: this is the hospitality of Aux Pauvres Diables. And the Squealers' Gate is the only way out</i>		
The Sea Ghost— <i>Short Story</i> . . . . .	Kenneth Perkins	35
<i>Torch Hubbard, seek your courage on the ocean's floor, and find your Destiny in the tentacles of a devilfish</i>		
Legends of the Legionaries— <i>Picture Feature</i> . . . . .	W. A. Windas	45
<i>Lexicon of the Fighting Men</i>		
\$1,000 Every Thursday— <i>Second of five parts</i> . . . . .	Jack Byrne	46
<i>Let the little lady sing for her supper, but let her also beware of machine guns</i>		
Meeting without Moonlight— <i>Short Story</i> . . . . .	David V. Reed	72
<i>Lesson for riders at night: Smart draw is better than fast draw</i>		
The Devil's Doubloons— <i>Third of four parts</i> . . . . .	Johnston McCulley	75
<i>Caballeros shouldn't go to sea unless they pay Satan's passage money</i>		
Victory— <i>Short Short Story</i> . . . . .	Robert Arthur	99
<i>An Argosy Oddity</i>		
Men of Daring— <i>True Story in Pictures</i> . . . . .	Stookie Allen	102
<i>Heroes for Humanity</i>		
The Sun Sets at 5— <i>Fifth of seven parts</i> . . . . .	Borden Chace	104
<i>A runaround with the doublecross; or, Manhattan nocturne for 4 A. M.</i>		
Argonotes . . . . .		127
Looking Ahead! . . . . .		128

Cover by Rudolph Belarski

*Illustrating The Sea Ghost*

*This magazine is on sale every Wednesday*

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.

WILLIAM T. DEWART, President & Treasurer;	WILLIAM T. DEWART, JR., Secretary
THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD.	PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE
3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C., 4	111 Rue Beaumur

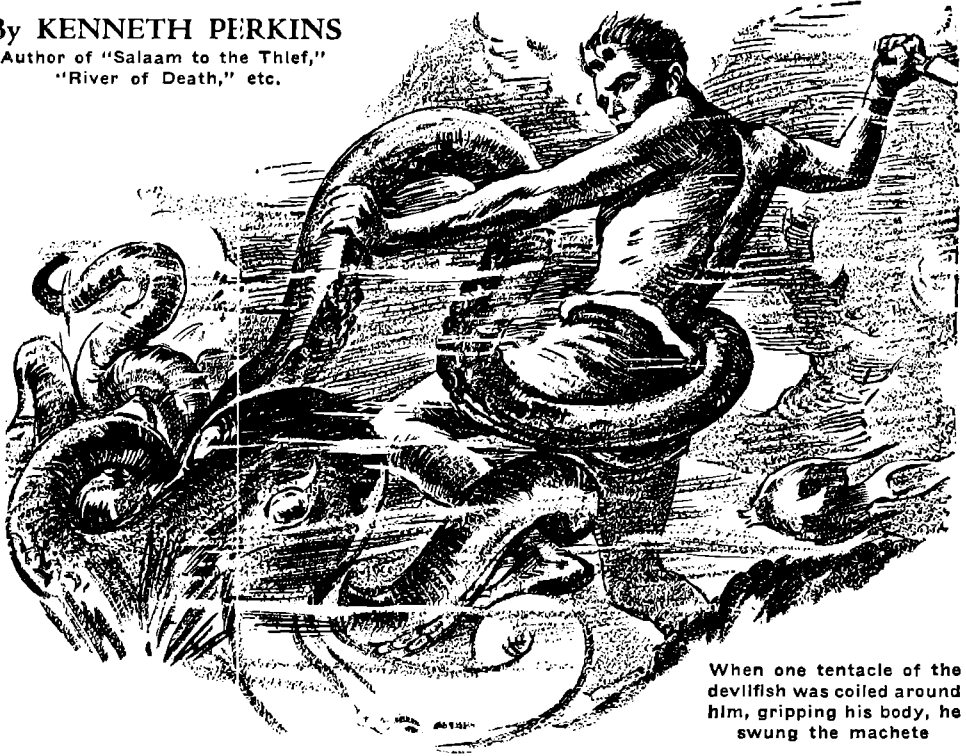
Copyright, 1940, by The Frank A. Munsey Company  
 Published weekly. Single copies 10 cents. By the year \$4.00; in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; Canada, \$5.00.  
 Other countries, \$7.00. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Remittances should be made by check, express money order  
 or postal money order. Entered as second class matter November 28, 1896, at the post office, New York, N. Y., under the Act  
 of March 3, 1879. The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright and must not be reprinted without the publisher's  
 permission. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Printed in U. S. A.

*Manuscripts submitted to this magazine should be accompanied by sufficient postage for their return if found unavailable. The publisher can accept no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

# The Sea Ghost

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Salaam to the Thief,"  
"River of Death," etc.



When one tentacle of the devilfish was coiled around him, gripping his body, he swung the machete

**More terrible to face, more agonizing to tear loose than the tentacles of any devilfish: the fear and defeat that takes hold on a man's spirit. And there are more rewards than one for the man who can lay a ghost**

**A** MAN sat on the fringing reef of Yaws Island looking into the lagoon. He was a pulpy man in damp whites and he kept rolling a fat Manila cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

He could see another man holding himself to the fans of coral on the lagoon's bottom at a depth of about nine feet. The diver came up, water streaming from his red hair into his reddened eyes. He had two flat rocks in his hands and he set these on the

bank so that he could pull himself out of the water.

Then he rested there, clinging, breathing heavily and staring at the man above him.

The latter puffed, his flabby arms folded across his knees so that his chin rested on one white sleeve. He took his cigar out of his mouth and said calmly, "You didn't clap those rocks together, did you?"

The diver's eyes flamed hard and bright then faded to the customary

bloodshot blue. "How could I clap them when I had to cling to the bottom? You can't stay on the bottom in naked diving."

"The rock's hold you down. Go ahead, dive again."

"Maybe we better go back to the village and ask the kanakas what to do."

"You know what to do. Except you've got no guts."

"But the kanakas can get a devilfish out of its cave with a sweet potato whistle. Or maybe rattling a coconut shell."

"They wouldn't come near this lagoon. You go down again. If you don't clap those rocks this time, I got something I can do." He stuck his cigar in his mouth and chewed it as the diver's eyes glinted again.

For a long time they glared at each other silently; then the diver dropped from the ledge and sank, weighted by the two rocks in his hands.

**H**E was the first white man ever to dive in this lagoon. At Yaws village they said no kanaka had dived here for a generation. This was because a devilfish lived in a cave under this fringing reef and some had seen it at low tide.

Those who had seen it talked about it in their own naïve figures of speech. For example they said this animal was the ghost of the devil Tumuraifenua. A devilfish seen through a glass box is hard to measure. With its trick of protective coloring it will seem to be a part of the long ridges of coral to which it clings.

A story starts. The kanakas on the next atoll hear it, and the atolls beyond. The "devil" grows bigger.

At Yaws Island the village kahuna embellished the story, doubtless to suit his own ends. But white men knew

that he was merely employing the frightful imagery of any other witch doctor.

Nevertheless no one wanted to dive for pearl oysters in that particular lagoon. The native huts, fisheries and yam plantations were on another part of the island, the lagoon being cut off by a jungle of betel palms, a mangrove swamp, and a desolate expanse of fringing reef. On its seaward side the barrier reef held off the moving water beyond except for a sweeping tide.

The whole side of the island was shunned. Hence there might have been some wealth in the unexplored lagoon for anyone brave enough to grub for it. This was the view of Windy Whitell, one time beer salesman, now turned pearl trader. He was the blubber-muscled man who sat on the reef.

Feathery fish hovered down there like flocks of birds. Mollusks clung to the bottom and Whitell could see them as if he were looking through a seven-foot thickness of plate glass. Bright crabs scuttled everywhere.

These were the animals—mollusks, crabs, little fishes—that made good brit for any devilfish. All that was needed was a man with nerve enough to hunt the beast at low tide and hack it to pieces with a machete.

Windy Whitell knew he could do this but he employed another man whom he had picked up in a waterfront saloon on an island thirty miles away to do it instead.

Torch Hubbard—they called him Torch because of his red hair—was down there now. He had a machete thrust into his belt down the length of his naked thigh. The rest of his body gleamed nude and white—the white untanned skin of a beachcomber and loafer who rarely exposed his body to the tropic sun or trades.

His whiteness down there was alarming; so was his red hair: for any water animal could see him from a good distance. That is why kanakas and Japanese are better divers than white men. They last longer.

Torch Hubbard was afraid to clap his rocks together. It took nerves and his nerves were shaky from a hang-over. Kava and native brandy do not make a courageous diver unless a man has just drunk a lot and imagines himself a good opponent for any enemy on the earth or in the sea. In this case Torch was sober, and fearful.

WHEN he needed air he came up. Once when he emerged from the surface he had only one rock. In the other hand he held a snow-white sea-shell and this he placed on the bank, grinning sheepishly. He hid the shell under a brown palm frond, for he did not want the other man to see what he'd been up to.

But Whitell had caught a glimpse of the sparkling white for he said, "Say, listen. Did you go down there to kill a devilfish or to pick flowers?"

Torch's grin made his ghastly face skull-like. The curl had gone out of his hair and he had a chill which made him shaky and miserable. "There's nothing down there," he pleaded, "except coral and shells—shells that've been sucked dry."

"Sure. Shell oysters," Whitell said. "They're dry, but there'll be more. Plenty. But they don't concern you. I'm paying you for killing a devilfish and already you worry about pearls which ain't in the contract. You're getting cash, and you pick flowers."

The two men grinned slowly, the one tightening his lips over his cigar, the other showing his teeth, terrified and idiotic.

Their silence was so tense that Torch Hubbard wanted to scream. He tried it, but could only gibber, "I won't go down there and wait for that thing to come out. I saw one of its arms. I saw its eyes in the cave. I'm not going to have my flesh sucked off my bones!"

"Enough of that talk!" Hubbard said, scarcely opening his lips over his cigar. "You're making up a nightmare in your head. You can make up a good one, I don't doubt, what with your boozy brains."

The diver stopped gibbering and stood waist deep, panting frantically.

"I told you you didn't have the nerve when you asked me for a job," Whitell said. "Then you let me charter a yawl and come over here, and you welch."

The red-eyed, red-haired man stared with the sick frenzy of a mad dog that has just been doused with water. The other one puffed in impatient little spurts. He took up a spear which he had gotten at the village: a murderous weapon with poison in the sinnet whipping that fastened the handle to the blade. They had brought it along to supplement the machete. He poked the red-haired man in the ribs, grinning.

Torch Hubbard winced. "No, no, don't! Don't start that stuff. I'll try it—I'll try it again."

"Go ahead, dive. If you haven't the guts to draw the thing out yourself, I'll get it out with a crab."

He reached for a fishing line and stuck its pearl hook into the shell of a red spotted crab.

Torch Hubbard watched him, fascinated; then when their eyes met he let go his hold on the coral ledge, humped himself like a lean garfish and went down.

Sea birds screamed in alarm. Clouds



of fire ants hovered over the widening circles of rippling silver. Windy Whittell dropped his fishing line over the shelf of coral and watched the crab shell on the hook zigzag downward as if it were alive.

He chewed at his cigar, sucking it, unaware that it had gone out. The sand flies that had stayed away from the smoke clouded about his head, but he was unaware of them too. His eyes fixed on the depths, as he made the crab jump and dance on the lagoon floor, enjoying the game like a boy with a new toy.

**U**NDERWATER, Torch Hubbard waited fearfully. He thought he saw a huge hunk of coral in the cave dwindle in size. He had heard that this is what a devilfish will do when it is waiting for food.

He was undecided whether to swim for the surface or to lie perfectly still and let the beast stretch out one of its sucker-bearing arms and examine him. In that moment vivid thoughts flashed like the dream of a past life as a man goes down for the last time to drown.

It was that gorgeous shell he had picked up which brought his thoughts away from the most hideous thing in the world to the most beautiful.

There were other shells like the one he had found, tucked away in crannies where the water darkened. They caught the green glow that pervaded the water, as sea shells catch a sound and imprison it forever, turning it into a song.

Beaming like that against jet blackness, the lighted shells evoked a picture of a girl with black hair and a lovely sheen to her eyes. Torch remembered how her eyes were the highlights in the dim room where he first met her.

This was a tourist's shop at Huva

Bandu thirty miles away. She had a booth in the shop and sold shells of her own collecting. Torch talked with Molly Bartlett a long time, going there every day. Being on her own since the death of her parents, she was cautious about picking up with a penniless American. So he told her about himself.

He told her how he had jumped ship at Huva Bandu because he did not take to the job of mess punk on a coprax trader. Mess punk, hatch foreman, chief of stevies, bulker, San Francisco bond salesman—it would have been a good enough record if it had been told backward.

He was a good bond salesman—the first job—because his customers liked to drink with him, remembering his name as an Olympic swimmer. He lived high and drank deep. But when the public stopped buying securities his earnings stopped. They stopped for two years, then he came to the South Seas. The South Seas meant escape.

He saw himself in her eyes which were as bright as mirrors. His whites were frayed but very clean. He was shaved. His battered pith helmet was freshly pipeclayed and so were his shoes, although the soles had been worn completely through and replaced with rubber he had cut from an inner tube.

This was a native touch. The kanakas made their own sandals that way. The rubber charged his gait somehow, giving him a comfortable slouch. He was lean, long-boned, loose of joints, with a soft voice and not a sou in his pocket.

Looking into the girl's staring eyes he realized all of a sudden and for the first time in his life that he was a typical beachcomber!

Besides that, he had to confess to her that he was being kicked off the

island. It was all because of a little regulation of the Colonial Administrative Office which demanded a deposit of an immigrant to cover his return passage to the last port should he find himself on the beach. He was trying to get a hundred dollars Mex somewhere so he could stay here where the girl was.

The next day she asked if he had found the hundred dollars Mex. When he gave the expected answer (no, but he had a line on something) she stared with a definite doubt in her eyes. She measured him as much as to say, "I wonder whether you're a real derelict—the kind that will run away from life." Then she thrust a hundred dollars across the counter.

She said she had sold her collection of shells, the good specimens she never showed to tourists. A Chinese curio dealer had given her the exact sum she needed, and no more.

**T**ORCH HUBBARD chewed on this angrily, all his fury turned upon himself. "Look," he said. "I'm paying my own way. Don't you think I'd let a girl pay it. I'll live on cocoanuts before I play that game."

"But it's only a loan," she said. "It only means you can stay here. You'll still be on the beach. How you get off is up to you."

"I heard a fellow talking in a saloon on the waterfront. He thinks there's a chance of finding pearls on Yaws Island. He's got a concession from the French, but he can't get any divers. There's a story about a giant devilfish and the kanakas are afraid to dive. He'll pay me a hundred Mex if I kill it. Then he can get divers."

"How are you going to kill it when it isn't there? It's only a kanaka legend."

"But this fellow Windy Whitell said some Jap poachers went there and left the next day. One of 'em was missing. It bolsters up the story. Isn't there such a thing as a benthoctopus?"

"There're only in very deep water. Thousands of feet deep."

"One might have been trapped there when it was small. It couldn't get out because the tide seeps through the reef."

Her eyes were getting bigger now, and brighter. "You want to fight something that's thirty feet around?"

The doubt in her eyes burned into him so that he felt the same doubt himself. The Equatorial Pacific, the languorous trades, unsteady work and steady drinking had brought a shake to his fingers. He had no reason to think he would be braver than the next man. He was willing to confess it, being no boaster.

But instead he said, "Thirty feet around? Those big fellows are mostly gelatin in their tissues, with big flabby webs between their arms, and no teeth to speak of. It's the little ones that have teeth and free arms."

"But big or little, how can you fight it? What do you know about this business? It takes something."

"Sure, I know. Just a little nerve. This fellow Whitell made that clear before he'd dicker with me. He said I didn't look as if I had it. He said I'd welch. Maybe so, but I'm not letting someone else tell me."

"Why didn't you knock him down?"

Torch was nettled. He did not know why. He had always stayed out of bar-room brawls. Besides he was asking the man for a job. He felt now that that might not have been the real reason.

Whitell was a big, heavy fellow; although Torch could have licked him, he had a little too much booze in his

eyes at the time. He took the easier and more bombastic way: the beach-comber's way. And that was to shout at the saloon full of men that he was not afraid of any devilfish.

Thus he avoided the temporary fight. And thus he had run away from the drudgery of a mess punk. Thus he had run away from the States.

And now he had to answer the girl's question. "Instead of knocking Whitell down I went out to the waterfront and asked the kanaka fishermen how you kill a devilfish. You get a machete, or maybe a spear they call a *tavero*. You just lie still and wait for the thing to crawl up to you. Then you slice it in a certain spot."

She made an involuntary gesture, reaching for him. "I know this Windy Whitell. He always wants something for nothing. He'll get a man to do the dangerous work for him, even when it means risking that man's life."

But the dark look of doubt had begun to ebb, leaving a glow in her eyes. She said as if to herself, "You're going to lie still and wait for it—"

"You said it was only a legend—a ghost. I'm going to fight a ghost, that's all."

She knew what he meant. He was going to fight the ghost of himself.

**A**T YAWS ISLAND when Torch faced the test, it looked as if Windy Whitell had guessed about right. The man he had hired was a waterfront loafer and he had no guts. He would fail at the first sight of a devilfish stalking towards him.

Whitell stared hard into the blue water. While he dangled the red spotted crab in front of the cave he noticed an empty oyster shell on the lagoon floor.

A doubt made his stomach feel cold.

Suppose there really was a giant down there; suppose all the oysters had been sucked dry. What if this diver actually killed a devilfish and then demanded his pay, when Whitell had nothing to gain?

Windy Whitell jumped to his feet with such a cumbersome windmilling of his fat arms that a parrot, watching him, squawked in wild senseless laughter. He turned, maddened, toward the palms to see where the laughter came from.

Some kanakas from the village were emerging cautiously from the betel palms like blue-faced boobies from a thicket. Whitell had the queer illusion that it was these villagers, not the parrot, that had laughed at him. His doubt rankled and wrenched at his vitals.

He beckoned to the villagers to come to the lagoon, but it was only their kahuna, an old man with salt-stained hair, that dared approach.

Meanwhile the diver came up. He clung to the ledge, scouring his wet hair with shaking fingers, gasping hysterically. But then he set his jaws and a sudden look of desperation made his eyes glint wild and clear.

"You saw something?" Whitell asked.

Torch nodded, choked for more air, then said, "I'm going down after it."

"Better wait," Whitell said, pointing his fat thumb over his shoulder at the kahuna. "Wait till that old duck gets here. I want to ask him something. There's a point I want cleared up before you go to any more risk."

"I won't wait," Torch Hubbard said. "If I wait, I'll lose my nerve. I'll never have my nerve again." He drew his machete with a slow mechanical movement of his arm as if his muscles twitched without his will.

"Listen," Whitell pleaded. "Maybe



it's no use. It may be all for nothing—your diving.”

But Torch was down.

As the fountain of silver bubbles sparkled upward from his diving body, the other man turned from the ledge, hearing the old kanaka's voice.

“Why will this white man sacrifice himself?” the witch doctor asked coming a few steps closer.

It was just the question Whitell wanted asked. He chewed his dead cigar, grinning. “He's going to kill that devil of yours, that's why. When we show you the carcass maybe some of your men will dive for me.”

The kahuna shook his head. “I told the youths of the village not to dive for you but to plant yams and work the groves. I told them of the devil so they would not waste their youth and their lungs diving for pearls where there are none.”

**W**HITELL'S eyes went pale, then glared with a slow, queer flame. “What are you talking about? You don't know that!”

“Look into the water and see the shells of the oysters. Look and see, they are empty.”

“Well, you black-toothed idiot!” Whitell cried wildly. “There'll be more of 'em!”

But the kahuna said, “One devilfish, as every pearl trader knows, will clean out a whole reef of oysters. I have seen how it will drop a stone with one arm into a shell and suck out the oyster with another. Thus it will feed all day with never a shell clamping shut on its arm. They have the cunning of devils. They are devils.”

Whitell gaped and swallowed and swore. “You're lying. They have no cunning. They'll ever start to swallow their own arms.”

“They have the hunger of devils. That is why there are no pearl oysters left.”

Whitell had no answer. He had seen the empty shells in the undersea garden of gorgonias, and so had Torch. But neither had taken this to mean that there were no live oysters on the whole reef. Windy Whitell still refused to believe it.

But the kahuna offered another argument. “Why else did the Japanese leave? Because there was a devilfish they must kill first? Would the Japanese give up for that when they hunt devilfish all over the sea? They dove here, and then they left. Would they leave pearls?”

No, Whitell had to admit to himself, they would not. He sank on a red hummock, settling in a heap as if his huge body had deflated as completely as his vision of sudden wealth. He had heard about the Japanese poachers. It proved what the kahuna said. This concession was worthless.

Whitell fumed and turned purple. His fortune in pearls dwindled in his imagination, giving way to a very tangible and immediate sum of money. He might owe the diver the preposterous sum of a hundred dollars Mex for killing a devilfish that any Japanese would have killed for a few sous.

That at least, if he had no fortune, was a matter to be considered. He turned from the witch doctor and crawled to the edge of the lagoon, staring into the blue shadows.

The diver was down there clinging to the bottom, his body like something waterlogged and drowned, rolling slightly with the slow perpetual movement of the sea ferns.

Windy Whitell's cigar fell from his mouth. Again the parrot, watching him

one-eyed, hooted brokenly. Whitell could see the devilfish crawl out of its purple cave, then walk upright on three of its arms.

That was what made it look so enormous to the man who was under water.

**T**ORCH HUBBARD waited in the garden of gorgonias which moved like a bed of flowers under a wind.

From this dense thicket of a sudden, a school of bright winged fish shot up like birds breaking from covert. They had seen it too—the serpent arm crawling into the garden.

As these beasts do in the hot season, the devilfish gave out a phosphorescent haze as it rolled along. It flared open slowly like a parachute so that to Torch Hubbard, twisting and looking upward, it seemed to have no definite size. It was infinite. And it brought such darkness that a fleeing sea mouse with its iridescent bristles leaped into a sudden contrast of light.

The kanakas said that the ghost of Tumuraifenua brought the night by holding down the sky with its tentacles. Torch Hubbard believed for that quick instant that this was true.

In the growing moment of darkness another one of those gorgeous snow-capped shells glowed as if of its own light. It pointed the way. It was a shining star. It reminded Torch that there was something priceless and lovely to be won.

But before he could win he must stay and fight this ghost. With a fury at his own fear, he decided that he had run away from enough things in his life. He waited until a tentacle reached down through the thicket of ferns, felt its way around his calf, then coiled itself snugly around his knee.

But whether he was a brave man

or a fool, he could wait no longer than that. He swung his machete, half severed the tentacle, then jumped upward for the surface.

It happened slowly like the vision of a kava drinker where time does not exist. Moments stretched into an insane eternity so that the jump was a slow everlasting sailing through space.

He got to the surface with the beast clinging to his thighs. But his shoulders and arms were in free air now. He swung his machete again.

The beast burst into a furious writhing, fear and anger changing its color definitely from coral to gray. Partly out of water, its arms flayed the surface making that hissing sound which kanakas sing about and imitate with a swish of hula skirts. But this gave way to the steady whirring of the machete.

Abruptly the beast shriveled, paralyzed by one stroke at that part where the arms joined its head. This was the spot they call "the life." The tentacles sank, curling stiffly like a paralytic's fingers.

When Torch climbed over the coral reef he brought the dead octopus with him, although he didn't mean to. The double rows of suckers were congealed, clinging to him, so that he looked like some sort of a sea monster himself, a Caliban bred in the swampy mangroves of the lagoon.

The kanaka witch doctor let out a bird-like screech and went hobbling and stumbling toward the betel palms. With his dim eyes it was probable that he mistook Torch for the devil of his own invention, his own songs and *parapores*. He would not come back when Windy Whitell yelled for help. Nor would any of the natives.

There were some, however who came through the palms and mangroves to-

wards the reef. And these were white: three men and a lean, wild-eyed girl.

Windy Whitell beckoned to them, screaming in a fat man's treble. He pointed to Torch who, having pulled the dead octopus from his loins, had lurched forward in a faint.

The man and the thing he had killed lay there very close to each other, two shapeless heaps. The slain devil was absurdly small, a shriveled, deflated thing with only three legs now. It was big enough as devilfish go, certainly no *octopus punctatus* of the deep Pacific. The "giant devil" which some of the kanakas had seen was a formation of coral which wavered in certain tides and in a certain momentary light.

One thing the white diver had accomplished anyway. He had lain a ghost.

**T**ORCH HUBBARD found himself staring up at the dark forms of three men. One who was as brown and thatch-whiskered as a cocoanut was binding the wounds where the suckers had been pulled away from the living, human flesh.

Another face, like the rare sky-white coral of the lagoon, floated just above Torch. This was Molly Bartlett looking at him as she knelt in the sand. As if his thoughts had been uninterrupted since his last dive, he remembered she had sold her favorite shells.

"I found something for you—down there," he gasped through stretched gray lips. "A shell for your collection. I hid it under a palm branch."

She did not answer or move. But at this first sound of his voice, a fearful and triumphant look shone like sudden sunlight on her wet face.

"How did you get here?" he asked, realizing for the first time that she was a good way from home.

"I heard you'd really left for Yaws Island. I was frightened. I came with this trader and his men."

"You'll like the shell I found. Don't you want to see it? It's a beauty. It made me think of you. It made me remember what I had to do."

It was not until the whiskered old trader had finished binding his wounds, that she got up and hunted for the shell. Torch's eyes followed her, even though someone was talking to him.

"Look here, Hubbard, I got something to tell you."

Torch's eyes roved dizzily, coming back from the girl to a large fattish hulk standing against the sun.

"You've got more guts than I ever dreamed of having," the fat man said. "You deserve more'n a hundred dollars. What you want is to get a job so you and that little lady can get married. That's what you told me, ain't it?" His lips wobbled to a friendly grin.

Torch tried to fix his eyes on the blobs of putty which made Windy Whitell's mouth.

"I saw that fight, all of it," the mouth was saying. "And I'm going to reward you. Instead of giving you a hundred dollars I'm giving you the confession. You can have all the pearls you find."

Molly had come back. She faced Windy Whitell and studied that crooked smile. "You'll pay this man, I hope."

"Well look," Whitell said. "I was just talking to one of the natives. They won't dive even now. Whoever has this concession will have to do his own diving and I'm too old for that."

"Cut it out!" the brown-bearded trader snapped. "The kid's all torn to pieces and you offer him a job which means he's got to dive again!"

"I'm giving him a chance to get rich,

ain't I? He wants something to support a wife, don't he?"

Molly Bartlett sat down by Torch, facing him so she could look at him hard. "Did you hear what he said?"

**T**ORCH stared back at her helplessly. He saw that same searching, measuring look in her eyes. She was letting him make the decision.

If he took the pay he would have to deposit it with the Administrative Office, which meant the would be on the beach again. If he accepted the reef—well, he would have a job, but his flesh cringed at the thought.

He knew the girl was thinking of all this. It was in her hot anxious gaze. She was waiting to see if he still had nerve enough to keep on going.

Without taking his eyes from her, he said, "I don't want his money. I've got to grub this reef for what it's worth."

He expected confidently that she would object, but she looked up to Whitell. "Write it down," she said in a cool, smart voice. "Two of us will sign it as witnesses."

Whitell gave a huge grin as he tore a leaf from his notebook and wrote. When the transaction was finished he lit a fat Manila cigar and puffed com-

fortably. He felt like passing cigars around but this was contrary to his habit. His brand cost money.

The girl still knelt by Torch, so close to him that there was just enough space for her to place that shell which she had unwrapped from its hiding sheath of palm fronds. Snow white, rounded whorls with frilled varices caught all the light of the blue sky as they had caught the fainter light under water. Now, in the sun, the shell was crowned with what looked like frost.

She whispered. "Torch, where did you find this?"

"Down there, deep," he said puzzled. "It was before the devilfish came for me."

She said, "It's a winding-stair shell, a royal wentle-trap they call it. There aren't a dozen perfect ones in the world. I don't know how much money it's worth: a fortune to you anyway."

He tried to get up, but his head sank back dizzily, his eyes clinging to her in an attempt to steady his mind. He tried to think, as he circled in a merry-go-round, just how many of those shells he had seen in that haunted water.

It was like a real merry-go-round now, what with a parrot laughing in wild syncopation to the beating of his blood.