

VARIOUS

ASTOUNDING STORIES
OF SUPER-SCIENCE,
MAY, 1930

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Various

Astounding Stories of Super-Science, May, 1930

Into the Ocean's Depths

A Sequel to "From the Ocean's Depths"

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

I read the telegram for the second time. Then I folded it up, put it in my pocket, and pressed the little button on my desk. My mind was made up.

To save Imee's race of Men-Who-Returned-To-The-Sea, two Land-Men answer the challenge of the dreaded Rorn, corsairs of the under-seas.

"Miss Fentress, I'm leaving this afternoon on an extended trip. The Florida address will reach me after Thursday. Tell Wade and Bennett to carry on. I think you have everything in hand? Is everything clear to you?"

"Yes, Mr. Taylor." Miss Fentress was not in the least surprised. She was used to my sudden trips. The outfit got along perfectly without me; sometimes I think my frequent absences are good for the business. The boys work like the devil to make a fine showing while I'm away. And Miss Fentress is a perfect gem of a secretary. I had nothing to worry about there.

"Fine! Will you get my diggings on the phone?" I hurriedly put my few papers in place, and signed a couple of letters. Then Josef was on the wire.

"Josef? Pack my bags right away, will you? For Florida. The usual things... Yes, right away. I'll be leaving by noon... Yes, driving through."

That was that. There were a few more letters to sign, a few hasty instructions to be given regarding one or two matters that were hanging fire. Then, on my way to my bachelor apartments, I read the telegram through again:

THINK IT WORTH WHILE IF YOU FEEL ADVENTUROUS AND
HAVE NOTHING PRESSING TO COME TO THE MONSTROSITY STOP
MAKE YOUR WILL FIRST STOP SHALL LOOK FOR YOU ANY DAY AS
I KNOW YOU ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR EXCITEMENT AND NEVER
HAVE ANYTHING IMPORTANT TO DO SO DON'T BOTHER TO WIRE
STOP PERHAPS WE SHALL SEE HER AGAIN
MERCER

I smiled at Mercer's frank opinion of my disposition and my importance to my business. But I frowned over the admonition to make my will, and the last telling statement in the wire: "Perhaps we shall see her again." I knew whom he meant by "her."

Josef had my bags waiting for me. A few hurried instructions, most of them shouted over my shoulder, and I was purring down the main drag, my duffel in the rumble, and the roadster headed due south.

"Perhaps we shall see her again." Those words from the telegram kept coming before my eyes. Mercer knew what he was about, if he wanted my company, when he put that line in his wire.

I have already told the story of our first meeting with the strange being from the ocean's depths that, wounded and senseless, had been flung up on the beach near Warren Mercer's Florida estate. In all the history of civilization, no stranger bit of flotsam had ever been cast up by a storm.

Neither of us would ever forget that slim white creature, swathed in her veil of long, light golden hair, as she crouched on the bottom of Mercer's swimming pool, and pictured for us, by means of Mercer's thought-telegraph (my own name for the device; he has a long and scientific title for it with as many joints as a centipede), the story of her people.

They had lived in a country of steaming mist, when the world was very young. They had been forced into the sea to obtain food, and after many generations they had gone back to the sea as man once emerged from it. They had grown webs on their hands and feet, and they breathed oxygen dissolved in water, as fishes do, instead of taking it from the atmosphere. And under the mighty Atlantic, somewhere, were their villages.

The girl had pictured all these things for us, and then – nearly a year ago, now – she had pleaded with us to let her return to her people. And so we had put her back into the sea, and she had bade us farewell. But just before she disappeared, she had done a strange thing.

She had pointed, under the water, out towards the depth, and then, with a broad, sweeping motion of her arm, she had indicated the shore, as though to promise, it seemed to me, that she intended to return.

And now, Mercer said, we might see her again! How? Mercer, conservative and scientific, was not the man to make rash promises. But how...?

The best way to solve the riddle was to reach Mercer, and I broke the speed laws of five states three days running.

I did not even stop at my own little shack. It was only four miles from there to the huge, rather neglected estate, built in boom times by some newly-rich promoter, and dubbed by Mercer "The Monstrosity."

Hardly bothering to slow down, I turned off the concrete onto the long, weed-grown gravel drive, and shot between the two massive, stuccoed pillars that guarded the drive. Their corroded bronze plates, bearing the original title of the estate, "The Billows," were a promise that my long, hard drive was nearly at an end.

As soon as the huge, rambling structure was fairly in sight, I pressed the flat of my hand on the horn button. By the time I came to a locked-wheel halt, with the gravel rattling on my fenders, Mercer was there to greet me.

"It's ten o'clock," he grinned as he shook hands. "I'd set noon as the hour of your arrival. You certainly must have made time, Taylor!"

"I did!" I nodded rather grimly, recalling one or two narrow squeaks. "But who wouldn't, with a wire like this?" I produced the crumpled telegram rather dramatically. "You've got a lot to explain."

"I know it." Mercer was quite serious now. "Come on in and we'll mix highballs with the story."

Locked arm in arm, we entered the house together, and settled ourselves in the huge living room.

Mercer, I could see at a glance, was thinner and browner than when we had parted, but otherwise, he was the same lithe, soft-mannered little scientist I had known for years; dark-eyed, with an almost beautiful mouth, outlined by a slim, closely cropped and very black moustache.

"Well, here's to our lady from the sea," proposed Mercer, when Carson, his man, had brought the drinks and departed. I nodded, and we both sipped our highballs.

"Briefly," said my friend, "this is the story. You and I know that somewhere beneath the Atlantic there are a people who went back to whence they came. We have seen one of those people. I propose that, since they cannot come to us, we go to them. I have made preparations to go to them, and I wanted you to have the opportunity of going with me, if you wish."

"But how, Mercer? And what – "

He interrupted with a quick, nervous gesture.

"I'll show you, presently. I believe it can be done. It will be a dangerous adventure, though; I was not joking when I advised you to make your will. An uncertain venture, too. But, I believe, most wonderfully worth while." His eyes were shining now with all the enthusiasm of the scientist, the dreamer.

"It sounds mighty appealing," I said. "But how..."

"Finish your drink and I'll show you."

I downed what was left of my highball in two mighty gulps.

"Lead me to it, Mercer!"

He smiled his quiet smile and led the way to what had been the billiard room of "The Billows," but which was the laboratory of "The Monstrosity." The first thing my eyes fell upon were two gleaming metal objects suspended from chains let into the ceiling.

"Diving suits," explained Mercer. "Rather different from anything you've ever seen."

They were different. The body was a perfect globe, as was the head-piece. The legs were cylindrical, jointed at knee and thigh with huge discs. The feet were solid metal, curved rocker-like on the bottom, and at the ends of the arms were three hooked talons, the concave sides of two talons facing the concave side of the third. The arms were hinged at the elbow just as the legs were hinged, but there was a huge ball-and-socket joint at the shoulder.

"But Mercer!" I protested. "No human being could even stand up with that weight of metal on and around him!"

"You're mistaken, Taylor," smiled Mercer. "That is not solid metal, you see. And it is an aluminum alloy that is not nearly as heavy as it looks. There are two walls, slightly over an inch apart, braced by innumerable trusses. The fabric is nearly as strong as that much solid metal, and infinitely lighter. They work all right, Taylor. I know, because I've tried them."

"And this hump on the back?" I asked, walking around the odd, dangling figures, hanging like bloated metal skeletons from their chains. I had thought the bodies were perfect globes; I could see now that at the rear there was a humplike excrescence across the shoulders.

"Air," explained Mercer. "There are two other tanks inside the globular body. That shape was adopted, by the way, because a globe can withstand more pressure than any other shape. And we may have to go where pressures are high."

"And so," I said, "we don't these things and stroll out into the Atlantic looking for the girl and her friends?"

"Hardly. They're not quite the apparel for so long a stroll. You haven't seen all the marvels yet. Come along!"

He led the way through the patio, beside the pool in which our strange visitor from the depths had lived during her brief stay with us, and out into the open again. As we neared the sea, I became aware, for the first time, of a faint, muffled hammering sound, and I glanced at Mercer inquiringly.

"Just a second," he smiled. "Then – there she is, Taylor!"

I stood still and stared. In a little cove, cradled in a cunning, spidery structure of wood, a submarine rested upon the ways.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "You're going into this right, Mercer!"

"Yes. Because I think it's immensely worth while. But come along and let me show you the *Santa Maria*– named after the flagship of Columbus' little fleet. Come on!"

Two men with army automatics strapped significantly to their belts nodded courteously as we came up. They were the only men in sight, but from the hammering going on inside there must have been quite a sizeable crew busy in the interior. A couple of raw pine shacks, some little distance away, provided quarters for, I judged, twenty or thirty men.

"Had her shipped down in pieces," explained Mercer. "The boat that brought it lay to off shore and we lightered the parts ashore. A tremendous job. But she'll be ready for the water in a week; ten days at the latest."

"You're a wonder," I said, and I meant it.

Mercer patted the red-leaded side of the submarine affectionately. "Later," he said, "I'll take you inside, but they're busy as the devil in there, and the sound of the hammers fairly makes your head ring. You'll see it all later, anyway – if you feel you'd like to share the adventure with me?"

"Listen," I grinned as we turned back towards the house, "it'll take more than those two lads with the pop-guns to keep me out of the *Santa Maria* when she sails – or dives, or whatever it is she's supposed to do!"

Mercer laughed softly, and we walked the rest of the way in silence. I imagine we were both pretty busy with our thoughts; I know that I was. And several times, as we walked along, I looked back over my shoulder towards the ungainly red monster straddling on her spindling wooden legs – and towards the smiling Atlantic, glistening serenely in the sun.

Mercer was so busy with a thousand and one details that I found myself very much in the way if I followed him around, so I decided to loaf.

For weeks after we had put our strange girl visitor back into the sea from whence Mercer had taken her, I had watched from a comfortable seat well above the high-water mark that commanded that section of shore. For I had felt sure by that last strange gesture of hers that she meant to return.

I located my old seat, and I found that it had been used a great deal since I had left it. There were whole winnows of cigarette butts, some of them quite fresh, all around. Mercer, cold-blooded scientist as he was, had hoped against hope that she would return too.

It was a very comfortable seat, in the shade of a little cluster of palms, and for the next several days I spent most of my time there, reading and smoking – and watching. No matter how interesting the book, I found myself, every few seconds, lifting my eyes to search the beach and the sea.

I am not sure, but I think it was the eighth day after my arrival that I looked up and saw, for the first time, something besides the smiling beach and the ceaseless procession of incoming rollers. For an instant I doubted what I saw; then, with a cry that stuck in my throat, I dropped my book unheeded to the sand and raced towards the shore.

She was there! White and slim, her pale gold hair clinging to her body and gleaming like polished metal in the sun, she stood for a moment, while the spray frothed at her thighs. Behind her, crouching below the surface, I could distinguish two other forms. She had returned, and not alone!

One long, slim arm shot out toward me, held level with the shoulder: the well-remembered gesture of greeting. Then she too crouched below the surface that she might breathe.

As I ran out onto the wet sand, the waves splashing around my ankles all unheeded, she rose again, and now I could see her lovely smile, and her dark, glowing eyes. I was babbling – I do not know what. Before I could reach her, she smiled and sank again below the surface.

I waded on out, laughing excitedly, and as I came close to her, she bobbed up again out of the spray, and we greeted each other in the manner of her people, hands outstretched, each gripping the shoulder of the other.

She made a quick motion then, with both hands, as though she placed a cap upon the shining glory of her head, and I understood in an instant what she wished: the antenna of Mercer's thought-telegraph, by the aid of which she had told us the story of herself and her people.

I nodded and smiled, and pointed to the spot where she stood, trying to show her by my expression that I understood, and by my gesture, that she was to wait here for me. She smiled and nodded in return, and crouched again below the surface of the heaving sea.

As I turned toward the beach, I caught a momentary glimpse of the two who had come with her. They were a man and a woman, watching me with wide, half-curious, half-frightened eyes. I recognized them instantly from the picture she had impressed upon my mind nearly a year ago. She had brought with her on her journey her mother and her father.

Stumbling, my legs shaking with excitement, I ran through the water. With my wet trousers flapping against my ankles, I sprinted towards the house.

I found Mercer in the laboratory. He looked up as I came rushing in, wet from the shoulders down, and I saw his eyes grow suddenly wide.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I was breathless. And Mercer took the words from my mouth before I could utter them.

"She's come back!" he cried. "She's come back! Taylor – she has?" He gripped me, his fingers like steel clamps, shaking me with his amazing strength.

"Yes." I found my breath and my voice at the same instant. "She's there, just where we put her into the sea, and there are two others with her – her mother and her father. Come on, Mercer, and bring your thought gadget!"

"I can't!" he groaned. "I've built an improvement on it into the diving armor, and a central instrument on the sub, but the old apparatus is strewn all over the table, here, just as it was when we used it the other time. We'll have to bring her here."

"Get a basin, then!" I said. "We'll carry her back to the pool just as we took her from it. Hurry!"

And we did just that. Mercer snatched up a huge glass basin used in his chemistry experiments, and we raced down to the shore. As well as we could we explained our wishes, and she smiled her quick smile of understanding. Crouching beneath the water, she turned to her companions, and I could see her throat move as she spoke to them. They seemed to protest, dubious and frightened, but in the end she seemed to reassure them, and we picked her up, swathed in her hair as in a silken gown, and carried her, her head immersed in the basin of water, that she might breathe in comfort, to the pool.

It all took but a few minutes, but it seemed hours. Mercer's hands were shaking as he handed me the antenna for the girl and another for myself, and his teeth were chattering as he spoke.

"Hurry, Taylor!" he said. "I've set the switch so that she can do the sending, while we receive. Quickly, man!"

I leaped into the pool and adjusted the antenna on her head, making sure that the four electrodes of the crossed curved members pressed against the front and back and both sides of her head. Then, hastily, I climbed out of the pool, seated myself on its edge, and put on my own antenna.

Perhaps I should say at this time that Mercer's device for conveying thought could do no more than convey what was in the mind of the person sending. Mercer and I could convey actual words and sentences, because we understood each other's language, and by thinking in words, we conveyed our thoughts in words. One received the impression, almost, of having heard actual speech.

We could not communicate with the girl in this fashion, however, for we did not understand her speech. She had to convey her thoughts to us by means of mental pictures which told her story. And this is the story of her pictures unfolded.

First, in sketchy, half-formed pictures, I saw her return to the village, of her people; her welcome there, with curious crowds around her, questioning her. Their incredulous expressions as she told them of her experience were ludicrous. Her meeting with her father and mother brought a little catch to my throat, and I looked across the pool at Mercer. I knew that he, too, was glad that we had put her back into the sea when she wished to go.

These pictures faded hastily, and for a moment there was only the circular swirling as of gray mist; that was the symbol she adopted to denote the passing of time. Then, slowly, the picture cleared.

It was the same village I had seen before, with its ragged, warped, narrow streets, and its row of dome-shaped houses, for all the world like Eskimo igloos, but made of coral and various forms of vegetation. At the outskirts of the village I could see the gently moving, shadowy forms of weird submarine growths, and the quick darting shapes of innumerable fishes.

Some few people were moving along the streets, walking with oddly springy steps. Others, a larger number, darted here and there above the roofs, some hovering in the water as gulls hover in the air, lazily, but the majority apparently on business or work to be executed with dispatch.

Suddenly, into the midst of this peaceful scene, three figures came darting. They were not like the people of the village, for they were smaller, and instead of being gracefully slim they were short and powerful in build. They were not white like the people of the girl's village, but swarthy, and they were dressed in a sort of tight-fitting shirt of gleaming leather – shark-skin, I learned later. They

carried, tucked through a sort of belt made of twisted vegetation, two long, slim knives of pointed stone or bone.

But it was not until they seemed to come close to me that I saw the great point of difference. Their faces were scarcely human. The nose had become rudimentary, leaving a large, blank expanse in the middle of their faces that gave them a peculiarly hideous expression. Their eyes were almost perfectly round, and very fierce, and their mouths huge and fishlike. Beneath their sharp, jutting jaws, between the angle of the jaws and a spot beneath the ears, were huge, longitudinal slits, that intermittently showed blood-red, like fresh gashes cut in the sides of their throats. I could see even the hard, bony cover that protected these slits, and I realized that these were gills! Here were representatives of a people that had gone back to the sea ages before the people of the girl's village.

Their coming caused a sort of panic in the village, and the three noseless creatures strode down the principal street grinning hugely, glancing from right to left, and showing their sharp pointed teeth. They looked more like sharks than like human beings.

A committee of five gray old men met the visitors, and conducted them into one of the larger houses. Insolently, the leader of the three shark-faced creatures made demands, and the scene changed swiftly to make clear the nature of those demands.

The village was to give a number of its finest young men and women to the shark-faced people; about fifty of each sex, I gathered, to be servants, slaves, to the noseless ones.

The scene shifted quickly to the interior of the house. The old men were shaking their heads, protesting, explaining. There was fear on their faces, but there was determination, too.

One of the three envoys snarled and came closer to the five old men, lifting a knife threateningly. I thought for an instant that he was about to strike down one of the villagers; then the picture dissolved into another, and I saw that he was but threatening them with what he could cause to happen.

The fate of the village and the villagers, were the demands of the three refused, was a terrible one. Hordes of the noseless creatures came swarming. They tore the houses apart, and with their long, slim white weapons they killed the old men and women, and the children. The villagers fought desperately, but they were outnumbered. The shark-skin kirtles of the invaders turned their knives like armor, and the sea grew red with swirling blood that spread like scarlet smoke through the water. Then, this too faded, and I saw the old men cowering, pleading with the three terrible envoys.

The leader of the three shark-faced creatures spoke again. He would give them time – a short revolving swirl of gray that indicated only a brief time, apparently – and return for an answer. Grinning evilly, the three turned away, left the dome-shaped house, and darted away over the roofs of the village into the dim darkness of the distant waters.

I saw the girl, then, talking to the elders. They smiled sadly, and shook their heads hopelessly. She argued with them earnestly, painting a picture for them: Mercer and myself, as she viewed us, tall and very strong and with great wisdom in our faces. We too walked along the streets of the village. The hordes of shark-faced ones came, like a swarm of monstrous sharks, and – the picture was very vague and nebulous, now – we put them to rout.

She wished us to help her, she had convinced the elders that we could. She, her mother and father, started out from the village. Three times they had fought with sharks, and each time they had killed them. They had found the shore, the very spot where we had put her back into the sea. Then there was a momentary flash of the picture she had called up, of Mercer and I putting the shark-faced hordes to rout, and then, startlingly, I was conscious of that high, pleading sound – the sound that I had heard once before, when she had begged us to return her to her people.

The sound that I knew was her word for "*Please!*"

There was a little click. Mercer had turned the switch. He would transmit now; she and I would listen.

In the center of the village – how vaguely and clumsily he pictured it! – rested the *Santa Maria*. From a trap in the bottom two bulging, gleaming figures emerged. Rushing up, a glimpse through the face-plates revealed Mercer and myself. The shark-faced hordes descended, and Mercer waved something, something like a huge bottle, towards them. None of the villagers were in sight.

The noseless ones swooped down on us fearlessly, knives drawn, pointed teeth revealed in fiendish grins. But they did not reach us. By dozens, by scores, they went limp and floated slowly to the floor of the ocean. Their bodies covered the streets, they sprawled across the roofs of the houses. And in a few seconds there was not one alive of all the hundreds who had come!

I looked down at the girl. She was smiling up at me through the clear water, and once again I felt the strange, strong tug at my heart-strings. Her great dark eyes glowed with a perfect confidence, a supreme faith.

We had made her a promise.

I wondered if it would be possible to keep it.

In the day following, the *Santa Maria* was launched. Two days later, trial trips and final adjustments completed, we submerged for the great adventure.

It sounds very simple when recorded thus in a few brief lines. It was not, however, such a simple matter. Those three days were full of hectic activity. Mercer and I did not sleep more than four hours any of those three nights.

We were too busy to talk. Mercer worked frantically in his laboratory, slaving feverishly beside the big hood. I overlooked the tests of the submarine and the loading of the necessary supplies.

The girl we had taken back to her parents, giving her to understand that she was to wait. They went away, but every few hours returned, as though to urge us to greater haste. And at last we were ready, and the girl and her two companions seated themselves on the tiny deck of the *Santa Maria*, just forward of the conning tower, holding themselves in place by the chains. We had already instructed the girl in her duties: we would move slowly, and she should guide us, by pointing either to the right or the left.

I will confess I gave a last long, lingering look at the shore before the hatch of the conning tower was clamped down. I was not exactly afraid, but I wondered if I would ever step foot on solid land again.

Standing in the conning tower beside Mercer, I watched the sea rise at an angle to meet us, and I dodged instinctively as the first green wave pelted against the thick porthole through which I was looking. An instant later the water closed over the top of the conning tower, and at a gentle angle we nosed towards the bottom of the sea.

An account of the trip itself, perhaps, does not belong in this record. It was not a pleasant adventure in itself, for the *Santa Maria*, like every undersea craft, I suppose, was close, smelly, and cramped. We proceeded very slowly, for only by so doing could our guide keep her bearings, and how she found the way was a mystery to all of us. We could see but very little, despite the clearness of the water.

It was by no means a sight-seeing trip. For various reasons, Mercer had cut our crew to the minimum. We had two navigating officers, experienced submarine men both, and five sailors, also experienced in undersea work. With such a short crew, Mercer and I were both kept busy.

Bonnett, the captain, was a tall, dark chap, stooped from years in the low, cramped quarters of submarines. Duke, our second-officer, was a youngster hardly out of his 'teens, and as clever as they come. And although both of them, and the crew as well, must have been agog with questions, neither by word nor look did they express their feelings. Mercer had paid for obedience without curiosity, and he got it.

We spent the first night on the bottom, for the simple reason that had we come to the surface, we might have come down into territory unfamiliar to our guide. As soon as the first faint light began to filter down, however, we proceeded, and Mercer and I crowded together into the conning tower.

"We're close," said Mercer. "See how excited they are, all three of them."

The three strange creatures were holding onto the chains and staring over the bulging side of the ship. Every few seconds the girl turned and looked back at us, smiling, her eyes shining with excitement. Suddenly she pointed straight down, and held out her arm in unmistakable gesture. We were to stop.

Mercer conveyed the order instantly to Bonnett at the controls, and all three of our guides dived gracefully off the ship and disappeared into the depths below.

"Let her settle to the bottom, Bonnett," ordered Mercer. "Slowly ... slowly..."

Bonnett handled the ship neatly, keeping her nicely trimmed. We came to rest on the bottom in four or five seconds, and as Mercer and I stared out eagerly through the round glass ports of the conning tower, we could see, very dimly, a cluster of dark, rounded projections cropping out from the bed of the ocean. We were only a few yards from the edge of the girl's village.

The scene was exactly as we had pictured it, save that it was not nearly as clear and well lighted. I realized that our eyes were not accustomed to the gloom, as were those of the girl and her people, but I could distinguish the vague outlines of the houses, and the slowly swaying shapes of monstrous growths.

"Well, Taylor," said Mercer, his voice shaking with excitement, "here we are! And here" – peering out through the glass-covered port again – "are her people!"

The whole village was swarming around us. White bodies hovered around us as moths around a light. Faces pressed against the ports and stared in at us with great, amazed eyes.

Then, suddenly the crowd of curious creatures parted, and the girl came darting up with the five ancients she had showed us before. They were evidently the council responsible for the government of the village, or something of the sort, for the other villagers bowed their heads respectfully as they passed.

The girl came close to the port through which I was looking, and gestured earnestly. Her face was tense and anxious, and from time to time she glanced over her shoulder, as though she feared the coming of an enemy.

"Our time's short, I take it, if we are to be of service," said Mercer. "Come on, Taylor; into the diving suits!"

I signaled the girl that we understood, and would hurry. Then I followed Mercer into our tiny stateroom.

"Remember what I've told you," he said, as we slipped into the heavy woolen undergarments we were to wear inside the suits. "You understand how to handle your air, I believe, and you'll have no difficulty getting around in the suit if you'll just remember to go slowly. Your job is to get the whole village to get away when the enemy is sighted. Get them to come this way from the village, towards the ship, understand. The current comes from this direction; the way the vegetation bends shows that. And keep the girl's people away until I signal you to let them return. And remember to take your electric lantern. Don't burn it more than is necessary; the batteries are not large and the bulb draws a lot of current. Ready?"

I was, but I was shaking a little as the men helped me into the mighty armor that was to keep the pressure of several atmospheres from crushing my body. The helmet was the last piece to be donned; when it was screwed in place I stood there like a mummy, almost completely rigid.

Quickly we were put into the air lock, together with a large iron box containing a number of things Mercer needed. Darkness and water rushed in on us. The water closed over my head. I became aware of the soft, continuous popping sounds of the air-bubbles escaping from the relief valve of the head-piece.

For a moment I was dizzy and more than a little nauseated. I could feel the cold sweat pricking my forehead. Then there was a sudden glow of light from before me, and I started walking towards it. I found I could walk now; not easily, but, after I caught the trick of it, without much difficulty. I could move my arms, too, and the interlocking hooks that served me for fingers. When my real fingers closed upon a little cross-bar at the end of the armored arms, and pulled the bars towards me, the steel claws outside came together, like a thumb and two fingers.

In a moment we stood upon the bottom of the ocean. I turned my head inside the helmet, and there, beside me, was the sleek, smooth side of the *Santa Maria*. On my other side was Mercer, a huge, dim figure in his diving armor. He made an awkward gesture towards his head, and I suddenly remembered something.

Before me, where I could operate it with a thrusting movement of my chin, was a toggle switch. I snapped it over, and heard Mercer's voice: " – n't forget everything I tell him."

"I know it," I said mentally to him. "I was rather rattled. O.K. now, however. Anything I can do?"

"Yes. Help me with this box, and then get the girl to put on the antenna you'll find there. Don't forget the knife and the light."

"Right!" I bent over the box with him, and we both came near falling. We opened the lid, however, and I hooked the knife and the light into their proper places outside my armor. Then, with the antenna for the girl, so that we could establish connections with her, and through her, with the villagers, I moved off.

This antenna was entirely different from the one used in previous experiments. The four cross-members that clasped the head were finer, and at their junction was a flat black circular box, from which rose a black rod some six inches in height, and topped by a black sphere half the size of my fist.

These perfected thought-telegraphs (I shall continue to use my own designation for them, as clearer and more understandable than Mercer's) did not need connecting wires; they conveyed their impulses by Hertzian waves to a master receiver on the *Santa Maria*, which amplified them and re-broadcast them so that each of us could both send and receive at any time.

As I turned, I found the girl beside me, waiting anxiously. Behind her were the five ancients. I slipped the antenna over her head, and instantly she began telling me that danger was imminent.

To facilitate matters, I shall describe her messages as though she spoke; indeed, her pictures were as clear, almost, as speech in my native tongue. And at times she did use certain sound-words; it was in this way that I learned, by inference, that her name was *Imee*, that her people were called *Teemorn* (this may have been the name of the community, or perhaps it was interchangeable – I am not sure) and that the shark-faced people were the *Rorn*.

"The Rorn come!" she said quickly. "Two days past, the three came again, and our old men refused to give up the slaves. Today they will return, these Rorn, and my people, the Teemorn will all be made dead!"

Then I told her what Mercer had said: that she and every one of her people must flee swiftly and hide, beyond the boat, a distance beyond the village. Mercer and I would wait here, and when the Rorn came, it was they who would be made dead, as we had promised. Although how, I admitted to myself, being careful to hide the thought that she might not sense it, I didn't know. We had been too busy since the girl's arrival to go into details.

She turned and spoke quickly to the old men. They looked at me doubtfully, and she urged them vehemently. They turned back towards the village, and in a moment the Teemorn were stalking by obediently, losing their slim white forms in the gloom behind the dim bulk of the *Santa Maria*, resting so quietly on the sand.

They were hardly out of sight when suddenly Mercer spoke through the antenna fitted inside my helmet.

"They're coming!" he cried. "Look above and to your right! The Rorn, as Imee calls them, have arrived!"

I looked up and beheld a hundred – no, a thousand! – shadowy forms darting down on the village, upon us. They, too, were just as the girl had pictured them: short, swart beings with but the suggestion of a nose, and with pulsing gill-covers under the angles of their jaws. Each one gripped

a long, slim white knife in either hand, and their tight-fitting shark-skin armor gleamed darkly as they swooped down upon us.

Eagerly I watched my friend. In the claspings talons of his left hand he held a long, slim flask that glinted even in that dim, confusing twilight. Two others, mates to the first, dangled at his waist. Lifting it high above his head, he swung his metal-clad right arm, and shattered the flask he held in his taloned left hand.

For an instant nothing happened, save that fluttering bits of broken glass shimmered their way to the sand. Then the horde of noseless ones seemed to dissolve, as hundreds of limp and sprawling bodies sank to the sand. Perhaps a half of that great multitude seemed struck dead.

"Hydrocyanic acid, Taylor!" cried Mercer exultantly. "Even diluted by the sea water, it kills almost instantly. Go back and make sure that none of the girl's people come back before the current has washed this away, or they'll go in the same fashion. Warn her to keep them back!"

I hurried toward the *Santa Maria*, thinking urgent warnings for Imee's benefit. "Stay back! Stay back, Imee! The Rorn are falling to the sand, we have made many of them dead, but the danger for you and your people is still here. Stay back!"

"Truly, do the Rorn become dead? I would like to see that with my own eyes. Be careful that they do not make you dead also, and your friend, for they have large brains, these Rorn."

"Do not come to see with your own eyes, or you will be as the Rorn!" I hurried around the submarine, to keep her back by force, if that were necessary. "You must –"

"Help, Taylor!" cut in a voice – Mercer's. "These devils have got me!"

"Right with you!" I turned and hurried back as swiftly as I could, stumbling over the bodies of dead Rorn that had settled everywhere on the clean yellow sand.

I found Mercer in the grip of six of the shark-faced creatures. They were trying desperately to stab him, but their knives bent and broke against the metal of his armor. So busy were they with him that they did not notice me coming up, but finding their weapons useless, they suddenly snatched him up, one at either arm and either leg, and two grasping him by the head-piece, and darted away with him, carrying his bulging metal body between them like a battering ram, while he kicked and struggled impotently.

"They are taking him to the Place of Darkness!" cried Imee suddenly, having read my impressions of the scene. "Oh, go quickly, quickly, toward the direction of your best hand – to your right! I shall follow!"

"No! No! Stay back!" I warned her frantically. All but these six Rorn had fallen victims of Mercer's hellish poison, and while they seemed to be suffering no ill effects, I thought it more than likely that some sly current might bring the deadly poison to the girl, did she come this way, and kill her as surely as it had killed these hundreds of Rorn.

To the right, she had said. Towards the Place of Darkness. I hurried out of the village in the direction she indicated, towards the distant gleam of Mercer's armor, rapidly being lost in the gloom.

"I'm coming, Mercer!" I called to him. "Delay them as much as you can. You're going faster than I can."

"I can't help myself much," replied Mercer. "Doing what I can. Strong – they're devilish strong, Taylor. And, at close range, I can see you were right. They have true gill-covers; their noses are rudimentary and –"

"The devil take your scientific observations! Drag! Slow them down. I'm losing sight of you. For heaven's sake, drag!"

"I'm doing what I can. Damn you, if I could only get a hand free –" I realized that this last was directed at his captors, and plunged on.

Huge, monstrous growths swirled around me like living things. My feet crunched on shelled things, and sank into soft and slimy creeping things on the bottom. I cursed the water that held me back so gently yet so firmly; I cursed the armor that made it so hard for me to move my legs. But I kept on, and at last I began to gain on them; I could see them quite distinctly, bending over Mercer, working on him...

"Do your best, Taylor," urged Mercer desperately. "We're on the edge of a sort of cliff; a fault in the structure of the ocean bed. They're tying me with strong cords of leather. Tying a huge stone to my body. I think they –" I had a momentary flash of the scene as Mercer saw it at that instant: the horrid noseless face close to his, the swart bodies moving with amazing agility. And at his very feet, a yawning precipice, holding nothing but darkness, leading down and down into nothingness.

"Run quickly!" It was Imee. She, too, had seen what I had seen. "That is the Place of Darkness, where we take those whom the Five deem worthy of the Last Punishment. They will tie the stone to him, and bear him out above the Blackness, and then they will let him go! Quickly! Quickly!"

I was almost upon them now, and one of the six turned and saw me. Three of them darted towards me, while the others held Mercer flat upon the edge of the precipice. If they had only realized that by rolling his armored body a foot or two, he would sink ... without the stone... But they did not. Their brains had little reasoning power, apparently. The attaching of a stone was necessary, in their experience; it was necessary now.

With my left hand I unhooked my light; I already gripped my knife in my right hand. Swinging the light sharply against my leg, I struck the toggle-switch, and a beam of intense brilliancy shot through the gloom. It aided me, as I had thought it would; it blinded these large-eyed denizens of the deep.

Swiftly I struck out with the knife. It hacked harmlessly into the shark-skin garment of one of the men, and I stabbed out again. Two of the men leaped for my right arm, but the knife found, this time, the throat of the third. My beam of light showed palely red, for a moment, and the body of the Rorn toppled slowly to the bed of the ocean.

The two shark-faced creatures were hammering at me with their fists, dragging at my arms and legs, but I plunged on desperately towards Mercer. Myriads of fish, all shapes and colors and sizes, attracted by the light, swarmed around us.

"Good boy!" Mercer commended. "See if you can break this last flask of acid, here at my waist. See –"

With a last desperate plunge, fairly dragging the two Rorn who tugged at me, I fell forward. With the clenched steel talons of my right hand, I struck at the silvery flask I could see dangling from Mercer's waist. I hit it, but only a glancing blow; the flask did not shatter.

"Again!" commanded Mercer. "It's heavy annealed glass – hydrocyanic acid – terrible stuff – even the fumes –"

I paid but slight heed. The two Rorn dragged me back, but I managed to crawl forward on my knees, and with all my strength, I struck at the flask again.

This time it shattered, and I lay where I fell, sobbing with weakness, looking out through the side window of my head-piece.

The five Rorn seemed to suddenly lose their strength. They struggled limply for a moment, and then floated down to the waiting sand beneath us.

"Finish," remarked Mercer coolly. "And just in time. Let's see if we can find our way back to the *Santa Maria*."

We were weary, and we plodded along slowly, twin trails of air-bubbles like plumes waving behind us, rushing upwards to the surface. I felt strangely alone at the moment, isolated, cut off from all mankind, on the bottom of the Atlantic.

"Coming to meet you, all of us," Imee signaled us. "Be careful where you step, so that you do not walk in a circle and find again the Place of Darkness. It is very large."

"Probably some uncharted deep," threw in Mercer. "Only the larger ones have been located."

For my part, I was too weary to think. I just staggered on.

A crowd of slim, darting white shapes surrounded us. They swam before us, showing the way. The five patriarchs walked majestically before us; and between us, smiling at us through the thick lenses of our headpieces, walked Imee. Oh, it was a triumphal procession, and had I been less weary, I presume I would have felt quite the hero.

I mee pictured for us, as we went along, the happiness, the gratefulness of her people. Already, she informed us, great numbers of young men were clearing away the bodies of the dead Rorn. She was so happy she could hardly restrain herself.

A dim skeleton shape bulked up at my left. I turned to look at it, and Imee, watching me through the lights of my head-piece, nodded and smiled.

Yes, this was the very hulk by which she had been swimming when the shark had attacked her, the shark which had been the cause of the accident. She darted on to show me the very rib upon which her head had struck, stunning her so that she had drifted, unconscious and storm-tossed, to the shore of Mercer's estate.

I studied the wreck. It was battered and tilted on its beam ends, but I could still make out the high poop that marked it as a very old ship.

"A Spanish galleon, Mercer," I conjectured.

"I believe so." And then, in pictured form, for Imee's benefit, "It has been here while much time passed?"

"Yes." Imee came darting back to us, smiling. "Since before the Teemorn, my people were here. A Rorn we made prisoner once told us his people discovered it first. They went into this strange skeleton, and inside were many blocks of very bright stone." She pictured quite clearly bars of dully-glinting bullion. Evidently the captive had told his story well.

"These stones, which were so bright, the Rorn took to their city, which is three swims distant." How far that might be, I could not even guess. A swim, it seemed, was the distance a Teemorn could travel before the need for rest became imperative. "There were many Rorn, and they each took one stone. And of them, they made a house for their leader." The leader, as she pictured him, being the most hideous travesty of a thing in semi-human form that the mind could imagine: incredibly old and wrinkled and ugly and gray, his noseless face seamed with cunning, his eyes red rimmed and terrible, his teeth gleaming, white and sharp, like fangs.

"A whole house, except the roof," she went on. "It is there now, and it is gazed at with much admiration by all the Rorn. All this our prisoner told us before we took him, with a rock made fast to him, out over the Place of Darkness. He, too, was very proud of their leader's house."

"Treasure!" I commented to Mercer. "If we could find the city of the Rorn, we might make the trip pay for itself!"

I could sense his wave of amusement.

"I think," he replied, "I'd rather stand it myself. These Rorn don't appeal to me."

It was over half an hour before we were at last free of our diving suits.

The first thing Captain Bonnett said:

"We've got to get to the surface, and that quickly. Our air supply is running damnably low. By the time we blow out the tanks we'll be just about out. And foul air will keep us here until we rot. I'm sorry, sir, but that's the way matters stand."

Mercer, white-faced and ill, stared at him dazedly.

"Air?" he repeated groggily – I knew just how he felt – "We should have lots of air. The specifications –"

"But we're dealing with facts, not specifications, sir," said Captain Bonnett. "Another two hours here and we won't leave ever."

"Then it can't be helped, Captain," muttered Mercer. "We'll go up. And back. For more compressed air. We must remember to plot our course exactly. You kept the record on the way out as I instructed you?"

"Yes, sir," said Captain Bonnett.

"Just a minute, then," said Mercer.

Weakly he made his way forward to the little cubbyhole in which was housed the central station of his thought-telegraph. I didn't even inspect the gleaming maze of apparatus. I merely watched him dully as he plugged in an antenna similar to the one we had left with Imee, and adjusted the things on his head.

His eyes brightened instantly. "She's still wearing her antenna," he said swiftly over his shoulder. "I'll tell her that something's happened; we must leave, but that we will return."

He sat there, frowning intently for a moment, and then dragged the antenna wearily from his head. He touched a switch somewhere, and several softly glowing bulbs turned slowly red and then dark.

"You and I," he groaned, "had better go to bed. We overdid it. She understands, I think. Terribly sorry, terribly disappointed. Some sort of celebration planned, I gather. Captain Bonnett!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You may proceed now as you think best," said Mercer. "We're retiring. Be sure and chart the course back, so we may locate this spot again."

"Yes, sir!" said Captain Bonnett.

When I awoke we were at anchor, our deck barely awash, before the deserted beach of Mercer's estate. Still feeling none too well, Mercer and I made our way to the narrow deck.

Captain Bonnett was waiting for us, spruce in his blue uniform, his shoulders bowed as always.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he offered, smiling crisply. "The open air seems good, doesn't it?"

It did. There was a fresh breeze blowing in from the Atlantic, and I filled my lungs gratefully. I had not realized until that instant just how foul the air below had been.

"Very fine, Captain," said Mercer, nodding. "You have signaled the men on shore to send out a boat to take us off?"

"Yes, sir; I believe they're launching her now."

"And the chart of our course – did the return trip check with the other?"

"Perfectly, sir." Captain Bonnett reached in an inner pocket of his double-breasted coat, extracted two folded pages, and extended them, with a little bow, to Mercer.

Just as Mercer's eager fingers touched the precious papers, however, the wind whisked them from Bonnett's grasp and whirled them into the water.

Bonnett gasped and gazed after them for a split second; then, barely pausing to tear off his coat, he plunged over the side.

He tried desperately, but before he could reach either one of the tossing white specks, they were washed beneath the surface and disappeared. Ten minutes later, his uniform bedraggled and shapeless, he pulled himself on deck.

"I'm sorry, sir," he gasped, out of breath. "Sorrier than I can say. I tried – "

Mercer, white-faced and struggling with his emotions, looked down and turned away.

"You don't remember the bearings, I suppose?" he ventured tonelessly.

"I'm sorry – no."

"Thank you, Captain, for trying so hard to recover the papers," said Mercer. "You'd better change at once; the wind is sharp."

The captain bowed and disappeared down the conning tower. Then Mercer turned to me, and a smile struggled for life.

"Well, Taylor, we helped her out, anyway," he said slowly. "I'm sorry that – that Imee will misunderstand when we don't come back."

"But, Mercer," I said swiftly, "perhaps we'll be able to find our way back to her. You thought before, you know, that – "

"But I can see now what an utterly wild-goose chase it would have been." Mercer shook his head slowly. "No, old friend, it would be impossible. And – Imee will not come again to guide us; she will think we have deserted her. And" – he smiled slowly up into my eyes – "perhaps it is as well. After all, the photographs and the data I wanted would do the world no practical good. We did Imee and her people a good turn; let's content ourselves with that. I, for one, am satisfied."

"And I, old timer," I said, placing my hand affectionately upon his shoulder. "Here's the boat. Shall we go ashore?"

We did go ashore, silently. And as we got out of the boat, and set foot again upon the sand, we both turned and looked out across the smiling Atlantic, dancing brightly in the sun.

The mighty, mysterious Atlantic – home of Imee and her people!

Murder Madness

BEGINNING A FOUR-PART NOVEL

By Murray Leinster

CHAPTER I

The engines of the *Almirante Gomez* were going dead slow. Away up beside her monster funnels her siren blew dismally, *Whoo-oo-oo-oo!* and was silent for the regulation period, and blew desolately again into the clinging gray mist that ringed her all about.

Murder Madness! Seven Secret Service men had completely disappeared. Another had been found a screaming, homicidal maniac, whose fingers writhed like snakes. So Bell, of the secret "Trade," plunges into South America after The Master – the mighty, unknown octopus of power whose diabolical poison threatens a continent!

Her decks were wet and glistening. Droplets of water stood upon the deck-stanchions, and dripped from the outer edge of the roof above the promenade deck. A thin, swirling fog lay soggy upon the water and the big steamer went dead slow upon her course, sending dismal and depressing blasts from her horn from time to time. It was barely possible to see from one side of the ship to the other. It was surely impossible to see the bow from a point half astern.

Charley Bell went forward along the promenade deck. He passed Senor Ortiz, ex-Minister of the Interior of the Argentine Republic. Ortiz bowed to him punctiliously, but Bell had a sudden impression that the Argentine's face was gray and ghastly. He checked himself and looked back. The little man was climbing the companion-ladder toward the wireless room.

Bell slipped on toward the bow. He did not want to give an impression of furtiveness, but the *Almirante Gomez* was twelve days out of New York and Bell was still entirely ignorant of why he was on board. He had been called into the office of his chief in the State Department and told curtly that his request for leave of absence had been granted. And Bell had not asked for a leave of absence. But at just that moment he saw a rubber band on the desk of his immediate superior, a fairly thick rubber band which had been tied into a certain intricate knot. And Bell had kept quiet. He went to his apartment, found his bags packed and tickets to Rio via the *Almirante Gomez* in an envelope on his dressing-table, and went out and caught a train to the ship.

And that was all he knew. The siren up above blared dolefully into the fog. It was damp, and soggy, and depressing. The other passengers were under cover, and the decks seemed to be deserted. From the saloon came the sound of music. Bell pulled the collar of his light topcoat about his throat and strolled on toward the bow.

He faced a row of steamer chairs. There was a figure curled up in one of them. Paula Canalejas, muffled up against the dampness and staring somberly out into the mist. Bell had met her in Washington and liked her a great deal, but he swore softly at sight of her in his way.

The afternoon before, he had seen a stoker on the *Almirante Gomez* pick up a bit of rope and absently tie knots in it while he exchanged Rabelasian humor with his fellows. He had not looked at Bell at all, but the knots he tied were the same that Bell had last seen tied in a rubber band on a desk in the State Department in Washington. And Bell knew a recognition signal when he saw one. The

stoker would be off watch, just now, and by all the rules of reason he ought to be out there on the forecastle, waiting for Bell to turn up and receive instructions.

But Bell paused, lit a cigarette carefully, and strolled forward.

"Mr. Bell."

He stopped and beamed fatuously at her. It would have been logical for him to fall in love with her, and it is always desirable to seem logical. He had striven painstakingly to give the impression that he had fallen in love with her – and then had striven even more painstakingly to keep from doing it.

"Hullo," he said in bland surprise. "What are you doing out on deck?"

Brown eyes regarded him speculatively.

"Thinking," she said succinctly. "About you, Mr. Bell."

Bell beamed.

"Thinking," he confided, "is usually a bad habit, especially in a girl. But if you must think, I approve of your choice of subjects. What were you thinking about me?"

The brown eyes regarded him still more speculatively.

"I was wondering – " said Paula, glancing to either side, "I was wondering if you happen to be – er – a member of the United States Secret Service."

Bell laughed with entire naturalness.

"Good Lord, no!" he said amusedly. "I have a desk in the State Department building, and I read consular reports all day long and write letters bedeviling the consuls for not including unavailable statistics in their communications. That's my work. I'm on leave now."

She looked skeptical and, it may be, disappointed.

"You look as if you didn't believe me," said Bell, smiling. "I give you my word of honor I'm not a member of the United States Secret Service. Will that do to relieve your suspicions?"

"I believe you," she said slowly, "but it does not relieve my mind. I shall think about other people. I have something important to tell a member of the United States Secret Service."

Bell shrugged.

"I'm sorry," he said amiably, "that I can't oblige you by tipping one of them off. That's what you wanted me to do, isn't it?"

She nodded, and the gesture was very much like a dismissal. Bell frowned, hesitated, and went on. He was anxious to meet the stoker, but this...

The siren droned dismally over his head. Fog lay deep about the ship. The washing of the waves and dripping of water on the decks was depressing. It seemed to be getting thicker. Four stanchions ahead, the mist was noticeable. He found that he could count five, six, seven... The eighth was indefinite. But a bar materialized in the fog before him, and the grayness drew away before him and closed in behind. When he was at the forward end of the promenade, looking down upon the forecastle deck, he was isolated. He heard footsteps some distance overhead. The watch officer up on the bridge. Bell glanced up and saw him as an indistinct figure. He waited until the officer paced over to the opposite side of the bridge. The air throbbed and shook with the roaring of the siren.

Bell slipped over the edge of the rail and swung swiftly down the little ladder of iron bars set into the ship's structure. In seconds he had landed, and was down upon that terra incognita of all passengers, the deck reserved for the use of the crew.

A mast loomed overhead, with its heavy, clumsy derrick-booms. A winch was by his side. Oddments of deck machinery, inexplicable to a landsman, formed themselves vaguely in the mist. The fog was thicker, naturally, since the deck was closer to the water's edge.

"Hey!" growled a voice close beside him. "Passengers ain't allowed down here."

An unshaven, soot-smearred figure loomed up. Bell could not see the man save as a blur in the mist, but he said cheerfully:

"I know it, but I wanted to look. Seafaring's a trade I'd like to know something about."

The figure grunted. Bell had just given his word of honor that he wasn't a member of the Secret Service. He wasn't. But he was in the Trade – which has no official existence anywhere. And the use of the word in his first remark was a recognition signal.

"What is your trade, anyways?" growled the figure skeptically.

"I sharpen serpents' teeth from time to time," offered Bell amiably. He recognized the man, suddenly. "Hullo, Jamison, you look like the devil."

Jamison drew nearer. He grunted softly.

"I know it. Listen closely, Bell. Your job is getting some information from Canalejas, Minister of War in Rio. He sent word up to Washington that he'd something important to say. It isn't treachery to Brazil, because he's a decent man. Seven Secret Service men have disappeared in South America within three months. They've found the eighth, and he's crazy. Something has driven him mad, and they say it's a devilish poison. He's a homicidal maniac, returning to the United States in a straight-jacket. Canalejas knows what's happened to the Service men. He said so, and he's going to tell us. His daughter brought the news to Washington, and then instead of going on to Europe as she was supposed to do, she started back to Rio. You're to get this formation and pass it on to me, then try to keep your skin whole and act innocent. You were picked out because, as a State Department man, hell could be raised if you vanished. Understand?"

Bell nodded.

"Something horrible is going on. Secret Service can't do anything. The man in Asunción isn't dead – he's been seen – but he's cut loose. And Service men don't often do that. He don't report. That means the Service code may have been turned over, and hell to pay generally. It's up to the Trade."

"I've got it," said Bell. "Here are two items for you. Miss Canalejas just said she suspected I was Secret Service. I convinced her I wasn't. She says she has important information for a Service man."

The brawny figure of the stoker growled.

"Damn women! She was told somebody'd be sent to see her father. She was shown a recognition-knot with the outsider's variation. Given one, for father. That'll identify you to him. But she shouldn't have talked. Now, be careful. As nearly as we know, that chap in the straight-jacket was given some poison that drove him insane. There are hellish drugs down there. Maybe the same thing happened to others. Look out for yourself, and give me the information Canalejas gives you as quickly as God will let you. If anything happens to you, we want the stuff to get back. Understand?"

"Of course," said Bell. He carefully did not shiver as he realized what Jamison meant by anything happening to him. "The other item is that Ortiz, ex-Minister of the Interior of the Argentine, is scared to death about something. Sending radios right and left."

"Umph," growled Jamison. "One of our men vanished in Buenos Aires. Watch him. You're friendly?"

"Yes."

"Get friendlier. See what he's got. Now shoo."

Bell swung up the ladder again. Mist opened before him and closed again behind. He climbed over the rail to the promenade deck, and felt a little flare of irritation. There was a figure watching him.

He slipped to the deck and grinned sheepishly at Paula Canalejas. She stood with her hands in the pockets of her little sport coat, regarding him very gravely.

"I suppose," said Charley Bell sheepishly, "that I look like a fool. But I've always wanted to climb up and down that ladder. I suppose it's a survival from the age of childhood. At the age of seven I longed to be a fireman."

"I wonder," said Paula quietly. "Mr. Bell" – she stepped close to him – "I am taking a desperate chance. For the sake of my father, I wish certain things known. I think that you are an honorable man, and I think that you lied to me just now. Go and see Senor Ortiz. Your government will want to know what happens to him. Go and see him quickly."

Bell felt the same flare of irritation as before. Women do not follow rules. They will not follow rules. They depend upon intuition, which is sometimes right, but sometimes leads to ungodly errors. Paula was right this time, but she could have been wholly and hopelessly wrong. If she had talked to anyone else...

"My child," said Bell paternally – he was at least two years older than Paula – "you should be careful. I did not lie to you just now. I am not Secret Service. But I happen to know that you have a tiny piece of string to give your father, and I beg of you not to show that to anyone else. And – well – you are probably watched. You must not talk seriously to me!"

He lifted his hat and started astern. He was more than merely irritated. He was almost frightened. Because the Trade, officially, does not exist at all, and everybody in the Trade is working entirely on his own; and because those people who suspect that there is a Trade and dislike it are not on their own, but have plenty of resources behind them. And yet it is requisite that the Trade shall succeed in its various missions. Always.

The Government of the United States, you understand, will admit that it has a Secret Service, which it strives to identify solely with the pursuit of counterfeiters, postal thieves, and violators of the prohibition laws. Strongly pressed, it will admit that some members of the Secret Service work abroad, the official explanation being that they work abroad to forestall smugglers. And at a pinch, and in confidence, it may concede the existence of diplomatic secret agents. But there is no such thing as the Trade. Not at all. The funds which members of the Trade expend are derived by very devious bookkeeping from the appropriations allotted to an otherwise honestly conducted Department of the United States Government.

Therefore the Trade does not really exist. You might say that there is a sort of conspiracy among certain people to do certain things. Some of them are government officials, major and minor. Some of them are private citizens, reputable and otherwise. One or two of them are in jail, both here and

abroad. But as far as the Government of the United States is concerned, certain fortunate coincidences that happen now and then are purely coincidences. And the Trade, which arranges for them, does not exist. But it has a good many enemies.

The fog-horn howled dismally overhead. Mist swirled past the ship, and an oily swell surged vaguely overside and disappeared into a gray oblivion half a ship's length away. Bell moved on toward the stern. It was his intention to go into the smoking-room and idle ostentatiously. Perhaps he would enter into another argument with that Brazilian air pilot who had so much confidence in Handley-Page wing-slots. Bell had, in Washington, a small private plane that, he explained, had been given him by a wealthy aunt, who hoped he would break his neck in it. He considered that wing-slots interfered with stunting.

He had picked out the door with his eye when he espied a small figure standing by the rail. It was Ortiz, the Argentine ex-Cabinet Minister, staring off into the grayness, and seeming to listen with all his ears.

Bell slowed up. The little stout man turned and nodded to him, and then put out his hand.

"Senor Bell," he said quietly, "tell me. Do you hear airplane motors?"

Bell listened. The drip-drip-drip of condensed mist. The shuddering of the ship with her motors going dead slow. The tinkling, muted notes of the piano inside the saloon. The washing and hissing of the waves overside. That was all.

"Why, no," said Bell. "I don't. Sound travels freakishly in fog, though. One might be quite close and we couldn't hear it. But we're a hundred and fifty miles off the Venezuelan coast, aren't we?"

Ortiz turned and faced him. Bell was shocked at the expression on the small man's face. It was drained of all blood, and its look was ghastly. But the rather fine dark eyes were steady.

"We are," agreed Ortiz, very steadily indeed, "but I – I have received a radiogram that some airplane should fly near this ship, and it would amuse me to hear it."

Bell frowned at the fog.

"I've done a good bit of flying," he observed, "and if I were flying out at sea right now, I'd dodge this fog bank. It would be practically suicide to try to alight in a mist like this."

Ortiz regarded him carefully. It seemed to Bell that sweat was coming out upon the other man's forehead.

"You mean," he said quietly, "that an airplane could not land?"

"It might try," said Bell with a shrug. "But you couldn't judge your height above the water. You might crash right into it and dive under. Matter of fact, you probably would."

Ortiz's nostrils quivered a little.

"I told them," he said steadily, "I told them it was not wise to risk..."

He stopped. He looked suddenly at his hands, clenched upon the rail. A depth of pallor even greater than his previous terrible paleness seemed to leave even his lips without blood. He wavered on his feet, as if he were staggering.

"You're sick!" said Bell sharply. Instinctively he moved forward.

The fine dark eyes regarded him oddly. And Ortiz suddenly took his hands from the railing of the promenade deck. He looked at his fingers detachedly. And Bell could see them writhing, opening and closing in a horribly sensate fashion, as if they were possessed of devils and altogether beyond the control of their owner. And he suddenly realized that the steady, grim regard with which Ortiz looked at his hands was exactly like the look he had seen upon a man's face once, when that man saw a venomous snake crawling toward him and had absolutely no weapon.

Ortiz was looking at his fingers as a man might look at cobras at the ends of his wrists. Very calmly, but with a still, stunned horror.

He lifted his eyes to Bell.

"I have no control over them," he said quietly. "My hands are useless to me, Senor Bell. I wonder if you will be good enough to assist me to my cabin."

Again that deadly pallor flashed across his face. Bell caught at his arm.

"What is the matter?" he demanded anxiously. "Of course I'll help you."

Ortiz smiled very faintly.

"If any airplane arrives in time," he said steadily, "something may be done. But you have rid me of even that hope. I have been poisoned, Senor Bell."

"But the ship's doctor..."

Ortiz, walking rather stiffly beside Bell, shrugged.

"He can do nothing. Will you be good enough to open this door for me? And" – his voice was hoarse for an instant – "assist me to put my hands in my pockets. I cannot. But I would not like them to be seen."

Bill took hold of the writhing fingers. He saw sweat standing out upon Ortiz's forehead. And the fingers closed savagely upon Bell's hands, tearing at them. Ortiz looked at him with a ghastly supplication.

"Now," he said with difficulty, "if you will open the door, Senor Bell..."

Bell slid the door aside. They went in together. People were making the best of boresome weather within, frankly yawning, most of them. But the card-room would be full, and the smoking-room steward would be busy.

"My cabin is upon the next deck below," said Ortiz through stiff lips. "We – we will descend the stairs."

Bell went with him, his face expressionless.

"My cabin should be unlocked," said Ortiz.

It was. Ortiz entered, and, with his hands still in his pockets, indicated a steamer-trunk.

"Please open that." He licked his lips. "I – I had thought I would have warning enough. It has not been so severe before. Right at the top..."

Bell flung the top back. A pair of bright and shiny handcuffs lay on top of a dress shirt.

"Yes," said Ortiz steadily. "Put them upon my wrists, please. The poison that has been given to me is – peculiar. I believe that one of your compatriots has experienced its effects."

Bell started slightly. Ortiz eyed him steadily.

"Precisely." Ortiz, with his face a gray mask of horror, spoke with a steadiness Bell could never have accomplished. "A poison, Senor Bell, which has made a member of the Secret Service of the United States a homicidal maniac. It has been given to me. I have been hoping for its antidote, but – Quick! Senor Bell! Quick! The handcuffs!"

CHAPTER II

The throbbing of the engines went on at an unvarying tempo. There was the slight, almost infinitesimal tremor of their vibration. The electric light in the cabin wavered rhythmically with its dynamo. From the open porthole came the sound of washing water. Now and then a disconnected sound of laughter or of speech came down from the main saloon.

Ortiz lay upon the bed, exhausted.

"It is perhaps humorous, Senor Bell," he said presently, in the same steady voice he had used upon the deck. "It is undoubtedly humorous that I should call upon you. I believe that you are allied with the Secret Service of your government."

Bell started to shake his head, but was still. He said nothing.

"I am poisoned," said Ortiz. He tried to smile, but it was ghastly. "It is a poison which makes a man mad in a very horrible fashion. If I could use my hands – and could trust them – I would undoubtedly shoot myself. It would be entirely preferable. Instead, I hope – "

He broke off short and listened intently. His forehead beaded.

"Is that an airplane motor?"

Bell went to the port and listened. The washing of waves. The throbbing of the ship's engines. The dismal, long-drawn-out moaning of the fog-horn. Nothing else... Yes! A dim and distant muttering. It drew nearer and died away again.

"That is a plane," said Bell. "Yes, It's out of hearing now."

Ortiz clamped his jaws together.

"I was about to speak," he said steadily, "to tell you – many things. Which your government should know. Instead, I ask you to go to the wireless room and have the wireless operator try to get in touch with that plane. It is a two-motored seaplane and it has a wireless outfit. It will answer the call M.S.T.R. Ask him to use his directional wireless and try to guide it to the ship. It brings the antidote to the poison which affects me."

Bell made for the door. Ortiz raised his head with a ghastly smile.

"Close the door tightly," he said quietly. "I – I feel as if I shall be unpleasant."

Closing the door behind him, Bell felt rather like a man in a nightmare. He made for the stairway, bolted for the deck, and fairly darted up the ladder to the wireless room.

"Ortiz sent me," he said to the operator. "You heard that plane just now. See if you can get it."

The operator looked up at him beneath a green eyeshade and grinned crookedly.

"Talking to 'em now," he said.

The key flicked up and down, and a tiny dancing spark leaped into being and vanished beneath its contact-point. The wireless room was dark save for the bright, shaded light above the sending table. A file of sent messages by an elbow. A pad for messages received was by a hand. Stray wreaths of tobacco smoke floated about the room, leaping into view as they drifted beneath the lamp.

"Is he bad?" asked the operator fascinatedly, his eyes fixed on his key.

Bell felt his eyelids flicker.

"Very bad," he said shortly.

"They tell me," said the operator and shuddered, "your hands get working and you can't stop 'em... I'm playing, I am! I'm playing The Master's game!"

The key stopped. He listened.

"They're going to try to swoop over the ship and drop it," he said a moment later. "I don't think they can. But tell Ortiz they're going to try."

Bell's eyes were narrow. It is not customary for a radio operator on a passenger ship to speak of an ex-Cabinet Minister of the Argentine Republic by his surname only. It bespeaks either impertinence or a certain very peculiar association. Bell frowned imperceptibly for an instant, thinking.

"You've – had it?" he asked sharply.

"God, no! I never took the chance! I saw the red spots once, and I went to Rib – Say! You got a password?"

He was staring up at Bell. Bell shrugged.

"I'm trying to help Senor Ortiz now."

The operator continued to stare, his eyes full of suspicion. Then he grimaced.

"All right. Go tell him they're going to drop it."

Bell went out. Gray fog, and washing seas, and the big ship ploughing steadily on toward the south... The horn blared, startlingly loud and unspeakably doleful. Bell listened for other sounds. There were none.

Down the steep ladder to the promenade deck. Paula Canalejas nodded to him.

"I saw you speak to Senor Ortiz," she said quietly. "You see?"

Bell was beginning to have a peculiar, horrible suspicion. It was incredible, but it was inevitable.

"I think I see," he said harshly. "But I don't dare believe it. Keep quiet and don't speak to me unless I give you some sign it's safe! It's – hellish!"

He went inside and swiftly down the stairs. He found a steward hesitating outside the door of Ortiz's cabin. He touched Bell's arm anxiously as he was about to go in.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, and stammered. "I – I heard Mr. Ortiz making some – very strange noises, sir. I – I thought he was sick..."

"He is," said Bell grimly. "He told me he does not want a doctor, though. I'm looking after him."

He closed the door behind him, and Ortiz grinned at him. It was a horrible, a terrible grin, and Ortiz fought it from his face with a terrific effort of will. There was foam about his lips.

"*Dios!* It was – it was devilish!" he gasped. "Senor Bell, *amigo mio*, for the love of the good God get my revolver from my trunk. Give it to me..."

Bell said shortly: "The airplane just radioed that it's going to try to swoop overhead and drop a package on board the steamer. It doesn't dare alight in this fog."

"I think," gasped Ortiz, "I think it would be well to tie my feet. Tie them fast! If – if the package comes, if I – if I am unpleasant, knock me unconscious and pour it into my mouth. I fear it is too late now. But try it..."

Through the port came the muttering of a seaplane's engines. The noise died away. Almost instantly the siren boomed hoarsely.

"Ah, *Dios!*" said Ortiz unsteadily. "There it is! Senor Bell, I think it is too late. Would you – would you assist me to go out on deck, where I might fling myself overboard? I – think I can control my legs so long."

"Steady!" said Bell, wrenched by the sight of the man before him fighting against unnameable horror. "Tell me – "

"It is poison," said Ortiz, his features fixed in a terrible effort of will. "A ghastly, a horrible poison of the *Indios* of Matto Grosso, in Brazil. It drives a man mad, murder mad. It is as if he were possessed by a devil. His hands first refuse to obey him. His feet next. And then his body. It is as if a devil had seized hold of his body and carried it about doing murder with it. A part of the brain is driven insane, and a man goes about shrieking with the horror of what crimes his body commits until the poison reaches that portion of his brain as well. Then he is mad forever. That is what I face, *amigo mio*. That is why I beg you, I implore you, to kill me or assist me to the side of the ship so that I may fling myself overboard! The Master had it administered to me secretly, and demanded treason as the price of the antidote. He deman – "

Steady and strong, rising from a muttering to a steady roar, the sound of airplane motors came through the port. Bell started up.

"Hold fast," he snapped savagely. "I'll go get that package when it lands. Hold fast, I tell you! Fight it!"

He flung out of the cabin and raced up the stairs. The door to the deck was open. He crowded through a group of passengers who had discounted the dampness for the sake of a novelty – an airplane far out at sea – and raced up to the upper deck. The roaring noise was receding. The siren roared hoarsely. Then the noise came back.

For minutes, then, the ship seemed to play hide-and-seek with the invisible fliers. The roaring noise overhead circled about, now near, now seeming very far away. And the siren sent its dismal blasts out into the grayness all about. Then, for an instant, a swiftly scudding shadow was visible overhead. It banked steeply and vanished, and seemed to have turned and come lower when it reappeared a moment later. It was not distinct, at first. It was merely a silhouette of darker gray against the all-enveloping mist. But its edges sharpened and became clear. One could make out struts, an aileron's trailing edge.

"Got nerve, anyhow," said Bell grimly.

It swept across the ship and disappeared, but the noise of its engines did not dwindle more than a little. The blast of the siren seemed to summon it back again. Once more it came in sight, and this time it dived steeply, flashed across the forecastle deck amid a hideous uproar, desperately, horribly close to the dangling derrick-cables, and was gone.

Bell had seen it more clearly than anyone else on the ship, perhaps. He saw a man in the pilot's cockpit between wings and tail reach high and fling something downward, something with a long streamer attached to it. Bell had an instant's glimpse of the goggled face. Then he was darting forward, watching the thing that fell.

It took only a second. Two at most. But the thing seemed to fall with infinite deliberation, the streamer shivering out behind it. It fell at a steep slant, the forward momentum of the plane's speed added to its own drop. It swooped down, slanting toward the rail...

Bell groaned. It struck the rail itself, and bounced. A sailor flung himself toward it. The streamer slipped from his fingers and slithered over the side.

Bell was at the railing just in time to see it drop into the water. He opened his mouth to shout, and saw it sink. The last of the streamer followed the dropped object down into the green water when it was directly below him.

His hands clenched. Bell stared sickly at the spot where it had vanished. An instant later he had whirled and was thrusting wide the wireless room door. The operator was returning to his key, grinning crookedly. He looked up sidewise.

"Tell them it went overside," snapped Bell. "Tell them to try it again. Ortiz is in hell! To try again! He's dying!"

The operator looked up fascinatedly, his fingers working his key.

"Is he – bad?" he asked with a shuddering interest.

"He's dying!" snarled Bell, in a rage because of his helplessness. He had forgotten everything but the fact that a man below decks was facing the most horrible fate that can overtake a man, and facing it with a steadfast gameness that made Bell's heart go out to him.

"They don't die," said the operator. He shuddered. "They don't die of it."

His key stopped. He listened. His key clicked again.

"They only had two packages," he said a moment later. "They don't dare risk the other one. They say the fog ends twenty miles farther on. They're going to land up there and taxi back on the surface of the water. It shouldn't be more than half an hour."

He pushed himself back from the table with an air of finality.

"That's all. They've signed off."

Bell felt rage sweeping over him. The operator grinned crookedly.

"Better go down and tie him up," he said, and licked his lips with the fascinated air of one thinking of a known and terrifying thing. "Better tie him up tight. It'll be half an hour more."

Bell went down the companion-ladder. The promenade was crowded with passengers now, asking questions of each other. Some, frowning portentously, thought the plane an unscheduled ocean flier who had lost his way in the fog.

Paula Canalejas was close to Bell as he shouldered his way through the crowd.

"That was for him?" she asked, without moving her lips.

Bell nodded.

"Tell him," she said quietly, "I – pray for him."

Bell nodded abruptly and went into the saloon. It was nearly empty. He wiped the sweat off his face. It was horrible to have to go down to Ortiz and tell him that at best it would be half an hour more...

Then there was a sudden scream below him, and then a shot. Bell jumped for the stairs, his heart in his throat, and saw Ortiz coming out of his stateroom door. His eyes were wide and agonized. His body...

Even in the incredibly short time before he reached the bottom of the steps, Bell had time to receive the ghastly impression that Ortiz was sane, but that his body had gone mad. Ortiz's face was white and horrified. His hands and arms were writhing savagely, working at the handcuffs on his wrists. His legs were carrying him at a curious, padding trot down the hallway. One of the hands held a glittering revolver. A steward was crouched behind a couch, his face white and filled with stark terror. And Ortiz held his head back, as if struggling to hold back and control his body, which was under the control of a malignant demon.

"Out of the way!" cried Ortiz in a voice of terrible despair. "Get someone to shoot me! Kill me! I cannot – ah, *Dios!*"

The hands leveled the revolver in spite of him, while he flung his head from side to side in a frantic attempt to disturb their aim.

"Close your eyes!" panted Bell, and hurled himself upon – whom? It was not Ortiz. It was Ortiz's body, gone mad and raging. The manacled arms flailed about frenziedly. The gun went off. Again. Again...

Bell struck. He knocked the Thing that possessed Ortiz's body off its feet. The hands groped for him. They clubbed at him with the revolver. The feet kicked...

"Keep your eyes closed," gasped Bell, struggling to get the gun away from those horrible hands. "It – it can't see when you keep your eyes closed!"

Fighting insanely as the Thing was fighting, he could not identify it with Ortiz himself. One of the hands unclosed from about the revolver and clawed at his throat. It seemed to abandon that effort and attacked Ortiz's face in a frenzy of rage, struggling to claw his eyes open. The other held the weapon fast with maniacal strength.

At the horror of feeling one of his own manacled hands attacking his face savagely as if it were itself a sensate thing, Ortiz opened his eyes. They were wide with despair.

The hand with the revolver made a sudden movement, and Bell flung his weight upon it as the clutching hand pulled the trigger. There was a deafening report...

The body seemed to weaken suddenly in Bell's grip. It fought less and less terribly, though with no lessening of its savagery. He managed to get the revolver away from the hands that shook with unspeakable rage. He flung it away and stood panting.

There was a crowd of people suddenly all about the place. Staring, stunned, incredulous people who regarded Bell with a dawning, damning suspicion.

Ortiz spoke suddenly. His voice was weak, but it was steady, and it was full of a desperate relief.

"I wish to make a statement," he said sharply. "I – I wished to commit suicide for personal reasons. Senor Bell tried to dissuade me. The handcuffs upon my wrists were placed there with my consent. Senor Bell is my friend and has done me no wrong. I shot myself, with intention."

Bell beckoned to the ship's doctor.

"Get him bandaged up," he ordered harshly. "There's no need for him to die."

The body was writhing only feebly, now. Ortiz looked up at him, and managed a smile. Again there was that incredible impression of the body not belonging to Ortiz, or Ortiz as a sane and whole and honorable, admirable man, and the feebly writhing body with its clutching hands as some evil thing that had properly been defeated and killed.

The doctor bent down. It was useless, of course. He made futile movements.

"I wish to speak to my friend, Senor Bell," said Ortiz weakly. "I – I have not long."

Bell knelt beside him.

"The Master's – deputy in Rio," panted Ortiz weakly, almost in a whisper, "is – is Ribiera. In Buenos Aires I – I do not know. There was a man – the one who poisoned me – but I killed him. Secretly. I do not think – the Master knows. I pray that – "

He stopped. He could not speak again. But he smiled, and a few seconds later Bell clenched his hands. Ortiz was gone.

Someone touched his arm. Paula Canalejas. He stared down at her and managed to smile. It was not a very successful smile. He drew a deep breath.

"I would like," said Bell wryly, "to think that, when I die, I will die as well as this man did. But I'm afraid I shan't."

But Paula said:

"The airplane can be heard outside. It seems to be moving on the surface."

And ten minutes later the plane loomed up out of the mist, queerly ungainly on the surface of the water. Its motors roared impatiently as if held in leash. It swung clumsily about, heading off out of sight in the fog to turn. It came back, sliding along the top of the water with its wing-tip floats leaving alternate streaks of white foam behind them. A man stood up in its after cockpit.

Bell crowded to the rail. The man – goggled and masked – held up a package as if to fling it on board. Bell watched grimly. But he saw that the pilot checked himself and looked up at the upper deck. Bell craned his neck. The wireless operator was waving wildly to the seaplane. He writhed his hands, and held his hand to his head as if blowing out his brains, and waved the plane away, frantically.

The pilot of the plane sat down. A moment later its motors roared more thunderously. It is not safe to alight on either land or water when fog hangs low, but there is little danger in taking off.

The seaplane shot away into the mist, its motors bellowing. The sound of its going changed subtly. It seemed to rise, and grow more distant... It died away.

Bell halted at the top of the companion-ladder and saw the wireless operator, with a crooked, nervous grin upon his face.

CHAPTER III

Bell saw what he was looking for, out in the throng of traffic that filled the Avenida do Acre, in Rio. He'd seen it over the heads of the crowd, which was undersized, as most Brazilian crowds are, and he managed to get through the perpetual jam on the mosaic sidewalk and reach the curb.

He stood there and regarded the vehicles filling the broad avenue, wearing exactly the indifferent, half-amused air of a tourist with no place in particular to go and a great deal of time in which to go there. Taxis chuffed past, disputing right of way with private cars which were engaged in more disputes with other cars, all in the rather extraordinary bad temper and contentiousness which comes to the Latin-American when he takes the wheel of an automobile.

As if coming to an unimportant decision, Bell raised his hand to an approaching cab. It had two men on the chauffeur's seat. Of course. All taxis in Rio carry two men in front. One drives, and the other lights his cigarettes, makes witty comments upon passing ladies, and helps in collecting the fares from recalcitrant passengers. The extra man is called the "secretary," and he assists materially in giving an impression of haughty pride.

The taxi ground to the curb. The secretary reached behind him indifferently and opened the door. Bell did not glance at him. He stepped inside and settled down languidly.

"The Beira Mar," he said listlessly.

The taxi started off with a jolt. It is the invariable custom in Rio de Janeiro. And besides, it reminds the passenger that he is merely a customer, admitted to the cab on suffrance, and that he must be suitably meek to those who will presently blandly ignore the amount registered by the meter and demand a fare of from eight to twenty-seven times the indicated amount.

The cab went shooting down the Avenida do Acre toward the harbor. The Avenida do Acre is officially the Avenida Rio Blanco, and it should be called by that name, only people forget. The Beira Mar, however, is named with entire propriety. It is actually the edge of the sea, and it is probably one of the two or three most beautiful driveways in the world.

The cab whirled past the crowded sidewalks. Incredible numbers of people, with an incredible variation in the shades of their complexions, moved to and from with the peculiar aimlessness of a Brazilian crowd. A stout and pompous negro politician from Bahia, wearing an orchid in his button-hole, rubbed elbows with a striking blonde lady of the sidewalks on his left, and forced a wizened little silk-hatted *parda*—approximately an octoroon— to dodge about him in order to progress. A young and languid person, his clothes the very last expiring gasp of fashion, fingered his stick patiently. He wore the painstakingly cultivated expression of bored disillusionment your young Brazilian dandy considers aristocratic. It was very probable that he shared a particularly undesirable bedroom with four or five other young men in order to purchase such clothing, but then, *farenda fita*—making a picture— is the national Brazilian sport.

Bell lighted a cigarette. It was not wise to regard the secretary of this particular taxi too closely, but if his face had been thickly smeared with coal dust, and if he had had a two weeks' beard, and if he had been seen on the forecastle of the *Almirante Gomez*, one would have deduced him to be a stoker who had not used the name of Jamison.

The cab reached the Beira Mar, and turned to take the long route about the bay. It is one of the most beautiful views to be found anywhere, and tall apartment houses have been built along its whole length to capitalize the scenery. True, the more brightly-colored ladies of the capital have established themselves in vast numbers among these apartment houses, but in their languid promenades they add – let us say – the beauties of art to those of nature.

A voice spoke from the chauffeur's seat.

"Bell."

"Right," said Bell without moving. His eyes flickered, however, and he found the device Jamison had inserted. A speaking-tube of sorts. Not especially efficient, but inconspicuous enough. He stirred listlessly and got his lips near it.

"All right to talk?" he asked briefly.

"Shoot," said Jamison from the secretary's seat beside the chauffeur. "This man doesn't understand English, and he thinks I'm in a smuggling gang. He expects to make some money out of me eventually."

Bell spoke curtly, while the taxi rolled past the Morro da Gloria with its quaint old church and went along the winding, really marvelous driveway past many beaches, with the incredibly blue water beyond.

"Canalejas is out of town," he said. "It isn't known when he'll be back. I met his daughter at a dance at our Embassy here, and she told me. We didn't dare to talk much, but she's frightened. Especially after what happened to Ortiz. And I've met Ribiera, whom Ortiz named."

"I've been looking him up," growled Jamison through the speaking-tube.

Bell flicked the ash from his cigarette out the door, and went on quietly.

"He's trying to get friendly with me. I've promised to call at his house and have him take me out to the flying field. He has two planes, he tells me, a big amphibian and a two-seater. Uses them for commuting between Rio and his place back inland. He went out of his way to cultivate me. I think he suspects I'm trying to find out something."

"Which you are," said Jamison dryly. "You've found out that Ortiz was right at least about –"

Bell nodded, and frowned at himself for having nodded. He spoke into the mouthpiece by his head with an expressionless face.

"He's practically fawned upon by a bunch of important officials and several high ranking army officers. Suspecting what I do, I think he's got hold of a devil of a lot of power."

Jamison scowled in a lordly fashion upon a mere pedestrian who threatened to impede the movement of the taxicab by making it run over him.

"Ortiz," said Bell quietly, "told me he'd been poisoned, and treason asked as the price of the antidote. I've heard that the Brazilian Minister for Foreign Affairs went insane six months ago. I heard, also, that it was homicidal mania – murder madness. And I'm wondering if these people who fawn upon Ribiera aren't paying a price for – well – antidotes, or their equivalent. The Minister for Foreign Affairs may have refused."

"You're improving," said Jamison dryly. The taxi rounded a curve and a vista of sea and sand and royal palms spread out before it. "Yes, you're improving. But Ortiz spoke of Ribiera only as a deputy of The Master. Who is The Master?"

"God knows," said Bell. He stared languidly out of the window, for all the world to see. A tourist, regarding the boasted beauties of the Biera Mar.

"A deputy," said Jamison without emotion, "of some unknown person called The Master poisoned Ortiz in Buenos Aires. And Ortiz was an important man in the Argentine. Ribiera is merely the deputy of that same unknown Master in Rio, and he has generals and state presidents and the big politicians paying court to him. If deputies in two countries that we know of have so much power, how much power has The Master?"

Silence. The taxi chugged steadily past unnoticed beauties and colorings. Rio is really one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

"It's like this," said Jamison jerkily. "Seven Service men vanish and one goes mad. You get two tips that the fate of Ortiz is the fate of the seven men – eight, in fact. We find that two men dispense a certain ghastly poison in two certain cities, at the orders of a man they call The Master. We find that those two men wield an astounding lot of power, and we know they're only deputies, only subordinates of the Master. We know, also, that the Service men vanished all over the whole continent, not in just those two cities. How many deputies has The Master? What's it all about? He wanted treason of Ortiz, we know. What does he want of the other men his deputies have enslaved? Why did he poison the Service men? And why – especially why – do two honorable men, officials of two important nations, want to tip off the United States Government about the ghastly business? What's it got to do with our nation?"

Bell flung away his cigarette.

"That last question has occurred to me too," he observed, and carefully repressed a slight shiver. "I have made a guess, which is probably insane. I'm going to see Ribiera this afternoon."

"He already suspects you know too much," said Jamison without expression.

"I am" – Bell managed the ghost of a mirthless smile – "I am uncomfortably aware of it. And I may need an antidote as badly as Ortiz. If I do, and can't help myself, I'll depend on you."

Jamison growled.

"I simply mean," said Bell very quietly, "that I'd really rather not be – er – left alive if I'm mad. That's all. But Ortiz knew what was the matter with him before he got bad off. I know it's a risk. I'm goose-flesh all over. But somebody's got to take the risk. The guess I've made may be insane, but if it's right one or two lives will be cheap enough as a price for the information. Suppose you chaps turn around and take me to Ribiera's house?"

There was a long pause. Then Jamison spoke in Portuguese to his companion. The taxi checked, swerved, and began to retrace its route.

"You're a junior in the Trade," said Jamison painstakingly. "I can't order you to do it."

Bell fumbled with his cigarette case.

"The Trade doesn't exist, Jamison," he said dryly. "And besides, nobody gives orders in The Trade. There are only suggestions. Now shut up a while. I want to try to remember some consular reports I read once, from the consul at Puerto Pachecho."

"What?"

"The consul there," said Bell, smiling faintly, "was an amateur botanist. He filled up his consular reports with accounts of native Indian medicinal plants and drugs, with copious notes and clinical observations. I had to reprove him severely for taking up space with such matters and not going fully into the exact number of hides, wet and dry, that passed through the markets in his district. His information will be entirely useless in this present emergency, but I'm going to try to remember as much of it as I can. Now shut up."

When the taxi swung off the Biera Mar to thread its way through many tree-lined streets – it is a misdemeanor, punishable by fine, to cut down a tree in Rio de Janeiro – it carried a young American with the air of an accomplished idler, who has been mildly bored by the incomparable view from the waterside boulevard. When it stopped at the foot of one of the slum covered *morros* that dot all Rio, and a liveried doorman came out of a splendid residence to ask the visitor his name, the taxi discharged a young American who seemed to feel the heat, in spite of the swift motion of the cab. He wiped off his forehead with his handkerchief as he was assured that the Senhor Ribiera had given orders he was to be admitted, night or day. When the taxi drove off, it carried two men on the chauffeur's seat, of whom one had lost, temporarily, the manner of haughty insolence which is normally inseparable from the secretary of a taxicab chauffeur.

But though he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, Bell actually felt rather cold when he followed his guide through ornately furnished rooms, which seemed innumerable, and was at last left to wait in an especially luxurious salon.

There was a pause. A rather long wait. A distinctly long wait. Bell lighted a cigarette and seemed to become mildly bored. He regarded a voluptuous small statuette with every appearance of pleased interest. A subtly decadent painting seemed to amuse him considerably. He did not seem to notice that no windows at all were visible, and that shaded lamps lit this room, even in broad daylight.

Two servants came in, a footman in livery and the major-domo. Your average *Carioca* servant is either fawning or covertly insolent. These two were obsequious. The footman carried a tray with a bottle, glass, ice, and siphon.

"The Senhor Ribiera," announced the major-domo obsequiously, "begs that the Senhor Bell will oblige him by waiting for the shortest of moments until the Senhor Ribiera can relieve himself of a business matter. It will be but the shortest of moments."

Bell felt a little instinctive chill at sight of the bottle and glasses.

"Oh, very well," he said idly. "You may put the tray there."

The footman lifted the siphon expectantly. Bell regarded it indifferently. The wait before the arrival of this drink had been longer than would be required merely for the announcing of a caller and the tending of a tray, especially if such a tray were a custom of the place. And the sending of a single bottle only, without inquiry into his preferences...

"No soda," said Bell. He poured out a drink into the tinier glass. He lifted it toward his lips, hesitated vaguely, and drew out his handkerchief again.

He sneezed explosively, and the drink spilled. He swore irritably, put down the glass, and plied his handkerchief vigorously. A moment later he was standing up and pouring the drink out afresh, from the bottle in one hand to the glass in the other. He up-tilted the glass.

"Get rid of this for me," he said annoyed of the handkerchief.

He saw a nearly imperceptible glance pass between the footman and the major-domo. They retired, and Bell moved about the room exactly like a young man who has been discomfited by the necessity of sneezing before servants. Anywhere else in the world, of course, such a pose would not have been convincing. But your Brazilian not only adopts *fazenda fita* as his own avocation, but also suspects it to be everybody else's too. And a young Brazilian of the leisure class would be horribly annoyed at being forced to so plebeian an exhibition in public.

He moved restlessly about the room, staring at the picture. Presently he blinked uncertainly and gazed about less definitely. He went rather uncertainly to the chair he had first occupied and sat down. He poured – or seemed to pour – another drink. Again he sneered, and looked mortified. He put down the glass with an air of finality. But he looked puzzledly about him. Then he sank back in his chair and gradually seemed to sink into a sort of apathetic indifference.

He looked, then, like a very bored young man on the verge of dozing off. But actually he was very much alert indeed. He had the feeling of eyes upon him for a while. Then that sensation ceased and he settled himself to wait. And meantime he felt a particular, peculiar gratitude to the late American consul at Puerto Pachecho for his interest in medicinal plants.

That gentleman had gone into the subject with the passionate enthusiasm of the amateur. He had described *icus*, *uirari* and *timbo*. He had particularized upon *makaka-nimbi* and *hervamoura*. And he had gone into a wealth of detail concerning *yagué*, on account of its probable value if used in criminology. As consul at Puerto Pachecho he was not altogether a success in some ways, but he had invented an entirely original method of experimentation upon those drugs and poisons which did not require to be introduced into the blood-stream. His method was simplicity itself. An alcoholic solution "carried" a minute quantity of the drug in its vapor, just as an alcoholic solution carries a minute quantity of perfuming essential oil. He inhaled the odor of the alcoholic solution. The effect was immediately, strictly temporary, and not dangerous. He was enabled to describe the odors, in some cases the tastes, and in a few instances the effects of the substances he listed, from personal experience.

And Bell had used his method as an unpromising but possible test for a drug in the drink that had been brought him. He inhaled the strangling odor of the spilled liquor on his handkerchief. And there was a drug involved. For an instant he was dizzy, and for an instant he saw the room through a vivid blue haze. And something clicked in his brain and said "It's *yagué*." And the relief of dealing with something which he knew – if only at second-hand – was so enormous that he felt almost weak.

Yagué, you see, is an extract from the leaves of a plant which is not yet included in *materia medica*. It has nearly the effect of scopolamine – once famous in connection with twilight sleep – and produces a daze of blue light, an intolerable sleepiness, and practically all the effects of hypnotism. A person under *yagué*, as under scopolamine or hypnosis, will seem to slumber and yet will obey any order, by whomever given. He will answer any question without reserve or any concealment. And on awakening he will remember nothing done under the influence of the potion. The effects are not particularly harmful.

Bell then, sat in an apparent half-daze, half-slumber, in the salon in which he waited for Ribiera to appear. He knew exactly what he was expected to do. Ribiera wanted to find out what he knew or suspected about Ortiz's death. Ribiera wanted to know many things, and he would believe what Bell told him because he thought Bell had taken enough *yagué* to be practically an hypnotic subject. Let Ribiera believe what he was told!

When he came into the room, bland and smiling, Bell did not stir. He was literally crawling, inside, with an unspeakable repulsion to the man and the things for which he stood. But he seemed dazed and dull, and when Ribiera began to ask questions he babbled his answers in a toneless, flat voice. He babbled very satisfactorily, in Ribiera's view.

When Ribiera shook him roughly by the shoulder he started, and let his eyes clear. Ribiera was laughing heartily.

"Senhor! Senhor!" said Ribiera jovially. "My hospitality is at fault! You come to be my guest and I allow you to be so bored that you drop off to sleep! I was detained for five minutes and came in to find you slumbering!"

Bell stared ruefully about him and rubbed his eyes.

"I did, for a fact," he admitted apologetically. "I'm sorry. Up late last night, and I was tired. I dropped in to see those planes you suggested I'd be interested in. But I daresay it's late, now."

Ribiera chuckled again. He was in his late and corpulent forties and was something of a dandy. If one were captious, one might object to the thickness of his lips. They suggested sensuality. And there was a shade – a bare shade – more of pigment in his skin than the American passes altogether unquestioned. And his hair was wavy... But he could be a charming host.

"We'll have a drink," he said bluntly, "while the car's coming around to the door, and then go out to the flying field."

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