

North-West ROMANCES



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Strange and awful rumors flew from the frozen North— weird tales of pagan rites. But not all the totem-pole gods and the long knives in Siwashland could stop Nick Cramer from claiming his torture-stake bride!

Blood Brother of the Snow-Gods

By SERGEANT DAN O'ROURKE

“**S**HEER off there! If you put a foot on my ship, I'll pitch you into the Gulf!”

Nick Cramer leaned his long body out

over the *Sunset's* railing, gesturing threateningly at the long Alaskan canoe sliding along the schooner's counter.

A laugh answered. Wood thudded

against wood when the dugout bumped the fishing vessel's side. A moment later four thick fingers gripped the rail and a heavily set figure in streaming oilskins pulled itself into view.

"Can the dignity!" Amos Kasoon's deep voice sounded. "Don't think I'm comin' aboard this hooker just for the pleasure of yappin' with you, eh? Got a job for you, an' good pay in it, Cramer—"

"Keep your job and get to the devil off my ship," the other man came back. "I told you that before, Kasoon."

Cramer's lips were tight under the shelter of his oilskin sou'-wester. He doubled one fist and reached back a long arm. It was gripped from behind.

"For Pete's sake lay off that stuff!" "Fat" Noland's easy-going tones sounded in his partner's ears. "There's a U. S. Marshal in Akutat, an' we got all the trouble we can handle right now. Soft pedal, Nick; soft pedal. This half-breed is bad medicine."

Cramer swung around to glare at Noland. The little man was wearing his perpetual grim—his rounded face apparently innocent of guile, and set with two eyes of almost baby blue.

The *Sunset's* captain shook himself free of the detaining hand, but was conscious of the fact that what Noland said was the truth; there was trouble enough without making more.

He was suddenly aware of Kasoon's figure beside him, but his eyes went beyond the man to where the Alaskan mountain tops were crowned by fleecy mists; rifted now and then by rain squalls blowing in from the Pacific.

For a moment the youngster's eyes took in the little fishing town of Akutat, set on piling and built out over the gray water—at the meeting of mountain and sea. Then his gaze dropped once more to the white shape of the canoe on the sullen waters below. A gasp of astonishment came to his lips.

A girl in a yellow slicker was making her way forward along the canoe. She reached the ratlines, Kasoon's hand went out to her, and a moment later she had leaped lightly to the deck, to smile over at Cramer.

Some order was passed to the Siwash paddlers in the Klingat tongue, the long

blades dipped, and the canoe sheered away from the schooner. Nick cursed softly under his breath when he wheeled about again and saw that a third visitor had come aboard behind Kasoon—a withered old Indian wrapped in a Chilcat blanket. He stood staring at the three, vainly trying to understand what it all meant.

A LONG the coast Nick Cramer had many friends and few enemies. He was quick to fight and quick to forget it. The man was lean and wiry from much hauling and running gear and halibut tackle. Even the skin on his close-cropped head was burned a rich brown from hatless days spent on the Pacific. Gray eyes, wide-placed, usually looked out on the world with a humorous twinkle in them. Now they were cold.

"Give me a hand to lower the small boat away," Cramer ordered Noland all at once. "Then you can put this lady and the other two ashore."

"Oh, no, no!" the girl appealed, coming forward a step. "I know this is most peculiar, Captain Cramer, but do please hear what Mr. Kasoon has to say. It's really most important to me."

"Sure, important to you, too," the big half-breed added. He laughed softly to himself when Nick, finding the girl's eyes still on him, hastily tugged down his slicker sleeves to hide the garish tattooing with which his arms were covered.

The tattooing had been a standing joke in Akutat until the day that Cramer decided he had had enough of such jocularities. Then his fists had impressed upon Kasoon that he had better find some other form of diversion.

"Look, Cramer," Kasoon went on after he had settled his grinning face. "You're broke, ain't you? Sure, I know it. The salmon fishing won't open for a month yet, so you'll stay broke. Also, I savvy the last payment on this here schooner is due next week; an' if you ain't got the money old 'Shylock' Jacobi will turn the two of youse loose on the beach. You'd look swell, walking down the rocks to San Francisco!"

"That's enough! By Jupiter, Kasoon—" Cramer's hands shot out with the words, fastening on the other man's slippery oilskins. The *Sunset's* owner lunged forward, jarring Kasoon off his balance and

crowding him against the vessel's rail. There came the thudding of rubber boots on the wet deck, the rustling of oilskins, broken all at once by the girl's cry.

Cramer became aware of slim hands gripping his own, and an appealing white face turned up to him. His hands fell away, and the other man speedily moved back from the rail.

"You'll do this for me, won't you? Please! Please!" the girl implored.

The muscles on Cramer's neck was still pulsing with resentment, and he still glared at Kasoon's high-cheeked, mahogany colored face, across which an old knife scar ran from ear to lip. But before he had time to do what he intended, Noland sent a kick to one ankle that caused Nick to forget it.

He whirled about, a hot oath on his lips. But Fat's head was already disappearing down the companionway, and the girl's eyes were on him. He checked the words in time.

"Perhaps we'd better go below out of the weather Miss-er," Cramer stumbled. He felt subconsciously that he was backing down and that Kasoon was laughing at him.

"Compton—Mildred Compton," the girl assisted him, a faint smile curling up the corners of her mouth at the sudden scarlet tinge that showed underneath the tan on Nick's jaws.

Down in the cabin Cramer entirely forgot the presence of the other three. The girl slid out of her oilskins revealing a youthful, lissom body, and a rounded olive face. About it was a rebellious mop of auburn hair, with two eyes of limpid blue.

"Lissen here," Kasoon's voice broke in on Nick's pleasant reveries. "This here is old Chief Tunguss of the tribe up at Hoonyah, an' Milly's my cousin. We wanta go up to Hoonyah, an' we wanta to go there quick. That's why I picked on the *Sunset*, 'cause she's fast. There's five hundred bones in it for you, an' I guess you needs it bad, eh? That'll about pay off old Jacobi."

"Five hundred!" Nick said to himself in surprise. "But what the devil does he mean by taking this girl to Hoonyah? It's away back from the beaten track. The place has a pretty evil reputation too; the coastguards were in there last fall about

some beastly pagan rites the Indians were trying to pull off. No, damned if I'll sail. I'll let the schooner go under the hammer first."

"Oh, please, Captain Cramer!" the girl's soft voice pleaded, when she noted the frown settling down on Nick's face. "Really, it's most important and I'm anxious to go at once. Please say that you will."

Cramer wheeled about, and the frown left his features instantly. But his eyes were cold as they roved the girl once more. He could see that she possessed a faint strain of Indian blood—a tinge that served to add color to her cheeks, a vague wistfulness to her orbs.

"Very well," Nick said suddenly when the blue eyes did not flinch. "I'll take you up." To himself he added, "And I'll bring you back, what's more, if there's anything wrong about this. I need that five hundred worse than anything in the world right now, but there's nothing in the contract prohibiting me giving you a free pass back to Akutat."

"That's the stuff. Knew you liked money," Kasoon laughed, pulling a crowded wallet from the pocket of his coat and peeling off five one-hundred dollar bills. He passed the over to the schooner's captain, with a gesture as though he were tossing a quarter to some unfortunate down-and-out.

THREE days later the *Sunset* threshed in from the open sea, ran up a long inlet under engine power, and so came to where beetling cliffs frowned down on an Indian village.

As the schooner neared the shore, Cramer's eyes roved. He saw a number of unpainted, rough lumber buildings set on stilts above the rocks. Fronting them were two dozen or more totem poles leaning over at crazy angles. Some were topped with the hideous wolf totem, others with eagle and bear figures. Below these on the narrow beach was a fleet of long dugout canoes, their bows emblazoned with the familiar rounded design of the whale god.

A wooden gong boomed ashore, when the schooner was sighted, and immediately the open spaces before the houses became crowded with figures. Yells and the baying of dogs came thinly over the water.

Nick drove in to within a hundred yards of the shore. Then at a nod from his comrade, Noland ducked below and shut off the coughing engine. When the boat lost way, Cramer let the anchor go, and with the *Sunset* motionless on the glassy water, watched a long canoe putting off for the ship.

When the craft came alongside, throaty, clucking phrases in Klingat were thrown up at Chief Tunguss by the men in the canoe, following which the old man elevated himself gingerly over the ship's side and was handed aft on the little vessel.

Mildred's grips were passed down; then she, too, went to the side. There the girl stood in indecision, staring down at the grinning, coppered masks of the Indians below. Alarm was suddenly stamped on her pale face.

"What's the matter? What are you frightened of?" Cramer's voice sounded as his rubbers thudded on the wet deck, and one hand went out, gripping the girl's arm.

"Here, what's bitin' you?" Kasoon interjected, thrusting his great body between the two and jarring Nick's grip loose. "I got her a good job here teachin' school an' that's all you need to know. You got paid to bring us to Hoonyah, an' that's all what concerns you—"

"For two cents I'd pitch you into the inlet!" the schooner owner broke in on the other. "There's something wrong here, Kasoon, and that girl is not going ashore. To the devil with your five hundred. I'm taking her back to Akutat."

"You are, eh? Why, you mealy-mouthed slob, I'll—"

Crack! Nick's fist cut off the words. Blood leaped up on Kasoon's high-cheeked face in reply to the vicious jab that sent him reeling backward. But in a moment the big man recovered his balance and flung himself forward. Kasoon was no coward, and subconsciously he recognized that here was the opportunity to repay that hammering Cramer had given him before a grim-faced audience of fishermen in Sitka.

Battering fists, swirling out of a bull rush, forced Cramer back foot by foot. He felt the shattering blows, but was only half conscious of them. Nick exchanged blow for blow, but all his thoughts were centered on the mystery of the girl.

"Hey, you fool; watch out!" Noland's yelp suddenly rang in his ears. Too late! Nick's foot caught in a tangle of rope lying on the deck. As he swayed, vainly trying to regain his balance, Kasoon slashed out a withering uppercut that rocked the schooner owner's head and sent him to the deck.

"**N**OW, you sap, I'll chew your ears off!"

Kasoon threw himself down on Cramer's prostrate form, hands gripping at the other man's throat. The stubble on his jowls ground into Nick's clean-shaven face; hot breath beat on his neck.

"Suffering Moses!"

Noland's yell, followed by a wild scream from the girl, pierced Nick's brain—sent the blood pulsing through his aching body, brought every muscle into play.

Backed by two hundred pounds of bone and sinew, every ounce of energy Cramer possessed went into three crashing blows. They were too short to prove deadly, but they served their purpose in checking Kasoon's maniac clawing.

Half way to his knees, Nick's sweat-hazed eyes made out Noland's shape struggling with three Siwash; saw that two others had grasped Mildred and were dragging her toward the ship's side.

That moment's breathing space was all that Kasoon required! A blundering jump carried him to his feet. A moment later he was at the bulwarks and had leaped out of sight, his laugh still ringing in Cramer's ears.

Nick whirled about and started to run forward, just in time to see Noland reel back as the Indians darted away from him. They threw the girl into the canoe and themselves vaulted lightly overside.

Cramer leaped for the shrouds, and hanging on with one hand, stretched the other out, vainly endeavoring to grip the canoe below.

"*Ko'moos!* Dog!" one of the Indians snarled at the white man. A painted paddle flashed. The sharp edge slammed down on Nick's out-thrust wrist, and with a grin of agony on his face the schooner captain pulled himself back out of range, bent double, nursing his agonized arm.

The long blades drove down, whirling the canoe over to where Kasoon's black head bobbed in the water. Through the

pain mists that were dimming his eyes Nick saw the big man being hauled aboard the canoe.

Kasoon shook himself, then reared upright in the vessel. He brandished one fist at Cramer, then waved it toward the struggling girl held down by the Siwashese.

"For Pete's sake . . . show . . . some savvy!" Noland's panting voice came in time to stop the frantic Cramer. One hand gripped Nick's shoulder as the schooner owner gathered himself for a spring.

"You must . . . be . . . crazy with the heat!" Fat choked out, still wrestling with his chum. "Heavy chance of swimmin' after them hoodlums an' winnin' the war. Come aboard, or I'll drag you in!"

Cramer made no reply. He stepped backward, to stand there with heaving chest, eyes still on the red-gold head in the canoe's stern.

"By Jupiter, no!" Nick threw out suddenly, "it'll be dark in an hour. I'll go ashore then and I'll bring her back if I have to kill off half that tribe."

Noland nodded to himself. Those hot words savored of cheap heroics, but he knew that Cramer was unconscious of them. The other man's strained face and tight lips told Fat that there would be trouble in Hoonyah that night.

FAIN lights sprang up in the windows of the huts ashore when finally a mantle of darkness clothed the mountains and blotted out the inlet's gray waters. With the night's coming, the wooden drum once more commenced its thudding.

Slipping about on the greasy rocks, their nostrils filled with the odors of seaweed, decaying wood and fish, Cramer and Noland slowly made their way up the beach. Now and then a dog whined from its shelter underneath the houses, but the animals made no outcry, being apparently accustomed to night prowlers.

Nick stopped at the first house, crept up on the creaking, rickety platform before it and peered it through a grimy window. One hand gripped Noland's arm, the door creaked, and they disappeared. Five minutes later they appeared again, both dressed in Indian clothing, smelling to high Heaven of fish oil and wood smoke. Each man's head was crowned with one of the Klingat dancing hats; woven out

of willow withes, broad-brimmed and face-concealing.

Nick choked back his disgust at the odors arising from his Indian garments, descended from the platform and started to make his way toward the largest cabin at the end of the straggling "street."

From this dwelling a babel of noise welled out on the night air. There was a humming drone of throaty voices, almost blotted out at times by the monotonous booming of the drum.

"This is a potlash—a giving away dance," Nick whispered to the other man. "I know the sounds. You savvy what the custom is, eh? One Indian makes another a present of canoe, a net or something of the kind, and then in turn he can demand any gift he chooses from the other man. Before the night is over they'll have exchanged all their stuff. They get well wound up over it too; excited is no name for it. Listen to that racket! We'll be able to slip in easily enough. All right, Fat, old timer."

"Sure. We'll get in okay, but how the hell are we going to get out again? That's what interests me," Noland grumbled to himself.

Pulling the dancing hat further down over his face, and hunching wide shoulders lazily, Cramer stepped up on the platform before the Chief's house, listened for a moment to the medley of sounds from within, then pushed forward through the doorway.

"*Nanich kopa moosoom?* Are you dreaming?" the schooner owner hissed in Chinook, when a burly back halted his progress.

The Indian grunted and for a moment the whites of his eyes glinted in the half light. Then he made way for the two men. They pushed forward by half a dozen other lounging shapes, until finally Cramer reached a position where he could see all that was going on.

The low, smoke-blackened interior of the Chief's house resembled a museum. On the rough walls were hung great wooden shields covered with crude designs in red and black—wolf heads, leering, half-human faces and the familiar whale's head totem. Long, carved canoe paddles leaned against the walls, with a wild jumble of gaudily fringed Chilkat blankets, dancing hats, spears and masks.

But these things held Nick's interest for a moment only. His hard eyes ranged the interest coppered faces under the coarse black hair until they settled on Chief Tunguss' parchment-like features, where the old man sat hunched upon a raised platform. Beside him Kasoon's bulk reared up in the half light. 1)

CRAMER leaned forward, staring with all his eyes. All at once a cold shiver struck down his spine. Mildred Compton was seated at the Chief's feet, shoulders covered with one of the gaudily embroidered Chilkat blankets, her glinting hair and white face showing up in startling relief against the murky background of crowding bodies.

Tunguss was droning some address in Klingat. Nick was only half aware of the words. His gaze was still on the girl's blanched face. Was that a totem sign? Could it be possible that—?

"Christopher!" the schooner owner breathed, when suddenly his peering eyes came to realize the significance of the vivid smearings on Mildred's white forehead. There a hideous face had been painted. It was a whale's head, open-mouthed, evil-eyed, and set off by two enormous ears, striped in gaudy reds and greens.

Tunguss' voice jarred his mind again; now Nick's ears caught the words as the old man droned on and on in Klingat:

"Behold this is a very strong potlash of many great gifts. Kasoon is very strong also. The old days have returned. No longer do the white men dare to interfere in the laws of the Klingats. Therefore he has brought us a maiden of white blood, that she be sent to speak for us to Kon-na-ka, the Diving Whale God."

Tunguss' clucking drone ceased for a moment, as his cunning eyes swept about the rows of faces, nothing the effect of the speech. A hissing murmur of approval greeted him.

Cramer felt the hair rise at the base of his head when the full meaning of the Chief's words blazed across his brain. Mildred was a sacrifice to appease the fishing gods; her forehead was marked with the medicine man's totem! She was doomed! In a flash he recognized that this tribe, remote from contact with the government's influence, was reverting to the pagan bar-

barities practiced by their ancestors during the Russian occupation of Alaska.

"The death of a white maiden is very strong medicine," Tunguss' throaty voice came again. "Kasoon has made us a rich gift and, behold, we return to him another as rich. He is a great fisherman and desires greatly that his boats alone shall take the salmon from the waters of Hoonyah. Have we not kept these waters from the white men for many years? Did not fishing boats from Wrangell and Sitka come and never return? Chakotloos! Are not the salmon so thick in the season that one may walk across dry footed? Ai! Ai! Therefore, our present to this strong one is that he alone of all the white men may fish in these waters and, therefore, become of great wealth. This, then, is our gift for the gift of her who goes to please the Whale Diving God!"

A sickening sensation enveloped Cramer's long body at the words, drowned suddenly by a burst of guttural clacking from the Indians.

"So that's the devilish scheme," Nick told himself. "Kasoon is giving his cousin to these savages for a sacrifice to the gods, and in return he's getting the exclusive fishing rights of this inlet. Oh Lord, what the deuce can I do?"

Cramer's eyes ranged wildly from the weapons on the wall to the rows of bronzed faces, now swaying back and forth in response to some kind of chant—then to where Mildred was crouched, head bent down on her breast.

A sense of utter helplessness flooded Nick's mind. What could he do, single-handed, against these savages? Why, there must be at least two hundred Klingats crowded into the hut. But he could not let Mildred fall into their hands alive. No, he'd—

A wild leap over the bent backs of the nearest Indians cut off the thoughts. Yelps of astonishment fractured the natives' sing-song droning as Nick blundered across the hut. But in a moment the softer sounds were changed to a volley of yells when the white man burst a passage through one group that had suddenly risen up to halt his progress. He reached the wall behind the platform.

A jerk tore loose one of the ten foot canoe paddles; heavily carved, flat and thin

bladed. Swirling it back over his shoulder Nick darted back toward the wall of faces.

WITH every muscle behind it the red and black blade whistled through the air. Nick felt a tremor run up his arms when the weapon jarred against Chief Tunguss' skull—and the paddle handle snapped off short in his hands.

A snarl came to the white man's lips as the broken paddle slipped from his hands. Dimly conscious of Kasoon's face and a fruitless arm that shot out at him, Nick ran across the platform, and jerked Mildred to her feet.

Cramer felt the girl pull herself out of his grasp, then sensed her hands clinging to his shirt. With it a sudden warm flush pulsed over his body. Mildred had torn herself loose so that he might have both hands free. Here was a girl worth fighting for!

The youngster's shoulder heaved and thrust. Hard fists sent shocking blows into the bronzed masks, fractured by those rolling eyes.

Yells and shouted orders in Klingat rang back from the low roof in an insane jumble of sounds. Every muscle in Cramer's body ached as he charged this way and that in short rushes, now striving to battle a passage to the door, again leaping about to face another foe from behind, when Milly's tightening hands warned him of danger.

But the babel of sounds that drummed on his ears made no impression. Two thoughts only filled his mind. Would he ever reach that door? What the devil had become of Noland?

A sudden high-noted cry from the girl brought Nick whirling about again—just as two great, greasy arms shot about his neck and a hard knee was pressed into the small of his back. A yelp of triumph broke from the natives, when another Indian took advantage of the white man's plight. Hands fastened on Nick's ankles and brought him to the ground with a thud.

Now a dozen hands were clawing at his breast and throat. Through the sweat that blinded him Cramer was vaguely conscious of feet, feet, feet! They came forward in regiments, stamping and trampling.

Another cry from the girl pierced his mind. At the note of terror in her voice Nick made one last superhuman effort. The

man holding onto his back loosened his hands with a groan when the schooner captain's fist found his stomach. There came a rending of cloth and the panting Cramer was on his feet, tattered shirt hanging from his shoulders by a few threads.

Half a dozen feet away Mildred was struggling with two Indians. Beyond her Kasoon's bulk reared up over the twisting heads as he thrust a passage through the mob, shouting some orders that apparently went unheard.

Nick was vaguely conscious of the bound that carried him over to the girl and of the slashing blows that set her free. But he knew this was the end. Grim realization pricked his mind. Hope was gone.

SUDDENLY Milly's voice came again, shrilling something his dazed brain could not pick up. Her finger nails dug into his flesh when she tugged at the remnants of his shirt and tore the tattered garment from his body.

"Kwii-kwii! Wahpoos!"

With the words there came a sudden astonishing silence that drummed on the ears like lead. It was broken only by wheezing breaths, shuffling and the Indian's guttural voice that rang out like a bugle.

"Stop! Stop!" Mildred shrilled in Chinook at Kasoon.

The big man shook his head and continued to thrust forward. Another order from the girl in the coast tongue, and two Indians fastened themselves on Kasoon's arms and, despite his insane oaths, prevented his moving forward.

"Oh, Nick, Nick, can't you see?" Mildred appealed tugging at Cramer's bare arm. "Look at the Indians; they're frightened! That tattooing on your chest. Quick! You've got to think quick!"

"Tattooing?" the white man said half to himself, bleared eyes going down to the multitude of crude designs in red and blue that covered his great frame. Tattooing? Well, it had been a kid's crazy notion to get that done. Sure made a guy look like thirty cents. But what was the sense in talking about it at a time like this?

His eyes roved again out over the sea of staring faces and tousled black heads. Through the haze that still clouded his mind, Nick recognized that a strange change had swept over the Klingats.

Instead of pressing forward, now the Indians were shoving away from him, coppered visages filled with awe. They hissed at each other in the native tongue, those in front stamping and elbowing the men behind them to get farther away from the white man and the girl. This sudden change in their demeanor was bewildering—extraordinary. What in blazes could it possibly mean?

"The Diving Whale God!" Milly's urgent voice smote him again as one white hand patted his bare chest. "You've got it there, with all those snakes, ships and things. Oh, Heavens, you're terrible! Can't you see that the Indians think you are a blood brother of the tribe, or you wouldn't be carrying that sacred sign? See the way they're looking at you. Quick, tell them!"

Kasoon had caught the import of the girl's gestures. A roar burst from him. He tore himself loose from the Indians.

One of Cramer's arms swept Mildred behind him, but the gesture was unnecessary. Half a dozen more natives threw themselves on Kasoon, and despite his great strength the man was helpless.

An urgent nudge from the girl. Cramer gathered his scattered wits and called in Chinook at the top of his voice:

"Are you all fools, you people of Hoon-yah? Am I, the son's son of Kon-no-ka, the Diving Whale God, to suffer thus because I come to the earth place from the clouds? I come seeking my woman, and finding her go again without strife, else there will be wailing. Do you dare to insult this totem?"

Cramer pulled his frame to its full height and pointed at the hideous whale's head hanging above the platform. Every eye followed the gesture—from the white man's tattooed breast to the wooden god.

"My father's father has brought vengeance to Tunguss, your Chief, because of his evil. The Diving Whale God kills all those that stand in his path, and as for this one, Kasoon—"

Boom!

A rifle shot filled the crowded hut with roaring echoes. There came a sudden chorus of thin yelps, then silence again. Kasoon gripped at his chest with one great paw and slumped forward. For a mo-

ment the bewildered Indians held him, then let his body thud to the ground.

"EVERY time I shies I gets me a cocoonut!" came from the dark portals of the door in cheery tones. "Ain't no guy at Coney Island what'll stick his face through a hole in the canvas when Mister Noland, the Boy Wonder, is on the job. Got him first crack. That's shootin', crew!"

"Quick! Quick!" Mildred urged, tugging at Cramer's arm. "The Indians don't understand English. They think this is part of the Diving Whale's vengeance too. Oh, Nick, Nick, you're—"

"Great Scot, it's Noland!" Cramer whispered to the girl, thrusting an arm about her waist. Then with a sweeping gesture of contempt, he waved the staring Klingats aside and passed on toward the door, followed by the rolling eyes of the natives.

"Pinched this rusty old Winchester outa one of the huts, but she sure shoots good," Fat announced as the three stepped hurriedly across the platform and leaped down on the rocks. "But, how the heck did you—"

Nick patted his ornamented chest shamefacedly, then wheeled half about to glance back over his shoulder. Now the chief's doorway was crowded with faces, but none of the Indians left the hut's shelter.

"I'll take a crack at 'em, whilst you two beat it for the boat," Fat suggested, throwing up the rifle. Cramer struck it aside.

"No," he ordered. "Blood-brother stuff, Fat. We're safe as houses now. Go ahead and get the boat ready; we're going aboard."

Noland's quick eyes noted the position of the tattooed arm, saw the shy smile on the girl's face.

"I know darned well what this means," Fat grumbled to himself padding off into the night, nostrils filled with the sea's salty tang. "I'll be squatting in that boat for an hour. Oh, well, not such a bad trip after all. We got the schooner paid for anyhow, and by heck we're gettin' a cook, too, from the look of it. Hey, crew! Wonder can she make civilized hot-cakes? Answer me that!"