

BURNED BRIDGES

IN THE still tropic night the sea stirred in phosphorescent ripples as its calm surface was broken by the dropping of the anchor. John Boone took a deep breath of anticipation, gazing over the rail at the Java shore-line only a couple of hundred feet away. The goal that had brought him all the way from New York was within striking distance, somewhere in that inky jungle growth that started almost at the shore line and extended back nobody knew how far.

The Southern Cross seemed only a little less brilliant than the moon over the slumbering, towering volcano in the distance. Boone stretched and flexed his muscles. Nothing could be done before daylight, but in the morning —

A shuffling footfall behind him brought him suddenly alert. It was Francia, the Portuguese owner-captain of the schooner he had chartered at Singapore. "You promised, Mr. Boone, to tell me why we came here, once we had anchored."

Boone nodded slowly. "Yes. Come with me to my cabin."

From an inner pocket in his trunk Boone brought out a yel-

lowed chart. He spread it on a table. Before them was a map of the Indian Ocean. Boone put his pencil point on the coast-line. "We are approximately here. Back there in the jungle"—he gestured almost directly inland—"there are half a million dollars' worth of pearls."

The Portuguese stared at him as if he were mad. "Pearls, mister? Pearls in the jungle?"

Boone grinned. "It's a long story, and I'll try to keep it short. My father was a pearl trader. A partner of his named Swithin ran off with all the pearls owned by the partnership, and disappeared completely. He and his young daughter were traced to this point on the coast. They were never known to have come out of the jungle again. My father always suspected that Swithin was killed by natives. But father was sure he would have had the good sense to have hidden the pearls first."

Boone refolded the chart and returned it to its hiding-place. He did not see the thoughtful, crafty look that flickered momentarily in the captain's eyes. "That's what you and I are here for," he said lightly. "If we never find the

By HARLEY L. COURT

*Nobody but that amazing girl knew the secret of the Vale of
Poison, and by her knowledge she was able to control the
barbaric natives*



"I hate you!" she cried, but he didn't believe her.

pearls, you have nothing to lose. I'm paying you for your time." Together they went back on deck.

TO BOONE'S eyes the jungle was an enticing, beckoning mystery. All that was ominous, foreboding about its tangled shoreline represented a challenge, a sporting gamble. He caught Francia's forearm in tense fingers. "Look!"

The full moon lighted the narrow beach so that it was almost as bright as day. With a snapping of bamboo the inky jungle had opened at one point to let a human figure onto the glistening sand. It was a woman, and she was white! Except for a sarong she was elementally naked. And on a leash, tugging at her wrist, was a seven foot leopard!

The beast sniffed, pointed at the schooner, and snarled venomously. But the girl, in her passage to the water's edge, acted as if she were unaware that human eyes stared at her.

She was like a goddess, infinitely graceful in motion, inexpressibly proud of carriage. Her bare shoulders gleamed with the sheen of polished ivory where they curved into her beautifully rounded arms. Her glorious breasts moved with a little lilt with her stride. Her legs were long and symmetrical and they tapered delicately into slender ankles and sandaled feet.

Boone held his breath. The whole scene was incredible. He turned his attention again to the leopard. Even at that distance he could see the savage glow in the animal's eyes. He was straining at his leash; but the girl held him easily.

Suddenly, still with no sign that

she had seen the schooner, the girl turned on her heel, and the jungle swallowed her and her pet as completely as if they had never existed. Boone rubbed his eyes.

Then he was conscious of a Malay deckhand addressing the captain in awed tones. "That girl—she is the White Princess of *Guwa Upas*! Not many men have seen her and lived!"

"She's lovely!" Boone said, hardly aware that he'd spoken. "Who is she? What's she doing in the jungle?"

The native deckhand shook his head. "I can't tell you, *tuan*. All I know is that it is death to venture into the *Guwa Upas*, the Vale of Poison. Only the White Princess can go there with her people and return unharmed. Without her presence no man can breathe in that place." The Malay clutched his throat and made strangling sounds.

A little later he strolled aft and the Portuguese captain followed him. Boone could hear them talking in low tones. But all his interest was on that shoreline where the girl had disappeared. Perhaps he would see her again when he went into the interior—

There was a deep rumble from the bowels of Mt. Solak, far off over the tree-tops. And at the same time a sudden wind sprang up and sang eerily through the ship's rigging. It was like a warning that died into silence as quickly as it had been spoken.

BY DAY the sun turned the jungle into a steaming cauldron. With the Malay deckhand and a Javanese sailor, all three armed

with short knives, Boone had penetrated three miles into the dank morass. Now he stopped to rest in a mangrove clearing.

It had been hard work, getting even this far. It was almost like ripping through a woven fabric as they had hacked their way through giant orchids, weird pitcher plants, vari-colored and unnamed tropic shrubs. Wild hogs had fled their coming. There had been Kidang deer, jabbering monkeys, and unbelievably large jungle rats.

Boone mopped his dripping face. Only his sixth sense made him hear the sound behind him. He whirled, his hand plunging for the revolver slung at his hip. Even then he was too late to dodge entirely the heavy blow aimed at his head. The club grazed his skull and crashed painfully down on his shoulder, and Boone looked into the hate-contorted face of the Malay deckhand.

Rage danced in Boone's eyes. He brought up his .45. But before he could fire, the Javanese sailor had launched himself on Boone's shoulders.

For a moment it was touch-and-go. All three rolled on the earth. Boone's hand that held the gun was plunged into a seething mud-hole. He got his fingers on the sailor's neck when the Malay's knee shot into his stomach. On top of that, a stone — Boone couldn't see whose hand held it — raked his cheek, plowing a bloody furrow.

Then Boone's fist caught the Javanese full in the mouth, knocking out teeth, and dropping the man face down in the mire. Boone wheeled just in time to duck an-

other swing from the Malay's club. He dived for his gun that he had dropped, and leveled it before the man had regained his balance.

Fear sprang up in the man's face. "Don't shoot, *tuan!*" he begged, suddenly abject.

"Why not?" Boone snapped. "You tried to kill me!"

"But it wasn't of my doing. It was under orders from Captain Francia. He wants the treasure of pearls for himself!"

Fury boiled in John Boone's veins. "I might have guessed it," he muttered. "The pearls are mine. And you, and that ratty little side-kick of yours, are going on with me! If either of you makes the slightest funny move from now on, I'm not going to stop to argue the matter!" He turned to the prone sailor and kicked him in the ribs. "Get on your feet!"

The groaning Javanese staggered upright, and stood swaying. And then hell broke loose!

FROM all sides there burst upon them a yelling pack of mahogany-skinned natives. Bamboo javelins whistled over their heads. The Javanese sailor cried out horribly as one of the spears, tipped with lava ground to a fine point, entered his chest and protruded a foot through his back.

John Boone brought up his mud-caked revolver and triggered it again and again. Its clogged mechanism refused to function. He clubbed it in his fist and smashed it down on the skull of his nearest attacker. The man went down.

But there were too many of them. Though they fought like madmen, the American and the

Malay deckhand were soon overpowered by sheer weight of numbers. A few minutes later, bound hand and foot, they were being borne away over the crude suggestion of a trail. Boone's whole body was an aching mass of agony. For hours they progressed in that fashion.

And then before them a cleared plateau opened up. Bamboo huts were scattered thickly about. On each side of their march naked native women lined the way. The procession came to a halt before a larger, more pretentious structure.

Boone's pulses leaped as he first cast his eyes on the rough veranda before the building. Standing before the entrance door was the white girl, the White Princess of *Guwa Upas*, the girl he had seen on the beach with her pet leopard!

In the bright sunlight her hair gleamed like spun gold. A *lei* of blood-red hibiscus blossoms failed to conceal the splendid hemispheres of her firm, maidenly breasts. From head to foot, every sweet curve of her entrancing figure was lovely enough to drive a man mad. Her unwavering, deep purple eyes studied the American.

There was a short colloquy between the girl and the leader of the prisoners' guards, but it was in a dialect foreign to Boone. In answer two of the natives led the Malay deckhand away while the others guided Boone onto the veranda.

The White Princess looked thoughtfully at Boone's blood-smearred face and muddy clothing. She spoke again to the leader of the guards. The man bowed low

and led Boone around the side of a building to a room with barred windows. A bolt shot home behind him.

THE room was scrupulously clean. On the floor was a mat of woven grass. At one side a bamboo bed was covered with soft animal skins. The American was still examining his prison when the door opened. A native girl carrying a gourd of water and a towel came in. She put down her burdens, smiled, untied his bonds, and left. But Boone realized that he was not yet in a position to attempt to escape. Undoubtedly there were guards outside attending to that.

The cool, fresh water was like balm to Boone's aches and bruises. He had finished washing up when his guard reappeared. Without a word the man grasped Boone's arm and led him outside. He indicated a hand-hewn chair on the veranda and Boone sat down wearily.

Before him was a deep declivity and, on the far side of the valley, he could see the volcano rising almost perpendicularly to its crater. He was conscious all the time of his guard, standing immobile beside him, naked *kris* in hand.

Despite the fact that he was a prisoner, it was hard for Boone to feel worried. Rather his chief emotion beyond his tiredness was one of excitement. Near him was the strange girl who had affected him so strongly on first sight. He was sure he would see her again soon, and his pulse was rapid in expectation.

As if in answer to his thought,

she appeared suddenly before him. Clad still in nothing but the flowered sarong, she dropped into the chair at his right.

To his amazement she addressed him in English, extending to him at the same time a pair of tarnished, old field-glasses.

"Look into the valley there," she said, "and tell me what you see."

The American attempted to conceal his start of surprise. He raised the glasses and scanned the panorama before him. At the base of the volcano was a broad valley half-obscured by shimmering, dancing, refracted heat-waves. And then Boone shuddered at what he saw. The whole floor of the valley was like an open burial-ground. It was strewn with bleached bones, the skeletons of animals and birds, the skeletons of what must have once been human beings! In the sparse vegetation the bones were a ghastly, deadly white, scattered helter-skelter, as if each lay where its owner had died.

Boone put down the glasses and lifted his eyes to the girl. "You were looking at the *Guwa Upas*, the Vale of Poison," she stated in matter-of-fact tones. "One breath of its air and all living things die. Strangers who visit my country from the outside world journey there. It is the law. And it is their last resting place."

She finished and a hullabaloo of gongs and tom-toms arose from the terrace immediately in front of the veranda. Native voices rang out in what was probably meant for song. Boone leaned forward and looked more intently. Four na-

tives, armed with short spears, were prodding the Malay deck-hand from the schooner Boone had chartered down the narrow path toward the valley. Again and again he stumbled, but his tormentors urged him on viciously.

When his form became dim in the distance, Boone lifted the glasses again. He saw the whole ghastly tragedy. The Malay was alone now and terror showed on his dark face as he looked back at his four guards. Their arms, up-raised with spears poised, told him there was no hope that way. He staggered on.

He came to a pass into the bottom of the valley so narrow that two men could not have walked through abreast. Again he paused. A rock was over his head, balanced so delicately that a light shove could have dropped it and closed the pass. The spears behind him gestured menacingly.

Weak-kneed, he entered.

Fascinated, Boone watched his progress. He strode forward three or four steps, then staggered. His hands clawed frantically at his throat. He went to his knees and turned, trying to crawl back to the valley's entrance. Before he had moved two yards, he shuddered convulsively and dropped. He lay there without moving.

SHAKEN with horror, Boone turned to the girl. "Why did you do that to that man?"

Her reply was unbelievably bitter. "Because I hate all men from the outer world. Men from outside killed my father, and I have sworn vengeance on all who come within my power!"

"Your father? Who was he?"

Her voice became softer. "My father was gentle, good and kind. He brought me here as a little girl, and he taught me as part of my education to hate and fear all men from outside—men such as yourself.

"My father had been driven into the jungle by men who wanted to kill him. All his life he had had to hide. But he told me what sort of men his enemies were. At last the jungle got him. Fever." Her eyes grew stormy. "Except for men like you my father need never have left civilization. You killed him! I hate you, and the 'civilization' you represent!"

Throughout her speech Boone had felt more and more strongly the magic of her presence. A strange tingling raced through his veins. But first he must know what he had begun to suspect—

"What was your father's name?"

"Swithin. Gordon Swithin. I'm Susan."

John Boone gave no sign of the conflicting emotions that churned in his breast. It was as he had guessed. The girl was the daughter of his father's swindling partner! And that meant that the pearls were probably not far away.

He studied her face, wondering if he should tell her. But staring at her, he felt all thought of the pearls slide meaninglessly from his mind. She was so sweet, so glamorous, so utterly alluring. He smiled into her violet eyes.

She flushed slightly, but not with displeasure. It was more as if she could read what was in his heart. A mist came into her gaze. Impul-

sively she spoke to the native guard by the American's chair, dismissing him.

She leaned toward Boone. Her red lips were slightly parted. He stretched out an arm that crept around her shoulders. At the same time he slid his chair nearer to hers. She sighed. Her skin was like cool satin to his feverish touch.

His head lowered to hers and her bare arms reached toward him in response. Her hair was soft on his cheek and her lips were soft and moist and intoxicating. He drew her to him and thrilled to the pressure of her resilient breasts against his chest. The fluttering of her heart communicated itself to him. Her breath was quick and gusty.

Such ecstasy as this he had never known. She was limp and pliant, every subtle curve of her figure molded to his. She moaned softly. . . .

AND then unexpectedly her body became rigid. Fire darted from her eyes. She drew away stiffly. "I hate you!" she cried. "You do this to me to gain my favor, to save your own life! You take advantage of me! But I know you are like all men from the outside world. Tomorrow you shall follow that Malay into the Vale of Poison!"

She clapped her hands sharply, and two natives responded. A couple of minutes later Boone found himself back in the room with the barred windows. And he heard the bolt snick home.

MIDNIGHT came and went—Boone had clung to his wrist—

watch—and still he couldn't sleep for thinking of the White Princess, of Susan. The moon was full; it was the season for the monsoon to shift. Through the bars of his prison Boone could see the Valley of Death and the volcano beyond it.

From the village there was a rhythmic, barbaric roll of drums that grew steadily in volume. He pressed closer to the window and wondered if his last hour had come. A procession of natives was coming toward the house in which he was held. The whole village was on the march. He could make out young warriors and old men; ancient hags and undeveloped maidens. They came to a halt before his prison.

Then, startled, Boone saw the White Princess come forth to take her place at the head of the ritualistic ranks. She walked with queenly grace, and, padding at her side, was the great leopard, on its leash.

The picture was something that the American would never forget. The grace of the half-naked girl was comparable to that of the leopard. The movements of her body made him think of a piece of classic Greek sculpture come to life. Off she strode toward the Valley of Death, and her tribespeople trailed behind her. Obviously the time had not yet come to deal with him.

When they were out of sight of his window, Boone found his desire to follow her overpowering. Would she go through that narrow pass through which the Malay had been driven? It was rumored, he remembered, that she was able to

go unharmed into the Vale of Poison.

Boone reached into his pocket. His negligent captors had not taken his pocket knife; and his prison was constructed chiefly of bamboo. He started on the door.

The wood had toughened until its fibers were almost hard enough to turn the blade. But he persevered. First, with little shavings, then larger whittlings he kept on until he had cut a hole large enough for him to slip his hand through. He shoved back the bolt, and was free!

There was no sign of human life remaining in the village. Without even considering his chances of making his way back to the coast and his schooner, Boone set off toward the dread *Guwa Upas*.

He reached the narrow pass over which he had seen the balanced rock from the veranda, and still he had come upon no one. Taking a deep breath, he plunged into the valley.

He passed the body of the dead Malay deckhand and hurried on. Strangely, he was feeling no ill effects. A stiff wind was blowing over the valley's floor. Then Boone came to a pause abruptly. Ahead of him in the center of the valley he could see the whole tribe gathered in a semicircle. Above them on a shelf of rock the White Princess stood bathed in a pool of brilliant moonlight. The leopard was crouched at her side.

Boone could see that she was addressing her people, but the wind would not let him hear her words. Above every other sound then came a rumble from the volcano that made the earth seem to

quiver. The girl turned and disappeared into a dark grotto, but reappeared almost at once.

BOONE caught his breath in amazement. The white-skinned, golden-haired girl was now literally weighted down with ropes of gorgeous pearls. They cascaded down over her naked shoulders, absorbing life and lustre from the petal tones of her skin. They streamed proudly over her magnificent breasts, looped low over the flatness of her narrow waist, carressed even the splendor of her gleaming thighs.

There was silence from the people for a moment, a silence which was as if every person there had simultaneously caught his breath. Then drums began to throb, no louder than the murmur of a vast chorus of awe-struck human voices.

A group of naked native maidens broke from the throng in a sinuous, writhing, barbaric dance. Young men joined their ranks, until all were dancing in homage to the White Princess. Streaks of dawn were showing in the East before, at a command from the pearl-covered priestess, they stopped and filed slowly back toward the village.

BOONE had managed to keep out of sight, and now in the whole valley there were only three living things, himself, the leopard, and the girl whom he adored.

He sprang from his concealment and scrambled up to the shelf where the girl Susan stood. She whirled and the leopard bunched his muscles with a snarl. She rebuked

the animal in low tones. She spoke to the American, "Do you know that my pet would kill you if I would let him?"

Boone smiled. "But you won't let him."

"Why not?"

"Because you love me—as I love you!" He held out his arms and she came into them as if that were the most natural thing in the world. But a minute later she had pulled away again.

"Why do you affect me as no man has ever done? Who are you?"

He still held her hands. "I am John Boone. Those pearls you are wearing were stolen from my father by your father. Perhaps that will explain to you why your father was so afraid to face any one from the outside world."

She was pale and her eyes were troubled. "I be-believe you," she said. "I had been afraid of that, and I suspected it." Tears welled up and coursed down her cheeks. "I found some newspaper clippings after dad had died that hinted at it."

Boone drew her back into the comfort of his arms and kissed the tears away. "It doesn't matter, now that we have found each other," he said. "I'm going to take you back to America with me." For a long time he petted and caressed her, and she responded with an ardency that set him on fire. . . .

THERE had been a long silence when he asked her: "But tell me the secret of this valley. How is it that you and your people can come here safely?"

She smiled wanly. "Father taught me," she explained. "Twice a year when the monsoon changes, it sweeps away the poisonous gases that seep up from the ground. There are twenty-four hours then when the valley is perfectly safe. At other times, even the birds that fly over it are likely to be killed."

She paused a minute. "My father took advantage of that fact to make this grotto a hiding place for the pearls. He told me to come here twice a year on the days that are safe to keep my people in awe of my magical powers. Also he told me that the pearls' lustre would die unless they came in contact with human flesh every so often."

Her voice faded and her eyes grew wide. Boone thought he could read fear in them. "John dear—look out!" she gasped. She was staring at something over his shoulder.

Boone spun on his heel.

"Put up your hands, Mr. Boone!" The gun that pointed at Boone was held by Francia, the Portuguese owner of the schooner the American had chartered. He grinned crookedly.

"I will take the pearls," he said. "And the pretty little girl will come with me. She will like it in Singapore." He extended calloused fingers toward her naked shoulder.

The leopard snarled and the Portuguese took a backward step. It was Boone's opportunity. He lunged forward and swung from his heels. The blow caught his opponent high on the cheek-bone and staggered him.

At the same time a louder, more

menacing rumble issued from the volcano. There could be no doubt this time but that the earth trembled.

The girl screamed. "We must run! If the rock falls at the entrance to the valley, we'll all be lost. Tomorrow the valley will be filled with poisonous gas again."

The Portuguese acted first. He snatched at the girl and held her before him as a shield. His revolver menaced Boone. He started backing toward the pass.

"You will stay, Mr. Boone. You and the leopard. My ship will not have room for all of us."

AGAIN the ground shook and Boone could see the rock at the valley's entrance tremble. Cold sweat broke out all over him. One more such tremor and the rock would be dislodged. The volcano was still growling.

The Portuguese and Susan were almost at the pass. Suddenly the girl tore free and yelled something in Javanese. The leopard heard and leaped for Francia.

The man's gun barked again and again but the beast was barely slowed. The Portuguese broke into a panic-stricken run to one side, away from the pass to freedom. He darted behind a huge boulder and turned his gun's fire on the leopard until he had emptied it. The animal bounded high in the air and dropped—dead.

But Boone had not waited to watch the drama. Holding Susan by the hand he was streaking to the valley's only exit. As they dashed through the pass, he could hear the curses of the Portuguese

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behind them. They reached the far end, but none too soon. As if in the throes of a death-convulsion, the earth heaved under their feet. The huge rock tottered almost over their heads. With a roar it toppled into the pass, closing it forever, cutting off from their ears the frenzied shrieks of the man who was imprisoned behind it—as surely doomed to death as any criminal

sentenced to a lethal gas chamber.

BOONE turned to the lovely girl with whom he had escaped. “Susan, darling!” he whispered. In the reaction to what had happened, they clung to each other as if they would never let go.

Then, hand in hand, easy in their hearts, they turned their backs on the Vale of Poison forever.

