

**By WILLIS
VACHEL KEITH**

FIRE

WHEN he heard the mournful, fog-hushed whistle of the Singapore boat, Steve Hunter rose from his desk in the Banda Island office of the Dutch East Indies Gold Mining Company, donned a slicker, and stepped out into the soupy drizzle.

Meeting the island steamer was usually an event, but this time he had no stomach for it. Adolph Vevera, the company manager, had died suddenly of a fever and his adopted daughter, a Nanking mission-school teacher, was on the boat, expecting to take his body back with her. Unfortunately there was no body. Too late Steve had learned that government regulations demanded immediate cremation. To make matters worse, the Singapore office had notified him that Max Hauser, a new manager, would be on the boat.

At the dock he elbowed his way through the crowd of Malays and Chinese to where the gangplank would be lowered. Papa Van Buckholder, rotund, white-haired Government Resident, was already there, waiting for his official mail pouch and attempting to converse with Dr. Pederson, the island's health officer, who was three sheets to the wind in anticipation of a shipment of whiskey.

The stern of the chunky, iron-hulled steamer had already been

warped in and McPherson, its red-bearded skipper, was standing at the port rail bawling for someone to cast a bow-line.

Steve looked up as a man and woman came out on deck and moved to the rail. The man was tall and heavy-set with beady eyes and thick, loose lips that seemed to be molded out of wet putty. His big, flat head with close-clipped blond hair was hunched into his shoulders like a turtle's. Steve shifted his attention to the woman and his breath choked up in his throat.

Her full, bowed mouth was blood-red and beaded lashes rimmed dark, exotic eyes. She wore no hat and her raven hair was drawn away from her face and tied in a tight, intricate bun at the nape of her neck. A sheer white silk dress clung to the curves of her voluptuous figure, cutting under high, firm breasts and outlining the sweeping arch of her hips. The skirt was almost knee-length and as the bow of the steamer swung in, her dress fluttered in the breeze and Steve could see the woman's shapely legs and glimpses of ivory thigh above the taut, gartered tops of her stockings.

McPherson bellowed an order and the gangplank swung down. Steve looked up again. The heavy-set man had disappeared but the

Hauser, the new Banda Island manager, had no business inflaming the superstitious natives—particularly when he was putting two beautiful women in danger. But Hauser was contemptuous of native gods—contemptuous until the gods themselves took a hand in the matter!

MOUNTAIN



"Get out!" Hauser ordered, brandishing the gun.

woman was still there, leaning over slightly so that her breasts half rested on the wooden rail. Her eyes, dark and sensuous, met Steve's for an instant and he could have sworn her carmine lips smiled. Then she was gone and McPherson waddled down the gangplank carrying Papa Van's mail pouch and shouting greetings. Steve drew him aside.

"That dark woman who was at the rail, Mac. Is her name Vevera?"

"Hell, no! She's Hauser's wife. Not bad, eh?"

"Wife?" The company radiogram hadn't mentioned anything about Hauser bringing a wife. "Is — is Miss Vevera on board, Mac?"

"Yep. Kept to her cabin pretty much. Say, that Hauser dame is all right. A young buck like you—"

STEVE saw them coming down the gangplank and broke away. As he drew closer, he knew that distance hadn't lent enchantment. Hauser was ugly with his underslung jaw and tiny eyes, but his wife was stunning. Every square inch of her body seemed to move under the clinging silk dress with nothing to impede it. Steve began to feel the nineteen months he had spent on Banda Island. The roof of his mouth went dry and his temples throbbed. He had all he could do to introduce himself and when she slipped her cool, tapered fingers into his moist palm and smiled, the nineteen months seemed like ten years.

"We'll go right to our residence, Hunter," Hauser said.

Steve tore his eyes away from

the brunette's exquisite form. "I—I have another passenger on board. Mr. Vevera's daughter came on from Nanking."

Hauser's soft, unpleasant face darkened. "What am I supposed to do, stand on this filthy dock until she's ready to get off?" He gestured irritably. "Have someone else take care of her."

Steve kept his voice down. "There isn't anyone else. Mr. Van Buckholdter, the Resident, is going over toward your cottage. I'll ask him to escort you." He brought Papa Van over and introduced him.

Hauser pointed to two large trunks and some hand baggage on the dock. "I want all that brought to my quarters, Hunter. At once!"

"I'm afraid it won't fit. Space is limited. We have a tool-shed and—"

"You heard me, Hunter!" Hauser growled. "Have it brought to my cottage!"

Steve glanced at Papa Van and the Dutchman's eyes mirrored amazement. "Yes, sir," he said, fighting down the desire to bury his fist in Hauser's ugly face. He watched them walk off the dock, his mind an angry whirlpool. Who in hell did he think *he* was, anyway? Fat, blubber-mouthed pig! Why, for two cents the company would take their lousy job and stick it—"

"I—I beg your pardon," a still, small voice at his elbow said.

STEVE turned and looked into eyes that made everything else seem unimportant. They were blue, but like no other blue he had ever seen. Tear-stained, they

shimmered with all the faceted radiance of star sapphires, eclipsing the loveliness of a pert little nose and strawberry lips, all of which was crowned by a wealth of golden hair.

"You're Nan Vevera!" he blurted.

She nodded. "Y-yes, I am. Are—are you Mr. Hunter?"

Steve blinked. He had expected horn-rimmed glasses, severely tailored clothes, and whatever else went with a mission-school teacher, not a blue-eyed blonde whose small, rounded bosom, rising and falling under the bodice of a simple cotton frock convinced him she wasn't a day over twenty.

"I'm Steve Hunter," he said dazedly, remembering what he was going to have to tell this slip of a girl.

"I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate your notifying me, Mr. Hunter," she said.

Steve took her arm. "We'll go over to the Resident's bungalow." He left orders for Hauser's luggage to be carted from the dock and led Nan Vevera across the flat toward the group of seven cottages that made up Banda Island's white settlement. The rain had stopped and the fog was beginning to lift. "I'm afraid I've brought you over here needlessly," Steve said. He went on to explain the sanitary regulation and when he mentioned the cremating of the body, he felt her quiver. "I can't tell you how sorry I am."

She looked up at him, her eyes tear-flooded. "I understand the reason for it and—and I'm glad I came. I've always wanted to meet you and see the island. Dad wrote

so much about it and—and you."

She was taking it like a major, even smiling through her tears. "You're swell," Steve said. "I've arranged for you to spend the night at the Resident's cottage. He has an extra room. You'll be more comfortable there than on the boat. They load with nutmeg and mace during the night and the screeching of the winches is enough to keep anyone awake."

She laughed and wiped her eyes and by the time they reached Papa Van's cottage her face was animated again. In a few minutes the genial Resident appeared, muttering under his breath. "Ach, dis new manager I do not like, Stevie."

"Well, he's a Dutchman, Papa Van. Hauser is a Dutch name."

"He iss not Dutch, Stevie."

Steve happened to glance at Nan Vevera. The pupils of her eyes were glittering strangely. "Is something wrong?" he questioned.

She paled and looked away. "Er—no."

He knew she was concealing something because her breathing had quickened and her breasts were agitated. Why should it have made a difference to her whether Hauser was Dutch or not? "I see Pederson got his whiskey," he said, watching the bibulous health officer and McPherson carrying a case over to the white shack that served as hospital and residence for Pederson. "That'll hold him for a week or so." His eyes shifted to Hauser's cottage where two Malay boys were struggling to get the second trunk through the narrow doorway. They managed it, somehow. He turned to Nan. "I'll

show you the mine before darkness sets in."

THE words were scarcely out of his mouth when all three of them heard a shot. Steve ran to the door. Hauser was standing on the porch of his cottage, leveling a smoking revolver at one of the Malay boys who was running across the flat. The other boy had crumpled at the steps. The revolver thundered again and the second boy stopped dead in his tracks, hung for a moment like a marionette, then pitched forward on his face.

"Get Pederson!" Steve shouted to Papa Van, dashing out. He reached the boy who had fallen on his face, turned the slight body over. The eyes were open and fixed, the mouth agape with blood trickling out of one corner. Pederson could do nothing for him. He was dead. Steve hurried to the crumpled figure at the steps but there was no need to touch it. He could see the gaping bullet hole at the back of the shaved head.

Hauser came to the front of the porch. "I caught the black devils trying to open one of my trunks! Get their filthy carcasses out of here, Hunter!"

Steve looked beyond him to the door of the cottage. Mrs. Hauser was standing there in negligee and underthings, her hand at her throat and the under-surface of her arm pressing against a full, net-cupped breast. Her eyes were frightened.

"Get 'em out!" Hauser ordered, brandishing the gun.

"This may cause trouble," Steve said. "We're five or six whites

against a thousand Malays and Chinese. You can't go around shooting them down." He pointed to the cluster of native shacks adjacent to the mine. Half-naked men and women were congregating in a clearing. "See that!"

"To hell with them!" Hauser rasped. "I'm running this outfit and I'll shoot down every last one of them if I feel like it! They can't steal from me!"

Papa Van arrived with Pederson in tow. The physician looked at the two bodies, shook his head and stumbled back to his cottage and the newly arrived case of liquor. Steve explained what had happened. The Resident shook his white head.

"No, id iss impossible! Nefer do dey steal! Vot goot vould id do dem?"

"I said I caught them trying to force open one of my trunks!" Hauser's eyes were like pin-heads of fire. "Do you think I'm lying?"

"Dey do not steal!" Papa Van insisted doggedly.

STEVE watched the clearing in front of the native shacks. The men had separated from the women and were coming toward Hauser's cottage in a solid phalanx of brown bodies, each with the curved bone handle of a *kris* protruding from his cotton *sarong*. Hauser saw them advancing and his loose cheeks twitched.

"Keep them back!" he shrieked. "I'll shoot them!"

Steve stepped up on the porch. "Give me that gun, Hauser!"

"No! Stand back, I tell you!" The revolver shook in his fat hand. "Stand back or—"

Steve lunged at him and his right hand whipped out, balled knuckles catching Hauser flush on the jaw. It was a knockout blow, timed to perfection and with every ounce of the young assistant-manager's muscular body behind it. Hauser went down and the gun clattered on the porch floor.

Steve dropped off the porch and faced the kris-armed Malaysians led by the giant, Samu, the one native on the island who spoke a smattering of English. They seemed to know, instinctively, that both boys were dead, for their women, back in the clearing, wailed horribly.

Steve pointed to the bodies. "Take them, Samu, and go back."

The huge brownskin shook his head. "We take bad *tuan*, also.

"No, Samu. *Tuan* did not mean to kill the boys. It was an accident. Go back!"

Samu translated and an angry rumble ran through the solid knot of natives. Brown fingers tightened about kris handles. Steve heard a woman's choked cry and he turned his head. Nan Vevera was standing a little away from the cottage, her cheeks ashen and her eyes bright pools of terror.

Samu advanced and the natives followed him. "Bad *tuan* die for kill!" he muttered.

Steve knew what they wanted—Hauser as a human sacrifice on the funeral pyre of the dead boys. He would have let them take him if he felt certain it would stop there. But it wouldn't. That much he knew. Half-savage, they would become drunk with power and the women would be in danger. Hau-

ser's wife with her sleek, full-breasted figure, and Nan.

He pointed suddenly to the fog-rimmed mountain peak in the distance. Gray smoke curled up from its volcanic peak. "*Gunong Api* will say if *tuan* is good or bad, Samu! *Gunong Api*!"

The Malaysians fell back and all eyes turned to the volcano. There was a moment of dreadful silence before Samu spoke. Four men came forward, lifted the bodies, and carried them away. The rest followed.

Papa Van mopped his brow. "Ach, Stevie, like a miracle it was!"

STEVE walked over to Nan Vevera. "You had no business being here. If trouble had started —" The adoration in her eyes stopped him short. Suddenly he felt the desire to hold her close and press his mouth down on the soft, moist loveliness of her lips and feel her young, firm body against him.

"I—I was afraid for you," she said softly. "Those horrible knives!"

He touched her arm and a warm wave passed over him. "You'd better go back to the cottage with Papa Van and stay there. There's no telling what may happen unless Hauser, himself, straightens this out with them. I'll see you later."

Mrs. Hauser came out on the porch, still in her negligee, kneeled beside her husband, and mopped his face with a wet cloth. Walking up the steps Steve could glimpse the deep hollow of her breasts where the brassiere cups were

joined. Again his mouth went dry and his temples pounded.

"He'll be all right," he said. "Let me get him inside." He dragged the lumpy, inert body to the sleeping porch at the rear of the cottage, stretched it out on a bed. "I'll send Dr. Pederson over to look at him."

Mrs. Hauser followed him to the front room, crowded with both trunks and the hand baggage. The front of her robe hung open. "You were very brave to face them as you did," she said, moistening her lips.

Steve tried to keep his eyes away from her warm, ivory-tinted flesh but it drew them like a magnet. Each breath she took swelled her bosom and filled the net cups of the brassiere.

"Which trunk did the boys try to open?" Steve questioned.

She came closer to him. "I don't know. I was in the back room at the time."

Steve laid a hand on one of the trunks. "The lock on this one is broken."

She forced her supple body between him and the trunk, gripped his shoulders. "Don't touch it! He'll kill you if you do!"

The robe was gaping now and her almost naked warmth pressed against Steve. He felt the roundness of her full bosom against his chest. She was breathing heavily, her parted lips close to his mouth.

Steve looked into her eyes. The pupils were bright and dilated with eagerness. "What do you mean, Mrs. Hauser?" he asked. "What's in the trunk that's so valuable?"

Her hands slid down his arms.

"Nothing. Really nothing." Tapering fingers caressed him sensuously. "I wish you'd call me Leona."

THE woman was a tramp on the face of it but that made her no less attractive. Nineteen months without seeing a white girl was a long time. Too long. His eyes swept over her. What the hell, she was practically throwing herself at him.

"Will you call me Leona?" she murmured, the tip of her tongue slipping redly between her moist lips.

Steve's arms went around her. There was no need for him to bring her closer. Her body swayed and her hands slid up again, locking at the back of his neck and guiding his mouth to the carmine moistness of her parted lips. No kiss had ever been like this one. It seemed to drain the blood from his veins and leave something molten in its place. He pressed his hands against her back, maddened by the tremor that rippled through her lithe body. She was driving him crazy. All the natural desire that had been dormant for so long welled up within him like live coals fanned by a bellows. His heart pounded against her yielding breast and his brain was on fire. She leaned back and the robe slid off her shoulders, baring the silken lustre of them.

It was then that Steve heard the rhythmic beat of tom-toms and the high, shrill cries of frenzied savages. He broke away from Leona's embrace and stepped to the door. Darknes was falling and in the twilight haze he could see the

"I'm running this outfit!" he snarled.



massed natives on their knees facing the mountain peak. One of their number, wearing a grotesque head-piece, danced weirdly in the half-light.

Leona Hauser's hand dropped on Steve's arm. "What is it, darling?"

It was strange, but now the very sound of her deep, passionate voice repelled him. He shrugged her hand off. "You'd better get your husband up. Tell him to meet me at the Resident's cottage."

"But—but you can't leave me this way!" Her parted lips trembled and her eyes were dark pools of eager supplication.

Steve looked at her flaccid, sensuous mouth and wondered how he had brought himself to kiss it. The robe dangled from a loose cord tied around her waist and her body was the body of a cafe girl in a Singapore dive. Without another word he pushed the screened door

open and hurried across the flat to Papa Van's cottage. The elderly Resident and Nan Vevera were on the porch, watching the strange ceremony of the natives.

"You know what it means, Papa Van?" Steve commented.

"Yah, I know."

"What *does* it mean?" Nan questioned.

Steve pointed to the volcano peak silhouetted against the eastern sky. "That's *Gunong Api*—Fire Mountain. Malaysians worship it. They're praying to it now, probably asking for Hauser's death. You'd better go back to the boat. You'll be much safer there in case we have trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

Steve hesitated. The ruse he had used—telling the natives the sacred volcano would decide whether Hauser was guilty or not—was bound to have repercussions. They would see some sign in the drifting smoke to mark his guilt. When that sign came, it would mean *Gunong Api* desired a human sacrifice—a live body hurled into its pit. That body would be Max Hauser's.

"There's no telling," he replied in response to Nan's anxious query. "In any event, the boat's the place for you. I'll get McPherson to go on board and keep steam up."

Nan shook her head. "I'm not leaving you alone, Steve."

"I won't be alone. Papa Van and Pederson and the Hausers will be here with me. I can't let you risk your life."

"It's my life and if I want to risk it I will!"

Steve turned to the Resident.

"You can order her off the island!"

Papa Van shrugged helplessly. "Nobody could order a woman, Stevie. Maybe she has a reason." His eyes twinkled. "Maybe she will eggsplain."

"There can't be any explanations! The chances are we'll *all* have to evacuate. I've got ten thousand ounces of gold in the office that *must* get on the boat before this thing breaks and I can't waste any time." He faced Nan. "Are you going on board or aren't you?"

Her blue eyes met his unflinchingly. "Not without you."

"All right, you're remaining at your own risk!" The door slammed behind him.

AT THE company office, Steve inspected the locks on three iron-bound cases of gold bullion, affixed shipping tags, and was about to walk to the dock and get some of the boat's crew to help him transport the precious metal, when the office door opened and Max Hauser came in. The right side of his jaw was blue and swollen and his small, sunken eyes were inflamed. He carried the gun with which he had shot the two Malay boys.

"Put that gun up!" Steve snapped. "Haven't you caused enough trouble with it?"

Hauser snarled deep down in his throat. "Don't tell me what to do! Where's the gold?"

Steve motioned with his head. "In those cases. I'm getting it on the boat before something happens."

"Like hell you are! That gold stays right here!"

"But it has to be shipped anyway. We might just as well put it aboard."

Hauser's mouth twisted in what was meant to be a smile. "It's not being shipped. Where's the Vevera girl?"

"In the Resident's cottage."

"That's fine." He leveled the gun at Steve's chest. "Now, listen to me. You and the old man and the doctor are leaving the island on the seamer at once! I'll take care of the girl."

Steve stared at him, dazed and bewildered. "You're mad!" he blurted. "The natives will kill you instantly if they know you're here alone!"

"Don't worry about me. I won't be here long enough for that and in the meantime this little peashooter will stop them. Get a move on! We'll round up your pals and see you on your way to Singapore."

Steve stood his ground, trying to figure it all out. It didn't make sense no matter how he looked at it. The gold bullion was ready for the boat. Why didn't Hauser want to ship it? And why did he want Nan to remain on the island?

"I'm afraid I don't get the point," he said. "The bullion belongs to the company and should be safeguarded."

Hauser snickered. "Not any more its doesn't. It belongs to me. So does that little blonde. I like her looks"

Steve stiffened. Now he understood. "You can't get away with anything like that, Hauser!"

"No? We'll see. Get your hands up!"

Steve raised his hands as the gun menaced. Quickly he measured the distance between Hauser and himself. He knew the risk he ran of stopping a bullet but it had to be taken. There was more than the gold involved now.

"Let's go!" Hauser ordered. "One bad move and you won't live to get off the island!"

Steve started for the door. Suddenly he turned and sprang. The gun roared and he felt the impact of lead as it struck his chest. It seemed to stop him dead in his tracks. He could see Hauser's ugly, twisted face in front of him and he tried desperately to propel his body forward so that he could reach it with a clenched fist but his legs became water weak and all the strength drained out of his body. He fell heavily to his knees, a milky haze forming over his eyes. Through it he could see Hauser looming over him. The haze deepened and became stygian darkness.

THERE was no pain, only an empty dullness. Steve opened his eyes. A group of indistinguishable faces were looking down at him. Gradually they took shape and form, became faces he recognized. Papa Van's and McPherson's with its flaming red beard. Pederson with blood-shot eyes and a weak mouth.

"Flesh wound," Pederson said thickly. "Missed everything and went clean through."

Steve remembered then that Hauser had shot him and all that preceded the shot was clear and

sharp. "Pretty damn' lucky," McPherson said.

Steve passed a hand over his heavy, tired eyes. Something seemed to be throbbing like a giant piston and the bed he was stretched on rolled from side to side sickeningly. He realized, suddenly, what it was. He was aboard the island steamer! He forced himself to sit up, brushing away McPherson's restraining hand.

"Where's — where's Nan . . . Miss Vevera?" he questioned fearfully.

Papa Van turned away. "Hauser kept her on the island," McPherson answered. "He forced us on board at the point of a gun. He thought you were dead so he let me and Pederson take your body."

Steve went cold. "And—and you left the girl there?"

"What else could we do? I figured we'd make the run to Singapore and get help."

"How far are we from the island?"

"Five miles."

Steve swung his dead legs to the floor. "Turn back! I'm going ashore for her!"

"No, Stevie," Papa Van cried. "Dis Hauser iss a madman!"

"I said turn back!"

McPherson tugged at his beard. "I'm not docking there, Steve. He's got a machine gun and he'll blow us all to hell!"

"You don't have to dock. I'll swim in."

"With a bullet hole in your chest and a million sharks in the water?"

Steve's face was white. "Don't stand here arguing with me! Turn back!"

He stood at the rail with Papa Van and McPherson as the steamer hove to a half mile from shore. Pederson had plugged the bullet wound with cotton dipped in alcohol and it drew with a steady, gnawing pain. "This is as close as I'll take her," McPherson said. "You can't swim it. Look at those sharks."

A half moon had broken through the thick sky and in its light Steve could see the dark fins of hungry man-eaters cutting through the inky water. Once he had watched a native tip over in a canoe. By the time help reached the poor devil, there was nothing left but a mangled torso.

"I'll take a life boat," he said.

THE dull boom of ceremonial tom-toms floated from the island. "I will not let you go alone, Stevie," Papa Van said.

McPherson drew a deep breath. "I'll row him but I won't go ashore. Hauser's got a machine gun and we've got nothing but our bare hands. It's suicide!"

"I'll take that chance."

With the skipper at the oars and Steve on the stern seat the small boat headed for Banda Island. Smoke from the crater of Fire Mountain drifted lazily across the moon. At the dock, McPherson tied to a pile. "You're taking an awful chance, boy."

Steve climbed up on the dock. "Wait here for me." From where he stood he could see the huge funeral pyre the natives had built. They were grouped around it, chanting a monotonous dirge. Lights flickered in Hauser's cot-

tage and the company office but the rest of the island was dark.

Crouching low, Steve headed for the office. It was empty but the three cases of gold bullion were still there. He started toward the manager's cottage only to pull up short when a ghastly human moan came out of the darkness ahead of him. He waited and listened. It sounded again, a cry born of horrible pain. Peering into the night he made out a figure dragging itself across the flat laboriously, inch by inch. It was a woman with dark, blood-matted hair hanging over her pale face—*Leona Hauser!*

Steve reached her side, dropped down on one knee, and supported her head against his crooked right arm. What he saw turned his stomach. Her right breast dripped blood and a livid streak across her left temple at the hairline indicated where a bullet had creased her skin. She was gulping air as though it were difficult for her to breathe and her lips were beginning to turn blue.

"What happened?" Steve questioned anxiously.

Her eyes rolled. "He—he shot me . . . wanted . . . other woman."

Steve knew she was referring to Nan Vevera. Hauser probably had her in his cottage at this very moment. There was no time to waste. He lowered the manager's wife to the ground, realizing that she was bleeding to death from the wound in her breast; that he was powerless to help her. But before he could go her clawed fingers clutched his arm.

"Wait!" she gasped. "He . . . is . . . not . . . Max Hauser! My

. . my husband is . . . is dead . . . in the . . . the trunk!"

SHE spoke in a half-whisper, forcing each word from her parched lips as though she realized her time was short. The story she told was one that made Steve's blood run cold. The man who was masquerading as Max Hauser, her husband, was, in reality, a German, Franz Schmitt by name. He had made ardent love to her and talked her into helping him murder her husband in order to get to the large supply of gold bullion he knew was on Banda Island. The deed had been done in Singapore and Hauser's body stuffed into one of the trunks. The second trunk had a built-in short wave radio sending set with which Schmitt planned to communicate with a hired fishing boat which would pick him and the gold up.

As he listened, Steve understood why Schmitt had pumped bullets into the two native boys. Evidently one of the trunks had opened while they were carrying it and they saw the body of Max Hauser.

The mortally wounded woman's voice drifted off into nothingness as she came to the end of her dying confession. Her body stiffened suddenly, quivered as though an electric current were passing through it, then went limp. Steve placed his hand on her breast. There was no heartbeat. She was dead.

CROSSING the flat, Steve approached the lighted cottage where he was certain he would find the murderous impostor and

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Fire Mountain

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Nan Vevera. He knew Schmitt had a revolver and McPherson had also mentioned a machine gun. On his hands and knees he crawled up the steps to the porch. The front room was empty but one of the trunks stood ajar and he could see

the dials of a radio apparatus. A light burned on the rear sleeping porch and Steve thought he heard a muted plaint.

He opened the screened door silently and slipped inside the cottage. Someone was on the sleep-

ing porch. He could hear heavy breathing. Hugging the wall he moved along the narrow hallway to the rear of the house. Suddenly a shrill, hysterical scream rocked the thatched roof and before the echoes of it died a man swore gutturally.

Throwing caution to the winds Steve leaped for the door of the sleeping porch and saw what he had expected to see. Nan Vevera, her cotton dress ripped almost to shreds, was sprawled on a cot, held there by Franz Schmitt's huge hands. Still conscious, she writhed and kicked desperately to avoid the German's filthy caresses but his groping brutal fingers found her and tore away the material that ineffectually covered her.

For a timeless moment Steve was frozen by the lurid picture and in that moment Schmitt took warning. He shot erect, his eyes glowing specks, and saliva drooling from the corners of his sensuous mouth. In the dim, yellow light of the oil lamp he at first failed to recognize Steve but, when he did, his mouth gaped open and his flushed cheeks went pale. This was the man he had shot down—the man whose dead body he had seen carried aboard the island steamer! Panic seized him and he backed away, terror of the unknown mirrored in his piggish eyes.

Steve sensed the German's reaction and the reason for it. He pointed an accusing finger. "You can't escape, Schmitt! You're doomed!"

Like a man gone mad, Schmitt screamed and lunged at what he thought was a ghostly apparition. Steve knew that with his bullet-

punctured chest he was no match for the burly German at close quarters. He side-stepped and struck with his right fist. The blow landed high on Schmitt's head but there was force enough behind it to stun him and throw him off balance. Steve moved in quickly and drove a short, hard blow to the still swollen point of the German's jaw. The man's head snapped back and he went down with a crash, conscious but paralyzed, unable to gain his feet.

There was a revolver on a table between the two cots and Steve went for it but never reached it. A fearful explosion rocked the cottage as though it were made of paper, hurling him to the floor. He picked himself up, shaken but unhurt. There was a rumble as though of distant thunder. The atmosphere had suddenly become unbearably hot.

Nan Vevera, seated on the edge of a cot, pointed down the hallway. "Look!" she cried.

Steve's eyes followed the direction of her trembling finger and his heart leaped to his throat. *Gunong Api* had erupted! Fire and molten lava belched from its crater and was sweeping down the mountain-side making flaming torches of the nutmeg trees in its path! The sky above the seething volcano was blood red, as though the heavens, themselves, were on fire.

"Quickly!" Steve cried, reaching for Nan's hand. "There's a boat at the dock!"

THE flaming lava was near the base of the volcanic peak as they stepped off the porch. Hordes of Malaysians and Chinese swarmed

toward the shore, forgetting in their panic that death lurked in the dark waters. Running wildly, Steve and Nan reached the dock. The life boat was gone!

"Mac!" Steve shouted. "Mac, where are you?" Clouds of black smoke pouring from Fire Mountain had obscured the moon and he could see nothing in the dense blackness. "Mac! Mac!" His voice rose to a shrill frenzy.

Then, out of the black came the slap of oars. A moment later the prow of the boat struck the piling. Steve looked behind him. The lava had covered the flat and was within a foot of the dock. Lifting Nan up he swung her into the boat and dropped down beside her. "Row, Mac!" he cried, shoving off.

He could feel his eyebrows shriveling from the awful heat. Leaning over he wet his hands and passed them over Nan's face and his own. McPherson bent his back to the oars and in a moment they were out of danger, pulling further and further away from where the molten lava was dropping into the water and sending up great clouds of steam.

On his knees, Steve held Nan close to him. The unearthly cries of the trapped natives gradually faded off as either Fire Mountain or the shark-infested waters claimed them one by one and soon there was only the rumble of the volcano and the hissing of steam.

"It's horrible!" Nan whispered. "They—they prayed for it and—and it came!"

Steve nodded. *Gunong Api* had wrecked its vengeance on all of Banda Island. Gold and men were buried forever in an ageless tomb.