

Red Hair and Blue Sea

(Continued from page 7)

CHAPTER VII

At snapping tension Palmyra strained to catch the sound again. Her eyes sought to weather and to lee. And then her gaze became fixed. For there, on the crossbar where Olive had fastened the fish, sat a large bird.

It was the sound of the bird's alighting that Palmyra had caught. The roost was now swaying under the impact, the newcomer shooting in and out its neck in a somewhat serpent-like concordance. The creature was black, its feet disproportionately small and the beak, strongly hooked at the end, a good five inches long.

The bird gazed back at the girl with some defiance of manner, as if it thought she might claim the fish. Then it lumbered along the pole and seized the victim, which managed a final flop.

Could it be that Olive had known he could attract a bird down by baiting such a lighting place?

News of the arrival had, in some manner, communicated itself to the sleeper.

From his countenance she could not guess whether he had expected to find a bird on the cross-bar, or whether he was pleased. Nor were his actions illuminating. With the leisurely velocity that was so disturbing an attribute, he first cut from a small cane-like growth a section the length of a finger. Then he shaved another piece down to a point. She thought he might intend pinning something with it. But he turned to her stores and tore out some thin package paper. This he laid on a box. With the knife he pricked his left forearm so that the blood came. Then with the blood and the skewer he began to write, presumably to make some sort of hieroglyphics.

While Olive finished his composition the girl watched in a paralyzing anxiety. What did he write? What was in this message that meant more than life and death to her? She sprang up once to demand a sight, then remembered she could not have understood.

The savage now folded his paper small, worked it into the hollow section of cane, closed the opening with a wad of leaf. He went to the bird, which seemed not to object, and tied the missile under one of its wings. Then he lifted it from the roost and tossed it into the air. Instantly astonishing pinions flashed out, a spread of six or eight feet.

Burke had said this strange being's purpose was to demonstrate to all, by his courage, that he could live down the effeminate name of Olive.

In despoiling Burke of the red-haired goddess, Olive but reached the climax of his demonstration. He had chosen the one thing that would most enrage the white man; was, therefore, the most dangerous to attempt—and the most convincing.

All too plainly the message the man-of-war bird carried could have but one destination: Olive proclaimed his darling; demanded that his clansmen come to his aid.

The brown man Olive was unaware of, or unmoved by, Palmyra's misery. As soon as he had launched the bird, he pulled down its perch. Then, with one of the uprights, he marched to the lee beach and began marking on the tidal sands.

The girl watched tragically. Until now there had seemed hardly a choice as to her fate. If she had, with the knife, succeeded in eliminating Olive, Burke would have returned to possess her. Or if disaster had eliminated Burke, then terrible solitude, with death from thirst.

But now, that messenger a mere speck in the sky, the highest thing as it seemed in the world, instinct within her had taken a stand. Beast that Burke was, he was at least better than this savage. A man of her own race, there was always the chance some appeal might reach through.

When Olive, having finished his work, turned toward her, she gathered herself for flight. But he stopped, safely distant, and she divined that he meant to attempt an exchange of ideas.

First, he pointed in the direction the Lupe-a-Noa had gone. When Palmyra did not understand, he picked up a piece of the fabric, buckram-like, with which nature binds fast her palm leaves. He folded it into a form roughly triangular and smaller end up. He represented a sail; he referred to the schooner itself.

Next, Olive, grinning successfully at her perception, marked a semi-circle on his forehead. She was puzzled until she recalled the scar on Burke's forehead. Again she nodded.

Once more Olive pointed to the scar to indicate that the white man was now the actor. As Burke, yawning drowsily, lay down and began to snore. The girl took it that Ponape had gone to sleep for the night. The islander next got up, pointed to the place he had lain as the white man, and then to six other places in a row, snoring reinforcingly as he made an inclusive gesture. All, she saw had been asleep.

Olive now indicated himself as the actor, by tapping his breast with a square forefinger. Cautiously, peering to this side and that, pausing to

look back and listen, he tiptoed away. With a final furtive glance, he raised himself, jumped as one going over the vessel's side into the water, simulated the movements of a swimmer. Palmyra read that, as soon as Burke and the crew had turned in last night, Olive had climbed the rigging of the man on duty, dropped overboard and swum back to her.

He went on with his drama. Making again the sign of the scar, he pretended to awake. He looked around, said, "Olive"; depicted surprise, anger. Drawing his knife ferociously, he kicked the imaginary sleepers into life, bellowed an order. He blew into his cupped hand, which was now sufficient to indicate the sail, performed the evolution of coming about; walked toward the girl, blowing into his hand and brandishing the knife.

She held her ground, understanding that the enraged pursuit returned to her. Olive stopped, pointed to the sun and then to a spot somewhat further along in the luminary's course. A sweeping gesture, a grimace, a stamping of the foot upon the sand; and he had said, as plain as words, that here Burke would step within an interval appallingly brief.

A Burke, far away and beyond call, might seem the lesser of two evils. But a Burke, rising over the horizon, as fast as a storm, regained all his vile significance.

This much was plain: here stood Olive and here, within two hours, would stand Burke. And that being so, what about the bird and its message?

Again, all was inexplicable. With the white brute hot upon the heels of the brown brute, there could be no such waiting as she had assumed, while a bird irresponsibly delivered its summons and rescuing tribesmen came across the sea. Then, why the message at all?

He had sent that message as a forlorn hope. Yet he was showing none of the strain which should have gone with so desperate a race. Indeed, his very calm frightened her. It was unnatural. He must expect, with a knife, to fight for her possession against Burke, with the deadly revolvers, and backed by the crew. Facing such terrible odds, no white man could have been so unemotional.

Could it be that he had come here to await Burke's arrival and then, almost within Ponape's grasp, to plunge the knife into her breast—and himself die? Was there that in his dark beliefs, traditions, to make such an act exquisitely worth the sacrifice; a supreme manifestation, say, of hate for his tyrant; a degradation in this island world eternally to make of the white man a mock?

Olive thrust out the square forefinger toward the quarter whence the Pigeon of Noah would descend upon them, and then toward the sun to indicate the flight of time. Following which he crossed to the lee beach and stood in the brine. He beckoned to her. He pointed to himself and to her, and then off across the water, with the motions of one who swims.

The girl stared. For the first time she was utterly at fault. By his indication he and she were to swim away together into the thousand miles ocean. That, however, could not be. He must have some other meaning.

But the savage made plain he did mean just that. He held out his hand toward her invitingly. He waved her—at once an appeal and a command—into the sea.

Palmyra cowered before Olive. His meaning was plain, all too plain. But his purpose? There lay the terror. "I tell you I can't swim," she cried out at last. "I can't swim. Don't you understand? I can't swim!"

For the first time his features offered a readable significance. He was perplexed. He fetched his coconuts. He sat down before her, indicated that she was the object of the play. He bound two of the dry nuts by their thong of husk to his ankle. Also others, as he showed, about his waist. And then, then she understood.

The girl saw that Olive thus was saying "life preserver." He meant to make her into a sort of raft.

Her agitation diminished. This bespoke life, not death. The fanatic, about to drown one, did not provide a float.

With six of the nuts he buoyed her hips and with four her shoulders. With a length of fibre he wound her skirt tight round her knees. Then he fastened his knife, securely but immediately at hand, in the things that bound her waist.

For an interval he left her, lying with upturned face, her eyes closed against the glare. He threw into the sea, so it would drift clear or sink, the food and cask of water, the severed leaves, the opened nuts; everything that spoke of his activity. Then, pausing for a last careful inspection, his glance lighted on the pink silk parasol. He examined it thoughtfully, raised it; offered it, with pleased look, to the tug of the wind. Olive had a sail.

Thus did they depart into the thousand miles of empty ocean. Olive swam briskly forward with her now. Exulting, she discovered that the sound which had mocked her, this time at last, was no cruel deception. It was the trample of surf upon a reef.

One sharp struggle and those splendid muscles had carried them, buffeted and breathless, through a cauldron of a cleft in the outer barrier. They came to rest in a shallow of spent surf on the reef between its higher rim and the nearby shore.

At first Palmyra was aware of nothing beyond the fact that she was once more on land. That was all-sufficing. The island, by reason of her hours in the water, seemed to rise and fall as giddily as the sea itself. But she could cling to a pandanus and feel safe.

How many, many miles had they come? She recollected men had tried to swim the English channel. Was the channel twelve or twenty miles across? Something like that. But it was cold northern water and the swimmers merely European. Olive must have brought her infinitely further.

The island, plainly, was inhabited. As Olive had written, why could not she?

But—what of paper? She paused, confronted by the stonewall of circumstance. No need to cut her hand as the brown man had done, for for bright drops of the pirate gore were already available. As she sat, the mosquitoes had been swarming round her.

While she puzzled, she felt reconnoitering for the hostile foliage. It proved to be a stiff sword-like leaf that thrust at her from the shadows.

The leaf, she found, was surfaced by a thin transparent film.

The appeal grew with tragic slowness. The pin work could not be hurried, the condensation of wording took thought.

But, readably, the leaf said: Help! Abducted by Ponape Lupe-a-Noa, from wrecked Yacht Rainbow, 4 days sail. His man Olive now steals me. Whichever gets me—death or worse.

Miss Palmyra Tree, Boston, U. S. A.

She must make the leaf noticeable. Nothing else at hand, she drew off one of her wet stockings. She smiled drearily. Silken hosiery where hosiery was unknown. That should attract attention.

With the stocking she bound a fragment of coral to the leaf. Then, gazing apprehensively about, she began to crawl forward. She must not try to go too far. And at the slightest sound she must drop the missile before Olive could see.

Within five or six yards the covered end. Beyond in the moonlight lay barren sand, foot trampled, a place in frequent visitation. She would have liked to go further. But the danger was tremendous, the gain uncertain. She paused breathlessly to listen. Then she flung the weighted leaf.

From out there a clink of sound reached back, brazen sound to her straining senses as a gong. It seemed impossible that Olive should not hear; should not spring grinning from the thicket; should not, unerringly as a dog, nose up, snatch that precious message, her only hope.

For an interval she hung on, waiting. Then, in the unexpected silence, body and mind collapsed. She dragged herself back to the waiting place, but she was unaware of it. The sand warmed her, the earth rocked her as in a cradle, but—she was asleep.

For ages she must have laid in torpor. Then, suddenly, she awoke with a cry. She was clasped tight in a pair of great arms; held close against a naked breast. No need for her to see that grinning face. It was the beast!

Desperately she put all her strength into a lunge. So unexpected this effort to get free that success was hers. Surprisingly, indeed, she flung herself quite clear of those arms—and fell, with a strangling gasp, into water that rose above her head.

When Palmyra Tree thus flung herself out of the arms of Olive, the brown man had been carrying her again down into the sea. The strong arms rescued her, yet she fought desperately. Ashore, she had been slow to trust those half seen figures about the fires. Having trusted, she could not bear to be snatched away before her appeal had been found.

The moon was gone in a downpour of rain. Sky and sea and land had lost form—dissolved. And yet in this melting world something had remained solid, for presently the girl received a smart bump between the shoulders. Twisting, she found an unstable shape that intuition, rather than sight, identified as a canoe.

Olive sat her on the canoe, staided her there, pointed. His hand seemed to fade into nothingness. He raised her own arm so she could feel the direction. No need for Olive to thrust his face close to hers and make the sign of the scar. It was the pursuing Burke.

She had just been struggling to free herself of the brown man, yet now, when she saw that success would have thrown her at once into the hands of the white, she was aghast. For with Burke present his timid creatures ceased to offer any chance; it was again with Olive's clansmen she felt her hope to lie.

But there was the leaf letter! She strove to make Olive understand they must go back. She pointed landward, gesticulated.

It was inevitable he should think she continued in resistance. He took her firmly, laid her prone, made her grip the framework.

With the paddle, strong, noiseless, Olive drove the canoe out into the world of waters.

Relieved of her apprehension, she began to patch together the incidents of their flight, into a revealing film. When the wind had revived to let Ponape Burke beat back to the first island in pursuit of Olive—(could it really be little more than twenty-four hours since the white man im-

prisoned her there?)—he found the place abandoned. He had also found her supplies gone, a thing implying a boat, and Olive's forgery of a boat's imprint on the sand, a counterfeit softened into greater verisimilitude by the placid tide.

Burke must either detect the fraud, or believe some vessel, almost certainly the Japanese gumbot, had sighted her distress signals. In the event, he was free to assume Olive had drowned in his effort to reach land, had arrived too late and then swum away, or had been taken off with the girl, presumably against his will.

She had no knowledge where Jaluit lay, or how far. But it was within reach; her only hope. As the former German base, there must yet be four or five white men and a dozen or so of Japs; and if this one of the two American mission centers was closed, still native Christians.

She so wanted to go to Jaluit that she could not fail to endow this savage with the grace of taking her there. Absurd though the idea, it gripped her till she could not, for the moment, but believe it true.

After all, though, what could it serve? She tried to rise for a view astern, but dared not stand. She saw no sail, yet knew her letter, the canoe theft, had made a chase certain. Their flying start would save them from other canoes but not from the swift Pigeon of Noah.

Now and then her companion himself would rouse to stand with ease on the jumping canoe and scan the sea for an enemy.

In one of these wakeful intervals she made, interrogatively, the sign of the scar which had come, in their conversations, to signify the white man. Passing at once from his Buddha-like repose into the animation of discourse, Olive pointed to the sun and then to a spot considerably further on in its line of march. Pursuit, it seemed, must be expected, but not as yet.

Now followed in long pantomime, at times unintelligible. The brown man, in his explanation, was hampered by the limit of action possible in a canoe. His story included himself and Burke, the island, the knife, that seemed to be a gun, the canoe, the Pigeon of Noah. Much of it, as it came, was meaningless because she did not grasp other parts upon which the meaning depended.

There was a point which baffled her, where Olive went through the motions of binding hands and feet, and forced something, crosswise, into his mouth. At first she thought he himself had been tied and gagged, then that must have been Burke. But long afterwards, when the savage had again sunk into stupor, the explanation flashed into her mind. She could now reconstruct the scene ashore, in part from what Olive had made clear, in part from what her intelligence told her must have occurred.

Ponape Burke, then, had felt that, if they had not been rescued by some vessel, they must have a canoe. And to make sure they should not get one in the dark hours, he had had all the canoes on the island brought together and had set over these a guard of two men with rifles, himself waiting near.

Olive, she surmised, had expected secretly to obtain a canoe from a friend and so sail without destroying Burke's possible belief in the fictitious ship. But the brown man, to his dismay, had found this impossible. As daylight must not discover them ashore, he had had no alternative save to take a canoe by force.

Under cover of the rain he had somehow managed to surprise, had bound the guards and got away without an alarm. He had hoped to prevent the chase thus made certain, by cutting rigging on the schooner; but, for some reason, had had to desist with little more than an hour or so of delay ensured.

One detail of Olive's pantomime explained perhaps why Burke had trusted the canoes to any guard but his own. He had been drinking heavily.

And so it was she responded with a cry when Olive, at last, clicking his tongue in chagrin, pointed astern.

No need for her eyes to seek out a tiny something against the sky to know that the Lupe-a-Noa was come.

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT THIS STATE

The only volcanic remains in Illinois are said to be Hick's Dome in Hardin county.

Illinois public utilities produced 588,274,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity during January—five per cent more than in January, 1927—according to the U. S. Geological Survey.

Illinois ranks first of the states in the manufacture of watches, clocks and other time-keeping devices.

Illinois has 869 weekly newspapers and periodicals—18 more than a year ago.

Illinois electric railways carry four times as many passengers as do all of its steam roads.

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