

RED HAIR AND BLUE SEA



by **STANLEY R. OSBORN**
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Burke had spoken of the brown man's arrest. Meanwhile, Olive had tired of his enforced bath.

Slowly Olive began to move downstream. Scarcely did the leaves that hid his head seem to stir as they skirted the bank, blending with the leaves of the background. Past Sentry Number One, past Number Two. Finally a friendly turn of the course and he could rise, dripping, and run for the suspected mangrove trail.

Trotting through the mud, he had neared the outlander village. Then, hearing his name, he stopped, whirled around, encountered one Taruk, a member of Ponape Burke's crew. Taruk, smiling affably, emerged from the thicket and the two shook hands.

Olive slipped into that house third from land's end. He crouched, the central support hiding his face. A glance showed the tide was moving out. He could not await reinforcements.

Opposite, Palmyra still leaned against the post, Martin behind her, the seated natives in front.

Then Olive, staking all on Burke's absorption, strolled out from shelter, grinned brazenly into the eyes of the startled sentry, entered that side of the prison house where the natives grouped. Unobtrusively, he dropped among them.

Neither the girl nor her guard noted his coming. A native more or less meant nothing.

But as Palmyra waited, with downcast gaze, her fingers working aimlessly at the hat and veil the old women had brought along, she became gradually aware that, of the brown hands on the mats before her, one wore a mitten of tattoo. Her eyes focussed into interest. And then, astonishing, she beheld on the brown forearm a name of five letters.

A glad cry rose to her lips. But she suppressed it, drove from her face the exultation forming there. Her own salvation, this man's life, depended on her caution.

The brown man opened his mouth and spoke aloud in the native tongue—direct to Martin.

Olive's expression was that of formal politeness. But, though he had seemed to address the white man, he had not done so. What he had said was this:

"Men of the village of Tanapai, listen here unto me. The high lady Palmtree shall be saved. I speak the way."

Olive was continuing in the tones of courtesy, looking at Martin but speaking direct to the villagers. In a sentence he appealed to their cupidity, to their fear of the Japanese. Then, without alteration of voice or manner, he added for the interpreter: "Make words, make words unto him. Anything—that shall mean nothing and have a pleasant sound."

The interpreter had got the idea. Out came a flood of compliment to which the white man made crude response, condescendingly amiable.

And so, under the very nose of the unsuspecting Martin, almost within hearing of Burke, Olive worked out his attack.

And Ponape Burke himself gave the signal. Springing up now, he bawled across to his mate: "Aho!—ahoy there! Haven't them dam' kanakas got the Pigeon out yet? Give a hail the moment y'sight her. These Japs is maybe up t'something."

He levelled his binoculars again upon the gunboat. Martin reached for his own, bent them upon that spot where the Lupe-a-Noa's topmasts must emerge from behind the taller trees.

For perhaps forty seconds both men were absorbed.

Then Martin, still seated, his shoulder against the girl's support, lowered his glasses, turned his head to speak to her.

But Palmyra was gone!

At Burke's order the crew, loading rifles, began to go through the thatches. Fortunately for Olive, Ponape remained in the open, bawling out commands and imprecations. The search, unsystematic, was still sincere, for, though some of the brown seamen grinned behind the white men's backs, none would have dared pass the girl by. Yet the quest covered the islet without result.

It was when Ponape Burk had stopped, completely at a loss, that a messenger came running from the Lupe-a-Noa. The schooner could not be got out. Diving, the natives had found under her nose two of the long hexagonal rocks from the ancient wall.

He would have been aghast to know that John Thurston had dis-

covered the vessel; had reached her before the working party and while her watchman was irresponsibly absent; had, in the brief interval afforded, made good use of his engineering skill. With a block and tackle and a light spar from the schooner, Thurston, in a few minutes, had done a labor at which slaves must have sweated for days. He had tumbled two of the stones off the wall into the canal. The Pigeon would not fly again until the month's highest tides came to lift her over.

A figure broke from among the men, went bounding along the path toward the outer point, carrying in its arms a heavy burden.

Burke uttered a cackle of triumph. For, as this figure, ran, there was visible over its shoulder a white straw hat, a blue veil fluttered into view and, below, Ponape saw the folds of a plaid raincoat.

As he ran, however, he struck his foot against a tree root, staggered; the burden was hurled from his arms to the ground. But he did not pause. Two of the sailors, flanking along the beach, sprang upon him. Others joined in. A struggle, and he was held.

Ponape Burke had remained at his post, an amused spectator. Now, however, when the girl on the ground did not stir after her fall, he ran toward her.

"Palmie," he called; "Palmie, are y'hurt?"

Another hundred feet and he stopped. Bewilderment turned into rage.

For lying there in the hat, veil and raincoat was no Palmyra Tree.

It was a big, roast pig.

Ponape Burke turned a savage face from this greasy pork to the man who had tricked him—his prisoner. Then an oath and a laugh struggled for simultaneous expression. For there, bloody, desperate, stood the brown man Olive.

The white man's features were contorted. "Where is she?" he demanded.

Olive clamped his lips shut.

It had been Burke's sudden descent upon the four houses which precipitated catastrophe. The villagers, grown overconfident, had thought he would not look there again. Olive, having seen the messenger from the Pigeon of Noah, had assumed erroneously that the schooner was ready; that Ponape, seizing the girl now, could sail at once. In desperation the brown man had snatched up the hat, veil and raincoat; thrown these about the pig—cooked to send to the feast down the coast.

Running toward the outer end of the islet he had hoped to draw off Burke and the crew, so the villagers could rush Palmyra shoreward to safety. He would hold the pursuit by carrying the pig into the sea; perhaps himself escape if Ponape feared the sound of firing. But, one misstep, and he had been caught before there was time to get the girl away.

Hence it was that she herself, peering tensely out, saw Olive led to the mai tree, his wrists bound behind him.

She saw the master in vehement demand for her surrender; Olive shake his head in defiance.

The villagers, crowding round Burke's guards, waited in consternation.

Ponape turned to them. "If you would save this man's life—speak." But Olive, pale yet unflinching, besought their silence.

They would have been glad to have this white woman off their hands and Olive free. The Japanese could not punish their yielding to force. They wished to yield—but the will of this one being held them fast.

Unnoticed, a boy had wormed into the crowd, a bit of paper folded small in his hand. His purpose was to toss the note so Ponape should get it, yet not know whence it came. But the urchin blundered. As the message left his fingers, Burke saw. The white man snatched up the paper, unfolded it.

"Your sacred word to free Olive unharmed (also the others), and I give myself up. He shall not die for me. If you promise, call loudly—yes."

Burke uttered a crow of victory. Whirling toward that point from which he conceived the note to have come, he put his hands to his mouth and shouted: "No, no, NO."

Then he clutched the boy by the wrist. "Show me where."

His revolver menacing; the messenger began to cry.

Under the muzzle of the big weapon the urchin quailed. He was appalled at Burke's anger. And he

saw that his own people wavered. At last, therefore, he raised a trembling finger, pointed toward a group of thatches.

The boy haltingly brought Ponape Burke to a hut. "In there," he whimpered.

Burke sprang under, dragged his guide with him. The house had been searched before. It was empty now.

The man's scrutiny took in every detail. Then he turned and the boy was in real danger. Savage irritation had all but overborne any sense of conscience.

Suddenly Burke's eyes opened wide, he leaped to the center of the house, stared up at the bundles of stiff bark

cloth, gave one a prod with the revolver.

From within there came a gasp of pain.

Palmyra Tree had lost the bitter fight. Ponape Burke at last had won. "Y'all see Olive hanged," he said. "And then, whether or no, y'all go t'Tanna."

He dragged her toward the tree, the native following, tongues a-click against teeth; the traitorous boy ahead, self-important, unscourged by any sense of guilt.

At the tree Olive stood among uneasy guards, hands bound behind him, feet loosely tied, noosing hemp drawn taut across its limb.

"Look at him—yer rope round his neck," Burke reproached. "Waiting, poor sucker, for y't set him free. This here kanaka was good enough t'die for you. But when it comes yer turn?" He laughed with brutal insinuation.

She could scarcely form the sounds. But at last she gasped out: "Let—him—go."

Olive knew not the words but he knew their meaning. "Never!" he cried. "Tell her—tell her she shall not give herself for me."

At this moment, however, there rose from the outskirts of the crowd a startled warning. "Zapanee . . . Zapanee, he come!"

Burke, with an oath, snatched up his binoculars. Three boats from the Okayama were already close. Rifles bristled.

While the others ran, Ponape Burke was carried only a step or two by the animal instinct of self-preservation. Then he stopped, started on, turned back.

Horror sat upon that visage; ludicrous, yet doubly intense by the very inadequacy of its expression.

He snatched forth the revolver. He could battle for her. Yes, kill half a dozen of those Japs. But—to what avail? Fighting or no, he'd lose her. "I can't go on without you," he burst forth, "and they won't let me go on with you. But if I can't live, I can die—with you."

He broke into the old laugh.

The boats, as one frantic glance told his victim, were still too far to aid. The natives all had fled. Only Olive remained; bound hand and foot, the rope from the noose dragging across the limb above.

Olive was writhing to sunder the sennit cords which bound his arms.

Olive—blood dripping from wrists torn in his struggle—hurled himself against the madman. The concussion of his bulk threw Ponape back. The bullet which would have pierced Palmyra's brain flew harmlessly into space.

The islander, by a supreme effort, snapped his bindings. He seized the other. He crushed his master to him like a gorilla. But the hand that held the revolver was yet, for the moment, free. It flashed in the muzzle pressed against Olive's side. The

hand, gripped convulsively, forced the hammer up toward its fatal blow. But now, astonishingly, all movement ceased.

Firing from a distance, someone had drilled Ponape Burke through his evil heart.

But, alas, the steel bullet had not stopped the madman. It had crashed on through the body of the heroic brown man who fought for her.

The girl shrieked out, fell fainting. And then, as these three lay, there came a sound of hoofs, and a muddy foam-flecked horse plunged up the village path with John Thurston.

He sprang from his saddle, flung aside the gun, caught the unconscious girl up in his arms.

When Palmyra Tree at last opened her eyes, she gazed up at John Thurston for a bewildered moment.

Side by side two bodies lay. Palmyra snatched herself back from John as if his touch had burned.

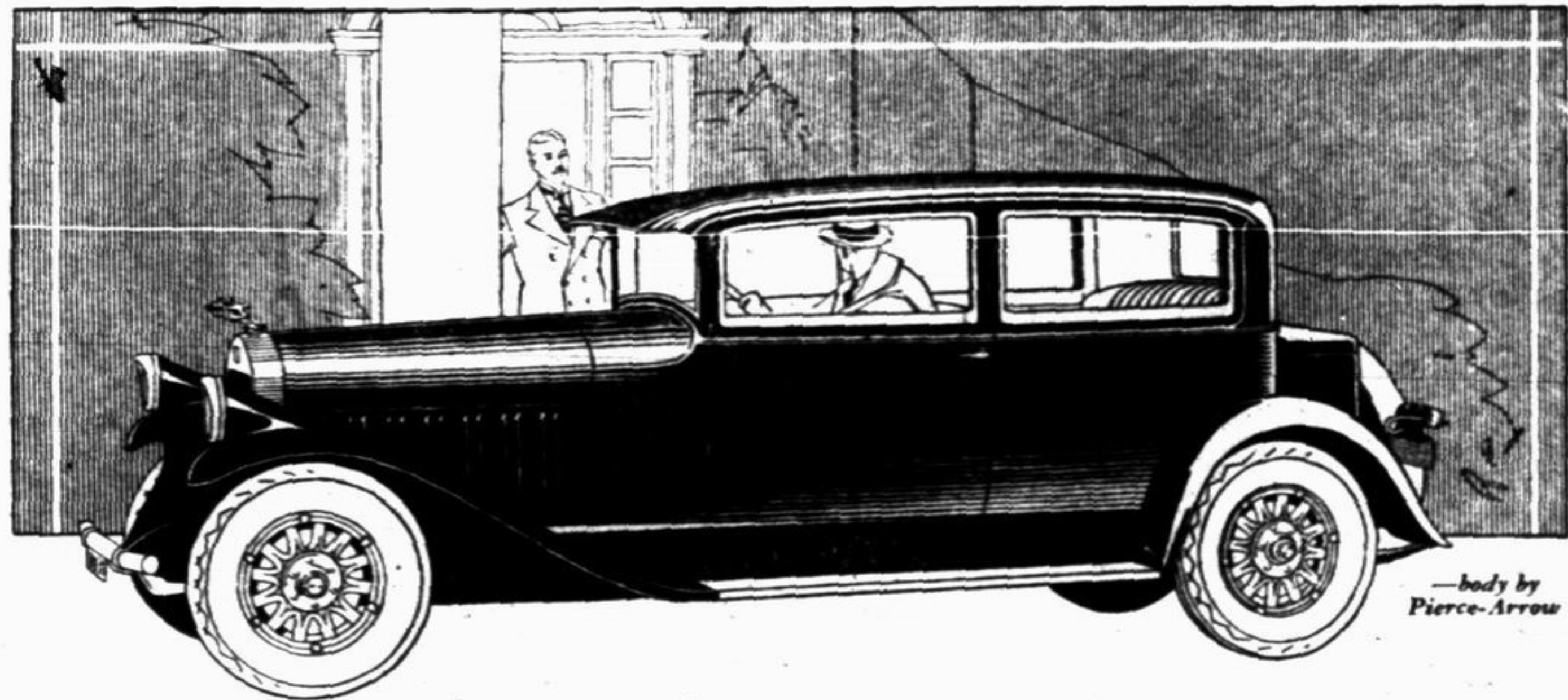
"And it was you," she cried, rigid in horror, "you who fired? Oh," she wailed, "I cannot, cannot bear that it should have been you—you who killed Olive."

"But, 'Oh, no, no, no, lady,' the surgeon interrupted in eager reassurance. "This native man is not dead."

She looked at that form in shuddering question.

"Bullet knocked him out a little," explained the officer, "but it hit nothing." Continued on page 11

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