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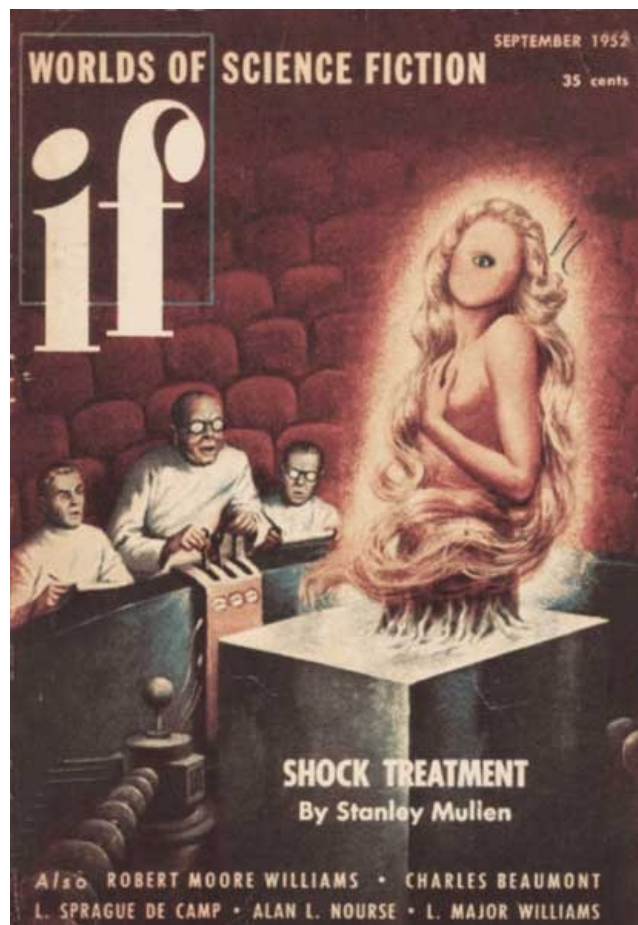
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[Pg 124]

It was like a mirage in reverse, this strange island off the California coast—it couldn't always be seen, but it was there—in Time.

[Pg 125]



Sinister Paradise

By Robert Moore Williams

"There's the island, Parker!" Retch called.

Bill Parker shifted the controls of the 'copter and the big craft swung in the direction Retch was pointing. Squinting his eyes against the sun glare rising from the Pacific, Parker clearly saw the island. It was miles away as yet but it swam like a mirage suspended just above the surface of the sea.



The island was not large—Parker guessed it as probably being less than two miles in circumference—but he could make out a fringe of trees along the shore and a central peak rising like a cliff in the center.

"I've found it again!" Retch spoke with fierce satisfaction—clenched fists. Parker heard the indrawn hiss of breath following the words; a hiss that seemed to hold a promise for the future. Revenge, vengeance, triumph, or something else? Parker could not determine what emotional overtone had found expression in Retch's words. But the emotional overtone was there. Out of the corner of his eyes, Parker glanced at the man sitting in the seat next to him. What he saw did not please him.

[Pg 126]

Retch was big. He had the muscular build of a prize fighter. The scar over his left cheekbone did not add to the attractiveness of his appearance. He did not, in Parker's opinion, look like the scientist he had claimed to be.

Parker shrugged such thoughts aside. What difference did it make what Retch was, or the nature of his business here? He had paid charter charges on the big helicopter.

"There it is, Parker!" Retch almost screamed the words. As he pointed again toward the island in the far distance, Parker caught a glimpse of a pistol in a shoulder holster under the man's arm.

The sight of the gun caused a split second of alarm in the big pilot. He had not known that Retch was armed. Then the alarm subsided. Parker pressed his left arm down against his body, assuring himself that his own gun was where it belonged.

The woman, Mercedes Valdar, seemed to catch some of Retch's excitement. She leaned forward across Retch's shoulder to stare at the island. Parker caught another whiff of the musky perfume that she used. He noticed again what he had realized the first time he met her—that in any man's language she was a beauty. Aquiline face, smouldering black eyes, high cheek bones, a delicate brown complexion that hinted at Indian blood back several generations in the past, she looked like something out of an exotic movie. The slacks and sport coat that she wore accentuated the fact that she was a woman.

Parker was aware again of the enigma of her presence. Retch had introduced her as his secretary. Parker, accepting the man's statement, had asked no questions. Asking questions in a matter such as this was a fine way to get a bust in the snoot.

"It ees the island!" Her whisper was sharp. A glow appeared on her face. "Soon we will be reech!" She slapped Parker heartily on the shoulder. "Beel, is not that wonderful!"

"It sure is," Parker answered. He was as astonished by the statement as he was by the slap on the shoulder.

"Shut up, Mercedes!" Retch spoke. "Parker, turn some juice into this thing."

"She's cruising at about her best speed," Parker answered.

"Then get her faster than cruising speed. We've found the island." His manner indicated that finding the island was very important but that something else perhaps of equal importance remained to be done.

"What's the big rush!" Parker countered. "You don't think it will vanish before we get there, do you?"

A startled look appeared on Retch's face. "No, of course not. That is—"

A thudding jar went through the ship.

"What 'appened?" Mercedes screamed in fear.

[Pg 127]

With a snarling crash of breaking metal, one of the helicopter blades was yanked from its mounting above them.

Parker had the dazed impression that he saw the big blade jerked away through the air. Then, like a leaf suddenly caught in a violent hurricane, the helicopter began to turn flip-flops in the air.

"Do somesing!" Mercedes cried.

As the ship jumped and began to yaw, she was thrown across the cabin. Jerking, buckling, jumping, twisting, the big helicopter lurched its way toward the surface of the sea below. Cutting the power, Parker leaped from his seat. He knew what was going to happen. He intended to try and be ready for it.

Retch, gripping his seat with both hands, yelled. "We're falling!"

"It's not news to me," Parker answered, jerking open the door to the compartment at the rear. Inside that compartment was a mass of synthetic fabric. Tossed to the surface of the sea, inflated by the self-contained flask of gas under pressure, it would make a rubber raft.

"You've left the controls!" Retch barked. "Do something to stop us. We're going to fall." The man's face was wild with fear as he twisted his head around to see what Parker was doing.

"You damned right I've left the controls!" Parker answered. "We've lost the equivalent of a wing in an ordinary plane. If you know any way to stop a plane from falling you tell me." Working with deft, sure hands, he pulled the mass of synthetic fabric out of its compartment.

"But we've got to get to that island. We've found it. We've got to get there while—"

"If we get there, we'll have to swim," Parker answered. "Personally, I'll consider myself lucky to get there by swimming. Here we go."

The last was spoken as the helicopter began its final plunge to the surface of the blue water below them.

Parker, with the mass of fabric clutched firmly in both hands, threw himself flat on the floor.

The 'copter hit with a terrific thud. An instant later, Parker was on his feet. The life raft was under one hand. With the other hand, he was reaching for the handle that opened the cabin door.

"We've got to get out of here. This ship will go the bottom like a rock."

Behind him, Mercedes and Retch were struggling to their feet. Parker yanked on the handle that opened the cabin door.

The handle did not budge.

The heavy jolt the craft had taken when it struck the surface had twisted the whole frame.

"Get that door open!" Retch moaned. "We'll be drowned like rats."

"Hell, I'm trying!" Parker answered. He yanked upward with all his strength.

The door still did not budge.

Outside Parker could see the green water rising around the cabin.

He backed away, ducked his head, threw himself with all his strength against the door.

[Pg 128]

Under the driving impact of his body, the door was knocked open. The mass of synthetic fabric in his arms, Parker catapulted through the opening and into the sea. He hit with a terrific splash. Mercedes followed him. Parker, treading water and working with the valve that would release the gas and inflate the raft, saw that Retch was still standing in the door of the 'copter.

"What am I going to do?" Retch screamed.

"Jump."

"But I can't swim."

"Then wait until I get this goddamned raft inflated. Ugh!" Parker's voice went into silence as arms came up out of the water and closed around his neck with a grip of death.

Mercedes, in a panic that often comes to people catapulted suddenly and unexpectedly into the water, was grabbing the nearest source of potential safety.

"Let go!" Even as he spoke, Parker felt her arms close even tighter around his neck. He knew then that she was not going to let go. She was pulling him under with her.

Giving one final jerk at the valve of the gas container, Parker found himself pulled under water.

The arms around his neck seemed to grip like iron. He caught them in both hands, yanked at them. His hands slipped. He grabbed again. She was behind him, on his back, so he could not slug her. Meanwhile each passing second was sending both of them deeper into the sea. He yanked at her arms again. This time his fingers held. Her grip was broken.

Twisting, he grabbed her hair. Then he began to fight his way to the surface.

His head broke water. As he gulped air, he realized the blessed sight before his eyes.

The rubber raft! His last jerk at the valve before Mercedes dragged him under had opened it.

From the door of the sinking helicopter Retch was staring at the raft. At the same instant in final desperation, he jumped. His clutching fingers caught the edge of the rubber raft. Like a frightened river rat, he pulled himself out of the water.

Treading water, Parker dragged Mercedes to the edge of the raft. Retch leaned over and lifted her in. For an instant, Parker remained in the water, his fingers firm on the raft, letting it support him while he gasped air into his lungs. Behind him, with a gurgle and a rumble, the helicopter sank. He swung himself into the raft. Mercedes, her masculine garb clinging to her, was sitting up.

"I am sorry, Beel," she said. "I get the scare up and I grab at you. I not know for sure what I am doing. You will forgive me, no?"

"Think nothing of it," Parker answered. "Anybody can get scared under these circumstances."

"That I know," she answered. "But you saved my life. And that I will remember."

"Forget it," Parker said. "I did what had to be done, nothing more."

[Pg 129]

"But I will remember it," she calmly repeated.

Parker was silent. Under her hardness for the first time he glimpsed something deeper, finer. She was the type who meant what she said. She was a woman who paid her debts. Under other circumstances... Parker put the thought out of his mind.

Now he set about doing what had to be done—paddling to the island. He turned his eyes toward it.

The island was gone. Calm, serene, the level face of the sea stretched away to the horizon.

Fear, dark, sudden, and overwhelming, arose in Bill Parker. The fear did not come up just because the face of the sea was level and calm, the island not visible, but because of something else, something that he had forgotten, something that he had put out of his mind and out of his life. Could it be possible that—

He caught himself. In that direction lay madness. Words exploded out of him. "Hey, what the hell? Am I nuts? What became of that island? I saw it!"

"I told you we had to hurry to get there when we saw it." Retch was hesitant. "It's—it's not always

there."

"But it's got to be there! I saw it!"

"There is a trick about that island," Retch said. "I—it—I—you don't always see it. Something funny."

Parker was across the shaking, unsteady raft. His impulse was to take Retch by the throat, to shake words out of him. "What do you mean?" He was restraining himself with difficulty.

Retch spread his hands. "I'm sorry, I can't explain. That's all I know. Believe me."

Retch was telling the truth Parker decided. The big pilot swung his gaze in every direction, searching for land. Somewhere in the far distance was the peninsula of Lower California. But it was beyond range of his eyes. As far as he could see, was barren water.

Setting his course by the small compass that was included as part of the standard equipment on the life raft, Parker paddled toward the south. The clumsy raft made little progress. Parker hardly noticed, hardly cared. Deep in his mind was a lurking thought he was trying to keep below his consciousness.

In the front of the raft, Retch sat with his back to Parker. From Retch's motions, Parker knew the man was cleaning his gun. Parker made no comment. When Retch had finished and had turned back to him, Parker spoke. "I want to know a little more about that island. How does it happen we can't see it?"

"I'm not certain," Retch answered. "I think it's a lot like the mirages you see on the desert. This island is something like that, only in reverse. In a mirage, you see something that doesn't exist. In the case of this island, you *don't* see something that *does* exist."

"Um," Parker said, then was silent. The explanation sounded reasonable enough, as far as it went. The trouble was it didn't go far enough, not nearly far enough to quiet the thought lurking deep in the big pilot's mind. He worked with the paddle. "When you hired me to fly you down here, you told me that you knew where this island was located but you didn't tell me it had a bad habit of vanishing."

[Pg 130]

"I didn't believe it myself," Retch answered. "So far as I was concerned, it was just a wild rumor."

"Um," Parker said again. As he spoke, part of the thought that he had been keeping buried in his mind came blasting to the surface. "She said it was a mirage too!" he blurted out the words. "And that goddamned Dr. Yammer—" He caught himself. Into his mind had come a vision of a woman he had once known, and a psychiatrist called Dr. Yammer. Pain crossed his face.

"What?" Retch asked. "Who are you talking about?"

"Nobody," Parker answered. "Just a woman I once knew."

Her name had been Effra. Effra of the Green Eyes, he had called her. Rigidly he forced the thought of her from his mind, forced himself to think of what Retch had said. But it was no good. His mind kept going back to Effra and Yammer.

"She is caught, trapped in a net of delusion and hallucination that is as solid as a block of steel," Dr. Yammer had once said, his voice precise with authoritarian certainty. "I cannot get her out of this steel block unless I hospitalize her, perhaps operate. There is no other choice, no other decision that can be made. Putting it bluntly—she is insane. A delicate thing, insanity. We still work in the dark with things of the mind."

At the memory of Yammer's words, Parker twisted uncomfortably. He used the paddle much more vigorously than was necessary. It was as if Yammer's face showed in the water into which he thrust the paddle.

Mercedes was studying Parker. "About this woman—"

"She was just a woman I once knew."

"You loved her, yes?"

"Well—" Parker was silent.

"Tell me what 'appened."

"Nothing," Parker said. "Oh, hell—all right. Up in LA three years ago I knew Effra. She was a pilot too, and we got to running around together. She liked to fly out over the Pacific all by herself. I don't know why; she just liked to flirt with danger, maybe. One time she came in a couple of hours over-due. Figuring she was down in the drink, I was about to rouse out the Navy to hunt for her when she came in." He paused.

Mercedes was silent. In the front of the raft, Retch said nothing. His eyes were still searching the skyline.

"She was wildly excited," Parker went on. "She said she had made a forced landing on an island

somewhere off the coast of Southern Cal. She also said there were a lot of strange people living on the island." He shook his head. There was a feeling in him he did not like.

His eyes came to focus on a ripple in the water. A shark. It made him think of Dr. Yammer.

"What 'appened then?" Mercedes asked softly.

"I helped her look for the island," Parker said. "We spent months looking in our spare time. We flew over more ocean than I ever knew existed. But we didn't find it."

[Pg 131]

"No?"

"That island was awfully important to her. She thought something wonderful was there, what it was, she could not tell me, just that it was there. When we could not find it, she began to doubt herself, to think perhaps she had not seen it, that she had not landed there. She reached the conclusion then—well, she went to see one of these fancy mental specialists who know everything about nothing and nothing about anything."

Under the water, he could see the eyes of the shark. They reminded him of the expression in Dr. Yammer's eyes, except that the shark's eyes looked more honest.

"And then?" Mercedes said, very softly.

"She—vanished," Parker said. "Yammer was going to stick her into a hospital, use something that he called 'shock' on her, maybe operate. She ran away."

"Did you try to find her, Beel?"

"For asking that question, Mercedes, I ought to choke you!" Parker said hotly. "I hunted high and low. All we knew for certain was that her plane was missing. I think she decided she would simply fly out to the sea she loved, and never come back." Again his voice sank to a whisper as he visualized Effra of the Green Eyes flying out over this wilderness of waters.

"I am sorry, Beel," Mercedes said gently. "Will you remember one thing, Beel?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"You saved my life back there. I will not forget it. If the time ever comes, I will pay my debt."

"Thank you," Parker said. "But there is no debt."

"You think this island we are hunting might be the same island your girl claimed she found?" Retch spoke from the front end of the boat.

"And if it is the same island?" Mercedes said.

Anger came boiling up in Parker. "If it is that island, and if I ever get back to Los Angeles, I am going to hunt up a psychiatrist by the name of Yammer and take care of him!" Parker dug the water savagely. Gradually, his anger subsided. "Where did you run into the rumor about this island?"

Retch shrugged. "It was just one of those things you hear." He studied the landscape. "We should spot a boat soon."

"We are not exactly on the well-traveled ocean lanes," Parker pointed out. "Does it happen that there are any other little things about this island that you forgot to tell me when you chartered my ship to fly you down here?"

Retch flushed. "Such as—"

"Such as how it happened that my 'copter threw a vane just after we sighted the place?"

Retch did not answer.

"Seemed as though somebody shot at us."

"Oh hell no! The loss of the vane was accidental."

"Accidents like that can happen but they usually don't. I checked the ship before we took off." Parker turned silent. There was no proof that the wrecking of the 'copter had been anything but an accident. "What do you expect to find on this island?"

[Pg 132]

"I told you—"

"Just before the 'copter started down, Miss Valdar was yakking about how we were all going to be rich," Parker interrupted.

The glance Retch gave Mercedes had no love in it. "Sometimes she's got her mouth open when she ought to have it shut."

Mercedes was silent. "I see," Parker said. "When you chartered my ship, you told me you were a scientist and that you wanted to investigate certain phenomena on this island. You said your

investigation would take only a few hours. I was to fly you here and wait for you. You said you might want me to fly you back to the mainland, or might not, depending on what you found here. Is this correct?"

"Certainly," Retch answered. "I'm sorry you lost your ship but the insurance will take care of it."

"Insurance will take care of the 'copter but not of my neck. *Are you a scientist?*"

"Of course. Didn't I tell you—"

"What kind of a scientist are you?"

"I—ah—What do you mean?"

"What's your specialty? Are you a biologist, a physicist, or what?"

"I—"

"I don't believe you are a scientist at all. You don't talk like one."

"Damn it, I told you what I am and that's what I am!" Retch's face showed sullen and his hand moved toward the gun. Parker tensed. Retch stopped the movement of his hand. He glared at the big pilot.

"Okay," Parker said. "It doesn't make any difference anyhow." He resumed paddling.

The sun slid down the western sky. Retch and Mercedes huddled in the front end of the raft and whispered to each other. From time to time, the woman glanced at Parker. He paid no attention to her.

The sea was calm. In the distance, a school of flying fish skittered over the surface. A dozen gulls played near the surface. A high-riding fin cut the water. Shark, sensing food.

The sun reached the horizon and wallowed in the sea like a fat, round shining pig on fire.

Mercedesscreamed, pointed, jerked a terror-stricken face toward Parker. "Beel! Beel!" She scuttled across the raft, threw herself into his arms. "Look, Beel, look!"

Terror and panic almost beyond understanding were in her words.

Parker looked where she was pointing. His heart climbed up into his mouth and threatened to choke him. He had thought he was shock-proof, that nothing could jar him. But here was something that made his mind reel.

Walking across the water toward the raft were three men.

Clad in knee-length breeches, wearing cloaks, the three men looked as if they had just stepped out of the 17th century. Two wore big, broad-brimmed hats, the third had a handkerchief wrapped around his head. He also had a wooden leg and he stalked across the surface of the sea with all the sureness he might have had with concrete under him. He carried a curved cutlass in one hand. The other two men were armed with swords, in scabbards. In addition, heavy, clumsy-looking pistols were thrust into sashes at their belts.

[Pg 133]

They looked like men out of a nightmare—or like pirates out of the olden days; swash-buckling buccaneers who had somehow managed to survive their proper period in history and to live into the 20th century.

"Ghosts!" Mercedes screamed. "Devils! They've come up out of hell because of our sins!" She wrapped her arms around Parker's neck. "Save me, Beel, save me!"

Parker caught her wrists, jerked her arms loose from his neck, and rose quickly to his feet. He hoped fervidly that his eyes had been deceiving him and that standing up would cause this mirage to disappear.

His eyes continued to deceive him. The three men did not disappear. They continued to walk across the water toward the raft. They moved with the sureness of men who know where they are going.

Behind them, suddenly outlined against the fat sun that was wallowing in the sea, rocky, grim, and forbidding, the mysterious island was now visible. It had reappeared. They had found it.

Three men coming from it had found them.

The shark found the three men.

Parker saw the triangular fin cut through the water toward them. Like a speed boat taking off on a race, the fin gathered momentum.

The three men saw it coming.

"Ho!" one yelled.

"A shark!" the second said.

"Have at him, boys!" the third shouted.

The shark charged them. Drawing their swords, the three men executed a nimble dance on the surface of the sea. They thrust downward—their swords entering the water with no difficulty whatsoever although their feet did not enter it—drew them back dripping red. They skipped lightly out of the way of the wounded and infuriated monster.

"Zounds!"

"Chop the sea pig down!"

"Carve his heart out!"

Old battle cries rang in the air as they fought the shark. Blood colored the surface of the sea.

The wounded shark suddenly took its death blow. It dived, was gone from sight, then broke the surface a hundred yards away. It beat the water into foam, threshing out its life.

With pleased interest, the three men watched the shark die. Dipping their blades into the sea to clean the blood from them, they wiped them dry on their pants legs.

Again they moved toward the raft.

Parker's hand went to the pistol inside his leather jacket. He loosed it in its holster but did not draw it.

Mercedes moaned and covered her eyes. At the other end of the boat, Retch had risen to his feet.

Bracing himself, Bill Parker waited for—whatever was to happen. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Retch slowly drawing his gun.

"Damn it, Retch, put that gun away!" Parker shouted. "Don't shoot until you know what the hell is going on." [Pg 134]

Retch turned, the gun visible in his hand. "What the hell—" Retch didn't put the gun away. He lifted it. Parker found himself staring into the muzzle.

"Get your hands up!" Retch snarled the words. "Mercedes, get that gun out of his holster. Get your goddamned hands up or I'll blow your blasted head off!"

The last was spoken to Parker as the dazed pilot tried to understand what had happened. He could hardly believe his own eyes. Automatically he lifted his hands. Mercedes slid past him, got behind him, taking no chances on getting between him and Retch's gun. He felt her fingers go inside his jacket. Expertly she lifted the gun from its holster.

"Toss me the gun!" Retch said. He caught the weapon the woman tossed toward him, glanced at Parker. "You thought I was going to start shooting at *them*?" He gestured toward the three approaching men. "You made a slight mistake." The grin on his face was wolfish.

"What the hell have I got into?"

"You'll find out, if you live long enough," Retch said. "Just behave yourself and do as you're told and maybe you'll stay alive." Again the wolfish grin showed on his face but under the grin, the words were harsh with meaning.

"Ho, Johnny!" the three men were drawing near the raft. "Ho, Johnny Retch! What kind of a flying ship is this that you have brought back with you?"

Retch turned to the three men. "Gotch! Peg-leg! Masterville!" Retch greeted them as old friends. The one he had called Gotch had spoken. All three of them stared at the raft and its occupants. Mercedes drew bold, appreciative stares. Parker got blank looks. Standing lightly and easily on the water, the three men surveyed the raft with doubtful contempt.

"Does this thing fly through the air like the Jez—" Gotch caught himself. "It looks to me as if it were more fit for sailing on a mill pond back in Devon."

"This is not the ship that flies through the air, that ship was wrecked. This is a rubber boat that it carried."

"Wrecked?" Gotch spoke. "But where does that leave us?"

"Everything has been taken care of," Retch spoke quickly. "You can always trust Johnny Retch to have two strings for his bow."

"Hmmm. And who is this?" Gotch gestured toward Parker.

"The pilot of the flying ship that was wrecked," Retch answered.

"Ummm. And what are we going to do with him?" Gotch glanced around toward the still floundering and dying shark as if he regretted their haste in disposing of what might have been a handy scavenger. "Um." He moved around the raft and stood close to Parker, staring at him. The sword in his hands still showed faint traces of red from the blood of the shark.

"We do not need any more men on the island!" Lifting his blade, Gotch glared at Parker.

"Do you, per'aps, need women?" Mercedes spoke quickly. Gotch turned his eyes on her. As he looked, some of the anger seemed to go out of him. [Pg 135]

"Perhaps what you need on the island are more women," Mercedes said. She smiled boldly.

Gotch broke into a grin. "But definitely, we need more women, if they are like you."

"Hey, lay off of her, she belongs to me!" Retch spoke violently.

"Come, let us pull the boat to the island," Peg-leg spoke quickly. "We have too many things to do to stand waiting here."

Grumbling, Gotch allowed himself to be persuaded to get in front of the raft and join the other men in pulling it.

Not until then did Parker dare to breathe. "Thanks," he spoke to Mercedes.

"It was nothing, Beel. Anyone could have done it."

"Thanks, anyhow," Parker said. "But what have we got ourselves into here?"

"I do not know for sure, Beel. Johnny, he like me, and he ask me to come along. He say we will both get reech—"

"Shut up!" Retch spoke.

Parker, sitting in the raft, watched the three men tow it toward the shore. He watched their feet. Where they stepped, the water seemed to grow firm. Pirates, cut-throats, killers, they certainly were. But added to that was the equally obvious fact that they could walk on water. In all history, Parker had only heard of one man who could do that, and he hadn't been a man, but a God.

Ahead of them, the island loomed in the sunset; a long strip of white, sandy beach; behind it a thick growth of trees; behind the trees the rocky central mass of the island rising up into the sky. Off to the right, Parker caught a glimpse of a wreck that lay against rocks jutting from the shore. He stared at it. Unless his eyes were deceiving him, it was the wreck of a Spanish galleon, a ship that belonged to the days when Spain had been draining the gold and silver and jewels of the new world into her coffers.

The men stopped, stared uneasily at the shore. Parker could make out two men barely visible between the beach and the grove of trees.

"Rozeno and Ulnar!" Gotch spoke. "Watching us." His lips curled and his hand went automatically to the hilt of the sword he was wearing. "Some day I will slit the throats of that priest and that Indian." Gotch spat into the sea.

"They're not causing any trouble," Peg-leg spoke.

"They're witches, by Gad!" Gotch answered. "They're warlocks, wizards."

"Father Rozeno is a very devout and holy man," Peg-leg said.

"He pretends to be a priest but he is more of a warlock than he is a holy man. As for that Indian, if he ever gives me the chance—" Gotch glared at the figures at the edge of the grove.

"Come on," Peg-leg said.

Mercedes contrived to move closer to Parker. "Beel, what are these theings here? I do not understand them. I do not like them." [Pg 136]

"Nor do I," Parker said.

A shiver passed over her.

"What's the matter, baby, you cold?" Retch grinned at her. "Don't worry about it. We'll get you warmed up on the island."

Imperceptibly she again moved closer to Parker. "Beel, it ees not good."

"You got into this of your own free will."

"Yes, but I did not know that theings like these were going to 'appen. I just thought—"

"Mercedes, if you open your mouth again, I'll knock your teeth down your throat!" Retch said.

Mercedes was silent.

As they came in to the shore, the two men who had been visible on the beach disappeared. Off to the left something else came into view. It was a small cabin plane, wrecked there in what had apparently been an attempt at a forced landing.

Before they reached the shore, the fat sun had wallowed itself out of sight into the sea. In the dusk, the island looked like a vast, rocky pinnacle thrust up out of the Pacific Ocean, or out of the ocean of time—Parker couldn't tell which. Mysterious, silent, it waited in the darkness like a vast

sleeping monster on the surface of the sea, a monster on which Spanish galleons and planes had been wrecked. Parker, his nerves jumpy, halfway expected it to vanish beneath the surface before they reached it.

But it didn't vanish. It remained fixed, solid, firm. When they stepped from the raft, the sand under their feet was solid, the crunch of it reassuring.

A breeze whispered through the trees. The island was quiet, too quiet. It seemed to brood in the darkness. In the vast stillness that hung like a pall over the place, the only sound was that of a bird, chittering sleepily in the dark woods.

It was the most out-of-place sound Bill Parker had ever heard.

It seemed to affect the others. At the bird-sound they were suddenly quiet, listening.

"To hell with it, it's nothing," Gotch said. "Come on."

Following a well defined path, they moved inland, toward the base of the cliff. Through the trees, Parker glimpsed fires. As he moved closer, he saw the source of the lights, the cooking fires of a village set against the base of the cliff.

"Ho!" Peg-leg called, announcing their arrival.

As they entered the village, the inhabitants came rushing out to them. They were the queerest lot of human beings Parker had ever seen. Spaniards, bearded grandees in tattered and mended bits of ancient finery, Indians, squat, stalwart, Englishmen, tall and blond, a motley crew.

They looked like the relics of half a dozen different nations, drawn from the fringes of time. Their garments did not belong in the 20th century. Their weapons were knives, swords, bell-mouthed pistols. Their language was a mixture of Spanish, English, Portuguese, and Indian dialects.

"What kind of a mad-house is this?" Parker muttered. "Get away, you!" The last was spoken to a slender Spaniard who was trying to jerk Parker's leather jacket from his back.

[Pg 137]

The man snarled at him, drew back.

"Get out of our way!" Retch yelled. The crowd made way for him. Calling greetings, snarling, Retch seemed very much at home here.

Mercedes looked hopelessly confused and at a loss. She stared around her as if she was appalled at what she saw. Parker drew the obvious inference. Mercedes had never been here before. All this was as new to her as it was to him. But Retch had been here.

Off in the woodland behind them somewhere a bird chirped, the same sleepy quiet sound that Parker had heard as they landed. Now it was louder, nearer, and even more out of place than it had been before.

The people around Parker also heard the sound. Startled faces turned toward the dark forest.

The sound came again, louder now. Parker was certain it was the call of a bird.

But if it was the chirp of a bird, it was frightening these people. Why should a bird-sound in the night frighten grown men? Utter silence fell. Even Gotch was still. Parker saw that the man's face had turned gray, that all the bristling bravado had passed out of him.

Even Retch, showing signs of strain and growing temper, was silent.

"The Jezbro!" someone whispered.

At the words, the strain and temper coming up in Retch burst the surface. "There is no such thing as the Jezbro!" His voice was almost a scream. "It's only superstitious nonsense—" His shouting voice went into silence as the sound came again.

The chirp was louder now. It was no longer one bird chirping in the dark night, it was a dozen. And it wasn't quite the sound of a bird any longer, it was a musical tinkle, an air-borne throbbing somewhat similar to the sound of a harp, a softly ringing chime. Parker could easily imagine that somewhere among those dark trees was a harper, moving closer.

The harpist did not seem to be upon the ground. He—or she—seemed to be up in the air, somewhere near the tree tops, moving in the dark night.

As the sound came louder, a man in the village suddenly went down on his knees, then another and another, until the whole group, including Gotch, were kneeling. Even Mercedes went to her knees in response to deep internal, superstitious pressures. Only Retch and Parker stood erect as two men strong enough to face the sound coming from the night.

"Get down, you fools!" Peg-leg's voice had real anguish in it.

"Get down, hell!" Retch answered. He had a gun in each hand, his own and the one he had taken from Parker.

"Beel! Beel!" Mercedes was jerking at Parker's leg. "What is 'appening?"

"Something," Parker answered. "I don't know what." There was fear in him. He could feel it in his heart, sense it in his bones, taste in his mouth. He rose above it.

The sound swept through the air. It came out over the trees above them. On the ground, the kneelers moaned in response. [Pg 138]

The harping sound leaped up, became a melody of weird notes filling the night air. Mingled with the eerie music were the moans from the prostrate humans.

Looking upward, Parker caught a glimpse of something moving through the sky. It blotted out the light of the stars and it looked a lot like a bird but like no bird he had ever seen before. It was too big to be any bird that had ever flown through Earth's air, but yet it flew. As it flew, it made the sound of a gigantic harp.

The bird passed over the village, moving along the cliff. As it slid into the distance, the harp music faded slowly away, became again the sound of a sleepy bird.

Around the village, the prostrate humans moaned, stirred, began to rise.

"What the hell was that thing?" Parker gasped.

"The damned fools call it the Jezbro!" Retch snarled. "The yellow cowards are afraid of it. I don't know what it is."

Parker was silent. To him, Retch sounded like a man scared right down to the soles of his shoes but desperately trying to pretend he wasn't.

"It was a warning sent by them," Peg-leg whispered, gesturing up toward the cliff in the darkness. "A warning to us to mend our ways."

"It was no such thing!" Retch shouted.

Peg-leg did not argue. He got slowly and silently to his feet. The group was silent, perturbed, and afraid. Even Gotch was silent. Whatever had passed overhead, had cast a pall of fear over them.

"You bilious, yellow-livered cowards!" Retch raged at them.

They made no response. The fear the Jezbro had inspired in them seemed to have made even his anger unimportant.

"But what is the Jezbro?" Parker questioned again. "I mean—"

"I told you it's nothing and that's enough of an answer. Hey!" The guns that Retch held came up sharply as another figure came soundlessly out of the forest and moved toward them. An old, bent, wrinkled Indian who hobbled along with the aid of a staff.

"Oh, it's you, Pedro!" Retch said. "What the hell do you want?"

For all the sign he gave, the Indian, Pedro, did not hear Retch's question. He hobbled straight to Parker.

"*En la manana Padre Rozeno huit nole el hombre e la mujer.* Father Rozeno will see the man and the woman in the morning." The voice was broken with age.

"I don't get it," Parker said. The Indian was already turning. He had delivered his message, his errand was finished.

"That damned Rozeno is not going to see anybody in the morning!" Retch yelled.

The Indian staffed his way into the forest. He still seemed not to hear Retch.

"Tell him they won't be there!" Retch screamed.

Pedro's back went out of the firelight as he moved into the trees. [Pg 139]

Retch seemed almost to go mad. His face turned purple. Both guns came to focus on the spot where the Indian had disappeared.

"Why shoot him?" Parker said. "He was just a messenger."

"Damn it!" Slowly, while the group watched impassively, Retch got himself under control. Suddenly he began to laugh. Strangely his laughter in this moment was more horrible than his anger had been.

"He sent for you, and the woman. All right, he'll get you. But I'll go with you. If he wants you, I'll take you to him." Again the laughter sounded.

"Who is Rozeno?" Parker asked.

"He is, or he was once, a Spanish priest. He and Ulnar think they rule this island. They are the two men we saw watching us from the shore. You'll see them in the morning."

That was the last word Retch said on the subject. He took Gotch apart, to talk to him. Peg-leg found food for Parker, but refused to talk. "Na, na, my son, when the Jezbro passes over us as a great bird—when it goes through the woods at night as a great howling beast—we do not talk about it."

Parker pressed for more information, but the old man turned stubbornly silent. Later he found Parker a place to sleep in his own hut. Parker had the impression that, all during the night Peg-leg, sat on guard at the entrance.

But nothing came in the night. In the morning Retch was there, saying, with grim bitterness, that now it was time to go up the cliff to see Rozeno and Ulnar. Mercedes, looking wan and bedraggled, with hate in her hot black eyes, was with him. So was Gotch. Gotch did not look in the least happy.

"What's biting you?" Parker said to Retch.

"Nothing."

"I get the impression something around here is just about scaring the pants off of you."

"You're crazy!" Retch's voice was a snarl. "I'm not afraid of anything around here—you—or anybody else." As he spoke, the man's face was a mask and his eyes were wild.

"Sure, okay, I get it," the pilot answered.

They moved along the cliff until they came to a ledge that sloped upward.

"We go up here," Gotch grunted.

As they went upward, they rose above the tops of the trees. Sparkling thinly in the morning sunlight, the sea came into sight. Circling the shoreline at a distance of about a mile, a curtain of mist was visible. It seemed to close in above them too, shielding the island like a thin, shining dome.

"That's a strange fog," Parker said.

"It's not a fog," Retch answered. "I don't know exactly what it is, but when it is there, the island is invisible. If you are on the other side of it, you see nothing at all."

"Um," Parker said. They continued upward. The ledge twisted, curved, went around the rising cliff. Slowly Parker became aware that the rising ledge was not a natural formation, it was a pathway cut into the face of the cliff.

[Pg 140]

At the realization, the pilot felt a touch of awe rise in him. This ledge was old. It must have been cut into this cliff long before Columbus had sailed westward.

Off in the distance beyond the curtain of mist was the coast of California, the beaches bright with bathers, the cities wrapped in warm sunshine, the roads alive with traffic. Over there in the distance were orange groves and millions of people.

Here on this island, behind this mist, unknown to millions of people so close to it, was something that did not belong in the 20th century, or in any other century Parker could imagine.

His back felt cold. In him, somewhere, was gnawing anger. This island, this place, was real. Back in his past a horrible wrong had been done, a wrong that now could never be corrected. He put the thought out of his mind.

The ledge turned into the cliff and became a tunnel that had been carved into solid stone. The walls of the tunnel were as smooth as polished marble. What tools could men have used in the old days to cut a tunnel with walls so smooth that they looked like glass? Modern equipment could not have done the job so well.

Niches in the wall of the tunnel admitted light and gave them glimpses of the island.

"Where the hell will we find—Oh, Pedro!" Retch spoke. The Indian messenger of the night before had appeared in the tunnel. He beckoned to them. They followed him into a large room cut out of solid stone.

It was one of the cleanest and most simply furnished rooms Parker had ever seen. It contained hand-made chairs along the wall and a big table, also hand-made. Light from a wall slit flowed into the room.

Seated behind the table, illumined by the light flowing in from the wall slit behind them, were Rozeno and Ulnar. Rozeno had a thin nose, the narrow face of the typical high bred Spaniard. Ulnar was short and squat, his cheeks were flat, his nose hooked. Both had black eyes that were utterly fathomless.

The faces were old, wrinkled, and kind. Parker took one look at this priest, and instantly liked him. As he glanced at Rozeno, saw the kindness on that face, he also saw, out of the corners of his eyes, Retch drawing a gun.

In that split second he knew why Retch had laughed so violently the night before, when Retch had said that he would go with them to see Rozeno and Ulnar.

Retch intended to kill both of them; to shoot them as they sat there at that table, unarmed and defenseless; shoot them like dogs!

The gun was already in Retch's hand. Parker's fist went out, up, connected with Retch's jaw, a blow that had all the pilot's strength behind it.

Retch's head was twisted to one side. He reeled away from Parker's blow. The snarl that came from his lips was the snarl of a wild animal. Metal thudded as the gun hit the floor. The room echoed with sound—Mercedes screaming. Parker followed Retch, followed him as a dog follows a rat. He caught a wild man.

[Pg 141]

Retch stumbled against the wall, caught himself on one of the hand-made chairs, jerked himself up, and drove at Parker. The pilot met the charge head on. They went down locked together.

Retch was a tornado erupting with violent fury. He threw Parker away from him, leaped to his feet. Parker pulled himself to one knee. The fallen pistol lay in front of him. He snatched it up.

Retch was coming toward him. He saw the gun in Parker's hand, hesitated.

"I'll kill you," the pilot said.

Retch caught himself. For an instant he seemed to hang in the air before Parker, yellow glaring in his eyes as he tried to make up his mind whether or not to buck the gun.

"Get your hands up," Parker said.

Slowly the yellow went out of Retch's eyes.

"Get your hands up!" Parker repeated.

This time Retch obeyed him. Parker backed him against the wall, took the second pistol from his pocket, his own gun.

"Damn you!" Retch snarled. Parker saw that the man was not speaking to him but to Gotch, he saw also that during all this Gotch had not moved. The man stood transfixed; afraid to move.

Parker turned to the two men behind the table. They had not moved either, though Ulnar looked as if he was about to come to his feet. Rozeno sat very still. There was sadness on his face.

"Go away," he gestured toward Retch. "And you, too, Gotch, go away."

"You mean we can go after—" Gotch faltered.

"I don't want to see either of you again," Rozeno said. There was actual living pain in his voice. "Go!"

"Wait a minute," Parker spoke quickly.

"Yes, my son?" Rozeno's face lost its sadness when he looked at Parker, it came alive with sudden animation.

"You don't mean to tell me you are going to let these two go?" the pilot protested.

"Of course."

"But Retch tried to kill you."

"I know—"

"And he'll try it again. There's something here that's driving him crazy. I don't know what it is but he knows. If you turn him loose—I would just as soon turn loose a rattlesnake, Johnny Retch."

Parker's words were hard, blunt, forceful. But for all the effect they had on the old priest, he might as well not have spoken them. Rozeno smiled. "I do not think Retch or Gotch will ever harm us. They have no means to harm us." He made a gesture with his hands, spoke a single word, "Go!"

Retch and Gotch went quickly from the room, like men who were very glad to go.

"I hope you know what you are doing," Parker said, saw that Rozeno was not looking at him. The old priest was watching Mercedes.

"You may stay here, with us," Rozeno added.

[Pg 142]

Mercedes' face mirrored gratitude. "Thank you."

Rozeno turned his attention to Parker. "You are new to our island, are you not, my son?"

"Yes."

"How did you arrive here? Was your ship wrecked?"

"Yes. Actually, however, we were looking for this island." Swiftly Parker explained what had happened.

"Retch went away, he hired you to bring him back in a ship that flies?" Rozeno seemed a little perturbed.

For the first time, Ulnar spoke, a single grunted sound. Rozeno answered with a swift flow of gutturals that Parker did not understand. Ulnar grunted again, a hot light appeared in his eyes. "Kill him!" His fist came down upon the table.

Again Rozeno looked pained. "I have worked so long and so hard with him, trying to show him the Way, trying to explain to him that killing is not a part of the Way. But the old savagery is still in his heart. Sometimes I despair of him." He shook his head very gently. The light flowing in from behind him made a halo of his long white hair. His eyes searched Parker. They were the kindest and at the same time the keenest eyes the pilot had ever met. They looked at him and through him; they probed deep down inside of him; they seemed to search down to the bottom of his soul. Parker had the feeling he was being weighed, measured, probed.

"It is not often that I offer a choice to those who come here," Rozeno spoke. "Usually they prefer to live in the village at the base of the cliff. You may live here with us, if you wish." The smile on Rozeno's face was a living thing.

Deep down inside of him, Parker felt his soul come to sudden life. "I'll stay here, Father, if I may."

The smile on Rozeno's face became even brighter. "Good, my son. You have made a very wise choice."

Parker was silent, perturbed, suddenly uneasy. Here in this place two old men lived in rooms near the top of a cliff. Down below was a village where brawling men lived, men who could walk on water. In the night, in this place something called a Jezbro went on the wings of a harp. There was magic here, mysteries that went beyond his understanding. What else was here?

"Tell me about this place, Father?"

Rozeno nodded. "Gladly, my son, gladly. I will show you and tell you as I show you. There are things here that even I do not understand." For a second, the old priest frowned as if he was contemplating mysteries that lay afar. Then his smile came back and he was rising to his feet. "Come with me, my son."

As they moved from the big room, Ulnar grunted hastily and gestured toward the wall slit. Looking through it, Parker saw a speedy craft moving inside the veil—a PT boat. His heart jumped at the thought that the Navy had finally penetrated the secret of this strange island. His heart sank when he saw that even if this was a PT boat, it was not a Navy ship. The craft was dirty, unkempt, it was not the smart, spick and span vessel that the Navy would operate.

[Pg 143]

As he watched, the boat veered abruptly, slowed, almost came to a halt as if its occupants had suddenly discovered the presence of the island.

Ulnar shook his fist at the boat. "*Vondel me sego!*" he said.

"No, no, Ulnar," Rozeno spoke hastily. "You must not *vondel* them. They are just some people who have stumbled through the veil and now are bewildered."

"Me make 'em more frightened," the Indian spoke. He brought one fist down into the other fist, a smacking sound.

"What is *vondel*?" Parker spoke.

Rozeno seemed not to hear him. The priest was already moving from the room.

"We do not know who cut these passages here," Rozeno said. "We do not know who cut these rooms into the rock. Some race that lived a long, long time ago—perhaps the legendary Murians, perhaps some other race—had this island as an outpost. I think, also, they used it as a scientific laboratory; a dangerous laboratory that they put far away from their homeland. A place where their wise men—their philosophers—could seek out the mysteries of nature."

"Um," Parker said. There was cold in him. He tried to force it away, discovered it would not go.

"There is something else that is very strange about this island," the priest continued. "Time is different here."

"How is time different?"

"In this way," Rozeno answered. "I came to the New World with Cortez."

"I see," Parker said.

"You take it very calmly."

"I do not doubt my own eyes nor do I doubt you."

The old priest glowed. "Good. Good. Tell me, my son, are there many men like you in the world of today? I have a dream, a secret private dream, that the scientists from your world might come here and study the strange things on this island."

"They would come here in droves if they knew about it. And so would everybody else. You would be over-run by hordes of the curious."

"Yes, we know that. That isn't quite what I meant. It was my hope that perhaps we could make this island what it was in the olden days—secret place where the wise men could come to study." The priest's face glowed again. "There is so much here to be learned and here, also, is the time in which to learn. Here great discoveries might be made. Here could possibly be discovered not only the secrets of nature but the secrets of the minds and the hearts of men. From this place, as the centuries passed, there might be fed out, little by little, knowledge that would change the world; knowledge that would change the hearts and the minds of men; knowledge that would eliminate poverty, stop wars, knowledge that would help the human race become what it must one day be."

The glow on Rozeno's face was bright. The dream he dreamed was suddenly, in Parker's mind, a living, breathing vital hope, the hope of all honest men everywhere, that tomorrow might be better!

[Pg 144]

"Would you, my son, help me achieve that dream? Will you go back through the veil and explain to some of your greatest scientists what we have here?"

"I would like nothing better," the big pilot answered. In a way, this was his dream too, though up until now it had always been a secret, hidden, impossible-to-accomplish thing. His hand went out to Rozeno. Deep inside of him, the glow grew to greater heights. Only one other thing was needed to make this glow a really perfect feeling, Effra, who had found this island and had tried to tell him about it. But Effra was gone.

They moved on to a big room where some of the scientific equipment of the vanished race still functioned. Set in a sunken pool ten feet in diameter in the center of the room was a circle of what looked like mercury. Leading up from it were heavy bus bars of some unknown metal. The bus bars came together and marched across the room to a control panel, one of the strangest control panels Parker had ever seen. The meters were graduated in colors. In front of the chair where the operator sat was a keyboard like that of a vast pipe organ. How much training would an operator need to operate this keyboard? Directly in front of the operator's seat was a square panel that looked like a television screen.

Set in niches where the right hand of the operator could reach them easily were statuettes of birds, animals, reptiles. Made of some metal, they were perfect representations. Parker saw a condor, a bald-headed eagle, a humming-bird, a cougar, a jaguar, an alligator. His eyes went back to the pool in the center of the room.

"It is generating power," Rozeno said. "As it turns, it creates some force, some energy. I do not understand this energy. No one now alive understands it. Understanding is one of the things I hope your scientists may achieve—come away, Ulnar." The last was spoken as the Indian strayed near the operator's seat.

Ulnar grunted impatiently. There was something about that seat that lured him. But he came away. They went into another room, leaving behind them the pool of mercury that turned slowly, like a miniature earth on some axis of its own. Parker took one look at the contents of this room, and gasped.

The crown jewels of England were no greater than these! Here were crowns of pounded yellow gold; here were gargoyle masks made of the same yellow metal; masks that sparkled with gems. Here, lying on the rock shelves, were ingots of what looked to be solid gold, each one heavy enough to be a full load for a grown man.

Ulnar was examining a gargoyle mask. He touched a gold bar, his old withered fingers seeming to savor the feel of it.

Rozeno smiled gently. "Ulnar treasures these things, they were put in his charge a very long time ago. He has been faithful to his trust."

"But—" Parker whispered.

[Pg 145]

"This is a part of Montezuma's treasure, a part that Cortez did not get. There is as much of it here as 400 men could carry away. Ulnar was one of Montezuma's most trusted sub-chiefs. He brought the treasure here, to keep it for his Chieftan."

Ulnar's wrinkled face broke into a grin. "Me take good care," he said simply. "Me clean, me polish, me save for my Chief."

"Tell me one thing?" he said.

"Gladly, my son."

"Does Johnny Retch know this is here?"

"I suppose so. All who live on our island know about it."

Muscles knotted at the corners of Parker's jaws. He pressed his arms down against his jacket so that he could feel the guns in the pockets. The guns felt good.

"Father Rozeno!" a voice called from a corridor outside the treasure room. "Father Rozeno? Where are you?"

"Here I am, my dear," the priest answered.

At the sound of that voice, Bill Parker forgot all about the guns in his pockets, Johnny Retch, Montezuma's treasure, and everything else that was on this island. He stood stock still, paralyzed.

A girl came through the opening into the treasure room. She wore a dark dress; sandals; her hands were gloved; she had apparently been working at some task. She smiled at Ulnar, glanced at Parker, nodded, looked at Rozeno, smiled, then glanced back quickly at Parker as if he reminded her of someone she had once known, then turned again to the priest. "Father, I have been cleaning all morning—"

So far she got. Bill Parker broke his paralysis and swept her into his arms.

"Effra—Effra—Effra—" His voice was a choked whisper, almost inaudible in the treasure chamber of Montezuma. As she had come through the door, his mind had given him a flashing picture of the plane wrecked on the shore. Effra, fleeing from Dr. Yammer, had taken one last desperate chance on finding her island; one last lonely flight out over the Pacific. No wonder he had been unable to find her. She had found her island. She had come here. She *was* here, in his arms.

There was wonder and awe and bewilderment in the big pilot. Here was a miracle almost past the understanding. "I've found you—Effra—"

For an instant, she lay in his arms like a frightened child who dared not move. "Please—" she whispered. He did not hear her. His lips sought hers, found them. She did not draw away, but neither did she respond. "Effra—" Parker looked up. Rozeno and Ulnar were regarding him with mild astonishment. In his arms, Effra stirred again. "Please—let me go."

This time the big pilot heard her. Setting her back on her feet was one of the hastiest movements he had ever made in his life. "Effra—I did not mean to startle you—but darling—"

She stood irresolute, staring at him. "Please—You have no right—"

He saw that her eyes, fixed on him, regarded him as an utter and complete stranger.

[Pg 146]

"Don't you know me, Effra?" There was almost a sob in his voice.

"I never saw you before in my life."

Parker turned, moved to a window slot, stood looking out. The trees below him, the island, the sea, the PT boat lying at anchor off shore, he saw all of these things, but yet he did not see them.

He had found Effra and she did not remember him, did not know him. Inside of him was agony, such pain as he had never known. He felt a touch on his arm. Rozeno stood there, his face troubled. "Do you know our Effra, my son?"

"Yes."

"Do you, perhaps, love her?"

"Yes."

"And you are very unhappy because she does not respond?"

"Yes."

The old priest's face grew a little more sad. "When she landed here, the last time, she made an awkward landing. She was thrown forward and she hit her head. She does not remember anything that happened before that." Rozeno's finger bit deeply into Parker's arm. "Come now, and I will introduce you to her, as a stranger."

Bill Parker found himself being introduced to the woman he loved. "I'm sorry about my actions of a minute ago," he said. "I thought you were someone else."

The smile she gave him was forgiving but it was also cool and distant. "That's all right, Mr. Parker. I understand." Her voice went into silence as another sound came into the room. The sound of rapid gunfire.

Parker had thought he had in his pocket the only two modern weapons on the island, but somewhere in the growth of trees far below the window slot, someone was firing a sub-machine gun.

Parker raced to the slot. Below him the island lay quiet. He turned. Mercedes, her face working,

was staring at him.

"Beel—Beel—I have not told you everything! That Johnny Retch, he hire you to fly him here in 'copter, to find thees island. He also have men in boat coming. Your job, which you did not know, was to find island, then lead men in boat to it. Johnny means to take all thees." The gesture of her hand included all the treasure of Montezuma. "He have men in boat to help him take it. He does not mean to let anything stop him. Not anything!"

Parker saw what he had not seen before, that Johnny Retch was a man who would always have two strings for his bow. Too late, he saw that the boat lying at anchor was not an accident.

"I should have killed that dog when I had the chance!" he snarled.

Shambling feet sounded in the corridor outside. Pedro burst into the room. He grunted words at Ulnar.

"Pedro says men come up the ledge," Rozeno said. "They must be from the boat. We must go to meet them. It will be a great pleasure to them. Come, Ulnar. Come, Bill." He moved toward the door.

Parker was across the room in quick strides, catching Rozeno's arm. "You can't do it, Father Rozeno. Those men who are coming up the ledge mean to kill." [Pg 147]

"My son!" Hurt showed on the priest's face. "Surely you do not know what you are talking about!"

"But I do know!" Parker almost shouted the words. Quickly, desperately he tried to explain the situation to Rozeno. To his growing horror, he saw no comprehension in the old priest's eyes. Slowly Parker began to realize that this old man was so gentle and so kind himself that he could not comprehend even the thought of anyone else being—evil!

"You may stay here, if you wish, my son, but Ulnar and I will go speak to these people who are coming up the ledge. Come, Ulnar."

His face glowing at the thought of meeting new people, the priest moved from the room. Ulnar grunted once, a hot, savage sound, then followed Rozeno like a dog following its master.

Effra started to follow them.

Parker caught her arm. "Please, at least you stay here. Understand me now if you never understood me before. Is there a window slot from which the ledge can be seen?"

"Yes."

"Then take me to it. Quickly!"

From the slot, Parker could see a section of the ledge. Two men were crawling along it, advancing as cautiously as scouts trying to surprise an outpost. Parker had never seen either of them before but their faces confirmed everything Mercedes had said—they were thugs, killers. Thrusting the pistol through the slot, the pilot took careful aim, pulled the trigger.

The thunder of the gun rang through the room, echoed across the island. The bullet knocked rock chips into the face of the lead man. He recoiled as if he had been stung. The Tommy-gun in his hand spouted lead blindly at the face of the cliff. The second man spun around—began shooting blindly.

Parker moved away from the slot, listened to the rattle of the guns outside. He could distinguish the heavy thud of the Tommy-gun, the sharper crack of the carbine, but other weapons were also firing. "They've got men with high-powered rifles posted in the tree down below."

He glanced from the slot. The men had disappeared from the ledge. As he moved back, a slug whined into the room. Mercedes cowered against the wall. Effra remained cool and poised. She was looking at Parker. "Haven't I met you somewhere before?" She seemed completely unaware of the rifle bullet that had just screamed through the slot.

"I—" Parker caught himself. There was agony in him. What good would it do if she did, finally, remember who he was, who she was? What they had once been to each other? He had three old men, and two women, and himself, with which to defend Montezuma's treasure against Johnny Retch, who had a small army of trained killers at his back.

What chance did they have? Johnny Retch, even if given Montezuma's gold, would not leave anyone alive except possibly Mercedes and Effra. [Pg 148]

"Do—do you know anything we can do to stop those men?" Parker said.

Light seemed to come into Effra's eyes.

"We might—we might use the Jezbro!"

From the shelter of the trees, Johnny Retch operated like a general in charge of a force of Commandos engaged in attacking a miniature Gibraltar. He was a very deliberate general. When the first shot from a slot in the cliff had driven the two men downward, he met them at the

bottom of the ledge, a cigarette dangling from his lips, a sub-machine gun in his hands. "Okay, boys, go back on up."

"There's a guy in there with a gun," one of the two protested. "He's inside and we're outside. We're sittin' ducks for him."

"We're covering the slots with rifles in the trees."

"But—" Neither of the men wanted to go up that ledge again. They might be hardened killers but they did not like the idea of facing a gun they could not see.

"Go on back up, boys," Retch said. He lifted the muzzle of the gun he held.

"But—"

"Either go back up or you'll stay down here a long time!"

They went back up the ledge. Retch retired to the shelter of the trees and watched.

No shots came until they reached the mouth of the tunnel leading into the cliff. There, one of the men was killed. He fell backward from the ledge, screaming as he turned over and over.

The falling man broke his way through the top of a tree and sprawled thudding on the ground. He did not move after he hit. Retch did not waste a second glance on him.

Muffled but clearly audible, the blasting roar of the machine gun came from the tunnel.

"He got in," Retch said. "Okay. Two more of you go up."

Two more men went up the ledge.

The entire population of the village had gathered to watch this storming of the cliff. They regarded Retch with wonder and with awe. Some of these men had been pirates in their day, they had known how to loot a tall ship, to kill its crew, to take over any wealth and any women it happened to carry.

Watching Retch, they discovered they had been amateurs in the fine art of attacking and killing. They had needed a man from the modern world to show them how the job ought to be done. They were greatly impressed, Gotch most of all.

Waving his sword, Gotch explained what he would do to that black priest, Rozeno, and to that cowardly Indian, Ulnar. Of all the listening group, only Peg-leg protested.

"Yeah, you'll get them all right—if the Jezbro don't get you first!" Peg-leg said.

Retch overheard the words. "Come here, Peg-leg, I want to talk to you."

The old sailor stumped his way to where Retch stood.

[Pg 149]

"Aye, Cap'n." He saluted. A look of surprise appeared on the old sailor's face as the first heavy slug hit him. As the second, third, and fourth slugs hit him, the expression of surprise became one of agony. He fell without a sound.

Retch stood looking down at him.

The group was silent. Gotch hastily lowered his sword.

"I don't want to hear any more superstitious talk," Retch said. "There are a lot of funny things here on this island but there is nothing to be afraid of—except *this*!" He patted the stock of the stumpy little gun he held. "And there's enough stuff up there to make all of us rich; we'll have everything we can ever want." A glow crept into Retch's eyes as he spoke. They glowed with a yellow color and the yellow seemed to come out of his eyes and spread over his face. He glanced down at Peg-leg.

"Dump him into the sea," he said, walking away.

The two men climbing the ledge reached the opening. They stopped there and apparently held a conference with the man who was already inside. They went inside. A few minutes later, one appeared at the opening.

"You can come on up now," he yelled, waving his gun. "All secure here."

"Gotch!"

"Yes, Cap'n."

"Come on."

Gotch went up the ledge with Retch. He went in shivering fear which he tried desperately to conceal.

"What the hell are you scared of?" Retch snarled at him.

"Nuthin', nuthin', Cap'n. Nuthin'."

"You yellow-livered—" Retch stopped in midsentence. A sound was in the air, the cheeping of a sleepy bird. It was a tiny sound, fragile, distant, far-away, almost too weak to register on the ears. Hearing it, Retch jerked his eyes to the sky, seeking the source.

Gotch threw himself flat on the ledge.

"The Jezbro!" Gotch gasped. "God—God—"

Looking at the sky, Retch caught a glimpse of something moving there. It looked like a bird, but it was like no bird he had ever seen in his life. It was more like shadow—a darkness that had a darting elusive silver color about it.

Like a swooping hawk, it was diving toward the ground, aiming at the group clustered in the trees at the spot where the ledge began to rise up the face of the cliff. As it dived, the cheeping sound of a sleeping bird was becoming a flooding blast of wild harp notes.

"The Jezbro!" Gotch wailed.

The Jezbro dived at the men on the ground. They heard it, saw it; they scattered through the trees like frightened chickens fleeing from a hawk.

The Jezbro selected a victim. Retch caught a glimpse of long, cruel talons extended; saw the man grasped in them. The man screamed as the talons touched him, tried to throw himself flat, tried to jerk away from them. Huge wings fluttered, beating the air. The man did not escape. The talons held. The beating wings lifted him.

[Pg 150]

Wild notes flooded outward. There was triumph in the music now. Huge wings beat the air. The Jezbro climbed up above the trees. Held firmly in the extended talons was a fully grown man.

Watching, Johnny Retch felt panic tumble through him, panic that was like a sudden touch of an ice cold hand. They had warned him about the Jezbro. Old Peg-leg had tried to tell him. Gotch had trembled in fear. They had all insisted that there was *something* here that did not belong in the world as he knew it.

He had laughed at them, he had called them superstitious fools. To him, there was nothing that was not of this world.

Nor was there now, when the moment of wild panic had passed. As the Jezbro swept upward through the air, rising along the face of the cliff, Retch jerked up the Tommy gun.

Smoke and lead blasted from the muzzle. The Jezbro was unharmed. Taking careful aim this time, Retch fired again, a furious blast of rattling sound.

The Jezbro swerved, the harp notes missed a beat.

From the suddenly loosened talons a figure plummeted downward, screamed as it fell, stopped screaming as it crunched against the ground.

The Jezbro circled in the air. It rose upward, swooped. Huge wings flapped, a tail structure was extended. From the gaping, extended mouth, a scream arose. The Jezbro seemed to leap toward the summit of the sky.

A flash of light as brilliant as the explosion of a miniature atom bomb flared for a brief second. Thunder clapped, rolled around the horizon; echoed back. In the distance the veil that circled the island shimmered and twisted as if it was about to collapse. It righted itself.

Except for a puff of swiftly dissipating white vapor, the air was clear. Where wild harp notes had once flooded now was silence. Where a creature that had once looked like a giant bird had flapped through the air now there was nothing.

On the ledge, Johnny Retch wiped sweat from his face. From his pockets, he methodically refilled the almost empty clip of the gun. He looked down at Gotch, who was sitting up.

"You killed the Jezbro!" Gotch was whispering. His eyes were searching the sky as if he still did not believe what he had seen happen.

"Sure," Retch answered. "I don't know what the hell it was, but it could be killed. Anything can be killed, Gotch. Remember that." The sting of acid crept into his voice. "Get up. We're going on up the ledge."

"By God, Johnny, you can do anything!" Gotch spoke. He rose with suddenly renewed confidence. "Wait'll we get to them—" He looked up the ledge toward the mouth of the tunnel.

Effra was seated in the operator's chair in front of the complex control panel that resembled the key board of a strange organ. She had been watching an image move in the screen directly in front of her eyes.

[Pg 151]

This image—it had been that of a great bird—had suddenly vanished.

"The Jezbro was destroyed!" she whispered. "The core of it was struck. When that happens, the complete projection is torn to pieces!" Her face was white with strain.

Parker took his eyes off the screen where he had been watching something that he did not pretend to understand.

"Sometimes they are very difficult to control," Effra continued, her voice a whisper. "Once set in motion, they seem almost to achieve life of their own. I did not send the Jezbro against the men on the ground, I sent it against the man on the ledge, against this Retch. But—" her voice faltered.

"I saw it get away," Parker said. There was turmoil in his mind, confusion. He was in a place where miracles came to life. The secret of the ability to walk on the water lay here in this room. Effra, in swift sentences had explained to him that the men who walked on the water carried little pieces of metal in their pockets; pieces of metal which increased tremendously the surface tension of the water where they stepped on it. She had also told him that Ulnar, working this equipment, had *vondeled* his helicopter, had sent out a tiny Jezbro that had struck at the ship, wrecking it. The Jezbro, the secret of the men walking on the water, had come from this room. The striking of the Jezbro was to Ulnar the act of *vondel*. Even the veil that surrounded the island was generated here; in the power being generated in the slowly circling pool of mercury; power that was changed and modified by the other equipment.

Here was the heart and the secret of the magic of this island; here even time was set aside.

Ulnar poked at Effra, grunted harshly. "I know," the girl said quickly. "In just a minute."

Ulnar grunted again. He hovered over her like some massive brooding spirit. He was eager to get his hands on the control board but his old fingers were no longer sufficiently flexible to play on that key board the tune that had to be played.

"*Pater noster*—Our Father—" In the silence came Rozeno's voice as he knelt in prayer. Bewildered and hurt and horrified, Rozeno and Ulnar had come back into the room to find Parker and Effra and Mercedes already there. Mercedes knelt beside him.

Pedro thrust his head through the opening behind them. "Him two more men, him man that kill Jezbro, him still coming up ledge."

"That's Johnny Retch," Parker said. "He's still coming. And there are probably others already inside here, looking for us in the rooms and corridors. We've got to move, Effra."

"I know, Bill." Her fingers started toward the control board, drew back. "I called you Bill. Is that your name?"

"Yes."

"It's a nice name."

"But now we must hurry," Parker said. As he spoke, Ulnar grunted a single sound that set the girl into motion.

Her fingers went to one of the little statuettes, an eagle, a perfect thing in its way, a marvelous representation of the bird of prey. Effra had told Parker, in hasty sentences, how these images were made, deep down in the mountain, of a particular kind of metal that was almost weightless. He watched her slip the eagle into a slot, held his breath as her fingers darted across the key board.

A soft hum sounded—currents moving—a glow sprang into existence surrounding the little image. Slowly, the statuette began to glow with a silver light. The glow played over it, it shifted, changed, was one thing this instant, was something else the next instant. It looked like a moth emerging from a cocoon and becoming a butterfly. The tiny wings came free, the head moved.

The cheeping of a sleepy bird was in the room.

At the sound, a wave of cold from the deepest depths of space seemed to sweep over Parker. Here was magic beyond the comprehension of the mind. Only it wasn't magic, it was a scientific achievement of the highest caliber.

At the cheeping sound, Effra's fingers moved swiftly on the control board, playing a symphony that only she understood. The little eagle moved out of the slot, it spread its wings, they fluttered, it moved upward into the air of the room.

With each circling of the room, it grew larger. The cheeping sound became louder, there was a touch of harp music in it now. Effra's fingers moved like lightning over the control panel. The growing eagle seemed to pick up its controls, it swirled, circled, went through the open slot, went out of the room, and into the air outside. It was now the Jezbro.

Its image appeared on the screen. It shot high into the air, still growing. The scene on the screen revealed in miniature the whole island, the sea lapping its shores, the boat lying at anchor. Effra's fingers moved frantically over the controls. "This is one of the hardest things to do. They

seem to be attracted to the sun, when first released. They struggle desperately to escape into space—There! I've got it under control."

The scene changed, became a group of men climbing the ledge. Parker saw these men suddenly jerk their heads toward the sky as they became aware of the Jezbro. He could imagine the fear that was shooting through them. They had seen Johnny Retch destroy the Jezbro, only here the Jezbro was again.

From their viewpoint, it had miraculously come back to life and was diving again upon them from the sky. Guns were fired upward. But these men did not have the cool, hard nerves of Johnny Retch, did not have his shooting eye. They missed. The Jezbro dived among them.

They scattered, screaming. Two went off the ledge, three raced down it. One mounted to the sky to the triumphant harping of the Jezbro. [Pg 153]

Parker felt a wave of relief flow through him. Here in the Jezbro was actually a most potent weapon, the means of stopping an attack. "Girl! You've done it!"

A second later he caught himself. "But Johnny Retch wasn't in that bunch. He must already be inside the cliff."

A gun roared three times inside the mountain. Footsteps faltered in the corridor outside. Pedro stumbled into the room. His face was a bloody mask.

"Him men inside." As he coughed out the words, he coughed out blood—and his life. He stumbled, caught himself, stumbled again, went down the way a dead man goes down, never to rise again.

"*Qui est in Coelis*—who are in Heaven—" Rozeno's voice whispered through the room. The only sound.

Ulnar moved slowly, stood beside Pedro. They had been master and servant but in the old days they had come up out of Mexico together, guarding a treasure. Ulnar moved to the wall, took down a heavy battle axe that hung there. "Time come for me," he said. "Me go meet men as my chief went to meet Cortez!" His eyes glinted.

"Wait!" Rozeno called. The priest was on his feet. "I have resolved the conflict in my soul. There comes a time when men, even good men, must fight against the forces of evil." From the wall he took a spear.

"I'll go with you two," Parker said. "In just a moment." From his jacket, he took one of the two pistols. Silently he passed it to Effra. "As a last resort, use it."

"But, Bill, there is still time—"

Parker didn't hear her. He was moving with Rozeno and Ulnar through another opening. "At least," Rozeno was saying. "We have this advantage. We know our way around here."

They moved silently, by side passages, through the rooms. "Find Retch," Parker whispered over and over again. "He's the heart and the core of this business. With him out of the way, we can handle the others."

"Do you see anybody, Pfluger?" Retch's voice came from somewhere.

"Naw. I think I got the old gink but he ducked out of sight somewhere."

"Retch is on the other side of the corridor," Rozeno whispered. "The man who spoke last is in the next room."

They slipped to the opening, peering into the next room. A man in there was crouching against the wall and watching the opening into the corridor. At the sight of the man, Ulnar went berserk. This was the man who had killed Pedro.

A shrill battle cry peeling from his lips, massive axe uplifted, Ulnar charged through the door.

The crouching man whirled. Smoke and thunder rolled from the gun in his hand. Ulnar had taken death wounds before he was halfway across the room. But death wounds or not, he kept going.

The heavy axe came down on the head of the man who was desperately trying to fend it off. The man went down. For an instant, Ulnar's battle cry of triumph, wild and savage and fierce, roared through the honeycomb of passages, then went into silence with Ulnar, forever. [Pg 154]

"Hey, Pfluger, what the hell happened?" Retch's startled voice came.

"We've got to cross the corridor to get at him," Parker whispered. "And there are other men in here somewhere."

"Listen!" Rozeno whispered.

Voices, a babble of sound, were coming from behind them.

"The men from the village," Rozeno whispered. "When they ceased fearing the Jezbro, they found the courage to come up here."

The babble grew stronger. Running feet moved along the corridor. Retch shouted somewhere, but the words were lost.

Rising above the other sounds was the cry of a woman—Effra.

Parker cursed beneath his breath as he ran. At the side entrance to the big room where the pool of mercury turned, he stopped, appalled.

The room seemed full of men. Some of them he recognized as coming from the village, others he had never seen before. From their appearance he judged they had come in the boat. Retch was coming through the door that led into the main corridor. The gun in his hands was centered on Effra, who crouched at the key board of the vast machine. There was a smile on Retch's face.

"Parker!" Retch's voice lifted in a yell. "Parker! I've got your girl. Come on out and give yourself up or I'll let her have it."

This was his moment of triumph, this was the moment when he won his victory. Parker, peering around the edge of the doorway, knew now that he had no way to go. If he moved into the room, and tried to shoot Retch, the man would certainly kill Effra in one wild burst of slugs as he turned the gun on the pilot.

"Parker!" Retch yelled again. A smile on his face, he waited for an answer.

Effra's fingers moved on the control panel. Mercedes got slowly to her feet. The men in the room were silent, waiting for an answer to Retch's command. Parker stood just outside the door, hesitant. No matter what he did, it seemed to him that there was only one answer.

Behind Retch, coming from the corridor, something moved. At the sight of it, Parker felt a flood of biting cold surge through him.

It was a puma—a gigantic puma. In its jaws, as it swung its head from side to side, dangled the body of a man it had killed in the corridor.

It was a Jezbro puma.

Once it had been a little image in a niche beside the machine from the old time. Then life had flowed into it, its own kind of life, now it walked as a huge ravening beast through the room where once it had been a tiny image.

The first man who saw it went dead white and slumped downward in a faint. The others saw it in almost the same instant. Pandemonium swept through the room. No man's nerves were proof against such a sight as this. Screaming men were suddenly trying to fight their way out of a place that had suddenly become haunted.

[Pg 155]

The puma flowed into the room. Like Retch, it had yellow eyes. They glared now, with a burning light. There was a vague mistiness about this puma but there was also about it the appearance of solid reality.

Retch spun to face the menace coming from behind him. The gun in his hands spat flame and fury.

He had destroyed the Jezbro hawk. He would also destroy this Jezbro puma.

The puma dropped the man from its jaws. It crouched. It leaped straight at the gun spouting lead. Retch slid to one side. The puma missed. It hit the floor, slid, tried to turn as a frantic girl moved buttons on the key board.

The floor was slick, the padded feet did not grip. The tail of the sliding puma touched the pool of mercury. The tail smoked as if it was suddenly on fire.

The puma screamed. It seemed to be drawn into the pool. It was as if something in the pool caught the puma, held it, pulled it into the mercury.

It went out of sight, vanished. No puff of flame followed. The life that had animated it had come from this pool. Now the life had returned to its source.

The dazed Retch lowered his smoking gun.

Parker moved silently forward.

"Lay down the gun, Johnny Retch!" he said.

Retch seemed to stiffen. His back was to Parker. He did not attempt to turn.

"You called for me," Parker said. "Here I am. Drop the gun!"

Retch snarled, spun, dropping flat as he turned. His eyes were narrowed. They glared at Parker like twin flames of yellow hate. He tried to bring up the gun.

Something came through the air, something that he did not see. It grabbed his arms, clutched them with a fierce grip, screamed at him. Mercedes!

Retch, with one savage thrust, flung her aside. Again the two yellow eyes glared at Parker as

Retch brought up the weapon that he held.

"You haven't licked me yet!" Retch screamed.

The gun in Parker's hand exploded.

Suddenly Retch had three eyes. One of them was in the middle of his forehead. It was round and blue.

He stood for a second, transfixed. Something had happened to him. He did not know exactly what it was. He had come here seeking Montezuma's treasure. He had it in the reach of his hand. But something had happened to him. What it was he did not quite know. Something—

He tried to lift the gun he held. His hands would not obey him. Or perhaps the gun had suddenly grown too heavy for him to lift. He could not raise it.

The yellow light in his eyes did not change. But suddenly he collapsed, went down, did not move.

Even after he was on the floor, his eyes remained fixed on Parker, glaring, yellow. Then, little by little, the yellow flames began to go out.

[Pg 156]

In the silence were two sounds. The first, Mercedes, whispering. "'Ave I paid my debt, Beel? I tried."

"You have paid it," Parker said.

The other sound was that of the old priest beginning the prayers for the dying. He had laid aside his spear. Now he was kneeling again, his voice lifting as he prayed even for those who had misused him.

Then there was another sound, voices shouting in the distance. The men who had run from this room were trying to regain their courage, trying to find the will to come back again.

Parker moved to the girl who sat at the key board.

"Effra, my dear, if you would—"

Catching his idea, she nodded. Her fingers lifted the image of an alligator from its niche.

Parker saw the 'gator waddle from this room of mystery and of magic, from this room of lost science, from this forgotten laboratory of a vanished race.

After the alligator, went a jungle cat, full of spit and scratch and the sounds of fury. After the cat went a jaguar, black, fanged, also with yellow eyes.

In the corridors the screaming stopped. Parker, listening, shuddered. He was glad he was not out in one of those corridors; one of the men who had tried to steal the treasure of Montezuma, one of the men who had followed Johnny Retch. Hell was walking through those tunnels—hell in the form of an alligator; hell in the form of a jungle cat; hell in the form of a jaguar with yellow eyes.

From the window slot, Parker watched men swarm out of the cliff. Some found the small boats, pushed out in them to the PT boat. Others swam. A jaguar went along the shoreline screeching at them. A jungle cat spat at them from the edge of the water.

On the boat, the anchors were hastily cast off. Powerful motors growled. Gathering speed, leaving a growing wake behind it, the boat drove itself into the veil, went out of sight.

Parker went back to the girl at the key board.

Her eyes came up to him. "Hello, Bill," she said.

"Effra?" he whispered.

"As I was sitting here, I remembered who you were—and who I am—Bill—Bill—" She came into his arms.

Hours later, on a balcony in front of one of the window slots, they still stood very close together. Rozeno and Mercedes were with them. Rozeno was speaking.

"Do you think, my son, that you can go out into the world, and contact the great men of this time, and bring them here one by one, so that we may build in this secure spot a group from which the lines of progress can flow out to all men in all the corners of the earth?"

"I can, Father," Parker answered.

"Unto all men—" Rozeno's lips moved in prayer. "Unto all men—"

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SINISTER PARADISE ***

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