

GIMLET TAKES A JOB

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



Gimlet's toughest appointment

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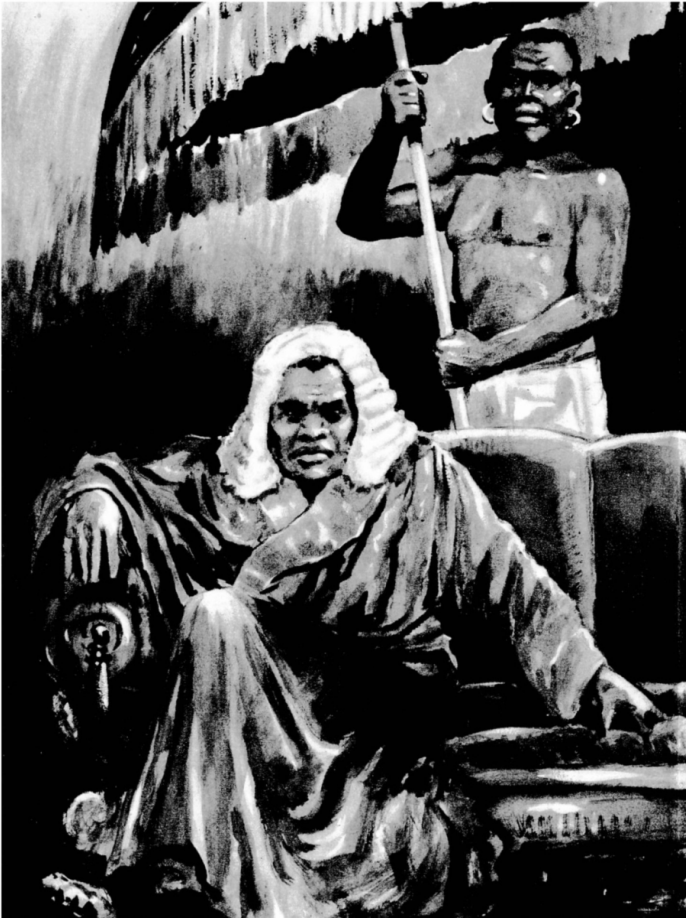
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There, on an old-fashioned horse-hair sofa, sat Mr. Jabez Christian ([page 29](#))

*GIMLET
TAKES A JOB*

Captain W. E. Johns

*Illustrated by
Leslie Stead*

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*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary
and have no relation to any living person*

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Illustrations

FRONTISPIECE

*There, on an old-fashioned horse-hair sofa,
sat Mr. Jabez Christian*

FACING PAGE [32](#)

'Let him go,' ordered Gimlet

FACING PAGE [96](#)

Sick with loathing, Cub set it free

FACING PAGE [160](#)

*Copper was walking with slow deliberate steps
towards the hole in the wall*

CHAPTER 1

The job

IT was at their annual reunion luncheon that Captain Lorrington King, D.S.O., one time ‘Gimlet’ of the celebrated commando troop known as King’s ‘Kittens’, broke the news of his appointment to the three surviving members of his force with whom he had never lost contact—and had, in fact, undertaken several official missions of a secret nature. They were ex-corporal ‘Copper’ Collson, six foot two of bone and muscle and three times heavyweight champion of the Metropolitan Police—hence his nickname; ‘Trapper’ Troublay, a French Canadian backwoods trapper before the war had brought him to Europe, his face still showing the scars of a hand-to-claw fight with a grizzly; and Nigel Peters, better known in the troop of which he was the junior member, as ‘Cub’.

Naturally, for a while the talk had been of ‘old times’, and exploits of a character so desperate that Cub sometimes wondered if they had really happened. It was when Copper observed heavily that they were now respectable citizens in civvy street, and the good old days were gone for good, that Gimlet dropped his bomb.

‘As a matter of fact,’ he remarked, stirring his coffee pensively, ‘I’ve just taken a job.’

There was a short silence. Everyone stared at him as if the words were not fully comprehended. Then on Copper’s face dawned an expression of frank incredulity. ‘You, skipper? A job? That’s a good ’un. Fancy you clocking in and out. Ha!’

‘It’s unlikely that I shall do any clocking,’ said Gimlet shortly.

‘Don’t say you’re going into Parliament.’

‘No.’

‘Been gambling and lost all your money, mebbe.’

‘I’m quite still independent financially, thank you.’

‘Then what’s the idea? My old Ma used to say nobody’d work if they didn’t ’ave to, and I’ve always reckoned she was about right.’

‘The government has just appointed me Governor of the island of Santelucia.’

‘Never ’eard of it.’

‘Neither had I until the other day. I imagine few people have heard of it. There’s been no reason why they should. Santelucia is one of several hundred islands belonging to us in the West Indies.’

‘What about your ’unting and shootin’?’

‘There’s a chance that there may be both on Santelucia. But the hunting won’t be for foxes and the shooting won’t be at pheasants.’

‘Ah!’ breathed Cooper. ‘Now I get it. Want any ’elp, sir?’

‘Yes, I shall almost certainly need some help,’ answered Gimlet. ‘I intended to ask you fellows if you’d care to come along. Officially I’m entitled to a personal assistant, a valet and a cook. How do you feel, corporal, about taking over the cook-house?’

Copper looked pained. ‘Me? Cooking? At my time o’ life? I can open a tin o’ bully with me teeth and knock up a dixy o’ tea, but that’s about all the cooking I’ve done.’

Gimlet smiled. ‘Don’t worry. These appointments are in name only. What I shall really need is someone I can trust to help me hold down a job from which efforts may be made to remove me.’

‘That sounds better,’ declared Copper, taking his coffee at a gulp. ‘How about giving us the low-down, sir.’

‘I’ll tell you as much as I know myself, which isn’t much, if you’ll refrain from firing questions at me until I’ve finished,’ agreed Gimlet. ‘While I’m talking you’ll wonder why the government doesn’t send an armed force to the island, so I might as well give you the answer to that now. The business must be handled quietly, so the fewer the people who know about it the better. Publicity might result in trouble on some of the other islands. Accusations would certainly be flung at us by the people who are always on the look-out for an excuse to howl about the high-handed methods of British Imperialism. In the old days, the job I’ve been asked to do would have been simplicity itself. The Navy would have landed a party of marines who would have wasted no time putting an end to any nonsense. But, unfortunately you may think, those days are past. The new idea is to appoint a committee to solve these problems.’

‘To do a lot of talking and get nowhere!’ Copper sniffed.

‘Just so. In this case the government has decided to do the job itself, quietly and without any fuss.’

‘Kid glove stuff, eh?’

‘That’s the intention, although whether or not it will work out that way in practice remains to be seen. Now let me tell you what it’s all about. According to the book, Santelucia is a tropic island twenty miles long by about twelve wide. Like many other islands in the region it is actually the crater of an extinct volcano. From the sea it rises sharply on all sides to a central cone-shaped mountain four thousand feet high. The top is hollow and filled with water. At least, it was. Things may have changed, for there’s no record of anyone going to the top for the last hundred years. The lower slopes are virgin forest, and that, in the West Indies, usually means almost impenetrable jungle. The trees thin out on the higher slopes. The top is bare rock—probably lava. The whole island is surrounded by a reef on which many ships have been lost. There’s only one known opening through it, and a dangerous one at that; which explains why the island has been so long neglected. Ships of any size keep clear. Opposite the opening, some distance up the hillside, is Rupertston, the capital, a miserable affair named after that swashbuckling pirate, Prince Rupert, who is said to have used the place. Rupertston is, in fact, the only town—if it can be called a town. A path leads up to it. There isn’t a road on the island. However, there’s a Government House, a courthouse, a jail, and an old fort built by Prince Rupert to guard the anchorage in the days when everybody fought everybody and buccaneers fought the lot. Incidentally, there’s an aspect of the reef, and the town in relation to it, that affects us. It’s the only place where a landing can be made.’

‘So anyone landing has to go ashore in full view of everybody,’ remarked Copper shrewdly. ‘No commando stuff from landing craft.’

‘Exactly. Just how many people there are on the island no one knows, for owing to the complete absence of communications it has been impossible to take a census. The number is reckoned to be about a thousand. The population is almost entirely negro, with a few mulattoes, descendants of slaves who escaped from plantations on the mainland, or perhaps went there when the slaves were liberated. There are no whites—I mean, real whites. At one time, up to fifty years ago, there were some white colonists engaged in the then prosperous sugar trade, but these have faded out since a great hurricane ruined them. The island is, I may say, smack in the middle of the hurricane belt, and over and over again crops and buildings have been blown flat.’

‘What language do the people speak?’ asked Cub.

‘Apparently a queer sort of gibberish that is mostly old-fashioned English. Originally the island belonged to Spain. The Dutch took it from

them. France took it from Holland, but they lost it to us during the Napoleonic wars. This sort of chopping and changing in the West Indies went on for hundreds of years. Why there should have been any fuss over Santelucia is hard to see, because the island was never any real use to anybody; but then, in the old days, people fought for the sheer devilment of it.'

'And loot,' put in Cub.

Gimlet smiled. 'Quite right. As you say, and loot. When the sugar business declined a few people took to fruit growing—they say the bananas are enormous—but there was no transport to take the produce to market so there was soon an end to that. The negroes that remained were a poor, impoverished lot, and it was in the hope of brightening their lives that Queen Victoria appointed the first resident commissioner. Some money was spent on buildings and equipment but it all came to nothing. You can't help people who won't help themselves. Now let us come to more recent times.

'During the war, when food productive land of any sort became valuable, the government decided to have another go at Santelucia. It could, at least, they thought, produce much-needed sugar. They did up the government buildings and appointed a man on the spot, a negro who appeared to be more intelligent than most, to the post of Special Commissioner. He was paid a salary and given some money to set things going. It's always a dangerous thing to put power in the hands of people who aren't used to it, and so it was in this case. It seems that all the Special Commissioner did was throw his weight about. His name, by the way, is Christian—Jabez Christian. Learning what was going on the government sacked him and sent out a white man, a civil servant named Copland, to put the place in order. Copland, and the two white servants he took with him, died within six months. This was discovered when a naval frigate called with fresh supplies. Not only was Copland dead, but Christian was back in his old job, living in the Government House. He said he had taken over to keep order, and to the skipper of the frigate that didn't sound unreasonable, although he reported a funny atmosphere about the place. Of course, the Colonial Office was not prepared to accept this state of affairs, so they sent out another man, a retired army colonel named Baker—a D.S.O. holder who had served in Jamaica and knew how to handle blacks. His job was to give Christian twelve months wages in lieu of notice and take over from him. Baker took four men with him. Nothing has been seen or heard of any of them since they landed; but a mulatto, bribed to talk, told the captain of a supply ship a grim story of a white man, out of his mind, wandering about on the island.'

‘What about this swiipe Christian?’ asked Copper.

‘He was back in the Government House, still keeping things in order.’

‘Well strike me pink! He’s got a nerve.’

‘If you think so now, you’ll think more so when I tell you the rest,’ resumed Gimlet. ‘It had become obvious to the government that there was something sinister behind this business when an incident occurred that threw the monkey wrench into the gears. Christian, having once been boss of the island, evidently intends to stay boss—if he can. But the other day he went too far, and if anything was needed to expedite his departure from office, this was it. He actually had the brass-faced audacity to levy harbour dues on a Norwegian tanker that ran in for shelter during a storm. And, moreover, he got them.’

Copper looked astonished. ‘You mean, the skipper paid up?’

‘He had to.’

‘Why did he have to?’

‘Because Christian’s special police—apparently he now runs a private police force—had the impudence to arrest four of the sailors who had gone ashore to stretch their legs and collect some fresh fruit and vegetables. Christian held them on a trumped-up charge of attempting to steal fruit. Absolute rot, of course. What could the skipper do? He couldn’t leave his men behind and he couldn’t start a war on a British island. So he paid up and the men were released.’

‘How much did he pay?’ asked Cub.

‘Fifty pounds.’

Copper whistled. ‘Strewth! That was piling it on.’

‘Yes, and a queer point arises there,’ asserted Gimlet. ‘What did Christian want the money for? Money has practically no value on the island for the simple reason there’s nothing worth buying. Anyhow, there’s nothing Christian couldn’t get merely for the asking. But never mind that. Naturally, when the skipper got home he lost no time in making a complaint. The government has refunded the money and promised to see that it doesn’t happen again.’ Gimlet smiled grimly. ‘I’ve been offered the job of Governor to see that it doesn’t. When I go I shall carry authority to kick Christian out and take over. I shall also do what I can to bring prosperity to the place—if that’s possible. I can have anything I need, within reason.’

‘How do we get there?’ asked Cub.

‘By boat in the ordinary way to Port of Spain, in Trinidad. There a sloop will pick us up and take us, with our kit and food stores, to Rupertston. We

shall have wireless. The previous people didn't have it, which was a pity, or we might have known what went wrong. If my report is favourable the government will make a grant of money, tools and equipment, in the hope of putting the place on a self-supporting footing. A regular steamer would be laid on. I have no doubt this rogue Christian will try to make himself awkward. If he does, he'll find we can be awkward, too.'

'My oath, he will and all,' muttered Copper.

'What about the people?' asked Cub. 'Do they support this black boss?'

'That's something we don't know. The two white governors ceased to function before they had time to render a report. It was six months before the vessel that took them there went back. Well, there it is. We'll get to the bottom of the business. The problem wasn't one that could be worked out in Whitehall.'

'Where do we live when we get there?' inquired Cub.

'In the Government House, of course.'

'If Christian is in he'll probably jib at being turfed out.'

'He can jib as much as he likes, but out he'll go.'

'Too blinkin' true he will,' growled Copper. 'Am I right, Trapper old pal?'

Trapper clicked his tongue, Indian fashion, as was his habit. 'Every time, chum,' he agreed softly.

'Just one last thing, corporal,' said Gimlet. 'Treat yourself to a good hair cut before we start. Better bring a pair of scissors with you, too. There are no barbers on Santelucia.'

'Aye-aye, sir,' said Copper cheerfully, winking at Cub.

CHAPTER 2

Santelucia

CUB'S first sight of Santelucia, which occurred nearly a month later, produced a sensation of pleasurable anticipation. There was no thought of actual danger in his head, although he realized that there might be some bad feeling at first between them and the self-appointed Commissioner. From the outset he had regarded the project in the light of a holiday, and an unusual one at that, with all expenses paid and a salary into the bargain. It was the same with all of them if the many conversations about the place were any guide. The grasping negro who had made it clear that he was reluctant to abandon his position of authority had not been forgotten; but at worst he was considered in the light of no more than a potential nuisance. After all, reasoned Cub, this was the twentieth century, and the days of petty tyrants were over. Not guessing how soon his judgment was to be proved wrong it was with confidence and content that he leaned on the rail of the sloop that had brought them from Trinidad, watching the island draw nearer.

From the sea, as it lay basking in the blazing white light of the torrid sun, it looked all that a tropic isle can be. In every way it came up to his expectations. Looking over the belt of white foam that marked the encircling reef, it appeared to rise languidly from placid water that could boast every shade of blue from palest turquoise to deepest ultramarine. Beyond the sea, the luxuriant vegetation that enveloped the island like a cloak, was every imaginable variation of green. A network of mangroves was almost black. Patches of sugar cane were of an emerald green so vivid as to appear unreal. Palms were everywhere; coconut palms, cabbage palms, and mighty royal palms that burst their drooping feathery fronds high in the air like green rockets. Only the central peak, to which clung a wisp of cloud left by the trade wind, looked harsh and mysterious. Shadowy ravines scored its flanks.

As the sloop carrying them and their belongings closed the distance it became possible to see the place in more detail. Bright spots of colour marked flaming poinciana trees, golden cassia and crimson hibiscus. In a word, here nature had done its best to create the fairyland of the old storytellers.

There on the hillside, with its crazy path winding up to it, was the huddle of multi-coloured houses that could only be Rupertston. Above the roofs, a Union Jack, looking somewhat incongruous, fluttered in the breeze. From about the middle rose the squat tower of the church. A little to one side, crowning a bluff just as Cub had imagined it, was Prince Rupert's fort, its crumbling walls, grey with age, softened by moss, lichen and shrubs, that had got a foothold where storming parties had failed. The advance of the jungle brigade is slow, but it always wins in the end, pondered Cub.

The run through the opening in the reef was a hair-raising affair, an undertaking not to be attempted without a pilot who knew the water. Cub had thought their own pilot, a brown-skinned Hercules, had made rather a business of the approach. Now he understood. For perhaps a minute, on all sides the water boiled and foamed, jagged rocks snarling in the glittering spray; then they were through, with the turmoil behind them and the sloop gliding over calm water, presently to drop anchor near a broad shelf of rock on which half a dozen negroes were standing. There was no wharf, or pier, so a boat was lowered and the new Governor's party were rowed ashore. The boat at once turned about to fetch the considerable quantity of luggage and stores.

The interval while they were waiting gave them an opportunity to look for the first time at some of the residents. The experience was not encouraging. In fact, it was very much the reverse. Without giving the matter serious thought, in a vague way Cub had imagined there would be a cheerful greeting, possibly an official welcome. There was nothing of the sort. The men did not even move, but stood staring with dull eyes and expressionless faces. They might have been animals.

Cub thought never in his life had he seen such a dirty, miserable, impoverished bunch of human beings. Indeed, he was slightly shocked to discover that men could sink so low anywhere on earth, much less where the Flag flew. Savages he had seen, but they were at least alive. These wretched creatures looked half dead. One was suffering from a skin disease. To say they were dressed in rags would be to pay them a compliment. They were clad in the remnants of rags, and filthy rags at that, which would have been better discarded altogether. He could not imagine any reason why they should be in such a deplorable state. It could not be hunger that ailed them, for there were fish in the sea, and on land an abundance of fruit and vegetables that flourished even without cultivation. He gave it up, glad that arrangements had been made for ratings to carry their stuff up the hill. The wretched creatures standing there looked incapable of physical effort.

He glanced at the others. Gimlet, frowning, seemed puzzled. Trapper's face expressed a mixture of disgust and pity. Copper's expression was one of frank bewilderment. He scratched his head. Then, seeing Cub looking at him he observed: 'Strike old Riley! If this is a sample of what we've come to take care of this is going to be no beano. Fair give yer the creeps, don't they? Where are these hula-hula girls with their ukuleles we always see at the pictures? Don't tell me they've been kiddin' me all me life. What's the matter with 'em?'

Gimlet answered. 'Get rid of any idea that this is a comedy, corporal. These men are scared stiff of something. But we shall have plenty of time presently to talk about that.'

The luggage, which made a formidable pile, for it included radio equipment, a freezing machine, spare clothes and a considerable weight of food, was now ashore, and the sailors were sorting their loads when down the path from the town came three figures so fantastic that Copper let out a guffaw. 'This looks more like it, chum,' he told Cub confidentially.

Cub did not answer. He was staring saucer-eyed at a spectacle he had never expected to see outside a stage burlesque.

One of the new arrivals, apparently the leader as he marched in front of his two companions, was a tall mulatto. He was in uniform. From where, or how, he had obtained it, was a matter for speculation. Certainly no white man could have imagined, much less designed, anything so ludicrous. The tunic, cut like an old-fashioned frock coat, was scarlet, laced with broad gold braid and studded with large gilt buttons. Enormous upturned epaulettes shed more gold on the shoulders. The trousers were sky blue with an orange stripe. Lank black hair hung from below a plumed hat. The man wore nothing on his feet, but they had been painted white above the ankles, presumably to represent spats. A sabre hung from his side, and a gold (or brass) ring from one ear.

But in spite of this absurd get-up it was the man's face that held Cub's attention. It was long, cadaverous and pock-marked. From it sprang a great hooked nose. Black eyes peered suspiciously from under bushy brows. Round a wide thin mouth, furnished with yellow teeth like fangs, hung a greasy black moustache. Never in all his life had Cub seen a face so stamped with villainy. A man can look repulsive without being a villain; and a man can look a villain without being repulsive. This man was both. From the first moment he saw him Cub was never in any doubt about that. The impression of wickedness destroyed any humour in the outrageous uniform as far as he was concerned. The man, he thought, not unnaturally, was Christian. But in this he was mistaken. The two followers, both full-blooded negroes, also

wore garish uniforms, several sizes too small; but they were not to be compared with that of their leader. Over their shoulders they carried rifles.

Happening to look round Cub noticed that the six original spectators had gone—or perhaps it would be more correct to say faded away, for he had not seen them go.

In an expectant silence the mulatto strode up to Gimlet, apparently having the wit to realize that he was in charge of the landing party. ‘What you do? What you come for?’ he demanded, in a peremptory tone of voice.

Gimlet’s piercing blue eyes bored into those of the questioner until, after a flicker, they turned away, stared out of countenance. ‘Who are you?’ he asked curtly.

‘I am General Pedro,’ was the startling reply. ‘Have you permission to land here?’

Gimlet ignored the question. ‘May I ask what army you command?’

‘The army of Santelucia.’

‘Very well,’ returned Gimlet in a brittle voice. ‘The army is now disbanded. Get out of my way and out of that uniform.’ He turned to the sailors who were grinning in delight at this unexpected entertainment. ‘All right. That’s enough,’ he said sternly. ‘Pick up those loads and let’s get along.’

Cub was not grinning. The hate and venom on the General’s face sent a chill down his spine. The idea that this was going to be a holiday received its first set-back.

As the sailors picked up their loads the General stepped into the path as if he intended to bar their way.

Said Gimlet crisply: ‘Listen to me, my fine fellow. If you’re not out of my sight in two minutes, and out of that uniform by the time I reach the town, I’ll have you clapped in gaol, you insolent rascal.’

For a moment the General stared, his jaw sagging as if he couldn’t believe his ears. Then, with a signal to his men, he turned about and set off up the path.

‘That skrimshanker ought to be in gaol, anyway,’ muttered Copper. ‘I’ve seen blokes with mugs like that down the East India Docks. Becha he’s got a razor up his sleeve.’

‘Not so much talking,’ said Gimlet. ‘Let’s move off. I have a feeling we aren’t welcome and it may take us a little while to get things straight.’

The party started up the hill.

‘How about getting our guns out, sir,’ suggested Copper. ‘Those stinkers have got rifles. They might go off.’

‘It’s a bit early to talk of shooting,’ answered Gimlet. ‘We should be able to manage without anything like that. We’ll give it a try.’

‘I’d sleep better o’ nights if that human rainbow was under the daisies,’ whispered Copper to Cub, as they went on.

The path was partly loose stones, and, in the steeper places, steps, worn by the tread of many feet over the years. Sometimes it traversed an open glade, but more often it ran through forest, the nature of which Cub could now judge properly for the first time. The prospect of trying to force a passage through it appalled him. Yet here it was near the track. The track obviously took the easiest route. What, he wondered, must the untouched parts of the forest be like? Bamboos and tree-ferns ran riot with creepers and parasites. There were enormous trees the names of which he did not know, with octopus-like roots sprawling above ground and trunks like columns supported by the rudders of ships. Over and through the tangle coiled and twisted in great loops the inevitable lianas. Underfoot were layers of dead leaves. The sticky humid air reeked of rotting vegetation. He had seen tropical forests before, but even those of the notorious Amazon Basin^[1] were no worse than this. The ants were just as numerous, and as busy.

^[1] See *Gimlet Off The Map*.

The climb to the town was a matter of perhaps three hundred feet, but by the time they were there, fit as he was, sweat was pouring down his face. There was no sign of ‘General’ Pedro and his army.

The path ended in what he took to be the town square. Dusty and littered with garbage it lay silent under the blazing sun. There was not a soul in sight. The only things that moved were some scrawny fowls that scratched amongst the rubbish. Two ancient cannon, red with dust, pointed towards the sea. Rust-corroded cannon balls lay near.

One side of the square was open and overlooked the anchorage. Two sides and part of the third were occupied by patchwork ramshackle houses so dilapidated that Cub marvelled that they could look so romantic from a distance. The last part of the square was taken up by a graveyard, so overgrown that had it not been for mouldering wooden crosses, most of them awry, it would not have been recognized as such. Behind stood the

little wooden church, pathetic in its drab decay. It looked tired, listless, hopeless, dejected, as if its efforts had been in vain. It was hard to believe that in the days of the island's prosperity ladies and gentlemen in silk and satin had worshipped there.

There was about the whole place an atmosphere of squalor, of sloth, of degradation. And there was something else, something which Cub found was not easy to define. There was a faint unpleasant smell—but it was not that. Then, suddenly, he got it. It was evil. What could be evil about the place he did not know, but he could sense it; a brooding, furtive wickedness which, with their arrival, had hidden under those shapeless roofs. But it could not conceal its presence. He turned away with a spasm of revulsion. Something horrible, he felt sure, had happened there.

The Union Jack, limp now the breeze was dying with the day, showed them the position of the Government House. Strictly speaking it was a bungalow. A single-storied building of wooden construction, it was, Cub was pleased to note as they walked towards it, in better repair than the rest, although not by any stretch of the imagination could it have been described as attractive. Victorian in design, apart from some ornate features that served no useful purpose, cheapness had clearly been the orders to the builder. There was no time to dwell on this, however, for on a broad verandah that fronted the structure, and to which access was gained by a flight of worm-eaten steps, a military parade had been prepared. It comprised General Pedro and no fewer than eight soldiers, armed with a variety of obsolete weapons—presumably the Santelucian army.

But what a change had come over the General. Gone was his arrogance and surliness. Sweeping off his plumed hat he smiled, and bowed low. 'Welcome to Santelucia,' he cried, in a strident voice.

Gimlet, who, of course, was not deceived by this hypocrisy, ignored the salutation. 'I thought I told you to take that uniform off,' he said coldly. 'Because you don't know me I'll give you another chance; but mark my words, when you do know me you'll realize I mean what I say. Is Mr. Christian here?'

The smile had vanished from the General's face long before Gimlet had finished speaking. Scowling, he waved a hand towards the door.

Gimlet turned to the sailors. 'All right, you boys. Dump the stuff on the verandah and get back to the ship. The skipper is anxious to get through the reef on the tide.'

The men obeyed the order, saluted and departed. For some time their laughter could be heard as they went down the path.

Followed by the others Gimlet went through the open doorway. It opened into a room of some size furnished in the ponderous style of the Victorian era. A picture of Queen Victoria hung in a cheap frame over the mantelpiece. Cub wasted no time looking at it, for there, on an old-fashioned horse-hair sofa under a red umbrella held by a negro, sat Mr. Jabez Christian. His one garment was a white-spotted heavy silk dressing-gown. On his head was a judicial wig.

As no information had been available concerning the man's appearance Cub was prepared for almost anything. But not for what he now saw. At his best a negro can be good-looking, and a fine figure of a man. Jabez Christian was the worst type; indeed, worse than the worst Cub had ever seen. Never had a human being of any race filled him with such loathing. Never, he thought, had a man been so inappropriately named.

Christian was, as far as it was possible to judge, between fifty and sixty years of age. His face was heavily jowled. Dull bloodshot eyes and thick pendulous lips suggested dissipation—probably alcoholic. His flesh, what could be seen of it, hung loosely on a frame that might once have been powerful, but was now a wreck. His nose was so flat that it merged into his cheeks, and might have been overlooked but for gaping nostrils. All this made him to Cub a veritable nightmare, a caricature of a man. His pose and expression were of such pompousness that in different circumstances he would have been funny. Such was the man they had come to discharge from his office; and not before time, thought Cub.

‘Mr. Christian?’ questioned Gimlet, crisply.

‘Yaas,’ drawled the self-appointed commissioner.

‘My name is King,’ stated Gimlet. ‘Her Majesty’s Government has appointed me Governor of Santelucia. You will therefore vacate these premises immediately. Later you will furnish me with an explanation of how you dare to come in here without permission. Certain other matters will have to be explained, too. Here is my authority.’ He handed the negro a sheet of paper.

Christian took it like a man in a dream. His eyes never left Gimlet’s face. It seemed to fascinate him. ‘You stay here, huh?’ he said in a hoarse voice.

‘Yes.’

‘Santelucia bad place for white men.’

‘When I need your advice I’ll ask for it. Meanwhile, remove yourself, taking with you any personal property you may have here. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, and to the people here.’

Somewhat to Cub's surprise Christian rose heavily from his seat. He had been prepared for protest, and, since he had seen the army, perhaps violence.

'Dis is not a place for white men,' muttered Christian thickly. 'You be sorry you came.'

'Is that a threat?' asked Gimlet sternly.

'No, sir. I tell de truth.'

'It will pay you to do so with me,' said Gimlet. 'Your co-operation with me will be more to your advantage than opposition. Tell this man Pedro he won't be needed any more, and let the people know I'll speak to them at nine o'clock to-morrow morning. Leave that wig behind. It doesn't belong to you.'

Christian threw the wig on the floor, revealing a bald pate, and walked past them to the door. On the verandah he could be heard muttering with Pedro.

Gimlet turned to the others. 'Start to get the stuff unpacked,' he ordered. 'Cub, get the radio assembled. Corporal, get the camp kit put up. I hate the idea of sleeping here before the place has been scrubbed down with disinfectant but we'd better have a roof over our heads. To-morrow we'll take on some staff. Trapper, see what you can do in the food line. Don't try anything ambitious until we see what sort of state the kitchen quarters are in. Manage with the Primus. Lamps can wait until to-morrow. Candles will give as much light as we shall need to-night.'

'Queer set-up, sir,' remarked Copper.

'Very queer indeed,' agreed Gimlet. 'I'm wondering where his lordship got that dressing-gown. He didn't buy it. For one thing it would cost a lot of money, and for another, that particular garment is made by only one firm in the world, and that's in Paris. But let's get on and make the most of daylight.'

They went about their separate tasks.

For some time Christian, Pedro and his men, were there, moving their property, mostly clothes, with Copper keeping a watchful eye on them to make sure they didn't take anything on the inventory of the house; for the furniture was, of course, government property. Gimlet was making himself acquainted with the building.

There was only one incident. Pedro, carrying out the umbrella, knocked from the sideboard one of those old-fashioned stand-up pictures with the frame covered in red velvet—very much faded. The subject was Queen Victoria and her children. He would have left it on the floor where it had

fallen, but Copper touched him on the arm. 'Ain't you forgot something, mate?' he asked quietly.

Pedro glowered.

Copper pointed at the photograph. 'Pick it up.'

Pedro didn't move.

'I said pick it up,' repeated Copper, in a voice ominously calm, 'and be careful 'ow you do it, because if you break the glass you're going to eat it, bit by bit,' he concluded.

Pedro stooped, picked up the frame, and almost threw it on the sideboard. Had he left matters there all might have been well, but his suppressed fury getting the better of his discretion, he spat at it.

The result must have surprised him, although it surprised neither Cub nor Trapper, who were there. Copper's fist flew out. Pedro's plumed headpiece took flight as the fist met his chin with a sound like a chopper falling across a stick. He himself hurtled across the floor until he was halted by the wall. He lay still.

Turning to two of the soldiers who happened to be there Copper barked, 'Take him outside.'

The soldiers, eyes rolling, obeyed with alacrity.

'Time somebody took 'im in hand,' murmured Copper without emotion, as he resumed his work.

Cub noticed that the first valise he unpacked was the one containing their guns and the cartridge magazine. Copper tested the mechanism of each gun carefully, loaded it, and put them together in a convenient drawer.

When darkness fell the only people in the Government House were its lawful tenants. It came with the usual tropical suddenness, and within a few minutes fireflies were waltzing against a coal-black background. Cub closed the door, locked it, and stuck two candles on the table. He lit them and drew the threadbare velvet curtains. Trapper produced plates of sliced bully, biscuits, pickles, butter and a pot of jam.

For a little while they discussed their hostile reception which, said Gimlet, did not particularly surprise him. It was suspected that something was radically wrong on the island: that was why he had been sent. The behaviour of the people they had so far encountered, and the absence of the general population, confirmed the government's suspicions.

A little later, somewhere in the darkness outside, a drum began to beat. *Tumatum-tum-tum, tumatum-tum-tum. . . .*

Presently it was answered by another, in the distance.

The drumming continued monotonously, the beats unchanging.

At last Copper said: 'If that's their idea of music while you work, I don't like it.'

'Those drums are talking,' said Gimlet.

'About us?'

'Probably.'

'If they're going to keep that up all night it'll get on my nerves,' put in Cub.

'That, no doubt, is the intention,' answered Gimlet dryly. 'I'm afraid we made a bad start, but it couldn't be prevented. Whatever we had done we should have made enemies of these puffed-up rascals who have been having things their own way for too long. They won't pack up without a kick, we may be sure of that. To-morrow we'll hear what the people have to say about it.'

'If there are any,' said Cub. 'The place looked dead to me.'

'Don't worry; there are people here,' asserted Gimlet. 'Christian, I fancy, has got them where he wants them. We'll see if he can keep them there.'

Outside, the drums rolled on with the precision of automatic machines.
Tumatum-tum-tum, tumatum-tum-tum.

CHAPTER 3

A visitor tells a tale

AN hour later they were still talking, for the night was sultry and no one felt like sleep. The drums were still making the air vibrate with their unending rhythmic beat, sometimes rising sometimes falling, when on a window pane came an urgent tapping. The sound, brittle and compelling, breaking through the drumbeats, brought them all to their feet.

‘Did you lock the door, Cub?’ asked Gimlet tersely.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Corporal, go and see who it is. Be careful!’

‘Aye-aye, sir.’

A quick step took Copper to the drawer where he had put the guns. With one in his hand he strode to the door.

With a quick movement Gimlet snuffed the candles.

Copper started to open the door. Instantly it was flung back in his face from outside, and with a shuddering gasp a figure sprawled into the room. Copper was on it in a flash, holding it down. ‘No you don’t, my beauty,’ he growled.

As a match flared in Gimlet’s fingers, Cub jumped to the door and locked it. The candles were lighted and they saw what had entered.

It was a white man who kept muttering over and over again in hysterical repetition: ‘Thank God you’ve come! Thank God you’ve come!’

‘All right, Corporal. Let him go,’ ordered Gimlet. ‘Cub, fetch the brandy from the medicine chest.’ Then, to the man, trenchantly: ‘Stop that noise.’

Although Copper had released him, for a minute the man remained on his knees, panting, gibbering, obviously in an extremity of terror. Gimlet pulled him to his feet and thrust a glass into a hand that so shook that some of the contents were thrown out. ‘Drink it,’ said Gimlet. ‘Trapper, a fresh pot of coffee and make it snappy.’



'Let him go,' ordered Gimlet ([page 36](#))

The man who now stood before them, still shaken by great sobs, was young; perhaps in the late twenties. He was emaciated as if in the final phase of a wasting disease. His face was ghastly, his eyes deeply sunken. Long hair was plastered from his head to a tangle of scrubby beard. His legs and bare arms were spotted with jungle sores. His only garments, a shirt and shorts, were torn and stiff with mud. Toes protruded from what had once been a pair of tennis shoes.

Gimlet steered him to a chair into which he flopped like an empty sack. Gradually the sobs subsided, although the man continued to suck his breath in gasps. Trapper had a mug of coffee in his hand. Hot as it was the man gulped it down with grunts of satisfaction. Then he asked for a cigarette.

'That's better,' said Gimlet. 'But before you start smoking you'd better eat something. It must be some time since you had a square meal.'

It was clear that part of the man's trouble was starvation; and if proof of this were needed it was provided by the manner in which he wolfed the food Trapper set before him.

'Take your time,' said Gimlet. 'You'll feel better after that.' Then, after a little while he went on: 'That's enough to go on with. If you stuff an empty stomach you may do yourself a mischief. You can have some more presently. Are you feeling well enough to talk?'

The man drew a deep breath and smiled wanly. 'I'm all right now, sir. Sorry I—made a—fool of myself.'

'Had a bad time, eh?'

'Horrible, sir, horrible.'

Copper gave him a lighted cigarette. The man drew on it hungrily, although he still shook to such an extent that he could hardly hold it.

'What's your name?' asked Gimlet.

'Gates, sir, Frederick Gates. Birmingham's my home town.'

'Where have you just come from?'

'Out of the forest. Out of the old fort, really.'

'What were you doing there?'

'Hiding.'

'From whom?'

'These niggers.'

'Why?'

'So they couldn't put a spell on me.'

'I see,' said Gimlet slowly. 'How long have you been here?'

'I can't say exactly, sir, but it must be nearly twelve months.'

'And have you been in hiding all that time?'

'Oh no. Only the last few months.'

'How did you get here?'

'I came with Colonel Baker. I was his batman. There were five of us altogether at the start.'

'Where are the others?'

'Dead.'

'So Colonel Baker is dead?'

'Yes, sir. Well, he was. Whether he's still dead I don't know.'

'What do you mean by that? If a man's dead he's dead—isn't he?'

‘In most places, but not here. These niggers can bring the dead back to life.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘I’ve seen it done.’

Gimlet smiled tolerantly. ‘They must have some smart conjurers here.’

‘Call it what you like, sir, it ain’t nice.’

‘I can believe that. Now let’s stick to facts. What actually happened to the rest of your party?’

‘They’re all dead except me. Murdered.’

‘Shot?’

‘Oh no, sir. Nothing like that. Nothing so clean. You needn’t be afraid of bodily violence. They don’t work that way. At least, I’ve never seen it. They just put a spell on you and you’ve had it.’

‘How did you escape?’

‘I got the wind up and bolted. Early on I’d spent some time exploring the old fort looking for souvenirs so I got to know my way about it. The niggers won’t go near it because they reckon there’s a duppy there.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A spook. If they didn’t believe it at first they believe it now, for at night I used to sit and howl something horrible. Scared the daylights out of ’em. Not that they weren’t scared before. I kept myself alive on yams and cassava. I saw your ship arrive and I saw you coming up the path. I guessed you’d be here so I’ve come to warn you.’

‘Warn us? Don’t you think we’re capable of taking care of ourselves?’

Gates spoke earnestly. ‘You haven’t a hope, sir. If you stay here you’re dead men—and you’ll never know what killed you. Take my tip and get out. I reckon you’ve seen Christian. Looks like a pantomime turn, but he ain’t, not by a long chalk.’

‘Yes, we’ve seen him.’

‘And Pedro, and his lot?’

‘Yes.’

‘They ain’t the worst. They’re as scared as the rest. The real big noise is a houngan.’

‘What’s a houngan?’

‘A voodoo priest. The whole place is rotten with voodoo. That’s why everyone’s scared stiff. You can’t laugh this voodoo stuff off. It gets you in the end. Look at Colonel Baker. Afraid of nothing on earth. He called it

mumbo-jumbo. But it got him. Look at me. I reckoned I was tough. I went through the war, got the D.C.M. and came out smiling. Nobody smiles here. Not likely. I didn't know what fear was. I do now. So will you if you stay here. You can't fight something you can't see. But you can feel it. It's in the air. It's everywhere.' Gates shuddered and gulped more coffee.

'What exactly are the people afraid of?' asked Gimlet curiously.

'Well, for one thing they're afraid of being turned into zombies.'

'What's a zombie?'

'A zombie is a dead body brought back to life. It has no will of its own. It does what it's told by the man who owns it. A slave. Works non-stop.'

'Do you believe that nonsense?'

'You have to believe it if you stay here, sir. I could show you some zombies. You can tell by their eyes. One of Pedro's fancy soldiers is a zombie. Pedro shot the man by accident. There he lay, dead as mutton, with a hole in his forehead. I saw it with my own eyes. Now he's walking about again. You can see the scar. I tell you, these houngans can work miracles.'

Copper stepped in, grinning. 'Catch bullets in the air, for instance?'

Gates turned serious eyes on him. 'Don't kid yourself. It's nothing to laugh at. This island's run on Fear, and if you stay here you'll know what fear is if you never knew before. The place is foul, unclean, with such horrors you couldn't imagine. It's one thing to die in battle, but it's a different matter knowing after you're dead you may be dug up and turned into a zombie to be a slave for ever.'

'Blimey, you are in a state,' observed Copper sympathetically.

'Wait till you wake up one morning and find the chalk mark on *your* door.'

'What does that do to yer?'

'It means you've had it. First thing every morning here people look at their door. They can't sleep for wondering if the mark of death is there.'

'Who makes this mark?' asked Gimlet.

'Nobody knows. Nobody ever sees it done. That's what started the trouble here. One morning the mark was on the door. We all laughed, thinking it was a joke. But it wasn't. Hark at them drums. They do something to you, too. After a time your nerves start beating in time with 'em, and then——'

'Just a minute,' broke in Gimlet. 'You must realize, Gates, that this is a pretty wild yarn you've been spinning us. Suppose you start at the beginning

and tell us, step by step, what actually happened here from the time of your arrival.'

'Well, it was like this, sir,' replied Gates, who was still shaking, although, due no doubt to the presence of white companions, he was getting himself under control. 'When the Colonel asked me if I'd care to come here with him he told me the people were a happy cheerful lot. Maybe they told you that. Maybe they really think that in London. All I can say is, if ever there was any happiness here it was some time ago. What did we find? A few people skulking about like mangy wolves, afraid of their own shadows. Not a smile anywhere. The Colonel wasn't worried about it. He said we'd soon put things to rights. After all, there were five of us. There was the Colonel, his secretary—a fellow who used to be in the Royal Corps of Signals—me, the butler and the cook. He was a big jovial fellow named Sims who could make forty different dishes out of a tin o' bully. We found Christian living here. The Colonel kicks him out, the same as you have, it seems. Says if he has any nonsense he'll have him deported. Only one person here ever came near us. He wasn't black. He was an Arab, or something like that. Ran a little mixed shop down the road. One night he came to us and told us some of the things Christian and his pal Pedro were doing here, making people pay him taxes and that sort of thing.'

'Money?'

'Yes.'

'What did he want money for? There's nothing here to spend it on, is there?'

'Booze, mostly. Every so often a trading schooner calls here. After it's gone the place stinks of brandy and gin.'

'Could the people buy it?'

'At a price. They had to slave all hours in the sugar plantations to make enough to buy a dram. That's what this Arab feller told us. The schooner calls every few weeks. It was here last about three weeks ago.'

'Carry on.'

'Well, as I was saying, this Arab, who seemed a decent sort of feller, came to see us. After dark it was. He gave us the low-down. Told us all about this voodoo business and how it was paralysing the island with fear. What he really came to see us for, it turned out, he wanted us to push off and take him with us. He said he couldn't stand it any longer. He told us about the hougans knowing all sorts of deadly vegetable poisons. He said the heart of the thing was a hounfort in the jungle. A hounfort is what they call a voodoo temple. They hold all sorts of beastly rites there, sacrificing white

cockerels, and things of that nature. They beat drums, clash cymbals, blow whistles, and so on, to call up spirits. Awful shindy. You can hear it sometimes. Fair makes your blood run cold. The place can't be far away. All the people go. They have to go. They can't keep away. If I can remember I'll tell you more of what this Arab told us.'

'Why can't he tell us himself?'

'He's dead. When he got home after seeing us the mark was on his door. They must have seen him come here. Eyes are always on you. You can't see 'em but they're there, watching every move you make.'

'And they killed this Arab?'

'Yes, but you couldn't prove it. He just sat down and died. And mind you, he had a different religion. He didn't believe in voodoo. But he died all the same. The Colonel swore he'd been poisoned. They buried him with great ceremony in the cemetery over the way, but whether or not his body is still there I couldn't say.'

'More zombie stuff, eh?' said Copper cheerfully.

Gates didn't smile. 'The next night there was digging in the churchyard. We heard it. The Colonel went out to see what was going on. When he came back something seemed to have happened to him. There was a queer look in his eyes. He went to bed. He was never the same again. Seldom spoke. Lost all his energy. Wouldn't eat. Just wasted away before our very eyes. One day he went out. He didn't come back. Nobody ever saw him again. I thought I saw him once, in his dressing-gown. But it was Christian wearing it. He was back in Government House by then.'

'What did the rest of you do?'

'Nothing. I hate to admit it, but we had the horrors on us. All we wanted to do was get away, but we couldn't. One by one the others died. Tom Sims was the last to go. I was with him when he died, leaving me alone. After that I don't know exactly what happened. I think I must have gone mad. When I came to myself I was in one of the dungeons of the old fort, crying like a kid. I've been living there like an animal ever since. I think the only thing that saved me from going completely balmy was knowing a government ship was bound to come here sooner or later to see what was going on. I saw you come, but I daren't leave the fort till it was dark in case they caught me on the way. That's about all, sir. I've told you the honest truth without a word of a lie. Now you take my tip and get out while you've got your health, because if you stay here they'll do you in. If—listen!'

From somewhere in the sullen darkness came an uproar of screams and yells and chanting to a din of drums and clashing cymbals.

Gates started to pant again. ‘That’s ’em at it. What did I tell you? Hark at it.’

Copper, grim-faced, strode to the door and flung it open.

Gates staggered back, a stifled scream on his lips, and a quivering outstretched finger pointing at the door.

The others looked. On the door had been roughly scrawled, in chalk, a cross.

‘It’s the mark,’ moaned Gates. ‘We’re too late. We’ve had it.’

Gimlet flashed round on him. His voice was like cracking ice. ‘That’s enough of that!’ To Copper he said quietly, ‘Shut the door.’

He returned to his chair and sat down.

CHAPTER 4

Gimlet asks some questions

FOR a little while there was silence in the room although outside the night was still being made hideous by the barbaric din. Gimlet smoked a cigarette, obviously concentrating his thoughts on the situation that had arisen. The others resumed their seats. Gates's face was ashen. It was apparent that he was a nervous wreck. Looking at him Cub doubted if he would recover while he remained on the island.

After a few minutes Copper said: 'Would you like me to go and have a look round outside, sir? See what all this hubbub is about?'

'Stay where you are,' answered Gimlet. 'There's nothing we can do to-night. We'll get the lay-out of the place to-morrow, in daylight.'

'I wouldn't like 'em to think they'd got us worried, that's all, sir,' explained Copper. 'Strewth! I remember that night——'

'Forget it,' requested Gimlet. 'We've never tackled anything like this before and I want to think about it before I rush into action against an enemy on his own ground.'

'What do you make of it, sir?' asked Cub.

'Gates is telling the truth—as he sees it. I don't see it like that. Neither will you unless you want to get yourselves in the same state that he's in. Take it from me, this talk of supernatural powers is all poppycock. It's cleverly organized trickery calculated to reduce these credulous blacks to crawling submission. Fear of the unknown is in their system, and has been for hundreds of years. They brought it with them from Africa—or rather, their forebears did—where it was started by some smart guys who called themselves witch-doctors. No doubt they've got some startling tricks up their sleeves; but you can see even better men on the stage in London. There people know it's trickery and sleight-of-hand, and so on. Here it's been put over as black magic.'

'We ought to 'ave brought a conjurer along,' said Copper.

'Or a hypnotist,' suggested Cub.

‘Get this fixed in your heads for a start,’ continued Gimlet. ‘No matter what you may see, no matter how miraculous it seems, it’s trickery. If you ever think otherwise you’re sunk. You’ll be afraid to go to bed at night. Our problem is to make these poor dupes see that. It’s not going to be easy. They’ve had the fear of the devil and all his works knocked into them. We’ve got to knock it out. We shan’t do that with bullets. We’ve got to show them that we don’t care two hoots for these hounigans, or whatever it is these fellows call themselves. Our magic is better than theirs. No doubt they’ll be wise enough to anticipate that and do all they can to strengthen their hold on the people. That may account for the tin-can party now in progress.’

‘A troop of commandos would soon mop the whole place up,’ suggested Copper.

Gimlet shook his head. ‘No use. The people would simply hide in the jungle, and you’ve seen what it’s like. We want them to come out into the open.’

‘How about arresting the ringleaders, Christian and Co., and putting them in gaol?’

‘That would make martyrs of them. Besides, that would mean laying on gaolers, which would not only be a dirty job but would tie us to the place.’

‘Well then, how about a little experiment?’

‘Such as?’

‘Putting a forty-five bullet through that stinking half-breed Pedro and then inviting his pals to make him get up and walk. If they’re as smart as they say——’

‘They could do it,’ declared Gates.

‘Oh, shut up,’ snarled Copper. ‘What are you trying to give me? What do you take me for, a canteen-wallah with mummy’s apron strings still round ’im? Old Guy Fawkes went down like any other man when I fetched him a wallop. Spooks my foot. His jaw felt solid enough to me.’

Gates looked horrified. ‘You mean—you *hit* him?’

‘What d’you think I did—kiss him?’

‘He’ll never forgive you for that.’

‘And what am I supposed to do—lay down and cry me heart out? Forgive me! Ha. That’s a good ’un.’

‘Pipe down,’ ordered Gimlet. ‘Arguing amongst ourselves won’t get us anywhere. Remember, Gates has had a rough passage. He’ll be all right when he’s been with us a little while.’

‘Okay, sir,’ sighed Copper. ‘If we can’t fight what are we going to do?’ He took a crumpled cigarette from his pocket, smoothed it and lit it.

‘I’ll give my orders when I’ve had more time to think about it,’ said Gimlet. ‘I expected a spot of bother but I hadn’t imagined anything quite like this.’

‘We could make a start by stopping that hullabaloo outside,’ suggested Copper hopefully.

‘How?’

‘A hand grenade tossed to ’em to share out would let ’em see we don’t care for their kind o’ music.’

Gimlet looked at Copper suspiciously. ‘Did you bring a bomb with you?’

‘Just a little ’un, sir.’

‘I’ve told you before about carrying bombs in your kit. One day you’ll blow us all up.’

‘Sorry, sir, but it’s got kind of a habit with me. I feel my kit ain’t complete without a squib or two. You know how handy they’ve been to us more than once.’

‘We’re not starting anything like that here,’ said Gimlet shortly. ‘Use your head, man. Think what a beautiful headline that would give the home newspapers. New governor announces arrival by throwing bomb at natives.’

‘I didn’t mean hurt anyone,’ expostulated Copper. ‘I was just hoping to show poor Gates here that he ain’t got nothin’ to be afraid of. I’ve never yet seen a party what a grenade wouldn’t scatter. What say you, Trapper, old pal?’

Trapper clicked his tongue. ‘Every time,’ he muttered softly.

‘You talk too much,’ snapped Gimlet.

‘Take my advice, sir,’ pleaded Gates. ‘Don’t eat anything except out of tins. Remember what I said about poison.’

Gimlet looked at him. ‘What about the water supply?’

‘I think that’s pretty safe, sir. It comes from an artesian well. The pump’s in the kitchen.’

Trapper confirmed this.

‘What sort of poisons do they use here?’ Gimlet asked Gates.

‘According to the Arab they’ve got all sorts, some acting fast and some slow. There’s a vegetable poison called harouma. They get others by boiling down spiders and reptiles. They use graveyard dirt——’

‘Here, hold on,’ protested Copper.

‘What’s the idea of that?’ inquired Gimlet.

‘It isn’t as daft as it sounds,’ said Gates. ‘They used to have a scourge here called yellow fever. The germs are alive in the ground where the victims were buried.’

‘Ow nice,’ sneered Copper.

‘They also use panthers’ whiskers, chopped up fine. The hairs stick in your stomach and start sores.’

‘Trying to give us the nightmare?’ questioned Copper cynically.

‘I’ve heard of leopards whiskers being used in Africa,’ said Gimlet. ‘Thanks, Gates. I’ll be glad of any more information on those lines. In Africa, poison is the witch-doctor’s main equipment, so no doubt the same thing goes on here. Make a note of it everybody. Poison is definitely something we shall have to guard against. Now Gates, I’ll treat those sores of yours. After that, a wash and a shave will make a different man of you. The Corporal will cut your hair, and no doubt we shall be able to fit you out with some better kit than the togs you have on. You’ve nothing to worry about now. We’ve handled stiffer jobs than this. I’d like to ask you one or two more questions. Tell me this. Was this fellow Pedro here when you arrived with Colonel Baker?’

‘Yes, sir. But the Arab told us he didn’t belong to the island.’

‘Do you happen to know where he came from?’

‘The Arab said he thought from one of the bigger islands, a place called Haiti.’

Gimlet nodded. ‘I might have guessed it. Haiti is a hotbed of voodooism. It’s a republic—nothing to do with us. How did your Arab friend learn that Pedro came from Haiti?’

‘He didn’t know for sure. He said he thought so because the ship that calls once in a while, the one I told you about, is manned by Haitians.’

‘What’s the name of this houngan who seems to be behind the trouble?’

‘They call him Papa Shambo.’

‘Have you ever seen him?’

‘No, sir. I don’t think he ever comes out.’

‘Where does he live?’

‘In the forest.’

‘Do you know where, exactly?’

‘No, sir. But his house should be easy enough to find, because with people always going to and fro there’s bound to be a track of sorts.’

‘I see. And where did Christian go when Colonel Baker turfed him out?’

‘To his own house. It’s in the town. I could show it to you.’

‘And Pedro?’

‘He’s got a house not far away, too.’

‘When you bolted to the fort what happened to the stuff you left here? I mean, the personal kit of Colonel Baker and your friends who died?’

‘I left it here.’

‘It isn’t here now.’

‘Then I reckon Christian must have pinched it. I know he’s got the Colonel’s silk dressing-gown because I’ve seen him in it, like I told you.’

‘Were there any weapons here.’

‘No, sir. The only weapon in the party as far as I know was the Colonel’s revolver. He said we wouldn’t want firearms, but when things got difficult he asked me to get his revolver out of his kit, which I did. He had it on him when he went out and I haven’t seen it since.’

‘And this Arab who died. You say he had a shop. What happened to it?’

‘I only saw the shop once afterwards and then it was empty.’

‘Looted?’

‘I expect so, sir.’

Gimlet nodded. ‘All very interesting. Thanks, Gates. I begin to get the hang of things. But that’s enough for to-night. To-morrow I hope to have a word with some of the people; then we shall know even more about it.’

Gates shook his head. ‘You won’t get anything out of the people, sir. They’re too scared to talk. They might as well be dumb.’

‘We shall see.’

‘There’s just one little thing I’d like to do, sir, if you don’t mind,’ said Copper.

‘What’s that?’

‘Take a step or two on the balcony to let ’em see we ain’t scared of their lousy music.’

Gimlet smiled. ‘That’s not a bad idea. It would be a fatal mistake to let them think we were afraid of them. You’d better stay inside, Gates. By the way, these people knew you by sight, I suppose?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘And they think you’re dead?’

‘They couldn’t think anything else.’

‘That’s capital. You’d better stay dead for the time being. We may have a trick there.’

Leaving Gates to start his ablutions in the kitchen they strolled out on to the verandah.

The moon was up, now, flooding the scene with its eerie blue light. The stars glowed like beacons, with the Milky Way a white streamer across the heavens. Beyond the open area of bare earth that fronted the Government House the forest lay black and mysterious. Apart from a few fireflies still waltzing near the trees, nothing moved. The houses, that began a little way to the left, were in darkness. But still the air vibrated to the rhythmic rumbling of the drums.

Tumatum-tum-tum, tumatum-tum-tum.

Copper fetched a rag and rubbed the chalk mark off the door.

Making a start

THE night passed without incident, Gimlet sleeping alone in a side room, and the others, using their camp beds, in the big room. Cub was some time getting to sleep, and he began to realize what Gates had meant by the drums getting on the nerves. They didn't alarm him. They merely irritated him by their persistence. At what time they stopped he did not know; they were still going when he dropped off to sleep.

He was awakened in the morning by the others moving about. It was seven o'clock and the sun was up, so getting into his white ducks—garments they were all wearing—he had a quick wash and started work on the radio equipment. Copper whistled softly as he stropped the old fashioned cut-throat razor which he still used. Gates, in borrowed kit, looked pale, but was already a different man from what he had been overnight. In the brilliant light of morning the fears that he had brought with him in the hours of darkness had faded away. The aromatic aroma of fresh coffee came from the kitchen.

The front door was wide open. Taking a look outside Cub saw that the square was still deserted. A few children, black and naked, were watching from a distance, but on Cub's appearance they promptly bolted.

'Grub up,' called Trapper.

Gimlet came into the room, immaculate in white.

Over breakfast he announced that he had decided on a policy. Gates, he averred, must have been the white man that rumour had reported to be roaming about the island. 'I shall do nothing until nine o'clock when I'm due to speak to the people,' he said. 'With respect to Gates, I can't think things are quite as bad here as he imagines. But then he was alone, without a soul to give him moral support. That makes a lot of difference to one's outlook. We do at least know the cause of the trouble here. I shall take a firm line from the start; anything looking like weakness would be fatal. I shall see Christian and Pedro and make it clear that I'm not prepared to stand for any of their nonsense.'

‘What about this high priest bloke—this houngan, or whatever he is,’ put in Copper, ‘are you going to look for him?’

‘Look for him? Certainly not. I shall send for him.’

‘He won’t come,’ declared Gates.

‘In that case he’ll regret it,’ said Gimlet grimly. ‘I’m not being given the run-around by any insolent voodoo monger. This is a British island and I’m the Governor, so if he wants to stay here he’ll do as he’s told. This isn’t the eighteenth century, and there are no pirates to cock a snoot at authority. We’ll handle this ourselves, for the time being, at any rate. To ask for assistance would look as if we were scared. The Colonial Office would want to know why. What could we say? That we were afraid of spooks, witch-doctors and zombies? They’d laugh at us. Of course, in the event of an open insurrection it would be a different matter. In that case I should have to ask for instructions. Our first job is to find out what happened to Colonel Baker, and the other people who have died or disappeared here. Cub, get the radio functioning, and try to make contact with the station at Trinidad in case we need something we may have forgotten.’

Nothing more was said. Cub got the radio working and had a word with the operator at Trinidad. He said nothing about conditions on the island.

The next hour was spent getting the house in order, Copper putting in some hard work with soap and water. There were some papers in what had been Colonel Baker’s office, but none of recent date. Gimlet said he felt sure that the Colonel would have kept a diary. Gates confirmed this. He said there had been several record books when he had arrived. They could not be found; but their disappearance was no mystery. It was evident that they had been removed, and probably destroyed, by Christian or Pedro, whose names would appear in them, and not to their credit.

The books in the book-case were a strange assortment; a few were fiction by forgotten authors; some were classics, and there were several biographies of eminent Victorians. None was later than the end of the nineteenth century. All were in a hopeless condition, musty-smelling, moth-eaten and generally falling to pieces. No time was wasted on them.

While waiting for nine o’clock Cub and Copper took a short stroll down the main street. It was, in fact, the only street, and hardly worthy of the name. Evil-looking and evil-smelling alleys wound like rat-holes into the jumble of dwellings that comprised the rest of the town, which was really nothing more than a village. From the central block, which had obviously been the original settlement, ramshackle huts straggled away into a mixture of jungle and half-cultivated ground. The crops, mostly weed-choked, were

maize, lentils and sugar cane. Apart from a few children, mostly naked, peeping round corners, not a soul was seen.

The shops were few, and shops in name only, the 'windows' being open benches on which were exposed a few miserable objects that revealed the poverty of the place. Cheap ornaments, mostly damaged, second-hand rags of clothes, a few bolts of flimsy cotton stuff, home-made wooden goods like bowls and stools, fruit, corn and nuts were the chief wares. To Cub it was all very pathetic. 'It's time something was done about this,' he told Copper moodily.

It was clear that Rupertston had about touched bottom as far as commerce and human occupation were concerned. That something was radically wrong was all too apparent. And, as Cub remarked to Copper, the Government were not to blame, for two successive governors who might have done something had disappeared in mysterious circumstances. They walked back towards the Government House expecting to see the people assembling there, for it was now just on nine.

Not a man or woman was there. Nine o'clock came, and still the square of bare earth lay naked under the blazing sun.

'Looks as if they ain't goin' ter play,' remarked Copper.

'Gimlet's plan is obviously to win the confidence of the people,' answered Cub. 'That's going to be difficult if we can't find them.'

Gimlet stood on the verandah. His expression was grim. So, when he spoke, was his voice. 'In the first house on the opposite side a man is peeping at us round that rag of a curtain. I saw him move. Corporal, take Trapper with you and bring him to me.'

'Aye-aye, sir,' Copper, with Trapper in step beside him, marched off.

Cub watched them reach the house. Copper knocked. The door remained closed. He opened it and called. There was no response. They went in. A minute later they came out, holding by each arm a passive but reluctant negro. They brought him to the verandah steps where, by the flag-staff, Gimlet stood waiting.

Physically the man was a good specimen, thought Cub; but his eyes were very wide, showing the whites, a sure sign of fear. He was brought to a halt between his escort two paces distant from Gimlet.

'Man present, sir,' reported Copper.

Gimlet spoke. 'Speak English?'

The negro moistened his lips. 'Yaas, boss.'

'What's your name?'

‘J—Joe, sir.’

‘Joe what?’

The man could hardly speak. ‘J-just Joe, boss,’ he stammered.

‘Glad to meet you, Joe. Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you. Do you know Mr. Christian?’

‘Yaas, boss.’

‘Did he tell you to be here at nine o’clock this morning?’

‘No, boss.’

‘Do you know what bully beef is?’

‘Yaas, boss.’

‘Do you like it?’

‘Yaas, boss.’

‘Got any?’

‘No, boss.’

‘Like some?’

‘Yaas, boss.’

Gimlet turned to Cub. ‘Fetch him a tin and a couple of packets of biscuits.’

Cub obeyed the order. The man looked as if he couldn’t believe his eyes when the present was put in his hands.

‘If you behave yourself there’s plenty more where that came from,’ Gimlet told him. ‘Do you know where Mr. Christian lives?’

The man hesitated, eyes rolling.

‘Speak up.’

‘Yaas, boss.’

‘Very well. You will now go and tell him that unless he’s here in ten minutes I won’t answer for the consequences.’

The man looked terrified.

‘You’ve nothing to be afraid of,’ said Gimlet. ‘If anyone lays a finger on you he’ll have me to reckon with. I shall need one or two good boys to work for me and you look the right sort. Tell your friends that I’m here to help them. Understand?’

‘Yaas, boss.’

‘Then get along, and come back here afterwards. Are those your children I can see watching us from your house?’

‘Yaas, boss.’

‘Bring them with you when you come. I’ll find something for them.’

‘Yaas, boss.’ The negro turned away.

‘Next thing we’ll be opening a lolly shop,’ muttered Copper.

Gimlet looked at him. ‘Corporal, occasionally you get a flash of inspiration. We’ve got a freezer and some custard powder. Trapper, make ice-cream.’

‘Aye-aye, sir.’

Cub smiled at Copper’s expression. Said Copper, in a low voice: ‘Fore you know where you are, chum, you’ll be running a fish and chip joint.’

Gimlet heard him. Without looking round he said: ‘That’s another good idea. You’re bubbling over with good ideas this morning.’

‘I’d better pipe down,’ murmured Copper sadly.

Five minutes elapsed. Then Christian, still in the dressing-gown, could be seen coming slowly towards them. Reaching them he came to a stop, looking from one to the other. His attitude was apprehensive rather than belligerent, giving Cub an impression that whoever had been the real boss of the island it was not this man. The real power lay either with Pedro, or Papa Shambo the houn gan. Christian may have been top dog once, but drink or fear, or both, had sapped his vitality.

Gimlet began without preamble. ‘I asked you to let it be known that I would speak to the people this morning at nine o’clock.’

‘Everybody goes out, mister. I dunno where to find dem,’ answered Christian sullenly.

‘You knew perfectly well where to find them,’ rapped out Gimlet. ‘You were with them—weren’t you?’

‘I don’ understand, mister.’

‘Don’t pretend to be a fool. It won’t fool me. You were all at Papa Shambo’s, making that infernal din.’

Christian was a poor dissembler after all. Expressions of fear and surprise strode across his face. ‘I don’ know nothing ’bout dat,’ he protested.

‘Don’t lie to me,’ said Gimlet sternly. ‘I have someone here who knows all your secrets.’ Raising his voice he called: ‘Gates, come here.’

Gates stepped forward.

Christian’s face turned grey. Cub thought for a moment he was going to faint.

‘Who told you you could have that dressing-gown?’ went on Gimlet. ‘It belonged to Colonel Baker. Take it off.’

Christian's confusion was not nice to watch. His eyes rolled, but they could not meet those of Gimlet, which never left his face. He took off the garment. Copper relieved him of it. Underneath he wore shorts, also stolen from the Government House, no doubt. But Gimlet let it pass.

'You will now go and tell the people I want to see them here right away,' ordered Gimlet curtly.

Christian swallowed. 'Yaas, suh.'

'That includes Pedro and his men.'

'Yaas, suh.'

'You will then go to Papa Shambo and tell him to report to me here at two o'clock precisely.'

That was too much for Christian. He went to pieces. 'Don' ask me to do dat, suh,' he pleaded. 'You don' make me die.'

'Rubbish,' snapped Gimlet. 'I've come here to help people and I'm not standing for any nonsense from Shambo or anyone else. I'm giving you a chance to mend your ways. If Shambo isn't here at two o'clock I shall forbid all meetings except in the church. That's all for now. Get along.'

Christian turned away like a man sleep-walking.

'They can't say I didn't give them a chance,' said Gimlet quietly, to the others.

'Fair enough, sir,' agreed Copper.

'Shambo is the trouble. Christian is as scared of him as the rest of them.'

'Then the quicker he's winkled out of his shell the better,' averred Copper. 'What-ho! Here comes Joe and his kids. Pore little blighters. What a 'ope kids have got here.'

Joe was coming across the square holding—or rather, dragging—a child in each hand. Clearly, the children did not want to come. Other children could be seen peeping round corners. One, a clean-limbed youngster of about fourteen, his ebony body as straight as a lance, with more courage than the rest made a cautious approach. But he stopped at what he evidently considered a safe distance—about ten yards.

Gimlet beckoned him on. 'Fetch a few bars of chocolate,' he told Cub, in a quiet aside.

When Cub returned the boy had closed the distance somewhat and was still moving an inch at a time, muscles braced, clearly ready to bolt at the first sign of danger.

Joe came up. Gimlet gave each child a bar of chocolate. He had a job to make them take it. Not a word could he get out of them. He held out a bar to

the older boy. 'What's your name,' he asked.

'Rupert.'

'What are you afraid of, Rupert?'

'You.'

'Why are you afraid of me? No, I shan't give you the chocolate till you tell me.'

'White mens eat lil' boys.'

'Who told you that?'

'Shambo, for a dollar,' put in Copper softly.

'Ebberyone say dat,' answered the boy.

Cub gave him the chocolate. Instantly he was flying round the square, making tremendous bounds. Without removing the wrapping he bit a piece off the bar and continued his gymnastics.

Copper watched him admiringly. 'Blimey! That kid ought to be trained for the high jump,' he declared.

'Another good idea,' said Gimlet. 'We'll organize some races later on.'

By this time, seeing that the children had come to no harm, others began to emerge from the places where they had been hiding. Joe still stood there, grinning sheepishly. The faces of his offspring were smeared with chocolate, which the heat had made soft.

'We're doing fine,' said Gimlet. 'There's nothing wrong with the kids, anyway.'

Trapper now appeared with a large basin, a spoon, and some paper. To Joe's children he gave a sickly-looking dollop of the contents of the basin on a piece of paper. The first lick scared them. It was probably the first time in their lives that they had encountered anything cold.

At home, it is unlikely that Trapper's ice-cream would have passed the test, but here it caused a sensation, and before long he was the centre of a clamouring, shrieking crowd of urchins, mostly naked, although some could boast a girdle of leaves. The bowl was soon empty. Some adults appeared, perhaps to see what all the noise was about.

Copper was grinning at the success of an experiment for which he could claim some of the credit. 'Comes ter something when yer use ice-cream for ammunition,' he observed.

'The battle hasn't started yet,' Gimlet told him. 'But if we can win the confidence of the kids it will be something.'

'Our stocks won't last long at this rate,' warned Trapper.

‘Then we’ll radio for more,’ asserted Gimlet. ‘If the Colonial Office jibs I’ll pay for the stuff myself. I shall be asking for a lot of things if all goes well, among them a doctor and a school teacher. But don’t let the behaviour of these children give you the idea that this is going to be easy. We haven’t started yet. And the more we look like succeeding the harder the bad elements here will fight to defeat us. But there are quite a lot of people here now so I’ll have a word with them.’

He took his place at the head of the steps and the others took up positions just behind him. He held up a hand for silence. Instantly a hush fell on the assembly, and he made what was probably the longest speech of his career. It lasted nearly ten minutes.

He told the people that he had been appointed by the Government, that he had been sent there to help them, and to bring prosperity to the island, although he wouldn’t be able to do that without their co-operation. All they had to do was obey his orders. No one else would give orders. From now on life was going to be better for everyone. The land would be properly cultivated. There would then be plenty of food and clothing for everyone. A ship would call regularly for the produce. It would bring stores and medicines. He was their friend. There was no need to be afraid. If anyone had a complaint to make he was ready to hear it. No public meetings would be held without his permission. Drums would stop one hour after sunset.

‘Remember,’ he concluded, ‘my word is the law; and those who go against it will be punished. That’s all I have to say to-day.’

The people were still staring at him as if to allow his words to sink in when a negro pushed his way through the little crowd carrying, on a section of banana leaf held in both hands, a handsome melon. He walked boldly up to the steps and presented it to Gimlet.

The people seemed to freeze. One or two on the outskirts began to slink away, and this alone would have made Cub suspicious even if he had not seen the man come out of the forest. The people were, he perceived, too ignorant to conceal their feelings. Something had happened, or was happening. The atmosphere had suddenly become tense.

Gimlet did not need to be told. To the man he said: ‘A very good melon.’

‘Yaas, boss.’

‘Do you like melons?’

‘Yes, suh.’

Gimlet borrowed Copper’s knife and cut a large wedge of the fruit. ‘That is for you, for bringing us the melon,’ he told the man. ‘Eat it.’

The negro did not move. He was a shifty-looking type. His eyes began to roll when he saw the trap into which he had stepped.

‘Eat it,’ cracked Gimlet remorselessly.

The man shuffled his feet. The crowd stood rigid. They might have been statues.

‘If you like melons why don’t you eat it?’ demanded Gimlet. His voice was merciless.

The negro dropped on his knees, grovelling. ‘Don’ make me eat it, massa,’ he pleaded.

‘Eat!’

The negro rose to his feet. His expression was that of a man hearing his death sentence. Quite calmly he took the wedge in both hands and bit a piece out of the middle.

Still the crowd remained as if petrified.

‘All right, that’s enough,’ said Gimlet shortly. ‘I shall keep this melon, and if ever you come back here you will eat it all. Go.’

There was an intake of breath from the crowd like escaping steam. The man who had brought the fruit fled, gibbering with terror, a hand on his stomach.

To the crowd Gimlet said. ‘You can all go now except anyone who needs medicine. Joe, you stay. I want to speak to you. Corporal, get hold of Rupert and find him some work until I’m ready to talk to him.’

‘Aye-aye, sir.’

The people, muttering among themselves, and with many a furtive glance towards the forest, began to move away. In a few minutes only Joe, his two children, and Rupert remained. Copper put a broom in Rupert’s hands and set him to sweep the verandah. Trapper sat on the bottom steps between the two children and introduced them to chewing gum.

CHAPTER 6

Preliminary sparring

GIMLET called Joe closer to him. ‘Now, Joe,’ he said, ‘I want to talk to you. I’ve come here to make the people happy and you’re going to help me to do that. I know you’re all afraid of something and I know what it is. But I’m not afraid. I know who sent me that melon, and why it was sent. You all knew, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, suh.’ Joe’s voice was barely audible.

‘But not one of you had the nerve to tell me it was poisoned.’

‘No, suh.’

‘You would have stood there and watched me eat it.’

‘Yes, suh.’

‘Very well. Let’s forget about that. What do you do for a living?’

‘I work, suh.’

‘Where?’

‘In de fields.’

‘In the sugar plantations?’

‘Yes, suh.’

‘Who do you work for?’

‘I dasn’t tell you dat, massa.’

‘Never mind. I know. Do you get paid?’

Joe’s eyes went furtively to the forest. ‘No, suh,’ he whispered.

‘Well, how would you like to work for me and be paid?’

‘No, suh. I dasn’t do dat.’

‘Why not?’

‘Orders say no one work for new Gubnor.’

‘Who’s orders?’

No answer.

‘Mr. Christian’s orders? Speak up.’

‘Yes, suh.’

‘And if I say you’re going to work for me, what then?’

‘Den I get de mark and I’s e a dead man. Den I work in de fields for ebber and ebber.’

‘How can you work if you’re dead?’

Joe rolled his eyes, showing the whites.

‘I see. You’re afraid of being turned into a zombie. Is that it?’

‘Yes, massa.’ Joe’s voice trembled.

‘Well, you can inform your friends there isn’t going to be any more of this zombie talk now I’m here,’ stated Gimlet confidently. ‘Now tell me this. The people here seem half-starved. Is there any shortage of food?’

‘Yes, suh.’

‘Why?’

‘Ebberbody working for——’ Joe’s voice broke.

‘What about fish? There are plenty of fish in the sea. Does nobody ever go fishing?’

‘No, suh.’

‘Why not?’

‘Orders say not to make boats.’

‘So that nobody can leave the island, eh?’

No answer.

‘Come here. I want to look at your eyes.’

Joe shuffled forward and Gimlet looked closely into his eyes. ‘You like smoking?’ he questioned.

‘Yes, suh.’

‘What do you smoke?’

Silence.

‘Where do you get your tobacco?’

No answer.

‘From Mr. Christian?’

‘Yes, suh,’ breathed Joe huskily.

Gimlet changed the subject. ‘Where’s the gaol?’

‘Ober dare.’ Joe pointed to a small box-like building that stood alone on the far side of the square.

‘Anybody in it?’

‘Yes, suh.’

Gimlet looked startled. ‘The deuce there is! Who has the key?’

‘De gaoler keeps de key, massa.’

‘One of Pedro’s men?’

‘Yes, suh.’

‘Where is Pedro now? I told him to be here.’

‘Couldn’t say, massa.’

‘Now listen carefully, Joe,’ continued Gimlet. ‘I may have to use the gaol. That means I shall need some policemen. I shall get uniforms for them and they will receive regular pay. Would you like to be one?’

Joe’s embarrassment was pathetic to watch.

‘You’d like to be one but you daren’t. Is that it?’

‘Yes, gubnor.’

‘There’s no hurry. Tell your friends and think it over. No harm will come to those who work for me. Are there any sick people on the island?’

‘Yes, massa.’

‘Then why don’t they come to me for medicine?’

‘Guess dey’s scared, gubnor.’

‘All right, Joe. That’s all for now. Come back to-morrow morning.’

‘Yes, suh.’ With anxious glances in the direction of the forest Joe hurried away.

Gimlet turned to where Rupert, under Copper’s supervision, was pulling out the weeds that festooned the verandah. ‘You going to work for me, Rupert?’ he asked.

‘Yes, suh.’

‘Good boy. Where’s your father?’

‘Ain’t got no fader, boss.’

‘Mother?’

‘Ain’t got no mudder, boss.’

‘Oh. Where do you live?’

‘In de fields, suh.’

‘Like to live here with me?’

‘Yes, suh.’

‘Corporal, fix him up and put him on our strength for rations.’

‘Aye-aye, sir.’

Gimlet turned to Cub. ‘Got the radio working?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then make a signal to Trinidad for transmission to London. Mark it urgent. Say we badly need food, general medical supplies, cooking oil, custard powder, freezing salt—but I’d better give you a list. Ask for the stuff to be flown out to us.’ Gimlet smiled. ‘They promised if I undertook the job I could have anything in reason. They’ll probably get a shock when they find I’m taking them at their word. No matter. The quickest way to break down the resistance here may be through the stomachs of these wretched people. I’m pretty sure that aside from anything else their constitutions are being undermined with dope of some sort—probably through the stuff they’re smoking. They wouldn’t be given tobacco if there wasn’t some purpose in it. You saw me have a good look at Joe’s eyes. Those enlarged pupils mean a drug of some sort, and that, in turn, would make them readily susceptible to this zombie racket.’

‘What do you reckon’s the truth of this zombie business, sir?’ asked Copper.

‘I don’t know. I don’t think anybody knows, although on some of the larger islands, Haiti in particular, plenty of white men have tried to find out. It may be all imagination, a sort of mass hypnotism. But of this you may be sure. The people who are supposed to be dead aren’t dead, and never were dead. They are given some sort of drug or poison to make them *appear* dead. The houngan has the antidote. He applies it, and the apparently dead man returns to life, with his mental faculties so weak that he does what he’s told. You’d have a job to make the natives believe that, of course. The terror of this awful fate has been ingrained in them for centuries. We’ve got to expose the thing as a fake, a fraud, a trick. We shall get nowhere until we do. This rascal Shambo knows all about it. He’s the real menace here. Christian is as much his victim as the rest of them. Pedro—well, I don’t know. He’s got white blood in him and may not be as credulous as the negroes. He may suspect the thing to be a racket, but it obviously suits him to play in with Shambo. He is, as it were, the official power on the island. Shambo is the hidden power. Sooner or later we shall have a showdown with him. That’s inevitable.’

‘Why not now, sir?’ suggested Copper. ‘I saw where that feller with the melon came out of the forest. The din last night came from the same direction. That should give us a line on the position of Shambo’s wigwam.’

Gimlet considered the matter. ‘We shall have to locate the place eventually,’ he agreed. ‘I’ll tell you what. I have ordered Pedro and Shambo

to report here at two o'clock. They'll get that message, you may be sure. We'll wait to see if they show up. Pedro might, but I doubt if Shambo will because that would be a let-down in the eyes of his miserable dupes. If they don't come, then Trapper, being the expert, can do a little scouting for this unholy voodoo temple, which is the source of the trouble here. Let's leave it at that for the moment. Now let's go and look at the gaol, although if it's locked, as I imagine it will be, we shan't be able to get in unless there's a guard, or someone in charge. You stay here, Gates, and look after the house.'

They walked over to the gaol, a one-storied building apparently consisting of two rooms. There were two windows. One was barred. Surprisingly, Cub thought, the single door opened at Gimlet's touch. Inside, in a crude chair, sat the guard; one of Pedro's soldiers. He was asleep. His rifle stood in a corner. Behind the chair another door presumably gave access to the prison cell.

Gimlet roused the sleeping warder with a staccato 'Wake up!'

The man started violently and scrambled to his feet, but it was several seconds before he appeared to be really conscious. From the way he stood swaying, mouth agape, eyes staring, he might have been drunk.

'Try that door, Corporal,' ordered Gimlet.

Copper tried the door. It was locked.

Gimlet held out a hand to the gaoler. 'The key!'

The man fumbled in his pocket and produced a bunch of three or four keys.

Copper took them, unlocked the door of the cell and pushed it open, to release such a stench that Cub backed away. Inside, two negroes squatted on the floor, their backs against a wall to which they were secured by rusty chains.

'You probably have the key of those shackles,' Gimlet told Copper. 'Set those men free. I don't know what they've done. They may not know themselves, so it's no use asking.'

With his nose wrinkling Copper obeyed the order. 'On your feet,' he told the prisoners.

With difficulty the men got up. They showed no emotion. Indeed, they appeared to be half dead. Copper remarked that if they closed their eyes they would be dead.

'Outside,' ordered Gimlet.

The men appeared not to understand.

Copper took them by the shoulders and pushed them into the open air, where they stood gazing about them helplessly, like two lost sheep.

Gimlet turned to the guard, who had not moved, but had watched the proceedings with bovine indifference. ‘Get this place cleaned up,’ he rapped out. ‘Corporal, fetch a broom from the house and see that he does it.’

‘Aye-aye, sir.’

‘When he’s finished take that tunic off him and bring it to me. Keep those keys.’

‘Aye-aye, sir.’

Followed by the others Gimlet went outside. ‘Apart from anything else I’m afraid this is going to be a dirty business,’ he said in a voice of deep disgust. ‘We’d better have a walk round and get some clean air into our lungs before we talk of lunch.’

‘You’re not doing anything else this morning?’ asked Cub.

‘No. We’ll start operations seriously this afternoon, when Pedro and Shambo are due to report.’

‘And if they don’t?’

‘We shall start operations either way. I expected it would take us a little while to get the hang of the situation.’

As they strolled past the Government House, Gates appeared on the verandah.

‘Everything all right?’ queried Gimlet.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘All right. A little exercise wouldn’t do you any harm. Come with us and show us the way round the town. Trapper, you take over from him and see about lunch.’

‘Right, sir.’

Gimlet, Cub and Gates, walked on down the dusty, weed-grown main street. Gates pointed out the few objects there were of interest, including the abandoned empty dwelling of the man he called the Arab. They saw only a few children.

Beyond the end of the street the scene changed to one of neglected cultivation, backed, on rising ground, by the ever-encroaching forest. The road, or rather track, struggled on a little way, dwindled to a footpath and finally lost itself in a riot of weeds, prickly pear and shrubs. On the lower side, at a distance of perhaps fifty yards, three men were chopping sugar cane with slow mechanical strokes. Gimlet stopped to look at them, and then, it seemed, Gates noticed them for the first time. His reaction was as

startling as it was instantaneous. A hoarse cry broke from his lips, and spinning round he rushed up the path as if pursued by a wild beast.

For a second or two Gimlet and Cub could only stare at him in amazement. Then said Cub, in an astonished voice: 'What on earth's come over him?' Raising his voice he shouted: 'Gates! Stop! Wait a minute.' He noticed that the workmen did not turn, although they must have heard the shout.

Having gone some way Gates turned an ashen face down the path, and seeing that the others were following slowly, waited for them to come up. It was soon evident to Cub that he was in the throes of another attack of jitters.

'What was all that about?' demanded Gimlet.

Gates was quite incoherent. Shaking as though with ague he pointed a wavering finger; but all he could say was, 'The Arab'; and this he repeated several times.

'What about him?' questioned Gimlet.

'He's there, working with those two negroes.'

'Well? What's wrong with that.'

'He's dead. They're all dead.'

'How very interesting,' said Gimlet calmly. 'I take it you mean they're zombies.'

'Y—yes.'

'You know, Gates, you'll really have to take yourself in hand,' asserted Gimlet. 'Let's go and have a word with them.'

'Not me, not for a million pounds,' declared Gates.

'Very well. You can either wait here for us or you can go on home,' said Gimlet curtly; and with that he strode briskly towards the workers.

Cub went with him. He was vaguely alarmed by Gates's outburst, but his dominating sensation was curiosity.

They walked up to the men, who, moving like puppets, continued their slow chopping. 'Good morning,' said Gimlet loudly. The men went on with their work. Even when Gimlet stood in front of them they paid not the slightest attention. Once, for an instant, Cub saw the eyes of one of them. They were blank, like the eyes of a statue. If they saw him they gave no sign. Gimlet picked up a stick and gave one of the men a slight blow. He might have struck a tree for all the notice that was taken of it.

'So this is the answer to the trouble here,' he said quietly.

'These men are not dead, of course,' said Cub.

‘They might as well be, as far as their faculties are concerned,’ answered Gimlet grimly.

‘What caused this condition, do you think?’

‘Hypnotism or some form of poison.’

‘Shambo’s work?’

‘No doubt about that. We shall find out.’

‘How?’

‘If this foul beast Shambo put these wretched creatures in this condition he can get them out of it. If he can’t, it’s going to be too bad for him, because I’m going to beat the hide off him until I get the truth. All right. We’ve seen enough. Let’s get back to lunch.’

CHAPTER 7

The first round

Two o'clock came. The square was deserted. Two-thirty. The square remained deserted. A quarter to three. There was still no sign of Pedro or Shambo—or anyone else, for that matter. Gimlet stood on the verandah, the others in a group behind him. Nobody spoke. Cub, Copper and Trapper, all knew only too well from the expression on Gimlet's face that this was not the moment for idle chatter.

At last Gimlet turned to them. Said he: 'I am the Queen's representative on this island. If my orders are to be flouted, and I accept that state of affairs, I might as well return home; which would be a confession that two or three ignorant blacks were too good for me. I have no intention of retiring.'

'We never 'ave yet, sir,' put in Copper. 'Bit late to start at our age.'

Gimlet continued. 'It is plain, from the absence of the men who were ordered to report here, that they think they can freeze us out as they did my predecessors. That makes them rebels, and I shall deal with them as such. I cannot, without loss of the dignity that befits my position here, go and fetch them; but I can for that purpose send such forces as I have at my disposal. That may mean violence. If so, it can't be avoided. If we lose this first round we've lost the battle, and the population, assuming that the other side has won, will go over to them entirely. This witch-doctor fellow is the man I want. Trapper, go and see if you can locate his hut—or whatever it is he lives in. Try to find it without being seen. When you know exactly where it is come back and report. I take it you'd prefer to go alone?'

'Yes, sir. The more men the more noise.'

'Right. Move off.'

Trapper departed by way of the back door. Where he went after that only he knew, for he was not seen again for an hour, when he reappeared as silently as he had gone.

'Find it?' queried Gimlet laconically.

‘Without much trouble, sir; but, *ma foi*, that forest is a Turkish bath. The place is half a mile from here. A path leads to it from the village but I did not use it. The house is a palm-thatched shack, very small, in a clearing. There is a larger building of the same sort close by. There’s a lot of witch-doctor equipment about; the usual stuff—totem poles, bones, feathers, rags, and so on.’

‘See anyone?’

‘Yes, sir. Christian, Pedro and a guy I took to be Shambo were sitting outside the door talking. Pedro is still in his fancy uniform. They were jabbering in a lingo of their own so I didn’t learn anything about the particular devilment they were cooking.’

‘What sort of creature is this Shambo?’

‘He’s an ordinary negro to look at, a tough-looking guy of about forty-five or fifty, dolled up in a suit of clothes I reckon he never bought on Santelucia. White ducks, shirt and tie complete. Brown and white sports shoes on his feet and a red bandana tied round his head.’

‘Colonel Baker had a pair of shoes like that,’ put in Gates, who was listening. ‘He used to wear his regimental tie—dark blue with a red zig-zag stripe.’

‘That’s it,’ said Trapper.

Gimlet turned to Gates. ‘Has he always dressed in European clothes?’

‘I dunno, sir. I never saw him. But from what the Arab told me he puts on ceremonials when there’s a voodoo meeting on. All got up to kill, in skins, feathers and so on.’

‘H’m. I think I’d better have a look at this gentleman,’ decided Gimlet. ‘Corporal, take Trapper and Cub with you and bring Shambo to me. Better bring Pedro at the same time. Use force if necessary. Take guns, but avoid bloodshed unless it’s a matter of your lives. Use the path. You’re on official business, so there’s no need for you to crawl about in the jungle.’

‘Aye-aye, sir,’ acknowledged Copper.

As automatics were served out, loaded and pocketed, Trapper remarked: ‘I guess the Skipper’s dead right. If they get away with this we’ve had it.’

‘They’re not getting away with it, chum, not if I know it,’ muttered Copper. ‘Lead on. You know the way.’

As Trapper marched direct for the path Cub had a feeling that hidden eyes were watching them; but they saw no one. Nor did they meet anyone on the winding half-mile track between the town and the objective. It ran through dense forest, silent, sultry and sinister. The trees had a smothering

effect. Not a bird called. Not an animal moved. The stench of rotting vegetation seemed to eat into Cub's nostrils. The atmosphere would have been sinister, he thought, even without the hideous wooden idols that occurred at intervals. Most of them took the form of posts surmounted by crudely carved yet realistic heads. Without exception every face was grotesque, devilish even in daylight. By night, in the light of flickering torches, they would be even more beastly. But that, Cub realized, was the intention—to prepare the terrified people for the unholy ceremonies conducted by the man who held them in his power through Fear.

'We'll make a bonfire o' these presently,' said Copper, jerking a thumb at a painted, leering mask. 'Guy Fawkes Day once a year ought ter be enough for anyone. What say you, Trapper, old pal?'

'Plenty,' agreed Trapper.

Rounding a bend the houngan's establishment came into view less than fifty yards away. The three coloured men who had run the island for their own benefit were still there, heads together in earnest conversation. Not until the new arrivals were close were they noticed. Then, the talking ended abruptly. The men did not move, but remained rigid, staring in the manner of startled animals.

Copper marched straight up to them. He looked at Shambo and Pedro. 'I want you,' he said crisply. 'On your feet.'

Neither moved.

'You deaf or something?' inquired Copper coldly. 'You've had your orders. Put a jerk into it.'

Still the men remained seated.

'Treating yourselves to a spot o' dumb insolence, eh?' said Copper softly. 'Where I come from we know how to deal with that. You ask my chums 'ere.'

No answer.

'I see yer want me to show yer,' said Copper. 'We do it like this.' Taking a quick pace forward he put his foot against Shambo's chair and sent it, with its occupant, hurtling across the hard-trodden earth. 'Get the idea?' he inquired, casually.

At the expression on the houngan's face as he picked himself up Cub's hand went to his pistol pocket. The man was mouthing with hate and fury and it seemed that he would retaliate. A razor appeared in his hand. For a second he crouched, then he sprang like a tiger.

Copper, knowing what the result of his action would be, was ready. He stepped forward. With his left hand he caught the arm holding the blade. At the same time his right fist drove like a pile-driver into the man's stomach, driving the air from his lungs with a hiss like escaping steam. Without pause he took a swift, short pace back. His fist, with his full weight behind it, swung up for the knock-out. It took Sharnbo on the chin, lifted him off his feet and sent him crashing against the wall of his house, where he slid to the ground and lay still. It was, no doubt, the first time any of the coloured men had seen a punch delivered by a heavyweight champion.

Copper turned to Pedro. 'How do you feel about it, mate?' he asked.

Pedro stood up.

'That's better,' murmured Copper. 'And you,' he told Christian, who obeyed with alacrity. 'Now throw your razors on the ground and make it snappy, unless you want me to pull your arms out by the sockets.'

Two razors tinkled on the hard earth.

'I see we're beginning to understand each other,' said Copper. He pointed at the prone figure of the witch-doctor. 'Pick that up and bring it along,' he ordered. 'It's his own fault he can't walk.'

Perceiving the task with which they were faced, Christian and Pedro hesitated. But not for long. Copper had only to clench his big fist to expedite obedience. Shambo was a heavy man and they had some difficulty with him; but Copper did not spare them. 'What's all the fuss about?' he growled, and stepping forward took Papa Shambo by the middle of his jacket and lifted him into their arms.

Whether this exhibition of Copper's great physical strength was deliberate, or made unconsciously, Cub did not know. He was, however, quite sure that his big comrade was one of those men who seem to be unaware of exceptional strength.

They set off down the path, the two body bearers bent double under their heavy load. With a white man on each side of them and another following behind they could not escape, but Cub kept a watchful eye on them in case one should suddenly produce an unsuspected weapon. When they were about half-way Shambo showed signs of coming round, so they put him down until he was able to stagger along on his own feet, still looking more than slightly groggy.

'Get a move on,' ordered Copper. 'Before I've done with you you'll learn to do as you're told—chucking your weight about with me.'

As they walked the short distance through the town Cub could again feel unseen eyes watching the strange procession. He hoped it was so, for only

by taking a firm line could they show that they were the rightful authority on the island and masters of the situation. As Gimlet had said, any sign of leniency, which would be taken as weakness, would be fatal. And, after all, they were not doing this for any purpose of their own. Behind it all was the government's wish to improve conditions for the long-neglected people of the island.

Gimlet was standing on the steps of the Government House, over which hung the Union Jack. His expression was stern, and his blue eyes as hard as ice. The men who lined up before him, Cub noticed, found it hard to meet them. That was understandable, for he had more than once seen a tough commando quail under the penetrating scrutiny that had given Gimlet his nickname.

Gimlet spoke first to Christian. 'Did you pass on my order to these men about reporting here?'

Christian squirmed and muttered something under his breath.

'Don't mumble, man!'

'Yaas.'

'Say *sir* when you speak to me.'

'Yaas, sah.'

Gimlet turned to Pedro. When he spoke, his voice had an edge on it. 'Did I give you orders to take off that uniform?'

'I think so, sir.'

'You don't think; you know I did. Why are you still wearing it?'

'I forgot.'

'Don't lie to me. Take it off—now.' Gimlet's voice was like the crack of a whip.

Pedro stared, hate and resentment smouldering in his eyes.

'If that tunic isn't off in ten seconds I'll have it taken off.'

Pedro half-glanced at Copper, standing beside him, and started slowly to remove the garment.

'He seems to need help, Corporal,' snapped Gimlet.

Copper stripped the tunic off the man's back and tossed it on the ground. Pedro wore nothing under it.

'Now the hat.'

Pedro beat Copper to it. He threw the hat on the tunic.

Gimlet turned to Shambo. 'Now you listen to me, my man, and I'd advise you to listen carefully. The ugly game that you've been playing here

is finished. Understand? Finished. All meetings are banned except those authorized by me. Where did you get those clothes you're wearing?"

No answer.

'Take them off!'

Shambo glared defiance.

'Help him, Corporal.'

With scant ceremony Copper peeled off the jacket.

'Look at the label inside the collar.'

Copper read out the name of a well-known London tailor.

'That's where Colonel Baker bought his clothes, sir,' said Gates, in a low voice.

'Take off the rest of those clothes,' Gimlet told Shambo.

The houngan spoke for the first time. 'Gubnor Baker gib dem to me. Dey's mine.'

'Why should Governor Baker give you his best clothes?'

This question was not easy to answer and the voodoo priest was silent.

'Where is Colonel Baker now?' rasped Gimlet.

Cub did not expect an answer to this and none was forthcoming.

'All right, Corporal. Go ahead,' said Gimlet.

Copper reached for Shambo, but the houngan stepped aside and slowly undressed, leaving himself in a pair of cotton drawers.

'If you forget what happened to Colonel Baker I'll give you a little while to refresh your memory,' said Gimlet harshly. Then, to Copper. 'Lock him in gaol on a charge of being in possession of stolen property. Better chain him.'

'Aye-aye, sir.'

But this was too much for the high priest of voodooism. He started to run. But Copper anticipated him, and thrusting out a foot, tripped him, so that he sprawled in the dust. There for a space he lay, breathing heavily, his eyes glaring with such hate that Cub felt a chill run down his spine. Copper dragged him to his feet. 'None o' that,' he grunted, as the houngan began to struggle. 'One more squirm and I'll pull yer arm out. You heard what the Governor said.'

Foaming at the mouth the houngan, in Copper's iron grip, was led across the square to the gaol. Copper, as an East End policeman, knew how to handle an unruly customer. Presently he returned with the keys in his hand.

Gimlet addressed the two remaining prisoners. 'I'm going to give you both another chance,' he said quietly. 'In future, when I say I want to see

you, you'll come quickly. But I warn you, if, after this, I have any trouble from either of you, you'll have cause to regret it. Now be off and think things over.'

The men walked away in silence.

Cub, feeling that Gimlet had won the first round, hoped the people were watching. But it was, he realized, only the first round. There would no doubt be others.

Gimlet turned to them. 'As I have banned all further meetings that pagan temple will no longer be required. Corporal, take Trapper and Cub with you and burn it down, together with any other voodoo rubbish you may find. While any remains it'll be a menace. Search Shambo's hut while you're there.'

'Aye-aye, sir.'

As they started off Copper remarked: 'Same old Gimlet. When you've got an advantage, he always says, foller it up. Don't wait to be attacked, says he. Start the ball a-rolling and keep going. Am I right, Trapper, old cock?'

'*Tch*. Every time, chum,' agreed Trapper.

CHAPTER 8

Round two

THEY had taken only a few steps when Cub noticed that Rupert, the black house-boy, was marching briskly behind them. 'Where do you think you're going?' he asked.

'Come with you,' answered Rupert, not in the least abashed.

'Oh, no, you don't,' returned Cub firmly. 'You go and tell the other children there will be some more ice-cream going very soon.'

There were in fact some children standing at a respectful distance calling 'Icy—icy—icy.' Rupert scampered off to them, doing his high jumps, and they did not see him again during their trip to the houngan's dwelling.

Copper pushed over the totem poles on the way. 'We'll collect 'em later on and make a bonfire,' he remarked.

As they walked on Cub was thinking about the scene that had just been enacted in front of the Government House. It provided ample food for thought. Shambo and his associates had submitted to Gimlet's powerful personality for the moment, but he could not believe they would continue to do so. He couldn't forget the blazing hate in the baleful eyes of the witch-doctor. That it would find expression in something unpleasant he did not doubt. But, as Gimlet had said, there was no alternative to the strong line he was taking. The horrible cult of voodooism, as fostered by Shambo, and which appeared to have replaced Christianity, had to be wiped out. For years, obviously, it had been the real power on the island. Until it was wiped out it would be impossible for them to do anything for the people, which was their purpose in being there. It was not going to be easy. Gimlet was trying to break that power, and, in his usual manner, he had attacked the core of the evil by letting the people see that he, not their erstwhile taskmasters, intended to be master of the island. In the old days the three ringleaders would have been hanged out of hand, and that would probably have settled the matter. Unfortunately, such methods could no longer be justified—unless, of course, it could be proved that Colonel Baker and his party had been murdered by them. That Colonel Baker had been murdered seemed certain. But how? By voodooism? To kill a man by the power of suggestion,

as opposed to common lethal weapons, would still be murder; but it would be impossible to prove.

Another thought that occurred to Cub was the purpose behind this brutal tyranny. Did these men, Shambo and the others, exercise their power for the sheer love of it? Was it that they enjoyed being dictators or was there something more—material gain, for instance? Why did they make their victims work? Why had the men, including the Arab, been cutting sugar cane? The obvious answer was for sugar. Where was the sugar? What became of it? As raw cane it would hardly be worth exporting, even though a schooner sometimes called. In the old days there must have been mills. Was one still in use, hidden away, perhaps, in some lonely place? In a word, were these taskmasters making money by using forced, unpaid labour. It seemed possible, decided Cub.

The houngan's shack came into sight. Not a sound came from it as they approached. Not that it was thought anyone might be there after what had happened.

They went first to the small hut. Copper shouted 'Anyone at home?' There was no answer, so they went to the temple, such as it was, and threw open the door. 'Phew,' sniffed Copper. 'Time this joint had a clean-up.'

The interior decorations of the building were so childish, so crude, in fact, so pathetic in their cheap simplicity, that Cub felt a twinge of conscience at the idea of destroying them. It was such a place as small children might have designed. Flags and strips of bunting hung from the ceiling. Roughly executed figures, numbers and geometrical symbols had been daubed on the walls in garish-coloured paints. Drums of several shapes, and cymbals, stood about. It was hard to imagine that anything evil or dangerous could emanate from this. Then he saw something that made him change his mind. A live white cockerel, tied by the legs, hung from a hook. Sick with loathing he lifted the wretched bird down and set it free. It had, he imagined, been intended for some unholy sacrifice. Suddenly the atmosphere of the place became sinister. Its purpose was, he remembered, to instill the fear of death—and worse than death.

They went into the houngan's dwelling, which was something between a modern cheap-jack shop and a medieval apothecary's surgery. Bones, skeletons of birds and animals, bunches of feathers, jars, bottles and cans, stood cheek by jowl with modern cheap glass ornaments and painted pottery. The contents of some of the glass jars were not pretty. Among other things they contained dead lizards, snakes and insects. Some contained earth; others, herbs, roots and even flowers. All of these things, Cub supposed, supplied the ingredients for the witch-doctor's deadly poison.

Copper remarked on the number of empty whisky, rum and gin bottles. Presently, behind a screen, they came upon several cases of full ones.

‘What-ho!’ said Copper. ‘Looks as if his nibs kept a nice little bar parlour all to himself.’

‘These cases can go on the fire with the rest,’ replied Cub, and the work began of throwing all the heathenish furniture into the temple. While doing this they searched diligently for clues that might help to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the earlier governors. They found several items of clothing, handkerchiefs and the like, that may have belonged to the Colonel. They found his revolver. There was no doubt of that, for his initials had been scratched on the butt.

‘Maybe Shambo will be able to explain how *that* got here,’ said Copper grimly, putting the weapon into his pocket. He looked around. ‘Well, that seems to be about the lot. Let’s go and put a match to the junk.’

They were turning towards the door when from somewhere close at hand came a sound which, in certain circumstances would have been commonplace. But occurring where it did, it struck Cub all of a heap, as the saying is. He stared in blank astonishment at the faces of his companions. Their expressions registered the same disbelief as his own. ‘That—that’s morse,’ he ejaculated.

The dots and dashes stopped, then went on again.

‘Morse it is, chum, and it ain’t got no business here,’ said Copper, in a curious voice. ‘It’s coming from over here.’ He took three purposeful steps to a small covered table against the wall. From the votive offerings it supported they had taken it to be an altar, or something of the sort, which was why it had not been touched. Copper seized the faded red fabric that covered in the lower part and tore it aside.

He remained rigid, the cloth still in his hand, staring. The others did the same. For a few seconds nobody spoke. Words were unnecessary. What one could see all could see.

There, behind the curtain, had been installed a small but modern wireless transmitter.

Cub snatched a pencil and an old envelope from his pocket intending to take down the message that was coming over the air, but it ended abruptly. He realized instantly the importance of their discovery.

Said Copper, in a hushed voice, ‘Well, if that ain’t a fair corker. S’welp me, you could knock me over with a match stick.’

Trapper clicked his tongue. ‘I felt in my bones that there was something phony about this outfit, but I wouldn’t have guessed this in a hundred years.

Somehow, voodoo and radio don't mix.'

'Evidently they do—here,' said Cub. 'The sooner the Skipper knows about this the better. It alters the whole picture more than anything I could have imagined.'

'Ha! Alters it. My oath it does, and then some,' declared Copper. 'It makes it a different picture. And I'll tell yer something else. There's more cooking on this little island than voodoo and sugar.' He looked at Cub. 'What's the drill?'

'We can't stay here,' answered Cub thoughtfully. 'Yet Christian and Pedro are free. They must be in the know. They might come here and tip off the people at the other end that Shambo is in gaol, and why. I suggest we put the instrument temporarily out of action to prevent anyone from using it until Gimlet decides what to do, I'll take the plugs out. When the people at the other end find they can't make contact they'll suppose it's a breakdown.' So saying Cub removed two of the plugs and put them in his pocket. 'Let's start the fire and get back to Gimlet,' he concluded.

They went over to the 'temple'. Copper put a match to some flimsy material and in a minute a pillar of fire and smoke was marking the end of the witch-doctor's stock-in-trade.



Sick with loathing, Cub set it free ([page 93](#))

They waited a little longer to make sure the fire could not be put out should anyone attempt it, and then turned their faces to the path.

Twenty minutes later Cub was telling Gimlet of the discovery of the wireless equipment in the witch-doctor's shack.

‘So that’s it,’ said Gimlet softly. ‘I would never have suspected it. It never occurred to me that Shambo was anything but what he appears to be—an island negro with a little more intelligence than the majority of them. This new aspect hooks up with some of the things Gates told us. About the schooner coming here, for instance. It’s quite clear now that Shambo’s hold over the people here isn’t organized merely to flatter his vanity. There’s more behind it, and before we’ve finished we’ll find out what it is.’

Cub put the radio valves on the table.

‘You did right to take those,’ confirmed Gimlet. ‘Christian or Pedro must know about the set and may well try to use it. They’re in the racket, whatever it is. To-morrow morning you can take the valves back and wait for messages to come through. They may tell us all we want to know.’

Now during this conversation Cub had noticed Rupert peeping round the corner of the house and making what appeared to be urgent signals. He walked over to him. ‘What’s the matter, Rupert?’ he asked.

The boy was shivering, and appeared to have some difficulty in speaking, either as a result of fear, or excitement, or both. He swallowed several times and then managed to get out: ‘Uncle Joe.’

‘What about Joe?’

‘Him bery sick. Die quick.’

Gimlet, who had heard this, came over. ‘What’s the matter with him?’

Rupert’s eyes rolled. His face was nearly green under its black pigment and he appeared to be on the point of fainting. With what was obviously an effort he managed to stammer: ‘He—heg—got dem-mark.’

‘So that’s why he hasn’t turned up,’ muttered Gimlet. ‘I was expecting him. We’ll attend to this right away. Everything else can wait.’ He went down the verandah steps and set off at a quick pace for Joe’s house.

The others went with him.

They found Joe sitting on his doorstep, his head in his hands. Although he must have heard them arrive, even if he did not see them, he did not look up when they came to a halt in front of him. Copper caught Cub’s eye and jerked a thumb at the door on which had been chalked the fatal mark. Doubtless Joe’s neighbours knew about it, for over the town hung the silence of death.

‘What’s the matter, Joe?’ asked Gimlet kindly.

The stricken man lifted a face from which all hope had departed. ‘I’s done for, Gubnor,’ he said in a voice that was strangely calm.

Gimlet forced a short laugh. ‘Why? Because someone has been scribbling on your door?’

‘It’s no use, Gubnor. I’s done.’ Joe’s head sank back into his hands.

‘Nonsense! Come and do some work and forget about it.’

Joe did not move, or speak.

Gimlet looked steadily at the negro for half a minute. Then beckoning to the others, he walked away a few paces. ‘Unless we do something about it, and quickly, that man is going to die,’ he said in a hard voice. ‘He believes

it, and while he believes it nothing can save him. Such is the power of auto-suggestion.'

'It's plain murder,' growled Copper.

'Of course it's murder, but that doesn't alter the fact.'

'Shambo could put him right,' said Cub thoughtfully.

'He could. But to ask him to do so would be to admit his power.'

'What about a dose of physic?' suggested Copper. 'Tell him it's stronger than Shambo's muck.'

Gimlet shook his head. 'He wouldn't believe it, so it would be useless.'

'Just a minute,' put in Cub. 'Let's admit that Shambo could save him. The argument against that is, to ask him would be an admission of his magic. Why ask him? Why not *make* him? That would be a different matter. Surely, if you forced Shambo to withdraw his death sentence it would prove, not only to Joe but everyone else, that we are stronger than Shambo.'

'Physically,' admitted Gimlet.

'All to the good,' persisted Cub. 'It would show that physical strength is superior to mumbo-jumbo, and as I see it that's the crux of the whole business. It's bound to come to that eventually.'

'Cub's got something there, Skipper,' asserted Copper. 'I'd put my money on physical strength every time. If it doesn't win here, we're sunk.'

'The alternative is to resort to Shambo's own methods—pretend to take a devil or something out of Joe's stomach,' went on Cub. 'That would be tricky. We haven't come to that yet. We couldn't run the island on conjuring tricks, anyway.'

Gimlet looked at Joe. He looked at the mark on the door. 'I think you're right,' he said slowly. 'We must save this man's life or not a single soul on this island will dare to speak to us. Corporal, bring Shambo here. Trapper, fetch a rope from the house.'

Copper and Trapper went off on their errands. Gimlet returned to Joe, whose head had sunk down to his knees. 'It's all right, Joe,' he said, cheerfully. 'We'll soon fix you up. Don't worry. We won't let you die.'

Cub, looking around, saw furtive faces at windows, watching.

Presently Copper returned, with Shambo's arm in a lock-hold. From the house came Trapper, carrying a rope. In a minute everyone was standing in front of the dying man.

Gimlet spoke to Shambo in a voice that had been known to make commandos turn pale. Pointing at Joe he said: 'You are responsible for this

man's condition. The moment he dies I'm going to hang you for murder, so unless you want to die with him you'd better get busy.'

Trapper had already made a noose at the end of his rope. He put it over the witch-doctor's head and drew it taut.

The hate on Shambo's face gave way to fear. He looked, as Copper afterwards put it, like a trapped rat. Whether or not Gimlet would actually have carried out his threat, he obviously believed it. His eyes opened wide. He drew a deep breath, his nostrils dilating. Then, without speaking he walked to the door and erased the chalk mark. Returning, he mumbled a few words over Joe's head.

Joe looked up. His face was transformed. He ran to Gimlet, dropped on his knees and put his head on his feet.

'All right, Joe. That's enough,' said Gimlet. 'Feeling better?'

'Yaas, Gubnor.'

'Good. I told you I'd fix you up. You see I keep my word.'

'Yaas, Gubnor.'

'Very well. Now go to the Government House and I'll find some work for you.' To Copper, Gimlet said: 'Take this scoundrel back to jail.' Then, to Shambo: 'The next time anything like this happens on the island I'll have you flogged until you cry for mercy, and should Joe, or anyone else, die without apparent cause, you'll hang within the hour. I mean that, so be careful.'

Copper jerked the rope. 'This way,' he ordered.

Gimlet and the others walked back to the Government House.

CHAPTER 9

A visitor by night

IT seemed to Cub that there was now plenty to do and plenty to talk about. Things were, he thought, going well, but the general project, which was the setting up of a proper administration on the island, instead of being simplified had become more complicated. It was true that Shambo, whom he felt was their chief antagonist, was under lock and key; but they could not keep him in gaol without bringing a charge against him. Christian and Pedro were at large, and while they were keeping out of sight for the moment it was not to be supposed that they would accept their dismissal without further protest. Behind these men there were others. The radio in Shambo's hut bore witness to that. He would not be likely to install such equipment even if he could afford it, which seemed highly improbable, merely for amusement. It was there for a purpose. What that purpose was remained to be discovered. The murder of Colonel Baker and his staff had to be investigated. That could not be ignored. Aside from these things the confidence of the population had to be gained; and lastly, but by no means least, the island would have to be explored for its agricultural possibilities, in order to ascertain if it could be made self-supporting. How all these things were to be done in the face of Shambo's hostility, and without the co-operation of the people, Cub could not imagine. It seemed to him that Gimlet would need twenty assistants, not three (he didn't count Gates) to tackle the job. When Trapper came in from the kitchen with a big pot of tea he made a remark to this effect.

Gimlet, who was standing in the doorway, turned. 'Nobody ever has enough help to do all the things he would like to do,' he said quietly. 'We shall have to do the best we can with what we've got. As things are, one of us at least is always tied to the house. It would be asking for trouble to leave it unguarded. The first thing, then, is to enrol some troops. We'll start with Joe. I shall make him N.C.O. in charge of the local levies by raising him to lance-corporal right away.'

'Crikey!' exclaimed Copper. 'That's what you call accelerated promotion, and not 'arf. It took me three years to get my first stripe.'

‘Get him fixed up in some sort of uniform right away,’ ordered Gimlet. ‘I must make out a report on conditions here for the Colonial Office in case the aircraft comes with stores.’

‘What about Joe’s pay, sir?’ asked Copper.

‘A shilling a day.’

‘What about his quarters?’

‘Fix him up in the stable that joins the house. It’s in pretty good order—only needs cleaning up. Joe can do that himself. Rupert can help him. We’ll make further plans when I come back.’ Gimlet went into his office.

Joe, who had been waiting outside, was called in and asked if he would like to be the first member of the new guard force. It was hard to convince him that this was not a joke at his expense; but when he was assured that it was a serious matter his face was a picture. Cub marvelled that only a short while before this same man was on the point of death. An old white shirt was found, and a blue chevron, made by cutting up a tie, was sewn on each arm. A stripe decorated a spare pair of shorts. Finally Copper presented the new recruit with a belt to which was attached Colonel Baker’s revolver and demonstrated by example how he was to mount guard outside the house. Thus Gimlet found him, with Rupert watching him with a broad grin, when he reappeared after writing his report.

Gimlet smiled approval. ‘That should produce some more recruits,’ he opined.

‘What’s the drill now, sir?’ inquired Copper.

‘My difficulty is, I want to be in several places at once,’ answered Gimlet. ‘I must make a survey of the place. I shall have to decide what’s to be done with Shambo. I want to talk to the people. Then there’s this zombie business. I don’t know what to make of those miserable wretches we saw working in the cane field. We can’t leave them in that condition. If we could bring that Arab, as Gates calls him, back to his proper senses, he might be able to give us some useful information. Actually, I imagine he’s a Syrian. There are a lot in the West Indies. He may know the truth about Colonel Baker. I can’t imagine a soldier like Baker succumbing to suggestion. I’d say he was poisoned.’

‘Talking of the cane fields, what becomes of the sugar crop?’ asked Cub.

‘That’s a point,’ answered Gimlet. ‘Call Joe in. He may be able to help us there.’

Joe was fetched and the question put to him.

He knew the answer. It was quite simple. The cane was crushed in an old mill now overgrown with forest. The syrup was casked and carried by the natives to the schooner when it called. He himself had helped to carry it, although he got nothing for his trouble. If he did not exaggerate it appeared that a considerable quantity of high quality sugar was still produced on the island. Where the ship took it he did not know, but Christian and Pedro were usually drunk after it had gone. Asked who the sugar plantations belonged to he said, 'The Government.' This turned out to be Christian's government, upheld by Pedro and his men.

'So that's the game, is it?' murmured Gimlet.

All Joe knew about the ship was that it was manned by West Indians, although a white man was in charge.

The change in Joe was astonishing. He was now more than willing to talk, and there was no doubt that this was the result of Gimlet's rough handling of the houngan. Clearly, strength, physical or otherwise, was something the negroes understood. Gimlet told Joe he could move his family over to the barracks, as the stable was now called, if he so wished.

When Joe returned to his post Cub remarked that for the first time some men were standing in the square, watching him, obviously more than a little interested. He pointed them out to Gimlet, who suggested that Joe be asked to speak to them with a view to enlistment. This was done, and everyone smiled at the new lance-corporal's air of importance as he marched across the square.

'That's the stuff,' said Copper. 'Funny what a uniform does fer a man, ain't it?'

Gimlet turned back into the room. 'There's nothing more we can do today, so let's make a plan for to-morrow. I, taking Gates, who knows his way about, will make a tour of inspection. I want to have another look at these alleged zombies. We can't have that sort of slave labour here however it is organized. I also want to have a look at that churchyard. Corporal, you and Cub will take up positions from which you can watch Shambo's hut. Put the valves back in the radio and note any messages that come through. Trapper, you'll remain here and deal with anything that arises—applications for enlistment, if any, sick people, and so on. Give the kids another issue of ice-cream and don't forget to feed the prisoner. That all clear?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Copper, speaking for all of them.

'I needn't warn you to be careful,' went on Gimlet. 'I know everything appears to be quiet, but don't take that for granted. There are dangerous men about, and I'll warrant they're hatching some devilment at this moment. If

they hated us when we came, after to-day's performance they'll be grinding their teeth. They'll try something, you may be sure of that, so watch your step and be ready for it when it comes. This is only a small island, but these rascals know their way about and we don't; so if they went into hiding I doubt if an army corps could winkle them out.'

Cub looked at the dark tangle of forest that climbed high into the hills and perceived the truth of this. It would be easier to find a pin in a straw-stack than a man in such a jungle.

'They may try their hocus-pocus stuff first,' went on Gimlet. 'But when they find it doesn't work they'll probably resort to direct violence. Anyway, let us not fool ourselves that we've finished with them.'

The remaining daylight was spent getting the 'barracks' ready, and sundry other jobs about the house.

At sundown Copper went over to the gaol with food for the prisoner. He brought it back. 'He's gone,' he announced, looking shaken.

All eyes went to his face.

'Don't ask me 'ow he done it,' went on Copper, putting the food on the table. 'The door was locked. It's still locked. The chains were locked. I locked 'em myself. They're still locked. But there's nobody in 'em. Looks like there's something in this spook talk after all. We ought to have 'ung the swipe.'

'Rot!' snapped Gimlet. 'Obviously, someone has a duplicate set of keys. Pedro probably. I should have foreseen the possibility. Well, if he's gone he's gone. It means that until new locks are fitted the gaol is no use to us. Let's have supper.'

Night fell. The drums were silent. But as they prepared for bed one started its maddening rhythm a long way off.

'That'll be Shambo, still trying to put the wind up the mob,' asserted Copper. 'Pah! Never mind making him rub that chalk mark out. We oughta rubbed *him* out. Okay. Lights out.'

He was reaching for his candle when the inner door opened and into the room came Rupert, making meaningless signs with his hands. His eyes were wide, showing the whites. His teeth were chattering.

'Now what?' growled Copper, springing out of bed. 'What's the matter, kid?' he asked quickly.

But Rupert was past speech. All he could do was swallow and point down the passage that ended at the back door.

‘Okay,’ said Copper. ‘I get it.’ Snatching up the gun and the torch that lay beside his bed he went quickly but cautiously down the corridor. Cub and Trapper were at his heels.

The back door was locked, but an open fanlight, too small for a man to get through, showed how Rupert had got into the house. Very quietly Copper unlocked the back door and opened it. Beyond lay a flagged courtyard, overgrown, like everything else, with weeds. It may have measured a score of paces each way. On two sides it was hemmed in by a black wall of tangled shrubs and palms. The other side, to the right of the house, was occupied by out-buildings, mostly dilapidated, of which one was the stable that had been converted into quarters for Joe and Rupert. The whole scene was bathed in brilliant moonlight. The only sound was the distant throbbing of the drum. There was not a movement anywhere. Not even a drooping palm frond stirred. The trees might have been painted in solid black on the sky.

‘Shall I fetch Gimlet?’ breathed Cub.

‘No. *Ssh.*’

The stable door had been opened. Moving with the slow deliberation of a sleep-walker, his hands held in front of him, came Joe, still in his shirt and shorts. As if feeling his way he moved silently towards the black wall of the jungle.

By staring hard at the spot where he would reach it Cub thought he could just discern a slight movement, something a shade lighter than the background. He squeezed Copper’s arm and pointed.

Slowly the torch, as yet unlighted, in Copper’s left hand came up until it was level with his shoulder. There was a faint *snick* and its beam stabbed the night. Standing in the round spotlight was a man. His right arm was raised. In the hand was a curved blade. Joe was within five paces of it, still moving forward as if being drawn by a magnet.

Copper leapt forward like a sprinter off the mark. In a flash he was half-way across the yard. His gun blazed, once, twice, three times, shattering the silence.

The man with the dagger let out an extraordinary cry, staggered about for a moment and then fell. The weapon clattered on the flagstones. By that time Copper was on him, gun held by the muzzle ready to strike. But there was no need.

Then a strange thing happened. Joe spoke, and he spoke in a natural, if somewhat indignant, voice. ‘What youse mens doing here?’ he asked. ‘What’s dat noise?’

‘It’s all right, Joe,’ answered Cub quickly, realizing that the man had in fact been sleep-walking—or something like it. At all events, he had been unconscious of his actions.

‘Love a duck! If I ain’t shot the Arab,’ exclaimed Copper.

Joe looked down. When his eyes fell on the man lying there he let out a hoarse cry. ‘Don’ touch dat man nobody,’ he shouted.

Gimlet, in his pyjamas, gun in hand, darted up. ‘What’s all this?’

Cub answered. ‘It’s a bit hard to explain. Rupert came to us looking scared to death. We came out to see why. Joe was walking across the yard towards this fellow who was standing under the trees with a knife in his hand. Copper shot him.’

‘It’s the Arab,’ said Copper.

‘So I see. Very odd. Bring him into the house so that we can see how badly he’s hurt.’

Between them they carried the unconscious man into the kitchen. Trapper fetched the big oil lamp from the sitting-room. At first Cub felt sure the Arab was dead, for there was blood on his face; but this proved to be no more than a superficial graze, presumably the wound that had stunned him, for the only other one was in the fleshy part of the man’s upper arm. Neither wound was likely to be fatal, or even serious. They were washed and dressed, and the man made as comfortable as possible on the floor of a spare room.

‘This is a nuisance,’ muttered Gimlet. ‘Someone will have to sit up with him.’

Copper showed him the dagger, which he had picked up. ‘Nice little toothpick to be totin’ around on a dark night.’

Gimlet frowned. ‘I’m still not clear about this. Why did Joe walk out as you say he did, and what was the Arab’s motive in coming here? He has nothing against us.’

‘Dat man don’ know what he do,’ declared Joe. ‘He’s dead.’

He seemed quite unmoved by the narrowness of his escape, and it struck Cub suddenly that he still did not realize that he was the intended victim. Indeed, Cub suspected that he knew nothing about what was happening until Copper had fired, when the noise of the shots had brought him out of the trance, or whatever subconscious state he was in.

Cub thought it better not to tell Joe the truth. He saw Rupert peeping nervously round the doorpost. ‘Here’s somebody who may be able to explain things,’ he said. ‘Rupert, come here.’

Hanging his head the boy came into the room.

‘What was it that scared you?’ asked Cub.

‘Couldn’t say, massa. I wake up mighty scared.’

‘Did you see anything?’

‘I see Joe sitting up in bed stiff like dead man. Him look mighty scared too. I feel de debbil coming close so I run.’

‘Did you see this devil?’

‘No, suh. But I feel him creeping mighty close.’

Cub turned to Joe. ‘Did you see or hear anybody?’

‘No, suh. I don’ know nothin’ ’bout it till I wakes up in de moonlight.’

Gimlet cut in. ‘They can’t help us. They’re telling the truth. A rabbit doesn’t know why the presence of a stoat can paralyse it with fear even though it can’t see the beast. It’s one of those things. The point is, we’ve got a sick man on our hands, and from all accounts, a peculiar one at that.’

‘Dat pore man don’ know nuttin’ ’bout nuttin’,’ asserted Joe. ‘Him dead. Him just obey orders. Can’t stop.’

‘Don’t talk rubbish,’ said Gimlet impatiently. ‘He fell down fast enough when a bullet hit him, didn’t he?’

‘Dat’s de truf,’ answered Joe in a voice of wonder. ‘Shambo say zombie can’t die ’cause he’s dead. Den why he fall down? I think Shambo a liar.’

‘Of course he’s a liar,’ put in Copper. ‘He’ll fall down too, if ever he gets a bit of hot lead through his ribs, and you can take my word for that. What say you, Trapper old pal? Am I right?’

‘Every time.’

‘That’s enough,’ said Gimlet shortly. ‘Let’s get back to bed. Off you go, Joe. And you, Rupert. We’ll fix a lock on your door to-morrow to prevent any more sleep-walking.’

‘Yes, suh.’

The distant drum was silent.

The Houngan hits back

CUB had gone to sleep thinking about the strange affair in the courtyard—for strange it certainly was—and his first thoughts the following morning turned to the same mysterious happening. What was it that had sent Rupert to them in a state of jitters? He had neither seen nor heard anything. What, then, did he fear? He himself did not know, yet in the event there had been ample justification for his terror. Was it that instinct for danger which civilized man has lost but which many wild creatures still possess? There seemed to be no other reasonable answer.

Then there was Joe's behaviour. The sinister influence that had affected Rupert had affected him to a still greater degree. Had they not intervened it would certainly have lured him to his death, although he appeared to be unaware of it. It was plain that he did not know what he was doing; and even after it was all over he still did not realize the awful peril to which he had been exposed and had so narrowly escaped. Obviously, had he been normal, and known that the man with the knife was there, he wouldn't have gone out. His actions suggested that he had been the victim of some form of mesmerism. Had the distant drum anything to do with that? Had it, by insinuating itself into his sleeping brain, conveyed a message, an order, which he was powerless to disobey?

And what of the Arab? What possible reason had he for wanting to kill Joe? Apparently none. Yet he must have come there determined to commit murder. It didn't make sense. Of course, reasoned Cub as he dressed, if Joe had in fact been actuated by some unholy power exerted by the houngan, the same might well have been applied to the Arab. He, too, was obeying a telepathic signal. But that was more understandable, for according to Gates the Arab was a zombie, and whether he had ever died or not, he was completely in the hands of his master, Shambo. But all this was to admit that Shambo possessed some secret mystic power, in which case the question arose, how far could this power extend? Could it be made to operate against white men as well as blacks. The disappearance of Colonel Baker and his staff suggested that it could—according to Gates's account. If that were so

then they were all in grave danger. Gates, clearly, believed in this mysterious power, against which ordinary lethal weapons were useless. He had seen it operate—or thought he had. Gimlet did not believe in it. Did that make him immune from it? It might, if the thing worked through the imagination. It was hard to see where imagination ended and fact began. Gimlet was convinced that it was all trickery of some sort; but then he was a man with an exceptionally forceful personality. It would need a more powerful personality than his own to make him do anything against his will. Cub could not believe that Shambo possessed the stronger will. Indeed, Gimlet had demonstrated that his will was the stronger by forcing the houngan to lift the death sentence he had passed on Joe.

Thus pondered Cub as he got into his clothes. It was all disconcerting, to say the least of it, he decided.

Copper broke into his meditations by breezing into the room.

‘Listen! I’ll tell you something,’ he said loudly. ‘There’s nothing wrong with the Arab.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Cub. ‘If two bullets——’

‘I ain’t talking about bullet holes,’ broke in Copper. ‘He’s come round, and he’s as right as you or me. Asked me who I was. Wanted to know what he was doing here.’

The door of Gimlet’s room had been ajar. He came in. ‘What’s that you’re saying?’

‘The Arab, sir. He ain’t no zombie. He’s as right as rain. Lively as a cricket. He wouldn’t believe it when I told him he’d been shot. Wanted to know who shot him and where it happened. If you asked me, I’d say he don’t know nothing about what ’appened last night.’

‘I must have a look at this,’ said Gimlet quickly. ‘Thinking the matter over I’ve come to the conclusion that the man had been hypnotised. Maybe that crack on the skull you gave him brought him to his senses. The shock may have broken the power in which he was being held by somebody—presumably Shambo.’

He went through to the room where the Arab was now sitting up. Cub, who had followed, saw that his expression was entirely different from what it had been when he had seen him in the cane field. The light of sanity was in his eyes.

Gimlet spoke to him. ‘Did you ever see me before?’

The Arab looked puzzled. ‘No.’

‘Don’t you remember me standing in front of you when you were cutting cane?’

‘But I haven’t been cutting the cane.’

‘What have you been doing?’

‘Working in my shop.’

‘Where were you last night?’

‘I was asleep.’

‘Didn’t you come to Government House to—see—somebody?’

‘No.’

‘Is this your knife?’ Gimlet showed the weapon.

The Arab took it. ‘Yes. It is mine. How did you get it?’

‘Never mind.’ Gimlet turned to the others. ‘That tells us all we want to know,’ he said softly. ‘He wasn’t responsible for his actions. For some reason or other the power that was directing his actions has been broken. Dress his wounds and see that he has some breakfast. I’ll talk to him again presently.’

When, twenty minutes later, Cub went out into the courtyard to look at the scene of the moonlight drama, he found Copper already there.

Seeing Cub, Copper called: ‘Come over ’ere, mate.’

Cub joined him.

‘Do you remember exactly where the Arab was standing when I let him have it?’

Cub went to the spot. ‘Here.’

‘Sure?’

‘Positive.’

‘He wasn’t in the bushes?’

‘Definitely not. Had he been we shouldn’t have seen him. He was in the open.’

‘That’s what I thought. Now take a dekko at this and tell me what you make of it. We seem to be in the thick of some rum goings on, but this is the rummiest yet.’ Copper parted the bushes and pointed to the ground just inside the fringe of undergrowth. ‘What’s that?’

Cub answered without hesitation. ‘Blood.’

‘Right. If the Arab was standing where you say, how did it get there?’

‘There’s only one answer to that,’ asserted Cub. ‘The Arab wasn’t alone. There must have been somebody standing behind him, directly in line with

you. One of your shots hit him.'

'That's how I worked it out,' stated Copper. 'If we're right, then last night's little bickering becomes a horse of a different colour. Am I right?'

'Absolutely,' agreed Cub. 'Whoever was here must have bolted when your shot hit him. He may have dropped at the time. Anyway, he's gone now. This explains something that has puzzled me. When you fired somebody cried out. Having heard the Arab speak I'd swear it wasn't his voice.'

'You reckon it was Shambo, eh, directing operations?'

'If it was it might explain something else. If he was wounded, and fell unconscious, or nearly so, his hold over the Arab could have been broken. The same with Joe, who seemed to come out of a trance at that moment. The Arab is all right now.'

'Then I 'ope that dirty witch-doctor is down for good so the Arab can stay all right,' said Copper. 'Let's see if we can follow this blood trail. It might not be too late to find the blighter.'

'He was on his feet when he got here, anyhow,' said Cub a minute or two later, pointing at a spot of blood on a leaf about four feet from the ground.

'I must have hit him high up,' observed Copper.

Only with the greatest difficulty were they able to follow the trail for a few yards into the thicket, and there the undergrowth became such a tangle, and the shade of the trees so dense, that they had to give up. In any case Trapper was shouting that breakfast was in, so they retraced their steps.

'Gimlet'll be interested in this,' said Cub, brushing himself down when they were back in the courtyard.

Very soon, at the breakfast table, they were telling him about it.

'It must have been either Pedro or Shambo,' averred Gimlet. 'Probably Shambo. He was there to see the Arab did his work properly—unless it is that he can exert a greater influence when he's near at hand. You may be right when you say Copper's shot broke the spell. I've been talking to the Arab again. He seems to be quite normal and wants to get up. I'm satisfied that his mind has been a blank for some time, poor wretch. I wonder is it worth while trying to follow that trail into the jungle?'

Cub answered. 'I don't think so. It was heavy going, and getting worse. You can't see a yard. It would be a slow job, and I doubt if you'd ever catch up with a man who's used to that sort of thing. It would be asking for trouble, too, if he happened to be armed.'

Gimlet nodded. 'All right. We'll leave it. If the man was Shambo the chances are he'd try to get to his hut. You were going there this morning so you may see something of him. The sooner you're on your way the better.'

'We'll move off,' replied Cub, getting up, and putting the radio valves in his pocket. 'Come on, Copper. Let's get cracking.'

'Be careful,' warned Gimlet. 'You're dealing with something more dangerous than a poisonous snake.'

'We'll watch it,' promised Cub.

In a few minutes they were on their way, taking the path, not so much because it was the easiest route as because the forest on either side was, if not literally impenetrable, nearly so—at least, to those unaccustomed to such travel. To force a passage through it would be slow, arduous labour.

They advanced cautiously, reconnoitring every corner before rounding it and watching the ground for marks. They were about half-way when Cub pointed to a single spot of blood. 'It looks as if he came this way,' he whispered.

The effect of this was to cause them to redouble their caution, stopping often to listen. They heard nothing. In the sultry heat the silence seemed to press on Cub like a blanket. It seemed incredible that in a spot so wild there should be no song of a bird or sign of animal life. Again the unpleasant feeling came over him that eyes were watching, although this, he suspected, was imagination, due to his nerves being at full stretch. Not that he was in any doubt about the dangerous nature of their sortie. What he feared was, exposed as they were, in conditions to which their enemies were accustomed and they were not, should an attack be made on them they would be put out of action before they could defend themselves. He had, of course, found himself in situations far more perilous when engaged in commando missions, without feeling quite like this. He could only suppose that the reason was because on those occasions he knew precisely what form an assault would take, whereas here he did not.

They reached the final bend beyond which stood the houngan's hut. Pressing themselves into the tangle of vegetation that lined the track they moved forward an inch at a time. Cub could see no one, hear nothing, but still he could not shake off the feeling that hostile forces were present, waiting, watching. With sweat trickling down his face from heat and tension he drew his gun and found solace in its hard companionship.

Suddenly Copper said: 'I'm not crawling for any bone-rattling witch-doctor,' and marched boldly forward.

Now, thought Cub, we shall see. All he saw was the hut standing silent and apparently deserted, exactly as they had last seen it. Nothing happened.

‘Anyone at home,’ said Copper loudly, on reaching the door.

There was no answer.

They went inside and saw at once that somebody had been there, for a few pieces of stick still smouldered on the slab of stone that passed for a hearth, giving off a wisp of pale blue smoke which, having no outlet, hung about, filling the place with a strange aromatic smell.

They saw at a glance that nobody was there, for the hut consisted only of a single room, with no windows. There were two doors, or rather doorways, for there were no actual doors. Curtains of some rough material hung over the openings. The one in front was of normal size. The one at the opposite end was small, giving access to a backyard, so to speak, littered with rubbish, vegetable refuse, empty cans and the like. This Cub observed, for he had at once pulled the curtain aside to see what was behind it. Returning, he replaced the valves in the radio.

Copper squatted on a stool. ‘What do we do now—just wait?’

‘I suppose so,’ answered Cub. ‘All the same, I don’t think we should just sit here as if the place was a café. It strikes me as being no sort of a trap to get caught in. You stay where you are. By pulling that curtain down you can watch the front. I’ll watch the rear. We shall both hear the radio if anything comes through. I’ll take it down.’

‘Okay,’ agreed Copper, taking out a packet of cigarettes, crushed as usual, and selecting one.

Cub went to the rear. He did not draw the curtain, perceiving that if he did, in his light clothes he would be more conspicuous against the dark background. Instead, finding an empty biscuit tin, he sat just outside with the curtain at his back. From this position he could not see Copper, but as they were only two or three yards apart, and each could hear any movement the other made, it did not seem to matter. Actually, it was to matter a great deal, but Cub was not to know that. At the time it merely struck him as the best arrangement to counter any attempt at interference.

Nothing happened. Time went on. He began to yawn, for sitting there doing nothing was tedious and the sticky heat seemed to sap his vitality. Even when the radio suddenly started to buzz Morse he found it an effort to take the message down on the small writing pad he had brought for the purpose. When the message ended he could make nothing of it, for all he had written were lines of letters that were obviously a code. He stared at them for some time in the hope of finding a clue that would enable him to

decipher it, but he found it hard to concentrate; so hard, in fact, that for the first time into his head flashed a suspicion that something was wrong. At first he thought he might be sickening for fever. He opened his mouth to speak to Copper, but no words came. Only with the greatest difficulty did he get on his feet. Staggering, he clutched at the curtain. It came down in his hand. Copper was on his back, on the floor. His gun lay near his hand.

Cub did not see this clearly. He seemed to be looking through a mist in which nothing was still, but floating about. Mustering his reeling senses he took a pace forward. He knew he had not the strength to get Copper out but he would try. He fell forward. As he struggled to rise something filled the front doorway. He saw Pedro's face, leering. It looked enormous, growing as it moved towards him. He loathed it. He hated it as he had never hated anything before. It may have been his rage that gave him strength for a final despairing effort. If he never did anything else he'd destroy that grinning, leering horror.

Raising his gun he pulled the trigger. *Bang! bang! bang!* Three times he fired. After the silence the explosions seemed to fill the whole world with sound. The room spun. And in the middle of it spun the face, huge and grotesque. But it was no longer grinning.

Gimlet takes over

GIMLET, accompanied by Gates, made a short tour of inspection of the town and its immediate environs without any incident worth recording. As far as the inhabitants were concerned, the best that could be said was, things were not quite as difficult as they had been. That is to say, while the atmosphere of decay and desolation still hung over the place, a few people, mostly women, did at least show themselves as they went about their usual household work, sometimes with a mumbled, 'Morning, Gubnor.' The children were less fearful, following the proceedings and sometimes calling, 'Icy-icy.'

'I think I've got my general bearings,' Gimlet told Gates after a while. 'There's certainly plenty to do here.'

They returned to Government House, getting a smart salute from Joe, to find Trapper talking to five men who had presented themselves for enlistment in the new force. Three were friends of Joe. The other two, strangely enough, were Pedro's men, who, said Trapper, had been attracted by the idea of drawing pay—a condition of service apparently unknown on Santelucia.

'Take their names and find them something to do until I'm ready to deal with them,' Gimlet told Trapper. 'I want to have another talk with the Arab. How is he?'

'Mending fast, sir. He wants to go back to his shop. He doesn't seem to realize what's happened to it, or how long he's been away.'

It did not take Gimlet long to satisfy himself that the man's memory, as far as recent events were concerned, was a blank. The things that had happened months before were to him as yesterday. In other words, from the day he had fallen under the influence of the voodoo witch-doctor, up to the time he had been shot, there was a period of time about which he knew nothing. The odd thing was, he was unaware of this. A slice had been cut out of his life.

He turned out to be, as Gimlet had suspected, a Syrian; or his parents had come from Syria. He himself had been born in Trinidad and was a British subject. Like most of these people he was a trader, and something of a craftsman in wood and metal. Hearing that there was no shop worth the name on Santelucia Island he had decided to break new ground and open one. Now he wanted to go home, and begged Gimlet to send him back to Trinidad.

‘I tell you, master, this is an evil place,’ he said earnestly. ‘There is death everywhere. There is death in the food you eat, in the water you drink, and in the air you breathe. This I swear by Allah—may his name be praised.’

‘Do you remember Colonel Baker?’ inquired Gimlet.

‘Yes. A good man. Too good, for he would not think evil of anyone. He spoke to me often as he passed my shop. One day he said he was going to the house of the houngan, Papa Shambo, who was making much trouble for him. I implored him not to go, for I had seen others go that way and they did not return. But he went, and may Allah forgive me, I watched him go and dare not follow. I did not see him again. This, I swear by the Prophet, is the truth.’

‘You don’t know what happened to him?’ questioned Gimlet.

‘No. Nobody knows what happens in that den of Shatan, for those who go do not return, except when meetings are held to praise heathen gods, and, so I have been told, do unholy things with the dead. Of these things no man dare speak for fear of the death that comes in the night.’

‘You spoke of these things with Colonel Baker?’

‘I did.’

‘Yet you did not die?’

For a moment the Arab looked puzzled. ‘It was the will of Allah. He is the Knower.’

Gimlet looked uneasy. ‘You do not believe in this black magic?’

‘How could I, under Allah?’

‘Yet you say it is dangerous to go to the houngan’s hut?’

‘Yes.’

‘Tell me why, exactly.’

‘I do not know. I only know that people who go there die. When these black people are called they go, although they know they go to meet death. But that this is by magic I will not believe.’

Gimlet turned to Trapper, who had come into the room. He looked concerned. ‘I’m beginning to wonder if it was wise to let Cub and Copper

go there. Some form of devilment must go on.'

Trapper shrugged. 'They can take care of themselves.'

'In ordinary circumstances, yes. But these are not ordinary circumstances. They've been away for some time, and, frankly, after what this man has told me I'm getting a bit worried. Take care of things here while I go to see if they're all right.' To the Arab he said: 'I take it you have never been to one of these meetings at Shambo's hut?'

'I have not.'

'You have heard rumours of what goes on there?'

'I have heard men talking when they did not think I could hear.'

'You repeated these things to Colonel Baker?'

'I did.'

'Yet you came to no harm? Why was that?'

'Because I do not believe in voodoo. It is true the mark was put on my door by a man who rode backwards on a horse in the dead of night. I saw him pass. In the morning I washed off the mark.'

'And no harm came to you?'

'No harm at all, by the Grace of Allah.'

Gimlet threw Trapper a sidelong glance, as if to say, what do you make of that? 'Watch things here until I come back,' he said, and leaving the house walked briskly towards the path that led to the houngan's dwelling.

It would be too much to say that he was alarmed, as he strode up the track, for he could not believe that a black—and judging by civilized standards, ignorant—voodoo priest, was a match for two experienced fighters like Copper and Cub; but in spite of his scepticism about magic he had to admit to himself that he was concerned. There was now evidence, not to be lightly discarded, that strange things happened on the island; things that defied logical explanation.

He walked quickly, but with a light foot, his eyes alert for danger, or for anything unusual.

He was about a hundred yards short of his objective, but still out of sight of it, when three shots, fired in quick succession, made him break into a run. Reaching the last bend, his eyes made a swift reconnaissance of the scene, but seeing no one he carried on. He was too old a hand at close fighting to run directly into the hut, not knowing what was inside. Just clear of the door, close to the wall, he paused, gun in hand, for a last look round.

'Cub,' he said sharply.

There was no answer.

At the precise moment that he moved forward there was a vicious thud just behind him. He was round in a flash, to see a knife quivering in the woodwork. He could not see the thrower, but the angle of it was a rough guide to the direction from which it had come, so he snapped a couple of blind shots into the jungle to discourage further hostilities until he could get under cover.

The nearest cover was, of course, the hut, and through the doorway he jumped, gun up and finger on trigger ready for instant action. The sight that greeted his eyes brought him to a halt, rigid. Copper lay on the floor, dead or unconscious. Near him Pedro lay in a crumpled heap, motionless, a small axe near his open hand. Just behind him Cub, on his knees, swayed from side to side as he strove to get up, but was unable to do so. The only indication of violence was a smear of blood on the mulatto's face.

Gimlet jumped to Cub and tried to get him up, at the same time rapping out the question: 'What is it?'

Cub was too far gone to answer. He tried. His lips moved, but no sound came from them. Gimlet let him down on his knees again and went quickly over him, looking for a wound. He found none. He looked round for water, although he was doubtful about using it. He found none, so the question of using a liquid that might be contaminated, or poisoned, did not arise. But behind a curtain he found a bottle of gin with the seal intact. Ripping off the stopper he soaked his handkerchief with the spirit and dabbed Cub's face with it, snatching glances at the open doorways at the same time. He was conscious of a strange sickly smell in the room without attaching any significance to it, so he flapped the curtain about to disperse it.

The spirit soon had an effect on Cub, who was able to say 'Smoke . . . poison.'

Then Gimlet understood, although he could see no fire to produce smoke, the reason being, as was revealed later, Pedro had fallen on it and smothered it. It was for this reason, no doubt, and the fact that he was sitting outside the curtain, that Cub had not entirely lost consciousness. Copper, who had been inside, had of course inhaled a greater volume of the drug, and it took Gimlet half an hour to bring him round, with Cub, who was fast recovering now the fumes had been banished, watching the doors. By that time he had managed to tell Gimlet what had happened, as far as he knew. What he did not know could easily be surmised.

Copper, still looking seedy, was made as comfortable as the circumstances permitted; and all they could do then was wait until he had recovered sufficiently to walk home.

Pedro was dead. He must have been killed instantly, for one of Cub's shots had gone through his head and the other two into his chest.

'A nasty business, but I shan't shed any tears over him,' said Gimlet. 'Had you been in the room with Copper no doubt you would both have been dead men by now. He didn't bring that axe to chop firewood. It's all perfectly plain. Either you were seen coming here, or else it was assumed that you would come, and a little fire was lighted for your reception. The wood of which it was composed had toxic properties. One of Shambo's little tricks, we may suppose. Once the smoke had got into your lungs and put you under he could do what he liked with you. Pedro deputised for him.'

'Was he by himself, do you think?' asked Cub.

'He certainly was not,' answered Gimlet. 'Somebody slung a knife at me just as I was coming in. My arrival must have upset their scheme. We can reckon that the hut is under observation.'

'We may have a job to get home.'

'I'm in no hurry; neither is the corporal, by the look of him. I'd like to think about it. I'd also like to teach these rogues a lesson, if I can get on terms with them. Keep your eyes skinned in case they try something else.'

They waited for an hour. Nothing happened. Over the forest settled its usual brooding silence. Copper recovered sufficiently to walk without difficulty and smoke a cigarette.

'Apparently they're not going to show themselves,' said Gimlet at last. 'I feel like wiping out Shambo's box of tricks altogether. If that doesn't put him out of business it should make things difficult for him.'

'How?' asked Copper.

'By burning this place to the ground. He's had his chance. There isn't room for two governors on the island—and I'm going to stay. Fire is the best way of disposing of that, anyhow.' Gimlet pointed to the body of the would-be assassin. 'Let Shambo make a zombie of him after that, if he's so clever. I've another reason for burning the hut, having no wish to walk into a knife coming the other way. What little breeze there is stirring is blowing from front to back. The fire should give us a smoke screen and enable us to get to the forest unobserved. It's no great distance to the path so we should be able to work our way round to it under cover.'

'What about the radio?' Cub put the question.

'It can burn with the rest. He has no right to have equipment like this without applying for a licence and giving his reasons.'

‘That reminds me,’ said Cub. ‘A message came through. I took it down but it’s in code. At all events it doesn’t make sense.’

‘We’ll look at it when we get home.’

‘You’re going to try to slip away?’

‘Not necessarily at once. When they see the place is on fire they’ll know we’re no longer inside and may show themselves in a rush to put it out. An attempt may be made to save some of Shambo’s special devil’s devices.’

‘That suits me,’ said Copper grimly. ‘I’ve a little device I’d like to hand ’em before we go.’

Gimlet frowned. ‘Are you still carrying a hand grenade about with you?’

‘Just one, sir. You never know when one’s coming in handy.’

‘One of these days, Corporal, the pin will slip out and——’

‘If it does I shan’t know nothin’ about it,’ retorted Copper, with simple logic.

‘Perhaps not, but I may, if I happen to be standing near you when it happens,’ said Gimlet curtly.

‘You didn’t talk like that in the old days, sir, when we used to trot about with our pockets stuffed full of ’em,’ reproached Copper sadly.

‘Let’s not discuss that now.’

‘Aye-aye, sir.’

‘We’ll get ready to move off,’ decided Gimlet. ‘I’m ready for my lunch.’

‘Same as you, sir,’ agreed Copper cheerfully.

There were few preparations to make. A lot of flimsy stuff was thrown near the front entrance. ‘Be ready to move smartly when I say the word,’ ordered Gimlet, and put a match to it. The curtain caught. The fire ran up it and in a moment the dry thatch was crackling. A cloud of smoke began to roll towards the forest at the rear of the building. It happened so quickly that there was no delay, and they were hardly ready when Gimlet said: ‘Let’s go. Keep in the smoke.’

Like wraiths they hastened across the short intervening space to the forest, where, by moving a little to one side, they got clear of the smoke. After a pause to survey the scene behind them they went on a little way, not without difficulty, to a position that commanded a view of the front entrance of the now blazing building.

They were in time to witness an extraordinary, and certainly unexpected, event. Above the crackling of the fire could now be heard a wild screaming. Who was making the noise, and for what reason, was a matter for speculation, for it came from inside the forest. All Cub knew was, it was

most unpleasant. Then from out of the forest, wearing a hunted look and clearly beside himself with terror, one of Pedro's soldiers burst into the open. He turned this way and that, as if unable to make up his mind which way to go. Then he appeared to see the track and tore down it in a frenzy.

Copper, who had raised his gun, lowered it. 'What's wrong with him?' he asked wonderingly. 'I've seen men in a panic, but blow me if I ever saw one in the state he was in.'

A minute later two more men burst out and raced off in the same direction as the first.

'What do you make of it, Skipper?' asked Copper.

'I'd say that Shambo, who's hiding out there in the forest, is having a spot of trouble with his supporters. A reasonable assumption is, Pedro was there with him. Seeing you two go in, and hoping to find you doped, he crept over to finish you off. Then came the shots. He didn't return. The only explanation of that was, you weren't doped and he got what was coming to him. Now Shambo sees his hut going up in flames he's trying to get Pedro's men to go over to put out the fire. But they're not having any. That's how I see it.'

'Why doesn't Shambo go and do his own dirty work?' growled Copper.

'Either because he's too much of a coward or else his wound—assuming he has been wounded—won't let him.'

'How about going in after him?'

'No man in his right mind tackles a cornered beast in cover. He can stay where he is for the time being as far as I'm concerned. We've given him something to think about and we'll get him when we want him. Let's get back to lunch or we'll have Trapper here, looking for us.'

They set off down the path.

The mill

THREE days passed in comparative peace. A lot of work was done and Cub began to hope that either Shambo had died from his presumed wound or had retired from a conflict in which he was getting the worst of it. His influence was definitely on the wane, for not only did children resort to the square in front of the Government House but the grown-up population was beginning to show itself. Some came for medical treatment. In fact, a different atmosphere was perceptible. Five men had been enrolled in Gimlet's Home Guard although uniforms were not yet available. In lieu of weapons they carried batons. Trapper gave them some elementary drill. Even Christian, looking sick and sorry for himself, could sometimes be seen, loafing about, as if trying to pluck up courage to renounce his allegiance to Shambo. In short, there was no doubt that the death of Pedro and the disappearance of Shambo had cleared the air.

Joe was now a cheerful and busy servant, clearly proud of his position. The same with Rupert, who wore a permanent grin, and in his anxiety to please did everything with a hop, skip and jump. Gates, whose nerves were still in a bad way, took over the cooking. He still hated the island, and would have left had there been any means of getting away. The Arab, still in bandages and still not knowing what had happened to him, had gone back to his shop.

The chief source of anxiety was now the state of the stores, which in view of the calls made upon them were running low. Gimlet was hoping it would not be necessary to cut off the free issues for fear the people might take his generosity as a flash in the pan calculated to deceive them. Radio signals to Trinidad were answered by an assurance that all requests had been transmitted to London. Everything would be coming along shortly.

There was still no clue as to the purpose of the radio equipment in Shambo's hut. The fact that it was there—or had been there—made it evident that the voodoo priest was something more than a witch-doctor. Some time had been spent on the message in Morse that Cub had taken down, but efforts to decode it had failed. London experts were too far away

to be consulted. The mystery would solve itself in due course, averred Gimlet, and as events were to show, he was right.

The disappearance of Colonel Baker remained a mystery, although all the natives who were willing to talk had been questioned. But either they knew nothing, or were afraid to talk for fear of reprisals, either from Shambo, or, if they were implicated in murder, from the Government. The churchyard had been explored for his grave without success. A number of fairly recent graves, and freshly turned earth, suggested sinister possibilities in the matter of zombies—dead people who, according to native belief, had been disinterred and restored to life as slaves with no will but that of their master. Cub did not believe this for a moment, although from his own observation he was forced to concede that Shambo possessed some peculiar power not easy to explain. Probably some form of hypnotism. It would not be difficult to persuade the credulous natives that he could raise the dead. In the fact that the natives believed in zombies lay Shambo's hold over them. Cub noticed that when they visited the churchyard any natives who happened to be about quietly faded away. Only time, he thought, and decent treatment, could allay their fears—unless of course Shambo could be exposed as a trickster.

Gimlet was always busy, working on a plan to allocate land to the people and bring the cane fields under proper cultivation. This would provide regular employment for the men and, at any rate to some extent, make the island self-supporting. He was also trying to find boat builders with a view to starting a fishing enterprise; for, as he remarked, it seemed absurd that an island in a sea swarming with fish did not exploit an inexhaustible food supply. He learned that there had been plenty of small craft in the old days. Now only a few people fished from the rocks.

On the fourth morning after the affair at Shambo's hut, he said, over breakfast: 'Now things are quiet I think it's time to locate this sugar mill Joe mentioned, and check up on the quantity of sugar there. There may be a lot. I hope there is. I can do with it.'

Cub looked surprised. 'But we're not short of sugar! What are you going to do with it?'

'Sell it. If there's a load we'll get someone to come out from Trinidad to fetch it. The proceeds will start a fund to provide the things necessary to expand the industry. These miserable people will then get something for their labour. Trapper has plenty to do here with the recruits, so you, Corporal, taking Cub with you, will have a look at this alleged mill. Joe will show you the way.'

When it came to the point, however, Joe was clearly reluctant to act as guide. Having admitted that he had helped to carry the casks of syrup to the harbour he could not deny that he knew where the place was, and he wriggled his toes in embarrassment when Copper told him sternly that the first duty of a soldier was to obey orders. Whereupon he consented to go, but without enthusiasm. He had only a vague idea of distance, so still not knowing how far they had to go the party set off.

The way lay first through the old overgrown sugar cane plantations at the far end of the town. From there, where without Joe's guidance there would have been little hope of finding it, a suggestion of a track meandered through a comparatively flat area of scrub, secondary growth and wild cane, towards a cleft in the hills which, at the foot, widened into a broad valley. Into this, by the storms of centuries, had been washed a flat bed of rich soil. This must have been discovered by the early settlers, for there were ruins at intervals. Some had been large houses with mills adjacent. Some were charred as though by fire. On one occasion a great rusty iron water-wheel was still in place over a brook that wandered through the valley.

'All this must have been under cultivation at one time,' remarked Cub, who found nothing surprising about its present condition. He knew from conversations at the outset of the trip that the economy of the West Indies had been founded on the sugar industry, and that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fortunes had been made from the commodity. It had then been a thriving undertaking, in which vast sums had been invested. Labour was cheap, even white labour, for criminals were commonly sentenced to years of servitude 'in the plantations'. When the price of sugar fell, everything collapsed with it. What he now saw was the result. It was a melancholy picture.

As they went on he found himself taking more and more interest in the scenery. The sun was hot and the going was far from easy, but it was very different from the virgin forest. No doubt it had all been forest at one time, but it had been cleared by the early settlers whose homes now lay in ruins. It was clear that such wild life as the island possessed preferred this more open country to the gloomy forest, for here were birds, butterflies and lizards, moving about or basking in the sunshine. They banished the awful feeling of death and desolation that prevailed elsewhere. Palms, palmetto shrubs and exotic flowers, gave the valley an air of gaiety. This was more what a tropic island should be, he thought. True, there were plenty of cacti with ugly thorns, but the track took care to avoid them.

The track ran on and on, until at last, mopping his forehead, Copper exclaimed: 'What was the idea using a mill so far from town—making

people walk all this way?’

‘One could think of several reasons,’ answered Cub. ‘In the first place this particular mill might be the only one in good repair. Again, being well out of the way it was unlikely to be seen by casual visitors. Remember, labour meant nothing to the crooks who were running the show when we arrived. They didn’t have to pay for it.’

Soon after this it became evident that they were nearing their destination, for Joe began to hang back, staring ahead and often stopping to listen, with obvious apprehension.

‘Are you scared of something, Joe?’ asked Copper, impatiently, during one of these intervals.

‘No, boss. I’se not feared,’ declared Joe, flagrantly lying.

‘Are you expecting to find someone here?’ asked Cub, in a flash of understanding.

‘No, suh.’

‘Don’t tell lies, Joe. You are. Who is it?’

Joe gulped, sweat streaming down his ebony skin. ‘Yes, I’se feared bad,’ he confessed.

‘Of what?’

‘Dem ole zombies.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake, Joe. Haven’t we finished with that rubbish?’

Joe did not answer.

‘How much farther have we to go?’

‘Jus’ a lil’ way. Jus’ round dem trees ahead.’

‘All right. Would you rather wait here until we come back?’

‘No, *suh*.’ Joe was emphatic. ‘I stay with you.’

‘Then lead on, and let’s have no more nonsense.’

‘Listen. What’s that?’ put in Copper.

From somewhere not far ahead came the crisp click of an axe on wood.

‘Sounds like someone chopping sticks,’ said Cub casually. He smiled cynically. ‘One of Joe’s zombies, perhaps.’

Joe did not smile. His face was now the sickly olive green tint of a badly frightened negro. ‘Dat’s right enough, suh,’ he gasped.

‘Let’s have a look at ’im,’ said Copper. ‘There can’t be much wrong with a bloke who can chop wood. What does a spook want with wood, any old how.’

Remembering the state of the Arab when he had first seen him Cub was not so sure.

They went on, slowly. Joe's teeth began to chatter. Cub felt sorry for him, and at the same time admired his courage for persisting in what must have been a ghastly ordeal. Alone, Cub was sure, wild horses would not have dragged him to the place.

The track bisected the clump of trees. Emerging on the far side, there before them, near a babbling brook, was a grey stone building of some size. From the side that overhung the stream projected a massive wooden water-wheel. Around lay great heaps of crushed cane. To these things Cub paid no attention, for on a piece of open ground near the building four men were at work, surrounded by chips, making casks.

'Gripes!' ejaculated Copper in a shocked voice. 'One of 'em's a white man!'

'Don' go near dem men, suh, dey's dead,' chattered Joe.

The party advanced, Cub leading, Joe keeping on Copper's heels.

The men, working with mechanical precision, did not look up.

Cub went on until he stood in front of the white man. He looked at him, and was shocked and sickened by what he saw. The few rags the man wore were filthy. His half-clad body was filthy. His hair, which would have been white had it not been caked with dirt, hung down hollow cheeks into a tangle of beard. There was a complete lack of expression in his sunken eyes. The general effect was to fill Cub with such horror that he could easily have rushed away from the place in a panic. But he stood his ground, and said loudly: 'Who are you?'

The man did not answer. He might not have heard. He went on with what he was doing. So did the others, who were negroes.

Joe was whimpering like a frightened child.

'Stop that noise,' snapped Cub furiously. He turned to Copper. 'I wonder could this be Colonel Baker?'

'Search me, chum,' answered Copper, evenly. 'He's pretty sick, whoever he is. Let's take the pore chap 'ome with us. I'll tell yer this,' he went on in a voice that had iron in it, 'if this turns out to be Shambo's doing, Gimlet or no Gimlet, I'll see he don't serve nobody else like it. When I catch that devil I'll cut his feet off at the ankles, sharpen the stumps and drive him into the ground with a mallet—my oath I will. Teach 'im to——'

'Okay. Hold it,' interposed Cub. 'Threats won't help us. Stand fast. I might as well have a look in the mill now we're here.'

He forded the stream and found the entrance, big double doors. Entering, he was greeted by the sweet sickly smell of unrefined sugar. One glance revealed all that he needed to see. One end of the room was stacked with casks from some of which a sticky liquid had oozed. The other end of the place was occupied by empty, newly-made casks. He returned to the others. 'Let's get home,' he said. 'I can understand Joe being scared. This place gives me the willies.'

At that moment there came through the sun-drenched air a sound so strange that Cub looked up in startled astonishment. It was the voice of a man, not exactly singing, but calling in a high-pitched voice in the manner of a farmer attracting the attention of his cattle. The slaves must have heard it, and it must have conveyed a message to them, for, for the first time, they desisted in their work and huddled together. The singer approached.

'He's coming here,' said Cub tersely. 'Let's watch this. Hide.'

They dashed behind the nearest shrubs.

Down the track came a negro, a basket balanced on his head. He wore no jacket, but Cub recognized him for one of Pedro's soldiers. Reaching the slaves he lifted down the basket and upset its contents, apparently food of sorts, on the ground. He laughed unpleasantly as the slaves stooped to pick it up, striking at them. He kicked the kneeling white man forward on his face.

Copper sucked in his breath in half a snarl, and Cub knew what was going to happen. 'Go steady,' he warned.

'I ain't standing that,' muttered Copper, and made a beeline for the bully, whose back was towards him.

At the last instant the man must have heard him coming, for he spun round; but he was too late to avoid Copper's fist, which slammed into his solar plexus and doubled him up with a gasp. 'How do yer like yer own medicine, you lousy lout?' growled Copper.

'Watch out for a knife,' cried Cub, running up.

Copper, in his rage, may not have heard him. At all events he ignored the warning. Seizing the man by the throat he shook him. He held on for so long that the man's eyes began to protrude, his arms flaying uselessly; which brought a protest from Cub. 'Go easy,' he said.

'Easy, my foot,' spat Copper. 'You leave this to me. There's only one way to handle this sort and I know it. If you don't like it, push off.' Taking the man's arm in his big hands he gave it a twist that produced a howl from its owner. 'Can you cure these sick men?' he demanded.

'No! No!'

‘Who can?’ Another twist. The negro screamed. ‘Who can?’ repeated Copper remorselessly.

‘Papa Shambo—Papa Shambo—Papa——’

‘Okay, I ’eard you the first time. Where is he?’

The negro writhed, but did not answer.

‘Where’s Shambo?’ rasped Copper. ‘Speak up, brother, or you’re going to lose an arm.’ Another twist that bent the man double and produced another shriek.

‘In de fort—in de fort,’ sobbed the man.

‘Ah! I thought you’d find yer voice,’ said Copper. He dragged the man to his feet. ‘Go on talking or I’ll tear you apart. Will these men do what you tell ’em?’

‘No.’ Another scream. ‘Yes!’

‘We’re getting on,’ said Copper grimly. ‘Then tell ’em to go to the town—and make it snappy, before something else snaps.’

What the man said to the slaves Cub did not catch. Joe told him afterwards that he ordered them to go to the town. At any rate, they set off down the track, walking like automatons, in single file.

Copper spoke slowly and with great earnestness to the man in his grip. ‘If you say a word to anyone about what’s happened here I’ll give yer something that’ll make this little party seem like a beanfeast. Here’s one for luck.’ He gave the man a blow that knocked him backwards into the brook. ‘And don’t let me catch you near the fort,’ was his parting admonition. He brushed his hands. ‘Come on, Cub. Let’s get ’ome.’

They followed the slaves down the track.

The fort

ON the way back to the town Cub wondered if they had done the right thing in bringing the so-called zombies with them. It was of course the presence of the white man that had been responsible for this decision, made on the spur of the moment. They couldn't leave him at the mill. Apart from any other reason, Shambo would learn that they had been there, in which case the white man would in all probability disappear, never to be seen again. Yet to bring him out alone, leaving the wretched negroes there, seemed wrong.

That all these men were suffering from some mental disorder was apparent; but that they could be restored to normal health was proved by what had happened to the Arab. What was to be done with them when they reached the town Cub could not imagine. The dread with which the people regarded them was made evident by the behaviour of Joe, so to have them in or near the Government House would drive every native away from the place, and undo all the good they had done towards establishing mutual trust and goodwill.

A demonstration of what was likely to happen occurred when, approaching the town, a negro appeared on the track, coming towards them. He stopped, took one look, and fled. He must have shouted his news in the town, for when the party arrived there wasn't a soul in sight, man, woman or child.

It seemed to Cub that the situation would force a showdown. If these miserable victims of Shambo could be cured—or brought back to life, as the people would think—their reputation would go up and the battle would be as good as won. If, on the other hand, they failed to release the slaves from their bondage, they would drop back to where they started, perhaps even lower.

On reaching the town, the zombies stopped, presumably because they had obeyed their order. Words failing to move them, Cub took the white man by the arm, and pulling gently was relieved to find that the man followed as meekly as a child. He was also relieved to ascertain that the arm felt like ordinary flesh and blood. Another point of interest arose from this. The

negroes followed, showing that they could see, in spite of their apparently sightless eyes.

In this way they reached the Government House, with Copper shouting ‘Stand still’ to the enlisted men who, after one incredulous stare, began to back away.

Gimlet appeared. ‘What’s all this?’

‘We found these men at the sugar mill,’ reported Cub. ‘This white man might be Colonel Baker.’

Gimlet called Gates from the kitchen. ‘Do you recognize this white man?’

Recognition and horror dawned together on Gates’s face. ‘It’s the Colonel—Colonel Baker,’ he said chokingly. ‘What have the devils done to him?’

‘That’s quite obvious,’ answered Gimlet grimly. Then, to Cub: ‘Is he submissive?’

‘Quiet as a lamb.’

‘Then take him to the room where we put the Arab. We can’t leave him in that state so get him clean and in some decent clothes.’

‘What about the others?’

‘Take them over to the gaol for the time being. You needn’t lock them in. Give them some food. I don’t think they’ll wander away. The poor wretches will probably stay wherever they’re put.’

‘Shambo is hiding in the old fort,’ informed Cub.

‘How do you know?’

Cub gave a brief account of what had happened at the sugar mill. ‘We thought if we could get hold of Shambo we could make him undo whatever it is he’s done to Colonel Baker,’ he concluded.

‘If he stuck his toes in it might make matters worse,’ said Gimlet dubiously.

‘Why not treat him as you did in the case of Joe?’ suggested Cub. ‘The case of the Arab proves that people in this state can be cured, although we’re not sure what actually did the trick. If it was Copper’s shot—well, I’ll admit we can’t very well use that sort of medicine on the Colonel.’

‘The circumstances were not the same, anyway. There’s a doubt in my mind. It’s a possibility that if Shambo were to die, these zombies of his, released from control so to speak, would recover without any treatment. But suppose they didn’t? They would remain as they are for the rest of their

lives. It's a question we can't answer by any method of reasoning so the thing becomes a gamble, with lives at stake.'

'Then what's the drill?' asked Cub.

'I don't know,' replied Gimlet thoughtfully. 'There has been trouble about this sort of thing at home. Certain people who allowed themselves to be hypnotized by professional hypnotists were not easily brought round afterwards. In one or two cases, the hypnotist, after a lapse of time, had to be fetched to complete the cure. I'm convinced that these alleged zombies are simply in a state of hypnosis. All this business about them being dead, buried, and dug up in the dead of night, is so much eyewash on the part of Shambo to produce a dramatic effect, and so enhance his power. I'm willing to own he may be a hypnotist. Why not? If people at home can be hypnotized on a stage, and that has certainly been done, think how much easier it would be here, with ignorant people already half doped by drugs, drums, blood sacrifices and the rest of the hocus-pocus.'

'What about Colonel Baker? Is that what happened to him?'

'Probably. I imagine he butted into one of these voodoo meetings, and with his resistance lowered by some trick of Shambo, became a victim. Remember the smoke drug that knocked Copper out—and he's a strong man. What has happened to Colonel Baker might well have happened to both of you had I not come along.'

'That's a nasty thought,' muttered Cub.

'It all boils down to this,' asserted Gimlet. 'As we're not hypnotists we must get hold of the only one we know on the island. Shambo. In any case I'm not having that dangerous rogue running about loose.'

'You're going after him?'

'I am. Gates knows the way to the fort. He must also know his way about the place so I'll take him with us. Trapper can carry on here while we're away. I'll just have another look at Colonel Baker before we start.'

They went through to the room in which the Colonel was seated in a chair, apparently oblivious to what was going on around him. His general bearing was one of utter weariness. Gimlet spoke to him, shook him, stared into his eyes calling his name, and even barked military orders; but it was all to no purpose. There was no reaction. The Colonel sat slumped in his chair, listless, staring in front of him.

As they returned to the verandah Copper said: 'May I make a suggestion, sir?'

'What is it?'

‘You keep out o’ this and leave it to me. Shambo needs tough handling. I can do it—with pleasure.’

‘We’ll try persuasion first.’

Copper shook his head sadly. ‘I was afraid o’ that.’

In a few minutes they were on their way to the fort, Gates leading, followed by Gimlet, Copper and Cub in that order. They had no great distance to go. They could, in fact, see the fort, standing on the edge of the cliff, from the Government House. But not until they were close did Cub realize what a massive pile it was. Built of the local stone, it was a single-storied fortress constructed in traditional style—that is, with castellated walls, buttresses and loopholes at intervals. In short, it was similar to a score of others in the West Indies, and in much the same state. At one place, however, on the side overlooking the cliff, a part of the wall appeared to have fallen out, leaving a gaping hole. Cub would have supposed this to be the result of an earthquake, and remarked on it; but Gates said he had been told that it was caused by an explosion years before, when a party of treasure hunters had incautiously employed gunpowder. He also informed them that there was only one entrance, on the land side, of course, and towards it they made their way over rock from which sprang the usual tangle of herbage.

The place lay quiet under the blazing sun. Two old cannon still guarded the entrance, silent witnesses of the fort’s original purpose. Heaps of cannon balls lay rusting to dust beside them.

‘It’s going to take us some time to go through that joint,’ remarked Copper. ‘We got to see Shambo don’t slip out while our backs are turned.’

Gimlet turned to Gates. ‘What’s the best way to go about it?’

‘It shouldn’t be as tricky as it looks,’ was the answer. ‘There ain’t many holes or corners. Actually, there’s only five rooms, four big ’uns, and a little ’un which I reckon was the one used by Prince Rupert. There’s two lots of steps lead up to the battlements. It’s a flat roof. Several old cannon lying about on it. He ain’t likely to be up there because there’s nowhere to hide. If he’s here he’ll probably be where I hid.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Well, there’s a flight of steps leads down to a bit of a rabbit warren of little rooms. Some of ’em were dungeons, I think, because there are still chains in the walls. The others might have been for stores, or loot, or gunpowder or something. I don’t rightly know. When you get to the bottom of the steps there’s a passage goes to the left and another to the right. That’s

where he might slip out. I mean, if we all go one way he might bolt from the other way without us seeing him.’

‘Is it dark down there?’ inquired Gimlet.

‘No. It’s a bit gloomy, but light comes in through the loopholes facing the sea side—that’s overlooking the cliff. But most light comes in at the far end through the hole where the wall was blown out. That’s where I hid, because from there I could keep an eye on things. For a good look round I could always slip up to the battlements.’

‘I see,’ said Gimlet. ‘From what you tell us our best plan would be to divide forces at the bottom of the steps, two going one way and two the other. That should make it impossible for him to slip away without us seeing him.’

‘That’s right,’ agreed Gates. ‘But you’ll have to watch your step. It’d be easy for anyone down there, knowing the place, to heave a knife at you before you spotted him. If they’d have come for me when I was hiding there that’s what I should have done. With food and water one man could hold out for some time.’

‘Let’s make a start,’ said Gimlet.

They entered through the gloomy portal.

It did not take long to explore the main rooms, Copper remaining in the doorway to prevent anyone from leaving. They found no signs of occupation. Cub then went up to the big flat roof. A glance was enough to show that there was no one there, either. Given time he would have liked to examine some of the guns that still poked their black muzzles through the embrasures. But he didn’t stop. Returning, he simply reported: ‘He isn’t there.’

‘I didn’t expect he would be,’ said Gates. ‘If he’s here he’ll be below.’

They advanced to the flight of stone steps leading to the lower regions. ‘When we get to the bottom I’ll turn to the left with Gates,’ decided Gimlet. ‘Corporal, you take the right, with Cub.’

‘Aye-aye, sir.’

It struck chill, but not damp, between the stone walls. Reaching the bottom of the steps they parted as arranged. Copper, his gun now in his hand, moved along a corridor to the right, Cub following close behind. As Gates had said, it was gloomy but not dark; a certain amount of indirect light came through the loopholes so no artificial light was necessary. Farther along, from the chamber in which the wall had been blown out, came even more light. The search, after all, presented no real difficulty. Small rooms

led off from both sides of the corridor so they merely had to look into each one as they came to it.

In this way they came nearly to the end. There were, in fact, only two rooms left, the one from which streamed the light from the broken wall, and another that appeared to form the terminus of the passage. Copper took the first, and Cub, who by this time felt sure the search was a failure, went on to the end.

The room in which he found himself, having no aperture, was darker than the rest, and he spent a minute peering about to make sure that it was in fact empty. It was, he supposed, the compartment in which Gates had slept, for a heap of grass lay in one corner and sundry debris, scraps of paper and the like, littered the floor. Regarding it, he could well understand why Gates's nerves had gone to pieces. His own, he thought, would not have lasted long in such dismal conditions.

Now he had imagined that Copper, having looked into the next room, would follow him along, and subconsciously he was waiting for him to join him. It struck him suddenly that Copper was strangely quiet, and still without suspecting anything, merely wondering what he was doing, he strolled back to meet him. After all, nothing could have happened without him hearing it. Or so he supposed.

Reaching the open doorway he looked in to see a sight that puzzled him, although at first he saw no particular significance in it. He simply thought it was queer. Certainly the truth did not strike him. Copper was walking with slow deliberate steps towards the hole in the wall, where the floor ended abruptly at a sheer drop of a hundred feet to the rocks below.

It was something about the way Copper moved that gave him his first glimmering of the truth. He was walking like a sleep-walker, as Joe had moved in the courtyard. A few more steps and he would be over the edge.

‘Copper!’ rapped out Cub. ‘What are you doing?’

Copper did not answer. He took no notice.

Then, suddenly, Cub knew. Even as the truth burst upon him he leapt forward, for Copper was now at the very brink. He grabbed him by the arm, pulled him back and flung his weight against him so that he staggered back against the wall. It was then, turning to prevent him from walking again to his death, that he saw Shambo.

The witch-doctor was crouching low against the inside wall. His eyes were blazing and his lips parted, showing his teeth.

Cub just had time to yell the one word ‘Gimlet’ and Shambo was on him. Locked in each other's arms they crashed to the floor.

It would be futile to attempt to describe in detail what followed for the next minute. Cub himself did not know. It was all a confused nightmare in which he struggled with a man who had the strength of a wild beast, and snarled like one. He knew that Shambo was trying to thrust him over the edge. He fought to prevent it. And even as he fought he knew he would fail, for his strength was not equal to that of the negro.

The end came suddenly, just as Cub gave himself up for lost, for he was underneath and they were on the brink of the precipice. Then in some miraculous way the weight was lifted from his body. He saw Shambo leaning backwards over the void, his hands clawing at the air. A scream broke from his lips and he was gone.

A voice, Copper's voice, said: 'Where did he spring from?'

Cub, gasping, managed to get on his knees.

Gimlet and Gates rushed into the room.

'What is it—what's going on?' demanded Gimlet crisply.

Cub couldn't speak.

Said Copper, in a voice of wonder: 'I dunno. I came in 'ere and there was Cub havin' a do with Shambo. I fetched Shambo a fourpenny one and he went over the edge. That's all I know. Lucky for Cub I happened to look in. Where Shambo came from all of a sudden beats me.'

It was a few minutes before Cub was able to give his version of the affair. Copper refused flatly to believe it. Cub was indignant. 'If I hadn't come in when I did you'd have walked straight over the edge,' he declared. 'I just caught you in time.'

'Are you trying to make out I didn't know what I was a'doin' of?' demanded Copper wrathfully.

'If you did, then all I can say is, you were determined on suicide,' retorted Cub.

'If I hadn't come in when I did, me lad, you'd 'ave been the one as 'ud gone over,' asserted Copper. 'The next thing you'll be trying to make out I was hypnotized.'

'You were,' stated Cub.

'All right. That's enough,' cut in Gimlet. 'Don't stand arguing about it here. We found what we came for.' He advanced to the edge of the cliff and looked down.

'See anything?' asked Cub.

'Nothing. There isn't the remotest chance of him being alive so let's get home. We've done enough for to-day.'

'I doubt if we've finished,' said Cub. 'Look what's coming.' He pointed. Coming through the opening in the reef was a schooner.



Copper was walking with slow deliberate steps towards the hole in the wall ([page 158](#))

The answers

NOT much was said on the way back to Government House, either because each was busy with his thoughts, turning over in his mind the strange and terrible drama that had just been enacted at the fort, or on account of the arrival of the schooner and what it might portend.

No one said so, but everyone must have thought that the death of Shambo was the best thing that could have happened, not only for themselves but for everyone on the island. Cub certainly thought so. His conscience was easy on the matter.

If there was no actual proof that Shambo was a murderer there were good reasons for supposing him to be one, in which case he deserved his fate. There was no doubt whatever in Cub's mind that but for his timely arrival Copper would a few moments ago have walked to his death, and Shambo would have been just as guilty of his murder as if he had pushed him over the precipice. By what strange power the witch-doctor had influenced him to behave as he had he did not know. Gimlet's belief, that the negro was the master of some form of hypnotism, seemed the only logical answer. Hypnotism, or mesmerism, was accepted as an established fact by medical and scientific circles, and if that were so there seemed to be no reason why a black man should not be able to exercise it as well as a white man. How Shambo had managed to hypnotize Copper without him being aware of it was a question for which he could find no answer. The fact remained, Copper no more knew what had happened in the fort than Joe had known in the courtyard; or, for that matter, the Arab had known about his period of servitude in the cane fields.

Only one doubt about the outcome of the affair in the fort remained in Cub's mind. For all practical reasons Shambo could be assumed to be dead. What, now, was the position with regard to Colonel Baker and the other zombies? Were they to remain in their present state of active unconsciousness for the rest of their days, or would they, free from the hideous influence that had for so long controlled them, recover? He could only pray that it might be so. Time would show. True, the Arab had been a

zombie and he had recovered. But had that been the result of the wound in his head?

With such thoughts as these exercising his mind Cub followed Gimlet back to Government House. Looking down he could see that the schooner was now lying alongside the landing rock with people moving about on her deck.

‘We should soon know the rest of the answers,’ said Gimlet. He went inside and returned with his binoculars. ‘She’s flying the Haitian flag—although, of course, that may mean nothing,’ he told the others.

‘Are you going down?’ asked Cub.

‘Certainly not. We’ll wait for them to come up. Not a word about Shambo or Pedro. Let them work things out for themselves. They may talk and give themselves away.’

‘I wonder if they know we’re here,’ said Cub. ‘I’m assuming that these are the people with whom Shambo was in touch by radio.’

‘I don’t think there’s any doubt about that,’ returned Gimlet, still with the glasses to his eyes. ‘They’re unloading something. It’ll be interesting to see what it is.’

‘Dat’s de booze, Gubnor,’ interposed Joe, who was standing near.

‘What do they do with it?’

‘Dey wait dere, Gubnor.’

‘Wait? What for?’

‘De boys to carry down de sugar casks. Den de boys come back wid de booze.’

‘So that’s how it’s done.’

‘Dat bad man Pedro he know when ship coming and hab de sugar ready,’ volunteered Joe.

‘That’d be worked by radio,’ murmured Cub. ‘What happens this time, when the sugar isn’t ready?’

‘I think they’re going to carry the stuff up here themselves,’ said Gimlet, still watching. ‘I fancy that by taking those radio valves you cut their contact with Shambo so they don’t know what’s happened. So much the better. Yes, they’re bringing the stuff up the path—probably want to get back through the reef on the next tide. Well, they’re due for a shock. That looks like the white man leading.’

‘There’s Christian going to meet ’em,’ put in Copper. ‘He’ll put ’em wise.’

‘Where?’

Copper pointed to where Christian was hurrying towards the head of the path leading to the harbour.

‘Stop him! After him, Joe. Go with him you boys.’

Joe raced away, followed by two of the new recruits who were standing beside him. They soon overtook the ex-commissioner who, as a matter of detail, was unaware that he was being pursued, until Joe laid a hand on his arm. After an altercation Christian returned with his escort.

Gimlet pointed to a spot near at hand. ‘Stand there and don’t move,’ he told Christian in a voice that forbade argument.

The ship’s company came on up the path, a leader who walked with a walking stick and six coloured men carrying heavy loads.

Gimlet’s party waited. It was soon clear to Cub that the alleged white man was not in fact white, although he was pale enough in colour to flatter himself that he was, if he preferred it that way.

Curiously enough, on reaching the top of the track he did not so much as glance at the Government House, so he did not see the party standing there. He walked straight on across the square as if he knew exactly where he was going. When Gimlet called to him, however, he stopped, and stared for so long that he was obviously taken by surprise.

‘This way,’ ordered Gimlet.

Slowly enough to suggest that he had misgivings the man came over. His sweating crew followed him and were glad to drop their loads for a rest.

‘Who are you?’ inquired Gimlet curtly.

‘What business is that of yours?’ answered the man, speaking with an American accent.

‘I happen to be the Governor here.’

‘Who says so?’

‘The British Government says so. In case you’ve forgotten it this is a British Colony, so I’d advise you to answer my questions and keep a civil tongue in your head. What’s the name of your ship?’

‘*Carlos Mendoza.*’

‘Are you the master?’

‘Sure.’

‘Owner?’

‘That’s me.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘Port au Prince, Haiti. You’d see my flag if you wasn’t blind.’

‘Was that your last port of call?’

The man hesitated.

‘All right. You needn’t answer if you find it necessary to lie. I see you’ve brought some merchandise ashore. Who’s it for?’

The man jerked a thumb at Christian. ‘For him.’

Surprisingly, Christian spoke up. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I don’t have no truck with it.’

‘What’s in this cargo?’ asked Gimlet.

‘That’s my business. You ain’t got no right to ask me questions.’

‘There happens to be law and order here now,’ replied Gimlet shortly. ‘One of the laws concerns customs and excise. Certain imports are forbidden and others are subject to duty. What’s shown on your manifest—or haven’t you got one?’

The man looked at Christian. ‘Where’s Pedro?’

Gimlet answered. ‘He doesn’t know. Pedro has nothing to do with it, anyway. Let’s see what you’ve got in these loads.’

The man took a pace forward. ‘You keep your hands off ’em,’ he said threateningly.

‘You talk to me like that and I’ll put you in gaol to cool off,’ warned Gimlet.

‘We’ll see about that,’ snarled the man, and strode away across the square, calling to his crew to follow him. They obeyed, but they did not take their loads. Copper and Trapper saw to that.

‘Where’s he going?’ asked Cub.

‘He’s gone to look for Shambo,’ answered Gimlet. ‘I suppose he thinks that because Shambo has been the big noise here he’ll be able to help him. Open those bundles.’

No one could have been surprised when the contents were revealed. They consisted mostly of bottles—gin, rum and whisky. One of the bundles contained something else; a brown waxy substance, not unlike heavy trade tobacco. Copper brought a slab over for Gimlet to see.

Gimlet put it to his nose. ‘Opium,’ he said. ‘I’m putting that ship under arrest. I’ll give you a notice, Corporal, and you can go down and tack it to the mast. Take Trapper with you, but I don’t think you’ll have any trouble. There can’t be many people left on board.’

‘That tough won’t take no notice of a bit o’ paper,’ opined Copper dubiously.

‘No matter. We’ll do the thing in the proper way.’

In a few minutes Copper and Trapper were striding down the track.

‘Get all this stuff put inside,’ Gimlet told Cub.

Joe and his assistants, grinning from ear to ear as if it was a great joke, began to shift the illicit merchandise.

At this juncture there occurred an interruption that took the wind out of everybody’s sails, as the saying is. Joe, taking a load of bottles through the door, dropped the lot and shot out like a scalded cat. Behind him came a pale, haggard man, who looked about him wonderingly. It was Colonel Baker. His eyes came to rest on Gimlet. ‘What’s all this going on?’ he asked in a weak voice. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m the governor here at the moment,’ answered Gimlet, looking somewhat embarrassed.

‘How dare you say that?’ was the indignant rejoinder. ‘I’m governor here.’

Cub was overjoyed, of course, for what he had hoped might happen had obviously happened. Colonel Baker was himself again, released from his ghastly bondage by the death of his taskmaster. But the situation created was a difficult one.

Gimlet dealt with it. Laying a hand on the Colonel’s arm he said, ‘Come inside and sit down, sir. You’ve been very ill for a long time and I was sent out to relieve you.’

‘Oh, so that’s it,’ returned the Colonel. He smiled wanly. ‘I must say I feel pretty dicky,’ he confessed.

Gimlet took Colonel Baker inside, a little later he returned. ‘I’ve persuaded him to rest,’ he told Cub. ‘He’s no idea of what has happened to him.’

A little later Copper and Trapper returned.

‘Any trouble?’ asked Gimlet.

‘No trouble at all, sir,’ Copper assured him, winking at Cub, who wondered what had really happened.

The news of Colonel Baker’s recovery dismissed the subject.

‘What are we waiting for?’ inquired Copper.

‘Presumably we’re waiting for the ship’s company to return from their visit to Shambo,’ replied Cub. ‘They’ll be sick when all they find is ashes.’

‘They’ll be sicker still when they get back ’ere and find the booze has disappeared,’ averred Copper.

‘They may cut up rough.’

‘That’s okay with me, mate, if that’s how they want it,’ said Copper cheerfully.

By this time, apparently, the word had gone round the town that things were happening, for quite a number of people had collected on the square and were watching events from a respectful distance. From their general attitude Cub had a suspicion that, in some strange way, they had learned that Shambo was dead. If so, they showed no sorrow at the passing of their witch-doctor.

‘Here we come,’ said Copper presently. ‘Now for the fireworks if there’s going to be any.’

The schooner’s captain and his men had reappeared and were marching towards the Government House.

Everyone waited.

‘Where’s Shambo?’ demanded the leader, striding up.

‘He’s dead. Pedro’s dead, too,’ answered Gimlet crisply. ‘It’s time you realized that your racket here is also dead. I’ve impounded your cargo and your ship’s under arrest. You’ll find the notice on the mast.’

The man stared incredulously. ‘Is that so?’ he asked slowly.

‘That is so,’ confirmed Gimlet evenly.

‘We’ll see about that.’ The man whipped out an automatic and began to back away. ‘Anyone who tries to follow me will get it.’

‘All right, let them go,’ ordered Gimlet softly. ‘It’s the easiest way. They won’t come back.’

Copper, who had stiffened, relaxed. ‘What about Christian? He’s going with them.’

‘So much the better. We’re well rid of him.’

In a few minutes the ship’s company was scrambling down the track towards the sea, watched, it seemed, by everyone in Rupertston.

‘It was better to let them go than start trouble with Haiti, which would probably mean officials coming here asking questions,’ averred Gimlet.

‘They ain’t ’ome yet, any old how,’ said Copper casually. ‘There seems to be a bit of a breeze blowing up, and they’ve got to make that passage through the reef.’

‘Any reason why they shouldn’t?’ asked Gimlet, looking at Copper suspiciously.

‘No. Oh no,’ returned Copper airily, tongue in his cheek.

As far as Cub was concerned he might as well have said 'Yes.'

In the failing light, for the day was now far advanced, they watched the crew of the *Carlos Mendoza* reach their ship, cast off and move towards the narrow opening through the reef.

'What are they doing? They'll be in trouble if they're not careful!' exclaimed Gimlet, who was watching through his glasses.

Even with naked eyes Cub could see that the vessel was steering an erratic course, as if the helmsman was finding the wind or the fast-flowing tide difficult.

'They're going to hit that reef in a minute,' said Gimlet. 'They should know their way through it by now. They must have been here often enough.'

'Serve 'em right if they did hit it,' remarked Copper, 'They hadn't no right to move the ship while it was under arrest. Am I right?'

'Sure you're right,' agreed Trapper.

Even Gimlet conceded that legally he was right. 'There they go! They've done it,' he cried, as the schooner, after wallowing for a moment in a trough, was lifted by a wave and thrown broadside on against the rocks.

For a minute the vessel pitched like a see-saw as the water rose and fell, and there seemed to be some chance that it would remain fixed, poised on the teeth that must have bitten into its keel; but then the heaving sea picked it up and carried it right over the reef, where it disappeared from sight in the clouds of spray that were always present where the big ocean rollers fought their eternal battle with the land.

'There isn't a boat on the island to help them.' The remark, which came from Cub, was a natural one.

'Whose fault's that, I'd like to know?' said Copper. 'Who stopped the people building boats? Christian. Or at least he knew all about it. He'd give something for one at this moment, I'll be bound. Not that I'd care to be in a boat in that sea.'

They watched for the schooner to reappear to seaward of the spray, but they saw nothing more of it. For one thing the brief tropic twilight, merging into the dusk, made it difficult to see anything clearly.

'Whether the ship has foundered or is still afloat there's nothing we can do about it,' said Gimlet, in a tone of finality, putting the glasses in their case and turning away. 'Now perhaps, we shall get a little peace. It's time we had something to eat.'

After Gimlet had gone in Cub looked Copper straight in the eye. 'Had you anything to do with the crazy steering of that ship?'

Copper looked pained. 'Me? As if I would!'

'Have you still got that hand grenade in your pocket?'

Copper felt his pockets. 'Well, blow me! Funny you should say that. I must 'a put it down somewhere and forgot to pick it up. Best thing that could have happened, mebbe. The Skipper was always on to me about it.'

'I wouldn't tell him where you put it, if I were you,' said Cub softly, and went on into the house.

Last words

GIMLET'S optimism was justified, and peace came at last to the little island of Santelucia; not only peace, but freedom; freedom of thought, of speech, and above all, freedom from fear. With the fall of the tyranny that had for so long enslaved it, it was as if a great ugly cloud had rolled away.

The people were now more than willing to talk, and more and more details of the sinister rule under which the island had laboured were revealed. Some of these threw a new light on the picture. It now began to appear that there had been more behind the story than the importation of hard liquor in return for sugar that had cost nothing to produce. The ultimate aim of the conspirators had been the seizure of the island as a black republic on the lines of Haiti and Dominica, in the same tropic sea. Shambo and Pedro were in fact Haitians who had fled after failing in an attempt to overthrow their own government. Aware that their records would be known they had kept under cover, using the ignorant Christian as a figurehead. This explained the radio equipment, for the schooner and its captain were in the scheme and it was necessary to keep in touch. There were reasons for supposing that others, who kept behind the scenes, were in it, too, waiting for the right moment to appear. The unexpected arrival of Gimlet, due to the folly of the drunken Christian, who (as so often happens) had tried to feather his own nest, in this case by interfering with foreign nationals, had thrown the wrench into the gears of the plot.

After learning of some of the things that had gone on, no one was likely to lament the doom that had overtaken the plotters—the islanders least of all. What, to Cub, made the thing so despicable, was the fact that they had victimized people of their own race and colour.

It may here be noted that wreckage washed ashore left little doubt as to the fate of the schooner. That Copper had had a hand in this Cub was sure, but he never learned how it had been done. Copper, with all his outspokenness, could be dumb when it suited him.

There was, of course, a certain amount of mystery that was never fully explained, and this was argued for long afterwards. The zombies, for

instance, all of whom returned to normal health after the death of the man responsible for their condition. The periods during which they were under his control remained blanks in their minds—which was, perhaps, just as well. Copper, for example, refused to accept any version, other than his own, of the affair in the fort. He scoffed at the suggestion that anyone could make him commit suicide. It seemed that Shambo either possessed exceptional powers as a hypnotist, or else held secrets, based on drugs and poisons, which he certainly knew how to employ. There was ample evidence of that. After all, many strange things occur on Haiti, where voodooism is still practised, that defy explanation.

The rest of the story is soon told.

Two days after the events narrated in the last chapter a big Service flying boat landed on the lagoon, bringing the things for which Gimlet had applied. Willing hands unloaded and carried the supplies to Government House, where ice-cream was served to mark the occasion. When the aircraft left it took with it Colonel Baker, in the care of Gates, and a full report, for the Colonial Office, on the island as Gimlet had found it, and the present position.

As a result of this a regular steamer was laid on, and after that the island never looked back. Watching the activity, Cub sometimes found it hard to believe that this was the Santelucia on which they had landed.

Gimlet and his comrades remained on the island for three months, and under their administration some of its former prosperity was restored. Then Colonel Baker, fully recovered, returned, bringing with him a staff that included a doctor and a school teacher. Joe, now a sergeant, and his platoon of Santelucian Levies, smart in new uniforms, accorded them the honours due to a new Governor. Copper was proud of them. He had said he would lick them into shape, and he did. They appeared to enjoy it.

Cub left the island with mixed feelings; but their work was done and there was no reason why they should stay. He had got to know the people, and he liked them, so he was sorry to say good-bye. They were given a great send-off, the entire population crowding to the waterfront. Rupert wept unashamedly.

Colonel Baker carried on with Gimlet's work and to-day Santelucia is in a fair way to becoming self-supporting. There is talk of the people putting up a monument on the square, to mark their gratitude to the man who banished all the 'debbils' from the island, and brought to an end the reign of Terror.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Gimlet Takes A Job* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]