

The House of Qasavara

Ponga Jim

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Ponga Jim Mayo looked toward the dark blotch of Bam Island.

“Easy does it,” he said, his eyes swinging toward Cape Wabusi. “Port a little... hold it!”

Quickly, Jim Mayo stepped to the SEMIRAMIS’s engine-room telegraph and jerked it to stop. They had reached anchorage.

“All right, Mr. Brophy,” he called. “Let go forward!”

He stood in the wing of the bridge of the freighter waiting to hear the splash of the anchor. Then he turned and went down the ladder.

Carol Sutherland got up quickly when he came into the ship's saloon. His white-topped cap was at a jaunty angle, but she thought that without the gleam of humor that was never far from his eyes his bronzed face would have been a little grim.

"Are we there?" she asked. "Is this Broken Water Bay?"

Ponga Jim nodded. In the glow of the light her red-gold hair was like a flame.

"Yes, this is it. But you can't go ashore tonight. It will be bad enough in the daytime."

"But my father's here, and—"

Her protest ended as he lifted a hand. The throb of engines down below had ceased, but there was another sound, the low, pulsing beat of drums rolling down from the dark, jungle-clad hills. She stopped, her mouth partly opened to speak, while the sound of the drums filled the room and seemed to pound with the same rhythm as the blood in her veins.

"Hear that?" he asked gravely. "Gets you, doesn't it?" He waited for a moment, listening. "And those fellows are headhunters or cannibals, Stone Age men living in a land that time forgot. Think of it," he said, waving a hand toward the lonely New Guinea shore. "Most of them have never seen a white man; thousands of them don't know there is such a thing. This is the jungle, Miss Sutherland. And this is a lonely coast, where few ships come."

"My father is here somewhere, Captain Mayo," she said simply. "I must go to him."

He shrugged. "If he's ashore we'll find him tomorrow. No boat leaves this ship before daybreak, I value my men too highly. Those boys ashore are stirred up. This whole country is throbbing with hate. There have been fifty-three natives who worked for white men killed within the past two weeks."

Jim walked into his cabin, and when he returned he wore a gun in his shoulder holster.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I can't figure what Colonel Sutherland would be doing on this coast. This Broken Water Bay is an unhealthy country in more ways than one, and certainly no spot for a plantation."

"But I know he came here," she protested. "I heard him mention the bay to this man who came to see him before he left. That man was coming, too. They were to land near the mouth of a small river, and I believe they were going to a village close by."

"That's impossible," he said decidedly. "There isn't any village near here. Those drums are fifteen miles from here at least."

"But I heard them talk about looking for someone, about finding the House of Qasavara."

"The House of Qasavara!" Ponga Jim stuck his thumbs in his belt. "Are you kidding me?"

"Why, no," she exclaimed in surprise. "I—"

"But you told me your old man was looking for a plantation location near Broken Water Bay, and now you spring this here Qasavara business on me."

"What's strange about that?" she demanded. "I heard Daddy and this man talking about it, and supposed it was a native village nearby."

Jim tossed his cap on the table and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Listen," he said, exasperated. "Qasavara is a cannibal-spirit living back in that steamy jungle somewhere. The House of Qasavara is where he takes his victims, and where the natives offer sacrifices to him.

"Until a couple of months ago he'd almost been forgotten, then several bodies were found bitten by five poisonous teeth. One was found at Salamoia while we were there, another at Madang, a couple outside of Port Moresby, and one near the airport at Lae. Every one of them was a native employed by white men. Then last week twelve were found at one time, all of them marked by the five teeth of Qasavara."

"But what can all that have to do with Father?" Carol asked. "I don't understand."

Jim shrugged. "You've got me, lady." He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, and then he looked up, meeting her eyes. "Didn't you tell me your father came from Sydney? That he worked for the government in some inspection service or something?"

"That's right. And about six weeks ago he received a letter from Port Moresby that worried him, and decided to come up here. I came with him, but stopped in Port Moresby."

"How about this guy who came to see him? Was he a slender, well-built fellow with a blond mustache? Military walk and all that?"

She nodded, puzzled. "Do you know him?"

"Know him?" Jim chuckled. "He's the best friend I've got. And sometimes I wonder if that's saying anything at all."

After Carol Sutherland returned to her cabin, Ponga Jim walked out on deck. It was completely dark, the sky spangled with stars, but no moon. In the blackness a quarter of a mile away was the darker shoreline and a faint, silver gleam from a rustle of surf.

Jim rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. It would be a joke on Arnold to show up here when Arnold had left him in Menado. And it must be a tough job or Major William Arnold would never have sent to Colonel Sutherland for assistance in breaking the case.

Yet he had seen in the few ports he had touched that the natives were frightened and surly. Whispers had come to him that all whites were to be murdered, and all those who worked for whites; that Qasavara had returned to claim Papua and would kill all Dutch and British people.

There was a stirring of unrest throughout the islands, and an outbreak now, calling for ships, money, and men, would be a severe blow to England. Besides, the Indies were the richest prize on earth, and to countries thirsting for colonies and expansion, they represented a golden opportunity.

Several times, Ponga Jim and Major William Arnold had spiked the guns of the Gestapo and other foreign agents working in the Indies. But those had been attempts at sinking ships and at destroying commerce in the islands. The present effort would stir much more strife than the former attempts.

Then he looked up and saw the head.

A native, his face frightfully painted with streaks of white, was crawling over the rail. Even as Ponga Jim's eyes caught the movement, a dozen other bodies lifted

into view and the rail was swarming with savages. Jim let out a yell and went for his gun.

At the first blast of fire three heads vanished. Another native, already on the deck, let out a wild yell and pitched over on his face. With a scream of rage a big savage hurled a spear that missed by an eyelash and then, jerking a stone hatchet from his belt, hurled himself at Jim, his face twisted with hatred.

Dropping into a crouch that sent the wild blow with the hatchet over his shoulder, Jim whipped a terrific left hook to the Papuan's belly. Then he jerked erect and slammed the man alongside the head with a wicked, chopping blow from the barrel of his automatic. Without a sound the native dropped to the deck.

From the bridge a machine gun broke into a choking roar as burst after burst swept the rail and the boats thronging out from shore. Jim snapped a quick shot at a big headhunter running aft, and wheeled around to see Selim wrest a spear from another and run him through.

Abo, one of the seamen, was down on the deck, writhing with agony, but Tupa had jumped astride his murderer's shoulders from the boat deck and buried a knife in the man's neck.

As swiftly as they had come, they were gone, and the rail was littered with bodies. Jim ran to the taffrail and snapped a couple of quick shots at the boats. He was rewarded by seeing one native jerk to his feet and topple over the side.

Slug Brophy came running aft with Red Hanlon and two of the crew. All carried rifles.

"That'll hold them," Jim said drily. "I wonder what started that?"

Slug grinned. "You can't chase all over the ocean mixing into trouble wherever you find it without getting guys after your scalp!" he said grimly. "These babies didn't tackle this boat because it's what they wanted, but because they were told to!"

"Yeah," Jim agreed. "You got something there."

Suddenly he thought of Carol and started forward on a run. He swung into the starboard passage and stopped dead still.

At the end of the passage her door swung idly with the slight roll of the ship, and the room beyond was lighted and empty. In the passage, a native woman lay on the floor, dead.

Jim swore viciously and leaped over the sprawled body. One glance told him that Carol was gone. Wheeling, he saw another native huddled in a corner, run through with his own spear. A groan startled him.

Whirling, gun in hand, he saw Longboy struggling to sit up, blood running from a gash on his scalp. Quickly, he knelt beside him.

"What was it, Boy?" he asked. "What happened?"

"Six, eight mans, they come overside while you fight. I see them. I hit one, knock him over. I throw marlinespike, get another one. Then pretty soon I in here, mans grab Missee, I sock 'em. Stick him with spear. Somebody shoot—bang, I no know what happen."

Jim got to his feet. "Red, get this man to the steward, you hear? Slug, we're going ashore. Those babies can't travel much faster than we can. I brought that dame down here, and I'll see she gets to her old man in one piece. Gunner stays

here in charge. I'll take you, Selim, Tupa, Abdul, the Strangler, and Hassan. We've got to move fast!"

When the boat touched the sand the moon was just lifting over the horizon. Jim Mayo shifted his rifle to his left hand.

"Red, you and Fly Johnny take the boat back," he ordered. "I'll keep Singo and Macabi with the rest of us. We might stumble into a tough scrap. Tell the Gunner to get the hook up if I'm not back by daylight and take her around to the Sepik. If we don't get them we'll pick you up about two miles up off Sago Bar."

Turning quickly, he struck off at a rapid walk. The natives would be traveling fast, as they would not expect pursuit before daylight and there was little chance of an ambush near the bay. Giant ficus trees spread their aerial roots beside the path, and there was heavy undergrowth, mostly ferns and sugarcane. The jungle shut in suddenly, dark and ominous.

Ponga Jim slowed his pace. Just how many men were in the band ahead he could not guess. Probably forty or fifty, for there had been nearly a hundred in the attacking party, and fearful execution had taken place along the rail and in some of the boats.

Slug hurried up alongside Jim. His short, powerful body moved as easily and rapidly as any one of the long, lithe seamen behind. "Skipper, I hate to think of them Guineas having Miss Sutherland. That girl was a bit of all right."

"Yeah," Jim nodded gravely. "You bet she was. But I'm not worried about them. That attack was planned by a white man for a purpose. You know what I think, Slug? Somebody knew that girl was aboard!"

"You mean they jumped us just to get her?"

"That's just what I mean. At first, I thought it was some of the same bunch we've had trouble with, and they recognized the boat. I thought maybe they were afraid we were going to butt in again. But now I think they had some spy who saw the girl come aboard in Port Moresby or saw her at Salamoia. The attack was a blind so that under cover they could get her."

"But what's the idea? What good would she be to them?"

"None, unless—" Jim hesitated, frowning.

"Unless what?"

"Unless they've got her father, and probably Arnold. They could use her to put pressure on Sutherland and Arnold, to make them give up a lot of information that both of them have."

Slug hitched his gun a little and swore under his breath. He knew only too well what fiendish tortures those savages could think of, but it wasn't the Papuans who would be worst, for the civilized men who led them would be most dangerous.

In the damp light of dawn they stopped for a hurried lunch. All the men were silent, grim. Jim scouted out along the trail with Tupa. Tupa knelt in the mud, pointing.

"See? They come this way," he said.

Jim studied the marks of high heels thoughtfully. Several times during the night his flashlight had picked them out along the trail among the tracks of other men. Now, in the growing light of day, they were plainer.

Ponga Jim swore suddenly.

“Slug!” he called. Brophy came running. “Look at those tracks! Carol Sutherland never made those! She’ll weigh about a hundred and fifteen, and by now she’d be tired. Yet those steps are light. They’ve got a child or a girl wearing those shoes!”

Brophy scowled. “But where the hell—”

“The river!” Jim said suddenly. “They made for the river. Get that stuff out of the way and let’s go!”

In a matter of minutes the packs were made, and Ponga Jim led off into the jungle at a rapid walk. As he walked, his mind worked rapidly. It could be either Heittn or Petrel, but somehow he believed this last attack was by someone new to him.

William, not so long since, had mentioned something about two German agents, Blucher and Kull, who had come into the Indies. Despite the loneliness of some sections of the New Guinea coast, it would be a poor place from which to operate. His common sense told him that the seat of the trouble would be in the dark and little-known interior. Legends placed the House of Qasavara somewhere in the unknown country at the headwaters of the Sepik.

They were following a well-beaten trail, and Jim paused from time to time to listen, but heard no sound. He was sure the trail would bring him out somewhere near Sago Bar, where he could intercept the Semiramis. Despite time and trouble, regardless of danger, it was up to him to follow the natives who had captured Carol Sutherland. Also, there was a chance Arnold was somewhere up the river and in terrible danger.

Dawn was just breaking when they came out on the bank of the river. About a mile wide, it rolled rapidly seaward, bearing here and there a giant tree or snag floated from the jungle upriver. The flood season was past, but the water was still high. The Sepik would carry a boat that didn’t draw more than thirteen feet for at least three hundred miles. With a good deal of extra water, there was a chance he could go much farther than that.

Tupa glided to his side, moving soundlessly.

“Papua boy, he come!” he whispered, pointing up the bank.

Moving toward him in the early light of dawn he saw a dozen powerful savages.

“Wussi River boy,” Tupa said softly. “They bad. Plenty mean.”

The Wussi River was some distance west, and these warriors were far off their usual beat. Ponga Jim shifted his rifle to the hollow of his arm and waited. His dealings with the natives there had been friendly, but for the most part they were a surly bunch. Many of them understood a few words of German and called small coins “marks.” Obviously, a remnant of the touch of civilization acquired when the Germans had owned that section, prior to the world war.

Jim stepped forward. “You see Papua man? White girl?”

The Wussi River men stared at him sullenly, muttering among themselves, but did not reply. Then one of them, a big man, stepped from the crowd and began a fierce harangue. His voice rose and fell angrily, and he made fierce gestures. Ponga Jim watched him warily.

“What’s he say, Tupa?” he asked guardedly.

“He say you go away. You bad white man. Qasavara very angry. Pretty soon he call all white men, all who know or talk to white men. Mebbe so all people who no fight white men.”

“Tell him that’s a lot of hooley,” Jim said coolly. “Tell him I’m a friend. Tell him Qasavara is dead, he was killed by Qat, the good spirit.”

Tupa told him quickly, but the native shook his head stubbornly. Tupa’s eyes widened.

“He say Qasavara has many men. Pretty soon he kill all English. He say Qasavara has dragons, two of them, with wings. Pretty soon take plenty heads.”

“Yeah?” Jim said. He hooked his thumbs in his belt. “So they got some ships? You tell that monkey face I personally will take care of Qasavara. Tell him he swiped my woman.”

Jim grinned and shifted the gun in his hands, watching the natives warily.

“Hey, Skipper!” Brophy said suddenly. “Here comes some more from the other direction! About twenty of them!”

Ponga Jim wheeled, but as he turned, he caught a flicker of movement from the jungle trail along which they had come.

“All right, boys,” he said casually. “We’re in for a fight. So take it easy and back up to those snags on the bar. Brophy, you and the Strangler get over there behind those logs now. Just walk over, taking it easy. As soon as you get sheltered, cover our retreat. Get me?”

“Right down the groove, Skipper!” Brophy said cheerfully.

“Selim! Abdul! Hassan!” Jim snapped quickly. “Take that downriver bunch. Tupa, watch the jungle. You, too, Singo. Macabi, you follow Brophy back to those snags.”

He had noticed the snags before they were scarcely on the bank of the river. A half dozen giant jungle trees of the ficus type had floated here and beached themselves on Sago Bar. Tumbled together, they formed a rude semicircle facing the jungle, open toward the river. They presented a natural fortress from four to six feet high.

“All right, Tupa,” he said finally, “you tell that big walrus we’re going out on the bar to cook some breakfast.”

The big man spoke suddenly, fiercely, walking rapidly toward them. Tupa looked worried.

“He say you move, he kill!” he said.

“Yeah?” Jim grinned. He handed his rifle to Tupa. “All right, when I sock this lug, you guys leg it back on that bar. Get sheltered as quick as you can.” The big native, a powerful man with huge muscles and an ugly face came closer. “Watch it, Brophy!” Jim said loudly. “Here comes the fireworks!”

The big native stepped close and grabbed at Jim’s arm. Then Jim hit him a short, wicked right chop that laid the man’s cheek open for four inches. A short left hook came up into the man’s belly, and the savage pitched forward on his face. A howl of anger went up, and suddenly, they rushed.

Ponga Jim whipped out his automatic and fired rapidly as he backed up. Two natives spilled over on their faces, and then the rifles behind him began to crash.

He turned and legged it for shelter. Something caught at his sleeve, but it wasn't until he was safe behind the log that he looked down. Slug's face was pale.

An arrow had gone through his sleeve near the wrist. One of those ugly, barbed arrows typical of the Papuans. Jim drew it out carefully.

"Would you look at that?" he said. "A yard long and six sharp bits of bone stuck in the shaft. If that got in a man they'd have to cut a six-inch hole to get it out. And those things are steeped in decayed meat. Starts septic poisoning." He tossed the arrow over the log. "Let that be a lesson to you guys. Don't any of you get hit."

Five of the natives were stretched out on the riverbank, and the rest had drawn back to the edge of the woods. There were at least a hundred savages inside the edge of that jungle by now, not over seventy yards away. Jim sat down and reloaded the clip in his automatic.

"You guys watch your step now," he said cheerfully. "There's nine rifles here and if we can't keep those guys from crossing that beach, we're a bunch of saps. Those boys can fight, but they haven't any belly for this stuff. If they start to come out, wait until nine of them are in sight. Then let them have it."

"Here they come!" Slug said suddenly, and Ponga Jim whirled to see a wave of savages break from the edge of the jungle. Coolly, carefully, his men began to fire, and the brown line wilted like wheat before a mowing machine.

The attack broke, and the remaining natives fled, with at least thirty men scattered on the beach.

"Now what do they think of Qasavara?" Ponga Jim muttered drily. "Get set, you guys! Here comes the Semiramis!"

The freighter was steaming up the river, and slowly the bow swung over in the channel, and a boat was lowered. On top of the chart house, Red Hanlon suddenly appeared and jerked the canvas jacket off the machine gun. He sat down behind it, and suddenly the gun began to rattle, drawing a thin line of steel along the jungle.

Red Hanlon met Jim at the rail as he came up the pilot ladder.

"We got a guy here says he knows right where the House of Qasavara is," he said.

Ponga Jim turned and looked at the powerful young native. Big, stalwart, and beautifully muscled, he carried a spear and a large knife in a wooden sheath. His head was shaven in front. Jim frowned.

"You're no Papuan," he said. "You're a Toradjas boy."

The big native nodded eagerly. "Me Toradjas. Me go Celebes, Banggai, Balabac, Zamboanga. Pretty soon me come Salamo, come here."

"You get around, don't you?" Jim said, speculatively. "You know where the House of Qasavara is?"

"Me sabby. These boy," the Toradjas made a careless gesture that took in all Papua, "they afraid Qasavara. I see his house close by Ambunti. Five white man there, one hifty-hifty. Two white man tie up. One you friend."

"My friend?" Jim said, incredulously. "What makes you think so?"

"Me see you him Amurang one time. You go Qasavara?"

"Yeah," Jim said. "What do you call yourself?"

"Man in Makassar, he call me Oolyssus," he said proudly. "Now Lyssy."

“Ulysses?” Jim grinned. “Not far wrong at that, boy. You get around. All right, let’s go!”

All day they steamed steadily up the Sepik. Here and there a cloud of herons flew up, or a flock of wild pigeons. Along the muddy banks crocodiles sunned themselves, great, ugly-looking fellows, many times larger than any seen downstream.

“What’s the plan, Skipper?” Slug said, walking up from the main deck at eight bells.

Jim shrugged. “No plan. Ambunti is two hundred and sixty miles from the mouth. It will be nearly morning before we get there. I’m going to take Lyssy and go out to that House of Qasavara, and what happens after that will be whatever looks good.”

“You’re not leaving me, Skipper. There’s going to be a mess back in those woods, and you know it. You can just figure Brophy in on that, or I quit!”

“Okay, Slug,” Jim said. “I can use you. I think this Toradjas is on the level. Good men, those fellows, good seamen, fierce fighters, and they don’t have a bit of use for other natives. Think they are superior. I’ve seen a lot of them, and they’d tackle their weight in mountain lions.”

It was pitch-dark when they dropped the anchor in the shelter of a river bend near Ambunti. The current was slack there, and the water sounded three fathoms. Silently, a boat was lowered, settling into the water with only a slight splash. Then the three men rowed ashore and slipped into the brush.

Ponga Jim stumbled along the path in the dark, following Lyssy and with Brophy bringing up the rear. They had made something more than two miles when suddenly Lyssy stopped dead still. In the same instant, a light flashed in Jim’s eyes, and before he could move, a terrific blow crashed down over his head. He felt himself sinking as a wave of blinding pain swept over him, and he desperately tried to regain his feet. Then there was another blow, and he slid to his face in the muddy trail.

It was a long time later when he came to. His lids fluttered open, but he lay still, without trying to move, but trying desperately to understand where he was. He realized suddenly that he was lying face down on a stone floor. He twisted, and an agonizing pain struck him like a blow. He turned over slowly.

“Ah!” said a voice sarcastically. “The sleeping beauty awakens!”

He struggled to sit up, but was bound hand and foot. Still, after a struggle, he managed it. Slowly, he glanced around.

“Well, well! What a pretty bunch this is!” he muttered.

Major William Arnold sat opposite him, his face dirty and unshaven. Beside him was Colonel Sutherland, a plump man with a round British face and calm blue eyes. Further away along the wall was Carol herself, her clothes torn, her face without makeup, but looking surprisingly attractive.

“William,” Ponga Jim said slowly. “I never thought I’d see the time when I’d see you wrapped up like that.”

There was a groan, and he turned slightly to see Slug Brophy coming out of it.

“You, too, eh? What happened to our Toradjas?”

“He got away,” Slug grunted. “That guy has skin like an eel. They grabbed him, and then he was gone—just like that.”

“Now what?” Carol said brightly. “All you brave and bold he-men should be able to get out of a little mess like this.”

“I don’t think you can depend on them, Miss Sutherland,” a cool voice said in very precise English.

Jim turned his head stiffly and saw two men standing in the door. One was a thick, broad-shouldered man with a powerful neck and the arms of an ape. The other man was tall, obviously a man of some culture.

“Permit me, Captain Mayo,” he said with exaggerated politeness. “My coworker, Wilhelm Blucher. I am Count Franz Kull.”

As he spoke, two more men appeared in the door.

“Ah, yes! And this is Fritz Heitn, with whose brother you have already come in contact, and this,” he indicated the tall, very dark man with massive, stooped shoulders, “is Torq Vokeo. You will know him well, very well, no doubt!”

“Vokeo is our expert in the matter of helping people to remember—you understand? He is, I might add, very efficient.”

He turned abruptly. “No more of this horseplay. Major Arnold, you will give me copies of the codes I asked for at once. You will also tell me where your other men are located and what their tasks are. I want that information by noon tomorrow. If I do not have it then, Miss Sutherland will be tortured until you give it to us. I should dislike to leave her to the tender mercies of Torq, but that is a matter for you and her father to decide.”

He looked down at Ponga Jim coldly. “As for you, Captain Mayo, there can be only one answer—death. We can’t have you in our way further. Within twenty-four hours our bands of native warriors will strike Salamoia, Lae, Madang, Hollandia, and elsewhere. Two of our planes will bomb Port Moresby, and within a matter of hours, New Guinea will again be in our complete possession. Nevertheless, I shall deem it a great privilege to have the honor of wiping you off the slate. You’ve given us no end of trouble.”

“Yeah?” Jim grinned insultingly. “And, Herr Kull. I’m going to give you a lot more. Do you think I came up here without reporting what I knew?”

Kull laughed. “We’ll see about that! As for reporting what you knew, we had you under espionage until you were on the river. There has been no chance since then.”

Turning, he motioned to the others. “We’ll give them a little time to think matters over. Then you may have them, Torq.”

When the heavy door closed and locked, Ponga Jim shrugged.

“Nice people!” he said expressively. “But if he thinks I’m going to lie here and wait, he’s got another guess coming.”

Just then the door opened softly, and Torq Vokeo stepped in. He held an iron spit, its end red hot and glowing. He smiled at Jim, baring his teeth wolfishly.

“You think is funny, eh? I show you!”

Quickly, Vokeo stepped across the room.

“Get set, Slug!” Jim said suddenly.

Throwing himself on his back, he kicked out viciously with his bound legs. Vokeo, caught with a terrific kick on the upper legs, stumbled and fell headlong. Instantly, Slug Brophy rolled over on top of the man.

Arnold, his eyes suddenly gleaming with hope, rolled over quickly three times, and rolled across Torq's legs. Then Sutherland rolled on his head. Cursing viciously, his oaths muffled by Sutherland's weight, Torq struggled to get free, but the three heavy bodies were too much for him.

Even as the man fell, Jim rolled over and pushed his tied wrists against the red hot spit. The smell of burning hemp filled the room. Time and again his wrists wavered, and burned him, but he persisted. Then, suddenly, he gave a terrific jerk, swelling his muscles with all his great strength. Slowly then, the rope stretched; another jerk, and it came apart!

With a leap, he was on his feet, and in a matter of seconds, he had untied Arnold. Then, as Arnold bent over Brophy's wrists, Jim grabbed Torq by the throat to stifle his shouts, and calmly slugged him on the chin. Then, while Arnold and Brophy freed Sutherland and his daughter, Ponga Jim bound the unconscious man and gagged him.

"Only one gun," Jim said, getting up. "You take it, Colonel. I'll have another in a minute."

He walked directly to the door and without a second's hesitation, pulled it open. The native guard turned, and Ponga Jim's fist met him halfway. Coolly, Jim dragged him inside, smacked him again, and then passed his rifle to Arnold and his knife to Slug.

Ponga Jim grinned. "Folks, it might be a good idea to wait here until they come back again, but I'm no hand to wait. Personally, I say we move right now. We make a break for the open, and once there, if attacked, it is every man—and woman—for himself. Make for the river at the big bend below. Ambunti. That's where the ship is."

He jerked open the door, and they started walking, fast. They had reached the end of a long, low stone hall before they were seen. A native guard half turned. Then he opened his mouth to scream. Jim sprang, but too late. A ringing yell awoke a million echoes in the hall. Then Jim slugged him.

But the native was big, and he was tough. With a yell of savage fury, he dove for Jim's legs. Jim tried to sidestep and then fell headlong.

"Run, damn you!" he yelled at the others.

Then he jerked to a sitting position and hooked a short left to the native's eye. It jarred the man loose, and Jim lurched to his feet and kicked him viciously in the stomach. With a howl of pain, the man rolled over on the floor.

In the yard outside there was a rattle of gunfire. And suddenly Fritz Heitn stepped into sight with a submachine gun. His eyes narrowed with eagerness as he saw the group clustered just beyond the door, and he lifted the gun. Then he saw Ponga Jim.

Concealed by a bend in the stair, Jim was slipping quickly and silently up the stairs. A dozen steps away when Heitn saw him, Jim leaped to his feet and lunged, even as Heitn brought the machine gun down and pulled the trigger!

But suddenly, even as Jim staggered erect, the gun slipped by him and went plunging down the stair. At the top of it, Fritz Heitn stood dead still, his eyes wide

and staring. Then slowly, he leaned forward and fell face down on the steps. Sticking from between his shoulder blades was the haft of a big knife!

Startled, Jim stared along the stone platform where Heitn had stood. Coming toward him, at a rapid trot, was Lyssy. Grinning, he stooped over and retrieved his knife.

With a quick slap on the Toradjas's shoulder, Ponga Jim ran down the steep steps and grabbed up the fallen machine gun. Then he stepped to the door. Across the narrow landing field he could see Arnold and Brophy disappearing into the woods after the others. Following them were Blucher and a dozen renegades.

Ponga Jim took in the situation at a glance. The two planes, one a heavy bomber, the other a small amphibian, were not a hundred yards away. Without a second's hesitation, Jim made his decision. He started down the landing field, which was actually a wide stone terrace belonging to the temple of Qasavara, toward the planes. A bullet whizzed by his ear from behind and smacked viciously against the stones ahead of him. Wheeling around, Jim caught sight of two figures silhouetted against the sky on the temple roof. He swept the machine gun to his shoulder, fired a burst, and saw one of the men fall headfirst over the parapet and take a long plunge to the stone terrace below. The other man vanished.

Jim wheeled, and as he turned a gun crashed, almost in his ear it seemed, and a bullet smashed into the machine gun and glanced off, ripping a gash in his sleeve and tearing a ragged cut along his arm. Franz Kull was standing not ten feet away, a Luger aimed at Ponga Jim's stomach. The gun was pointed and the finger tightening on the trigger, and there wasn't a chance in the world of him missing at that distance.

Jim staggered, and slowly his knees buckled. He tumbled over on his face. Kull hesitated, lowering the Luger to cover Ponga Jim's still form.

"Got him," Kull whispered. "They got him after all!"

He glanced quickly around. Blucher was furiously directing his band of renegades in the pursuit of the escaped prisoners.

Kull smiled and slipped the gun into his waistband. He stood for a minute, staring down at Ponga Jim Mayo's body, at the slow pool of blood gathering under his left side.

"Almost," he said, "I am sorry."

He stooped and caught Jim by the arm, turning him over. He saw Jim's eyes flicker open and saw the right fist start, and in one panic-stricken moment, realized he had been tricked. Then that fist slammed against the angle of his jaw, and he staggered, grabbing for his gun.

Like a tiger, Jim was on his feet. A left knocked the gun from Kull's hand, and a right sent him reeling against the parked bomber. But Kull straightened, slipped Ponga Jim's left, and hooked a hard left to the head. He ducked a right, and sunk a left in Jim's body, then a right.

Ponga Jim grinned. "A boxer, eh?" he said.

He jabbed quickly, and the punch set Kull off balance. A right caught him in the midsection, and a sweeping left sent him to his knees. Coolly, Jim stepped back.

"Get up, Kull, and take a socking!" he ordered.

Kull straightened and then rushed, hooking hard with both hands. Jim staggered, grinned, and tied Kull up, whipping a wicked left to his head and body. The punches traveled scarcely six inches, yet they landed with sledgehammer force. Kull jerked away, and Mayo whipped up a right uppercut that knocked him back against the plane. Then Jim stepped in and crossed a short, hard right. Kull slipped to the stone pavement.

Ponga Jim wheeled and swung open the door to the cabin of the amphibian.

The motor sputtered and then roared into life. Out of the corner of his eye, Jim saw Blucher turn, puzzled. Then he started, and gave her the gun. It was little room for a takeoff, but enough, and Ponga Jim cleared the trees at the other end of the terrace by a matter of inches. He banked steeply and came back flying low.

Blucher stared at him, puzzled, and a half dozen of the renegades stared upward. Then Jim cut loose with both machine guns, raking the terrace.

With a roar of rage, Blucher jerked up his gun, but the blast of leaden death was too much for him, and he broke and ran for the jungle. His men were less fortunate, and the machine guns swept the terrace like a bolt of lightning.

Then it was all over. Slowly he wheeled above the huge stone building, getting a good look at it for the first time, the great towers, the battlements, and the queer, fantastic architecture. Jim glanced over the side, and nothing moved on the terrace.

He turned the plane and flew for the distant masts of the SEMIRAMIS.

Night had fallen when they met on the captain's deck of the tramp freighter. Above on the bridge, Slug Brophy paced casually, watching the channel as the dark jungle-clad banks slid by.

Ponga Jim leaned back in his deck chair, pushing back his cap.

"There goes your Qasavara trouble, William!" he said cheerfully. "Again Mayo comes to the rescue. It seems I have to save the British Empire about once every thirty days."

Arnold chuckled. "You aren't doing so bad. Picked up a nice amphibian plane, just like that."

"The fortunes of war, William, merely the fortunes of war! Hello! Here comes Ulysses!"

The big Toradjas stopped a few feet away and then stepped forward, handing Ponga Jim a thick wad of Bank of England notes. Colonel Sutherland gulped, and his eyes widened. "Me find him House of Qasavara," he said. "You take, eh?"

"You bet I'll take!" Jim said, winking at Arnold. "Ah, the sinews of war! Ulysses, you are now a member of my crew, a full-fledged member!"

"You betcha!" Ulysses said.

"That man," Major Arnold said positively, "has the makings of either a thief or a philosopher!"

Ponga Jim got up and offered his arm to Carol.

"Both, William, both! He's going to be a soldier of fortune!"



