

The PINK PEARLS of TEBRAU ~ by Hughes Tracey

"MEAT, just meat," purred the thick voice as the portly man settled himself in the reclining chair on the shaded veranda.

"I don't know," replied his meager companion, who was standing by the railing. "I believe this Raglaiff gets through a lot of work in spite of his lackadaisical ways."

"Meat, just meat—to me," the thick voice purred again.

The restlessness of the younger man betrayed his anxiety and the importance of the coup they had in view.

"After the sleazebag shall have a talk," Jabes muttered drowsily, and his large manila cigar drooped dangerously.

"You'll burn yourself," called the other more loudly than was necessary in the oppressive stillness of the tropical afternoon.

The senior partner jerked upward, removed his cigar and studied it for a moment.

"This business has got on your nerves, Lyman," he said; "keep cool, my boy."

"Not so easy," Lyman retorted, "with the thermometer at 96 in the shade—and a chance of losing the best deal I've ever been in."

"Not a chance, not an earthly," Jabes affirmed confidently. "He doesn't know a thing about this."

"Why shouldn't he know? He's got his secret agents, too."

"Meat, just meat to me," Jabes asserted irritably. "A nice young chap and all that, but—puff!" He snapped his fingers.

The junior partner had more respect for their business rival, and, moreover, he felt there was too much at stake to take risks.

"You ought to know best," he complained. "But I don't think the fellow is a dub. Old Venner made a fortune in Hattom Garden mainly through his foreign buyers, and I know that he chose Raglaiff in preference to older and more experienced men."

The senior partner sat upright, rubbing his fat chin irritably, turned his dark eyes on his junior, and waited, with pursed lips, in silence for several moments. The younger man fidgeted and looked out over the palms to the molten sea shimmering in ripples of golden light.

"I don't usually discuss details, Lyman," said the thick voice, reprehensively, and the younger man turned round sharply; "but I'll make this an exception. I have been twenty-five years in the pearl business and for most of that time I have been after these pearls. Now I'll tell you something of their history." He paused, looking round cautiously.

"Quite safe," Lyman assured him, and Jabes sat back and began his narrative.

"ABOUT seventeen years ago the Sultan of Tebrau brought a new wife to his harem. She was an Eurasian and became his favorite. Well, to her—a perfect little doll she was, but wise like all women who know their price—anyhow the Sultan gave her the famous necklace of pink pearls, every one of which is a perfect specimen. Now this little woman and her son had enemies, but she knew it, and about ten years ago the necklace disappeared."

"She hid it," broke in Lyman.

"And much besides," said Jabes. "About that time that wise old bird, the Sultan of Jolomunga, and the little Eurasian became great friends—always were, I believe—so she sent the kid to Jolomunga for safety."

"Oh! I thought that kind of thing didn't happen between themselves."

"Well, ye know, the young fellow might swallow something that didn't agree with him," Jabes leered. "or a coconut might fall on him one day, or anything might happen—the sharks might get him, anything—"

"He waved his arm in a comprehensive sweep.

"A short while ago," Jabes resumed, "the little woman died of some unknown disease. But the kid is not going to be a pauper. The little doll saw to that. And now his fortune is coming to him. The whole pearling fleet of Jolomunga has gone to escort it."

"But Raglaiff may know about this, too," Lyman countered seriously.

Jabes laughed long and sarcastically; then leaned forward and said:

"Even if he does know about the pink beauties he'll be too late. My offer has been made already and will be supported by the advice of the holy man of the Palace."

"The Imam!" Lyman gasped incredulously. "The Imam!" Jabes's unctuous countenance wrinkled with satisfaction.

"Aye! The holy man of the Palace of Jolomunga," he said slowly. "Now is there anything else worrying that wise head of yours?"

LYMAN was smiling admiringly at his senior.

"Well, not very much," he said. "But just suppose Venner's people got there first and made a personal offer?"

"There's a hundred miles of water between here and Jolomunga and no airplanes for hire!" Jabes seemed to hover, expectant.

"But a boat!" protested Lyman, whose appetite for profit was only whetted by its proximity and size.

"Plenty of them, ha! ha! but nothing we need fear. There is nothing to beat my launch, within 500 miles of Zambanga. Think I'd miss that!" Jabes laughed scornfully. "Besides, the young fellow can't give me the ship. I'm watching that. If he tried, I'd just run him—well, you'd see a boat move for once in your life."

"You've been very thorough," Lyman ventured, with an envious smile.

"Now a bit more, my boy—and let this be the last time you interrupt my sleazebag. The Hon. Percival Raglaiff is going on a shooting trip. He's been negotiating with Wu Pei for a boat—I thought it might mean something else—Hello!" He whistled.

"There's the Honorable coming down the street."

The senior partner stood up and waved a ponderous arm.

The tall youthful figure in white halted



"The commands of our honorable patron have been carried out," Wu Pei announced unemotionally in sibilant English

and waved his hand slowly in reply. He seemed to hesitate, and then Jabes waved again, more emphatically inviting.

"Go and show him up," he snapped. Then turning, he shouted a welcome to the young English nobleman.

The Hon. Percival Raglaiff stepped on to the veranda and grasped Jabes's hand in a firm muscular grip. He was tall and well-formed but not massive. His fair hair, fresh complexion and blue eyes gave him the ingenious appearance of a studious young man rather than a man of business. He deposited a long case against the veranda railing and threw himself into an easy chair.

"A perfect dog of a day, what!" The Hon. Percival blew a hot breath. "Don't know how you keep cool, Jabes."

"A good cool drink," suggested the thick voice ingratiatingly. "Come, Lyman," he turned to Raglaiff. "The whole of Singapore is first rate."

"Which you'd drop in oftener," said Jabes, raising his glass. "Very glad to see you any time."

"Cheerio, old man; simply topping of you, what!" and the ingenious young man sipped his highball.

"Beastly job lugging these things about," The Hon. Percival pointed to the gun case. "Cleaning it up a bit; going out with Jolomunga party."

"Oh, indeed!" Jabes affected much surprise.

"Want to join them off the Point day after tomorrow. Beastly nuisance—can't get anything but a sailing boat."

"Jabes commiserated with the candid young man, and the latter continued freely: "Old Wu Pei, the Chinese shipping Johnny, y'know, searched the place for a cutter or a launch. Not a thing about though; beastly nuisance, what! But I'm not going to miss that trip, by Jove!"

The young man dived into his glass, and Jabes exchanged glances with his partner.

"Perhaps I could help you out, Raglaiff," the thick voice purred genially.

"Not at all," protested the young man. "Really, y'know, couldn't think of it. I'll get along. I'll get away in the morning and make the Point before sunset—there's fine night stalking there, I'm told; so I shall have a day's or a night's sport to get me into form before the other fellows come along."

He took up the gun case, opened it, and stroked the shining metal with caressing touch. Jabes again exchanged glances with his partner, who was seated on the opposite side and slightly behind Raglaiff.

JABES'S astute mind was working hard. Here was his opportunity. He had the whole game in his hands now. Where the devil was that messenger? He glanced surreptitiously at his watch. The fellow was not due for some time yet. His eyes roamed up and down the dusty sun-scorched road and over the shimmering waters of the Straits. He must hold Raglaiff somehow. The natives, he knew, made the journey to Jolomunga in their vintas; so another might do it. Besides, the Point was not much out of the way to Jolomunga. All the better for him. He could take Raglaiff there. Then every possibility would be provided for. Then a new idea struck him.

"Why not go overland, Raglaiff? You can have my car," he suggested.

"Thanks awfully, old man; but, y'know, I've got to get the steamship, and her course lies about seven miles to westward. I hate bringing them out of their way, and, in fact, I've told them I should be out to meet them. Besides, owing to the reef, they'd lose any amount of time if they came close in to fetch me."

The Hon. Percival smiled—and his smile was of the type that seemed to reveal the candor of a simple soul. He snapped down the lid of the gun case and, rose.

Jabes looked eagerly, but in vain, for the expected messenger. Something must be done now.

"What, off already, Raglaiff?" he protested. "Well then, we must strain a point and fix up something for you."

"Not at all, old man. Simply splendid of you, y'know, but I couldn't think of it."

"My dear Raglaiff, it will be a great

pleasure. We help one another out here, ye know." And Jabes chuckled.

"That's simply topping of you. Eh, Lyman?" The Hon. Percival laughed with evident delight.

"I'm sure Mr. Jabes will be delighted to help a friend," Lyman purred sleekly.

"I must be off now," said Raglaiff. "Must call at Wu Pei's." Jabes glanced significantly at his partner and rose. "Coming out?" queried the Hon. innocently. "Excellent! We'll toddle down together."

He talked in his boyish way as they passed down the stairs and out into the glaring streets. The older man clung tenaciously to the roadside, availing himself of whatever shade the tall palms offered.

"I'll fix up something definite by 5 or 6," the thick voice purred, as they neared Wu Pei's. "You can rely on that."

A moment later they entered the shipping office and Chinese banking house of Wu Pei, and were quickly ushered into the inner sanctum where the head of the business sat behind a high desk.

THE stooped figure, in a gorgeous garment of green flowered silk, looked up, and the drooping black mustache flickered as the yellow lips parted in a cautious smile.

"The Honorable Patron of this humble house is welcome." He glanced dispassionately at Jabes, and then: "Pray, be seated, gentlemen."

Raglaiff gave him a familiar "good-afternoon," and, advancing, leaned upon the desk, with Jabes close behind him.

"The commands of our Honorable Patron have been duly carried out," Wu Pei announced unemotionally in sibilant English.

"Good! Well, there you are," Raglaiff teased on the desk a check pinned to a folded sheet of paper.

"Payment might have awaited the return of our Honorable Patron," Wu Pei said gravely, his cold mesmeristic eyes holding the inquisitive gaze of the old pearl dealer.

"May be met with most excellent sport," Raglaiff laughed. "Hope we do, said Raglaiff, laughing, as he turned to leave.

"Punguous, but a topping old chap," said the Hon. Percival when the two men reached the street.

"Can't see why you bother with that kind of people."

Jabes felt uneasy, though there was nothing suspicious that he could virtually point to.

"He's only got my personal stuff, y'know," the boyish voice replied. "He saves me a lot of bother; looks after my Chinese servants—does a dozen things for me. Topping old chap, by Jove! Looks like the high priest of some dead and gone religion," Raglaiff added, laughing inconsequently.

"Well, you'll let me know before 6 o'clock? Simply topping of you, what?"

The Hon. Percival grasped Jabes's hand, wheeled suddenly, and was gone at a brisk pace across the deserted plaza toward the block of buildings where he had his office. Jabes retraced his steps, perspiring, toward his house on the sea front on the western side of the town. The old pearl buyer felt secure in his grip of the situation.

MEANWHILE the Hon. Percival had entered his private office and summoned his confidential clerk—an undernourished, wizened man, past the prime of life, who had followed him, past commendable fidelity, the fortunes of the house of Venner during thirty years.

"Bonney, there," a letter delivered shortly from Wu Pei. Bring it in at once—mind you, unless Mr. Jabes is here."

The confidential clerk manifested his astonishment, but his superior warned him in a dismissive gesture, and he was left alone at his correspondence in a characteristically stringent struggle against time, until a discreet knock roused him.

"Thank you, Bonney," The Hon. Percival opened the expected message, extracting three inclosures, which he proceeded to read. "Eight thousand," he murmured; and, later—quoting from the second paper—"any sum up to and not exceeding seven

thousand. Quite enough!" The third sheet he laid carefully beside a box of cigars within easy reach of an armchair near his desk.

"Don't file that receipt until I tell you. And—ah—Bonney! Mr. Jabes will call shortly. Show him in here, give him that chair, ask him to help himself to a cigar, and tell him I shall be back in five minutes. Then come and tell me."

"You clearly understand, Bonney?" he asked, for the clerk seemed too astonished to comprehend.

"Yesir," and passed a bony hand across his puckered brow.

"Good old Bonney!" Raglaiff laughed disconcertingly. "But mind, Bonney, no supervision. Close the door fully when you leave Mr. Jabes here."

The Hon. Percival retired to a spare room at the back of the office, unrolled a map he had taken from a drawer, pinning down the corners on a plane table beneath a window. Next he withdrew from his pocket a leather case containing a liquid leucate compass which he laid, open, over the ornamental arrow at the side of the map. Then he bent over the table and patiently moved it about slightly to right or left until at length he smiled at the sensitive needle below him.

"Set! Got it at last. Never imagined the days I sweated as an artillery cadet would ever help me to do anything except fire guns!"

HE BENT again over the table, this time with ruler and pencil, measuring distances and making calculations. He murmured, "miles, and," "miles to the galleon," and, "margin for safety," till at length he stood up, lit a cigarette and proceeded to enjoy the satisfying aroma of the fragrant leaf in the boyish way in which he was familiar to the world, till a knock at the door made him swing round quickly.

"Oh, it's you, Bonney," Bonney held a parcel.

"Mr. Jabes is in your private office, sir. And this just came from Wu Pei's."

Raglaiff opened the parcel and disclosed a piece of board as long as a chess board, with a straight yellow line along the middle broken only by a circular depression at the center. Into this depression he fitted the compass, and into two holes at either end of the yellow line two wooden pegs, painted similarly to the line.

"Excellent, Bonney, excellent! That is luminous paint," he said, pointing to the yellow line. Then he glanced at his watch.

"Four minutes yet, Bonney," he said, and while he spoke his finger indicated certain places on the map. "A straight line between the Point and Jolomunga will measure exactly the same as the yellow line between the two yellow pegs on the board. Is that clear, Bonney?"

The confidential clerk professed his belief in the unproved, and turned wondering eyes on the intent face of his young chief.

"Now, Bonney, if I fix this board over the map so that the two plugs stand precisely over the Point and Jolomunga, you will have a luminous way connecting the two places. That saves you the trouble of having a light over your map—if you need to steer such a course by night."

"Pack up all these things carefully," he said, shortly, his manner undergoing one of those sudden changes. "I shall go into other matters with you tonight. And—Bonney—I may call you into my room presently. Take what instructions I give you without asking questions. Understand?"

"Yesir," replied Bonney, as the Hon. Patron of Wu Pei softly closed the door and passed down the passage toward his private office loudly humming a lively tune.

"I am delighted, Raglaiff, to be able to help you," gushed Mr. Jabes.

THERE was a brief pause while Raglaiff as he noticed the position of the receipted bill. Jabes, happy with the information he received from Jolomunga, puffed blithely clouds from rounded lips. He was visualizing himself in the act of completing the deal while his youthful competitor would be on his way to shoot wild pig.

"Fine cigar, Raglaiff. In perfect condition, too."

A FAT villain! Mr. Tracey has run counter to literary tradition and created an obese bad man who matches wit with a bland and smiling youth for a string of priceless pearls.

The Hon. Percival was gently deprecatory. "Perfect, simply perfect!" Jabes laid his hands on wide-apart fat legs, and grinned at the ingenious blue eyes and eager countenance opposite him.

"It's simply topping of you, y'know, what," the Hon. Percival repeated, and then paused before asking:

"How long would it take to run to the Point in your launch?"

"If we let her out we could do it in three hours."

Raglaiff exclaimed in astonishment, and remembered, with an unpleasant twinge, how long it would take in his boat. Jabes was boastfully emphatic.

"By Jove! I should love to try her, Jabes."

"And so you shall," Jabes agreed. "Of course, you've handled a motor launch before?"

Raglaiff assured him and gained the only move he now desired from Jabes; but his enthusiasm continued:

"Shall we say half-past 2 prompt?"

Jabes agreed that the hour would suit him very well. They would arrive at the Point just before sunset—but the confident pearl buyer saw not the danger lurking in darkness. Raglaiff rang for his clerk.

"Mr. Bonney—remember you will leave in the morning with my kit as already arranged. But—Lyman, I suppose, will come also?"

Jabes nodded his reply. "Excellent! Dinner for three then, instead of one, Bonney."

"Yesir."

"And, Bonney, you had better be on the lookout for us at the end of the headland on the near side. You will find some delightful spots for the tent there, especially round the lagoon. That's all, Bonney. Get away early. Even then you will not have much time. Eh, Jabes?" He smiled ingeniously. "You may expect us about half past 5."

"Certainly," affirmed the thick voice. "An at fresco dinner will be delightful. Ha! ha! delightful!" And the Hon. Patron of Wu Pei entirely concurred.

THE following afternoon the powerful launch swept swiftly in the path of the declining sun, and the three occupants chatted amicably.

It was past the half-hour before a meager figure on the near side of the headland hailed the trio, and Raglaiff, with consummate skill, swung the launch ashore.

"The camp is at the upper end of the lagoon," Bonney called, and pointed landward.

"Shall we walk? It's only half a mile over the scrub," Raglaiff said.

"Not for me," responded Jabes. "I prefer to ride there if you can run her up."

"Of course," Raglaiff answered readily and signaled to his confidential clerk to come aboard.

Bonney, complying with previous instructions, at once entered upon a full account of his search for a suitable place, thus engaging the attention of Jabes and Lyman.

Meantime the Hon. Percival, picking up his landmarks, directed the launch toward a peculiarly formed rock, then headed her toward the lagoon. His lips were smiling but his eyes were tense, and he moved the tiller with swift though gentle touch as he steered a cautious way through the tortuous, reef-bound channel, which even in full light of day demanded most skillful navigation to avoid disaster. At length the launch entered the lagoon, and Raglaiff circled round it, "to give the sharks the sight of their lives," he said, and Jabes laughed at his youthful enthusiasm.

Dinner was a hearty meal, and night had fallen before the men lighted their cigars. They smoked in satisfied silence for some time, enjoying the fragrant coolness of the night, till the tropical stillness was rent by a shrill whistle. Raglaiff, rising instantly, emitted a piercing note.

"One of my men," he casually replied in answer to suspicious demands.

Then a dark figure appeared, silhouetted against the sky, on the high ground above them to the west.

"Krieki—Krieki!" the Hon. Percival called, and the figure disappeared. A few minutes later the swarthy form of a powerful, lithe, half-clothed Moro approached to within a few paces.

"Righto, Krieki, want me?" Raglaiff asked in Spanish.

"Bl, senor," was the guttural response, and he extended a white envelope.

Raglaiff withdrew out of hearing and, by the aid of an electric torch, read the letter. His youthful face wrinkled with pleasure.

Then he flashed the light on the half-naked, muscular figure, slowly lifting the brilliant circle to reveal the glittering eyes and vermilion lips of the grinning Moro.

"The senor is pleased?" asked the guttural voice.

"You have done wonderfully well, Krieki. How did you deliver the letter to the Sultan?"

Krieki grinned more expansively and stared unblinkingly into the bright glow.

"The Imam of my village, senor, is a great friend of the Imam of the Palace. I am a messenger from one Imam to the other. Then I give your letter to the Senior Secretary of the Sultan, and he is very pleased."

"The extra thousand did it, I suppose," the Hon. Percival mused. "Buena, buena," he commented. "Now go to the boat where Pedro is and you will find food fit for a good Mohammedan." He pointed westward and turned toward the others.

"What is it? Not trouble with the Moros?" demanded Jabes.

"Senor," whispered a guttural voice close behind Raglaiff, "these are your enemies."

Raglaiff, surprised, wheeled suddenly. "All right, Krieki."

"Senor, they are dogs." The dark form drew his heavy bolo and cleft the air with a swishing sound.

"No, Krieki," Raglaiff replied, severely, though he could not repress a smile. "The launch is in the lagoon; that is enough. I hope. Anyhow—now go and eat, Krieki, at once. I shall need you very soon, perhaps." And the Hon. Percival returned to Jabes and Lyman.

"I have just received news," he announced, calmly, "that necessitates a change of plans."

"Eh! what's that?" demanded Jabes, suspiciously.

"Business demands that I leave you at once," replied the ingenious young voice.

"The devil you do!" Jabes snorted. "And how are you going to do it? Not in my launch. You can't steal a march on me. Ha! ha!" the thick voice laughed harshly.

"I fear you are rushing to conclusions, Jabes." The young man spoke very softly.

"Am I, am I, by—?" The older pearl hunter's suspicions fired his rage, and he rushed headlong toward the launch, calling to Lyman. "You can't get away from me, my buck," he roared.

"Jabes!" Raglaiff called, with quiet insistence, and the hurrying, stumbling figure halted. "Be very careful. Don't rush on your way out through the reefs. The lagoon, y'know, is full of hammer-headed sharks."

Raglaiff laughed musically.

Then he turned in the opposite direction, and, joined by Bonney, hurried westward toward the small bay where his boat was beached.

"Come, quickly. Every second counts now. We shall have a start—how long depends—yes it depends—"

his voice trailed into an inaudible whisper, for the uneven scrub-covered ground needed all his attention.

"Get in, man," commanded the thick voice, now hoarse with rage. "He's trying to bluff us!" Jabes's voice rose to a scream. "A chicken—like that! Sit down," he shouted, and a moment later swore at Lyman for doing nothing.

In a few minutes they had two lamps lighted and the engine running. Jabes sat back a moment beside the tiller to regain his breath.

The launch leaped forward suddenly as the engine roared into full voice, and Lyman bumped heavily against the cabin.

"Steady, Jabes, steady," the younger man screamed. "There may be rocks ahead. Raglaiff took a long time to reach the lagoon, though I didn't notice it at the time."

The truth of these words struck home to Jabes, and he shut off the engine as suddenly as he had started it, but the launch continued to move forward till an ominous grating and then a thud that sent a shiver through every line brought her to a halt.

The terrified pair sat in awed silence for several minutes. Then the senior partner broke the spell.

"She's all right. Take one of the lamps to the bow and tell me how to steer."

Lyman obeyed, but a few minutes later he said:

"I can't see a thing except water."

Jabes rushed forward, rocking the launch, and it grated audibly on the sharp concealed rocks.

"Nabbed, nabbed, by—!" Jabes swore fiercely. "He's snared us, tricked us into this trap."

WITH this and similar reflections and denunciations, Jabes beguiled the tedious hours till the first glimpse of red dawn.

"Now for it," Jabes cried, and, with Lyman lying in the bow, he threaded the tortuous windings toward the sea. Then he pulled the starting lever to the limit and the powerful engine throbbed in full-throated roar as the launch skimmed over the waveless sea, casting from its graceful filled bow a double wave of blue-green.