



The attack caught the whole crew unready; the black raiders swept the schooner. Albro's first warning was the cutting of his air pipe

[Originally published in *Collier's* magazine, August 18, 1917]

THE LOST GOD
BY JOHN RUSSELL
ILLUSTRATED BY W. H. D.
KOERNER

PROPHETS have cried out in print, no man regarding, and saints have been known to write their autobiographies, and even angels are credited now and then with revealing most curious matters in language quite plain and ungrammatical. But I have seen the diary of an authentic god who once went to and fro on the earth and in the waters underneath.

His record is the Book of Jim Albro, and he made it at Barange Bay, which is Papua, which is the end of the back of beyond and a bit farther yet: the great, dark, and smiling land that no white man has ever yet gripped as a conqueror, where anything can happen that you would care to believe and many things that you never would. He neglected to copyright it himself. The chances of his returning to claim it are apparently remote. And Jeckol says that fiction is stranger than truth anyhow, and pays better. So I shall feel quite safe in making free of that remarkable work, just as Jim Albro set it down with a leaden bullet on some strips of bark and left it for those who came after to find.

In his very blackest hour Jim Albro must have known that somebody would come after him, some time. Somebody always did come after him, no matter how far and to what desperate chance his trail might lead. He was that kind. All his days he never lacked the friend to hunt him up and to pack him home when he was helpless, to pay his bills or to bail him out at need. One of those irresistible rascals born to a soft place near the world's heart whose worst follies serve

only to endear them, whose wildest errors are accepted as the manifestation of an engaging caprice, while they go on serenely drawing blank checks against destiny!

It is odd that he should have had to settle up in the end unaided, cut off from all help, completely isolated—and yet with the savor of popular admiration still rising about him, amid the continued applause of a multitude.

“A chap like Albro can't simply drop out of sight, like you or me might,” said Cap'n Bartlet, thoughtfully. “He's filled too much space and pulled through too many scrapes. He's had his way too often with men and devils—and women too.”

We were strung along the rail on the afterdeck of the little *Aurora Bird* as she began to grope the passage through the barrier reef, a silent lot. Talk had been cheap enough on the long stretch up the coral sea, when every possible theory of Albro's fate and the fate of his three white shipmates and their native crew had been thrashed to weariness. But now suspense held us all by the throat, for we were come at last to Barange, the falling-off place.

And something else held us—I could call it a spell and not be so far wrong. The lazy airs offshore bore down to us the scent that is like nothing else in the world, of rotting jungle and teeming soil; of poisonous, lush green, and rare, sleepy blossoms, heavy with death and ardent with a fierce vitality. This is the breath of Papua, stirring warm on her lips, that none who has known between loathing

and desire can ever forget. Many men have known it, traders, pearl-ers, recruiters, gold hunters, and eagerly have sought to know more and have died seeking. There she lies, the last enigma, guarding her secrets still behind her savage coasts and the fringe of her untracked forests—the black sphinx of the seas, lovely, vast, and cruel.

We had been watching the widening gap of the bay off our quarter, the palm-tufted threads of beach, the sullen hills aquiver in the heat haze and the nameless dim mountains beyond. For an hour or more the only sounds had been Bartlet's gruff orders to the Kanaka at the wheel, the gentle crush of foam overside, the musical cry of the leadsman and the tap-tap of reef points and creak of tackle as our sails failed and filled again. Each one of us was intent for some sign of the disaster. Each one of us had a question pressing on his tongue—pretty much the same question, I judge—but nobody cared to voice it until the cap'n spoke. He had had, we knew, rather a special interest in Albro. "Throw him how you like, he'd land on his feet," he said.

"Aye," confirmed Peters, the lank trader from Samarai. "Or if so be he couldn't stand, why the crowd would fair fight for the privilege of proppin' him up and buyin' him the last drink in the house."

"You think he's alive?" piped Harris then.

"I think he's alive," said Bartlet, without turning his shaggy gray head. "He weren't made to finish higger-mugger in no such hell hole. I'm

backing the luck of Jim Albro, that always had his way."

"Like as not," said Peters, and span the cylinder of his big Webley revolver and chuckled a little; "like as not we'll find him sittin' on a stump all so lofty with the niggers squatted round in rows, addressin' of the congregation."

You will note—and a queer thing too—that this happened before we had learned the first sure detail of the affair at Barange Bay.

IT was now the 20th of April.

On the 2d of November preceding, the pearling schooner *Timothy S.* had cleared from Cooktown on her lawful occasions for Joannet Harbor in the Louisiades. She had never reached Joannet. A month later she had been spoken by a Sydney steamer up among the Bismarck Group, where she had no ostensible business to be. And early in March some cannibal gossip of the west coast, friendly or only boastful, had passed word to some missionary of a British schooner cut off at Barange. That was strictly all. It remained for certain friends and backers at Cook-town, with or without lawful occasion, to link up the vaguely rumored outrage with the actual and private destination of the *Timothy S.* and to send our search party go-look-see. But Jeckol snorted.

You could hardly blame Jeckol. Among the five of us he was the only man who had never crossed Jim Albro at one point or another in the career of that eccentric luminary. And, besides, it was Jeckol's business to snort. You must have read his clever bits in the "Bulletin"—those little running

paragraphs that snap and fume like a pack of Chinese crackers? He had been loafing about Banana-land on vacation just before we started, and of course he got wind and wished himself along. Trust a pressman to know the necessary people and a chance for copy.

"I've heard a deal of talk of this Albro since we weighed anchor," he said. "What's all about him? He wasn't commanding the *Timothy S.*?"

"No," drawled Peters. "No—he didn't command. Mullhall was skipper."

"Did he launch the scheme then? Was he the discoverer of this wonderful virgin shell bed they were going to strip?"

"No," returned Peters. "No—you couldn't say he had any regular standin' in the expedition. He shipped as a sort of supercargo—didn't he, Cap'n Bartlet?"

"Cabin boy, more likely," said Bartlet in his slow way. "Or bos'n's mate—or even midshipmite."

Jeckol eyed us all around, but nobody smiled.

"You're getting at me," he said. "Never mind. Only I'm going to write the yarn, you know. You'd much better help me pick the right hero. What's your famous Albro like?"

"The takingest chap that ever stood in shoe leather," cried young Harris with a rush. "Absolutely. I never saw him only twice, but I remember just how he looked and what he said. The first time he was drunk—but—but that was all right. He sang 'Mad Bess of Bedlam' to make your hair curl. And one night in Brisbane when he took on the

Castlereagh Slasher for two rounds—"

"Six foot of mad Irishman," said Peters, "and about three inches of dreamy Spaniard atop of that—to put a head on the mixture, you might say. Blue-black, wavy beard and an eye like a blue glass marble—"

"With the sunlight shining through," Harris shot in.

"James O'Shaughnessy Albro." Peters lingered upon the name. "As to his luck, Cap'n Bartlet may be right, but I wouldn't call it so. He was born too late. He should ha' been a conquistador—d'y' call 'em?—and gone swaggerin' up and down in the old time holding pepper rajahs to ransom and carvin' out kingdoms. Whereas he was only Jim and anything you like between a navvy and a millionaire.

"Nobody knows what he'd done back home—prob'ly he got to bulgin' over too many boundaries and needed room. He blew into the Endeavor River one season with a tradin' schooner of his own—curly maple saloon, satin divans, silver-mounted gun racks—by Joe, you'd ha' thought he was goin' to trade with cherryubims for golden harps in the isles of paradise. And so he very nearly did, too, what *with* the dare-devil chances he took, till he lost craft and all on a race back from Thursday Island." "Wrecked?" asked Jeckol.

"Just gambled. Old man Tyler could lay his *Hawfinch* half a point nearer the wind than a chap has a right to expect from an archbishop. Jimmie paid over at the dock head and went weavin' his way up Charlotte Street a beggar, turned into a political barney they were havin' there, and

made them a roarin' speech on somethin'—temperance prob'ly. And, by Joe, if they didn't elect him a divisional councilor the next day!"

"I've heard of that," proffered Harris with a grin. "Wasn't it the same winter he did a quick dash to the tin mines for his health? It seems there was a beauteous and wealthy widow. He couldn't have loved her half so well had he not loved her pretty underhousemaid more. So he started for Mount Remeo. My word, he'd turn the worst scrape into a romance, that fellow! They say he made a big winning at Romeo—just to console himself."

"He made a dozen winnings. And I've helped him to a job as warehouse clerk at Samarai when he wore no shirt under his coat, and gunny bags for trousers. That's what the cap'n here means by his luck, I fancy, because you couldn't keep him down. Capitalist, miner, politician, stevedore—it was all one to Jimmie. Look how he bought up the *Crestwick* that nobody else would touch when she went ashore on Turn-again Island, cleared fifteen thou' off her by the nerviest kind of work and dropped it all on the next Melbourne Cup. Little he cared. He was havin' his own way with life—as you say, Cap'n Bartlet."

But Jeckol frowned and pursed his thin lips.

"He never saw the game that was too big for him," said Harris, "nor held back his smile nor his fist." "Darlinghurst jail is full of the same sort," observed Jeckol dryly.

"You ask what he was like?" Cap'n Bartlet swung around beside the wheel. "I'll tell you. I'm married to

a girl that was pretty chief with Jim Albro once. There's no living man dare stand and say a word agen my wife—the finest in Queensland, sir—but I knew all the talk when I married her. And yet you see me here."

"Ah? With an entirely friendly purpose?" queried Jeckol, peering at him. "Or to make sure he won't come back?"

I saw the color flood to Bartlet's rugged cheek and ebb again.

"In friendship," he answered simply.

Jeckol made a gesture like a salute, with a hint of mockery perhaps, but he said no more.

And we others said rather less. Bartlet brought the schooner smartly about on her heel and laid her square through the gap and we turned again to that sinister bay, opening before us like the painted depth of a stage set, whereon we were now to discover and reconstruct our obscure tragedy.

We drew a quick curtain on it. Scarcely had we come abreast the near headland when one of the brown, breech-clouted sailors leaped up forward with a yell, and each startled eye swept past his darting finger to the wreck of the *Timothy S.* There could be no manner of doubt—a green hull with a black water line, bedded low and on her side, hatches awash, just behind a shallow jag of the shore well away to leeward. We needed no glasses to pick her name or to see that nothing remained of life or value about the battered shell. She lay in her last berth, in the final stage of naval decay, stripped to the shreds of rigging, her masts broken short and bare as bleached bones; and from her

whitened rail rose up a flight of boobies that cried like shrill, mournful ghosts and vanished.

“Aye—that’s the end of their pearlin’ cruise,” said Peters grimly. “That’s Mullhall’s craft, sure enough. The southwest gales would drive her there. She must ha’ been anchored just about where we’re passin’ now, and I shouldn’t wonder.”

“On the shell bank?” sniffed Jeckol, leaning to squint down into the sparkling blue.

“Fair under our keel, I’d say.”

At a signal the leadsman had flown his pigeon again, though we were well past all reefs.

“Twenty-two fathom!” Harris echoed the cry. “That’s diving! I heard it was a deep-water bed. D’you suppose they were at it when the niggers jumped ’em?”

“I figger they were,” said Peters. “See that scrubby bit of island? —the point’s not a hundred yards away. A dozen canoes could mass up there and never be noticed. By Joe, it’s plain as paint. The ship snugged down for business—the diver below, like as not—pumps and tackle goin’—all hands busy on board and the watch calculatin’ profits to three decimals behind the windlass. Aye, there’s your treasure hunter, every time! Then perhaps a slant of wind settin’ around that point to give the raid a runnin’ start—and—”

“Him finish,” concluded Harris briefly. “All over in ten minutes. They’d hardly know what hit ’em. A black cloud—that’s all. A black cloud.”

And Peters was right—it was all too plain. None of us but had heard tales enough, and stark history

enough, of these blood-stained barriers that hedge the true unknown continent. To our waiting minds his few phrases threw a sharp picture of the careless ship, the stalking death, and the swift horror that must have followed. There lay the wreck and there the empty bay. The rest we could fill in for ourselves, or just about. “Then what are you doing here?” asked Jeckol at last.

PETERS was already dealing out rifles and ammunition by the deck house, and Bartlet, looking drawn and old, did not seem to hear, but Harris jerked an answer over his shoulder with the flippancy of emotion. “Oh, you can’t tell—we might find some smoked heads to bring away. ”...

A few minutes later the cap’n was giving him his last instructions while we of the shore party dropped to our places in the big whaleboat.

“You’re not to follow us in whatever happens— mind that. If you sight more’n three canoes at a time, knock out the shackles and run for open sea. I’m leaving you Obadiah—he’s a goodish shot—and four of the best boys.”

The young mate nodded. He hated not coming with us, but Bartlet knew. This was Papua, where wise men take no chance and fools seldom live long enough to take a second.

We took none ourselves as we rowed slowly shoreward and sheered off out of spear throw, watching the wall of jungle. There is no beach inside Ba- range, only the mangrove roots that writhe down to the water’s edge like tangled pythons through the oozy banks of salt marsh. It was very still

and very clear in the afternoon sunlight, though the heat pouring out over us seemed the exhalation of a great steam bath, choked with stewing vegetation. Now and then our crew of clean-limbed Tonga boys rested on their oars, with timid, limpid gaze turned askance. We heard their quick breathing and the drip from the oar blades—nothing else. At such times we floated in a mirage where each leaf and frond and looping liana with its mirrored image had an unnatural brilliance and precision, like a labored canvas or a view seen through a stereoscope.

AND there stole upon us again the oppressive solicitation of the land, subtle and perilous. Behind the beauty and wonder of it, beyond those bright shores and the first low foothills of the range—what? Nobody knows, that is the charm and the lure. Peoples, religions, empires untouched since the birth of time—fabulous wealth, mountains of gold, cliffs of ruby, “cataracts of adamant,” any marvel that fantasy still dares to dream in a prosaic century. They may be; no man has ever drawn the map to deny them. They must be: why else should the sphinx smile?

“I suppose a hundred woolly-heads are spying on us now,” whispered Jeckol suddenly. “Why don’t they do something?” He fiddled nervously with his rifle and sniffed. “What a place! This air is deadly—rotten with fever. Faugh! It’s animal. It’s like—it’s like a tiger’s throat!”

I blinked at the little chap and with the same glance was aware of Peters standing up in the bow. The

trader was just lighting a short-fused stick of dynamite from his cigar. Before I could cry murder he had lobbed it in and shot the bush.

It struck with the smash of all calamity in that utter quiet. The trees sprang toward us and the roar rolled back from angry rocks. Like a multicolored dust of the explosion burst a myriad of screaming birds, lories, parakeets, kingfishers, flashing motes of green and blue and scarlet in the sunshine. But they dwindled and passed. The echoes died. The smoke drifted away and the green wall closed up without a scar; the silence engulfed us once more, floating there, futile invaders who assaulted its immense riddle with a squib.

“They don’t seem to care much,” giggled Jeckol. But Bartlet raised a finger. Far away in the wood something stirred. It drew nearer, with long pauses, pressing on and at last charging recklessly through the undergrowth. We had the spot covered from half a dozen rifles as there broke out at the verge a creature that leaped and clung among the creepers.



*There broke out at the verge a creature
that leaped and clung among the
creepers*

“Mahrster!” it cried, imploring.
“Mahrster!”

A man — though more like a
naked, starving ape with his knobby
joints and the bones in a rack under
his black skin — and shaken now by

the ecstasy of terror! Not at us. He
faced the guns without wincing. His
beady eyes kept coasting behind him
the way he had come as if he looked to
see a dreadful hand reach from the
thicket and pluck him back. The
jungle, the land, was what he feared—
“Mahrster,” he gasped, “you take’m me
that fella boat along you! One fella
ship-boy me — good fella too much!”

“What name?” challenged
Peters. “What fella ship?” From the
chattered reply we caught a startling
word.

“By Joe—he’s one of their boys!
Give way, cap’n.”

We edged in until Peters could
yank the quaking bundle aboard and
pulled again to safety from the
mangrove shadow while the fugitive
stammered his story in broken *beche
de mer*.

It was true, we had found a
survivor from the lost *Timothy S.*
Kakwe, he called himself, and he had
come to Barange “long time before
altogether.” Two months, at least, we
judged. In the attack on the schooner
he had escaped by swimming. Himself
a Papuan, of a very different tribe and
region, he had taken to the tree tops
after the fashion of his own people, the
painted monkey folk of Princess
Marianne Straits—a facility to which
he owed his life, it appeared, for he
had since lived on fruits and nuts
among the cockatoos, undiscovered.

This much we gathered from his
gabble before Peters caught him up.

“But the others—them white
fella, mahrster?” “All finish,” said
Kakwe bluntly.

“How?” cried Peters.

“No savee, me. Too much

fright—walk along salt water—get to hell along beach, along tree. Me fright like hell.”

HIS account tallied with our own theory of the massacre, but he had seen no bodies brought ashore, could not identify the murderers, could not say where the native village lay or how to reach it, would not guide anyone into that bush on any consideration. For the rest—this was a “good fella place” to get away from quickly.

“Ah,” said Jeckol, sympathizing. “And that’s a true word.”

So indeed it seemed, and it is curious to think how close we were to giving up then. Aye, we were that close. We drifted out toward the anchorage and looked helplessly around us. The place was so huge, so baffling. Hopeless to search further among empty swamps and forests, to grope at large in this hushed wilderness, to coerce a jungle. The cruisers that have bombarded these same coasts on many a punitive expedition have learned how hopeless—against Papua, who keeps her secrets.

We must have been halfway back to the *Aurora Bird* when Bartlet, sitting thoughtful in the stern, made the sign that brought us up all sharp.

“He’s lying,” he said quietly.

Jeckol’s nerves jumped in protest.

“Eh—what? The black? He’s only scared half to death. You wouldn’t blame him for wanting to get out of this trap, would you? I do myself.”

“He couldn’t have lived

overhead the whole nest o’ them all this time without learning something,” declared Bartlet.

“Why should he lie?”

But Peters had risen to snatch around that weazened ape face, blank as a mummy’s—his own was alight. “By Joe, and a timely reminder. When you’ve got to ask why a Papuan nigger should lie you’ve gone pretty wide! As for scare—what d’y’ suppose he must ha’ seen to scare him so?”

Here he bent our monkey man over a thwart and introduced him affectionately to the Webley.

“You fella Kakwe,” he said, “my survivin’ jewel— I forgot your breed. I should ha’ begun by bang’ m black head blong you. Now don’t stop to gammon. Whatever you’re holdin’ back you *show*—savee? S’pose you no show’ m straight, me finish long you close up altogether!”

And Kakwe showed. Dominated by superior wickedness, with all the black man’s docility under the instant threat, he collapsed quite simply at the touch of steel, and he showed—the nook where a tiny, hidden creek flowed down among the mangroves, the winding course that led by the swamp’s edge through dank and darksome channels to a trodden mud bank and Barange village itself, tucked away there like — huddle of giant hives in a back lot. This time we paused for no maneuvering. Even Jeckol grabbed a boat hook and we pushed through, eager to strike on a definite lead at last—

Though we might have saved our energy, for the wild had its surprise in waiting. The village was silent, deserted, tenantless.

We landed at the square, to call it so, a rude clearing on which the few houses faced, those sprawling, spacious communal dwellings—palaces among huts—that sometimes amaze the explorer along the west coast. None opposed us. Nothing moved, not so much as a curl of smoke. An insect hummed in the sun like a bullet, and I take no shame to say I ducked. But that was all. And when the groveling Kakwe led us to a wide platform that ran breast high across the front of the largest house we stood with rifles propped and quickened pulses, staring stupidly at the thing we had come this far to find.

Only a box, lying on the middle of the platform, under the shadow of the lofty thatch—a small, brass-bound chest such as sailormen love and ships carry everywhere! “Loot!” snorted Jeckol. “Well—?” But Cap’n Bartlet had laid hold of another trove, a coil of ringed rubber tubing, neatly disposed about the chest. “What’s there?”

“A diver’s air pipe,” stated the cap’n “What about it?”

“It’s been cut—top and bottom.”

WE crowded for a look, and I saw his tanned fist tremble ever so slightly.

“A diver’s pipe,” he repeated. “A diver, d’you see? They had a diver, and—according to your notion, Peters—” He drew a slow breath. “What—what if that there diver *did* happen to be overboard at the minute the rush came?”

And then came the voice of Peters, cool and drawling: “Some one’s left a message on the box.”

As we span around he turned it over atilt, so that all might see the bold letters, scarred in lead, of that laconic legend—all but Bartlet, who fumbled for his spectacles. “Writ with a Snider bullet, I take it,” continued the trader. “One of them soft-nosed kind as supplied to heathen parts for a blessin’ of civilization.” “Read it, can’t you?” begged the cap’n.

And this was the notice Jeckol read:

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The Crew of the Schooner
Timothy S. of Cooktown that tried a
cast with fortune and turned a deuce.
Barange Bay, Jan. 22, 19—

J. MULLHALL, *master*

BAMBA, KOHO

B. SMYTHE, *mate* KAKWE,

JACK-JACK

HENRY NEW MENOMI,

FRANK

Hic finis fandi

+

Cap’n Bartlet removed his hat and wiped away a stream of sweat with deliberate care and a red-barred kerchief. “Sounds natural,” he observed, clearing his throat. “Though I never did make much of that ‘hic’ language.”

“It means ‘here ended the talk,’ or something of the kind,” explained Jeckol. “But still,” he added, quite seriously, “the list isn’t complete, you know. Where’s your friend Albro?”

Peters rolled the white of an eye on him. “Is it your fancy,” he inquired, “that the niggers run much to writin’ epitaphs? Or books—?”

He held up to our gaze the

object he had found on lifting the lid of the box—a packet of thin bark strips covered with coarse markings and bound with a twist of fiber which next he unknotted, to run the leaves over in his hand. “I knew he was alive,” said Cap’n Bartlet simply.

And that was the way we won to the story of James O’Shaughnessy Albro, Even now I can recall each tone and gesture of its telling, each detail of the group we made there in empty Barange village; the trader’s drawl and check as he read a line or turned to Kakwe with a question or flung in some vivid comment of his own; the strained attention on Bartlet’s earnest face; the incredulous sniff and squint of little Jeckol, still unsubdued, fidgeting about; the statted bronze figures of our Tonga boys as they stood leaning patiently on their rifles, awaiting the master’s next whim; the massed ring of the jungle; the odd, high-peaked houses with their cavernous fronts like gaping and grinning listeners; the lances of sunlight that began to splinter and fall out among lengthening shadows across the open; and through all and over all the heat and the smell and the brooding, ominous, inscrutable mystery of Papua!

Seeking wealth I found glory. I went below as an amateur diver and I came up a professional god. But I wish I could find which son of a nighthawk it was that cut my pipe. I’d excommunicate him on the altar.

This is a page from the Book of Jim Albro, and it shows him as he lived. Later entries are not so clear, not by any means so sprightly, and some are pitiful enough in all truth. It

must have been set down in the early hours of his reign, while he was still in the flush of his stupendous adventure, before he had begun to understand what lay ahead. But here was the man “with an eye like a blue glass marble,” that “never held his fist or his smile.” No other could have written it after the events he had survived.

Just as Peters inferred to have been the case, the attack on the *Timothy S.* caught the whole crew of pearl hunters unready. They had seen no natives at Barange, they kept no lookout, and when Albro stepped off the ladder that morning of January 22 he left his shipmates contentedly employed on deck. He never saw any of them again, or—what might have been a different matter—any part of them. He went down to the shell bed, and while he was there the black raiders made their sweep of the schooner.

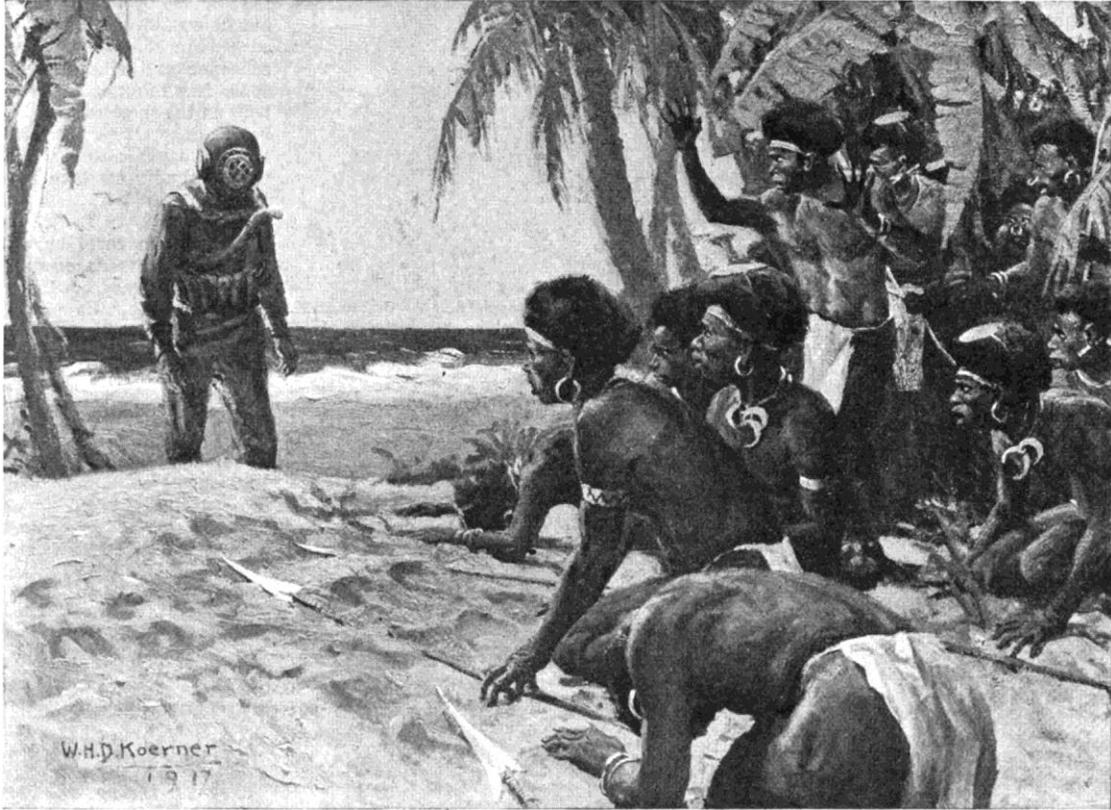
It is likely the savages took the diving lines for an extra mooring—it is certain they knew nothing whatever about the apparatus—and Albro’s first warning was the cutting of that air pipe, when he found his pressure gone and water trickling through the inlet valve. Fortunately, he was just preparing to ascend and had tightened his outlet to inflate the suit. Fortunately, too, his helmet was furnished with an adjustable inlet and he was able hastily to close both valves.

He tugged at his life line, but it drew loose in his hand. He turned over on his side to look upward, but he could see nothing—only the vague blue twilight through which the slack coils of his severed air pipe came

sagging. Then he knew that he had been cut off, and the hideous fear that lies in wait for every diver amid the perils and loneliness of the sea bottom seized upon him. He might have popped to the surface by throwing off his forty-pound weights, but he was aware that no chance accident could have served him so, and his impulse was to get away, from schooner and all, to shore. Under water he had some few minutes to live, perhaps four or five, as long as the inclosed air should last him. Frantically he began to struggle toward the beach, yielding to a moment's panic that was to cost him dear. While trying blindly to slash free the useless pipe he lost his diver's knife!

THE rotten coral burst and sank under footing. Clogging weeds

enwreathed and held him back with evil embrace. A tridacna spread its jaws before his steps so that he nearly plunged into that deadly spring trap of the deep. But he kept on up the slope; his keen spirit rallied and bore him through, and he came surging from the waves at last on a point of rocks outside the bay where he could cling and open the emergency cock in the helmet. The suit deflated and he breathed new life. But here he suffered his second immediate mishap, for as he scrambled to his feet a dizziness took him and he slipped and pitched forward heavily, and with a great clang of armor the god fell fainting at the very threshold of his world.



An incredible apparition of power, towering triumphant over the stricken ranks of the dusky cannibal folk

*Broke left arm getting ashore.
Walking the beach when I met the
niggers. They dropped on their faces,
and I saw I was elected.*

These are the words with which Jim Albro chooses to make his note of a scene that can scarcely have had its parallel in human experience. With two dozen words, no more. You figure him there, I hope, that muffled colossus with his huge copper helm flashing red and his monstrous cyclopean eye agleam, striding along the strip of white beach against the hostile green hills of Papua. You see him break, an incredible apparition of power and majesty, upon the view of the dusky cannibal folk and stand towering over their stricken ranks,

triumphant—a glimpse as through the flick of a shutter that passes and leaves the beholder dazzled and unsatisfied! But the whole record is only a series of such glimpses, some focused with startling lucidity, some clouded and confused, and all too brief.

One other bit remains to fix the picture—an inimitable splash of color, flung at the end of a perplexing page.

I picked out the chief devil-devil doctor, and raised him to honor. Old Gum-eye. Friend of mine.

MARK the spirit of the man. Whole chapters could supply no clearer tribute to his resilience and entire adequacy. Unerringly he took the right course to enforce the role thus amazingly thrust upon him and

to establish his godhead. Already he had caught up the situation, had put its shock behind him. The inscription on the box remains his only reference to the loss of the schooner and her crew. And while this might seem to argue a certain lack of sensibility, I cannot feel it was so with Albro. His was a nature essentially episodic, prompt to the play of circumstance. The thing was done and past crying over; the blacks had acted by their lights, and he had very swiftly to act by his. They had given him his cue. How well he filled the part we can guess. By evening he had been installed in some kind of temple or devil house as an accredited deity to the Barange tribes.

HERE ends the first part of

the Book, so far as its unnumbered and fugitive entries can be arranged—the first part and the only part quite comprehensible, before the haze of distress and anxiety has dimmed our image of that strange god, whose mortality was all too real. He began its composition that same night, picking up the Snider cartridge and the bark strips while still he had some measure of liberty! Perhaps he foresaw that he would want to leave the record. Perhaps he merely sought distraction, and he had need of it.

Squatting above his own altar, he prepared his own epistle. Around his sanctuary slept a guard of devil doctors, priests, sorcerers—he uses all three terms. No sleep for Albro. But while he wrestled there alone through long hours he found the pluck to jot those early notes by the flare of a

guttering torch, beguiling the pain of his broken arm and the new terror that was now rapidly closing upon him.

Like a glint of lightning from a cloud comes the following spurted item, written the next day:

Forty hours of this. Am growing weaker. My arm—[word scratched out] Had to give up trying to start the glass in my helmet. Can't budge it...

Soon afterward occurs another passage in the same startling altered key:

Tried to get away this [morning], but the priests too suspicious. I wanted to try smashing the glass on a rock. Likely would have burst my ear drums anyway—

And further:

If I could get hold of a knife for three minutes. Bamboo stick [part illegible here]—can't tear vulcan, canvas. No use...

When Peters read those lines aloud and looked up he confronted a sickly ring of auditors.

“Good God!” breathed Bartlet. “He couldn't get out!”

The knowledge of Albro's actual plight crashed upon us all in just that phrase, and I leave you to gauge its impact. We had had no hint of it. Here was the diary before us. We were only waiting to learn the present address of the diarist. Indeed our whole attitude toward the singular discovery we were making had been quite cheerful, even exultant, like that of children who follow the tribulations of some favorite hero, secure of the happy solution.

“Couldn't get *out?*” squeaked Jeckol. “How do you mean—he couldn't?”

“He was locked up in that blasted diving dress!”

“Locked up?”

“Sewed up—sacked up,” said Peters heavily. “Did you ever see the damn’ stuff? He calls it canvas, which it ain’t, but tanned twill—two-ply—with rubber between. He can’t tear his way out with a stick, he says. And small wonder. Talk about strait-jackets!” “But—but why doesn’t he take off the helmet?”

Peters stared unseeing at the packet in his hand, and his face was saturnine.

“By Joe, what a mess!” he murmured. “What a beau-ti-ful mess! Look here—d’y’ know a diver’s outfit? First he wears a solid breastplate — see? —that sets about his shoulders. Then the helmet fits on that with several neck rings and screws hard down with a quarter turn to a catch. Aye, there’s a catch to snap it home. And where is that catch? Why at the *back!* No diver was ever intended to take off his own helmet!”

We could only blink at him dumbly. “Albro couldn’t reach it. Of course if he should manage to rip away the cloth from the eyelets he’d be all right—he’d simply shift the whole upper works. But them eyelets, now, they lock down all around through a vulcanized collar. He couldn’t reach more’n two of them either.”

“There’s the glass—”

Peters offered the diary.

“What does he say himself?”

There’s only one removable glass to a helmet and that’s in front—an inch thick and screws tight in a gun-metal socket. It’s guarded with a gridiron of bars—same as the two side glasses.

He wants to break it, but he can’t. He wants to unscrew it, but he can’t. He wants to cut himself loose, but he has no knife. Do you see him—by Joe! —do you see him twistin’ and writhin’ and fightin’ for his life in there—*with one good arm?*”

“Why—” cried Jeckol, in sudden appalled perception. “He couldn’t even eat. He’s starving inside that suit!” “Starving?” echoed Bartlet, from colorless lips. “God—if that was all! He’s dying of thirst by inches!”

I do not know how it struck Jeckol, but it seemed to me as if a blackness came in upon the sun.

“Go on,” urged Bartlet. “Go on!” But it was not so easy to go on. Peters found whole pages of the Book impossible to decipher. At places it lapsed to a mere jumble of sprawling characters. Again the soft lead was hopelessly blurred over, where the pages had been often thumbed, or perhaps crumbled and thrown aside. He shuffled them hastily and we hung upon his search!

... uneasy god. They got me tied up now to keep me safe [words missing] joke, to pass out here like a rat under a bell jar. Not me. I don’t mean to....

Curious. When Peters resumed the thread, when he read that eloquent line, those of us who had known Jim Albro nodded solemnly, one to another, as if sharing a profound and secret thrill. For this was the man’s real triumph— and we felt it then, regardless of the outcome—that alone, beyond any conceivable aid for the first time in his life, speechless, helpless, at the end of all those amiable arts which had given

him his way so often with men and devils, and women, too, Jim Albro was still the Jim Albro “that you couldn’t keep down.”

His body was consuming and shriveling with its own heat. He had to scheme for each scant breath he drew, spreading the dress and collapsing it at short intervals to renew the foul air. He had to view the tempting tribute laid out before the altar, juicy mangoes and figs and sugar cane, wild berries and young drinking coconuts freshly opened, with the new, cool milk frothing up at the brim. He had to receive the homage of a people, and to count by the wheeling sun how many hours of torment were left him. Worse than all, he had to withstand the pitiless irony of it, the derisive grin of fate that drives men mad. He did these things, and he would not yield. He did not mean to. And lest you should think the phrase a mere flourish—observe the testimony of the Book.

THE tribes flocked in that second day to do him honor. There was a great gathering in the square. Some vivid pantomime was displayed before the high seat. Some unusual rites were enacted before the temple, when the bamboo pipes and drums were going and the doctors wore their vermilion mop wigs and masks of ceremony and chains of naked dancers were stamping and circling to the chant. Jim Albro watched and noted it all behind his solid inch of plate glass; not passively, not indifferently, but with close attention and the very liveliest interest. Aye, this god took an interest in the welfare of his people!

Heaven knows what he saw in the Papuans of Barange. By all accounts they are a plum-black race of rather superior ferocity—six feet is their medium stature and their favorite dish a human ear, nicely broiled. So the old traders report, and never an explorer has improved the description. It required someone who could sit down among them without losing his head—quite literally—to learn more. Albro filled the bill. He had nothing to do but to sit. And while he sat he busied himself with the thoughts that have made the strangest, and the blindest, reading in the diary.

A prime lot of raw material. Why [de?] people always lie about niggers? Unspoiled [part illegible] the makings. Their orators told me in dumb show [words missing] behind the hills [lines missing]. Wonderful!

Wonderful, he Says. Wonderful what? Chances, perhaps. Opportunities. Possibilities. Certainly nobody else ever had such as lay before Jim Albro if he could have won free to take them, as a conqueror, as a god. Was he dreaming even then of empire? Had he had a glimpse into the meaning of Papua that struck fire to his roving and restless soul? Had he fallen enamored of the sphinx, and had she drawn the veil for him? It may be. The fact stands that, fevered and tortured as he was, burning with thirst and pain, he discovered something capable of rousing that cry from him. We hear the cry, and that is all we hear—nearly.

... suppose I should take a hand at this dumb show myself. I could do it. I know I could. Am going to trust

old Gum-eye. And afterward....

Peters looked up from the last page.

“Well?” said Jeckol impatiently.

“That’s the end,” announced Peters.

I cannot say what the breathless group of us had been expecting. Possibly the first-hand memoir of a miracle would have satisfied us, or the harrowing confessions and last wishes of the moribund. But so natural and unfeigning a thing as a full stop to the tension left us stupefied. We felt aggrieved, too, as if the author should have postponed his business long enough to let us know whether he was dead or not.

“It can’t be!” cried Jeckol, all abroad. “How could it end there? What happened to him? Where is he?”

Peters swung his gaze around the vacant clearing and the impenetrable palisade of the forest.

“This was written three months ago, remember,” he said.

“But he had a plan,” insisted Jeckol. “He surely had a plan. He says he was going to do something. He’d found a friend he could trust. What next?”

“The friend must ha’ failed him.”

Cap’n Bartlet shook himself like one awaking. “No friend would have failed him,” he said deliberately.

“And—you’re forgetting that ship boy again.”

ONCE more, with a rattled oath, Peters pounced on the unfortunate Kakwe, quailing beside him. Once more he brought to bear the

persuasion he best knew how to use; and once more the black boy submitted, wholly, and showed. He had nothing to tell. He could throw no light on events. But he had seen from the trees where the “white fella mahrster him diver” forgathered with all the fiends of the pit, whereat he was “too much fright,” and he showed us this time up the platform of the identical wide-thatched house by which we had been standing. We crept in through the low entrance and across a floor of sagging bamboo mats and found ourselves before a curtain of pandanus that hung midway. We were long past astonishment, but Jeckol, arresting a gesture, dropped his hand.

“I daren’t,” he whimpered.

It was Bartlet who put the curtain aside. And there, in the twilight of the place, we saw the god as he had appeared in his recent earthly phase. His great copper head gleamed at the back of a shallow niche, made fast against the wall. The muffled, stiff clumsiness of his diving dress revealed a heroic figure, still disposed in the attitude of a sitting Buddha, with the leaden-soled diving shoes thrust out by either knee. His single huge eye glared down at us balefully from over the altar as we stood, overwhelmed in the presence. “And so he did—pass out,” said Jeckol.

Something had caught the quick eye of Peters. Horrified, we saw him step forward and lay a vigorous and sacrilegious hold on that high divinity, saw the shape start and tremble as with life, saw it shake and flutter like a bundle of rags in the wind, and flap—emptily.

“Yes,” said Peters. “He’s passed

out, right enough. Leastways from here. Passed out, and on. And quite easy too. Look at these slits—would you?”

THE diving suit had been laid open like a stripped pelt with long cuts of a keen blade, one down the middle of the back, one across the shoulders, and others connected along the inside of each limb to the wrists and ankles. “Gone!”

“Gone,” confirmed Peters. “Whether the niggers dug him from it piece by piece like the kernel from a nut or whether that friend of his helped him to shed complete—you can take your choice. In either case he’s gone—and gone this time to stay.”

“There’s no — no blood!” gasped Jeckol. “Anyhow!”

Cap’n Bartlet had removed his hat to polish his shiny forehead with the colorful kerchief, and he was looking out of the door over the tops of the trees to the far blue and nameless mountains of Papua, with an eye at peace.

“You could always bank on the luck of James O’Shaughnessy Albro,” he said simply. “I knew he was alive.” But Jeckol was still reeling.

“I shan’t write this yarn,” he assured us earnestly. “It’s too—it’s too—and besides, there’s no end to it.”

“*Hic finis fandi,*” suggested Peters.