

AUG. ★

25¢

SPICY-ADVENTURE STORIES



**HENRY
KUTTNER**

TROPIC HELL

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Tropic Hell

Date of first publication: 1941

Author: Henry Kuttner (1914-1958)

Date first posted: Nov. 10, 2021

Date last updated: Dec. 7, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211121

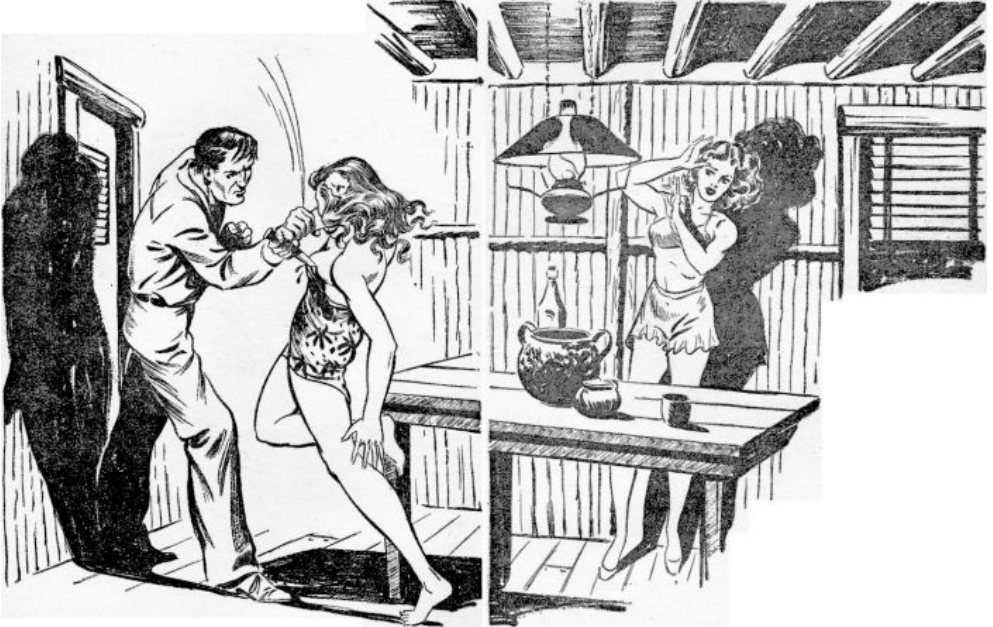
This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries.

TROPIC HELL

By HENRY KUTTNER

First published *Spicy-Adventure Stories*, August 1941.



His hand caught her wrist and the dagger twisted.

Dawson was sure that something was wrong on the island. It was none of his business, but he remembered how nice Loretta had been to him. The thought of her at the mercy of the giant Storm was not pleasant. . . .

Something was moving on the water of the lagoon. It was a small outrigger, and it kept away from the moonlight as much as possible, all the while working its way toward the tramp steamer *Quest*, riding at anchor outside the barrier reef that guarded Marava Island. Second Mate Joe Dawson, leaning on the rail, chewed the bit of his pipe and tried to fight down his mounting excitement.

Was Loretta Kent returning? Had she finally discovered the truth of Dawson's words—that a South Pacific island was no place for a raw kid fresh out of Frisco? The second mate hunched his big shoulders, remembering uncomfortably how the girl's eyes had blazed at him.

"I know my way around, Mr. Dawson," she had cried. "And I can take care of myself. Please let go of my arm!"

Which Dawson had done, flushing under his deep tan as he watched the girl go overside, slim and lovely in her white dress, to leap lightly into the motor-boat that waited to take her to Marava.

Well, he couldn't blame her, knowing her story as he did. She was alone in the world, except for her brother, Tim Kent, who owned a plantation in lonely little Marava. She hadn't seen him for years. And now, just out of college, she'd hopped a boat to Tahiti and made connections with the *Quest*.

At dawn the tramp freighter would lift anchor and head for Papeete. So. Maybe it was the blood-tingling power of the tropics, but Dawson couldn't get the picture of Loretta out of his mind—the way her auburn hair tossed in the wind, the provocative thrusts of her tilted young breasts, the excitingly lithe movements of her legs and hips under thin cotton cloth—and the brief flash of her tapering thighs as she had swung down to the motor-boat.

Nor could he forget the way Rudy Storm, Kent's overseer, had looked at the girl. But—what the hell! *Ka*—it was finished.

It was finished unless the outrigger now grating against the hull held Loretta.

Two slim figures swiftly mounted the ladder then, hung overside. Native girls. Disappointment lanced through Dawson. They were very frightened, he guessed by the glances they cast back at the shore. He went to meet them.

"*Aloha!* What's up?" he greeted.

The foremost *vahine* was pretty, in a childlike way. But her body wasn't childlike. Under her gay *pareu* the flowing, graceful curves were—interesting. There was a *hau*-blossom in her dark hair, and her full lower lip was quivering. She said, "Take me to your captain. Quickly!"

Dawson shook his head. "He's asleep—and he doesn't like to be waked up. You can talk to me."

The girl hesitated, exchanged looks with her companion. "Oh—I see. Take us to a cabin, then, please. We—we can't talk here. We might be seen."

Might be seen . . . what was wrong? Dawson said, "*Ka*," and led the way to a cabin. Not till the door was shut did the girl relax at all. Then she went swiftly to a table and gestured to her companion, who took a cloth bag from her red *pareu*. She emptied it; pearls spilled on the table-top. Dawson's eyes went wide.

"I thought there weren't any pearls on Marava!"

"I am Utota—a princess of our tribe. And there are pearls here. They are all yours—all of these—if you will take me away from this terrible island."

Lamplight made blue shadows on her young, frightened face.

Dawson's jaw tightened. "Wait a minute. Have you stolen these from the *malihini*—Tim Kent?"

"*Aie*, no! You do not know—" She broke off, whirling toward the door as it was flung open.

A tall, big-boned giant, with flaming red hair and icy gray eyes, stood on the threshold. He wore stained tropical whites, and his hairy, freckled hand was very close to the revolver at his belt. It was Rudy Storm, Kent's overseer.

He stepped forward; native policemen crowded after him into the low-ceilinged cabin. The two girls cried out, but made no move. Dawson saw hopeless desperation in their faces.

Utota whispered, "Don't let him take me back!"

The mate's lips thinned. He said, "What do you want, Storm?"

The giant was deftly scooping up the pearls and restoring them to their bag. "These are stolen," he explained. "From Mr. Kent. These girls are thieves."

“He is lying,” Utota said, and flinched at the cold, deadly glance Storm gave her from his icy eyes.

“They will come back with me, Mr. Dawson, and be suitably punished.” He turned to his natives. “Arrest them.”

Abruptly Utota moved, lithe as a tigress. From her *pareu* a knife lifted, glittering icily in the lamplight. She sprang at Storm, the blade driving toward his barrel chest, her eyes ablaze.

The giant grunted with surprise. He swung his big torso aside with unexpected agility, and seized the girl’s wrist as it flashed past. The knife dropped clattering to the floor.

Utota fought like a wild thing, as though for her very life. The *pareu* ripped and tore. Bronze, smooth skin gleamed through the rents; the satin of her breasts rippled as she clawed and struck vainly at Storm. Then his huge hand smashed down viciously against the girl’s head, and, with a choked little cry, she went down.

The other *vahine* crouched in a corner, sobbing with hopeless fear. Abruptly she moved to seek protection behind Dawson, whose lips were thinned and white at what he had seen. Yet, he realized, Utota had attacked Storm—tried to kill him.

He heard the *vahine*’s soft voice whispering.

“*Kent is dead—*”

Storm snapped an order. The natives moved swiftly, seizing both girls and dragging them on deck. But as the red-haired giant turned to follow, Dawson stopped him.

“Wait a bit, mister.”

“Yeah?” The ice-gray eyes bored coldly into the other.

“Did you hear what that *vahine* said?”

“I heard nothing,” Storm clipped, and waited.

“She said Kent was dead.”

“Well, she lied.”

Dawson nodded. “Maybe. But why didn’t Kent come out to meet his sister?”

“I told you,” the giant grunted. “He’s sick. Touch of fever. A native chopped him up a bit—went *amok*—and he’s in no condition to go traveling.”

Storm went out. Dawson heard his voice on deck shouting orders. Presently there came the splash of paddles.

Now what? There was something wrong—plenty wrong. The second mate sensed it. Yet what could he do? Dekker, the first mate, was drunk below decks, as usual, and the old man thought of nothing but picking up cargoes and selling them for as much as he could get. No use to talk to them. Loretta Kent had paid her passage to Marava—that was all they cared about.

But, one moonlit night not long out of Tahiti, Dawson had found Loretta standing by the rail—and her lips had been sweet. It was only tropic glamor affecting a raw kid, he knew. Afterward she had ignored that hour. But Dawson had not forgotten, and now the thought of Loretta perhaps at the mercy of the huge Storm was not pleasant. He remembered how the giant had looked at her. . . .

Kent dead? Scarcely logical. Unless he had died within the last week or two. His letters had been regular, according to Loretta.

On an impulse, Dawson called the bos’n, a husky Lascar boy. “I’m going ashore,” he said. “Be back in an hour or so.”

Betel-stained teeth flashed. “*Ae ae.*”

The second mate made sure his revolver was loaded, stowed it under his shirt, and dropped into the ship's dinghy, floating astern. He cast off the rope and, with muffled oars, began to row as silently as possible. Foam flashed silver under the moon. The lagoon lay still and flat, like a facet of an immense diamond. Palm-fronds waved gently against the purple sky. The Southern Cross hung low on the horizon.

Well, this wouldn't take long, Dawson thought. He'd just check up, and be back aboard the *Quest* before anyone but the bos'n knew he was gone.

The dinghy grated on yellow sand. Dawson sprang out, dragged the boat up a bit, and headed for the village. There were no natives about. A heavy, strangely ominous silence seemed to hang low over Marava. Once a parakeet fluttered up under his feet, croaking sleepily, but that was all. The scent of hibiscus was sickeningly strong.

At the edge of the village clearing, Dawson hesitated, staring around. In the bright moonlight he could see several dozen huts, crudely built of bamboo and *pandanus*-leaves. Some distance away there were lights in the window of a big *godown* . . . a white man's house.

Stealthily Dawson made his way to it.

He moved from window to window till he found the one he sought. He looked into a dimly-lit room where a heavily-bandaged figure lay on a cot, silent and motionless. Kent?

Fair enough. Like a shadow he slipped on. In the *godown's* big room he saw Storm and Loretta seated on rattan chairs, sipping drinks and sweating despite the breeze from the *punkah* that swung slowly overhead. Their voices came to him.

“. . . a doctor?” That was Loretta. She had changed her dress, and wore a light linen frock that clung closely to her in the oppressive heat. Her breasts swayed a little as she leaned forward, and Dawson saw the direction of Storm's gaze.

“He doesn't need it. He'll be okay in a day or so.”

“But—he's bandaged like a mummy! He could hardly talk—”



She struggled vainly, but she was like a baby against his strength.

Dawson caught his breath in a little gasp. He turned hurriedly back to the first window. The still figure was still lying there. It hadn't moved. Yet—was it Kent?

Silently the second mate got in through the window. The "invalid" didn't hear his approach till it was too late. Then one hard hand was about a soft throat, squeezing purposefully, while Dawson plucked off bandages. . . .

The brown, frightened face of a native stared up at him, eyes wide and bulging. "Auwe!" the boy gasped—and was silent as Dawson's fingers tightened.

"Where's Kent?"

“*Auwe!* I—”

The grip did not relax. “Talk!”

“Dead! Dead! Do not kill me! Do not—”

Dawson nodded, satisfied. With desperate speed he bound and gagged the native. It didn’t take long, and the sound of voices came faintly from the next room, undisturbed.

Dawson pushed open the door and went in. His gun snouted forward, menacing and deadly.

“Don’t move, Storm,” he said. “Keep your hands on the table.”

There was a soft little cry from Loretta. She sat staring at the second mate, her red lips parted. Storm’s face twitched once; then he obeyed, placing his palms flat on the table-top before him.

His eyes were gray ice.

“Loretta,” Dawson said, not looking at her, “your brother’s dead. I mean—Storm killed him.”

She didn’t understand. “But—no!”

“Stop me if I’m wrong, Storm,” Dawson said. “You killed Kent quite a while ago and took over his plantation here. You’re the only white man on Marava, so it wasn’t hard to do. You forged his name, wrote letters to his sister—and cleaned up. Right?”

Storm didn’t answer. His red hair flamed in the lamplight.

“You didn’t expect his sister to come on, but you were ready for her. You had a native bandaged up so Loretta would think he was her brother. Just for a while—till the *Quest* pulled anchor. Then you were going to kill her, too, weren’t you?”

Loretta glanced from one man to the other.

Dawson said, “Go in and take a look, if you don’t believe me.”

She got up hesitantly, slipped around behind Dawson, and vanished into the dimness of the next room. Storm sat motionless, his hands flat on the table, cold murder blazing in his gray eyes.

Then Loretta screamed.

Involuntarily Dawson turned. From the corner of his eye he caught the flashing movement Storm made, and sprang aside, but too late. The giant’s gun came out blasting. A shock of agony tingled through Dawson’s hand, and his pistol went flying up toward the *punkah*.

He dived aside, whirled, saw Storm rising from the table, grinning triumphantly.

Again the gun blasted.

Dawson wasn’t there. He went into the adjoining room in a hurry. A bullet clipped hair from his scalp. He heard a table go over, and Storm’s heavy feet thumping forward.

Two figures were struggling in the dimness—Loretta and the native. Moonlight made a patch on the floor, and glistened on the girl’s auburn hair, and on trailing bandages. The native boy had been stronger than Dawson thought. Strong enough to free himself from the bonds. . . .

Dawson sent his fist jabbing out in a hard, straight-arm blow. It *thunked* against flesh and bone, and the native went down without a sound. Storm’s shadow loomed on the threshold.

Then he drew back suddenly, realizing, apparently, what an easy target he made. He was hidden from sight now, and his voice rose in an angry shout.

Dawson groped out through the gloom, felt the soft warmth of the girl’s body, and dragged her closer. He whispered, “He’ll rouse the village. We won’t have a chance then. Got a gun?”

“N-no—”

“We’ll get back to the ship.” He pushed her toward the open window. “Scram. Don’t make any noise. I’ll be right with you.”

Loretta obeyed. Her feet thumped softly on the ground outside. Dawson hesitated, listening to Storm’s hoarse breathing beyond the threshold. He felt an inclination to plant his fist on the red-haired giant’s jaw, but realized the futility of the gesture. Storm was armed; he wasn’t. And the first thing was to get Loretta safely back to the ship.

So he went out the window, and a bullet skimmed along his ribs. Another shot went wild. The girl was a half-seen wraith in the moonlight, and he ran toward her, his back crawling with the expectation of a bullet better aimed.

Behind him he heard Storm cursing, and the *thud-thud* of racing naked feet.

He found Loretta’s arm, gripped it, dragged her forward. She gasped, “This—this isn’t the way—”

“We’ll circle. Storm will try to cut us off.”

The jungle swallowed them. The rustle of palm-fronds whispered above their heads. Distantly came the low booming of waves on the barrier reef. Under the trees it was dark, and they avoided the moonlit clearings as they ran.

Thorns and branches tore at them, ripping viciously at Loretta’s thin dress, rustling with sardonic goblin laughter. The sounds of pursuit grew louder. The girl’s breath came in gasps.

“Wait!” Dawson halted her. He bent low, forced aside a screen of palmetto fronds, and peered out. The purple darkness of the lagoon was before him.

But nearer—on the beach—were natives, slipping about like shadows across the white sands. Storm’s bull voice cried a command.

The riding lights of the *Quest* were visible beyond the reef. But no hail could reach it. It was too far out.

“Damn,” Dawson said softly. “They’ve cut us off. They’ll be guarding the boats—”

“Can’t we swim?”

He shook his head. “Sharks. We’ll have to wait.”

“Wait? But the *Quest* won’t wait!”

Dawson pulled the girl back. “The excitement will die down pretty soon. We’ll watch our chance, grab a boat, and head out.”

“Won’t there be guards? You said—”

For answer Dawson only smiled grimly, his fists balling into hard knots. “We’ll get a boat,” he said at last. “But right now we’ve got to hole up. This’ll do.” They halted some distance back from the beach, where the jungle grew thick. Dawson helped the girl wriggle under concealing bushes. “They won’t find us here. But talk low.”

They waited, while the distant shouts grew fainter. But they did not die. All about them, hidden by the night and the jungle, were men searching. . . .

“The natives don’t like Storm,” Dawson murmured at last, half to himself. “That *vahine* girl who came aboard the *Quest*—she was scared to death of him. So are the others, I’ll bet. But they’ll obey him—they don’t dare do anything else.”

He glanced at Loretta, lying beside him. Her white shoulders, scarcely concealed by the tatters of her dress, were shaking. Dawson’s lips tightened. It was tough on the kid—running into this, just out of a college in the States. Her brother dead—

He looked at her sharply. Her sobs were growing louder, edged with hysteria. With soft urgency he said, "Pipe down! They'll hear you—"

"I—I can't help it!" She was shuddering with reaction. Her voice rose. "H-hit me before I scream!"

Her pale face turned, dimly visible in the gloom, eyes wide. She was hysterical, Dawson realized. Her lips parted, and he clapped his hand over her mouth.

She started to struggle, shaking all over. Short of knocking her cold, there wasn't much Dawson could do. She bit him, and he jerked his hand away, grunting with pain.

She had just started to scream when Dawson kissed her. It was one way of giving her something else to think about. An unusual sort of gag—but it effectively stopped her from yelling.

His mouth was tight against hers. She tried to pull free, but Dawson held her. And, suddenly, she responded. Her lips were warm, sweet—demanding!

Rather shakily, Dawson drew back, not wanting to. His eyes strained through the gloom. He could see the girl's body, scarcely concealed by her tattered dress, the long, tapering curve of her thighs, the rounded cups of her breasts. . . .

She started to shiver again. Dawson saw her lips part, her lashes a dark shadow on her pale cheeks. A white arm crept about his neck, drawing him down.

Subconsciously he realized why Loretta wanted his kisses. She was afraid—afraid of thinking and remembering. In Dawson's arms was a brief illusion of safety, and so she clung to him, trying to blot out the menace that shrouded them by drowning herself emotionally. . . .

But her lips were sweet. The intoxicating odor of *hau*-blossoms mounted within Dawson's nostrils. He forgot everything but the white, tender body he held so close.

At last she pulled free, the fear gone from her eyes. "C-can't we—get back to the *Quest* now?" Her voice was shaky.

Dawson swallowed with difficulty. Without a word he rose and slipped into the darkness. When he returned, a grim smile quirked his lips.

"Yeah. We can make a run for it now. There's a boat not far away—and only a couple of guards."

They moved like shadows to the jungle's edge. Dawson said, "Wait here. I'll draw the guards away. You run for the boat—and I'll join you. If I don't, paddle for the *Quest*."

He skirted the forest, moving along the beach. Then he slipped out into plain view—and, as he had expected, the natives bit.

They came racing toward him. He waited, seeing they were armed with *newas*—war clubs.

There was a piece of driftwood near by, and he picked it up. Then he waited. Beyond the racing figures he saw Loretta fleeing toward the outrigger.

Footsteps crunched on the sand behind him. He whirled too late. There was a flashing glimpse of dark, shadowy bodies that seemed to rise up out of the beach itself—and something whirled through the gloom toward his head.

A trap! He had time for only that thought before blinding pain crashed into his brain, and he went down into unfathomable darkness. . . .

He woke up in Storm's *godown*, his head splitting, and lamplight hurting his eyes. Fiber ropes bound him hand and foot. He lay against the wall in a dim corner, tied to one of the

vertical beams, and Storm himself was relaxed in a rattan chair, one brawny arm prisoning Loretta.

The thin dress had been ripped completely off her body, and what she wore under it wasn't enough to matter. There were dark, angry bruises on her arms and shoulders. Her auburn hair was disarranged, and she was struggling vainly to escape Storm's grip.

The giant ignored her. He was drinking gin, and set the bottle back on the table with a grunt. Then he turned back to the girl.

It wasn't pleasant to watch. Dawson's jaw muscles bunched, and he strained at his fetters till they dug into his flesh. But the ropes had been knotted tightly, and didn't give. He had to watch as Storm, half drunk and inflamed with passion, caressed the struggling girl.

But he didn't cry out. Instead, he worked at the ropes.

Storm said thickly, "Listen, I haven't seen a white woman for months. Why don't you be good to me? I—"

She bit him, and he cuffed her savagely across the face and called her something unprintable, even in Tahitian.

Then the door opened and Utota, the *vahine* girl, came in. She did it quietly, and there was a *pahoa*—a vicious little dagger—glittering in her hand. Above the top of her *pareu* Dawson could see angry welts criss-crossing the bronze skin. So she had been punished for trying to escape!

Storm didn't see her. He was too engrossed with Loretta. And Dawson waited, praying that the dagger would slide home into the giant's muscular back before he sensed danger.

The blade ripped skin and flesh as it lanced down—but it missed its mark. Storm's arm swept around, and there was a confused tangle of arms and legs. Loretta seemed to be flung out of the *melée*. The giant reached for her, but changed his mind as Utota's *pahoa* drove at his chest. He bellowed with pain and rage. Blood spurted.

Loretta's tapering legs gleamed as she raced across the room. Utota struck again. But Storm's big hand found her wrist. The dagger twisted in midair—and sheathed itself in the *vahine's* breast.

She gave a soft little cry, and went limp.

Storm sprang up. Loretta evaded his blundering rush and fled out the open door into the night. Cursing, the giant plunged after her.

Dawson felt sweat trickling down his cheeks. He wrenched frantically at the prisoning ropes. In a few moments Storm would return—

There was movement in the shadows. Utota dragged herself to her hands and knees. The *pareu* slipped from her body as she lurched forward, blood trickling down her swaying breasts.

She dragged herself toward Dawson, her glazed eyes fixed on him.

And fell, with a whisper that faded into silence.

"The *pahoa*—"

Her weight was light on Dawson's knees. The *pahoa*! The dagger's hilt still protruded from the *vahine's* chest. And its blade was sharp.

"Thanks, Utota," Dawson said softly, though she couldn't hear him. He strained to reach the knife. And succeeded.

The ropes bit into his flesh. The *vahine's* blood was slippery and warm against his wrists as he sawed the strands apart against the knife's edge. It did not take long. Once his hands

were free, he was able to use the *pahoa* more easily.

Feet thudded on the steps outside. Dawson sliced down at the last of the ropes, and, as they fell free, sprang up, his legs buckling from lack of circulation. But there was no time to massage them back to life. Storm stood on the threshold, Loretta struggling in the crook of his arm. Storm's jaw dropped with amazement.

His hand dived down, came up with the pistol.

Loretta's swift blow struck it aside. The bullet whanged against the tin wall of the *godown*. Then Dawson was across the room, the knife gleaming, and a savage grin on his blood-stained face.

Storm made an error. He tried to swing Loretta before him as a shield. But Dawson hurtled forward, diving low, and his shoulder drove hard against the giant's legs.

The three of them went backward down the steps, a confused tangle. The gun exploded.

Dawson felt his left arm go limp, afire with blazing agony. He was flat on his back, held down by Storm's great weight, and the giant's furious gray eyes were glaring into his own. The pistol lifted, its muzzle swinging till it was a black hole into which Dawson looked.

With all his strength he struck up at Storm's jaw. At the same time he rolled his head aside. The bullet thumped into the ground, throwing up a spray of dirt.

Storm had jerked up his jaw to avoid the blow. But Dawson's fist drove against the giant's throat. Not hard—no. But the keen-bladed little knife was still gripped in it!

Blood spurted out into Dawson's eyes. Storm gave a choked, bubbling scream and threw himself back. The pistol went off as a trigger finger convulsed in a death agony. And then Storm lay motionless, staring up blindly into the moonlight, the *pahoa*'s hilt red-stained, and the blade sunk deep in human flesh.

Rather shakily, Dawson stood up, wondering how badly he was hurt. His side hurt, and his left arm was throbbing. Well—he wouldn't die of those wounds.

He turned to Loretta, who was rising to her feet, and his good arm went about her as she swayed.

"I—I'm not hurt," she whispered. "No—"

The pad-pad of running feet came. Dawson rescued the revolver and stood waiting. But he anticipated no trouble from the natives. They would be only too glad to be released from Storm's brutal tyranny.

Meantime—

He shoved Loretta toward the *godown*'s door. "Beat it. Wait for me inside."

Then he turned to meet the natives. Would there be any difficulty?

There wasn't. Ten minutes later Dawson was inside the *godown*, and Loretta was bandaging his arm.

She looked very pretty in the lamplight. And, as she said, the *Quest* wouldn't pull anchor till dawn.

There wasn't any hurry—till dawn!

[The end of *Tropic Hell* by Henry Kuttner]