

## The Fourth Man

The island of New Caledonia is not much more than a patch of dense jungle rising from South Pacific waters a few hundred miles off the northeastern coast of Australia. For half a million years, the only humans living on the island were the Canaque natives, a dark-skinned people closely resembling the aborigines of the nearby continent. A hundred years ago, the French military conquered the island and pushed the natives inland, up the rivers and hills and into the deep jungles. The white man ruled the coastal lands, and onto these coastal lands the French rulers placed a terrifying prison called Noumea, a prison reserved for only the most desperate of criminals. The criminals locked within this most terrible of jungles would stop at nothing to...well, listen to what they would do:

One night, late at night, so late that night was giving way to morning, some frogs, snakes and alligators saw a raft moving slowly down the lazy green river leading past Noumea prison toward the coast. The raft might have been taken for a drifting tangle of roots or leaves as it slid out of the shadowy river mouth at dawn and dipped into the first waves of the open waters where the river meets the sea. When at last the sun came up, the raft had passed the wide entrance to the bay and headed to open sea.

It was a curious craft for such a journey; but though it was primitive, it was a seaworthy craft. It was a catamaran – raft with two bamboo extensions from a central structure of tangled wood and brush. Palm leaves served for its sail and a paddle of jungle wood served to steer the boat. This raft had a single point of real seaworthiness. Its twin floats, paired as a catamaran, were woven of strong leather “bladders.” These bladders were like leather balloons – and they held the craft well above the water. It was these bladders that made the craft float so well and sail so stable. The skilled hands of the raft builder’s wife, sister, and mother had sewn the seams of these watertight bladders. The raft-builder had absolute confidence in the strength of these seams and in the ability of these bladders to support the raft in even the wildest of waters. The raft was as light as a bladder itself - elastic, buoyant, fit to ride any sea in any weather.

One other quality of this raft recommended it beyond all comfort and safety to its present crew: it was nearly invisible. The men inside had only to pull down its mast and

lie flat on the bottom of the raft, and they could not be seen even half a mile away. And remaining unseen was a matter of some importance to this particular crew.

Four men occupied the raft. Three of them were white – members of what they regarded as a superior race. But these men were members of another special race – the race of criminals. For that reason, they had been condemned by the government of France to a South Pacific prison for life. These three men hoped to use this raft to escape those life sentences.

There *was* a fourth man on this raft, but no one thought of him. The fourth man was the man who had built the raft; he was the one piloting the craft. *His* skin was black. He was altogether a very ordinary specimen of the Canaque natives of the island. These natives were a people closely related to the aborigines of nearby Australia. This fourth man was such a man – one of the millions of dark skinned men dominated by the far smaller race of white men. He sat at the rear of the raft, quiet and unnoticed by the men in charge.

The three whites sat together on the raft in silence for hours. At sunrise, as if some spell had been broken by the brilliant gleam of the sun, they moved and breathed deep of the fresh sea air, and looked at one another with hope in their exhausted faces. At the sight of sunrise, they could see where they had come from. They cast worried looks back toward the jungle island – and its prison – which was now in the distance.

"Friends," said the leader, "our escape is done." With a gesture like a magician's, he produced from the inside pocket of his torn shirt three cigarettes, fresh and round, and offered them to his white comrades.

"Cigarettes!" cried the man at his right. "True cigarettes! Good man! And here? Doctor, I always said you were a genius. New cigarettes from the box!"

Dr. Dubosc smiled a very special smile. It was a confident, all-knowing, smile -- a sarcastic smile with a hint of violent intent. And here, at the bottom of the earth, among the lost islands and jungles of the South Pacific, that smile had set him apart from other less talented men in the prisons, the labor mines, and the chain gangs of a community of desperate prison-men. It was the smile of a superior intellect with dark motives.

Dr. Dubosc had carried that sarcastic smile from Paris to the jungle prisons set up by the French government for the most dangerous of criminals. And Dubosc was one of the most dangerous. Until his prosecution for a murder committed while performing a bank robbery, his magician's mind had stolen some of the greatest fortunes from the most secure banks in France. Those magician's hands had prepared some of the deadliest poisons to eliminate countless enemies. But it was that smile that made people remember Dr. Dubosc.

"By way of celebration," Dubosc explained. "Consider. There are seventy-five escape attempts from Noumea Prison every six months, of which not more than one succeeds. Could anybody expect to win on that percentage? I ask you. But *we* won. I persuaded just the right guard to look the other way at just the right hour on just the right night to make our escape possible. Money has a wonderful way of closing the eyes of prison guards who are in debt."

A young man seated on the raft looked at Dr. Dubosc with admiration. Feelings came readily upon his beardless face, a tender face, with eyes too large and soft to be manly. This boy was Fenayrou. He had been condemned to life in prison for six murders committed with his criminal specialty – a deceptively small knife. He usually went for the victim's back. He was too tender and gentle – and viciously sneaky – to kill in any other way. This Fenayrou was the Doctor Dubosc's loyal errand boy. He had already killed three people on the doctor's orders. "Is not our doctor a wonder?" Fenayrou said, as he handed a cigarette along to the third white man. "He thinks of everything. We are free!"

The third man did not smile as he took the smoke. He was a huge, pock-marked man with hairless eyelids, known by many names. His most common name was "Perroquet" – "The Parrot" in English. It was a name that came from his beaked nose. He was a hired killer by profession, accustomed to use his fists to control men – and to use a thin wire he kept in his pocket to strangle those who would not be controlled. While Dubosc was the most intelligent of these three, and Fenayrou was the sneakiest, this Perroquet was the one with the official reputation of "brutal killer." The Parrot accepted the cigarette, but he said nothing until the first gulp of tobacco filled his lungs. Then he

grumbled: “Fenayrou, you little punk. You and your damned ‘freedom.’ This ocean is not freedom. This is a shark pond. We’re not safe yet. Suppose there comes a storm.”

“Go to hell,” said Fenayrou.

“It is not the season of storms,” interrupted Dubosc.

But the Parrot’s words had given them a moment of doubt. They paused and looked about with the fear of men who find themselves on wide waters. The spaces of the sea were so wide and empty. There was a threat in each wave that came from the depths. None of them knew the sea. None knew its ways, what tricks it might play, what traps it might spread – traps possibly more deadly than those of the jungle. But there was nowhere else to go than out, out into the immense ocean. The raft was moving now into strong waves, and the water bubbled in over the front of the raft and ran down among them as they sat. Though the intruding water was warm, the salty sea seemed ready to swallow them.

“Where is that cursed ship that was to meet us here?” demanded Fenayrou.

“It will meet us right enough,” Dubosc affirmed.

“So you say,” growled Perroquet. “Damn! This wind will blow us to China if we keep on this way.”

“We dare not stay any closer to land. There is a government boat at the port of Torrien on the island. They are always scouting for escaped convicts. That is their job. Also, the traders go armed hereabouts, ready for men like us. They know how much they can earn by turning us in to the prison authorities. And don’t imagine that the native trackers have given up on us. There are likely to be following us in their canoes.”

They’d follow us so far, and out to sea?” murmured Perroquet.

Fenayrou laughed, for the Parrot’s fear was a funny thing, coming, as it did, from such a large and violent man. “Don’t worry about the sea. Watch out for the cannibals. They might eat you yet. You are a big meal to them”

“Is it true?” demanded the Parrot, appealing to Dubosc. “I have heard it is even permitted to these devils to keep all runaways they can capture to eat.”

“A stupid tale,” said Dubosc.

“They’ll eat a man piece by piece,” chuckled Fenayrou. “They will eat only a little bit of you, Perroquet. Let them make a stew of your brains, if you have any brains inside that thick skull.

“In the name of God - what brutes!” Perroquet said. And with an obscene gesture, he pointed to that fourth man who was on their boat and yet so completely separated from them that they had almost forgotten him. “Look at that animal!”

The Canaque native was steering the raft quite without noticing Perroquet’s remark. He sat crouched at the stern, his dark body glistening like varnished wood in the brilliant light of the ocean spray. He held the steering paddle, as immobile as a statue, his eyes fixed upon the course ahead. There was no trace whatever of expression on his face, no hint of what he thought or felt – or whether he thought or felt anything. He seemed not even aware that the white men were staring at him.

“It occurs to me,” said Fenayrou in a pause, “that our friend here who looks like a shiny black boot is able to steer us God knows where – perhaps to turn us in and claim the reward.”

“Reassure yourself,” answered Dubosc. “He steers by my orders. besides, he is a simple creature. He’s like a child – incapable of any but the most primitive reasoning.”

“Is he not capable of stabbing us in the backs?”

“His mind is too small to devise any treachery that would deceive us. Also, he is bound by his duty. I made my bargain with his chief, up the river; he sent this man to deliver us on board our ship. He is doing a job. It is the only interest he has in us.”

“I am glad you feel so confident,” returned Fenayrou, adjusting himself lazily among the leaves at the bottom of the raft and sucking the last of his cigarette. “For my part I wouldn’t trust a creature like that for two cents. God! What a stone face he has!”

“Animal!” repeated Perroquet.

Under the heat of the day, two of the convicts lapsed into dozing. But Dubosc did not rest. His tormented soul peered out as he stood to sweep the skyline. His escape theory had been so precise; but the facts were so different. He had counted on meeting a ship – one of those little pirate ships of the South Pacific islands that can be hired for any criminal purpose. But now there was no ship, and here on this sea there was no land-based crossroads where one might sit and wait. Such a raft as the one on which they floated could not be made to remain in one place upon the sea. It floated freely and, for the most part, uncontrollably. They depended upon the speedy arrival of the hired pirates to escape the terrifying possibility of an extended stay on the hot surface of this empty sea.

For the other two men on the raft, the logic of the situation was unclear. They knew of Dubosc’s worldwide fame as a criminal genius. Dubosc was the man who could arrange anything – even an escape requiring the cooperation of people on the other side of the planet. Dubosc was the man who could set things up with such perfection as to be plucked from the sea by pirates hired by friends twelve thousand miles away. But if Dubosc was so smart, why had he not taken care of things?

Dubosc was confident of his own powers. Dubosc was an important man to the criminal leaders back home. Many men in Paris stood to benefit from Dubosc’s escape, and all stood in fear of his enmity. The pirates would be sent, he knew. But when they would arrive, no one could know for sure. And the doctor had an immediate problem – survival. His men were becoming thirsty, and there was all too little water.

Perroquet looked for a drink. Here, in a damp depression among the leaves of the raft, had lain the bottle of green glass in which they carried their only water. It was not to be seen. “Where is that flask of water?” the Parrot demanded. “The sun has grilled me to the bone.”

“We cannot waste our water,” Dubosc insisted.

The Parrot thrust forward his sunburnt purple face. “What do you say to me there? No water? Where is that water?”

“I have it,” said Dubosc.

Perroquet saw now that the Dr. held the bottle between his knees, along with their single packet of food in its wrapping of coconut husk.

“I want a drink,” challenged Perroquet.

“Think,” said Dubosc. “We must guard our supplies like reasonable men. We do not know how long we may be floating here in the sun.”

Perroquet grumbled and gradually hushed. There fell a silence among them, heavy and strained, in which they heard only the squeaking and cracking of the frail raft as it labored in the waves. Distressingly, they were being pushed steadily outward and onward into the open sea. The last cliffs of the island of New Caledonia were no long even a smudge in the west, but only a hazy line. Before them stood the infinite ocean, shining almost red in the rosy morning light, and still they saw no ship upon the great round expanse of a sea that gleamed like a brass plate under a burning sun.

“When will they come?” murmured a half-conscious Fenayrou.

Dubosc began to answer: “We do not know how long” –

– “So that is the way you talk now?” interrupted the Parrot, half choking. “You do not know how long? But you were sure enough when we started.”

“I am still sure,” returned Dubosc. “The ship will come. Only she cannot wait for us in one spot. The wind will not allow it. She will be cruising back and forth until she finds us. We must wait.”

“Ah, good!” said the killer. “We must wait. And in the meantime, what? We fry here in the damned heat with our tongues hanging out while you give us water drop by drop?”

“Perhaps.”

“But no! The killer clapped his hands. “By God, there is no man big enough to feed me water with a spoon!”

Dubosc shrugged as a sign that he was not afraid.

“Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink,” laughed Fenayrou.

“You laugh!” cried Perroquet, turning in anger. “But how about this failure of a captain that lets us put to sea without enough water? What? He thinks of everything, does he? He thinks of everything! Damn! Let me hear you laugh again you little shit!”

Fenayrou looked over at the gigantic figure of Perroquet, and decided to hold his laugh for the moment.

“And now he tells us to be reasonable,” concluded The Parrot. “Tell that to the devils in hell. Can’t remember water – but you can remember your own cigarettes! Right, Doctor? Leader?”

“He does have a point... forgetting to bring more than a small bottle of water...” muttered Fenayrou, frowning. “A bad piece of work for a captain of runaways.”

But the doctor faced mutiny with his famous smile, the smile of a man in command. We left our prison rather hastily, gentleman. Remember? It was not possible to load the water containers and still escape.

“You should have known ahead of time,” muttered Fenayrou.

“Or you.” Perroquet scowled at Fenayrou.

“Or you, gorilla!” said Fenayrou, tossing the accusation back at the Parrot.

Dubosc stopped them with a stern look. “All of this alters nothing. Unless we are to die very speedily, we must guard our water.”

“I want a drink,” repeated the Parrot.

“You can claim your share, of course. But take warning of one thing. After it’s gone, do not think to borrow off of us – Fenayrou and me.”

“He would be capable of it, the pig!” exclaimed Fenayrou. “I know him. See here, Perroquet, my old friend the doctor is right. Fair for one, fair for all.”

“I want a drink, Perroquet said.”

Dubosc removed the wooden plug from the flask. "Very well," he said quietly. With the delicacy of a magician, he took out a large canvas wallet, the crude equivalent of a doctor's black bag. He pulled out a tiny cup, holding not much more than an ounce. Carefully, he poured a bit of the clear liquid. Fenayrou laughed at Perroquet's disappointment as he accepted that tiny cup between his big fingers. Dubosc then served Fenayrou and himself with the same amount before he closed the bottle. "In this way we should have enough to survive," concluded Dubosc.

No one was surprised that he ignored that other man who sat alone at the back of the raft – the black Canaque native. No water was to be wasted on that creature.

Perroquet had a complaint: "What if these jokers you call your friends decide to rid themselves of you? What if they have decided to let you rot here? That would be a great joke! To let us wait for a ship that does not exist!"

"Perhaps the doctor knows better than an idiot like you," suggested Fenayrou.

The killer ignored the boy for a moment as he continued his assault on the doctor. "How can you know that they will not fail you," demanded Perroquet with a bullying tone.

But Dubosc would not be bullied. "It would not be well for my friends in Paris to fail me. There is a safe deposit in my Paris bank full of papers to be opened at my death or disappearance. Call it my will. But this will contains a great deal of information about the criminal activities of my so-called friends. This will of mine could put a half a dozen of them into prison for a lifetime, and could lead to the hanging of another half dozen. They cannot afford to let me die.

"The hell they can't," barked Perroquet.

"Rest assured – they hired the pirates to pick us up."

Now it must be admitted that Dubosc was a persuasive man. With time and patience, he succeeded in impressing his less intelligent raft-mates so well that, when the wind fell at sunset, they were almost cheerful, and were ready to believe that the morning would bring the ship. They dined on a dry biscuit and another thimbleful of water, and

they divided the night watchman duties by friendly agreement. And through that long clear night of stars, whenever the one of the three who lay awake between his comrades chanced to look back to the rear of the boat, he could see the shadow of another figure – of the naked black Canaque – who slept apart from the whites, and rested in what appeared to be perfect peace.

Dawn came. But it was an evil sunrise. Fenayrou, was aroused by a foot as hard as a hoof, and stared up at Perroquet's angry face, with the doctor's dead-serious stare just behind.

“Lazy pig! Good-for-nothing! Will you wake up so I can smash your ribs? In the name of God, here is how you keep watch! You sleep when you should watch!”

“Keep off!” cried Fenayrou wildly. “I fell asleep! I couldn't help it! Keep off! Don't touch me!”

“Why not, fool? The ship could have missed us! A ship could have passed us a dozen times while you slept!”

Dubosc watched coolly while Perroquet knotted his huge fists over Fenayrou, who crawled away catlike, his mouth twisted to a snarl resembling a cornered animal's. Suddenly, the morning light flashed with the naked gleam of steel, and Dubosc saw that Fenayrou was gripping a knife, ready to use it on Perroquet. If they should fight with that weapon, anyone might be stabbed. Dubosc was suddenly alerted to the need to end the struggle. He stepped cautiously between the fighters. “Enough. Fenayrou, put away that knife.”

“He kicked me.”

“You were at fault,” said Dubosc. “You fell asleep while on watch.” Then he turned to the Parrot. “Perroquet! Stop!”

“Are we all to die so that he may sleep?” stormed The Parrot.

“The harm is done. Listen now, both of you. Things are bad enough already. We may need all our energies.”

No more was said. They dropped their quarrel, for they were awed by the size of the open sea. Silently they shared their tiny food rations as before, made an effort to eat with their few drops of water, and sat down to ready themselves for what was to come.

But nothing came. A calm had fallen over the tropical sea. No breeze. The air hung like a heavy weight. The sea showed not the faintest crinkle on its surface, only the polished waves glowing as the sun struck the surface of the water. It was a savage sun that burned upon them with the power of a magnifying glass, a sun that sucked the moisture from their poor human bodies and sent them crawling to the shelter of the bottom of the raft. They came to hate all that was bright – even the brilliant blue sea encircling them; and when the doctor made them dip themselves overboard to cool themselves, they found little comfort in this glowing, warm, salty, undrinkable bath.

And always, a curious sight met their eyes. While they clung along the edge of the raft, cooling themselves in the water, they all faced inward toward the raft, and there sat the black native. He did not join them for the little swim. He hardly seemed warm. He did not glance at them. He sat resting on his heels in the way of the native, with arms hugging his knees. He stayed in his place at the back of the raft, motionless under that shattering sun, gazing out into nothingness. Whenever they raised their eyes, they saw him. He was the only thing to see. He seemed completely unconcerned by the terrible conditions.

“Here is one man who appears to enjoy himself quite well,” remarked Dubosc.

“I was thinking so myself,” said Fenayrou.

“The animal!” rumbled Perroquet.

They observed him, and for the first time, with direct interest, and with a thought of him as a fellow human being. But not kindly. They regarded him with the beginnings of envy.

“He does not seem to suffer.”

“What is going on in his brain? I almost think he despises us,” said Dubosc.

“Or secretly laughs at us,” said Fenayrou.

“The animal!” snarled the Parrot.

“Perhaps he is waiting for us to die,” suggested Fenayrou. “Perhaps he is waiting for the reward. This cannibal would not starve on the way home at least. And he could deliver us in pieces after munching on us.”

The other white men did not laugh at Fenayrou’s joke. Instead, they studied the fourth man.

“How does he do it, doctor? Has he no feeling? We have had water and he has had none, said Fenayrou.”

“Look at his skin, fresh and moist, observed the doctor.”

“And his belly, fat as a football!” growled Perroquet “Is there any way he could be stealing our supplies?”

“Certainly not.”

“What if he has supplies of his own, hidden somewhere?”

The same monstrous idea struck them all, and the others helped the Parrot search. They knocked the black man aside. They searched the platform where he sat, digging among the palm leaves that made up the raft, seeking some hidden treasure, seeking perhaps a hidden bottle or a canteen. They found nothing.

“We were mistaken,” said Dubosc. “He has nothing.”

But Perroquet had a different way of expressing his disappointment. He turned on the Canaque native, caught him by his hair, and proceeded to give him a long, lingering beating. This was a little specialty of The Parrot’s. He paused only when he himself was breathless and exhausted. He then threw the native’s limp, unresisting body from him. “There, you lump of dirt! Pig! The beating was a useless thing to do, but the others said nothing.

His work done, Perroquet pondered for a time. Then he spoke. “See here, Doctor” he said. “You are wise, eh? He leaned forward to look into the doctor’s face. “Very good. But if you think you are going to use that cursed brain to get the best of us in any

way – see here, my boy, I'll pull your brain out through your crooked nose ... like that. He took Dubosc by the nose.

Fenayrou gave a nervous giggle. And Dubosc, pulling away, shrugged; but it was perhaps about this time that he began to regret that he didn't let Fenayrou stab Perroquet the day before. The doctor knew now: Perroquet would only become worse with time. Only two bonds kept the white men together. One was the flask of water, which Dubosc held by his side with a strip of leather. The other bond connecting these men was the presence of the hated black native.

There was no forgetting the fourth man now, no overlooking him. He was always on their minds now, more impressive, more mysterious, and more exasperating with every hour. Their own powers were slipping away. But the naked savage had yet to give the slightest sign of complaint or weakness. And so he remained unchanged, a fixed fact and a growing wonder.

The brutal rage of Perroquet, in which he had vented his distorted hate of the native, had been followed by superstitious doubts.

“Doctor,” he said at last, “is this a man or a fiend from hell?”

“It is a miracle,” put in Fenayrou.

But the doctor lifted a finger. “It is a man,” he repeated, “and a very poor and wretched example of a man. He is scarcely above the ape. He has a secret,” said the doctor.

“What kind of secret does he hold?” demanded Perroquet, burning in anger.

“I cannot say,” admitted Dubosc. “Possibly some method of breathing, some peculiar posture that operates to cheat the sensations of the body. Perhaps he can hypnotize himself. ”

“Ask him!” demanded Fenayrou.

“To ask him? Useless. He will not tell. Why should he? We give him no share of what we have.”

“I know several very excellent ways of learning secrets,” said the Parrot as he passed his dry tongue over his lips. “Shall I begin?”

Dubosc came back and looked at him. “It would be useless. He could stand any torture you could invent. No, that is not the way.”

“Listen to me,” replied Perroquet with sudden violence. “Me, I am wearied of talking. You say he is a man. Very well. If he is a man, he must have blood in his veins. I might just drink that blood of his.”

“Who is the cannibal now?” jeered Fenayrou.

Perroquet half rose as if to strike out. “I’ll break your neck before I eat him. Then I’ll eat you.”

Dubosc interrupted to prevent the fight. “No, we do not need food. We need drink. The blood would be hot. Also it would be salty. It would not help our thirst.”

“Kill the animal, then; and throw him overboard, Perroquet said.”

“We gain nothing by that. He works for us.”

“I believed you once, doctor, you old windbag. But not now. Now I watch. I watch you. I watch Feynarou. I’ll sleep no more. I leave no man alone with that bottle of water.”

So Perroquet watched. They all watched. They watched the Canaque. They watched each other. And they watched the falling liquid level in their flask. Another dawn came with the same dead calm, heat rising like an oven’s through the thick tropical air. Cloudless, hopeless. And then Dubosc announced that their water allowance must be cut to half a thimbleful. There remained perhaps one real glass of water in that bottle – three miserable sips of bare life to share among the three of them.

And then it happened. At the sight of the bottle, at the tinkle of its sparkling contents, so cool and silvery inside the glass, Fenayrou's nerves snapped. "More!" he begged, with pleading hands. "I'm dying. More!"

When the doctor refused him, he crawled begging among the leaves on the floor of the raft, then rose suddenly to his knees, raised his arms, and pointed across the water with a hoarse cry. "A ship! A ship!" he cried.

The other men spun about. They saw the thin, unbroken ring of the great ocean, and that was all they saw, though they stared and stared. Then they turned back to Fenayrou and found him in the act of tilting the bottle to his mouth. A fast, cunning, careful slash of his knife had loosed the water flask from its leather sling at the doctor's side. Even now the pathetic little man was sucking sloppily at the mouth of the bottle, spilling the precious liquid.

With one sweep of his arm, Perroquet picked up the paddle, swung it like a bat, and knocked Fenayrou to the bottom of the raft. Springing across the flattened man, Dubosc snatched the flask upright and moved to the other side of the raft. He stared at the big killer, who stood wide-legged, his blood-shot eyes on fire, rumbling in his chest.

"There is no ship," said The Parrot. "There will be no ship. We are done. Because of you and your rotten promises that have brought us here – Doctor, liar, ass!"

Dubosc stood firm. "Come a step nearer and I'll break the bottle and all its water over your head."

They stood looking at and measuring each other. Perroquet's brows gathered in a slow effort of thought. What to do? "This lump of meat – your pal Fenayrou – I think he's half-dead. Do you want the same, Doctor?"

"Think," urged Dubosc with his schoolteacher's tone of voice. "Why should you and I fight? We are reasonable men. We can see this trouble through and win yet. Such weather cannot last forever. Besides, here are only two of us to divide the water now." We'll dispose of this jerking, twitching, half dead little creature.

“That is true,” nodded The Parrot. “That is true, isn’t it? When he joins the fish, Fenayrou kindly leaves us his share of the water. For us two! A great idea! O.K. I’ll take my share of the water now, Doctor.”

Dubosc examined him carefully. “Hold off. Wait. We can’t waste.”

“My share at once, if you please,” insisted Perroquet, with a heaviness to his voice. “Afterwards we shall see how we shall get along. Afterwards.”

The doctor smiled his old smile. “So be it,” he said. Without giving up the bottle, Dubosc brought out his canvas wallet once more -- that wallet whose mysterious contents had helped make him famous among criminals -- and rolled out the tiny cup by some swift magician-like movement of his flexible fingers. Meanwhile, he held Perroquet’s eyes with his own. Firm, calm, relaxed.

“I will measure it for you,” the doctor said with a reassuring tone. His hands darted between the wallet and the cup. He poured the thimbleful of liquid, and handed it over quickly. When Perroquet had drunk it, the doctor filled it again - and again. “Three, four, five,” he counted. “That is enough.”

But The Parrot’s big grip closed quietly around the doctor’s wrist at the last offering, wrenched him, and held him helpless. “No, it is not enough. Now I will take the rest. Ha, wise man! Have I fooled you at last?”

There was no chance to struggle, and Dubosc did not try; he only stayed, smiling up at the brutish man, waiting.

Perroquet took the bottle. “The best man wins,” he remarked. “Eh, my old boy? That’s your saying, isn’t it, Doctor? The best...” Perroquet’s lips moved, but no sound came forth. A look of the most intense surprise spread upon his flabby round face. He reached for his stomach, a pain in his face. He stood swaying a moment, and then he collapsed like a huge puppet when the string is cut.

Dubosc stooped and caught the bottle again, looking down at his big enemy, who sprawled in a brief convulsion and then lay still. A bluish scum oozed out between his

teeth. The doctor's poison had worked very rapidly on the huge Parrot, who was now just a twitching pile of flesh.

"Not quite dead yet?" said Dubosc with that vicious smile. "Well, soon. Yes, the best man wins." Dubosc laughed as he raised the flask for a last deep drink.

"The best man wins!" screeched a voice in his ear. Fenayrou, writhing up and striking like a wounded snake, drove the knife deep between the doctor's shoulders. Then Fenayrou again collapsed, victim of the smashing blow delivered earlier by the Parrot.

The bottle fell and rolled to the middle of the platform, and there, while each of the wounded creatures struggled vainly to reach it, the bottle of water poured out its silvery treasure in a tiny stream that trickled away and was lost. Then all lay with the stillness of approaching death.

All but one – the native, who had sat watching, seemingly bored as the struggle unfolded.

And, after all, the pirate ship did come.

The little pirate ship sailed in a manner worthy of its able Captain, Jean Guilbert, the merriest pirate who ever snatched a cargo of gold from a French or British ship. Moving with the first breeze out of the west, the boat came sailing and skipping along with a flash of white waves. This pirate ship, named *Le Petite Suzanne* (*The Little Suzanne* in English) anchored alongside the raft.

"And here they are sure enough, by damn!" said the Captain, Jean Guilbert, in that half-English, half-French language adopted by the pirates of the Caribbean seas from which he sprang. "Zose passengers for us, hey? They been here all de time, not ten mile off - I bet you, Marteau. Ain't it hell?"

What you think, by damn?"

The pirate captain's second in command, a tall man with a gloomy outlook named Marteau, handed back the binoculars to his boss. He was not yet convinced he had lost the bet he had made with Guilbert about whether they would ever be paid for picking up

the convicts. “More bad luck. I never approved this job. And now – just look – we’ve done this voyage for nothing. They’re dead.”

“Marteau, if God in heaven gave you a golden harp, still you would holler, ‘bad luck,’” replied Captain Jean. “Do I hire you to stand here and cry about ze bad luck? Get a boat over, and quick!”

Marteau took several of the boat’s crew down to the raft. “It’s just as I thought,” he called up to the deck from the raft. “I told you how it would be, Captain Jean.”

“Hey?” Captain Jean cried, bouncing at the rail. “Have you got those passengers yet, my boy?”

“I have not,” said Marteau in a tone of sad triumph. There was nothing in the world that could have pleased him quite so much as this chance to prove Captain Jean the loser on a bet. “We are too late. Bad luck, bad luck. That calm weather that kept us from reaching them. They are all dead!”

“Will you mind your business and bring them on board?” shouted the skipper.

“But they’re dead!” replied Marteau.

“What is that to me? All ze better; they will cost nothing to feed.”

“But how--“

“Barrels, my gar,” said Captain Jean. “Those barrels at the back of the ship. Fill them nicely with salt water, and there we are! Ze salt water – it will preserve their miserable, stinking carcasses until we get back to the men who hired us to pick zem up.”

And after having drawn all possible satisfaction from the other man’s amazement, Captain Guilbert sprang the joke on his second in command with a grin. “The gentlemen’s passage is all paid, Marteau. Before we left Australia, Marteau, I made a contract to bring back three escaped convicts. Not three live ones, but three. And so by hell I do – in pickle barrels! They’ll pay.”

Only now was Marteau beginning to understand his captain's grim joke, and his lost bet. His eyes widened, his mouth dropped.

"Yes, by damn, dead or alive – it make no difference to the men who pay me! Ha Ha! A dead carcass as good as a live one!"

Marteau grimaced. "You win this time, Captain," conceded the beaten gambler.

"And now if you'll kindly get zose dead passengers aboard like I said and bother less about ze damn luck, I'd be much obliged. Also, you owe me a hundred francs, by damn. Ha ha!"

Marteau recovered himself with difficulty in time to recall another little detail. "Captain, there is a fourth man on board that raft. He is a Canaque native – still alive. What shall we do with him?"

"A Canaque?" snapped Captain Jean. "A Canaque! I had no word in my contract' about no Canaque ... Leave him there ... He's only a damn native. What do I care. He'll do well enough where he is. God will let him live or die."

And Captain Jean was right, perfectly right. For while *The Little Suzanne* was taking aboard her cargo of dead men, the wind freshened from the west, and just about the time the little pirate ship was sailing away for Australia, the "damn native" spread his own sail of palm leaves, twirled his own little sea craft around, and headed the catamaran eastward, back toward his home island. He knew these waters well, having sailed them all his life, and he estimated that he'd be home in a day. His job complete, the Canaque pondered with pleasure what he'd do with the fine payment he had been promised by his chief for this delivery. Feeling somewhat dry after his exertions, he pulled a hollow reed with a sharp end and, stretching himself at full length in his accustomed place at the rear of the raft, he thrust the reed down into one of the bladders underneath the boat, and drank his fill of the sweet, fresh water he had stored in these bladders some days back for his voyage onto the wide sea. He had several such storage bladders remaining, built into floats at several places just above the water line – quite enough food and water to last him safely home again.