



Sinister Paradise

and Five Other Foreboding Pleasures

by Robert Moore Williams

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Sinister Paradise

By **Robert Moore Williams**

*It was like a mirage in reverse,
this strange island off the California coast
—it couldn't always be seen, but it was there—in Time.*



"THERE'S the island, Parker!" Retch called.

Bill Parker shifted the controls of the 'copter and the big craft swung in the direction Retch was pointing. Squinting his eyes against the sun glare rising from the Pacific, Parker clearly saw the island. It was miles away as yet but it swam like a mirage suspended just above the surface of the sea.



The island was not large—Parker guessed it as probably being less than two miles in circumference—but he could make out a fringe of trees along the shore and a central peak rising like a cliff in the center.

"I've found it again!" Retch spoke with fierce satisfaction—clenched fists. Parker heard the indrawn hiss of breath following the words; a hiss that seemed to hold a promise for the future. Revenge, vengeance, triumph, or something else? Parker could not determine what emotional overtone had found expression in Retch's words. But the emotional overtone was there. Out of the corner of his eyes, Parker glanced at the man sitting in the seat next to him. What he saw did not please him.

Retch was big. He had the muscular build of a prize fighter. The scar over his left cheekbone did not add to the attractiveness of his appearance. He did not, in Parker's opinion, look like the scientist he had claimed to be.

Parker shrugged such thoughts aside. What difference did it make what Retch was, or the nature of his business here? He had paid charter charges on the big helicopter.

"There it is, Parker!" Retch almost screamed the words. As he pointed again toward the island in the far distance, Parker caught a glimpse of a pistol in a

shoulder holster under the man's arm.

The sight of the gun caused a split second of alarm in the big pilot. He had not known that Retch was armed. Then the alarm subsided. Parker pressed his left arm down against his body, assuring himself that his own gun was where it belonged.

The woman, Mercedes Valdar, seemed to catch some of Retch's excitement. She leaned forward across Retch's shoulder to stare at the island. Parker caught another whiff of the musky perfume that she used. He noticed again what he had realized the first time he met her—that in any man's language she was a beauty. Aquiline face, smouldering black eyes, high cheek bones, a delicate brown complexion that hinted at Indian blood back several generations in the past, she looked like something out of an exotic movie. The slacks and sport coat that she wore accentuated the fact that she was a woman.

Parker was aware again of the enigma of her presence. Retch had introduced her as his secretary. Parker, accepting the man's statement, had asked no questions. Asking questions in a matter such as this was a fine way to get a bust in the snoot.

"It ees the island!" Her whisper was sharp. A glow appeared on her face. "Soon we will be reech!" She slapped Parker heartily on the shoulder. "Beel, is not that wonderful!"

"It sure is," Parker answered. He was as astonished by the statement as he was by the slap on the shoulder.

"Shut up, Mercedes!" Retch spoke. "Parker, turn some juice into this thing."

"She's cruising at about her best speed," Parker answered.

"Then get her faster than cruising speed. We've found the island." His manner indicated that finding the island was very important but that something else perhaps of equal importance remained to be done.

"What's the big rush!" Parker countered. "You don't think it will vanish before we get there, do you?"

A startled look appeared on Retch's face. "No, of course not. That is—"

A thudding jar went through the ship.

"What 'appened?" Mercedes screamed in fear.

With a snarling crash of breaking metal, one of the helicopter blades was yanked from its mounting above them.

Parker had the dazed impression that he saw the big blade jerked away through the air. Then, like a leaf suddenly caught in a violent hurricane, the helicopter began to turn flip-flops in the air.

"Do somesing!" Mercedes cried.

As the ship jumped and began to yaw, she was thrown across the cabin. Jerking, buckling, jumping, twisting, the big helicopter lurched its way toward the surface of the sea below. Cutting the power, Parker leaped from his seat. He knew what was going to happen. He intended to try and be ready for it.

Retch, gripping his seat with both hands, yelled. "We're falling!"

"It's not news to me," Parker answered, jerking open the door to the compartment at the rear. Inside that compartment was a mass of synthetic fabric. Tossed to the surface of the sea, inflated by the self-contained flask of gas under pressure, it would make a rubber raft.

"You've left the controls!" Retch barked. "Do something to stop us. We're going to fall." The man's face was wild with fear as he twisted his head around to see what Parker was doing.

"You damned right I've left the controls!" Parker answered. "We've lost the equivalent of a wing in an ordinary plane. If you know any way to stop a plane from falling you tell me." Working with deft, sure hands, he pulled the mass of synthetic fabric out of its compartment.

"But we've got to get to that island. We've found it. We've got to get there while—"

"If we get there, we'll have to swim," Parker answered. "Personally, I'll consider myself lucky to get there by swimming. Here we go."

The last was spoken as the helicopter began its final plunge to the surface of the blue water below them.

Parker, with the mass of fabric clutched firmly in both hands, threw himself

flat on the floor.

The 'copter hit with a terrific thud. An instant later, Parker was on his feet. The life raft was under one hand. With the other hand, he was reaching for the handle that opened the cabin door.

"We've got to get out of here. This ship will go the bottom like a rock."

Behind him, Mercedes and Retch were struggling to their feet. Parker yanked on the handle that opened the cabin door.

The handle did not budge.

The heavy jolt the craft had taken when it struck the surface had twisted the whole frame.

"Get that door open!" Retch moaned. "We'll be drowned like rats."

"Hell, I'm trying!" Parker answered. He yanked upward with all his strength.

The door still did not budge.

Outside Parker could see the green water rising around the cabin.

He backed away, ducked his head, threw himself with all his strength against the door.

Under the driving impact of his body, the door was knocked open. The mass of synthetic fabric in his arms, Parker catapulted through the opening and into the sea. He hit with a terrific splash. Mercedes followed him. Parker, treading water and working with the valve that would release the gas and inflate the raft, saw that Retch was still standing in the door of the 'copter.

"What am I going to do?" Retch screamed.

"Jump."

"But I can't swim."

"Then wait until I get this goddamned raft inflated. Ugh!" Parker's voice went into silence as arms came up out of the water and closed around his neck with a grip of death.

Mercedes, in a panic that often comes to people catapulted suddenly and unexpectedly into the water, was grabbing the nearest source of potential safety.

"Let go!" Even as he spoke, Parker felt her arms close even tighter around his neck. He knew then that she was not going to let go. She was pulling him under with her.

Giving one final jerk at the valve of the gas container, Parker found himself pulled under water.

The arms around his neck seemed to grip like iron. He caught them in both hands, yanked at them. His hands slipped. He grabbed again. She was behind him, on his back, so he could not slug her. Meanwhile each passing second was sending both of them deeper into the sea. He yanked at her arms again. This time his fingers held. Her grip was broken.

Twisting, he grabbed her hair. Then he began to fight his way to the surface. His head broke water. As he gulped air, he realized the blessed sight before his eyes.

The rubber raft! His last jerk at the valve before Mercedes dragged him under had opened it.

From the door of the sinking helicopter Retch was staring at the raft. At the same instant in final desperation, he jumped. His clutching fingers caught the edge of the rubber raft. Like a frightened river rat, he pulled himself out of the water.

Treading water, Parker dragged Mercedes to the edge of the raft. Retch leaned over and lifted her in. For an instant, Parker remained in the water, his fingers firm on the raft, letting it support him while he gasped air into his lungs. Behind him, with a gurgle and a rumble, the helicopter sank. He swung himself into the raft. Mercedes, her masculine garb clinging to her, was sitting up.

"I am sorry, Beel," she said. "I get the scare up and I grab at you. I not know for sure what I am doing. You will forgive me, no?"

"Think nothing of it," Parker answered. "Anybody can get scared under these circumstances."

"That I know," she answered. "But you saved my life. And that I will remember."

"Forget it," Parker said. "I did what had to be done, nothing more."

"But I will remember it," she calmly repeated.

Parker was silent. Under her hardness for the first time he glimpsed something deeper, finer. She was the type who meant what she said. She was a woman who paid her debts. Under other circumstances.... Parker put the thought out of his mind.

Now he set about doing what had to be done—paddling to the island. He turned his eyes toward it.

The island was gone. Calm, serene, the level face of the sea stretched away to the horizon.

Fear, dark, sudden, and overwhelming, arose in Bill Parker. The fear did not come up just because the face of the sea was level and calm, the island not visible, but because of something else, something that he had forgotten, something that he had put out of his mind and out of his life. Could it be possible that—

He caught himself. In that direction lay madness. Words exploded out of him. "Hey, what the hell? Am I nuts? What became of that island? I saw it!"

"I told you we had to hurry to get there when we saw it." Retch was hesitant. "It's—it's not always there."

"But it's got to be there! I saw it!"

"There is a trick about that island," Retch said. "I—it—I—you don't always see it. Something funny."

Parker was across the shaking, unsteady raft. His impulse was to take Retch by the throat, to shake words out of him. "What do you mean?" He was restraining himself with difficulty.

Retch spread his hands. "I'm sorry, I can't explain. That's all I know. Believe me."

Retch was telling the truth Parker decided. The big pilot swung his gaze in every direction, searching for land. Somewhere in the far distance was the peninsula of Lower California. But it was beyond range of his eyes. As far as he could see, was barren water.

Setting his course by the small compass that was included as part of the standard equipment on the life raft, Parker paddled toward the south. The clumsy raft made little progress. Parker hardly noticed, hardly cared. Deep in his mind was a lurking thought he was trying to keep below his consciousness.

In the front of the raft, Retch sat with his back to Parker. From Retch's motions, Parker knew the man was cleaning his gun. Parker made no comment. When Retch had finished and had turned back to him, Parker spoke. "I want to know a little more about that island. How does it happen we can't see it?"

"I'm not certain," Retch answered. "I think it's a lot like the mirages you see on the desert. This island is something like that, only in reverse. In a mirage, you see something that doesn't exist. In the case of this island, you *don't* see something that *does* exist."

"Um," Parker said, then was silent. The explanation sounded reasonable enough, as far as it went. The trouble was it didn't go far enough, not nearly far enough to quiet the thought lurking deep in the big pilot's mind. He worked with the paddle. "When you hired me to fly you down here, you told me that you knew where this island was located but you didn't tell me it had a bad habit of vanishing."

"I didn't believe it myself," Retch answered. "So far as I was concerned, it was just a wild rumor."

"Um," Parker said again. As he spoke, part of the thought that he had been keeping buried in his mind came blasting to the surface. "She said it was a mirage too!" he blurted out the words. "And that goddamned Dr. Yammer—" He caught himself. Into his mind had come a vision of a woman he had once known, and a psychiatrist called Dr. Yammer. Pain crossed his face.

"What?" Retch asked. "Who are you talking about?"

"Nobody," Parker answered. "Just a woman I once knew."

Her name had been Effra. Effra of the Green Eyes, he had called her. Rigidly he forced the thought of her from his mind, forced himself to think of what Retch had said. But it was no good. His mind kept going back to Effra and Yammer.

"She is caught, trapped in a net of delusion and hallucination that is as solid as a block of steel," Dr. Yammer had once said, his voice precise with authoritarian certainty. "I cannot get her out of this steel block unless I hospitalize her, perhaps operate. There is no other choice, no other decision that can be made. Putting it bluntly—she is insane. A delicate thing, insanity. We still work in the dark with things of the mind."

At the memory of Yammer's words, Parker twisted uncomfortably. He used the paddle much more vigorously than was necessary. It was as if Yammer's face showed in the water into which he thrust the paddle.

Mercedes was studying Parker. "About this woman—"

"She was just a woman I once knew."

"You loved her, yes?"

"Well—" Parker was silent.

"Tell me what 'appened."

"Nothing," Parker said. "Oh, hell—all right. Up in LA three years ago I knew Effra. She was a pilot too, and we got to running around together. She liked to fly out over the Pacific all by herself. I don't know why; she just liked to flirt with danger, maybe. One time she came in a couple of hours over-due. Figuring she was down in the drink, I was about to rouse out the Navy to hunt for her when she came in." He paused.

Mercedes was silent. In the front of the raft, Retch said nothing. His eyes were still searching the skyline.

"She was wildly excited," Parker went on. "She said she had made a forced landing on an island somewhere off the coast of Southern Cal. She also said there were a lot of strange people living on the island." He shook his head. There was a feeling in him he did not like.

His eyes came to focus on a ripple in the water. A shark. It made him think of Dr. Yammer.

"What 'appened then?" Mercedes asked softly.

"I helped her look for the island," Parker said. "We spent months looking in our spare time. We flew over more ocean than I ever knew existed. But we

didn't find it."

"No?"

"That island was awfully important to her. She thought something wonderful was there, what it was, she could not tell me, just that it was there. When we could not find it, she began to doubt herself, to think perhaps she had not seen it, that she had not landed there. She reached the conclusion then—well, she went to see one of these fancy mental specialists who know everything about nothing and nothing about anything."

Under the water, he could see the eyes of the shark. They reminded him of the expression in Dr. Yammer's eyes, except that the shark's eyes looked more honest.

"And then?" Mercedes said, very softly.

"She—vanished," Parker said. "Yammer was going to stick her into a hospital, use something that he called 'shock' on her, maybe operate. She ran away."

"Did you try to find her, Beel?"

"For asking that question, Mercedes, I ought to choke you!" Parker said hotly. "I hunted high and low. All we knew for certain was that her plane was missing. I think she decided she would simply fly out to the sea she loved, and never come back." Again his voice sank to a whisper as he visualized Effra of the Green Eyes flying out over this wilderness of waters.

"I am sorry, Beel," Mercedes said gently. "Will you remember one thing, Beel?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"You saved my life back there. I will not forget it. If the time ever comes, I will pay my debt."

"Thank you," Parker said. "But there is no debt."

"You think this island we are hunting might be the same island your girl claimed she found?" Retch spoke from the front end of the boat.

"And if it is the same island?" Mercedes said.

Anger came boiling up in Parker. "If it is that island, and if I ever get back to

Los Angeles, I am going to hunt up a psychiatrist by the name of Yammer and take care of him!" Parker dug the water savagely. Gradually, his anger subsided. "Where did you run into the rumor about this island?"

Retch shrugged. "It was just one of those things you hear." He studied the landscape. "We should spot a boat soon."

"We are not exactly on the well-traveled ocean lanes," Parker pointed out. "Does it happen that there are any other little things about this island that you forgot to tell me when you chartered my ship to fly you down here?"

Retch flushed. "Such as—"

"Such as how it happened that my 'copter threw a vane just after we sighted the place?"

Retch did not answer.

"Seemed as though somebody shot at us."

"Oh hell no! The loss of the vane was accidental."

"Accidents like that can happen but they usually don't. I checked the ship before we took off." Parker turned silent. There was no proof that the wrecking of the 'copter had been anything but an accident. "What do you expect to find on this island?"

"I told you—"

"Just before the 'copter started down, Miss Valdar was yakking about how we were all going to be rich," Parker interrupted.

The glance Retch gave Mercedes had no love in it. "Sometimes she's got her mouth open when she ought to have it shut."

Mercedes was silent. "I see," Parker said. "When you chartered my ship, you told me you were a scientist and that you wanted to investigate certain phenomena on this island. You said your investigation would take only a few hours. I was to fly you here and wait for you. You said you might want me to fly you back to the mainland, or might not, depending on what you found here. Is this correct?"

"Certainly," Retch answered. "I'm sorry you lost your ship but the insurance will take care of it."

"Insurance will take care of the 'copter but not of my neck. *Are you a scientist?*"

"Of course. Didn't I tell you—"

"What kind of a scientist are you?"

"I—ah—What do you mean?"

"What's your specialty? Are you a biologist, a physicist, or what?"

"I—"

"I don't believe you are a scientist at all. You don't talk like one."

"Damn it, I told you what I am and that's what I am!" Retch's face showed sullen and his hand moved toward the gun. Parker tensed. Retch stopped the movement of his hand. He glared at the big pilot.

"Okay," Parker said. "It doesn't make any difference anyhow." He resumed paddling.

The sun slid down the western sky. Retch and Mercedes huddled in the front end of the raft and whispered to each other. From time to time, the woman glanced at Parker. He paid no attention to her.

The sea was calm. In the distance, a school of flying fish skittered over the surface. A dozen gulls played near the surface. A high-riding fin cut the water. Shark, sensing food.

The sun reached the horizon and wallowed in the sea like a fat, round shining pig on fire.

Mercedes screamed, pointed, jerked a terror-stricken face toward Parker. "Beel! Beel!" She scuttled across the raft, threw herself into his arms. "Look, Beel, look!"

Terror and panic almost beyond understanding were in her words.

Parker looked where she was pointing. His heart climbed up into his mouth and threatened to choke him. He had thought he was shock-proof, that nothing could jar him. But here was something that made his mind reel.

Walking across the water toward the raft were three men.

Clad in knee-length breeches, wearing cloaks, the three men looked as if they

had just stepped out of the 17th century. Two wore big, broad-brimmed hats, the third had a handkerchief wrapped around his head. He also had a wooden leg and he stalked across the surface of the sea with all the sureness he might have had with concrete under him. He carried a curved cutlass in one hand. The other two men were armed with swords, in scabbards. In addition, heavy, clumsy-looking pistols were thrust into sashes at their belts.

They looked like men out of a nightmare—or like pirates out of the olden days; swash-buckling buccaneers who had somehow managed to survive their proper period in history and to live into the 20th century.

"Ghosts!" Mercedes screamed. "Devils! They've come up out of hell because of our sins!" She wrapped her arms around Parker's neck. "Save me, Beel, save me!"

Parker caught her wrists, jerked her arms loose from his neck, and rose quickly to his feet. He hoped fervidly that his eyes had been deceiving him and that standing up would cause this mirage to disappear.

His eyes continued to deceive him. The three men did not disappear. They continued to walk across the water toward the raft. They moved with the sureness of men who know where they are going.

Behind them, suddenly outlined against the fat sun that was wallowing in the sea, rocky, grim, and forbidding, the mysterious island was now visible. It had reappeared. They had found it.

Three men coming from it had found them.

The shark found the three men.

Parker saw the triangular fin cut through the water toward them. Like a speed boat taking off on a race, the fin gathered momentum.

The three men saw it coming.

"Ho!" one yelled.

"A shark!" the second said.

"Have at him, boys!" the third shouted.

The shark charged them. Drawing their swords, the three men executed a nimble dance on the surface of the sea. They thrust downward—their swords

entering the water with no difficulty whatsoever although their feet did not enter it—drew them back dripping red. They skipped lightly out of the way of the wounded and infuriated monster.

"Zounds!"

"Chop the sea pig down!"

"Carve his heart out!"

Old battle cries rang in the air as they fought the shark. Blood colored the surface of the sea.

The wounded shark suddenly took its death blow. It dived, was gone from sight, then broke the surface a hundred yards away. It beat the water into foam, threshing out its life.

With pleased interest, the three men watched the shark die. Dipping their blades into the sea to clean the blood from them, they wiped them dry on their pants legs.

Again they moved toward the raft.

Parker's hand went to the pistol inside his leather jacket. He loosed it in its holster but did not draw it.

Mercedes moaned and covered her eyes. At the other end of the boat, Retch had risen to his feet.

Bracing himself, Bill Parker waited for—whatever was to happen. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Retch slowly drawing his gun.

"Damn it, Retch, put that gun away!" Parker shouted. "Don't shoot until you know what the hell is going on."

Retch turned, the gun visible in his hand. "What the hell—" Retch didn't put the gun away. He lifted it. Parker found himself staring into the muzzle.

"Get your hands up!" Retch snarled the words. "Mercedes, get that gun out of his holster. Get your goddamned hands up or I'll blow your blasted head off!"

The last was spoken to Parker as the dazed pilot tried to understand what had happened. He could hardly believe his own eyes. Automatically he lifted his hands. Mercedes slid past him, got behind him, taking no chances on getting between him and Retch's gun. He felt her fingers go inside his jacket.

Expertly she lifted the gun from its holster.

"Toss me the gun!" Retch said. He caught the weapon the woman tossed toward him, glanced at Parker. "You thought I was going to start shooting at *them*?" He gestured toward the three approaching men. "You made a slight mistake." The grin on his face was wolfish.

"What the hell have I got into?"

"You'll find out, if you live long enough," Retch said. "Just behave yourself and do as you're told and maybe you'll stay alive." Again the wolfish grin showed on his face but under the grin, the words were harsh with meaning.

"Ho, Johnny!" the three men were drawing near the raft. "Ho, Johnny Retch! What kind of a flying ship is this that you have brought back with you?"

Retch turned to the three men. "Gotch! Peg-leg! Masterville!" Retch greeted them as old friends. The one he had called Gotch had spoken. All three of them stared at the raft and its occupants. Mercedes drew bold, appreciative stares. Parker got blank looks. Standing lightly and easily on the water, the three men surveyed the raft with doubtful contempt.

"Does this thing fly through the air like the Jez—" Gotch caught himself. "It looks to me as if it were more fit for sailing on a mill pond back in Devon."

"This is not the ship that flies through the air, that ship was wrecked. This is a rubber boat that it carried."

"Wrecked?" Gotch spoke. "But where does that leave us?"

"Everything has been taken care of," Retch spoke quickly. "You can always trust Johnny Retch to have two strings for his bow."

"Hmmm. And who is this?" Gotch gestured toward Parker.

"The pilot of the flying ship that was wrecked," Retch answered.

"Ummm. And what are we going to do with him?" Gotch glanced around toward the still floundering and dying shark as if he regretted their haste in disposing of what might have been a handy scavenger. "Um." He moved around the raft and stood close to Parker, staring at him. The sword in his hands still showed faint traces of red from the blood of the shark.

"We do not need any more men on the island!" Lifting his blade, Gotch

glared at Parker.

"Do you, per'aps, need women?" Mercedes spoke quickly. Gotch turned his eyes on her. As he looked, some of the anger seemed to go out of him.

"Perhaps what you need on the island are more women," Mercedes said. She smiled boldly.

Gotch broke into a grin. "But definitely, we need more women, if they are like you."

"Hey, lay off of her, she belongs to me!" Retch spoke violently.

"Come, let us pull the boat to the island," Peg-leg spoke quickly. "We have too many things to do to stand waiting here."

Grumbling, Gotch allowed himself to be persuaded to get in front of the raft and join the other men in pulling it.

Not until then did Parker dare to breathe. "Thanks," he spoke to Mercedes.

"It was nothing, Beel. Anyone could have done it."

"Thanks, anyhow," Parker said. "But what have we got ourselves into here?"

"I do not know for sure, Beel. Johnny, he like me, and he ask me to come along. He say we will both get reech—"

"Shut up!" Retch spoke.

Parker, sitting in the raft, watched the three men tow it toward the shore. He watched their feet. Where they stepped, the water seemed to grow firm. Pirates, cut-throats, killers, they certainly were. But added to that was the equally obvious fact that they could walk on water. In all history, Parker had only heard of one man who could do that, and he hadn't been a man, but a God.

Ahead of them, the island loomed in the sunset; a long strip of white, sandy beach; behind it a thick growth of trees; behind the trees the rocky central mass of the island rising up into the sky. Off to the right, Parker caught a glimpse of a wreck that lay against rocks jutting from the shore. He stared at it. Unless his eyes were deceiving him, it was the wreck of a Spanish galleon, a ship that belonged to the days when Spain had been draining the gold and silver and jewels of the new world into her coffers.

The men stopped, stared uneasily at the shore. Parker could make out two men barely visible between the beach and the grove of trees.

"Rozeno and Ulnar!" Gotch spoke. "Watching us." His lips curled and his hand went automatically to the hilt of the sword he was wearing. "Some day I will slit the throats of that priest and that Indian." Gotch spat into the sea.

"They're not causing any trouble," Peg-leg spoke.

"They're witches, by Gad!" Gotch answered. "They're warlocks, wizards."

"Father Rozeno is a very devout and holy man," Peg-leg said.

"He pretends to be a priest but he is more of a warlock than he is a holy man. As for that Indian, if he ever gives me the chance—" Gotch glared at the figures at the edge of the grove.

"Come on," Peg-leg said.

Mercedes contrived to move closer to Parker. "Beel, what are these theengs here? I do not understand them. I do not like them."

"Nor do I," Parker said.

A shiver passed over her.

"What's the matter, baby, you cold?" Retch grinned at her. "Don't worry about it. We'll get you warmed up on the island."

Imperceptibly she again moved closer to Parker. "Beel, it ees not good."

"You got into this of your own free will."

"Yes, but I did not know that theengs like these were going to 'appen. I just thought—"

"Mercedes, if you open your mouth again, I'll knock your teeth down your throat!" Retch said.

Mercedes was silent.

As they came in to the shore, the two men who had been visible on the beach disappeared. Off to the left something else came into view. It was a small cabin plane, wrecked there in what had apparently been an attempt at a forced landing.

Before they reached the shore, the fat sun had wallowed itself out of sight

into the sea. In the dusk, the island looked like a vast, rocky pinnacle thrust up out of the Pacific Ocean, or out of the ocean of time—Parker couldn't tell which. Mysterious, silent, it waited in the darkness like a vast sleeping monster on the surface of the sea, a monster on which Spanish galleons and planes had been wrecked. Parker, his nerves jumpy, halfway expected it to vanish beneath the surface before they reached it.

But it didn't vanish. It remained fixed, solid, firm. When they stepped from the raft, the sand under their feet was solid, the crunch of it reassuring.

A breeze whispered through the trees. The island was quiet, too quiet. It seemed to brood in the darkness. In the vast stillness that hung like a pall over the place, the only sound was that of a bird, chittering sleepily in the dark woods.

It was the most out-of-place sound Bill Parker had ever heard.

It seemed to affect the others. At the bird-sound they were suddenly quiet, listening.

"To hell with it, it's nothing," Gotch said. "Come on."

Following a well defined path, they moved inland, toward the base of the cliff. Through the trees, Parker glimpsed fires. As he moved closer, he saw the source of the lights, the cooking fires of a village set against the base of the cliff.

"Ho!" Peg-leg called, announcing their arrival.

As they entered the village, the inhabitants came rushing out to them. They were the queerest lot of human beings Parker had ever seen. Spaniards, bearded grandees in tattered and mended bits of ancient finery, Indians, squat, stalwart, Englishmen, tall and blond, a motley crew.

They looked like the relics of half a dozen different nations, drawn from the fringes of time. Their garments did not belong in the 20th century. Their weapons were knives, swords, bell-mouthed pistols. Their language was a mixture of Spanish, English, Portuguese, and Indian dialects.

"What kind of a mad-house is this?" Parker muttered. "Get away, you!" The last was spoken to a slender Spaniard who was trying to jerk Parker's leather jacket from his back.

The man snarled at him, drew back.

"Get out of our way!" Retch yelled. The crowd made way for him. Calling greetings, snarling, Retch seemed very much at home here.

Mercedes looked hopelessly confused and at a loss. She stared around her as if she was appalled at what she saw. Parker drew the obvious inference. Mercedes had never been here before. All this was as new to her as it was to him. But Retch had been here.

Off in the woodland behind them somewhere a bird chirped, the same sleepy quiet sound that Parker had heard as they landed. Now it was louder, nearer, and even more out of place than it had been before.

The people around Parker also heard the sound. Startled faces turned toward the dark forest.

The sound came again, louder now. Parker was certain it was the call of a bird.

But if it was the chirp of a bird, it was frightening these people. Why should a bird-sound in the night frighten grown men? Utter silence fell. Even Gotch was still. Parker saw that the man's face had turned gray, that all the bristling bravado had passed out of him.

Even Retch, showing signs of strain and growing temper, was silent.

"The Jezbro!" someone whispered.

At the words, the strain and temper coming up in Retch burst the surface. "There is no such thing as the Jezbro!" His voice was almost a scream. "It's only superstitious nonsense—" His shouting voice went into silence as the sound came again.

The chirp was louder now. It was no longer one bird chirping in the dark night, it was a dozen. And it wasn't quite the sound of a bird any longer, it was a musical tinkle, an air-borne throbbing somewhat similar to the sound of a harp, a softly ringing chime. Parker could easily imagine that somewhere among those dark trees was a harper, moving closer.

The harpist did not seem to be upon the ground. He—or she—seemed to be up in the air, somewhere near the tree tops, moving in the dark night.

As the sound came louder, a man in the village suddenly went down on his knees, then another and another, until the whole group, including Gotch, were kneeling. Even Mercedes went to her knees in response to deep internal, superstitious pressures. Only Retch and Parker stood erect as two men strong enough to face the sound coming from the night.

"Get down, you fools!" Peg-leg's voice had real anguish in it.

"Get down, hell!" Retch answered. He had a gun in each hand, his own and the one he had taken from Parker.

"Beel! Beel!" Mercedes was jerking at Parker's leg. "What is 'appening?"

"Something," Parker answered. "I don't know what." There was fear in him. He could feel it in his heart, sense it in his bones, taste in his mouth. He rose above it.

The sound swept through the air. It came out over the trees above them. On the ground, the kneelers moaned in response.

The harping sound leaped up, became a melody of weird notes filling the night air. Mingled with the eerie music were the moans from the prostrate humans.

Looking upward, Parker caught a glimpse of something moving through the sky. It blotted out the light of the stars and it looked a lot like a bird but like no bird he had ever seen before. It was too big to be any bird that had ever flown through Earth's air, but yet it flew. As it flew, it made the sound of a gigantic harp.

The bird passed over the village, moving along the cliff. As it slid into the distance, the harp music faded slowly away, became again the sound of a sleepy bird.

Around the village, the prostrate humans moaned, stirred, began to rise.

"What the hell was that thing?" Parker gasped.

"The damned fools call it the Jezbro!" Retch snarled. "The yellow cowards are afraid of it. I don't know what it is."

Parker was silent. To him, Retch sounded like a man scared right down to the soles of his shoes but desperately trying to pretend he wasn't.