

Operation Paradise

By WILBORNE HARRELL

Editor's Note: Wilborne Harrell has just completed a novelette which will appear, by permission of Mr. Harrell, in installments until completed. This week The Herald carries the first of these installments.

Judith Grant stood at the rail of the "Zephyr" and gazed sadly over the star-sprinkled Pacific. Out there, somewhere beyond the horizon, lay the magic islands of romance, a land where dreams come true. She should have been happy, deliciously happy, but her heart lay heavy within her breast. It seemed that all the brightness had fled the world and life become a drab thing; and that only she and the moon were left in all the wide ocean.

Oh, it was all just as she had dreamed it would be: the velvet night, the soft breezes, and somewhere in the ship soft strains of music and the gay tinkle of laughter. In her dreams she had lived all this, its every detail. In her dreams she had stood at the rail of this same trim little yacht, gazed into the warm beauty of the tropic night, and listened to music and laughter . . . and had loved . . .

At a party she had met Rex Gordon, rich, debonair, and handsome in a dark, dangerous way. He had promptly laid siege to her heart, swept her off her feet, and hardly before she realized what was happening, she had promised to marry him. Eagerly, they laid plans for the future. Rex had some business to attend to that required his presence in Honolulu; they would make up a group of friends, sail away to Hawaii in the "Zephyr," announce their engagement on the way, and be married in Honolulu. There would be steel guitars and ukuleles, a real native feast, hula dancing, and beautiful leis for everybody. And what girl, Judith had told herself, could wish for a more romantic fulfillment of her dreams than that.

But now, her eyes sought the far distance in faint bafflement, as though the night and the stars had conspired against her.

The sea lay smooth and beautiful, like the deceptively sleek muscles of the potential savagery that lurked beneath the long, rolling swells. Soft breezes stirred Judith's hair, but her heart was not stirred by the beauty and the grandeur of the sea. Standing at the rail, her mood was not reflected in the mood of the sea, tranquil, serene—peaceful.

But now her dream had come to an end; and her love, once so bright and shining, lay like a tarnished thing, spurned by her heart that had once so joyfully accepted it. In her heart, all was tumult; there was no peace.

Afar off on the horizon, shining dimly in the moonlight, the feathered finger of a lone palm tree pointed to the stars. There lay the first of those magic islands of dreams and romance. The cruise, that had started so

hopefully, holding the promise of happiness at journey's end, now had become a thing of terror to her. She dreaded the day when the "Zephyr" would dock at Honolulu. In her heart, she knew she would never marry Rex Gordon. She knew, now, she didn't love him, never had loved him. But she must tell him the truth; she must break their engagement. And she dreaded that, because she did not want to hurt him.

Her tortured eyes again sought the distance; the palm tree, closer now, twinkled in the starlight.

Just when it all began, this crumbling of her love, Judith could not tell; in fact, there were but few things she could positively place her finger on. Definitely, she did not like Buckley, Rex's business partner, who had accompanied them on the cruise. He had the appearance of a gangster, and in no manner conducted himself as a business associate of Rex Gordon. And then, there was the strange incident that occurred in Rex's office-cabin aboard the "Zephyr." It was the only time Judith had ever visited his private office unbidden, and she was surprised at the annoyance that plainly made itself apparent on Rex's handsome face at her intrusion. Buckley's attitude told her that she was definitely not welcome. And when she innocently wandered too close to Rex's desk and glanced at some papers lying there, he had flown into a rage. Instantly contrite, though, he had regretted his anger, and taking her in his arms had tried to make amends for his unparadiseable action. But she could not forget the look of angry passion that had fleetingly taken possession of Rex's handsome face.

And now, tonight, had come the final episode, the pay-off, that irrevocably spelled doom to all her dreams and hopes. Etched in acid of bitter revelation, it had bitten deep into her pride, her love and the faith and trust that she had given to Rex Gordon. With her, there could be but one love; hers was a love that did not dissemble or qualify. And she demanded the same kind of love that she gave. But it seems that Rex's idea of love did not run counter to hers. Even now, out here under the freshness and purity of the stars, she could not erase from her mind the scene of which she had been an unwilling observer: Rex in the arms of Helene Powers, the singer. Blindly she had stumbled out of the darkened salon and made her way to the boat deck. She had been unobserved; neither Helene nor Rex had seen her.

The yacht plowed its way onward with its incongruous freight of happiness and heartbreak. Judith's eyes again sought the far spaces of sea and sky, as she inwardly fought for self-control and a solution to her problem. The finger of the palm tree had now drawn closer, and, silver-painted with moonlight could be seen a tiny

silver beach. And there were revealed other palm trees. The gentle winds stirred their fronds, and swaying in the breeze, they seemed to beckon to her to come to them, as though they would offer peace and surcease from the turmoil within her breast.

A wisp of unruly hair caught by the breeze flirted with her nose—a nose with a slight supercilious tilt, but withal, a very dainty little nose. Judith sighed as she absently fingered the runaway lock of hair beneath the ribbon that caught up her tumbled golden tresses; in the freshening breeze she was forced to fight a spirited battle with the rebellious curl, which insisted on remaining anywhere but in the proper place.

Occupied with the curl and engrossed in her own somber thoughts, Judith did not hear the footsteps that came up behind her.

Rex Gordon placed his hands upon her shoulders and turned her around. "Darling, why aren't you with the party?" he said, and attempted to draw her into his arms. And as she drew back, almost imperceptibly, he turned a surprised glance upon her face. "Is there anything wrong, my sweet?"

Standing tall in the moonlight, Rex made a figure handsome enough to stir the heart of any girl. But tonight Judith felt no answering response, no thrill at his nearness, no extra leap of her heart at his voice or the touch of his fingers. The love which once she bore him now lay heavy within her heart.

Rex was saying: "Judith, darling, what's troubling you? They have been asking for you; why don't you join the rest of the bunch. You know, Helene is going to sing—one of her famous radio songs."

At the mention of Helene Power's name, Judith shuddered slightly. An extra burst of loud music came to them as a door was opened. "Rex, I don't feel well; too much music gives me a headache. I think I'll stay out here where it's cooler. Do you mind?"

"Just as you wish, darling, but you could be a trifle more considerate of my guests." Rex could be charming when he desired, but now a slight frown of irritation creased his forehead. "After all, you know we are going to be married. And, in a sense, they are your guests, too."

"Yes, I know, Rex . . . But—" Judith's hand was trembling; she sought her brow.

Rex pushed her away gently, at arm's length, and gazed searchingly into her face. He placed his hand under her chin and looked steadily into her eyes, and what he saw there was confirmation of what he had only before sensed vaguely but now was made starkly apparent. He had noticed a slight change lately in Judith's attitude toward him. A muscle in his handsome, lean jaw twitched slightly, as though he were holding in control an anger that could be aroused quickly.

"Judith, darling, what is the matter?" His voice was quiet but restrained. Again he attempted to draw her into his arms, but this time she drew back with a suddenness that startled him into taking a backward step.

Judith backed into the rail. There was something closely akin to horror in her voice. "Rex . . . Under your arm . . . Why are you wearing a gun? I felt it." Her voice had sunk to a whisper, and her hand sought her mouth to suppress a scream. Incredible surprise showed on her face. "Rex, why are you wearing a gun?" Her voice rose as she repeated the question.

Anger, held in leash but now threatening to break in passionate fury, passed over his face. This gave

way to a look of fear.

Rex stepped forward and grasped Judith roughly by the wrist. "Quiet, you little fool—do you want the whole boat to hear you?" His fingers crushed into her wrist; and the mask of civilized veneer that he had been wearing slipped entirely from Rex Gordon's face and revealed the ruthless, potential killer that lay beneath.

Quietly, but unobtrusively, another figure that had been standing, unseen, not far away, detached itself from the rail and sauntered toward them. For a split second the tense tableau held; then Rex dropped Judith's hand and turned to the intruder, whose voice, suave and cool, said:

"Pardon me—may I have a light?" He laughed lightly. "You know, this breeze is a little rough on matches."

Rex said, "Oh, so it's you, Markham." He spoke brusquely and plainly with resentment at the intrusion. He placed his hand into his pocket and brought forth a large, ornate silver lighter and thrust it at Markham, who leaned forward to receive the proffered light.

In the shadow of his lowered eyes, Markham vouchsafed Judith a keen, appraising glance. Then he bent his sharp, inquisitive eyes on the lighter in Rex's hand.

It was then that Rex Gordon did an inexplicable thing. He quickly withdrew the lighter and dropped it into his pocket; from another pocket he produced a duplicate lighter and offered it to Markham. Rex attempted a strained smile to cover his action, but his face betrayed confusion. "Sorry, I forgot. No fluid. Try this one."

Markham accepted the light and drew smoke gratefully into his lungs, but he offered no comment on Rex's strange action. The breeze caught the smoke from Markham's lips and wafted it toward the distant, palm-fringed island, which was now steadily drawing nearer, the inviting little beach shimmering in the moonlight. The course of the "Zephyr" would bring the island off their port bow.

Markham said, "Beautiful out there, isn't it, Miss Grant." He gravely contemplated the glowing tip of his cigarette. "There is much beauty in the world, and much happiness, if we know where to look to find it." He smiled ruefully—"But most of us look in the wrong direction."

Judith smiled, but did not reply. The glow of Markham's cigarette added another star to the night.

Barely restraining his anger Rex stood stiffly, holding the still burning lighter in his hand. For an awkward moment no one spoke, making them more acutely aware of the music from within and the party that was still in progress.

Abruptly Rex doused the lighter and dropped it into his pocket. "I think Miss Grant wants to be alone, Markham," he said, pointedly. "Shall we join the party? Miss Grant will join us later."

Rex nodded shortly to Judith, and grasping Markham firmly by the arm led him toward a companionway, from whence came another burst of music and hilarity.

Alone with her thoughts, Judith's gaze again sought the island, which

all unconsciously she had begun to think of as a friend. The palm trees beckoned so friendly in the breeze, and the little beach glistened so invitingly in the moonlight. Appreciably nearer, the island was fast decreasing the distance that lay between it and the "Zephyr"; soon it would fall swiftly astern.

So close were they now, Judith almost imagined she could smell the lush dampness of the tropical foliage. Oh, what a blessed relief and release from all her troubles it would be, she thought, if she could be alone on a desert island, away from the world and all its cares.

Rex had become a stranger to her. What manner of man was he? And what was the sinister meaning of the gun she had discovered strapped to his side. And Markham? What manner of man was he? For she was certain that the slight bulge in his dinner jacket also indicated the presence of a gun. Had the world suddenly turned topsy-turvy; had the cruise that had begun with so much happiness, and was to end with marriage and a honeymoon, suddenly become a nightmare voyage with gunmen?

Judith's eyes sought the island, which was now almost directly off the port rail. The moonlight painted and etched sharply its every detail. Here was a tropical island, here was a haven, a refuge. Here, before her, in reality, actually waiting for her,

was what her whole being a moment before had been crying out for—a tropical island, where she could be alone, away from her troubles, the world and all its cares.

Judith's pulse quickened; her hands tightened on the rail. She must get off this ship—to remain longer, under the circumstances, would be intolerable. Suddenly, a plan that had been forming subconsciously in her mind, now began to take definite form. It was a daring, impulsive plan born of desperation. Why not? Why not get off this boat? Escape to that island, out there—her island, the only friendly thing she had seen in the whole Pacific Ocean.

Judith glanced about her in all directions. She was alone. Hastily she stepped out of her evening dress, rolled it in a small bundle, and fastened it about her shoulders, leaving her arms free for swimming. She kicked off her ridiculously small party shoes, climbed to the rail, and in one perfectly curved dive, flashed downward to the blue, moon-drenched waters below. Quite some distance from the "Zephyr" she broke surface, swimming strongly.

So little time had elapsed between the conception of the thought and the execution of the plan, Judith gave no thought about the foolhardiness of her action. For all she knew, there might be sharks. The island may be uninhabited; or worse, occupied by

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