

THE HILDEBRAND RARITY

By Ian Fleming

The sting-ray was about six feet from wing-tip to wing-tip, and perhaps ten feet long from the blunt wedge of its nose to the end of its deadly tail. It was dark grey with that violet tinge that is so often a danger signal in the underwater world. When it rose up from the pale golden sand and swam a little distance it was as if a black towel was being waved through the water.

James Bond, his hands along his flanks and swimming with only a soft trudge of his fins, followed the black shadow across the wide palm-fringed lagoon, waiting for a shot. He rarely killed fish except to eat, but there were exceptions - big moray eels and all the members of the scorpion-fish family. Now he proposed to kill the sting-ray because it looked so extraordinarily evil.

It was ten o'clock in the morning of a day in April, and the lagoon, Belle Anse near the southernmost tip of Mahe, the largest island in the Seychelles group, was glassy calm. The north-west monsoon had blown itself out months before and it would be May before the south-east monsoon brought refreshment. Now the temperature was eighty in the shade and the humidity ninety, and in the enclosed waters of the lagoon the water was near blood heat. Even the fish seemed to be sluggish. A ten-pound green parrot-fish, nibbling algae from a lump of coral, paused only to roll its eyes as Bond passed overhead, and then went back to its meal. A school of fat grey chub, swimming busily, broke courteously in half to let Bond's shadow by, and then joined up and continued on their opposite course. A chorus line of six small squids, normally as shy as birds, did not even bother to change their camouflage at his passage.

Bond trudged lazily on, keeping the sting-ray just in sight. Soon it would get tired or else be reassured when Bond, the big fish on the surface, did not attack. Then it would settle on to a patch of flat sand, change its camouflage down to the palest, almost translucent grey, and, with soft undulations of its wing-tips, bury itself in the sand.

The reef was coming nearer and now there were outcrops of coral niggerheads and meadows of sea-grass. It was like arriving in a town from open country. Everywhere the jewelled reef fish twinkled and glowed and the giant anemones of the Indian Ocean burned like flames in the shadows. Colonies of spined sea-eggs made sepia splashes as if someone had thrown ink against the rock, and the brilliant blue and yellow feelers of langoustes quested and waved from their crevices like small dragons. Now and then, among the seaweed on the brilliant floor, there was the speckled glitter of a cowrie bigger than a golf ball - the leopard cowrie - and once Bond saw the beautiful splayed fingers of a Venus's harp. But all these things were now commonplace to him and he drove steadily on, interested in the reef only as cover through which he could get to seaward of the ray and then pursue it back towards the shore. The tactic worked, and soon the black shadow with its pursuing brown torpedo were moving back across the great blue mirror. In about twelve feet of water the ray stopped for the hundredth time. Bond stopped also, treading water softly. Cautiously he lifted his head and emptied water out of his goggles. By the time he looked again the ray had disappeared.

Bond had a Champion harpoon-gun with double rubbers. The harpoon was tipped with a needle-sharp trident - a short-range weapon, but the best for reef work. Bond pushed up the safe and moved slowly forward, his fins pulsing softly just below the surface so as to make no sound. He looked around him, trying to pierce the misty horizons of the great hail of the lagoon. He was looking for any big lurking shape. It would not do to have a shark or a large barracuda as witness of the kill. Fish sometimes scream when they are hurt, and even when they do not the turbulence and blood caused by a sharp struggle bring the scavengers. But there was not a living thing in sight and the sand stretched away into the smoky wings like the bare boards of a stage. Now Bond could see the faint outline on the bottom. He swam directly over it and lay motionless on the surface looking down. There was a tiny movement in the sand. Two minute fountains of sand were dancing above the nostril-like holes of the spiracles. Behind the holes was the slight swelling of the thing's body. That was the target. An inch behind the holes. Bond estimated the possible upward lash of the tail and slowly reached his gun down and pulled the trigger.

Below him the sand erupted and for an anxious moment Bond could see nothing. Then the harpoon line

came taut and the ray showed, pulling away from him while its tail, in reflex aggression, lashed again and again over the body. At the base of the tail Bond could see the jagged poison-spines standing up from the trunk. These were the spines that were supposed to have killed Ulysses, that Pliny said would destroy a tree. In the Indian Ocean, where the sea poisons are at their most virulent, one scratch from the ray's sting would mean certain death. Cautiously, keeping the ray on a taut line, Bond trudged after the furiously wrestling fish. He swam to one side to keep the line away from the lashing tail which could easily sever it. This tail was the old slave-drivers' whip of the Indian Ocean. Today it is illegal even to possess one in the Seychelles, but they are handed down in the families for use on faithless wives, and if the word goes round that this or that woman a eu la crapule, the Provençal name for the sting ray, it is as good as saying that that woman will not be about again for at least a week. Now the lashes of the tail were getting weaker and Bond swam round and ahead of the ray, pulling it after him towards the shore. In the shallows the ray went limp and Bond pulled it out of the water and well up on the beach. But he still kept away from it. It was as well he did so. Suddenly, at some move from Bond and perhaps in the hope of catching its enemy unawares, the giant ray leapt clean into the air. Bond sprang aside and the ray fell on its back and lay with its white underbelly to the sun and the great ugly sickle of the mouth sucking and panting.

Bond stood and looked at the sting-ray and wondered what to do next.

A short, fat white man in khaki, shirt and trousers came out from under the palm trees and walked towards Bond through the scattering of sea-grape and sun-dried wrack above highwater mark. When he was near enough he called out in a laughing voice: "The Old Man and the Sea! Who caught who?"

Bond turned. "It would be the only man on the island who doesn't carry a machete. Fidele, be a good chap and call one of your men. This animal won't die, and he's got my spear stuck in him."

Fidele Barbey, the youngest of the innumerable Barbeyes who own nearly everything in the Seychelles, came up and stood looking down at the ray. "That's a good one. Lucky you hit the right spot or he'd have towed you over the reef and you'd have had to let go your gun. They take the hell of a time to die. But come on. I've got to get you back to Victoria. Something's come up. Something good. I'll send one of my men for the gun. Do you want the tail?"

Bond smiled. "I haven't got a wife. But what about some raie au beurre noir tonight?"

"Not tonight, my friend. Come. Where are your clothes?"

On their way down the coast road in the station wagon Fidele said: "Ever hear of an American called Milton Krest? Well, apparently he owns the Krest hotels and a thing called the Krest Foundation. One thing I can tell you for sure. He owns the finest damned yacht in the Indian Ocean. Put in yesterday. The Wawekrest. Nearly two hundred tons. Hundred feet long. Everything in her from a beautiful wife down to a big transistor gramophone on gimbals so the waves won't jerk the needle. Wall-to-wall carpeting an inch deep. Air-conditioned throughout. The only dry cigarettes this side of the African continent, and the best after-breakfast bottle of champagne, since the last time I saw Paris." Fidele Barbey laughed delightedly. "My friend, that is one hell of a bloody fine ship, and if Mr Krest is a grand slam redoubled in bastards, who the hell cares?"

"Who cares anyway? What's it got to do with you - or me for the matter of that?"

"Just this, my friend. We are going to spend a few days sailing with Mr Krest - and Mrs Krest, the beautiful Mrs Krest. I have agreed to take the ship to Chagrin - the island I have spoken to you about. It is bloody miles from here - off the African Banks, and my family have never found any use for it except for collecting boobies' eggs. It's only about three feet above sea-level. I haven't been to the damned place for five years. Any way, this man Krest wants to go there. He's collecting marine specimens, something to do with his Foundation, and there's some blasted little fish that's supposed to exist only around Chagrin Island. At least Krest says the only specimen in the world came from there."

"Sounds rather fun. Where do I come in?"

"I knew you were bored and that you'd got a week before you sail, so I said that you were the local under water ace and that you'd soon find the fish if it was there, and anyway that I wouldn't go without you. Mr Krest was willing. And that's that. I knew, you'd be fooling around somewhere down the coast, so I just drove along until one of the fishermen told me there was a crazy white man trying to commit

suicide alone at Belle Anse and I knew that would be you.”

Bond laughed. “Extraordinary the way these island people are afraid of the sea. You’d think they’d have got on terms with it by now. Damned few of the Seychellois can even swim.”

“Roman Catholic Church. Doesn’t like them taking their clothes off. Bloody nonsense, but there it is. And as for being afraid, don’t forget you’ve only been here for a month. Shark, barracuda - you just haven’t met a hungry one. And stone-fish. Ever seen a man that’s stepped on a stone-fish? His body bends backwards like a bow with the pain. Sometimes it’s so frightful his eyes literally fall out of their sockets. They very seldom live.”

Bond said unsympathetically: “They ought to wear shoes or bind their feet up when they go on the reef. They’ve got these fish in the Pacific and the giant clam into the bargain. It’s damned silly. Everybody moans about how poor they are here, although the sea’s absolutely paved with fish. And there are fifty varieties of cowrie under those rocks. They could make another good living selling those round the world.”

Fidele Barbey laughed boisterously. “Bond for Governor! That’s the ticket. Next meeting of LegCo I’ll put the idea up. You’re just the man for the job far-sighted, full of ideas, plenty of drive. Cowries! That’s splendid. They’ll balance the budget for the first time since the patchouli boom after the War. ‘We sell sea-shells from the Seychelles.’ That’ll be our slogan. I’ll see you get the credit. You’ll be Sir James in no time.”

“Make more money that way than trying to grow vanilla at a loss.” They continued to wrangle with light-hearted violence until the palm groves gave way to the giant sangdragon trees on the outskirts of the ramshackle capital of Mahe.

It had been nearly a month before when M had told Bond he was sending him to the Seychelles. Admiralty are having trouble with their new fleet base in the Maldives. Communists creeping in from Ceylon. Strikes, sabotage - the usual picture. May have to cut their losses and fall back on the Seychelles. A thousand miles farther south, but at least they look pretty secure. But they don’t want to be caught again. Colonial Office say it’s safe as houses. All the same I’ve agreed to send someone to give an independent view. When Makarios was locked up there a few years ago there were quite a few Security scares. Japanese fishing-boats hanging about, one or two refugee crooks from England, strong ties with France. Just go and have a good look.” M glanced out of the window at the driving March sleet. “Don’t get sunstroke.”

Bond’s report, which concluded that the only conceivable security hazard in the Seychelles lay in the beauty and ready availability of the Seychelloises, had been finished a week before and then he had nothing to do but wait for the ss Kampala to take him to Mombasa. He was thoroughly sick of the heat and the drooping palm trees and the plaintive cry of the terns and the interminable conversations about copra. The prospect of a change delighted him.

Bond was spending his last week in the Barbey house, and after calling there to pick up their bags, they drove out to the end of Long Pier and left the car in the Customs shed. The gleaming white yacht lay half a mile out in the roadstead. They took a pirogue with an outboard motor across the glassy bay and through the opening in the reef. The Wawekrest was not beautiful - the breadth of beam and cluttered superstructure stunted her lines - but Bond could see at once that she was a real ship, built to cruise the world and not just the Florida Keys. She seemed deserted, but as they came alongside two smart-looking sailors in white shorts and singlets appeared and stood by the ladder with boat-hooks ready to fend the shabby pirogue off the yacht’s gleaming paint. They took the two bags and one of them slid back an aluminium hatch and gestured for them to go down. A breath of what seemed to Bond to be almost freezing air struck him as he went through and down a few steps into the lounge.

The lounge was empty. It was not a cabin. It was a room of solid richness and comfort with nothing to associate it with the interior of a ship. The windows behind the half-closed venetian blinds were full size, as were the deep armchairs round the low central table. The carpet was the deepest pile in pale blue. The walls were panelled in a silvery wood and the ceiling was off-white. There was a desk with the usual writing-materials and a telephone. Next to the big gramophone was a sideboard laden with drinks. Above the sideboard was what looked like an extremely good Renoir - the head and shoulders of a

pretty dark-haired girl in a black and white striped blouse. The impression of a luxurious living-room in a town house was completed by a large bowl of white and blue hyacinths on the central table and by the tidy range of magazines to one side of the desk.

“What did I tell you, James?”

Bond shook his head admiringly. “This is certainly the way to treat the sea - as if it damned well didn’t exist.” He breathed in deeply. “What a relief to get a mouthful of fresh air. I’d almost forgotten what it tastes like.”

“It’s the stuff outside that’s fresh, feller. This is canned.” Mr Milton Krest had come quietly into the room and was standing looking at them. He was a tough, leathery man in his early fifties. He looked hard and fit, and the faded blue jeans, military-cut shirt and wide leather belt suggested that he made a fetish of doing so - looking tough. The pale brown eyes in the weather-beaten face were slightly hooded and their gaze was sleepy and contemptuous. The mouth had a downward twist that might be humorous or disdainful - probably the latter - and the words he had tossed into the room, innocuous in themselves except for the patronizing ‘feller’ had been tossed like small coin to a couple of coolies. To Bond the oddest thing about Mr Krest was his voice. It was a soft, most attractive lisp through the teeth. It was exactly the voice of the late Humphrey Bogart. Bond ran his eyes down the man from the sparse close-cropped black and grey hair, like iron filings sprinkled over the bullet head, to the tattooed eagle above a fouled anchor on the right forearm, and then down to the naked leathery feet that stood nautically square on the carpet. He thought: this man likes to be thought a Hemingway hero. I’m not going to get on with him.

Mr Krest came across the carpet and held out his hand. “You Bond? Glad to have you aboard, sir.”

Bond was expecting the bone-crushing grip and parried it with stiffened muscles.

“Free-diving or aqualung?”

“Free, and I don’t go deep. It’s only a hobby.”

“Whadya do the rest of the time?”

“Civil Servant.”

Mr Krest gave a short barking laugh. “Civility and Servitude. You English make the best goddam butlers and valets in the world. Civil Servant, you say? I reckon we’re likely to get along fine. Civil Servants are just what I like to have around me.”

The click of the deck hatch sliding back saved Bond’s temper. Mr Krest was swept from his mind as a naked sunburned girl came down the steps into the saloon. No, she wasn’t quite naked after all, but the pale brown satin scraps of bikini were designed to make one think she was.

“Lo, treasure. Where have you been hiding? Long time no see. Meet Mr Barbey and Mr Bond, the fellers who are coming along.” Mr Krest raised a hand in the direction of the girl. “Fellers, this is Mrs Krest. The fifth Mrs Krest. And just in case anybody should get any ideas, she loves Mr Krest. Don’t you, treasure?”

“Oh don’t be silly, Milt, you know I do.” Mrs Krest smiled prettily. “How do you do, Mr Barbey. And Mr Bond. It’s nice to have you with us. What about a drink?”

“Now just a minute, treas. Suppose you let me fix things aboard my own ship, hein?” Mr Krest’s voice was soft and pleasant.

The woman blushed. “Oh yes, Milt, of course.”

“Okay then, just so we know who’s skipper aboard the good ship Wawekrest.” The amused smile embraced them all. “Now then, Mr Barbey. What’s your first name, by the way? Fidele, eh? That’s quite a name. Old Faithful,” Mr Krest chuckled bonhomously. “Well now, Fido, how’s about you and me go upon the bridge and get this little old skiff moving, hein? Mebbe you better take her out into the open sea and then you can set a course and hand over to Fritz. I’m the captain. He’s the mate, and there are two for the engine-room and pantry. All three Germans. Only darned sailors left in Europe. And Mr Bond. First name? James, eh? Well, Jim, what say you practise a bit of that civility and servitude on Mrs Krest. Call her Liz, by the way. Help her fix the canapés and so on for drinks before lunch. She was once a Limey too. You can swap yarns about Piccadilly Circus and the Dooks you both know. Okay? Move, Fido.” He sprang boyishly up the steps. “Let’s get the hell outa here.”

When the hatch closed, Bond let out a deep breath. Mrs Krest said apologetically: "Please don't mind his jokes. It's just his sense of humour. And he's a bit contrary. He likes to see if he can rile people. It's very naughty of him. But it's really all in fun."

Bond smiled reassuringly. How often did she have to make this speech to people, try and calm the tempers of the people Mr Krest had practised his 'sense of humour' on? He said: "I expect your husband needs a bit of knowing. Does he go on the same way back in America?"

She said without bitterness: "Only with me. He loves Americans. It's when he's abroad. You see, his father was a German, a Prussian really. He's got that silly German thing of thinking Europeans and so on are decadent, that they aren't any good any more. It's no use arguing with him. It's just a thing he's got."

So that was it! The old Hun again. Always at your feet or at your throat. Sense of humour indeed! And what must this woman have to put up with, this beautiful girl he had got hold of to be his slave - his English slave? Bond said: "How long have you been married?"

"Two years. I was working as a receptionist in one of his hotels. He owns the Krest Group, you know. It was wonderful. Like a fairy story. I still have to pinch my self sometimes to make sure I'm not dreaming. This, for instance," she waved a hand at the luxurious room, "and he's terribly good to me. Always giving me presents. He's a very important man in America, you know. It's fun being treated like royalty wherever you go."

"It must be. He likes that sort of thing, I suppose?"

"Oh yes." There was resignation in the laugh. "There's a lot of the sultan in him. He gets quite impatient if he doesn't get proper service. He says that when one's worked very hard to get to the top of the tree one has a right to the best fruit that grows there." Mrs Krest found she was talking too freely. She said quickly: "But really, what am I saying? Anyone would think we had known each other for years." She smiled shyly. "I suppose it's meeting someone from England. But I really must go and get some more clothes on. I was sunbathing on deck." There came a deep rumble from below-deck amidships. "There. We're off. Why don't you watch us leave harbour from the afterdeck, and I'll come and join you in a minute. There's so much I want to hear about London. This way." She moved past him and slid open a door. "As a matter of fact, if you're sensible, you'll stake a claim to this for the nights. There are plenty of cushions, and the cabins are apt to get a bit stuffy in spite of the air-conditioning."

Bond thanked her, and walked out and shut the door behind him. It was a big well-deck with hemp flooring and a cream-coloured semicircular foam rubber settee in the stern. Rattan chairs were scattered about and there was a serving-bar in one corner. It crossed Bond's mind that Mr Krest might be a heavy drinker. Was it his imagination, or was Mrs Krest terrified of him? There was something painfully slavish in her attitude towards him. No doubt she had to pay heavily for her fairy story. Bond watched the green flanks of Mahe slowly slip away astern. He guessed that their speed was about ten knots. They would soon be at North Point and heading for the open sea. Bond listened to the glutinous bubble of the exhaust and idly thought about the beautiful Mrs Elizabeth Krest.

She could have been a model - probably had been before she became a hotel receptionist - that respectable female calling that yet has a whiff of the high demi-monde about it - and she still moved her beautiful body with the unselfconsciousness of someone who is used to going about with nothing, or practically nothing, on. But there was none of the chill of the model about her - it was a warm body and a friendly, confiding face. She might be thirty, certainly not more, and her prettiness, for it was not more than that, was still immature. Her best feature was the ash-blond hair that hung heavily to the base of her neck, but she seemed pleasantly lacking in vanity about it. She didn't toss it about or fiddle with it, and it occurred to Bond that she didn't in fact show any signs of coquetry. She had stood quietly, almost docilely, with her large, dear blue eyes fixed almost the whole time on her husband. There was no lipstick on her mouth and no lacquer on her fingernails or toenails, and her eyebrows were natural. Did Mr Krest perhaps order that it should be so - that she should be a Germanic child of nature? Probably. Bond shrugged his shoulders. They were certainly a curiously assorted couple - the middle-aged Hemingway with the Bogart voice and the pretty, artless girl. And there was tension in the air - in the way she had cringed as he brought her to heel when she had offered them drinks, in the forced maleness of the man. Bond toyed idly with the notion that the man was impotent and that all the tough, rude act was nothing

more than exaggerated virility-play. It certainly wasn't going to be easy to live with for four or five days. Bond watched the beautiful Silhouette Island slip away to starboard and made a vow not to lose his temper. What was that American expression? 'Eating crow'. It would be an interesting mental exercise for him. He would eat crow for five days and not let this damnable man interfere with what should be a good trip.

"Well, feller. Taking it easy?" Mr Krest was standing on the boat-deck looking down into the well. "What have you done with that woman I live with? Left her to do all the work, I guess. Well, and why not? That's what they're for, ain't it? Care to look over the ship? Fido's doin' a spell at the wheel and I've got time on my hands." Without waiting for an answer, Mr Krest bent and lowered himself down into the well-deck, dropping the last four feet.

"Mrs Krest's putting on some clothes. Yes, I'd like to see over the ship."

Mr Krest fixed Bond with his hard, disdainful stare. "Kay. Well now, facts first. It's built by the Bronson Shipbuilding Corporation. I happen to own ninety per cent of the stock, so I got what I wanted. Designed by Rosenblatts - the top naval architects. Hundred feet long, twenty-one broad, and draws six. Two five-hundred-horsepower Superior diesels. Top speed, fourteen knots. Cruises two thousand five hundred miles at eight. Air-conditioned throughout. Carrier Corporation designed two special five-ton units. Carries enough frozen food and liquor for a month. All we need is fresh water for the baths and showers. Right? Now let's go up front and you can see the crew's quarters, and we'll work back. And one thing, Jim," Mr Krest stamped on the deck. "This is the floor, see? And the head's the can. And if I want someone to stop doing whatever they're doing I don't shout 'belay' I shout 'hold it'. Get me, Jim?"

Bond nodded amiably. "I've got no objection. She's your ship."

"It's my ship," corrected Mr Krest. "That's another bit of damned nonsense, making a hunk of steel and wood a female. Anyway, let's go. You don't need to mind your head. Everything's a six-foot-two clearance."

Bond followed Mr Krest down the narrow passage that ran the length of the ship, and for half an hour made appropriate comments on what was certainly the finest and most luxuriously designed yacht he had ever seen. In every detail the margin was for extra comfort. Even the crew's bath and shower was full size, and the stainless steel galley, or kitchen as Mr Krest called it, was as big as the Krest stateroom. Mr Krest opened the door of the latter without knocking. Liz Krest was at the dressing-table. "Why, treasure," said Mr Krest in his soft voice, "I reckoned you'd be out there fixing the drink tray. You've sure been one heck of a time dressing up. Puttin' on a little extra Ritz for Jim, eh?"

"I'm sorry, Milt. I was just coming. A zip got stuck." The girl hurriedly picked up a compact and made for the door. She gave them both a nervous half-smile and went out.

"Vermont birch panelling, Corning glass lamps, Mexican tuft rugs. That sailing-ship picture's a genuine Montague Dawson, by the way..." Mr Krest's catalogue ran smoothly on. But Bond was looking at some thing that hung down almost out of sight by the bedside table on what was obviously Mr Krest's side of the huge double bed. It was a thin whip about three feet long with a leather-thonged handle. It was the tail of a sting-ray.

Casually Bond walked over to the side of the bed and picked it up. He ran a finger down its spiny gristle. It hurt his finger even to do that. He said: "Where did you pick that up? I was hunting one of these animals this morning."

"Bahrein. The Arabs use them on their wives." Mr Krest chuckled easily. "Haven't had to use more than one stroke at a time on Liz so far. Wonderful results. We call it my 'Corrector'".

Bond put the thing back. He looked hard at Mr Krest and said: "Is that so? In the Seychelles, where the creoles are pretty tough, it's illegal even to own one of those, let alone use it."

Mr Krest moved towards the door. He said indifferently: "Feller, this ship happens to be United States territory. Let's go get ourselves something to drink."

Mr Krest drank three double bullshots - vodka in iced consommé - before luncheon, and beer with the meal. The pale eyes darkened a little and acquired a watery glitter, but the sibilant voice remained soft and unemphatic as, with a complete monopoly of the conversation, he explained the object of the voyage. "Ya see, fellers, it's like this. In the States we have this Foundation system for the lucky guys that

got plenty dough and don't happen to want to pay it into Uncle Sam's Treasury. You make a Foundation - like this one, the Krest Foundation - for charitable purposes - charitable to anyone, to kids, sick folk, the cause of science - you just give the money away to anyone or anything except yourself or your dependants and you escape tax on it. So I put a matter of ten million dollars into the Krest Foundation, and since I happen to like yachting and seeing the world I built this yacht with two million of the money and told the Smithsonian - that's our big natural history institution that I would go to any part of the world and collect specimens for them. So that makes me a scientific expedition, see? For three months of every year I have a fine holiday that costs me just sweet Fatty Arbuckle!" Mr Krest looked to his guests for applause. "Get me?"

Fidele Barbey shook his head doubtfully. "That sounds fine, Mr Krest. But these rare specimens. They are easy to find? The Smithsonian it wants a giant panda, a sea-shell. You can get hold of these things where they have failed?"

Mr Krest slowly shook his head. He said sorrowfully: "Feller, you sure were born yesterday. Money, that's all it takes. You want a panda? You buy it from some goddam zoo that can't afford central heating for its reptile house or wants to build a new block for its tigers or something. The sea-shell? You find a man that's got one and you offer him so much goddam money that even if he cries for a week he sells it to you. Sometimes you have a little trouble with Governments. Some goddam animal is protected or something. All right. Give you an example. I arrive at your island yesterday. I want a black parrot from Praslin Island. I want a giant tortoise from Aldabra. I want the complete range of your local cowries and I want this fish we're after. The first two are protected by law. Last evening I pay a call on your Governor after making certain inquiries in the town. Excellency, I says, I understand you want to build a public swimming-pool to teach the local kids to swim. Okay. The Krest Foundation will put up money. How much? Five thousand, ten thousand? Okay, so it's ten thousand. Here's my cheque. And I write it out there and then. Just one little thing, Excellency, I says, holding on to the cheque. It happens I want a specimen of this black parrot you have here and one of these Aldabra tortoises. I understand they're protected by law. Mind if I take one of each back to America for the Smithsonian? Well, there's a bit of a palaver, but seeing it's the Smithsonian and seeing I've still got hold of the cheque, in the end we shake hands on the deal and everyone's happy. Right? Well, on the way back I stop in the town to arrange with your nice Mr Abendana, the merchant feller, to have the parrot and tortoise collected and held for me, and I get talking about the cowries. Well, it so happens that this Mr Abendana has been collecting the dam' things since he was a child. He shows them to me. Beautifully kept - each one in its bit of cotton wool. Fine condition and several of those Isabella and Mappa ones I was asked particularly to watch out for. Sorry, he couldn't think of selling. They meant so much to him and so on. Crap! I just look at Mr Abendana and I say, how much? No no. He couldn't think of it. Crap again! I take out my chequebook and write a cheque for five thousand dollars and push it under his nose. He looks at it. Five thousand dollars! He can't stand it. He folds the cheque and puts it in his pocket and then the dam' sissy breaks down and weeps! Would you believe it?" Mr Krest opened his palms in disbelief. "Over a few goddam sea-shells. So I just tell him to take it easy, and I pick up the trays of sea-shells and get the hell out of there before the crazy so-and-so shoots himself from remorse."

Mr Krest sat back, well pleased with himself. "Well, what'd you say to that, fellers? Twenty-four hours in the island and I've already knocked off three-quarters of my list. Pretty smart, eh, Jim?"

Bond said: "You'll probably get a medal when you get home. What about this fish?"

Mr Krest got up from the table and rummaged in a drawer of his desk. He brought back a typewritten sheet. "Here you are." He read out: "Hildebrand Rarity. Caught by Professor Hildebrand of the University of the Witwatersrand in a net off Chagrin Island in the Seychelles group, April 1925'." Mr Krest looked up. "And then there's a lot of scientific crap. I got them to put it into plain English, and here's the translation." He turned back to the paper. "This appears to be a unique member of the squirrel-fish family. The only specimen known, named the "Hildebrand Rarity" after its discoverer, is six inches long. The colour is a bright pink with black transverse stripes. The anal, ventral and dorsal fins are pink. The tail fin is black. Eyes, large and dark blue. If found, care should be taken in handling this fish because all fins are even more sharply spiked than is usual with the rest of this family. Professor

Hildebrand records that he found the specimen in three feet of water on the edge of the south-western reef." Mr Krest threw the paper down on the table. "Well, there you are, fellers. We're travelling about a thousand miles at a cost of several thousand dollars to try and find a goddam six-inch fish. And two years ago the Revenue people had the gall to suggest that my Foundation was a phoney!"

Liz Krest broke in eagerly: "But that's just it, Milt, isn't it? It's really rather important to bring back plenty of specimens and things this time. Weren't those horrible tax people talking about disallowing the yacht and the expenses and so on for the last five years if we didn't show an outstanding scientific achievement? Wasn't that the way they put it?"

"Treasure," Mr Krest's voice was soft as velvet. "Just supposin' you keep that flippin' trap shut about my personal affairs. Yes?" The voice was amiable, nonchalant. "You know what you just done, treas? You just earned yourself a little meeting with the Corrector this evening. That's what you've gone and done."

The girl's hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes were wide. She said in a whisper: "Oh no, Milt. Oh no, please."

On the second day out, at dawn, they came up with Chagrin Island. It was first picked up by the radar - a small bump in the dead level line on the scanner and then a minute blur on the great curved horizon grew with infinite slowness into half a mile of green fringed with white. It was extraordinary to come upon land after two days in which the yacht had seemed to be the only moving, the only living thing in an empty world. Bond had never seen or even clearly imagined the doldrums before. Now he realized what a terrible hazard they must have been in the days of sail - the sea of glass under a brazen sun, the foul, heavy air, the trail of small clouds along the rim of the world that never came closer, never brought wind or blessed rain. How must centuries of mariners have blessed this tiny dot in the Indian Ocean as they bent to the oars that moved the heavy ship perhaps a mile a day! Bond stood in the bows and watched the flying-fish squirt from beneath the hull as the blue-black of the sea slowly mottled into the brown and white and green of deep shoal. How wonderful that he would soon be walking and swimming again instead of just sitting and lying down. How wonderful to have a few hours' solitude - a few hours away from Mr Milton Krest!

They anchored outside the reef in ten fathoms and Fidele Barbey took them through the opening in the speedboat. In every detail Chagrin was the prototype coral island. It was about twenty acres of sand and dead coral and low scrub surrounded, after fifty yards of shallow lagoon, by a necklace of reef on which the quiet, long swell broke with a soft hiss. Clouds of birds rose when they landed - terns, boobies, men-of-war, frigates - but quickly settled again. There was a strong ammoniac smell of guano, and the scrub was white with it. The only other living things were the land crabs that scuttled and scraped among the liane sans fin and the fiddler-crabs that lived in the sand.

The glare from the white sand was dazzling and there was no shade. Mr Krest ordered a tent to be erected and sat in it smoking a cigar while gear of various kinds was ferried ashore. Mrs Krest swam and picked up sea shells while Bond and Fidele Barbey put on masks and, swimming in opposite directions, began systematically to comb the reef all the way round the island.

When you are looking for one particular species underwater - shell or fish or seaweed or coral formation - you have to keep your brain and your eyes focused for that one individual pattern. The riot of colour and movement and the endless variety of light and shadow fight your concentration all the time. Bond trudged slowly along through the wonderland with only one picture in his mind - a six-inch pink fish with black stripes and big eyes - the second such fish man had ever seen. "If you see it," Mr Krest had enjoined, "just you let out a yell and stay with it. I'll do the rest. I got a little something in the tent that's just the dandiest thing for catching fish you ever saw."

Bond paused to rest his eyes. The water was so buoyant that he could lie face downwards on the surface without moving. Idly he broke up a sea-egg with the tip of his spear and watched the horde of glittering reef-fish darting for the shreds of yellow flesh among the needle-sharp black spine. How infernal that if he did find the Rarity it would benefit only Mr Krest! Should he say nothing if he found it? Rather childish, and anyway he was under contract, so to speak. Bond moved slowly on, his eyes automatically

taking up the search again while his mind turned to considering the girl. She had spent the previous day in bed. Mr Krest had said it was a headache. Would she one day turn on him? Would she get herself a knife or a gun and one night, when he reached for that damnable whip, would she kill him? No. She was too soft, too malleable. Mr Krest had chosen well. She was the stuff of slaves. And the trappings of her 'fairytale' were too precious. Didn't she realize that a jury would certainly acquit her if the sting-ray whip was produced in court? She could have the trappings without this dreadful, damnable man. Should Bond tell her that? Don't be ridiculous! How could he put it? "Oh Liz, if you want to murder your husband, it'll be quite all right." Bond smiled inside his mask. To hell with it! Don't interfere with other people's lives. She probably likes it - masochist. But Bond knew that that was too easy an answer. This was a girl who lived in fear. Perhaps she also lived in loathing. One couldn't read much in those soft blue eyes, but the windows had opened once or twice and a flash of something like a childish hate had shown through. Had it been hate? It had probably been indigestion. Bond put the Krests out of his mind and looked up to see how far round the island he had got.

Fidele Barbey's schnorkel was only a hundred yards away. They had nearly completed the circuit.

They came up with each other and swam to the shore and lay on the hot sand. Fidele Barbey said: "Nothing on my side of the property except every fish in the world bar one. But I've had a stroke of luck. Ran into a big colony of green snail. That's the pearl shell as big is a small football. Worth quite a lot of money. I'll send one of my boats after them one of these days. Saw a blue parrot-fish that must have been a good thirty pounds. Tame as a dog, like all the fish round here. Hadn't got the heart to kill it. And if I had, there might have been trouble. Saw two or three leopard sharks cruising around over the reef. Blood in the water might have brought them through. Now I'm ready for a drink and something to eat. After that we can swap sides and have another go."

They got up and walked along the beach to the tent. Mr Krest heard their voices and came out to meet them. "No dice, eh?" He scratched angrily at an arm pit. "Goddam sandfly bit me. This is one hell of a god-awful island. Liz couldn't stand the smell. Gone back to the ship. Guess we'd better give it one more going-over and then get the hell out of here. Help yourselves to some chow and you'll find cold beer in the icepack. Here, gimme one of those masks. How do you use the dam' things? I guess I might as well take a peek at the sea's bottom while I'm about it."

They sat in the hot tent and ate the chicken salad and drank beer, and moodily watched Mr Krest poking and peering about in the shallows. Fidele Barbey said: "He's right, of course. These little islands are bloody awful places. Nothing but crabs and bird dung surrounded by too dam' much sea. It's only the poor bloody frozen Europeans that dream of coral islands. East of Suez, you won't find any sane man who gives a damn for them. My family owns about ten of them - decent-sized ones too, with small villages on them and a good income from copra and turtle. Well, you can have the whole bloody lot in exchange for a flat in Paris or London."

Bond laughed. He began: "Put an advertisement in The Times and you'd get sackloads..." when, fifty yards away, Mr Krest began to make frantic signals. Bond said: "Either the bastard's found it or he's trodden on a guitar-fish," and picked up his mask and ran down to the sea.

Mr Krest was standing up to his waist among the shallow beginnings of the reef. He jabbed his finger excitedly at the surface. Bond swam softly forward. A carpet of sea-grass ended in broken coral and an occasional niggerhead. A dozen varieties of butterfly and other reef-fish flirted among the rocks, and a small langouste quested towards Bond with its feelers. The head of a large green moray protruded from a hole, its half-open jaws showing the rows of needle teeth. Its golden eyes watched Bond carefully. Bond was amused to note that Mr Krest's hairy legs, magnified into pale tree-trunks by the glass, were not more than a foot away from the moray's jaws. He gave an encouraging poke at the moray with his spear, but the eel only snapped at the metal points and slid back out of sight. Bond stopped and floated, his eyes scanning the brilliant jungle. A red blur materialized through the far mist and came towards him. It circled closely beneath him as if showing itself off. The dark blue eyes examined him without fear. The small fish busied itself rather self-consciously with some algae on the underside of a niggerhead, made a dart at a speck of something suspended in the water, and then, as if leaving the stage after showing its paces, swam languidly off back into the mist.

Bond backed away from the moray's hole and put his feet to the ground. He took off his mask. He said to Mr Krest, who was standing gazing impatiently at him through his goggles: "Yes, that's it all right. Better move quietly away from here. He won't go away unless he's frightened. These reef-fish stick pretty well to the same pastures."

Mr Krest pulled off his mask. "Goddam, I found it!" he said reverently. "Well, goddam I did." He slowly followed Bond to the shore.

Fidele Barbey was waiting for them. Mr Krest said boisterously: "Fido, I found that goddam fish. Me - Milton Krest. Whadya know about that? After you two goddam experts had been at it all morning. I just took that mask of yours - first time I ever put one on, mark you - and I walked out and found the goddam fish in fifteen minutes flat. Whadya say to that eh, Fido?"

"That's good, Mr Krest. That's fine. Now how do we catch it?"

"Aha." Mr Krest winked slowly. "I got just the ticket for that. Got it from a chemist friend of mine. Stuff called Rotenone. Made from derris root. What the natives fish with in Brazil. Just pour it in the water, where it'll float over what you're after, and it'll get him as sure as eggs is eggs. Sort of poison. Constricts the blood vessels in their gills. Suffocates them. No effect on humans because no gills, see?" Mr Krest turned to Bond. "Here, Jim. You go on out and keep watch. See the darned fish don't vamoose. Fido and I'll bring the stuff out there" - he pointed up-current from the vital area. "I'll let go the Rotenone when you say the word. It'll drift down towards you. Right? But for lands sakes get the timing right. I've only got a five-gallon tin of this stuff. 'Kay?"

Bond said "All right," and walked slowly down and into the water. He swam lazily out to where he had stood before. Yes, everyone was still there, going about his business. The moray's pointed head was back again at the edge of its hole, the langouste again queried him. In a minute, as if it had a rendezvous with Bond, the Hildebrand Rarity appeared. This time it swam up quite close to his face. It looked through the glass at his eyes and then, as if disturbed by what it had seen there, darted out of range. It played around among the rocks for a while and then went off into a mist.

Slowly the little underwater world within Bond's vision began to take him for granted. A small octopus that had been camouflaged as a piece of coral revealed its presence and groped carefully down towards the sand. The blue and yellow langouste came a few steps out from under the rock, wondering about him. Some, very small fish like minnows nibbled at his legs and toes, tickling. Bond broke a sea-egg for them and they darted to the better meal. Bond lifted his head. Mr Krest, holding the flat can, was twenty yards away to Bond's right. He would soon begin pouring, when Bond gave the sign, so that the liquid would get a good wide spread over the surface.

"Okay?" called Mr Krest.

Bond shook his head. "I'll raise my thumb when he's back here. Then you'll have to pour fast."

"Okay, Jim. You're at the bomb-sight."

Bond put his head down. There was the little community, everyone busied with his affairs. Soon, to get one fish that someone vaguely wanted in a museum five thousand miles away, a hundred, perhaps a thousand small people were going to die. When Bond gave the signal, the shadow of death would come down on the stream. How long would the poison last? How far would it travel on down the reef? Perhaps it would not be thousands but tens of thousands that would die.

A small trunk-fish appeared, its tiny fins whirring like propellers. A rock beauty, gorgeous in gold and red and black, pecked at the sand, and a pair of the inevitable black and yellow striped sergeant-majors materialized from nowhere, attracted by the scent of the broken sea-egg.

Inside the reef, who was the predator in the world of small fishes? Who did they fear? Small barracuda? An occasional bill-fish? Now, a big, a fully grown predator, a man called Krest, was standing in the wings, waiting. And this one wasn't even hungry. He was just going to kill - almost for fun.

Two brown legs appeared in Bond's vision. He looked up. It was Fidele Barbey with a big creel strapped to his chest, and long-handled landing-net.

Bond lifted his mask. "I feel like the bomb-aimer at Nagasaki."

"Fish are cold-blooded. They don't feel anything."

"How do you know? I've heard them scream when they're hurt."

Barbey said indifferently: "They won't be able to scream with this stuff. It strangles them. What's eating you? They're only fish."

"I know, I know." Fidele Barbey had spent his life killing animals and fish. While he, Bond, had some times not hesitated to kill men. What was he fussing about? He hadn't minded killing the sting-ray. Yes, but that was an enemy fish. These down here were friendly people. People? The pathetic fallacy!

"Hey!" came the voice of Mr Krest. "What's goin on over there? This ain't no time for chewing the fat. Get that head down, Jim."

Bond pulled down his mask and lay again on the surface. At once he saw the beautiful red shadow coming out of the far mists. The fish swam fast up to him as if it now took him for granted. It lay below him, looking up. Bond said into his mask: "Get away from here, damn you." He gave a sharp jab at the fish with his harpoon. The fish fled back into the mist. Bond lifted his head and angrily raised his thumb. It was a ridiculous and petty act of sabotage of which he was already ashamed. The dark brown oily liquid was pouring out on to the surface of the lagoon. There was time to stop Mr Krest before it was all gone - time to give him another chance at the Hildebrand Rarity. Bond stood and watched until the last drop was tilted out. To hell with Mr Krest!

Now the stuff was creeping slowly down on the current - a shiny, spreading stain which reflected the blue sky with a metallic glint. Mr Krest, the giant reaper, was wading down with it. "Get set, fellers," he called cheerfully. "It's right up with you now."

Bond put his head back under the surface. Every thing was as before in the little community. And then, with stupefying suddenness, everyone went mad. It was as if they had all been seized with St Vitus's dance. Several fish looped the loop crazily and then fell like heavy leaves to the sand. The moray eel came slowly out of the hole in the coral, its jaws wide. It stood carefully upright on its tail and gently toppled side ways. The small langouste gave three kicks of its tail and turned over on its back, and the octopus let go its hold of the coral and drifted to the bottom upside down. And then into the arena drifted the corpses from up-stream - whitebellied fish, shrimps, worms, hermit crabs, spotted and green morays, langoustes of all sizes. As if blown by some light breeze of death the clumsy bodies, their colours already fading, swept slowly past. A five-pound bill-fish struggled by with snapping beak, fighting death. Down-reef there were splashes on the surface as still bigger fish tried to make for safety. One by one, before Bond's eyes, the sea-urchins dropped off the rocks to make black ink-blot on the sand.

Bond felt a touch on his shoulder. Mr Krest's eyes were bloodshot with the sun and glare. He had put white sunburn paste on his lips. He shouted impatiently at Bond's mask, "Where in hell's our goddam fish?"

Bond lifted his mask. "Looks as if it managed to get away just before the stuff came down. I'm still watching for it."

He didn't wait to hear Mr Krest's reply but got his head quickly under water again. Still more carnage, still more dead bodies. But surely the stuff had passed by now. Surely the area was safe just in case the fish, his fish because he had saved it, came back again! He stiffened. In the far mists there was a pink flash. It had gone. Now it was back again. Idly the Hildebrand Rarity swam towards him through the maze of channels between the broken outposts of the reef.

Not caring about Mr Krest, Bond raised his free hand out of the water and brought it down with a sharp slap. Still the fish came. Bond shifted the safe on his harpoon-gun and fired it in the direction of the fish. No effect. Bond put his feet down and began to walk towards the fish through the scattering of corpses. The beautiful red and black fish seemed to pause and quiver. Then it shot straight through the water towards Bond and dived down to the sand at his feet and lay still. Bond only had to bend to pick it up. There was not even a last flap from the tail. It just filled Bond's hand, lightly pricking the palm with the spiny black dorsal fin. Bond carried it back under-water so as to preserve its colours. When he got to Mr Krest he said "Here," and handed him the small fish. Then he swam away towards the shore.

That evening, with the Wawekrest heading for home down the path of a huge yellow moon, Mr Krest gave orders for what he called a 'wingding'. "Gotta celebrate, Liz. This is terrific, a terrific day. Cleaned up the last target and we can get the hell out of these goddam Seychelles and get on back to civilization.

What say we make it to Mombasa when we've taken on board the tortoise and that goddam parrot? Fly to Nairobi and pick up a big plane for Rome, Venice, Paris - anywheres you care for. What say, treasure?" He squeezed her chin and cheeks in his big hand and made the pale lips pout. He kissed them drily. Bond watched the girl's eyes. They had shut tight. Mr Krest let go. The girl massaged her face. It was still white with his finger-marks.

"Gee, Milt," she said half laughing, "you nearly squashed me. You don't know your strength. But do let's celebrate. I think that would be lots of fun. And that Paris idea sounds grand. Let's do that, shall we? What shall I order for dinner?"

"Hell - caviar of course." Mr Krest held his hands apart. "One of those two-pound tins from Hammacher Schlemmer - the grade ten shot size, and all the trimmings. And that pink champagne." He turned to Bond. "That suit you, feller?"

"Sounds like a square meal." Bond changed the subject. "What have you done with the prize?"

"Formalin. Up on the boat-deck with some other jars of stuff we've picked up here and there - fish, shells. All safe in our home morgue. That's how we were told to keep the specimens. We'll airmail that damned fish when we get back to civilization. Give a Press conference first. Should make a big play in the papers back home. I've already radioed the Smithsonian and the news agencies. My accountants'll sure be glad of some Press cuttings to show those darned revenue boys."

Mr Krest got very drunk that night. It did not show greatly. The soft Bogart voice became softer and slower. The round, hard head turned more deliberately on the shoulders. The lighter's flame took increasingly long to relight the cigar, and one glass was swept off the table. But it showed in the things Mr Krest said. There was a violent cruelty, a pathological desire to wound, quite near the surface in the man. That night, after dinner, the first target was James Bond. He was treated to a soft-spoken explanation as to why Europe, with England and France in the van, was a rapidly diminishing asset to the world. Nowadays, said Mr Krest, there were only three powers - America, Russia and China. That was the big poker game and no other country had either the chips or the cards to come into it. Occasionally some pleasant little country - and he admitted they'd been pretty big league in the past - like England would be lent some money so that they could take a hand with the grown-ups. But that was just being polite like one sometimes had to be - to a chum in one's club who'd gone broke. No. England - nice people, mind you, good sports - was a place to see the old buildings and the Queen and so on. France? They only counted for good food and easy women. Italy? Sunshine and spaghetti. Sanatorium, sort of. Germany? Well, they still had some spunk, but two lost wars had knocked the heart out of them. Mr Krest dismissed the rest of the world with a few similar tags and then asked Bond for his comments.

Bond was thoroughly tired of Mr Krest. He said he found Mr Krest's point of view oversimplified - he might even say naive. He said: "Your argument reminds me of a rather sharp aphorism I once heard about America. Care to hear it?"

"Sure, sure."

"It's to the effect that America has progressed from infancy to senility without having passed through a period of maturity."

Mr Krest looked thoughtfully at Bond. Finally he said: "Why, say, Jim, that's pretty neat." His eyes hooded slightly as they turned towards his wife. "Guess you'd kinda go along with that remark of Jim's, eh, treasure? I recall you saying once you reckoned there was something pretty childish about the Americans. Remember?"

"Oh Milt." Liz Krest's eyes were anxious. She had read the signs. "How can you bring that up? You know it was only something casual I said about the comic sections of the papers. Of course I don't agree with what James says. Anyway, it was only a joke, wasn't it, James?"

"That's right," said Bond. "Like when Mr Krest said England had nothing but ruins and a queen."

Mr Krest's eyes were still on the girl. He said softly: "Shucks, treasure. Why are you looking so nervous? Course it was a joke." He paused. "And one I'll remember, treasure. One I'll sure remember."

Bond estimated that by now Mr Krest had just about one whole bottle of various alcohols, mostly whisky, inside him. It looked to Bond as if, unless Mr Krest passed out, the time was not far off when Bond would have to hit Mr Krest just once very hard on the jaw. Fidele Barbey was now being given the

treatment. "These islands of yours, Fido. When I first looked them up on the map I thought it was just some specks of fly-dirt on the page." Mr Krest chuckled. "Even tried to brush them off with the back of my hand. Then I read a bit about them and it seemed to me my first thoughts had just about hit the nail on the head. Not much good for anything, are they, Fido? I wonder an intelligent guy like you doesn't get the hell out of there. Beach-combing ain't any kind of a life. Though I did hear one of your family had logged over a hundred illegitimate children. Mebbe that's the attraction, eh, feller?" Mr Krest grinned knowingly.

Fidele Barbey said equably: "That's my uncle, Gaston. The rest of the family doesn't approve. It's made quite a hole in the family fortune."

"Family fortune, eh?" Mr Krest winked at Bond. "What's it in? Cowrie-shells?"

"Not exactly." Fidele Barbey was not used to Mr Krest's brand of rudeness. He looked mildly embarrassed. "Though we made quite a lot out of tortoise-shell and mother-of-pearl about a hundred years ago when there was a rage for these things. Copra's always been our main business."

"Using the family bastards as labour, I guess. Good idea. Wish I could fix something like that in my home circle." He looked across at his wife. The rubber lips turned still further down. Before the next gibe could be uttered, Bond had pushed his chair back and had gone out into the well-deck and pulled the door shut behind him.

Ten minutes later, Bond heard feet coming softly down the ladder from the boat-deck. He turned. It was Liz Krest. She came over to where he was standing in the stern. She said in a strained voice: "I said I'd go to bed. But then I thought I'd come back here and see if you'd got everything you want. I'm not a very good hostess, I'm afraid. Are you sure you don't mind sleeping out here?"

"I like it. I like this kind of air better than the canned stuff inside. And it's rather wonderful to have all those stars to look at. I've never seen so many before."

She said eagerly, grasping at a friendly topic: "I like Orion's Belt and the Southern Cross the best. You know, when I was young, I used to think the stars were really holes in the sky. I thought the world was surrounded by a great big black sort of envelope, and that outside it the universe was full of bright light. The stars were just holes in the envelope that let little sparks of light through. One gets terribly silly ideas when one's young." She looked up at him, wanting him not to snub her.

Bond said: "You're probably quite right. One shouldn't believe all the scientists say. They want to make everything dull. Where did you live then?"

"At Ringwood in the New Forest. It was a good place to be brought up. A good place for children. I'd like to go there again one day."

Bond said: "You've certainly come a long way since then. You'd probably find it pretty dull."

She reached out and touched his sleeve. "Please don't say that. You don't understand - " there was an edge of desperation in the soft voice - "I can't bear to go on missing what other people have - ordinary people. I mean," she laughed nervously, "you won't believe me, but just to talk like this for a few minutes, to have someone like you to talk to, is something I'd almost forgotten." She suddenly reached for his hand and held it hard. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to do that. Now I'll go to bed."

The soft voice came from behind them. The speech had slurred, but each word was carefully separated from the next. "Well, well. Whadya know? Necking with the underwater help!"

Mr Krest stood framed in the hatch to the saloon. He stood with his legs apart and his arms upstretched to the lintel above his head. With the light behind him he had the silhouette of a baboon. The cold, imprisoned breath of the saloon rushed out past him and for a moment chilled the warm night air in the well-deck. Mr Krest stepped out and softly pulled the door to behind him.

Bond took a step towards him, his hands held loosely at his sides. He measured the distance to Mr Krest's solar plexus. He said: "Don't jump to conclusions, Mr Krest. And watch your tongue. You're lucky not to have got hurt so far tonight. Don't press your luck. You're drunk. Go to bed."

"Oho! Listen to the cheeky feller." Mr Krest's moon-burned face turned slowly from Bond to his wife. He made a contemptuous, Hapsburg-lip grimace. He took a silver whistle out of his pocket and whirled it round on its string. "He sure don't get the picture, does he, treasure? You ain't told him that those Heinies up front ain't just for ornament?" He turned back to Bond. "Feller, you move any closer and I

blow this just once. And you know what? It'll be the old heave-ho for Mr goddam Bond" - he made a gesture towards the sea - "over the side. Man overboard. Too bad. We back up to make a search and you know what, feller? Just by chance we back up into you with those twin screws. Would you believe it! What lousy bad luck for that nice feller Jim we were all getting so fond of!" Mr Krest swayed on his feet. "Dya get the photo, Jim? Okay, so let's all be friends again and get some shut eye." He reached for the lintel of the hatch and turned to his wife. He lifted his free hand and slowly crooked a finger. "Move, treasure. Time for bed."

"Yes, Milt." The wide, frightened eyes turned side ways. "Goodnight, James." Without waiting for an answer, she ducked under Mr Krest's arm and almost ran through the saloon.

Mr Krest lifted a hand. "Take it easy, feller. No hard feelings, eh?"

Bond said nothing. He went on looking hard at Mr Krest.

Mr Krest laughed uncertainly. He said: "Okay then." He stepped into the saloon and slid the door shut. Through the window Bond watched him walk unsteadily across the saloon and turn out the lights. He went into the corridor and there was a momentary gleam from the stateroom door, and then that too went dark.

Bond shrugged his shoulders. God, what a man! He leant against the stern rail and watched the stars and the flashes of phosphorescence in the creaming wake, and set about washing his mind clear and relaxing the coiled tensions in his body

Half an hour later, after taking a shower in the crew's bathroom forrard, Bond was making a bed for himself among the piled Dunlopillo cushions when he heard a single, heartrending scream. It tore briefly into the night and was smothered. It was the girl. Bond ran through the saloon and down the passage. With his hand on the stateroom door, he stopped. He could hear her sobs and, above them, the soft even drone of Mr Krest's voice. He took his hand away from the latch, Hell! What was it to do with him? They were man and wife. If she was prepared to stand this sort of thing and not kill her husband, or leave him, it was no good Bond playing Sir Galahad. Bond walked slowly back down the passage. As he was crossing the saloon the scream, this time less piercing, rang out again. Bond cursed fluently and went out and lay down on his bed and tried to focus his mind on the soft thud of the diesels. How could a girl have so little guts? Or was it that women could take almost anything from a man? Anything except indifference? Bond's mind refused to unwind. Sleep got further and further away.

An hour later Bond had reached the edge of unconsciousness when, up above him on the boat-deck, Mr Krest began to snore. On the second night out from Port Victoria, Mr Krest had left his cabin in the middle of the night and had gone up to the hammock that was kept slung for him between the speedboat and the dinghy. But that night he had not snored. Now he was snoring with those deep, rattling, utterly lost snores that come from big blue sleeping-pills on top of too much alcohol.

This was too damned much. Bond looked at his watch. One-thirty. If the snoring didn't stop in ten minutes, Bond would go down to Fidele Barbey's cabin and sleep on the floor, even if he did wake up stiff and frozen in the morning.

Bond watched the gleaming minute-hand slowly creep round the dial. Now! He had got to his feet and was gathering up his shirt and shorts when, from up on the boat-deck, there came a heavy crash. The crash was immediately followed by scrabbling sounds and a dreadful choking and gurgling. Had Mr Krest fallen out of his hammock? Reluctantly Bond dropped his things back on the deck and walked over and climbed the ladder. As his eyes came level with the boat-deck, the choking stopped. Instead there was another, a more dreadful sound - the quick drumming of heels. Bond knew that sound. He leapt up the last steps and ran towards the figure lying spreadeagled on its back in the bright moonlight. He stopped and knelt slowly down, aghast. The horror of the strangled face was bad enough, but it was not Mr Krest's tongue that protruded from his gaping mouth. It was the tail of a fish. The colours were pink and black. It was the Hildebrand Rarity!

The man was dead - horribly dead. When the fish had been crammed into his mouth, he must have reached up and desperately tried to tug it out. But the spines of the dorsal and anal fins had caught inside the cheeks and some of the spiny tips now protruded through the blood-flecked skin round the obscene mouth. Bond shuddered. Death must have come inside a minute. But what a minute!

Bond slowly got to his feet. He walked over to the racks of glass specimen jars and peered under the protective awning. The plastic cover of the end jar lay on the deck beside it. Bond wiped it carefully on the tarpaulin, and then, holding it by the tips of his fingernails, laid it loosely back over the mouth of the jar.

He went back and stood over the corpse. Which of the two had done this? There was a touch of fiendish spite in using the treasured prize as a weapon. That suggested the woman. She certainly had her reasons. But Fidele Barbey, with his creole blood, would have had the cruelty and at the same time the macabre humour. "Je lui ai foutu son sacré poisson dans la geule". Bond could hear him say the words. If, after Bond had left the saloon, Mr Krest had needled the Seychellois just a little bit further - particularly about his family or his beloved islands - Fidele Barbey would not have hit him then and there, or used a knife, he would have waited and plotted.

Bond looked round the deck. The snoring of the man could have been a signal for either of them. There were ladders to the boat-deck from both sides of the cabin-deck amidships. The man at the wheel in the pilot-house forrard would have heard nothing above the noise from the engine-room. To pick the small fish out of its formalin bath and slip it into Mr Krest's gaping mouth would have only needed seconds. Bond shrugged. Whichever had done it had not thought of the consequences - of the inevitable inquest, perhaps of a trial in which he, Bond, would be an additional Suspect. They were certainly all going to be in one hell of a mess unless he could tidy things up.

Bond glanced over the edge of the boat-deck. Below was the three-foot-wide strip of deck that ran the length of the ship. Between this and the sea there was a two-foot-high rail. Supposing the hammock had broken, and Mr Krest had fallen and rolled under the speed-boat and over the edge of the upper deck, could he have reached the sea? Hardly, in this dead calm, but that was what he was going to have done.

Bond got moving. With a table-knife, from the saloon, he carefully frayed and then broke one of the main cords of the hammock so that the hammock trailed realistically on the deck. Next, with a damp cloth, he cleaned up the specks of blood on the woodwork and the drops of formalin that led from the specimen jar. Then came the hardest part - handling the corpse. Carefully Bond pulled it to the very edge of the deck and himself went down the ladder and, bracing himself, reached up. The corpse came down on top of him in a heavy, drunken embrace. Bond staggered under it to the low rail and eased it over. There was a last hideous glimpse of the obscenely bulging face; a sickening fume of stale whisky, a heavy splash, and it was gone and rolling sluggishly away in the small waves of the wake. Bond flattened himself back against the saloon hatchway, ready to slip through if the helmsman came aft to investigate. But there was no movement forrard and the iron tramp of the diesels held steady.

Bond sighed deeply. It would be a very troublesome coroner who brought in anything but misadventure. He went back to the boat-deck, gave it a final look over, disposed of the knife and the wet cloth, and went down the ladder to his bed in the well. It was two-fifteen. Bond was asleep inside ten minutes.

By pushing the speed up to twelve knots they made North Point by six o'clock that evening. Behind them the sky was ablaze with red and gold streaked across aquamarine. The two men, with the woman between them, stood at the rail of the well-deck and watched the brilliant shore slip by across the mother-of-pearl mirror of the sea. Liz Krest was wearing a white linen frock with a black belt and a black and white handkerchief round her neck. The mourning colours went well with the golden skin. The three people stood stiffly and rather self-consciously, each one nursing his own piece of secret knowledge, each one anxious to convey to the other two that their particular secrets were safe with him.

That morning there had seemed to be a conspiracy among the three to sleep late. Even Bond had not been awakened by the sun until ten o'clock. He showered in the crew's quarters and chatted with the helmsman before going below to see what had happened to Fidele Barbey. He was still in bed. He said he had a hangover. Had he been very rude to Mr Krest? He couldn't remember much about it except that he seemed to recall Mr Krest being very rude to him. "You remember what I said about him from the beginning, James? A grand slam redoubled in bastards. Now do you agree with me? One of these days someone's going to shut that soft ugly mouth of his for ever."

Inconclusive. Bond had fixed himself some breakfast in the galley and was eating it there when Liz Krest

had come in to do the same. She was dressed in a pale blue shantung kimono to her knees. There were dark rings under her eyes and she ate her breakfast standing. But she seemed perfectly calm and at ease. She whispered conspiratorially: "I do apologize about last night. I suppose I'd had a bit too much to drink too. But do forgive Milt. He's really awfully nice. It's only when he's had a bit too much that he gets sort of difficult. He's always sorry the next morning. You'll see."

When eleven o'clock came and neither of the other two showed any signs of, so to speak, blowing the gaff, Bond decided to force the pace. He looked very hard at Liz Krest who was lying on her stomach in the well-deck reading a magazine. He said: "By the way, where's your husband? Still sleeping it off?"

She frowned. "I suppose so. He went up to his hammock on the boat-deck. I've no idea what time. I took a sleeping-pill and went straight off."

Fidele Barbey had a line out for amberjack. Without looking round he said: "He's probably in the pilot-house."

Bond said: "If he's still asleep on the boat-deck, he'll be getting the hell of a sunburn."

Liz Krest said: "Oh, poor Milt! I hadn't thought of that. I'll go and see."

She climbed the ladder. When her head was above the level of the boat-deck she stopped. She called down, anxiously: "Jim. He's not here. And the hammock's broken."

Bond said: "Fidele's probably right. I'll have a look forrard."

He went to the pilot-house. Fritz, the mate and the engineer were there. Bond said: "Anyone seen Mr Krest?"

Fritz looked puzzled. "No, sir. Why? Is anything wrong?"

Bond flooded his face with anxiety. "He's not aft. Here, come on! Look round everywhere. He was sleeping on the boat-deck. He's not there and his hammock's broken. He was rather the worse for wear last night. Come on! Get cracking!"

When the inevitable conclusion had been reached, Liz Krest had a short but credible fit of hysteria. Bond took her to her cabin and left her there in tears. "It's all right, Liz," he said. "You stay out of this. I'll look after everything. We'll have to radio Port Victoria and so on. I'll tell Fritz to put on speed. I'm afraid it's hopeless turning back to look. There've been six hours of daylight when he couldn't have fallen overboard without being heard or seen. It must have been in the night. I'm afraid anything like six hours in these seas is just not on."

She stared at him, her eyes wide. "You mean - you mean sharks and things?"

Bond nodded.

"Oh Milt! Poor darling Milt! Oh, why did this have to happen?"

Bond went out and softly shut the door.

The yacht rounded Cannon Point and reduced speed. Keeping well away from the broken reef, it slid quietly across the broad bay, now lemon and gunmetal in the last light, towards the anchorage. The small township beneath the mountains was already dark with indigo shadow in which a sprinkling of yellow lights showed. Bond saw the Customs and Immigration launch move off from Long Pier to meet them. The little community would already be buzzing with the news that would have quickly leaked from the radio station to the Seychelles Club and then, through the members' chauffeurs and staffs, into the town.

Liz Krest turned to him. "I'm beginning to get nervous. Will you help me through the rest of this - these awful formalities and things?"

"Of course."

Fidele Barbey said: "Don't worry too much. All these people are my friends. And the Chief Justice is my uncle. We shall all have to make a statement. They'll probably have the inquest tomorrow. You'll be able to leave the day after."

"You really think so?" A dew of sweat had sprung below her eyes. "The trouble is, I don't really know where to leave for, or what to do next. I suppose," she hesitated, not looking at Bond. "I suppose, James, you wouldn't like to come on to Mombasa? I mean, you're going there, anyway, and I'd be able to get you there a day earlier than this ship of yours, this Camp something."

"Kampala." Bond lit a cigarette to cover his hesitation. Four days in a beautiful yacht with this girl! But

the tail of that fish, sticking out of the mouth! Had she done it? Or had Fidele, who would know that his uncles and cousins on Mahe would somehow see that he came to no harm? If only one of them would make a slip. Bond said easily: "That's terribly nice of you, Liz. Of course I'd love to come."

Fidele Barbey chuckled. "Bravo, my friend. And I would love to be in your shoes, but for one thing. That damned fish. It is a great responsibility. I like to think of you both being deluged with cables from the Smithsonian about it. Don't forget that you are now both trustees of a scientific Koh-i-noor. And you know what these Americans are. They'll worry the life out of you until they've got their hands on it."

Bond's eyes were hard as flint as he watched the girl. Surely that put the finger on her. Now he would make some excuse - get out of the trip. There had been some thing about that particular way of killing a man...

But the beautiful, candid eyes did not flicker. She looked up into Fidele Barbey's face and said, easily, charmingly: "That won't be a problem. I've decided to give it to the British Museum."

James Bond noticed that the sweat dew had now gathered at her temples. But, after all, it was a desperately hot evening...

The thud of the engines stopped and the anchor chain roared down into the quiet bay.