

Crawling Death of Bad Luck Island

by BRIAN O'BRIEN

THEY CLICKED AND SCUTTLED
OBSCENELY AS THEY TORE
THE BROKEN CRAB APART—
THEN THEY TURNED TOWARD US



I guess it is the most lonesome spot in the world—a jangle of lava peaks jutting out of the empty ocean. It's called Trinidad; not the resort in the Caribbean, but one of the scores of Trinidads discovered by the old devout navigators back in the 16th century. It is 700 miles from Brazil in the middle of the South Atlantic. No one can live on it; it has killed hundreds. Mariners cast ashore there just disappeared. Pirates hid loot from Peru under its rotted cliffs. Treasure hunters have ruined themselves searching for the man-high golden candlesticks *that are still there*.

But the island is guarded by two things. One is the rollers; mighty seas that come surging up from the Antarc-



tic to thunder against the crumbling crags for days on end. I found the other thing some years ago when I was fool enough to land on that nightmare shore.

It was just after the war. I'd been up to Manaus to work on a rubber concession, got paid off when the outfit folded and worked my passage down the Amazon to Belem. I was hanging about, footloose, not yet broke, but keeping my eye open for a job. I'd been spending my evenings in a little cantina. For several days I'd seen this stocky Scot about the waterfront. He lived aboard a 60-foot auxiliary ketch with two other guys. One night he came over to my table and asked me to have a drink. His name was Grier-

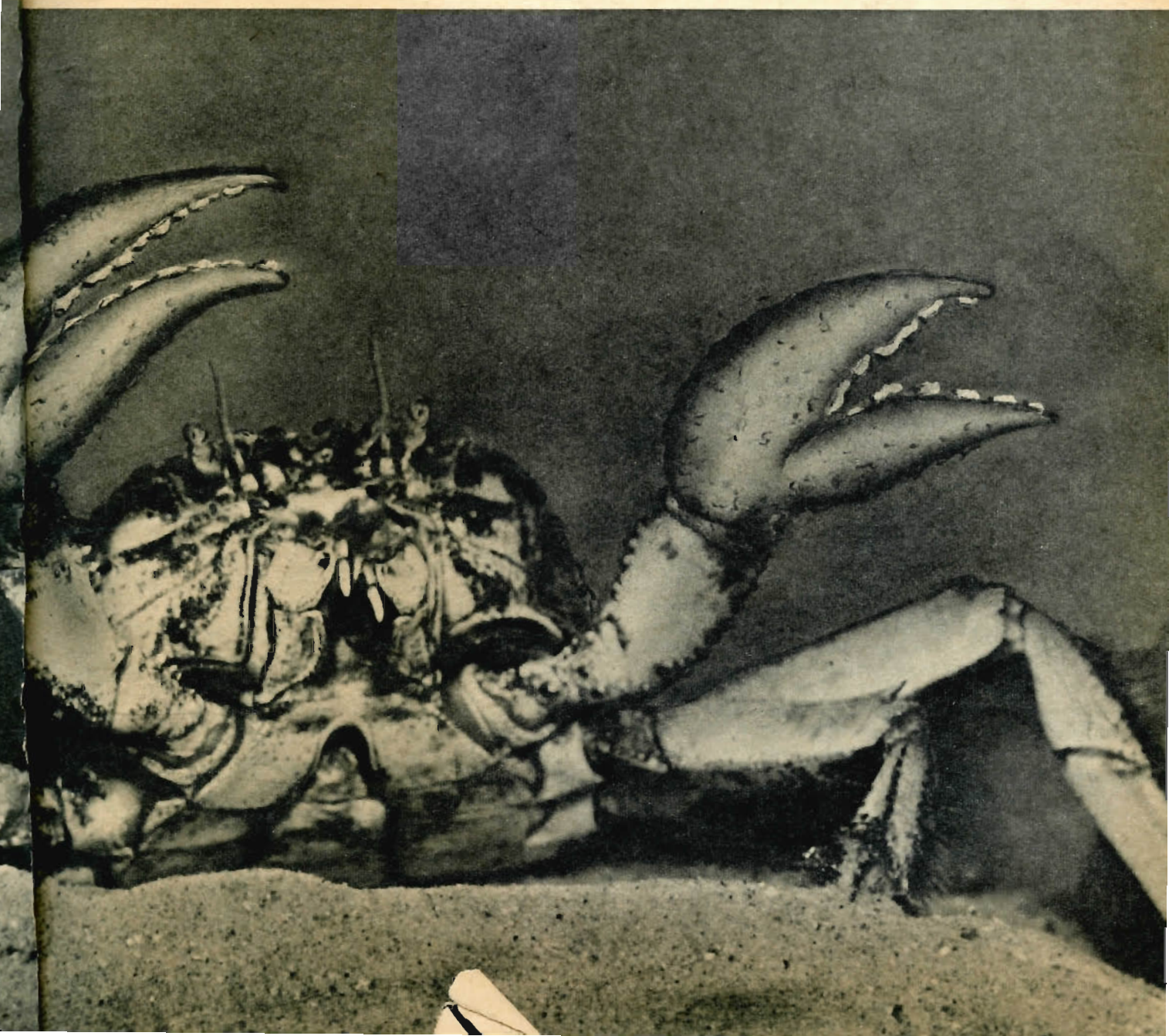
son, a shy sort of guy who spoke in a clipped accent that was more English than Scots. After a couple he asked me if I was looking for a job. Told him yes. Then came the proposition.

He was a treasure hunter, had sailed his ketch, *Lochaber*, from Glasgow to Belem to look for treasure on Trinidad. He had accounts of an attempt made by the yacht *Alerte* back at the turn of the century. The *Alerte* party had found the spot where the Lima treasure was buried, but a landslide had covered it. And the party, out of food and sick as dogs, had gone back home.

But there was a whisper that one of the party had discovered the cave where the treasure lay and had covered

it with a slab of lava, intending to come back and grab the stuff for himself. Grierson had made a deal with this old man, who had been unable to return to the island, to find the loot and share with him. He had three partners in the ketch with him. But one had taken sick in Belem and gone home.

"We've three Portuguese aboard," he told me, "Two to help handle the *Lochaber* and the third an old, old man who knows his way about the island and can lead us to the *Alerte* diggings. Offer you a chance to come along—give us the edge over these fellows, so to speak. Give you a twenty-fifth of whatever we find. Can't pay you, but we'll feed you (*Continued on page 46*)



An inventory of his few possessions turned up his service revolver, two matches and a few sulfa pills he had brought along at his wife's insistence, besides his parachute canopy, risers and harness and a fully charged bailout bottle of oxygen.

Once he heard a plane fly over. He threw back the parachute cocoon so it could be seen more easily, but the plane went away. He knew he had to have a flare of some kind to attract attention, but the flares had gone with the A-1 kit.

Then he remembered the matches, and his bailout bottle.

When he heard the sound of another search plane, Pittman spent one precious match, lighting it and setting fire to the rubber tube of the bailout bottle. Opening the valve, he squirted a jet of oxygen over the smoking rubber and produced an excellent substitute for a flare. But still they didn't see him.

Pittman once saw a snow rabbit burrowing through the deep drift some 20 feet from him. He took careful aim and shot the rabbit—but was unable to crawl to it with his shattered leg.

Weak from loss of blood and from pain, he wondered how long he could hold out. He had no food, no water. He tried compressing a snowball to suck, but it was too powdery. Pittman remembered his survival training warning against eating snow to get water. The calorific loss of heat involved in eating it and the small amount of liquid to be gotten from powder snow make it useless as a source of water.

There was nothing more to do but wait, and pray.

His prayers were answered on the third morning, when an SA-16 amphibian rescue plane from the 44th Air Rescue Squadron made a lucky pass and spotted him.

But fate almost took that lucky break away, too, because the amphibian pilot thought Pittman's parachute was a rescue marker, one of many dropped as guides to the intensive air search!

BACK at The Pas, however, it was soon discovered that the colored parachute did not coincide with the position of any marker. It had to be Pittman!

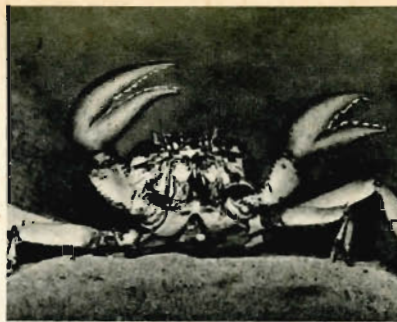
A helicopter from the 44th quickly sped back to the scene, that afternoon, and the pilot hovered low overhead, the big blades blowing a freezing but welcome blast of air over the injured airman.

A rescuer dropped to the ground and fastened a sling to Pittman and soon he was hauled aboard and on his way out.

The fact that Pittman is alive today—along with Epton and me—is a tribute to the fine work of the Canadian rescue team that operated smoothly under Air Commodore J. G. Bryan, RCAF, of the 14th Group HY in Winnipeg, and the men of the USAF's 44th.

It was also a tribute to the Strategic Air Command's thorough survival training, which prepared us for the ordeal that might have cost us our lives.

I no longer have that cold fear of a high-altitude bailout, and as awful as the ordeal was, it has scratched one more bogy from the nightmare fear of a stratosphere blowout. ◆◆◆



and if worse comes to worst we'll land you back in Belem without it costing you anything."

What could I lose?

The *Lochaber* was a handy craft in the wide seas. The partners were Reynolds, an English lawyer, and another Scot named Bell. The two hands, Belem *coboclos*, knew the score and were given to listening at the skylight of nights. Jose-Maria, the old man, told us he had been with the *Alerte* party. He said the island was about six miles long by four at the widest part. Only one side, the southwest, was good for landing, and then only when the wind was right. The *pampero* blew up from the south and made it impossible most times of the year. Then there were the rollers.

"Over 30 meters high, the cliffs," he said. "Rollers break over them."

Hundred-foot breakers! Trouble was Jose was right!

He told us it was impossible to reach the treasure site from the sea. We had to land and climb over the crags, then wade around the south end over lava ledges to find Sou'west Bay under the Sugarloaf.

We made good time; in five days we sighted the island, a sinister set of pinnacles on the horizon. And the birds sighted us. They came screaming; gannets, frigate birds, gulls, terns. They perched on the rails and fouled the deck from bow to stern. They stank. We drove them off. They soared up, screeching—it sounded like laughter—and they came back, settled themselves and stared at us. The hands kept crossing themselves and wanted to go home.

We hauled around and watched the seas breaking up the eroded cliffs, stained red and green and black. The ground sloped upward to serrated peaks, gray and fissured. We sailed around and found green on the eastern side; ferns and scrub grass, but no trees, not a tree on the island.

It was Jose who gave us our anchorage, about four miles off a cape called the Ness. We dropped our hook in 18 fathoms and one hand, Grierson and I went ashore with Jose. We left Bell and Reynolds on board in case the Portuguese got ideas of running off with the ketch. I was the odd man, you see; the balance of power!

We ran to the north of the Ness and saw a spit of lava jutting out into the breakers like a wharf. There was a small cascade dripping on to the narrow beach. To our left an island stuck up like a bowling pin. It was called Ninepin, Grierson told me.

Landing wasn't easy; heavy seas break-

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ing over the Ness kept us humping to prevent smashing the boat against the lava.

I made it first, wetted to the waist. Then Grierson scrambled ashore. The hand kept the engine running while he nosed in and Jose jumped. We dragged him up on the lava and the boat backed, turned and danced back to the ketch. We were ashore.

It was a wilderness. Something dreadful had happened to that place. There were black cylinders lying about; petrified trees, Grierson said. The sea was screaming in over the narrow belt of black sand and we heard a tremendous thunder and saw a green wave curl up the Ninepin and shatter all about it. The ketch looked a long way off out there in the blue and the island loomed over us in grim desolation.

WE scrambled up from the beach to a ledge under the hill. Grierson gave a sudden yell. I wheeled to see him kicking an enormous land crab from his shoe. The thing was red and yellow and blue; one mighty pincer had the Scot by the toe. He shook it clear and it clattered on the rock. Jose stamped it and we backed off. Then there was a clicking and scuttling. Several more crabs sidled out of cracks in the lava, spurred across to the broken one and tore him to pieces with the fierce rapacity. Then they eyed us. Their blob-eyes on stalks and long, serrated mouths gave them a sort of satanic leer. One darted in at my foot. I kicked him clear. The rest turned on him and ate him. Then they ringed us, pincers waving, eyes watching us like thieves.

"My God, let's get out of here," Grierson muttered.

It wasn't that easy. We were on this ledge about 30 feet above the sheltered beach. And Jose-Maria had forgotten he no longer had the strength of his youth. We stumbled past a deep fissure and started the climb. We reached a sort of plateau and there were marks of a path, but we soon found it was blocked by a landslide. Jose pointed to a peak that was his landmark.

Climbing again, we reached a ledge where seabirds nested. They flew at us, screaming, and we beat them off frantically. All about us now the plateau extended like a moonscape, empty but for thorn and sere ferns. When we halted the birds attacked us. We stumbled, Jose panting feebly, to where another upward trail began. To reach it we had to jump across a slash that reached down to blackness. We began to scale the crumbling rock. At every step it broke under our feet so that we had to move abreast.

Twice we snatched Jose who was sliding down into the abyss. Once a rock turned under me and I clung, watching it drag tons of debris that thundered down in a cloud of black, choking dust.

It was afternoon when we reached the highest ridge and worked down to the eastern shore. Then it was easy until we found the lava ledges over which the sea washed and the archway that led us around Sugarloaf to Sou'west Bay.

It was a narrow cove with a ledge and small cascade. We saw rusted picks, a broken wheelbarrow and a scar in the cliff that Jose said was the beginning of the workings.

The ketch was far out, to the southwest. We waved our hats and a flag danced at the masthead.

"They've seen us," Grierson said thankfully. "Think they can get the boat into this beach, Jose?"

But Jose was staring upwards to where a reddish cloud writhed above the island like blown flame.

"That's nothing," Grierson laughed. "Wind chuting up from the ravines."

"No *senhor*," the Portugese muttered. "Look!"

The beach below us was covered with the bright yellow crabs, their red and blue pincers waving as they scuttled toward our cliff.

"Go up," Jose shouted. "Rollers come."

Birds were tossing in the wind like blown paper and we saw a huge sea rise and hide the ketch. There was a hideous roar as an undertow dragged the beaches bare, then a mighty explosion and spray hit Sugarloaf, smashed against the cliffs and our sheltered cove boomed like the inside of an organ loft. The sea rose almost to our feet, then sank back as the wave receded, leaving a twitching mass of dying debris.

"How often do those things happen?" Grierson muttered.

"Every hour, perhaps two hours," Jose said. "Sometimes last six week."

"Hey," Grierson was staring to sea. "Where's the ketch?"

"Swamped by that roller?"

"Maybe they saw it coming and got under way." He didn't sound too hopeful. "Look. We've no provisions. I vote we take a look at the diggings, then make our way back to the Ness. Then we can get back to the ketch and bring off some food and tools."

"If the ketch is still there," I said. "I don't like these bloody, staring crabs."

Cautiously we moved to a stream that marked the ravine where the *Alerte* diggings started. The slash went back straight then seemed to turn.

"My chart says the stuff is right at the bend," Grierson said. "You stay here, Jose."

We clambered over the ledge, kicking dozens of the stinking crabs out of our way. The stream was blocked with debris. But there were marks where lava slabs had been laid. It was dark and warm in there and the air whined with mosquitoes. The slopes above us were sifting dust and the bend loomed ahead like a turn in a dark alley. We heard a rumbling like distant thunder. Jose yelled from the beach.

"Slide!" Grierson yelled, and almost

knocked me down scrambling for the beach.

We barely made it. The ravine filled like an hourglass filling with sand. Great boulders rolled in and we crouched in the open while the ravine choked with a landslide of hundreds of tons.

"No bloody wonder they gave up," Grierson groaned. "The hell with it. Let's get back. Need bulldozers to clear that away."

Jose was moaning, nursing a bleeding foot. Around him the crabs fought over some broken fellows. Jose, his drawn face yellow, motioned us to driftwood. We snatched pieces in time to crush a few monsters big as dinner plates as they came sparring in like bulldogs.

As we kicked them over the edge of the ledge to the beach another roller swept in, hit Sugarloaf and surged past our cove to smash against the rocky islets guarding the mouth.

"Getting dark," Grierson said. "Better get a fire going; we're stuck for the night, I'm afraid."

We fought those crabs for driftwood and piled rocks about the ledge to keep the brutes out. Jose, jerking with nerves, moaned that the place was accursed.

We crouched beside the small blaze; that fire had to last until daylight. There was brackish water from the stream. The endless clatter of the crabs and the sight of their vicious claws waving in the firelight above the rocks was enough to give me the creeps. One crab got in and nipped my hand. I shook it off with a yell. Grierson cursed. Jose rolled like a dog, whined like one. Another roller came, filling the night with phosphorescence that flashed on the wings of screaming seabirds.

"The end!" Jose came up, eyes starting.

We tried to calm him as a distant landslide shook the cove. A crab fell on me, scrabbling for a hold. I shook it off and stamped it madly. We added wood to the fire. The birds quieted and the seas boomed with regularity. Jose mumbled prayers in a high monotone.

I must have dozed. There was a piercing scream and the space about us was filled with crabs. Grierson, yelling like a maniac, scooped them out. Jose wailed as I smashed and stamped, retching in the fetid stink they made. The fire was scattered. We dragged the embers together, terrified of the dark. Then there was a babbling, and Jose jumped over the wall of rocks. We heard him hit the beach and a series of screams.

"We've got to get him," Grierson whispered, without moving.

It was at that moment that a roller came smashing and thundering against the island. When it subsided Grierson peered at me.

"No use looking now," he whispered.

WE crouched over the fire, smashing the creatures as they clattered on the rocky wall we had built. There was another roller just at dawn. Then we struggled along the beach, past Sugarloaf and up the east ledges. By luck we found the path up to the plateau. From its summit we made out the ketch tacking in toward the Ness. Grierson fired some grass that gave off a good smoke before it blew out. We saw the boat leave the ketch and we stumbled across the crumbling lava plateau and slid down the ravines in clouds of dust and filth until we found the cascade on the lee of the Ness.

There we waited, agonized with suspense, stamping the horrid beasts that clicked and sparred about our feet, until the boat with Bell and a hand plunged to within a few yards of the lava spit. Then we jumped in and swam to her, sobbing with relief as we were dragged aboard.

They got us to the ketch and we swallowed big jolts of whisky while the hands secured the boat.

Only just in time. Another roller came and Reynolds got the auxiliary going to climb what seemed a mountain of water. The island was hidden for minutes as we slid down the far side of the sea. Then we saw spray smash the stained cliffs and heard the thunder of lava as the decayed peaks crumbled into the ravines.

"Whether Jose-Maria was killed by the crabs or the roller, I don't know," Grierson stated. "But I know this. I wouldn't go back to that island if all the loot of Peru was waiting on the beach."

We got back to Belem in a week, and were promptly put under arrest by the Brazilian police. They knew about our venture and were standing by to seize anything of value we might have found. The treasure still belonged to the church, they said. They held us 10 days while they searched the *Lochaber* from stem to stern and questioned us about the death of Jose-Maria.

When it was all over Grierson offered me passage to Bermuda where he intended to stop on his way home to Scotland. I refused; I'd had enough of the ketch and of Trinidad Island, too. I worked my way home passing coal in an ancient tramp steamer.

After those ghastly multicolored crabs with the devil faces it was a pleasure, every sweaty minute of it. ♦♦♦

PHOTO CREDITS

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