



**THE VALLEY OF
NEVER-COME-BACK**
and other stories

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Beatrice Grimshaw
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1: The Valley of Never-Come-Back

EVEN in bright Sydney, the light seemed a little pale— to Meredith, new landed. It was a sunny day; out in the street, the rays played with you, lightly, pleasantly; indoors, they slipped through narrow windows, and peered, unsure of themselves, among the massed, dusk furniture. Where Meredith had come from, sun-rays bit you to the marrow; they flung themselves in fierce battalions through wide doorways never closed; they burned the scant white mats, and sallowed the basket chairs. A curious, gentle world, this of the cities, in spite of hooting traffic and humanity boiling up like ant-hills; a world of blues and greys and cream colours, nothing emphasized. When you lay in your extraordinarily wide bed in the hotel, of nights, with four choking walls about you, your waist missed the hard bulge of the navy-pattern Colt that had been your bed-fellow for so long; you found yourself snapped into sudden wakefulness, twenty times a night, by footsteps that passed your door. Impossible to realize, just at once, that they didn't mean, didn't threaten, anything.

Up north, far north towards the Line, in Papua, the world was coloured like a parrot's plumes; the seas were flaming blue and furious green. There were no hordes of white folk— a few scores in the settlements; out in the ranges, where Meredith had lived, no one— except the natives, on whose account one slept with that blued-steel companion. They were the people of the unknown; Meredith lived on the edge of it. In Papua, it is the natives of the unknown country whom you must distrust, because— heartily and fiercely, down to the bottom of their hearts, and to the point of the long killing-dagger of human bone— they distrust you.

Years— years— how many, since he had trodden pavements or seen the hurried stranger crowds go by? In Papua you knew everyone. In Papua you walked not too fast, and carefully, always; you were so used to the rough tracks, the rock-strewn river-beds, and in any case there was never anything to hurry for. He knew it of old, this process— painful, almost— of speeding up body and mind to the time of the wide-awake places. It was bound to last some days. By Saturday or Sunday next he would be feeling different; his environment would have closed round him, flowed over his head; he would be a chip in the current, swept easily along, instead of the little struggling thing that now beat about on the surface. By Sunday next

A woman passed him in the lounge of the hotel, almost brushing his knee with her skirts. They were very short skirts; the legs beneath them, frankly

displayed, according to the mode of the day, were silk-clad and beautifully shaped. She seemed to be all silk, a little ruffly, like a flower. She smelled of fresh violets; there was a great bunch of them at her waist the colour of her dress, and the colour of her eyes. Meredith did not get beyond the eyes for a minute. Then he noticed that the hair waving under the little purple hat was deep black. She had a fur thrown loosely about her neck.

It all attracted Meredith, by its strangeness— its unlikeness to anything in his life of late. Not for many years had he seen women who wore dark silken things, and framed their faces in the intriguing dusk of furs. It gave a fascinating newness to the woman of the violet clothes and eyes. He watched her as she moved across the lounge, and seated herself in a window where she could look out and watch the street. A shut window; what horror. It would take him a long time— longer than next Sunday— to get used to shut windows.

The woman— she seemed to be young; under thirty, at all events— loosened her fur with dark-gloved hands (how small a woman's hands looked in dark gloves! he'd forgotten that) and leaned forward. She seemed to be waiting for someone. Imagine any man keeping her waiting.

"I would like to punch his head for him," thought Meredith. Then he saw her draw back, and quickly open her handbag. He did not know why she looked so earnestly inside it; why she drew her handkerchief across her lips as she did so— but a certain self-possessed hurry in her actions told him that the man was coming now.

He watched the door; it would be interesting to see

What? there was Packer coming in; good old Packer of the Civil Service; didn't know he was away from Kurukuru Station, down on leave. He'd like a yarn with him by and by, but just now it would be more interesting to see what sort of lucky man it was who....

Jove! It was Packer himself. He was going up to her. She had risen, and they were about to go out together. Would Packer see him? The lounge was so dark— everything in Sydney was dark; dark and choking and stuffy. If they looked at the mirror by the door, they were bound to see him. Yes, Packer had seen; he was coming back. Good old Packer; how smart he was; never seen him look such a dandy. Packer was a well-bred man; squatter family; looked it to-day, though he didn't look like anything much but a beachcomber or a pirate when you met him at Kurukuru, at the back of all beyond. Going to introduce? He was.

"Hallo, Meredith ! Well, but I am glad to see you; I never thought.... This is Mr. Meredith, Mrs. May; he's one of the maddest chaps in Papua, but you'd stand him all right if you knew him; he has his points. I say, how does it happen you aren't dead?"

"Did you want me to be?" asked Meredith. He had risen and was standing with his back towards the light, facing the "Violet Lady" as he had already named her in his mind. He was not very tall, not very broad, not very marked as to feature, and you could not, in any case, see him clearly against the window. His clothes, through long sojourning in trunks, were creased, and smelt of mothballs more than enough. He was not an impressive figure, but the Violet Lady looked twice at him.

"I thought you were bound to be dead," was Packer's reply. He turned to his companion. "This man," he said, "is the only man who's ever come back alive from a valley right away in the interior that's all sort of queer stories about it. Nobody knows anything much, because nobody's been able to tell. They call it the 'Valley of Never-Come-Back.' "

The Violet Lady gave him a third look— a long one, this time. Meredith returned it with interest. Like most pioneers, he was a trifle innocent where women were concerned, but more than a trifle determined to make his way with them. The bushman, like the sailor, has to take his opportunities while they are ripe. In that long third look Meredith had read an opportunity, and his hand was already out to pluck and hold.

"I'll tell you about it," he vouchsafed, "if you would like to hear." Packer stared at him. Meredith was close-mouthed even among the silent men of the Papuan bush country. He had never volunteered to tell anybody anything before— not so much as a comment about the weather could you screw out of Meredith, when the keep-it-close fit was on him— and it generally was. Packer could not but think he was joking with the Violet Lady.

Madeline May— to give her her full, true, though theatrical-sounding name— was not so foolish as to think anything of the sort. She guessed at once that there was an interesting secret— and what so attractive as locked doors? But the afternoon's amusement was in peril, and Packer must not be offended. Madeline had hopes of Packer. The late Mr. May had been dead long enough to allow of his widow's slipping, a little prematurely, into the picturesque stage when one half-mourns, but he had hardly left enough behind him to pay for the purples and the lilacs that expressed her bisected grief. She was getting very anxious, being neither so young nor so pretty as Meredith, innocent bushman that he was, had judged her, and having by no means enough money to go gunning among the big game that she, naturally, coveted.

Packer had, perhaps, exaggerated the importance of a Papuan Resident Magistrate's position. Madeline had, maybe, been taken in; maybe not— one thinks perhaps not. But it was getting to a point where she had to re-marry, as promptly as possible, or else....

Mrs. May, widow, did not want to "else." There are good women who are capable of darkening their hair and eyelashes, with things out of bottles that are of course not really dyes; who are not above lip-paints; who contrive to look like sirens, or the more modern "vamp," and are not terribly offended if taken for the thing they look like— once in a way. Mrs. May was quite good. She was as selfish as a cat, as greedy as a fowl; she talked scandal like a hospital sister; was not above small, safe acts of dishonesty, and she had never in her thirty-odd years of life done a disinterested kindness to any human being. But she was good.

She wanted to marry again, and Packer, it seemed, wanted— or would want, with a little more encouragement— to marry her. She knew several women who were married to Papuan Government officials. They had an excellent time. After six months in the country, they had contrived to get their doctors to order them "South," and they still contrived to get their doctors to keep them there. The husbands stayed away in Papua, where they could not be a nuisance to anyone, and paid for everything. The wives stopped on in pleasant Sydney, and enjoyed themselves. Oh, it was a fine life ! and one could, if one wanted, discover quite a little society of Papuan wives— ordered relentlessly "South " and thriving on it— to foregather with. She had always envied Mrs. Noone and Mrs. Blank-Dasher and the rest, of Papua; always wanted to join that happy band of do-nothings. This was her chance. Yes, she would go out with Packer— but she would cast her nets for the other man, later. She'd heard of queer things happening in that country— men who found oil-fields, others who discovered forests of sandalwood, and made thousands in a month.

The quality of the smile that she gave Meredith— unaccompanied by words; Madeline May knew the values of silence— sent him to his stuffy room in a trance of delight. One could not stand the lounge after that. One had to be alone, and dream....

There is no knowing how things might have gone, had Mrs. May's fishing been unsuccessful that afternoon. But it chanced that she landed her fish; and, as was natural, an immediate re-valuation took place. Packer, R.M., swimming free, and Packer landed and gasping at her feet, were two very different things. At once he went up in price; he represented, in a world that is hard and uncertain, security and ease; he was (to change the comparison) the barn-door fowl in the hand, better worth having than a flock of birds of paradise in the bush. Mrs. May put out of her head at once the thought of trying to keep both men. She knew the danger of that as thoroughly as a silk-legged widow of thirty-and-too-much was likely to know it.

But, none the less, she wanted Meredith's secret. A little kindness might not come amiss.

It followed that she managed to get him alone, on pretext of wanting to see Sydney from the roof of the hotel. Mrs. May knew— who better?— that the empty corridors of hotels are lined by walls that have ears. She carried Meredith off to the top, therefore, and, surrounded by belching chimney-pots and a view of the harbour, badly smeared, she spread her nets in view of this easily captured bird.

Afterwards she told Packer, with a tiny little laugh, that " he fell for it right away." Mrs. May was one of the many Australians who think it "cute" to use American slang; being under the irremovable impression that Vanderbilts and Astors converse in the language of the Bowery.

"Believe me," she said, "I got him to tell me all about it. I couldn't have slept a wink if I hadn't. I always say that I'm a born detective. How do you think your little Maddie pulls the sleuth stuff?"

Packer, not quite sure what she meant, replied at a venture: "I'm sure anything you pulled would come without much pulling," and, getting off slippery ground, asked her what she had heard? He didn't believe old Meredith would tell anybody all about anything— not if it was an angel from Heaven or his own (Packer's own) little Maddie.

Madeline, suddenly practical, dropped her airs and Americanisms for a minute. This was business. This was the thing that mattered most in life— money.

They had gone to the gardens for quiet. Australia's most famous, if not most lovely, view lay painted before them on the hanging canvas of the blue Pacific. Red roofs, green gardens, fairy inlets and bays, all as the advertisements depicted it— and the gardens, with their steps and statues, and the beautiful neat flowers, and delightful clipped trees, and the tidy, clean walks that wound about, leading to lovely kiosks where you could have tea.

"I do like the gardens," burst out Maddie, in an irrepressible aside. " Little old Sydney and its gardens for me, every time... What were you saying, dear? Oh— about your friend. Well, then I must be an angel, for he told me...."

Packer was so deeply interested that he forgot the apparently inevitable compliment. "For heaven's sake what was it?" he demanded, stopping before her in the midst of the asphalt walk, his head and shoulders blocking out half Sydney Harbour. "It's been a sort of legend for years— the valley, away in the interior, that men were supposed never to come back from. And there's been two or three who didn't— apart from natives, who hardly count. Was he there? What did he find?"

"He says," answered Mrs. May succinctly, "that he did get there, and that he found gold."

"Gold? Gold? Are you sure?" Packer breathed deeply.

Madeline May looked at him. Fond as she was of money, she was very far from understanding the nature of the gold-lust, a passion not wholly ignoble, as it is known to men of the outback. Packer had actually turned white, or as nearly white as his tan would let him. He was panting as if he had just run up a hill.

"Gold! Where? How much?" he demanded, clutching her arm in his excitement. A policeman, rocking slowly along the path, slowed down still more to cast a professional glance at him. He let go her arm. "I beg your pardon," he said, "but— you don't know what it means!"

"My dear man," said Madeline, rubbing her arm, which was not hurt at all, "I know as much about gold as anyone else. Perhaps I want it a bit more than you. He said it was gold— alluvial gold (didn't I remember well?) and lots of it, in the bed of a river."

"Well? "

"Well! What more do you want? Don't you know where the river is?"

"I can make a guess— but that's not what I mean. Did he just say that, and stop? Didn't he tell you anything about how on earth he ever got there, or how he came back? You know they call it the 'Valley of Never-Come-Back'— at least, that's what the native name means, translated. Why, Meredith has no business to be alive at all, if half the things they said about the place were true!"

Madeline May looked a little disturbed. It seemed that she must have had succumbed, in her own way, to the gold madness that was now shaking Packer down to the bottom of his soul. It had not taken her in just the same fashion, but she had certainly allowed the main point of the discussion to slip. She had forgotten that she wanted to know Meredith's secret; he had, it appeared, drawn the red herring of the gold across her path, rather cleverly.

"And I thought I had him in my hand," she muttered to herself, twisting and crushing the ends of her gossamer veil in her hand. She felt humiliated. Didn't she know her job of a pretty woman better than that?

"What do you think? " Packer asked with anxiety. "What did he say? "

"Oh, just what I told you. No, he did not say why or how he'd come back. I suppose he thought it was enough that he was back."

"You don't think so, and I don't. There's something behind." Packer stared fiercely at the eternal stone boxers squaring up to each other on either side of the path. One would have thought he wished to challenge them.

Meredith was his friend— yes, but not his "mate." There is a difference, among Australasians. Packer was a man with no very lofty sense of honour; he had as much as most men, neither more nor less. It was not against his code to find out, by any means available, what his friend had chosen to conceal. That there was something grave, he did not doubt for a moment. The very fact that Meredith had told Mrs. May so much as he had, proved— to Packer, who knew him— that the secret, the real secret, remained behind.

Now that he came to think of it, the information wasn't very new. For years there had been rumours of gold in the unknown valley. It was not the reputation of its dangers that had kept men from attempting the journey. The white man of Papua is notoriously a dare-devil. No, it was a more prosaic reason— that of expense. It costs money, much money, to get into the interior of the "Unknown Land." You may traverse half Africa— you may make yourself a nickel-plate reputation as one of the hundred and ten undistinguished "African explorers" with less than the money needed for a three months' prospecting trip of a few score miles in the unexplored parts of New Guinea. Unless, of course, you are the Government— but the Government has other fish to fry.

The "Valley of Never-Come-Back " was situated in one of the great blanks that lie upon the Papuan map, among the half-traced, huge, torrential rivers of the West. Years gone by a Chinaman was supposed to have reached it, and got away alive; but he was never able to tell anything about it, because, when he went down to the inhabited places again, the first white man who met him found that he had lost his reason. At best, he could not speak more than the merest smattering of pidgin English. But in spite of that, and in spite of the fact that he never said a sensible word while they were taking him down in the schooner to Queensland, and putting him safely away in an asylum, something got out. There was a whisper of gold. There was a whisper of something else— nobody knew what. But it was something terrible.

It was to be expected that some of the Papuan gold-digging crowd— perhaps the hardest, pluckiest crowd in all the South Sea world— would take up the challenge that Nature, and luckless Ah Wing, had thrown down. Two contrived to raise the money (no one knew where the Chinaman had got his) to recruit the necessary carriers, to get away, with stores, arms and ammunition for six months, into the unknown.

For six months nobody took alarm. For eight months, Port Moresby waited. Then down the coast drifted the inevitable native rumour that is, in New Guinea, the Mother Carey's Chicken to disaster. It was said that the men and their carriers were lost.

No one believed it at first. The rumour grew. The Government sent out a patrol officer, and police. The patrol officer could not find out where the miners had gone, because the natives of the district were hostile, and shot at him on sight, instead of waiting to answer questions. He did his best, searched villages, picked up more rumours; and came back. So did not Hart and Willoughby; nor yet the carriers whom they had taken with them. And the silence of the Papuan bush closed over their fate.

An Australian, fond of adventure, and possessed of money to burn, came up to Papua to burn a little of it looking for the gold, for Hart and Willoughby, and, incidentally, for adventure. Whether he found Hart and Willoughby, or the valley, or the gold, is not to this day known. It is probable that he found adventure; certain that he found the greatest adventure of all.

There were one or two others; but no one was quite certain whether they had been looking for the valley, or merely prospecting, in an ordinary way; since it became unfashionable at that date, to say that one was going to look for the place. One ran the risk of being called absurd and uncivil names.

But the legend held, as the legend of somebody's secret island down at the East End holds to-day; as the tale of the diamonds on the Aikora is bruited about, once in a way; comes to nothing, and dies down again. The valley had become one of Papua's strange tales.

Instead of which, Meredith went out and found it, or said he did. Packer, when he reflected on these things, was moved to forget the presence of his lady-love, and to say, with an Army-in-Flanders word or two, bitten short in his moustache, that he'd cut the heart out of Meredith, but he'd get it somehow.

Madeline was practical. She had had to be.

"That's nonsense," she said crisply. "What you've got to do is to find out why he's come down to Sydney anyhow. He must have business here. If he's really found the gold, he wouldn't leave it without some big reason."

"Oh, he wants to finance some sort of syndicate," answered Packer absently. "There's nothing in that. They all do."

The shadows were growing blue in Sydney Gardens; the women picnicking on the grass with their children felt the lowering temperature and began to cluck and fuss over their brood like hens, gathering the little ones together and driving them towards home. Men, loafing and smoking on the seats, sat up and looked about them; pipes were put in pockets, newspapers folded away. It was nearly time to close. Down on the walk below the two stone boxers, eyeing each other, seemed to wait with heads down and hands guarding for the moment when the gates should be shut, and the wandering people gone.

Madeline, sensitive, suddenly, to the rise of the tides of night, to the whisper that they bring with them of the shortness of our day, the certainty of

the dark that comes after and comes soon— Madeline, a little over-wrought and inwardly troubled lest she might not have indeed played her great game wisely, caught at the arm of the man she had chosen, beginning to cry, gasped out, into Packer's entirely sympathetic ears:

"I can't bear to be poor. It's wicked for him to keep it to himself. I'll die if I don't find out."

Meredith had come down by the *Morinda*. It followed that, being in a hurry, he was to go back by the *Marsina*, since the *Morinda* had already sailed on her return journey to the Mysterious Land. There are only the two steamers, and it is well understood in Papua that business trips take the traveller to Sydney by one and bring him back by the next— unless, indeed, he is in such a hurry that ten days, at the end of a two thousand mile run, is time enough for him.

This last was what Meredith had intended. If it had not been for the little Violet Lady. But because of her dark feathery hair, and her silken ankles, and the pitiful charming, little-widow way she had with her, he had somehow discovered that his sales and his purchases would keep him twenty days in Sydney, instead of only ten. So he let the *Morinda* sail and took his passage by the boat that was to follow.

In the matter of the Violet Lady, he thought that Packer "butted in" more than enough— Packer, indeed, seemed to think he owned her; it was as much as a man could do to get a quiet talk with her, on the hotel roof-garden, or in the lounge. But when he hinted at Packer's attentions, Mrs. May only looked down at the tip of her small shoe and sighed, with a little smile at the back of the sigh. And Meredith, of course, understood that Packer was making himself a nuisance, but that she was too kind to tell him so.

Eleven days after the arrival of his ship in Sydney— one day after the sailing back again of the *Morinda*— he missed Madeline May. He missed— though with less regret— Packer as well. He could not understand it. The hotel people only knew that they had both gone away that morning and left no address. Their rooms were given up, their luggage fetched. Meredith, who had been practically certain that Madeline was going to accept him to-morrow or the day after, felt as one feels who, walking in the dark up a long flight of stairs, puts down his foot, disconcertingly, in the air instead of on a last, non-existent step. When this happens there is a jar: Meredith was badly jarred. He could not imagine— he would not imagine....

Until a chambermaid, who knew a good fellow when she saw one, and who had— one will suppose— a heart of her own (though Meredith could not have told you whether she had even a head, or two legs), came and told him, playing with her bunch of keys the while, and not looking at him directly, that

she thought the lady and gentleman who had left that morning were going to be married.

She was a "picture fan"; she had an inflamed sense of dramatic values, and expected Meredith to "register" — she didn't quite know what — the well-known emotion, whatever it may be, that is simply and naturally expressed by staggering back, with a stiff neck and a jutting chin, and a hand suddenly slapped to a forehead. She would not have been surprised if he had seized her passionately by the arm and shouted: "Girl — do you lie to me?" She knew! Bless you, she had seen it all along

But Meredith, being a man from "outback," just looked at her and asked, in an even voice, "Anyone tell you?"

"No!" giggled Myrtle of the keys. "I put two and two together meself. But it's gospel true. Why, when they come back from goin' out in a taxi, and she went to her room to tidy her hair and get her suit-case, there was rice on the floor! Rice! Besides — I knew it, anyhow."

There was no change on Meredith's face; no paling of the bronze-burned skin. He did not break off the conversation and hurry away, one arm thrown over his eyes. Instead, he remarked to Myrtle: "You're a pretty girl, Myrtle; no wonder you know so much about weddings. When's your own coming off, eh?"

A man must pinch a girl's arm, by all the rules of the game, when he makes such an enquiry.

"Go on!" giggled Myrtle, and immediately ran away, so that he could not have followed her advice even if he had been desirous of doing so.

Having thus "saved his face" Meredith turned into his room, bolted the door, sat down on a chair, and looked steadily at his boots for fifteen minutes. At the end of that time he got up, said "Damn her!" and went down to the lift and out.

It was in his mind more or less all day that he had cut the Violet Lady completely out of his existence, and also had forgotten her completely. At intervals he told himself that she was nothing to him; she would never touch his life again.

IN THE meantime, the *Morinda*, running steadily north, carried in one of her deck cabins Mr. and Mrs. Lancelot Packer, who had taken train and Just managed to pick up the ship at Brisbane.

On the boat deck, right aft, is the place for a quiet talk — for a talk that must not be overheard. It is true that nobody on the *Morinda* would have tried to eavesdrop on a newly-married couple, obviously fond of one another. But there was that between Mr. and Mrs. Lance Packer that had naught to do with dears and darlings.

Sitting on a sail-covered locker, looking down on the second-class deck, where the pigs and the poultry, and the people who are "broke," journey all together, the Packers talked. They had found out by now that they were an amazingly congenial pair, and Mrs. Lance had lost all regret for Meredith's possibly wider prospects. Something within her told her that he would have been fussy and faddy; probably the sort of man who would want you to keep all your little pie-crust promises as if they really mattered; who would make great eyes at you if you told a harmless fib. "Gee! but that highbrow stuff does give me the willy-willies," she confided to her mate, in a burst of Americanese that was not quite so accurate as she fancied it.

"That's right," agreed Packer, on general principles. He was never quite sure what Maddie meant when she began to talk like a "best seller," though he liked it on the whole.

Maddie reflected for a minute, looking out, without seeing anything, at the prospect of the Glass House Mountains, away off on the golden coast of Queensland. The sum of her reflections was that it was a bit of a handicap to a woman to be good— Good with a capital letter— as she was. Perhaps another kind, a trifle worse, would have been more successful with Meredith. Of course, she had had him on a string; she knew that— but though she could have made him marry her by holding up a finger, she could not, with all the fingers of both hands, and the length of her tongue to boot, get him to tell her any more than he had told about the mysterious valley. He had assured her, laughing (and Maddie liked the look of blue eyes wrinkled up with laughter in a hard brown face) that there wasn't anything to tell. Pressed, morally and physically, he had first tried to kiss her, and then, when she wouldn't let him— because she was good, one must remember that— he had, still laughing, overwhelmed her with a flood of mining technicalities. He wouldn't even let drop a word about his business in Sydney. It came upon little Maddie, just then, that the men of the wilderness were neither so soft nor so simple as they— quite unjustifiably — made you think.

She had, in order to punish him, deliberately left him under the impression that she "meant something"— to use her own term— and had then taken delight in going off without a word. There was reason for the hurry beyond Madeline's desire to land her fish safely. Packer had, at the last minute, decided to catch up the *Morinda* via Brisbane, and get to Papua ahead of Meredith who had definitely abandoned his passage by the steamer.

"One can easily find his carriers, and get to the place somehow," he said. "I don't know what the deuce he's up to in Sydney, and I don't care. Gold's gold. Are you sure it was nuggets, Mad?"

For Madeline, greatly daring, had contrived to stalk the explorer once, for half a morning; had seen him go into a bank, and open the mouth of a little canvas sack, before the interested eyes of an official; had, disappointedly, watched him retire to some inner fastness with his sack— but not till she had caught the rough shining of golden lumps and grains inside it. After, she had chanced on a distant view of him, going into a George Street shop. She did not dare to follow him there; it was too open— but she had taken note of the position of the shop, and, later on, had gone in to try and find out what she could. It was— of all things— a rubber goods shop, an immense place, dealing in everything rubber from fire-engine fittings down to elastic bands for letters. Maddie, with what she felt to be great presence of mind, had asked the clerk who came forward if the tall gentleman who just left had ordered his raincoat to be sent home for him or not, and if he had left any message about a coat for her. The clerk, regretfully, couldn't answer; he hadn't served the gentleman. The assistant manager— would the lady kindly ask him?

The assistant manager was of another kidney. He eyed Madeline up and down, and said that the customer she referred to had not purchased any coat, or left any message. "Not a coat?" twittered Madeline, very sweetly. " But what did he—" This was to have been the key of the situation; the assistant was to have mentioned, of course, what Meredith did buy. Instead, he only asked her, rather curtly, if he could serve her with anything. She bought a bathing cap that she did not want, and went out, her nails clenched tight inside her gloves. Brute!

Packer, her Packer, soothed her blistered vanity. He was eager to know what she had to tell; he made her repeat it more than once. "Nuggets," he said to himself, lovingly. And— "Partridge's shop"— couldn't have been rubber coats or boots, he never wears them. Sluicing tackle? Couldn't have been that, either, for a place chock full of rivers. Rubber canoe? No— bottom would be ripped out of her in two shakes; all those western rivers are full of snags." He could not make it out. "Went to the bank first with his gold," he said. "Big order, evidently; he had to get the cash. He must have wanted something expensive. What the devil— oh, what the devil, Maddie, could it have been?"

"I wish we knew," said little Mrs. Packer, uneasily. "I feel sure it's important. Are you going to make a try as soon as you land? "

"Rather. My leave isn't up yet; I have another two months, but I'll go back to work at once, and start a long patrol inland. The place isn't in my division, but I don't know who's likely to tell, once I'm ten days back of the coast. You see, if I make a patrol of it, I shan't have to pay carriers, and I can take my armed police with me; it won't cost me anything at all."

"Would the Government let you?"

"The Government," said Packer calmly, "won't be asked. The Government will get a nice little report of a patrol, if I don't pull the thing off, and nobody will be any the worse. If I do pull it off I shall be fired for using Government police and carriers on my own business, and I shan't care a little hang."

"I do think you're clever," fluted Madeline. "I am glad I married you." She felt this was indeed the kind of man to stand between the world and a poor little widow; she could not call herself a widow now; curious— she rather missed the pathetic name; it had done such good service. Well, Lance was the kind of man to take care of her, anyhow.

"What do you suppose," demanded Packer, ramming down the tobacco in his pipe with a leisurely finger, "was the exact size of the nuggets that you saw? "

THREE WEEKS afterwards, Mrs. Lancelot, left alone on the station, was finding, in the immense, silent mornings, in the empty afternoons, when the sea thrashed unceasingly upon the beach, and the palms were never done with their lonely, idle thrumming upon the iron roof of her house, full time to realize just what was this life of a Papuan magistrate's wife, into which she had so joyfully flung herself. There could be for her no easy lazy life in a Sydney flat, among the other "semi-detached" wives— Packer, with post-marital frankness, had told her he was head over ears in debt to "B.P's.," and could hardly afford her tucker in New Guinea. There was, for the same reason, no chance of spending the long months of his absence in a Port Moresby hotel. Her new husband, hardened by years of risk and deprivation, laughed at her fears of the country and the natives, her almost tearful dismay over tinned train-oil butter, tinned milk, tinned meats that were variously and beautifully labelled but that tasted, every one, when you came to eat them, exactly like stewed string. He told her she would be lucky if she saw a salad this time three years hence, and that if she couldn't eat yam she had better try 'tato, for English potatoes were fivepence a pound in "Port," and his salary wouldn't run to it. He was very fond of her, very kind in his own way; he mortgaged the last of his credit to supply her with groceries during his absence, and cut down his own stuff to do it. He left his second-best police-sergeant with her, and a dozen constables, all with large furry heads, all dressed in braided blue serge jumpers and tunics, like Victorian ladies going in to bathe. He told her what to do if anyone came along the coast looking for him; he explained to her that the mission was only fourteen miles away, and that she could run over there any time she liked in the whaleboat; besides, there were plantations farther along, not two days off.

Oh, she'd be all right; people got used to being a bit lonely in Papua. And he kissed her, and kissed her again, and tramped away, waving his hand, at the

head of his train of carriers and armed police. And Madeline Packer saw them all wind off into a crack in the great forest, like ants creeping into a wall, and there was nothing left but silence, and the sea, and the wind blowing under the thatch.

Then began for her the sadness of the white wife left alone; the crying in corners; the lethargy that would not let her rise and dress of a morning, but kept her lying till high noon, staring under her mosquito net at the sun-rays slowly painting the bedroom wall; the meals that she could not trouble to order, or to eat when the houseboy brought them, badly cooked and served; the senseless, useless journeying, many times a day, to the top of the little ridge near the station, whence she could command the coast on both sides, and see if anyone was coming. There never was anyone. Nor did she take the whaleboat, as Packer had cheerfully assumed she would, and go to look for company. Town bred, timid, she looked with horror upon the restless seas that fronted the station bungalow; she trembled at the very thought of going out among those mad white horses, sinking and soaring helplessly in a world of beaten foam. It was only the ordinary, steady south-east sea, which no resident of Papua fears, though every traveller from the westward curses its inconvenience with a heart and a half. But to wretched Maddie, it was all the terror of all the seas of the world, pressing on one lonely little heart.

After long waiting came fear; after fear, despair. And at the end, a messenger. He came to the house in the evening, sundown, so that she had not any warning of his arrival. The natives saw him and raised a cry, but she did not understand what they were saying, and when the tall, thin figure clad in khaki suddenly appeared in the light of the lamps before her, she dropped the book she had been trying to read, and screamed as if she had seen a spirit. It was only a moment till she was on her feet; her arms were out, her lips ready to cry, "Lance, Lance!" before they melted into his....

The figure spoke; it came nearer, into the full light.

"Mrs. Packer—" it began. Madeline's arms dropped down. She stood where she had risen from her chair, staring. The man was Meredith.

PACKER found the first part of his journey easy enough.

He wanted a score or two of carriers; he got them without difficulty, because he sent his police to fetch them— an act entirely illegal, since he was not on Government business, but the district had only four white men in it, and none of them was within fifty miles of him, so who was going to tell?

Thinking one might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, in case one did get found out, Packer stole his sheep by ordering the police to find and catch Meredith's carriers, while they were on the job, and to bring them in

irons, if they would not come without. Five terrified inland natives, heavily ironed, limped in with the rest of the carriers. They confessed to having carried for the white man; they did not know it was wrong; they wanted to know what the Chief meant to do about it. If he thought of killing them, they begged to point out that they were in very poor condition, and not worth the eating of such a nobleman. Wild eyes glaring from black-painted circles, betel-stained teeth clicking with fear, they stood in front of him, begging clemency.

Packer told them royally that he did not want to eat them, did not even want to kill them at present. Whether he would kill them or not later on depended on themselves. He wanted them to lead him to the place where the white man had found the gold.

At this the natives raised a howl, and began stamping and leaping in their irons. They did not know where the white man had found gold. They did not know what gold was. They had never heard of the Valley of Never-Come-Back, and anyone that went to it was sure to die, and they had not been there, and they would not go again. No, they did not understand what the white man was saying through his interpreter. They did not understand anything. They wanted to go home.

"You think they know?" asked Packer of his black sergeant, a Kiwai who feared nothing on earth or sea.

The sergeant spat on the ground, to show his disgust.

"Sir, they are black swine," he said. "They too much fright."

"What's the matter with the place, anyway?" asked Packer.

The sergeant flung a few questions at the leanest, wildest, most miserable of the captured men, and replied, saluting:

"Sir, they say too much very bad devil stop along that place."

Packer swore disgustedly.

"You and your devils," he said. "Devils, devils! To hear any of you talk, you'd think there were as many devils as mosquitoes in New Guinea. You'd think the air was thick with them. Everything's devil with you, from whooping cough to earthquakes. Can't you get anything more out of him?"

"No, sir. This bushman very dam ignoran' fellow. This bushman too much fright. I think he see some devil along bush what bite him. I not savvy him talk very well."

"Can't make anything out of that," mused Packer to himself. "All their blooming devils bite, or strangle, or poke people's eyes out. Just have to carry on, sergeant."

"Yessir."

"Bring them along with us, and take their irons off when we're an hour or two out. See they don't get away."

"Yessir."

WEEKS— many weeks— later, all that was left of Packer's expedition trailed slowly, painfully into camp, through the rain of a mountain night. It was cold; they had been climbing for many days, and the steamy warmth of the plains was far behind. All day they had been struggling through the moss-stifled forests of the high main range, where trees are veiled and furred in moss, all clammy-wet, and fallen logs are wrapped in shrouds of emerald, and a man walks, not on solid ground, but on a treacherous, rotting carpet of mosses big as ferns, that may at any moment give way, and drop him neck-deep into a chaos of moss and mud. Lovely beyond description are these moss forests; hateful beyond telling.

Spiritless, the carriers laid down their loads, and trailed tired limbs in search of logs to split for the fire. There were not many of them left, even as there was not much left for many or few to carry. Once again the man-eating tribes of the mountains had come down on the white man who threatened their homes, and had attacked Packer and his camp in the dark. They found him better prepared than others had been— Packer, who knew by now that he was certain to be dismissed with disgrace on his return, was minded to get as much use out of the armed police as he could, while he had them; and he had ordered them to fire without scruple. Two or three carriers and four police were killed in the first rush of the cannibals, but after that bullets and bayonets told against spears and stone clubs, and the mountain men retired, and left free passage to the white man and his train.

Packer, who had risked his life as freely as anyone, did not trouble himself about the losses. He thought he could explain when he got down to the coast, at least so far as would keep him out of serious trouble— dismissal, of course, being now sure— and, in any case, it was a much-wanted relief to the stores. They were, for days after, not so short of provisions.

But on this wet, black night, far in the unknown country, when they camped on the spine of a ridge among wind-beaten trees that looked down upon a gulf of stars, food was short again; warmth was short; safety, comfort, assurance of any kind, absent. Packer was almost certain that this great ridge, on the tip of which he had camped, must be very near the valley from which no man came back. Everything proved it— the distance, the lie of the country, the strange absence for days past of any signs of native life; most of all, the increasing terror of the carriers, who had to be watched all night by himself and the police in turn, lest they should steal what was left of the provisions, run away, and condemn the whole party to certain death. And still, he could get no hint out of them as to what the dangers might be that lay ahead. He

knew by now that his interpreter did not really know the language of Meredith's carriers, as he had professed he did. Nobody knew their language. No one could tell what they said or thought about anything, though it appeared— from the likeness of one solitary word to a similar word in the coast language— that the chief subject of their conversation, night and day, was devils.

The rain had ceased after supper, and the stars showed clearly; above the mighty gulf that lay below, Packer, enjoying the comfort of his pipe, leaned against a tree and talked to the Kiwai. It was not discipline, but discipline might be hanged; he'd have little use for it in future, however things might go.

"Morning time," he said, "we go down."

"Yessir. Morning time, go down. I very glad we finish this go up."

"What you think we find along this place?"

"Me no savvy, sir. Me take you orders."

Packer, drawing at his pipe, watched the immovable, Jewish-nosed profile against the sky; the broad, drilled shoulders. "The man's braver than I am," he thought. "If I were he, I wouldn't face it. He believes in all these devils just as much as the carriers do. I wonder what they are, anyhow? The sooner we find out the better. This is a queer place— fertile as you like, but not a sign of a native tribe within ten days, big mountains draining on these lower ones till they're sunk in moss and stuff, and not a drop of water but what you dig for, though it rains fit to drown you half the afternoon. Wonder what a geologist would make of it all."

The Kiwai, rolling a banana leaf cigarette, bent his bushy head to get a light. He seemed very quiet, very well contented with his world. He had to obey orders. Once in a way he scratched himself, and fidgeted. The carriers, underneath their rude bush shelters, could be heard scratching too, and whimpering like dogs.

"Scrub itch," thought Packer, rubbing his hand, which burned and tingled. "But I didn't think there was any here. Besides, it ought to be under one's clothes. If we were at a lower altitude I'd almost think— Gad it is though; it's mosquitoes. Well, you never can account for the little devils." He slapped his neck, viciously. The Kiwai shuffled his bare legs.

"Plenty muskeet, sir," he ventured.

"Better sling your net," said Packer. "Thought we'd done with them a week ago."

The Kiwai, smoking his banana leaf cigarette, seemed to consider things in general. Presently he took the cigarette out of his mouth and thriftily extinguished it against a log for future use.

"I no like, sir," was the sum of his thoughts.

"What don't you like? "

But the sergeant-interpreter seemed to have lost his tongue.

"Well, sergeant," laughed Packer, "I never thought to see you afraid of anything."

"I no 'fraid, sir. I take you orders."

"Well, you said you were afraid."

"No, sir. Me say, I no like."

"Damn you, what don't you like?"

The Kiwai got up from his place, saluted, and walked silently away.

"That puts the top on it," said Packer, biting at the end of his pipe.

He sat a little longer by himself on the rim of the ridge, looking down at nothing at all, in the dark, and listening to the low singing of some river that ran away, unseen, a long way down.

"The place is getting on my nerves," he thought. He was familiar with the effects of the lonely mountain country on civilized man and his over-strung nervous system. "By and by," thought Packer, "I'll be seeing things that aren't there, and hearing— Jove! what was that? Have I begun already?"

He listened, sitting very still, and keeping his breath close held. Very, very far away, thin in the distance, there seemed to be a sound of— music? Not actual music, but surely musical notes— long-drawn, continuous, high and low curiously mingled.

Packer did not think he had heard anything like it before, but he could not be sure. He had a kind of half-formed, puzzling fancy that there was something unpleasant connected with the sound— its associations, if it had any, in his sub-conscious mind, were not agreeable. But he did not know at all what it was. He sat a long time listening to it. It never varied. He noticed, as he watched, that the various creatures of the night were coming out, as they came, nightly, when the camp had settled down to quiet; a wallaby hopped through the forest; a python, somewhere near, drew yards of scaly coils through dead leaves and fallen branches with a sound like tissue paper softly folded; birds of the dark rose silently and planed above his head. He saw that they all took flight backwards up the range; not one of them launched itself into the sweep of sky and stars that overhung the valley.

Turning into his tent, with its mosquito net slung on poles, and its rough camp bed unfolded, Packer was haunted, till he fell asleep, by the odd, uncharacteristic phrase of the Kiwai sergeant— "Sir, I no like..."

When morning came, unexpected difficulties came with it. The carriers mutinied, desperately, and with a determination that nothing could shake. From the first look-down into the valley at dawn they seemed to know where they were, and it was plain that they were struck with panic by the knowledge.

Packer, an eye at his telescope, examined the valley, so far as its sloping mountain walls allowed. He could see nothing to excite fear. The sides were irregular and steep, perhaps a couple of thousand feet in depth; the valley seemed to be bag-shaped at one end, without exit, and to follow, at the other, the ordinary winding course of a mountain gorge. There was plenty of vegetation to be seen, so there could not be any poisonous gases about; that was a solution that had occurred to him. But now it must be given up, as also must the idea of some exceptionally plucky and dangerous inland tribe. Clearly, no native lived within many days of the Valley of Never-Come-Back.

It was not the business of a morning to go down into that valley and explore it; probably not the business of a week. Packer wanted his provisions, his tents; he wanted boys to clear the thick bush for him, and more boys, if he met with signs of gold, to work with pick and shovel. But it seemed that he was to have none of these things. The carriers, one and all, refused with violence. Some of them flung themselves face downwards on the ground, weeping and howling; some screamed insults at him in their native tongue; one or two even seized their clearing knives and made as if they would attack him. At this, the six police came forward and flung up their rifles, shouting as loudly as the carriers. Neither understood the other, but the unarmed men backed down.

Packer saw that he could not, by any means short of murder, force his carriers into the valley, and at that he shrank. He thought he had only to give the word for his police to fall upon them, kill one or two, and drive the others on.... But one wasn't a murderer, if one wasn't quite a saint, and anyhow—was one really sure of the police themselves?

The answer to this was swift in coming. It appeared that one was not. Hanging together, muttering and looking over their shoulders, with dark sullen eyes, and blubber lips stuck out, the six police, after reducing the carriers to quiet, began to show that they had a little affair of their own to consider, and that they were by no means anxious to attempt the valley. Packer ordered, bullied, to no result. One man only stuck by him, the Kiwai sergeant.

"I no like," he repeated stolidly, again and again; and afterwards, "I take you order, sir." It seemed as if he had forgotten every phrase of pidgin English save those two, that represented, in few and stumbling words, his fear and loyalty.

"By God ! sergeant, you're a good-plucked one," swore Packer. "If I get the gold, you shall have enough of it to buy you a whaleboat of your own." He knew that, to a native from Kiwai, the possession of a whale-boat represented the very sum and crown of human ambition.

"I no like," repeated the Kiwai, like a minute gun going off. Then, suddenly, as they began to descend the slope together, the five remaining police keeping guard over the carriers, "Forty feet, sir? "

"Yes," said Packer, understanding. "A forty-foot boat, with two masts, and sails, and oars, and real brass rowlocks."

The Kiwai let out a wild chuckle, and then became strangely grave. It seemed that he was reckoning up his chances of securing the forty-foot whaleboat with two masts, and that he found them small.

Cursing the carriers as he went. Packer resolved to see what he could of the valley in a day, and return to the camp at night-time.

"It's all bunkum about anything being wrong with the place," he thought. "Those tribes we passed through are enough to account for it. I suppose they ambushed everyone who came along.... Except Meredith."

He found it necessary to assure himself of this again and again as he made his slow, difficult way down the precipices humming in and guarding the mysterious valley. The Kiwai was almost yellow with fear; his lips, in spite of the moist heat, seemed cracked and dry, and he kept licking them continually. Every now and then he stopped to look about him, hanging on to a branch with one hand, and peering anxiously down into the valley that still seemed so far below. Packer, who kept a good look-out on his own account, could not disguise from himself that there was something queer about the place. No birds, for one thing— he had not seen one, since he started, and there ought to have been many, flying startled up from the valley as the sergeant and he crashed noisily downward. And, when they stopped to rest for a minute, he could almost have sworn he heard that curious, musical sound, like, and yet not like, something that he thought he ought to know, and did not.

Of a sudden the Kiwai let out a barking cry.

"Woof!" he shouted, and with one frantic hand began pointing into the valley at a small clear space of gravel a long way below.

Packer looked, but could see nothing till he took the telescope. He gave one glance and dropped it again. He thought— though he could not be sure— that there were bones, white and bare, shining in the sun among the boulders and gravel of what seemed to be an ancient river bed.

"Just as likely as not it's nothing," he thought. "And whether it is or not, I'm going, so why worry?.. I believe they were too small to be men's bones. Probably pigs'."

They went down and down. The air, that had been cool on the mountain top, now grew oppressively wet and warm; sweat streamed in runnels down the Kiwai's dark legs; Packer's shirt stuck to his back. "There must be a deuced sight of water somewhere here, though there isn't a river apparently," he

thought. "I suppose all that frightful moss-hag country drains right down into it. Lord ! isn't it hot? But I never heard of the heat killing anyone in Papua yet. Or the mosquitoes— though heaven knows they're bad enough." The Kiwai and himself, for the last half hour, had been ceaselessly beating themselves with green boughs, trying to find some relief from the swarms of fierce mosquitoes that attacked them. They were not large mosquitoes, they were the small, black mosquito, soft, easily caught and crushed, and, when crushed, smelling of fleas; that is the worst, most persistent, and most irritating of all the many mosquitoes that torment black men and white in Papua.

And now the real nature of the noise that had been puzzling him so long became plain at last to Packer. It was the war-cry of mosquitoes, billions and trillions strong— mosquitoes in such numbers as he had never dreamed of. They clung to his eyelids in bunches, they clustered in his nostrils, they hung like hanks of black beads upon the lobes of his ears, his lips were swelled up as if he had been fighting. His arms and neck felt as if they were bathed in fire. He struck and struck, drove them away, and felt them settle again instantly in larger swarms. If it was ill with him it was still worse with the Kiwai, whose bare legs and feet were showing angry red through the brown skin, and whose dark jumper attracted the little tormentors in thousands.

Packer swore fiercely at them and went determinedly on. It seemed as if he were going down into a solid mass of mosquitoes, packed like herrings at shoal time. His blood was full of the venom, and he felt the wild feverishness that is brought on by these wholesale poisonings mounting and mounting in his mind. He could have killed, in that moment; could have slashed a man to pieces with an axe, and enjoyed it.

But instead of a solid, tangible enemy, on level ground, there were the myriad tiny, winged devils filling the air; there was the precipice slope of the valley; there was, not so very far away, the bottom of the valley where he had seen the white bones shining in the sun where he was now certain the famous gold must lie....

Packer, like most old inhabitants of Papua, was something of a prospector. He had looked for gold before now, and if he had not found it he had learned a good deal about the places where it was likely to be found. And the rocks down which he was climbing, the formation of the ranges, the look of the old dried river bed, the shape and run of the whole valley spelt, to the practised hunter, Gold!

"A jeweller's shop it'll be," he panted, beating wildly with his green branch at the mosquitoes. A jeweller's shop, in the mining talk of Papua, means a small, easily worked find of very high value. Jewellers' shops do not make big fields, but they enrich the men who find them.

"Throw a stone down, sergeant. I want to judge how deep it is," he ordered. The Kiwai obediently picked up a lump of stone, and poised it. In the instant, while he was judging his distance, Packer let out a shout, and seized his arm.

"Give it to me," he cried. The Kiwai gave the stone, and Packer, holding it up to the sunlight, for a moment forgot even to chase away the terrible mosquitoes. The native, stamping and beating, watched him.

"Gold!" said Packer, solemnly. "Colours all through. Sergeant, do you hear? This one is gold— good gold My word, I find one proper big lot down there. Lord, Lord!" he went on to himself. "If that's what it's like on the sides of this valley, the bottom must be stiff with it. Damn the mosquitoes, they're killing me!" He beat about with his branch.

"Yessir," said the Kiwai suddenly. "He killem altogether man."

"Oh, rats!" answered Packer, coughing, and spitting up a mouthful of mosquitoes. It seemed to him as if he were breathing mosquitoes now. The yelling hum was beyond anything he had ever imagined; since they were as bad as this in the daytime, he could well understand how a man might hear the terrible chorus at its worst— if worse could be— from the top of the range at night. Devils— devils— the natives were right.

"I'm losing my head," he thought. "Damn it, the brutes turn one's blood into pure poison." He felt on fire all over— like this must the martyrs have felt when they were being burned to death.

Death!

The thought halted him in his tracks. He stopped, and his mouth fell open. Into it a million mosquitoes dashed. Packer choked and spat them out; he did not dare to curse; he kept his lips tight shut when he could breathe again. His eyes were swelling so that the lids began to come down over the pupils. He'd be blind presently; so would the Kiwai, and then— then they would lose their way, and then—

He remembered, with singular accuracy, that one short glimpse of the white bones in the valley. He had never really thought they were the bones of pigs.

"You go back, sergeant— go back while you can," he gasped, with his fingers across his mouth.

"You going back, sir?"

Packer shook his head. He wasn't done yet.

"I stop along you, sir," choked the Kiwai, spitting mosquitoes. His great black and white eyes were all bloodshot, his face was swelling out of shape. He stamped and danced ceaselessly on his bare, swollen legs.

Packer had no breath to say what he thought. He went on down. It became impossible to think, for a moment, of anything but the torment of the mosquitoes. Behind closed lips, he found himself muttering half-crazed ejaculations, " God, this is awful. Can't stand it. Going through fire— live fire. This is awful. This is how they... Awful, this is awful!"...

He felt he was getting near breaking strain— and at the same moment he saw, through half-closed eyes, that the bed of the valley was at hand. He stumbled and fell over a root; the Kiwai caught him by the slack of his trousers, and saved him from falling the rest of the distance. Packer stayed where he was for a moment, half crouched on the ground. There was a momentary release from the torture, as he buried his face in a mass of fern. He pulled the fern out by the roots; as he rose, it might be useful for beating off the brutes....

His thoughts stopped short, as a clock stops when suddenly jarred. The fern was in his hand; its long roots trailed downwards in the air, and as they hung, gold— thick gold dust, pure and sparkling— dropped from them.

Packer gave a yell, stopped to choke, shouted again, and motioned to the Kiwai. The latter turned his bloodshot eyes on the fern, and then pointed down to the ground. Where his feet, and Packer's, had disturbed the soil in the scramble of the fall, pale sparkles answered to the sunlight. The ground was full of gold.

"If it's like this here, what's the creek like?... Awful, my God!... this is torment— I can't— I— There'll be all the gold that ever.... Yes, I will, I will, if it kills me. This is killing.... Gold— heaps of it."...

For the second time his feet gave way under him; he could only see out of one eye now, and things were getting blurred. He fell again, and this time the Kiwai was not quick enough. Packer struck, turned over, and landed in the bed of the dry creek.

He thought he must have been stunned for a moment. When he opened the one eye that still remained fit for use, there was nothing to be seen above him but a black cloud of mosquitoes, swarming and settling down. The screaming of the terrible horde was like the sound of steam whistles. He tried to get up, and found one leg was useless.

"That's the finish," he thought to himself. "The dead finish." Merciful insensibility seemed to float down upon him; through it he could vaguely hear the footsteps of the Kiwai, running— running hard and stumblingly down the bed of the creek.

"Left me," was Packer's last thought, before the world went out.

HE AWOKE to indescribable agony; every inch of his body felt as if it had been skinned with a blunt knife. He could not see, but his eyes were not

suffering like the rest of him; something cool was touching them, deliciously. His ears were terribly swollen; it was hard to be sure if one heard anything—but there seemed to be people talking. Packer wondered if he was dead...

He found he could open one eye.

It showed him the walls of a small room, semi-transparent walls, through which you could see sky and trees. Two people were near him; one of them was a white man, who was bathing his eyes, and the other was—

Surely he was dead after all, and this was a devil— an old-fashioned devil, of the kind you saw in pictures when you were a child. The devil was big and shapeless; it had an immense head, with huge glaring eyes; it had not got hoofs, but its feet were formless and clubbed. Packer murmured something, he did not know what. The white man bent down over him, and looked at him.

"You're all right now," he said. There was something odd in his voice. Packer, through the mist that obstinately clung about his mind, said to himself dully that the man was telling lies about something, but he did not know what. The man was holding whisky to his mouth; it burned and hurt; he wanted to push it away, but his hands would not come up when he ordered them to do so. A little of it went down his protesting throat. The mist cleared somewhat after that, and he knew— for a moment— that Meredith had somehow got there— wherever "there" was— from Sydney, and was standing close over him, staring in his face.... Years afterwards it seemed, there was the touch of a hand feeling his wrist; another, at his side. With an enormous effort, he opened his one eye, and saw, "as in a glass darkly," the Kiwai feeling his heart, and Meredith beside him, on his knees, praying....

THE PIONEER of Papua has many hard things to do and to face, but Meredith thought he had never had a harder task set him by fate than that of breaking to Mrs. Packer the news that her man, like other women's men, was not coming back to her; that the cruel, unknown lands had taken him, as they had taken so many before. He made it as short as he could; he told her quickly, without the cruelty of "preparing," and steeled himself to endure her first wild distress, her snatching at unbelief, her slow despair when unbelief gave way. He left her with the native women for an hour or two, and came back when the worst of her sudden grief had spent itself, to answer the questions that he knew she would ask him.

Packer, he told her, had found the valley, even as he, Meredith, had found it. From what the Kiwai said, it seemed clear that Packer had been caught exactly as other men had been; that the amazing richness of the gold on the sides of the valley, and the certainty of finding wealth beyond all dreams in the river-bed below, had lured him down and down, till he was beyond going back.

Even if he had not met with the fall that flung him senseless on the river-bed, and left him unprotected for hours to the full attack of the mosquitoes while the Kiwai was going down the creek, he would not, in all probability, have been able to climb up the sides of the valley again. No one ever had done so, Meredith thought. As for himself, what had saved him on his first trip had been the self-restraint that had checked him, at the very first finding of gold, and had sent him up the range again, with gold in sight below him everywhere... only just in time. He had come back again from Sydney with a couple of rubber diving dresses, the kind that carries its own air supply, contained in a knapsack. He had brought a Thursday Island diver with him, and the two of them had prospected the bed of the creek, with a mosquito-proof house to change, sleep, and feed in. Yes, it was amazingly rich; but he needn't bother her with technical details. Yes, they knew what they were going to do; they were going to use poison gas on a large scale; nothing else would be of any use— you couldn't drain that country. No, of course, he had not gone by the same route as Packer; there was a much better one, which he had found coming back from his first trip. Enmity? How could she ask? Poor chap, he only wished Packer had got what he wanted; he would never have grudged him a share of it, if only he had come to him as man to man, and asked him what he had found— but that was all past. The carriers and police had joined his party; they all got back together. As for the Kiwai, undoubtedly he had done his best to save his master's life, by running down the creek on the bare chance of meeting natives, or finding a short way out. He could have got up the cliff again, in all probability, having a thicker skin than the white man; but he had not tried, he had stayed below and taken the hundredth chance. Reward him?

Certainly. Packer had promised him a whaleboat, and he, Meredith, would see that the sergeant got it.

"A— a whaleboat!" sobbed the widow— widow once more— behind her soaked handkerchief. "Do they?— what are they?"

"About a hundred pounds," answered Meredith.

Mrs. Packer seemed to meditate. She was quietening down now; she had had time to think that this man before her had been very much in love with her; that he was undisputed possessor of the biggest gold find ever made in New Guinea. And poor Lance after all....

She slipped her fingers through her hair, tidying it surreptitiously. She looked at Meredith, under long, wet eyelashes. And Meredith, to whom the death of Packer was a story of three weeks old, looked back at her, and felt a little ashamed of himself for the warmth of the sudden thrill that went through him. He broke into talk again, to hide it.

"I'll order the best boat that can be got in Sydney," he said, " and have it sent up by the next Morinda."

Mrs. Packer, a new handkerchief in her hand, wiped her eyes delicately, and cried a very little more. Then she looked up at Meredith. Her eyelashes were very long.

"Isn't that a lot of money to spend?" she said simply. "Surely a dinghy would do?"

As long as Madeline Packer remains upon this mortal world, she will never understand why it was that Meredith, who was once so terribly in love with her, never, after she was widowed, asked her to marry him.

2: Lost Wings

YOU KNOW the smell of the rubber matting in the saloon companion, and the narrow doorway opposite as you come in, blazing light at you, and the knees and shoe-tips of the other passengers, where they sit reading, humped on the lounges. You know it all— how that steamer world comes back in a rush to you, who have been long away from it, and how you realize that you have, after all, come home. The elbowing feel of your bunk, and the round glare beside— tight-compressed alley-ways, with mirrors in strange places— the old sense of laziness and leisure, wedded to a feeling of achievement, of important things being effortlessly done— how right it seems, how glad you are of it all.

Yet as the steamer shears her way to the high seas, and the great steel mountain, deck-terraced, funnel-crested, that lately rose so strong and still at the quay side, becomes a mere light, hollow toy in the hands of the Pacific— as the green of reef-water shades to Prussian blue of uncounted deeps— as you are off at last beyond doubt, off and away— something from that fast-receding shore begins to tug at your mind.

You think you have left or forgotten some matter ashore— a piece of luggage, a commission, a farewell. You cannot think what it may be, because you really finished with everything before you left. Yes, everything ! It can only be fancy.

But it pulls and pulls.

The strong sea-wind gets up and slaps you on the breast like an old, rough mate of yours who meets you gladly again. You press down your hat and lean to the steamer's roll while you seek a place for your deck chair. On the weather side, the large green island has become a little blue one; the palms prick up like pin-points. Oh ! it's far and far away now, and the wide seas lie before; and why do you feel— still, still— the pull of that tiny land— you who have done with it all....

David found me before long; he had been in our cabin putting away his gear. David and I are mining experts. We had been wanted in Naula; we had done what was wanted and were going away. He put his chair beside me and sat smoking, never saying a word, while the liner bucked and rolled through the big seas. There were other passengers on deck; a drummer or two, bound for Fiji, a brace of missionaries, one little woman, in a dull blue dress, who seemed to be travelling alone. Not many were "under hatches," in spite of the roll. Island folks are well seasoned to the ways of the unpeaceful Pacific.

I looked at all these and wished them dead, except the little blue woman; she seemed harmless, and she was not very young. If she had been eighteen,

tall, waisted like a palm tree, and bosomed as an island ship is bosomed when she spreads her curving royals to the wind— if she had had eyes like dark lagoons with the stars in them and a mouth like a fallen hibiscus flower, I should have fled from the salty, windy deck and gone to bury myself in the beetle-haunted dusk of the hole they called a smoking-room, where never woman comes to worry us, on the blessed island boats. Because then she would have reminded me....

But she was five-and-thirty or so, palish, slight, with hair that seemed to have been golden and was now only light in colour; with large grey-blue eyes that scanned the horizon curiously, almost as a sailor scans it.... I found myself thinking that she must have been much at sea to catch that look. I saw, when she walked, that she leaned to the motion of the steamer with the unconscious ease of one who has lived long on ships.

I was not curious about her, you must understand; she occupied my eyes, but not my mind. I said to myself, lazily— "Some captain's widow who used to travel with him," (it was odd that I should have thought so, was it not, seeing that she wore no mourning?), and settled down to my smoke. My pipe went out a good deal and I lit it several times; you know how it is— sometimes. And the steamer reeled up the sides of the waves, and "scended," which is not descending, but going crabwise down the valleys of them. And I thought and thought and thought, and kept re-lighting my pipe, and David didn't say a thing. You could not help loving David; he is forty-something, a big man very well made, with a certain likeable baldness, and a good Roman nose, and three strips of fur on his face, one big one above his well-shut mouth, and two, not so much smaller, over his good, very bright, very kind grey eyes. He stretches a leg out in front of him and looks at you a bit sidewise, and then takes to his pipe again, and you know he is damned sorry for you and won't bother.

It is a pity there are not more Davids. You women ought all of you to have one David each. A few of you have; you will recognize my description and feel so glad you have got a real David who is made of kindness from the little likeable bald spot on his crown to the long, sensible feet in his good boots. Some woman, who hasn't taken this David I speak of from me, his mate, has lost more than she knows by it.

At last the lunch bell rang and I got up to go and plaster my hair back with two brushes— because, no matter what has happened to you, twenty-six is twenty-six, and one doesn't see all the passengers in the first half-hour. And David— his other name is Shaw— took his pipe out of his mouth, looked at the bowl of it, and said, to the pipe apparently:

"She isn't worth it; nobody is, old man; buck up."

"Who told you I want bucking up? How do you want me to buck any more than I'm doing? What way are people expected to buck, and how does anyone know when they've bucked enough?" I asked.

He did not seem to hear me. He knocked the pipe on the edge of his deck chair, looked into the empty bowl, and then went on:

"Because, you see, black's black, even when it's cream, and you can't make an island girl the mother of your children— not to speak of the mistress of Kirwyn, when you get it."

"Who's a denigin' of it, Sairey?" I said.

He went on again— David has a way of answering what you think, while ignoring what you merely say.

"I've seen a lot of island girls— quarter, half, eighth and all the rest of it. I never saw one to match Ailala."

Now that was like David; another man would have run her down; but he knew that praise of her beauty was like oil on a burn, to my sore mind; and, being a man, he admired her himself— though not as I had— to my bitter cost.

"I don't think there is another girl like her this side of Tahiti. An old Greek coin, it is, when she looks away, side face, with that curling hair that rushes back, and the ribbon she ties in it. Beautiful figure, too— but that's more common. You have pluck, you know, because of course...."

"I guessed that," I said, rather hastily. I was not coxcomb enough to say right out what we both knew.

We were standing now, leaning, east, west, east, west, to the steamer's ceaseless roll.

"Some absentees from lunch, I bet," commented David. "Come on and have a peck."

"Of course," I answered loudly. "I'm dashed hungry." But the food, when I got it, wasn't good; it had no taste— been in cold storage too long; that is the way with steamer food. I am an excellent sailor; nevertheless my plate went away piled up. David didn't seem to see. He insisted on my coming to play bridge afterwards with himself and a couple of the drummers. We played for more money than I've ever seen David give in to. I won a good bit. He seemed better pleased than if he had won himself, and the day went on, bit by bit, and hour by hour. And there was dinner, and then night, when one could not talk, or smoke, or play cards, or eat, or, least of all, sleep. One could only lie in hell, and think.

For Ailala had other lovers, and if she had not secured me, Gerald Kirwyn, mining expert and next heir to a very good old property, there were plenty of lesser fry. And I knew, as clearly as if I had seen and heard the thing which had not happened yet, that she would accept one of them.

About that time, I think if I had been a millionaire, and not afraid of being put down a lunatic (which most millionaires are), I should have bargained with the captain to put back to Naula town. But no one ever does do such things, even when he can. So the *Avatele* rolled her way along, unchecked, towards far Fiji, and I kept on frying in hell, and thinking of Ailala, with her Greek-coin face, married to this or that good match. For Ailala, though she was said to be "coloured," was a girl carefully brought up by the elderly white couple who had adopted her; there was no question of light island loves with my beauty of Naula town, and if I, held by the thought of Kirwyn and Kirwyn's county folk, had been madly scrupulous, so were not others.

It was a short run to Fiji, but I don't care to say what bores the passengers were— all except my old David and, oddly, the little woman in the dull blue dress. It turned out that we were bound for the same place, an uninhabited island lying far from steamer tracks, and reached by schooner or cutter from Suva. I don't know which was the more astonished, Mrs. Pirani or Shaw and I, when we discovered that Remora was our common objective.

"But what can you want there?" we all three said at once. I won't pretend that the words were identical; still, that was the general trend of the cry we all set up. Mrs. Pirani— the captain had introduced us to her by that name, but she was obviously English— got hold of the conversation first; I suppose we allowed her.

"What can anybody want with Remora but myself?" she demanded a little imperiously. She had pretty hair, when you looked at it, loose and yet satiny; and I could imagine that those blue, pale eyes of hers had once been lovely, before tears washed out their light. You could not look at her twice and doubt that she was one of those who wear the "sorrow's crown of sorrow."

Because of this, I suppose, she knew that things had been going ill with me, and was specially kind to me in a hundred little womanly ways that you could scarcely notice. She remembered, just after she had spoken, and said to me, more gently:

"But I suppose you are going to do some business there; I hope you'll find it interesting."

"Not so very," answered Shaw. "We've only got to poke about a bit, and go home."

I may say that we were representing a company that wanted to sell Remora to the Fulcrum people for copra making. They wanted to be sure no minerals of value were included in the deal. Years ago, before our company acquired the place with a dozen others, there had been rumours of something valuable hidden away there, but if there was, no one had ever found it, had ever, even, put a name to what it was. It was just the silly kind of yarn that

means nothing at all; however, since Shaw and I were bound to go to Naula anyhow, they thought we might as well come on a bit further.

"May one ask what you want with it, Mrs. Pirani?" I suggested, in my turn. I was perhaps a bit curious— not very— I was too sick of life just then to feel anything strongly. But I thought one might as well know.

Mrs. Pirani's eyes took on a strange, shadowy expression as of one who looks upon "old unhappy, far-off things" before she answered:

"I'm trying to find my husband."

Shaw and I felt embarrassed. They had told us on the ship that "the little widow was a shingle short," and, though we had not believed it, her reply seemed to suggest, at least, a curious attitude of mind. For she had been widowed twenty years— so it was said— and there had never been any particular doubt about her husband's death, except the small uncertainty that, for a time, attends the death of anyone who meets his end by drowning. Pirani had been drowned; and if he hadn't been, it was plain he would have given some sign of it in all the years that had run since the beginning of the century, and here was his widow "trying to find him."

"Oh !" she said, immediately sensing our doubts,

"I don't mean that I think he may not be dead. I'm obliged to suppose that he is— dead. But there are things in connection with his— death— that want clearing up, and I am going to spend the rest of my life till I die in trying to clear them."

"But Remora—" I suggested.

"It was in Remora," she said in a kind of hushed tone, "that we spent our married life; we were married on the ship and landed there on our wedding day. All my happiness is there."

"He died on Remora?"

"I don't know." She would say no more.

TWO WEEKS later, Shaw, Mrs. Pirani and I stood on the beach of Remora Island watching the little auxiliary schooner that had brought us from Fiji go plunking and smelling away. A pile of bags and cases lay on the beach; half a dozen Fijian boys, brought on from Suva, lounged nonchalantly staring about them and combing their upright hair till it stood more stiffly than ever. The sun was beginning to set above a wide, lonesome lagoon enclosed in the circle of the island; man-o'-war and bo'sun birds, planing and crying, showed dark against the orange of the west. There were palms and palms, inside and outside the atoll, fringing it so that it looked, as one has said, like a great green wreath flung down upon the water. No native huts were visible, no brown canoe furrowed the flawless jade of the inner lagoon or rode the wild, white

horses that tossed their manes upon the seaward beach. It was a Robinson Crusoe island, void of human life.

"I think," said little Lucy Pirani, furling her sun-umbrella, "that the shortest way to the house is along the inside beach; it will probably be overgrown."

"House?" we said together.

"Yes, I have been here once or twice since the old days. Theo built well, our little place was standing when last I— you can see it now"— as we ploughed side by side through the deep sand. "That whitish block. The roof probably wants mending, but our boys can do it in an hour to-morrow morning, and I don't think it will rain."

We found the house, built of sawn coral blocks from the reef, fairly weathertight, and our camping gear furnished its two rooms well enough. The boys ran up a shelter for themselves. At a table made out of packing-cases, Shaw, the woman and I supped together that evening. It was almost cold when the night wind rose and went howling down the lagoon. The stars, seen through the doorless doorway, looked wondrous bright, as if the wind had brushed them clear. There was no moon, but you could see quite plainly the peelings of white foam blown along the water, and the grey-ivory terrace of the long, untenanted beach. It had the look of a place alive and exulting in itself, which you only find in very remote and lonesome spots, and which makes you feel, when you do find it, as if you were a bubble, a fragment of dust, a nothing.... The lands that you have made and railwayed and roaded and builded on have no voices left to tell you of such things. But the wilderness speaks the truth.

For all that I was thinking thus, I was thinking of Ailala just the same. I never stopped thinking of her, underneath the other things. You know.

Lucy Pirani knew. She looked up by and by from the tea she was drinking out of an enamelled iron cup, and said in that extraordinarily sweet voice of hers:

"Did you understand that we've really been going towards Naula all the way from Fiji, Mr. Kirwyn?"

I had understood. South Sea travel is like that. We had gone to Fiji, eight hundred miles off, to get to a place not two hundred miles away from our starting point. But then Naula hadn't anything except whale-boats and the calling steamer from south.

Yes, I had known I was veering back towards Ailala all this time. It had kept me consoled, though really it meant little.

I put down my own cup and sat looking out into the star-filled night. Shaw plugged away at the hard bacon on his plate. Mrs. Pirani, sitting upright on the

box that served her for a chair, with her hands folded on her lap, looked at us both and then remarked conversationally:

"When we lived on Remora, my husband flew to Naula twice."

"The devil he did!" exclaimed Shaw, startled out of all composure.

You must remember that this was nineteen-twenty and that Teodoro Pirani had been dead, or lost, for twenty years. And in the days of the Boer War, who talked of flying?

"I'm not mad," stated Lucy Pirani, coolly. "I thought it was time you knew, that's all. What do you think we came here for in nineteen-hundred, except to have that great big, safe, shallow lagoon to practise over and the privacy of the place to keep things quiet? My husband," she spoke now with an uplifted head, and eyes relit, of a sudden, with all the fires of youth, "my husband was a greater genius than Lilienthal, or the Wrights, or Bleriot, or any of them all. You couldn't rank any of the flight people with him. You could rank Marconi if you liked— Marconi was his countryman, and he was like Theo, he discovered something that no one else had ever thought of. Those aeroplanes— those Zeppelins"— she almost spat the words out— "what are they? Do they give you your dream?"

Now here she touched on something that all the world knows, but that nobody dares to say. I will say it, for once, out loud as Lucy Pirani did:

"We are disappointed with flight."

It isn't what we dreamed of, when we were little and longed to fly— when the human race was little and played about with the swan pinions and wax wings, and nobly broke its legs and heads with them. A big motor car of the air was not the toy we cried for, it is all we have got; but what we really wanted— though none of us dare say so— was to fly.

We wanted to put on wings or something— well, wings then; why be ashamed?— and just flop and flap about ourselves. We wanted to be like the angels in the Bible pictures, the fairies in the prize books. We thought we'd love to go flapping a yard or two above the ground, quietly, like big moths, down country lanes full of flowers; to dip and soar among the tree tops.

No, don't tell me that the flight to-day is that. It isn't, any more than motor-boating is swimming. It's a magnificent thing, a heart-shaking, glorious thing, a new faculty added to human nature, a new kingdom given to mankind— anything you like. But it's not flying.

Tell me, Flight-Lieutenant, home from the war and fresh still from amazing feats dared in mid-heaven— would you not, just as you are, like to try the real, personal flying that not one of the Air Service has ever known? Would you not like to go as a bird goes, moved by your own muscles, swimming in the air?

Mrs. Pirani said these things and many others to us as we sat on the packing-cases by the doorway of the ruinous old house on the island, looking out on the stars and hearing the thunder of the wind. She made our hearts within us ache with the longing for flight, real flight, such as the world knows not yet, but such as it will know one day. And then she told us that she, she herself, had tried it.

"I wish I never had," she said, longingly. "It is like being given one sip of a magic drink and then seeing the cup broken before your eyes, while you have to go on all your life without another drop. You are never content when you have flown— really flown. Theo would have died if he could not have put on his wings every day."

"Wings?"

"Yes. Real wings, what people want— what they want for themselves, you know. Aeroplanes and airships— all right, of course— traffic, journeys, and that sort of thing. But we want to fly."

I realized it. Who has not? Who hasn't dreamed of the actual flight that people naturally long for? The slow, perfect movement, the hovering and dipping, the smell of road dust close under your toes as you skim along....

"I will show you something," said Lucy Pirani.

She took a worn morocco case out of her pocket and opened it. It showed a photograph of a man with wings on, just starting in flight across this very lagoon of Remora.

I don't know what I said in my astonishment. I have an idea I swore. Mrs. Pirani said nothing; she kept on holding up the case, while Shaw and I in the lamp-light looked at the photograph— and looked.

The late Teodoro Pirani wore a swimming suit of some striped material, cut short above his fine muscular thighs. His head was bare. His arms could not be seen; they were enclosed from shoulder to finger-tip in large, flexible bat wings, which seemed to extend a good way beyond the hands. The bat pattern was perfect— there was the central rib, the long slanting phalanges, the translucent tough membrane in between, and Pirani, upheld by these contrivances— which, beautiful as they were, could not have carried a tenth of his weight by any known law of mechanics— had just cleared off from the roof of the house and begun to fly steadily and surely over the lagoon. You could not see his face, silhouetted against the sky, but the rest was clear.

"Good God ! " was all that David Shaw found to say.

"I took it myself," said Lucy Pirani, still holding it up. "Do you see the tail? That was an essential part; Theo used to say that the angels in books couldn't have flown a yard without stopping, because they had none."

We noticed now that Pirani had a tail fastened to his feet; a curious skinny, fishlike contrivance with a big spread.

"He steered partly with that and partly with the wings themselves," she said. "You could do it the third or fourth time you tried. At first you would tumble into the lagoon and wade ashore, just slipping your feet out of the tail-pockets first. But then you got the way of it, and it was Heaven— oh, Heaven. Anything that fulfils a basic need of human nature is Heaven— cold water, sleep.... And you know how you long and dream for this; it's so clearly one of our needs, though one doesn't know why. Flying, flying! Oh, when I think that I'll never fly again!"

"But, Mrs. Pirani," cut in David's homely bass, "if this thing really did happen, why can't it happen again? Seems as if Pirani had got ahead of everyone; well, he wasn't a god, you know, and other men may find what he did. Was it a special material?"

"Piranite," she answered instantly. "No one ever dreamed of it before. No one ever will again."

"Oh, I don't know. What was it like?"

"It had practically no weight at all, and immense strength. It was strong in two different ways, if you understand— just as you prepared it. It could be stiff, with a little spring in it for the phalanges, you know, or else it could be flexible and tough, for the webs. And as for weight— I could carry both wings in my hand and scarcely know they were there."

"The woman's mad, of course," I thought to myself, looking at her face, all lighted up with the enthusiasm which had never failed her (one could swear) at any mention of Pirani or his work. "Mind unhinged by trouble. Case of monomania. She—" And then I jolted up, mentally, against the photograph. Fake? No. It was old and yellow, and they didn't know how to fake twenty years ago. But if the photograph was right, then she was speaking the truth.

David, leaning forward with his arms laid across his knees, went on asking her things. His eyes looked bright.

"How were they worked?" he asked.

"There was no engine," answered Lucy Pirani, proudly. "They worked of themselves."

"Oh, but that is—"

"I'd give my life— gladly," said the little woman, "if I'd had the education to understand. But you know I'm not a bit clever, and there was only the governess on the station at home. These new flappers, with their knowledge of machines and so on But I never was like that. I hated technical things— girls did twenty-five years ago. And then I married Theo, and he was a real Latin— they never want their women to know things, only to be pretty and nice. So I

just picked up words— like a parrot. I've tried to learn since, but I can't. I haven't the head. And most people think me mad. You would too, if you hadn't come to the island with me. About the wings, I only know that Theo had more knowledge of atomic energy than anyone in the world, but I don't know what it is. He used to kiss me, and laugh, and draw himself up— he looked so handsome when he did it— and say, 'Little Bird, thy husband is half a century older than the world; he has harnessed the steed that no one else can see.' And then he would look at his sheets and rods of Piranite and the electric battery "

"Battery? What for?" David snapped the question out like a shot. It was clear that he was enormously interested.

"I don't know, I don't know! I'd give my life if I—"

He kept it in that little concrete room there, and did something to the stuff with it. It was an awfully big battery and he told me never to touch it."

"What effect did it have on the Piranite? "

"It made it expand and contract, and keep on doing it for hours and hours and hours— I don't know how long. Theo could shut off the expanding and contracting when he liked, and plane, like these flight men with their engines." She spat the word "engine" out as if she would have scrapped every engine in the world, had she had the chance. " So you see, the thing did its own flapping, and you guided by your muscles. It was just like Heaven."

"Of course," said Shaw, half to me, half to himself, "we've always known that wings of sufficient power and size would carry a man, but we haven't the proper pectoral muscles, and our bones aren't hollow, so we couldn't work anything big enough. It is not impossible, given this Piranite stuff; I can even see, in a woolly sort of way, how the atomic energy could be used as she says. Mrs. Pirani, if all this is correct, your husband must have been a very great man."

"Of course," she said, scornfully. Then, with a brusque yet kindly changing of the subject— "It's time to go to bed; there are plenty of to-morrows."

Next morning, David, the conscientious, hauled me off to make a general survey of the island, and see if any geological formation promised the valuable things that had been hinted at in connection with Remora. Our survey was short. We came to the conclusion— which no one is ever likely to dispute— that Remora was a coral atoll pure and simple, that it had no guano, no phosphates, no soil to speak of, and of course no minerals. I wondered what the starting point of the rumour could have been; but David, poking about idly in the sand with his stick, remarked that he had no particular doubts.

"It has been this Pirani business," he said. "Some report of a 'valuable discovery' has drifted away on one of the island boats and been generally

misconstrued. We're on a wild-goose chase, Gerry my boy, and we may as well acknowledge it. We have just got to put in our time fishing and yarning till the boat comes back."

I did not mind; the deadly apathy that follows on a nervous strain had got fast hold of me, and I wanted nothing better than to lie half asleep under the palms by the lagoon, watching the daylight wax and wane, and hearing the sea-birds scream above the reef, feeling little and thinking not at all. I did not believe I should ever want to work again— ever wish to go back to the world of rushing, train-catching, office-inhabiting folk. I spent that day in a grove of cool iron woods, couching on their dry, fallen needles, and listening in a half dream to the sighing of the wind through the green-haired boughs above. Pacific people plant these trees on graves. I think I understand why.

I don't know what David was about, except that he was talking a good deal to Lucy Pirani, and walking here and there about the atoll with her. She came to me at one o'clock, followed by a Fijian bearing food.

"You can lunch out here where it is quiet," she said, and went away again. About four o'clock she came back. I was pretending to read then, but I don't fancy she was taken in. She drew out some knitting work, and, clicking away at it so that she did not see my face, she said, quite simply:

"Tell me if you like. I've lost, too."

"Oh, there's nothing to tell," I answered her, scraping up the dry fir needles with my hand. "I suppose you know, anyhow. Ailala Pearson— that adopted daughter of the Pearsons— you know the old scandal of Naula; how her mother was a white girl and married a Naula chief, and died a few months after, when Ailala was born. You'd never know Ailala wasn't white— Spanish or something— she's a face like an old Greek coin— but the black is there, and it will out. No white man in his senses—"

"A face like an old Greek coin," said Lucy Pirani, slowly, an odd sleep-walking look in her eyes. She did not seem to have heard anything else I said. "A face— have you her picture?"

You will guess I had, I took it out and handed it to Mrs. Pirani. She had a big shade hat on; I could not see her expression as she held the picture up and looked at it. She kept it quite a long while and never said a word. By and by she handed it back to me, got up and went away, still without speaking. I didn't mind her much. I liked the little woman, but I was almost sure her troubles had shaken her mind in some degree.

The light sank down among the ironwoods and palms; the bo'sun birds began to hurry, screaming, homeward. The sand grew chill beneath my hands. It seemed that it was time to rise and go back to the concrete hut by the beach, so I went.

Mrs. Pirani was helping the boys to cook dinner.

I found David alone, tidying up things in his trunk.

"What have you been doing all day? " I asked him. I did not care to know—but one must talk, if one is to go on living.

"Looking for Teodoro Pirani, deceased, or his remains."

"What! you really shouldn't let that little lunatic— kind as she—"

"She isn't a lunatic, my boy, though I will allow she is somewhat taken up with one idea. It's a curious story; want to hear it?"

I did not, but I said yes.

"Well, said David, snapping the lock of his cabin trunk and sitting down on it for want of a chair, "it seems that Pirani brought up his apparatus from Melbourne here, in nineteen-hundred, and brought her too; they'd been married on the trip and they spent their honeymoon learning to fly about the lagoon. Jolly good place for it; couldn't well break yourself up at a moderate height— and Pirani's flying allowed you to go on just like the birds do, skim along the ground or water, perch on a tree if you liked. They stayed some months, I forget how many, and Pirani used to go off for flights now and then, and at last he took to flying too far and too long, and could hardly get home. He went to Naula more than once and it nearly broke him up— you see Pirani's flying wasn't like the aeroplane sort where your engine buzzes you along at a hundred miles an hour "

"I say, do you really believe all this?"

"My boy, I do," was David's answer, given gravely, with those sensible, kind eyes of his looking out very straight from under their furry brows.

"Well, go on! Pirani flew too far, and what happened?"

"What you'd expect. He never came back, and the Piranite wings were lost with him, and Mrs. Pirani was a widow, but she always thinks there's just an off chance she mayn't be after all."

"Why on earth?"

"Partly because she won't let herself think anything else, and partly because she never heard of his being seen after he arrived on Naula Island the last time— nobody saw him leave. There appears to me to be a mystery somewhere or other— or I might say the smell of one, as it were— but I can't locate it exactly."

"Why was she on Naula? "

"She's been visiting Naula and every island within three or four hundred miles of Remora for the last twenty years. She thinks she has a clue now."

"Clue to what?" I asked. I did not want to know. If I had guessed— had dreamed— how vitally important all this was to me— But I did not.

"She's worked it out that Teodoro Pirani didn't leave Naula the last time he flew there. So he was not lost at sea, as one would have supposed."

"Oh?"

"No, she came here to have a last hunt, she says, for any bit of the Piranite that may have been carried out into the lagoon and swept up again— she says it was indestructible, practically— but I don't think she found it. However, she has found something, I don't know what, but it seems to have worried her more than a bit. She came in a while ago looking like death, and those eyes of hers— pretty eyes they are; wonder she's never— Well, she looked like a person who's seeing ghosts, and not nice ghosts at that. Do you know what's the matter?"

"Yes," I said. "I know what's the matter with you. You're falling in love with her."

David is good natured, but you may take him too far. I'd have remembered that if I had been less

"I suppose," he said, " that's your notion of a joke. It's not mine," and he walked off.

It was odd how the notion of flying— wing-flying, such as Teodoro Pirani discovered— took hold of me in dreams that night. I suppose it was the sight of the photograph, and perhaps the memories with which Remora Island must have been filled. Memories do float about places where things have happened; we all know that. At all events I spent the night skimming and dipping, soaring, sailing slowly over the green mirror-glass of the lagoon, not as our flying men of to-day go, but as Pirani and Lucy Pirani, and they alone of all the human race had flown in Remora twenty years ago.

Don't tell me you do not want to do it yourself. I know you do, I know you want to know if you ever will. Read on and see.

Ailala's face, of course, was with me in my dreams; the lovely Greek-coin profile and the backrushing, deeply waved dark hair, held in by the gold fillet she loved to clasp across that little classic head. Ailala was flying too; she looked as if Nature had built her for that purpose and no other. Always Ailala had had the look of a winged victory about her— of something lightly poised and passing. Now I knew what the look had meant. I cannot tell you how exquisitely she flew. The grace of a dancer, of a skater, of a sailing, snow-winged gull, blended as flower-perfumes blend in a perfect bouquet, was hers; and I could even see the ruffling of her thin white dress against the wind she made, and the opening of her blossom-red mouth as she panted with her own speed. It was amazingly vivid. When I woke, I found the image of Ailala herself almost obscured by the aching hunger that had awaked in me, through that

vision, for wing-flight over the green-glass, still lagoon. I knew how Lucy Pirani, who had tasted of the wonder, must have been feeling all these years.

"There's something a bit uncanny about this place," I said to myself. I went back to the grove of ironwoods to laze and dream the morning hours away—what else was there to do? And, as before, at one o'clock Lucy Pirani came to join me, and a boy with her bringing food. She seldom seemed to eat herself; I do not know what she lived on.

I found her changed. She looked like one who has heard disturbing news. But she did not speak herself at first, only asked me, simply, if I was feeling less troubled about Ailala.

"You have been so plucky about it," she said. "Most men would have married a girl like that and never thought of the trouble that was bound to follow. I've never known a mixed race marriage that didn't cause— By the way, were you long enough in Naula to meet Itari, the chief that her mother married?"

"I saw him," I answered. "He lives on another island and has nothing to do with the girl. He gave her up to those Pearson people as soon as she was born— you know her mother died then. I gathered that he didn't care about her. He isn't like her, except for the little touch of dark colour she has, and that's so little, anyhow, that it hardly tells."

Mrs. Pirani had a palm-leaf fan in her hand; she waved it to and fro for a minute, and then, still fanning, asked me:

"Did it ever strike you that Itari was a murderer?"

It struck me, anyhow, that the little lady had a habit of springing surprises on you. I don't know that I took her seriously.

"Why, I don't know," I answered, lazily. Then a sudden recollection of Itari's face— dark, hatchety, tight-lipped, fiery-eyed— sprang into my mind and I amended: "Come to think of it, he did rather."

"He was," said Mrs. Pirani. She fanned and fanned away. Her eyes had the hard, sparkling look that only blue eyes take on in anger. I should not have liked to meet her with a dagger in her hand and that look upon her face.

"Listen," said Lucy Pirani, suddenly laying down her fan and leaning over to touch my sleeve. "Listen; I'll tell you, and it will do you good to get out of your own troubles for a while. Besides, this concerns you."

"Me? How could it? "

She did not hear me. She was "off" as I put it. By this time I had come to regard her as a charming, amiable sort of Ancient Mariner, who felt bound to tell her many-times-told tale whenever she met a fitting listener. When one has an idea that a story has been told, perhaps often by the very person who is relating it to you, it is sure to lose value in your eyes. Still, I listened, lazily, held

by the heavy apathy of the mood that had been my constant companion ever since I said good-bye to Ailala under the wind-blown flame-trees of Naula shore.

"You think," said Lucy Pirani, "that you are very miserable, don't you? When something hits us, we're all the same. We say like the man in the Bible: 'Is there any sorrow like unto my sorrow?' And we don't think there is."

She fanned herself in silence for a moment, looking out over the long-lined, level green of the lagoon, and seeing— I have no doubt— those days of twenty years ago when she and Teodoro Pirani, her glorious young lover, wheeled and hovered like the birds over those still waters. And it seemed to me, oddly, a kind of allegory of human life. Don't we all fly gloriously for a little while and walk dully through the rest of our days?

"If you had had Ailala," said Mrs. Pirani, "and lost her by death— think of it."

"I don't want to," was all I found to say.

"If you lost her by death, and by worse than death as well— how would it have been? "

"Damnable," I said. It seemed to me I knew what she meant. "I'd have killed the other," I added.

"Men do kill for a woman they love," she said. "Itari did."

"Whom did he kill?"

"My husband." It was almost a cry. She held the fan tight in both hands.

"For— for— you?" I said dully. I did not understand.

Lucy Pirani snapped the fan-stick in two, flung it down and rose to her feet. Her dull blue dress fluttered as she ran through the ironwood trees— away, away....

It occurred to me that she must really be mad. I went in search of David, who had been somewhat cold to me since my ill-advised remarks about falling in love. He was busy— David was always busy— in the main room of the cottage, sorting out on the top of a packing-case the mineral specimens we had gathered up at Naula. They were not of much account— some iron ore, a handful of black sand with a few, too few, sparks of gold in it, lumps of mica schist, half a dozen miscellaneous chippings from here and there. I asked him plainly if Mrs. Pirani was in her senses or not, and if she was, what she could be driving at about Naula, and chiefs, and murders and me.

David, too kind to bear malice, looked at me with his usual pleasant smile as he answered:

"She thinks that her husband was murdered on Naula, because of some woman."

"Herself?"

"Not herself. It seems to have hit her hard. She evidently got on to the idea the other day, after talking to you— I don't know what you said—"

"Nothing at all; I was talking about my own affairs."

"Well, that's her idea, and she is half mad over it. She thinks he flew to Naula to visit this woman and was killed in consequence, and—"

"But what proof has she, after all these years? "

"I don't know. But she seems to think she has some. She— she—"

"*What have you got there?*"

It was Lucy Pirani's voice, but strange and breathless, a voice damped down by some strong emotion as you damp piano strings with the pedal. She had come in unnoticed, on her small light feet, and was leaning over David Shaw's big shoulder.

He got up at once and offered her his seat.

"What have you got there? " she repeated, without taking any notice of his words. Her arm, in its dull blue sleeve, was stretched out, pointing to a fragment of micaceous stuff, of a pretty opaline colour, that lay among the specimens.

"That? " said David, picking it up. "Don't know, but it doesn't appear valuable. I only brought it away because I couldn't identify the stuff."

"When you hold it up, what colour is it?" asked Mrs. Pirani, in the same odd, damped voice.

David picked up the specimen— it was like coloured talc, rather— and held it in the light. It showed, as the light from the doorway fell through it, a peculiarly beautiful dull blue colour.

"Why it's just like your— dress," I was going to say when Mrs. Pirani, without ceremony, snatched the thing out of David's hand.

"Where did you get it? " she asked, and her voice was now a scream. " Did you get it on Ranarana?"

"Ranarana? Yes, that was the place."

"Where Itari lives?"

"Think so. What's the matter?"

Mrs. Pirani, holding the fragment to her heart as if it were a child, made answer:

"It's Piranite."

"Piranite?"

"Yes. Don't you see?— it has practically no weight— bend it " It bent like rubber.

"The colour— I always dressed in that colour because I loved it so."

She kissed the glowing piece of talc-like mineral.

"That'll give the clue to someone wiser than I am," she said, cuddling and crooning over the prize, "and Theo will live again in his fame, as he ought to have lived. And it will do more than that, it will hang Itari some of these days." Her eyes shone brighter than the Piranite as she spoke. "He killed Theo and broke up the wings— but they'll fly with him to death and hell yet."

Her face was very white, and though she spoke with a kind of fierce joy I saw no joy in it.

"Why did he kill him?" I asked, all amazed. For indeed I did not see.

"Oh, you young fool!" she cried, turning on me, "don't you see? It was because he wanted the girl that Theo— Theo— loved—"

"She didn't know he killed your husband when she married him?"

"No."

"Why did she marry a native, anyhow?" I asked, still puzzled.

"Because," answered Mrs. Pirani, very low, "she was in despair...."

I opened my lips again, and as if maddened by my question she snatched at my breast-pocket and pulled out the morocco case that held my picture of Ailala. From her own pocket she took a small miniature case— not the folder that held the photograph of Pirani flying— opened it, and held it beside the picture she had taken from my case."

"Look," she said.

And I looked, and saw two faces— one of a man in the dawn of life, young, splendid, with a profile like an old Greek coin, and short, richly curling hair. He was dark, as Italians are dark. The other was Ailala— line for line, tint for tint, the same.

While I was staring, Mrs. Pirani wrapped the piece of Piranite in a soft lawn handkerchief and slipped it in her pocket.

"Stay till you are wanted," she said. "You've got to hang one man, and make another famous, and marry another. You're worth more than any diamond ever found on the Rand."

"Marry another?" I said, and then it burst on me. Ailala, daughter of Italian and English parents, might— should— be the mother of my children and the mistress of my home, no black shadow forbidding. I gave a cry.

"So you understand, do you?" said Lucy Pirani, her hand pressed over her treasure. "Someone always has to pay. I've paid for you."

David looked at her as I had never seen him look at a woman.

As I went out to the sandy beach and the sun, bent on looking for any sign of our returning boat— though indeed she was not due for days— I heard a word that was not meant for me.

"You're young enough to begin life again," he said, and his hand felt for hers.

"I'll begin it again," she said, "where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage."

She did, a few months after. I am stupid, but I had guessed from the first she would not long survive the blow that had taken from her her dearest memories. David has gone on an Antarctic expedition. Ailala and I and two men whose names you do not yet know (but you and the world will know them soon) are on Remora Island; the hut is a laboratory now, and we're getting on well with Piranite. Ailala has a madness in her for flight— bird flight.

She lives only for the day when the first pair of wings will be completed, and the first of us— she swears it shall be herself— will float out over the green-glass lagoon. All things considered, I do not wonder.

3: The Island Grave

I CAME into the world at sundown, while the cool Tasmanian night was creeping from east to west, and dewes were falling. Low embers of light still showed behind the western hills; upon the sunrise side there was darkness, and one star.

My mother, when she opened her eyes, saw it shining. They told me that she looked at it, and said faintly, "Star."

"Yes," said the women who tended her, "it's night now." But she shook her head a little, and laid one hand, slow lifted, on my silky hair:

"Star," she said again. She closed her eyes, and in a little while after it was, as the woman had said, night....

So I grew up without a mother. It may be, if she had lived, that my name—the name I am going to tell you— would have been less famous. Mothers are strange about the things they want, and do not want, for their women-children. I found a book of hers when I was a growing girl. It had been used for the copying of poetry she liked. One verse, copied in red, as if she wished to mark it out beyond the others, was the well-known:

*"Stay, stay at home my heart, and rest,
Home-keeping hearts are happiest...
For those that wander they know not where
Are full of doubt and full of care;
Stay, stay at home, and rest.*

*Stay, stay at home, my heart, and rest;
The bird is safest in the nest;*

O'er all that flutter their wings and fly

*A hawk is hovering in the sky—
To stay at home is best."*

Well, she died, and my father managed my career. There was no doubt from the very first, in his commercial mind— he was an auctioneer and commission agent— that my gifts of mimicry and song must be turned to the best account. He spent all his savings on me; I had three years with Marchesi; I studied in Milan— always with a hired chaperon in charge. Father was plain about the necessity of my keeping in the narrow way. "It pays to run straight, my girl, and don't you forget that," was his continual burden. "Your mother

was a good woman; mind you're like her. She was a sensible woman too. The name she picked for you couldn't have been bettered. Star Oliver! a real *prima donna*'s name."

Now that I have told you, you remember it. It is more years than I like to reckon since I last fronted the glowing blur of an audience's one, upturned face, or flung the gold of my voice, blindly, down the dark well of a gaping phonograph. But I do not think the world has yet forgotten the Tasmanian Jenny Lind.

My father died; he never had full time to reap return of the coin and care he had invested in me. I continued to run straight: I do not quite know why. It was not inherent goodness; the things of the spirit have never appealed to me— though, if you have ever seen me weeping on the steps of the church as Marguerite, or heard me sing Elizabeth's glorious protestation of innocence, you will almost have thought you saw white angel wings springing up below the clasp of my diamond necklace. ... I think it must have been pride— pride, or the love of Walter.

Walter was my passionate love. A woman with temperament, however many loves there may be in her life, can always in the end look back to two that stand above all others— the passionate love, and the great one.

I think the passionate love always fails you, in some way, whether you marry it or not. Walter did fail me. I am not going to tell that story. His family were in it; my pride, that would not hear of the common stage breach of promise, was in it too. In the end he went away to shoot tapir in South America, and I broke my heart in London and got married.

One has to do something violent when one's heart breaks. Some women drown themselves; I married Bart Stanley, the tenor with whom I had been playing all that season.

If you want to know what he was, he was just a husband— at first. Any woman can fill in the detail. Most of them have married husbands, when you come to think of it. In plays we marry lovers; but plays are— play.

Of course, being a husband, Bart was jealous. He was jealous even before we married. I had a good many presents from unknown admirers— jewellery, as a rule, some of it very beautiful; Bart wanted it all sent back or given to charities. I did not gratify him— though there was none of it that I cared much about, save for one pendant, a great cabochon-cut star sapphire, hung about with dropping, tear-shaped pearls. It had no card with it, only a slip of paper, on which was typed:

Star, good-bye!

I liked the thing; liked the sentiment of it— though that was perhaps a little *voyant*— and I would not part with it, even when Bart declared I knew and was in love with the man who had sent it. Alas, alas! if I knew anything, I knew that it was not he. I had had too many men in love with me not to know what one might, and might not, expect from any one of them.

I wondered sometimes, in the earlier days of such married life as a *prima donna* can know, who might have had that poetical thought— who, among the hundreds of thousands who had heard me, the hundreds who fancied themselves more or less in love with me, had sought out the one gem that could be associated with my name; the pure star wavering deeps of splendid blue; the tear-shaped pearls— do not all pearls mean tears?— that seemed to weep its fall.

He must have known Bart Stanley better than I did when I married him.

A *prima donna* never seems to have luck in matrimony. I suppose most people know that Bart and I separated in six months, and that during the last part of our short married life he behaved like a devil loosed from hell.

He was not with me when I came home to Sydney— I had bought a villa there— after my American tour. I boarded the *Golden Head* at San Francisco very late; the gangway was up, and had to be lowered for me. I went on without seeing any of the passengers, except a group of schoolmarm tourists who were singing "Aloha Oe" in a seasick kind of manner at the rail. Have you noticed that "Aloha Oe" can be made to sound terribly like the whoopings of a heavy day at sea?

For the first part of the voyage I kept my cabin. It was a deck suite, with fans and louvred doors; I had a bath and a little library, even a little yacht pianette. I did not need to go out on deck, and I preferred, after the hurry and excitement of the tour, to enjoy peace. You know what it is with a great artist on board these liners. Once you put your head forth from your cabin you do not belong to yourself for a single moment; you are haunted and autograph-albumed and stared and chattered out of existence; all the men want to flirt with you, so that they can be seen doing it; every mortal soul of the women tries to entrap you into hearing about her wonderful relative with the amazing voice, who is going to cut out every other singer in the world— or, worse, angles for a "candid opinion" of her own horrible singing.

I had to come out at last; we were far south, and the heat had become too great for electric fans to cope with. Nothing would serve, in those latitudes, but the fourteen-knot breeze on deck— though even that was warm.

I remember that I had spent a very tiresome morning, in spite of sitting with my feet in the scuppers, and face determinedly turned seaward over the rail. The decent people don't worry when you "sport your oak" after this well-

known sea fashion, but nothing can stop the bores. I was looking despairingly at the procession of ivory trade-wind clouds, in the hope of seeing what I did not see— some sign of cool or even stormy weather— when the very worst of the "bore -women" descended on me with something like a demand that I should listen— just once— to the singing of her sister, who had a wonderful.... You know.

I could have filled in the whole speech in my sleep.

Generally I don't listen to these sucking Galli-Curcis. I know Melba constantly did, and does. That is where Melba and I differ. An artist's nerve force is her capital; why should she have to dole it out bit by bit to people who don't pay for anything?

Nevertheless the woman drove and drove me, till in despair I said I would listen. I went down to the saloon, and they opened a semi-grand of a deadly American make, with squeaking pedals, and half the middle notes out of tune, and the woman's sister sang. "What do you think of it— candidly?" they asked me, holding their breath. And I got up, and swept my skirts about me— we had skirts to sweep in that year — and I said loudly and clearly, "Horrible!" and I went out, as you fling out in "Carmen" after the *Habanera*, when you feel mad in love, or murderous, or both....

Nobody asked for candid opinions any more that voyage.

As I was leaving the saloon I ran full into— Walter! Before I knew I had kissed him, because somehow I did not realize he was actually there, and because I always used to kiss him, when I rushed off from my "Carmen" scenes, the year we were going to be married. He had always waited in the wings for that kiss. And there he was, not the least bit changed, with the same grey eyes, furry-lashed, and the same half-laughing, half-tired face— the face that didn't even exert itself to make you like it, it knew so well you would.... And he had on a tan silk suit, such as he used to wear in the warm days of that summer— that one summer. And it clung to his shoulder a little, in the heat, and showed the fine round muscle underneath, as those silk suits used to do. There was the clean smell of the stuff he used for shaving, like thyme, and a whiff of his own cigarettes— the kind I used to take from him, rarely, when I thought I could allow myself a smoke. Past and Present seemed to break over me like a wave. I felt giddy. I found myself sitting on the hot amber velvet of the lounge, with a hiss of blue and white seas coming in through open ports, and Walter standing looking down at me. The women were gone. What became of them after? Do I know, or care?

"There's a desert island on the port bow," was what Walter said to me.

"The captain says we can stop off and see it. Some salt water has got into the drinking tanks, and he's short. He says there's water there."

"Does he?" I answered him. I looked at my hands in my lap. They were very white, and felt cold when I moved them one on another— though the yellow velvet against the back of my head was hot as if it had just been ironed. I wondered was I going to faint. And yet, you know, I was conscious that black hair, deeply waving, looks its best against yellow; I knew that the paleness of my face, in that heat, made the blue of my eyes stand out like blue lakes in snow.

What I said, when I collected myself, was: "Well, how are you?" It wasn't the sort of thing people say in a "situation" on the stage— was it?

"Very fit," said Walter. He was taking a cigarette out of his case; he lit it up, and I knew— because I knew him so well— that he meant to underline the suggestion, the recollection of old days:—

*"Smells are surer than sounds or sights
To make your heartstrings crack."*

I think mine cracked a little— in that minute, when the blue, caressing smoke of Walter's special brand began to curl.

"Give me one," I said. "I shan't have to sing for weeks." He lit it for me, from his; I leaned over, and the short wavy lock that never will grow long fell down from my forehead, and dangled, just as it used to do. I heard him catch his breath; I wondered if he did it on purpose. He was capable of it, and I could know it and yet love him.

It was not so hot in the lounge behind the saloon as one would have thought. All the ports were open and full of the sound of the sea; the big, paddle-like electric fans were whimpering overhead. There was nobody but ourselves. Walter dropped down on the stuffy amber velvet beside me.

"You're coming ashore, aren't you?" he said, between puffs.

"Yes, I think so. I've never seen a real desert island."

We looked at each other, and there were a thousand sentences in our eyes.

"It's not so hot," he said, looking at the toe of his brown shoe.

"There's a draught right through," I answered him.

"And I think the wind's got up a little." Inside my heart I was singing, as they say only I can sing, those words and notes of flame:

Come back to me, beloved, or I die!

I know that he overheard me; he has the sixth sense. But he went on, smoking in between and making love with those deep-lashed eyes only:

"It's in the *Pacific Sailing Directions*; I looked it up. Said to be uninhabited. Three hundred miles from anywhere. Had pearl shell once in the lagoon; fished out twenty or thirty years ago. Ships sometimes call for water; there's a

stream. Quite an interesting place." And his eyes said: "Why did you, why did you marry him? "

Mine, I know, flashed back in angry sparks: "Because you left me."

I said: "I shall go and put on a pair of strong shoes and a shade hat."

"Do," he agreed. He was still smoking tranquilly when I left him, and a steward, in white with tinkling buttons, was explaining to him that he must not smoke just there, and he was feeling in his waistcoat pocket for a coin.... Just like Walter. Easier to tip and stay. The line of least resistance, always.

They got the boats out and pulled us to the island. All the passengers, almost, came; they were a tiresome, cackling crowd, but I do not think Walter and myself heard anything they said. We were in a dream— the dream of gold that you remember.... And in the radiance of that dream the island looked incredible, unearthly, in its loveliness. I know that it is indeed beautiful. But on that day it had the light of Paradise. I do not mean Heaven. I am not a religious woman. No, by Paradise I mean the place, not Heaven, whatever it may be, of which we find rare gleams and promises in the most exquisite moments of our lives; to which we others who are not so very good, and yet not very bad, hope to go when we die— though the good folks tell us there is no such place. Perhaps there is. Perhaps Heaven is kinder than the great souls think, to us of little soul.

At any rate I saw a lightening of the nameless, lovely world in that solitary island, when we came up to it, over a quiet sea, through drifts of shoal water that wavered in heliotrope and green chrysoprase underneath our keel. There was a look on the tall swinging palms as if one saw them through cathedral windows of pale golden glass. There were shadows of a purple that you could not paint or name under the trees, but on the intense white beach the shaded scoops and hollows were blue, as hollows in snow. There were green lawns with flowers fallen on them; birds crying in the trees; a wash of small, unceasing waves along the empty beaches. All the island, on that blue morning, seemed to float, unsubstantial, upon the glassy moat of its lagoon; you almost thought the wind, when it came up, would catch the tops of the palm trees and send the whole wonderful place a-sail.

Just behind the beach the rough underbrush parted a little in one place, and the passengers, with shouts of delight, hurled themselves at the opening. "Oh, oh," they cried, "a track— there'll be a house, and Robinson Crusoe living in it with his man Friday." We followed after them. Walter said: "There won't be anyone living here; the path is all overgrown. The owner will be away." I was pleased when he said that. I did not wish there should be people.

It was only a minute before the track widened out— still choked with weeds and growing brush and saplings— and showed us a small clearing with a

house in it. The passengers, at this, began to cackle like a flock of turkeys. They ran up the steps, and peered through the windows; they stared at the yellow-flowered creeper that had been trained about the walls, and that had, in the absence of anyone to prune it, amazingly overrun all the roof and the verandah. They beat, mockingly, upon the door, and shouted: "Robinson Crusoe, Robinson Crusoe, come out to us! " One of them said she saw a bed, a table, chairs, piles of tinned food put up on shelves, sheets, linen in an open press.

"Robinson Crusoe does himself well," she said. " Let's stop over and pay him a visit." They made a hundred jokes, very poor ones, but pleasing to themselves, and ran about like rabbits.

"You'll have to look sharp," said the third officer, who had come with us. " The captain said half an hour o the tick, and no more, for watering; it's twenty-five minutes, and the boat with the water tank will be just about starting. He'll give me Hades if we're late. He was proper narked about having to stop. It costs the devil and all of a sum for every minute the ship's kept waiting. Do please come on, all you people." Then, as some of them seemed inclined to linger: "Look here, I warn you, anyone who isn't in the boat in five minutes will be left behind."

Nobody, it seemed, wanted to incur that fate. We all knew what the captain was— a martinet about the discipline of his ship; everyone understood that the officer was speaking no more than truth when he said that there was really danger of being left.

"I wish we had had time to see more," I whispered to Walter, as we followed the crowd of passengers.

Walter did not answer. Instead, he took my hand— there was no one to see— and held it in his own as we walked. Did I tell you that he has the sixth sense? I have also. I read what he wished, and I knew that I wished it too. And the green forest through which we went became bright with a light that the gorgeous tropic sun never shed, and musical with songs that were never sung.

"It's not too late," he whispered to me, as we neared the beach. And again, as the sound of the sea came up: "Not too late." And, as we saw the shore-light, and the foam, and the whaleboats rocking on the tide: "Not too late— yet— yet— to set right our mistake."

"They'd find us— wait for us," I whispered back.

"There's a thicket— we could hide. They couldn't look or wait very long."

"I— I— clothes— food— what would you—"

"Didn't you see the food, and the piles of linen?"

He was looking at me now, as we walked fast through the underbush that was like green, tangled, mermaid's hair, set with gems of clear white berries.

There was no carelessness now in his face. It was Walter, ten times more awake, more alive, than I had ever known him. "I've plenty of money," he went on, in the same low, hurried voice, that shook a little now and then. "We could leave it, and I daresay when the owner comes back he'd be glad. Slip round this big tree— you won't be seen— come, run!"

Just for a moment I struggled against his hand— I don't know why— and then I yielded to it; caught up my dress with my free fingers, and ran. I have never gone to fat like so many great singers; I am slim and well figured. I can run, still, like a deer.

It was a narrow island, though a fairly long one. We reached and passed the house, followed a track behind it— more weedy and choked, if possible, than that in front— and found ourselves on another beach, open, stony, and thrashed by south-east breakers. A little way down the beach there was a dense thicket of some flowering shrub— orange flowers it had, I remember, and curious snowy tips to its green leaves.

"If we get into that," said Walter, pulling me along by the hand— for my Louis heels were beginning to tell on the rough ground— "nobody can find us; they'll never think of looking. I'll hold the boughs for you; dodge in. Now— would anyone know we were on the island?"

I sat down on the sandy earth; I was a trifle winded. The branches wove green nets before my face. There was a pleasant smell of something crushed and spicy— leaves, it may have been. Among the boughs, you could see the tumbling white and blue of the seaward beach, but I knew that we ourselves could not be seen.

Walter stood up, looking cautiously through chinks in the leaves.

"This is fun," he said. "Like being two kids again."

"You never were anything else," I said suddenly. For I realized, in that moment, that Walter was, just as he had always been, the child— the snatching, laughing, careless, cruel, but always irresistible child— and that, if he died at eighty, he would be the same. There are so many of these child-men, and we love them so much better than they merit....

I don't know why, but it made me realize what I was doing. I was a hundred years older than Walter— though my birth year was two years after his— and I was letting him lead me, with his wicked, resistless child-fingers — where?

I got up and began shaking the sand off my skirts. I don't know what I meant to do. There was an instant when we stood: Face to face, silent.... and then, the child-fingers, man-fingers, were round mine, and Walter was pleading, coaxing, laughingly compelling, as only Walter could do.

"You can't go back. You can't go back. The boat's away by now. They wouldn't wait for Gabriel himself. Our own island— alone in the seas— Star— my Star! Stay!"

Behind the thicket there was open ground, lightly grassed. I had freed myself from the branches of the orange-flowered, white-tipped trees, and was standing on the level lawn. Walter, grasping at my hands, pressed after. I backed away; my foot struck against a big upstanding stone, and I almost fell.

"Here, hold on, Star!" he cried. "You nearly came an awful cropper. Did you hurt yourself?"

He had caught me as I fell back, and set me on my feet again.

"No," I said, turning round to look at the stone. "But what a boulder! One didn't expect to find it here, behind the beach. Someone must have—"

My voice died away in my throat, trailing a little, as a record in a phonograph trails out when the motor stops. I stood, pointing with one hand to the stone.

I could not speak.

"Are you ill?" asked Walter, anxiously, looking at my face. "Star!— you've hurt yourself— darling "

I found my voice; it didn't seem like my own.

"Look! " was all I could say.

He followed the direction of my pointing hand, and looked. And he saw, as I had seen, that the stone was a gravestone, roughly hewn from one of the beach boulders, and set on this quiet lawn. And he read, as I had read, the name on it.

"Is there anything wrong with my eyes? " I asked, choking, "or— or— what is that name?"

Like one hypnotized, he answered me, staring:

"Star Oliver!"

"And the year?"

"This year."

"Let me go," I cried. " Let me go! "

"Don't scream so— Star!" For I was shrieking at the top of my voice as I ran through the thicket, down on the beach, back again to the house and the path and the leeward side of the island. "Star! For God's sake — you'll ruin your voice. It's some silly trick— it's— My God, girl, don't go on like that. Sit down." I was stumbling all over the track like a foundered horse, crying out, and sobbing, in the midst of my cries :

"The grave— the grave!"

Walter took me by the arm, forced me to a seat on a fallen log, wiped my face with his handkerchief, and told me to pull myself together, so sharply that

I obeyed him. He sat looking at me for a minute or two, while I forced back the tearing sobs, and brought my shaking mouth to a firm line, as I had often done the instant before I had to spring upon the stage, gay and full of joy....

Hysterics? Call it temperament. One must pay for one's talent.

"The boat is gone," said Walter presently, still watching.

I sprang up. "But it must not be gone. Do you hear me? It must not. Do you think I would stay— with that thing—"

"Don't start all over again, please." The chilliness of the tone was like a dash of water, and I saw that he knew he was beaten. "I said the boat was gone and it is, but you can go and signal if you like." He turned his back on me, like the rude child he was. I ran to the shore, and sent out a call that made the rowers in the whaleboat turn and pause, and presently row back.

They had thought we were with the second boat. And I do not really think the captain would have waited for us if we had not turned up as we did.

We were both on board in another quarter of an hour, and the *Golden Head*, through a spumy, rattling squall, was trampling out to sea.

We had bad weather after that; I kept to my cabin, and the passengers said I was sick. I was not seasick; I never have been in my life. But nevertheless I was ill, for I was dying.

October first was the day of our visit to the island. As I lay in my berth, with the huge Pacific combers darkening the glass of the ports, and the ship's bulkheads cringing and screaming about me, I went over the days again and again, counting them as they slipped away. Thirty days left in October, thirty in November, thirty-one in December. Ninety-one. Then, as we rolled and "scended" on our way to Fiji, and reached Fiji, and sailed away again— nineteen days left in October, thirty in November, thirty-one in December. Eighty days left. Eighty days to live. Less, it might be, but certainly no more.....

You think me superstitious. You must remember that the thing was, and remained, unexplained. I had not spoken of it to anyone but Walter, and as I had not seen him again, I did not know what he thought about it. But it could not matter what he thought. Vision or reality— and sometimes I wondered if it had not been a vision, so far as those carved letters went— we had, both seen it; it was, if anything on earth had ever been, a warning. Before the end of the year I knew that I should die.

Think of your name— Richard Stanley Smith, or Marguerite Greenwood, or whatever it may be— imagine it, if you like, to be far more uncommon; something that could not possibly figure in chance or coincidence— and then picture yourself finding it, as I found mine, cut deep, above the date of the passing year, upon a grave....

You are, perhaps, not a romantic person; not cursed, or blessed, with the temperament that is inseparable from a great artist's soul. Yet a shudder runs through you at the thought. Guess, then, how I felt.

After Fiji, they began to be anxious about me on the ship; to understand it was no sea-sickness that kept me immured in my own rooms, and that caused me to refuse, day after day, morning after morning, almost every dainty prepared to tempt my appetite, by the chef of the *Golden Head*. "She don't eat enough to keep her alive till Sydney 'arbour," I heard the stewardess whisper outside my louvered door. "Mark me, we'll drop 'er overboard before we sight the 'Eads."

There was no ship's doctor on the boat— it is often so, on trans-Pacific liners. The captain, who was getting anxious, wished to come in and see me for himself, but I refused. At last, pushing aside my maid, who faithfully kept the door, he forced an entrance.

"Mrs. Stanley," he boomed, standing beside my berth and seeming to fill the whole cabin with his immense, white, brassy-buttoned presence, "I'm responsible for the welfare of my passengers, and I insist on your seeing someone. I've found out there's a doctor among the passengers. You've got to let him come in and have a look at you."

"I will not," I told him. My voice was very weak.

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to insist. Why, madam, I run the risk of having the whole ship quarantined. This doctor, Nicholas is his name, says he'll see you, and, by God, you'll have to let him. I'm sorry to incommode you, but—"

"Can one not die in peace?" I flashed upon him, at this abominable tyranny, opening wide my eyes.

"Not on my ship you can't, by a long chalk," said the brute. "I'm going to send him in ten minutes." He went.

"Marie," I said, "if strangers have to come in, you may as well put my lace rest-gown on me, and the little pink satin slippers. Can they not let me die? It is all I ask; not much, I think Yes, you can coil my hair above that ivory comb; I don't care. What are you bringing there? Powder? Lipstick? What does it matter? They will wrap me in white linen, and lay me on the grating to-morrow; you can do what you wish. No, I do not want the mirror; I'm done with such things."

"If Madame could only see herself— with that paleness of the camellia, and Madame's hair, so black "

"No matter. Lay me down again." I closed my eyes. When I opened them there was a strange man standing at my berth, a tall man, heavily built; I do not know how he could have come in so noiselessly.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"My name's Georges," he answered, in an accent somewhat foreign. I expected an apology for the intrusion that the captain had forced, but it did not come.

The man— he seemed youngish, about thirty-eight; he had snow-white, sparkling hair, very thick, and narrow, well-cut features; his eyes were of an ordinary brown, but the driving force behind them seemed very far from ordinary.

"You don't know my name," he continued, with a little, odd, foreign gesture of one hand. "That doesn't matter, Madame. The world knows yours. I am nothing"— again the deprecating sweep of the hand— "but it is to me, happily, to assure you that you are not truly ill."

"I am not ill, I am dying," I answered him.

"Not dying, not to die, for many years."

"You don't know," I said, looking up at his strange brown eyes. They seemed to have lights in them— silver lights. I could see the blur of my white rest-robe reflected there, and the spot of my white face.

"Madame, I do know. There is nothing to fear."

"Man," I said, "is it possible that you know what I saw?"

"I know it."

"On that deserted island— with no one but—"

"With no one but your evil angel, Madame— yes."

"Then," I said, raising myself on one arm, "you must have second sight, for I am sure he did not tell you."

"He has not told," answered this strange man. "Nevertheless, it is for me to say to you, set your heart at rest. If there was one evil angel on that island with you, also there was one good. Live, madame, and forget."

"I think I have seen you before," I said. I was sitting up now, with the lace robe gathered round me; I had tossed the silk quilt from the bed, and my small rose shoes were swung towards the floor.

"That is right," he said. "You will rise when I go, and now you will be quite well."

"Have I not seen you?"

"Many times, madame; I have heard you sing."

"Thousands do that," I told him, "but I don't remember their faces. Yours I have seen it, in London, in Vienna. I know." For I remembered, now, that head of sparkling, young white hair, and the great figure of the man, and the eyes that looked you through. There was no child-soul inside the man's body of this Dr. Georges.

He did not answer; he only bowed, as he turned away to leave me. I had an inspiration— I have them sometimes; a great artist, like a violin, trembles to

vibrations unfelt by coarser things. I sprang, at last, from my bed, and stood upon the floor.

"You are the man who sent me the star sapphire!" I cried.

He said neither yes nor no, but went away.

Three days after we reached Sydney, and I walked ashore to the motor, and drove myself to my villa in Rose Bay.

I had seen Georges— somehow, one could not think of him as an ordinary "doctor"— once or twice on deck, but he scarcely spoke to me, though I often felt his eyes fixed on me when my head was turned another way.... One knows.

As for Walter, he was, I think, angry with me. I do not know; I have never known. He passed out of my life, in every sense that matters, that day when we stood together above the grave on the desert island, and read my name. I have heard little about him since.

Sydney, and Tasmania, welcomed me as only the south can welcome its own. Ricciardi, journeying by the Mediterranean route, met me there, as arranged; and with his grand opera company we produced the "Nibelungen Ring" as Australia has never seen it produced, before or since. Every night I wore the great star sapphire— though sapphires are not at their best by night— and when the curtain had at last rung down on the encores, double and treble and quadruple, the showers of bouquets, the cartloads of baskets handed up, I used to slip behind and look through the artistes' peep-hole, as I looked always before the curtain rose, to see if the sparkling head of young white hair was anywhere in the audience. But it never was.

I cannot account for the thing that happened. Perhaps one does not have to account for such things; they are beyond reason. I fell in love with Georges— the man whom I felt to be of noble character; whom, so strangely, I had lost.

Not as I had loved Walter; the passionate love had had its sway, and left an empty throne. No, I was nearly thirty now, and the great love, which finds all human beings capable of knowing it, had found me at last; and found me, as it almost always does, too late.... You remember, do you not? Do I not speak truth?

In the Pompeian court of my villa, with its pink and grey marbles, and its roses hanging between pillars against the Australian blue, I used to lie, all morning, the latticed doorway locked, listening to the waves' white, restless hands beating against the rocks below the garden, and trying to fancy that I heard the sea upon the island beach; saw the pale red blossoms of the island flowers burning against the sky. And I used to fancy that the island was mine, and that Georges— the man whose very Christian name I did not know— was

with me there. For, strangely enough, the thought of him and the thought of the island were inevitably bound up, the one with the other.

Did I say that I had divorced Bart Stanley? It does not matter much. I was free, but my freedom seemed of little use.

There came a time, in the Sydney winter, when chill southerlies swept up from the bay, and the dust was whirled about in yellow pillars, cold and foul. My roses were gone; the Pompeian court was dreary, full of mists and of dead leaves blown by the wind. I sat indoors before a great bay window that gave me all the light the sad June day could spare. I had nothing in my hands; neither book nor work. I do not read much at any time, and sewing I have always hated. So there seemed nothing on this day, when I feared the dust and wind for my voice, but to sit there as I sat, fingering the star sapphire that always hung round my neck, and wondering how many years, or how few, it would be before my beauty shrivelled away in the slow fires

that were consuming me. Talk to me of beautiful sad women!— no sorrow heavier than a lost jewel, or a missed appointment with a lover, ever added to any woman's beauty. Trouble, the real thing, eats like rust, and scars— like flame. The scars were beginning to show upon me.

A maid came in with the mail. My secretary had already seen it and sifted the begging letters, the invitations, the letters of business, the personal notes, apart from one another. Almost all she had opened, as it was her right to do. One remained intact; a strange-looking letter stained and smelling of the sea, written in a hand I did not know. There was no "Personal" on the envelope; the girl had used her discretion.

I sent the maid away before I opened that letter. My sixth sense had told me whence it came.

Long ago, the letters of Walter had made me catch my breath and turn red or pale, when they came; my hands, when I touched their envelopes, used to shake so that I often tore the page inside. This letter I opened with cool fingers, and a heart at rest. It held three lines only:

Star Oliver-

Will you come to the island?

Michael Georgieff, who gave you your sapphire.

"Marie!" I cried, springing to my feet. The maid heard me in the servants' room at the other side of the house, where she was gossiping with the other woman. She came running, breathlessly:

"Pack all my things to-night!" I said.

"Madame, Madame, and the theatre? "

"There's a Union liner to-morrow— one can arrange— hurry, Marie. Tell Miss Greaves to write and say that I will pay forfeit; she can draw the cheque, and I will sign it to-night."

"Madame— my God!— but it's a fortune lost!"

"Pack my things!" I said, and ran from the room.

It was just after the last bell had rung that Marie came on board, breathless, and full of apologies.

"I couldn't help it, Madame," she half sobbed. "I couldn't let Madame go without proper things, once I had heard." She tossed a great bale of clothing, that she had brought in a motor, down on my lounge. I wondered how the hysterical creature could have found out, or guessed— I had thought But these servant women can scent a wedding from miles away.

"You can open them," I said, as the gangway went up with cries and creaking of winches, and the ship began slowly, slowly, to edge away from the quay. Marie fell upon the bundles. I looked, expecting some folly of bridal stuff— white dresses, perhaps a wreath.... Marie took out black toilettes, a black hat, black veils.

"What does this mean?" I asked. The woman, who loved a scene, like all her class, gurgled, of intent, in her throat, and put her hand to her breast, as she replied:

"They sent me the cable, and told me to break it to Madame. The husband of Madame is dead, they say stabbed, in New Orleans."

"Break it!" I cried. "What nonsense— it's nothing on earth to me." For indeed I thought it was not. "I shall put that rubbish through the port," I said, and I was going to, but Marie fell upon it with a cry.

"If I may have it!" she begged.

"But you are not a widow."

"No, no— but Madame knows that I am fiancée, and good things will always make over— one can never tell—"

I burst out laughing, and went to my bedroom cabin, singing the "*Habanera*."

I did not tell you— did I?— anything about Michael Georgieff. But you will know, of course, I knew at once, when I saw the name. It was the Michael Georgieff— the great Russian doctor, who had studied the human mind as no other ever studied it; the "Pasteur of the soul." Great as Star Oliver was in her own world, Michael, the man with the archangel's name was fully as great in his.

The island, too, I knew about that, when I saw that name. For Georgieff— he only used the name Georges as an incognito— was said to have a hidden retreat in some far corner of the world, where he went to secure perfect quiet

for the deep studies that had made him so widely famous. Afterwards, I knew that his route was always by Fiji; he used to get a little sailing vessel there, and with a native crew make for the island, many days' way. As for myself, I bought the Union liner off her course, to take me to the place.

They landed me there from a boat one exquisite South Sea morning, and then steamed away, with Marie waving farewells across the rail. She was to be married in Wellington. The provident widow's robes went in the bottom of her trunk. I hope she has never had occasion to wear them.

Michael Georgieff was waiting for me, and together we went up the narrow path, cut and weeded now, that led to the little house. There was another house on the way, a new, small one.

"Who lives there?" I asked him.

"No one lives there," he answered. "A Greek priest is staying till next steamer call."

"Ah, to marry us?" I asked him, simply.

"Just so," he said. "When I heard of the death of the wicked man you married—"

"You were waiting for that?" I cried; and the shadows of the years suddenly rolled away, and became clear as glass.

"Madame, what else?" he said. "I am Greek Church. We don't have divorce."

"You shall make me Greek Church if you like," I told him. "I always thought the ikons very chic."

"I shall unmake you as a heathen first," he said.

We reached the house. The underbush had been cut away, I saw, down to the windward beach.

"Why has the stone been taken away?" I asked him. "What was it? A vision, as I have always thought, sent to save me?"

"No, Star," he answered me. "I put it there."

"You?"

"When my Star fell from heaven. That day I buried my love, and raised the stone above its grave."

"You mean my marriage?"

He bowed that strange silver head.

"Ah," I said, "you knew him?"

"Once," said Georgieff, "he was under my care; his family thought him mad. But I sent him back to them. 'He is not mad; he is only bad,' I told them. 'He will die by the rope or the knife some day.' I wish he had died by my knife— before he dared to climb the heavens, when he was more fit for hell."

I was not listening to him; I went into the house.

"You have made this beautiful," I said. For he had brought strange and lovely things from all corners of the earth and heaped them up like treasure. "Why did you not come and tell me yourself?" I asked, as I paused on the threshold of one small, exquisite room.

"Your love might have died, while waiting," answered Michael. "If it had, you would not have come. I knew, by that. Look up," he said, as I went to enter the room. I saw a great star of carved silver hung above the door.

"Your room," he said. "I have thrown the stone into the sea."

4: Isles of Peace

THE schooner went like a swan, stately and conscious of herself. Tide more than wind drew her towards the islands; there was so little breeze that the wings of the beautiful creature, full spread, were painted white on the streaming blue of the sea. Losara, high-peaked, with that dreaming backward lean that lends to so many South Sea islands their look of charmed repose, lay nearest to the ship; Lilawa, low, green, and palmy, sparkling with the play of wind among varnished leaves, ran peeringly out from behind. There were no other islands in the group. There was no other land, in all the desert of tumbling seas that ran between Losara, Lilawa, and New Zealand, weeks away.

Riddell, standing in the bow behind the look-out man, kept silence as they wormed their way through outlying reefs and coral horse-heads, to the break in the lagoon. A passenger, on island ships, must know his place. But his mind was talking loudly, and it said to him, again and again: "This is it!— this will do!"

The more he saw of the place the more he liked it. The schooner, her little auxiliary engine at work, downed sails, and sidled along the reef. Beaches came into view; they were white as the beaches of his dreams had been, with bright blue shadows that he had not dreamed of. Lawns ran down to the water; you would have thought they were made by man. On a spit of rock, as they verged landward, shone suddenly a forest tree, aflame from buttressed trunk to final twig with geranium-coloured flowers.

They had left winter in New Zealand; here it was high spring, with birds telling delight, and sun, eternal sun, upon Lilawa's low sweet lawns and the splendid peaks of Losara.

It was always sun here, always summer; the years swung full-orbed through circles of flawless gold; winter and death and chill were nightmares of the past. Far off, men strove for a crust of bread, for a handful of fire to warm their shivering bones; there were strikes and revolutions; there had been, not long ago, the hell-flame of war, searing green worlds to ashes. Losara and Lilawa, dreaming in the charmed circle of their reef, knew nothing of it all.

"The Isles of Peace," murmured Riddell to himself as the clamour of the anchor chains died down and the schooner swung to rest. Binham, the captain, standing wide-legged beside him, answered unexpectedly:

"Ay, that was the name— La Paz— reckon it was some Bolivian dago that called them that; you know they wasn't on the charts till 'forty-nine. When England picked them up she stuck on the native name again. Now, doctor, we're going to get the whaleboat in the water, and the sooner you can inspect your property and let us get away again, the better I'll be pleased. These

islands are all right in daylight, but I wouldn't conduct her out of them after five-thirty for the command of a Cunarder."

Binham, forty, sun-dried and sea-salted, disillusioned about the islands and their peoples, products, and romances as only the captain of an island schooner can be, clearly was not in the least impressed— as people in Wellington had been— with the romantic side of Riddell's bargain in islands. To folks inhabiting cold cities of the south it was a wild adventure, this purchase of Losara and Lilawa, the unused, uninhabited isles, by an English doctor who actually proposed to live on his property. To Binham, master of the auxiliary schooner *Pearl*, trader, recruiter, pearl buyer, "hard case" in general, it was just one commercial transaction among many, not interesting to him except in so far as it gave him some little extra profit in the way of passage money. A man couldn't be expected to go six hundred miles, more or less, out of his way, without sticking it on a bit....

Beyond a casual question about the possible planting of cocoanuts, Binham hadn't troubled, on the way up from Wellington, to find out what Riddell wanted the islands for. He was a man who talked about himself.

The curse of the South Seas is the overworked letter "I." Binham, from six bells of the morning watch till two bells of the evening watch, spilled autobiography. Riddell, with the habit of his profession, listened, criticized, and wondered how a man who saw all things in heaven and earth flat and savourless could remain so vividly interested in himself, who was not interesting at all.

"Are you going to land?" asked the doctor.

"I reckon I will," answered Binham, turning his fish-like gaze on the islands. He was a bluish-nosed, blunt-featured man; thick coats of self -approval seemed to mask his face as blubber masks the whale. Riddell, tall, lean, and browned, the stamp of the Great War bitten on his features in lines that hinted at experiences beyond the common terrible, resembled him scarce more than a gull bred in the fierce Western Ocean resembles a sleek parrot of the south. The storms of the wide Pacific's hurricane belt had left no trace on Binham beyond lined eyelids and skin burned sailor-red; on the other man, other tempests, not of the sea, had cut hieroglyphics, deep but hard to read.

The whaleboat pulled into the lagoon. Riddell, his eyes on Losara, seemed to be taking in the place at a glance— the grassy flat behind the beach, the wall of uncleared forest, the peaks that leaped beyond. Binham, pulling at his pipe, remarked between puffs that there was a chance of wooding and watering here, if he reckoned right. He would thank Dr. Riddell to come

up to the gully with him so that he could see if the stream was a permanent one. "No fresh water for six hundred miles," he explained. "Must

think of one's ship. And by the way, doctor, what the blazes made you think of takin' such a place?"

It was the first time he had asked the question.

Riddell, eyeing the beach that gave upon the celadon-green lagoon, was silent for a moment. The spot moved him; moved all the Robinson-Crusoe instincts that lie dormant in most men. Its sun-filled loneliness called to him like a song. Certain it was that man did not live on, did not visit, Losara. No lilies could stand so thick and unbroken, right on the selvedge of the sand, no crimson coral-flowers pile themselves in such untroubled wind-heaps, where either natives or whites were in the habit of landing. He mounted the bow of the whaleboat and leaped ashore, his head swimming with quotations.

..."We were the first that ever burst...." "Something lost behind the ranges— something waiting for you— go!..." "Gleams the untravelled world, whose margin fades...."

"Doctor," persisted Binham, monotonously, "what made you take it? It's no blooming good for cocoanuts as I can see— too blanky hilly. It's the hell of a way from anywhere; a man who lives here is going to pay heavy for freight on his stores. And if it's shell you're looking for, why, I can tell you without even puttin' the water-glass on it that there isn't none in them lagoons. They was having the loan of you that sold you this place. It's not worth anything. Why, Doc, if it was, it would ha' been nipped up years ago. Everyone knows all about the islands nowadays. I remember when I was off Tarawa in 'ninety-four

It did not seem to Riddell, patient as he had been hitherto, that he could stand another chapter of the captain's autobiography. He broke in abruptly.

"See here," he said, coming to a halt under a huge Barringtonia that had rained white and pink house-painter brushes over a rood of sand: "Look! This is what I came for, if you want to know."

Binham, staring, took from his hand the small Russia-leather case of saxe blue, with spring unfastened, that the doctor held out. Within the circle of gold inside was a woman's head, painted by the first miniaturist of the twentieth century.

The captain swore a slow, emphatic oath.

"Is she as good looking as that— cross your heart?" he added.

"Cross your heart, lungs and liver— cross all the viscera you've got if you like— she is," said the doctor.

"And did she turn you down?" asked Binham, licking his lips a little. He had a crude but strong sense of melodrama, nourished by visits to the picture-shows of Auckland and Wellington.

"Turn me down? Not much. We're going to be married in two months and a half. Three weeks back to Wellington, seven weeks home again."

"Why, Lord strike me, you aren't going to bring her here?"

"Whether the Lord strikes you or not, that's my intention."

"And no plantation nor nothing?"

"Nothing— as you put it."

Binham gave him one long stare from his fishy eyes and asked no more. They were turning up towards the river; for a minute both were busy finding and keeping balance on the chaos of boulders that filled the lap of the gully. Presently Binham spoke.

"So far as I can see," he said, "there'll be any amount of water here for the supplyin' of ships."

Riddell chuckled to himself. It was his own professional way of dealing with a lunatic— to keep the conversation going and avoid the subject of delusions....

EVEN if Marguerite— fair, haloed with angel curls, like the youth of ancient Florence; busy in her womanly way, while she waited, with carding and combing of sphagnum moss for the wounded, as maids of long ago busied themselves in their lovers' absence with household carding and spinning— even if she had not shone like a Pharos-light at the end of the long voyage, it would have seemed very long to Bart Riddell. Released, through wounds, from the war, which was now so near its end that there was no question of going back, Riddell was still suffering somewhat from the shock of his injuries, and somewhat more from the effects of the earliest months in Belgium, when he had gone through a hell of horrors worse even than the common experiences of doctors in those awful days. His courage, his kindness had remained unbroken; his vivid, original mind had retained all its powers. One thing alone of evil the Great War had done to him; it had blown to dust his belief in human happiness.

It is true that you and I, and the grocer, and the king, walk every day, all day, upon a mere ice-film of circumstances that may split up to cracking fragments, and drop us into the black that lies below, before we have finished our afternoon tea. But none of us knows it. The film is not transparent; if it were

To Bart Riddell, ever since 'fourteen and the hell of Belgium, it had been. That was the difference. Riddell knew, fiercely, in his very bones, what most people but vaguely half believe. He knew that death was coming; that happiness must go.

Even before the war he had endured "bludgeonings of Fate" such as fall to the lot of few. At three-and- thirty he had lost his father, who killed himself because of wrecked fortunes; his mother, who died of a broken heart; a dearly loved sister, whose happy marriage ended before a year was out at the birth of her little dead son. He had had a friend, such a friend as men dream of and seldom know. He had had a sweetheart... You know the tale; it is very old, but when it happens to oneself it is as new as death.

She had not even been content, the woman who left him for his friend; nor had the friend been good to her. Bart would have put his strong body as a shield across either of them to keep them from fire or steel with his own flesh. But he had not been able, by the greatest sacrifice he could make, to give them a year of happiness.

Then came the war, and Belgium. Then, towards the end of those red years, when Bart Riddell was recovering from a wound that had gained him the Military Cross, came Marguerite.

Marguerite was a clergyman's daughter, reared in a lonely parish. A charming and amazing mixture of latest twentieth century and earliest nineteenth. She was dutiful and housewifely as our great-grandmothers; she visited the poor of the parish with a Lady-Bountiful basket on her arm, carded moss for the wounded, made as many socks and shirts as anyone in the county. Also she played a fine game of hockey, and could run and repair motor cars.

She warmed her father's slippers, she fetched her mother's shawls, she took a class in the Sunday School. Besides this, she wrote "thoughtful papers" on the duty of self development (having been to a great girls' school of the new type), the rights of the individual, and the modern aspects of the Darwinian theory.

As a matter of course she held a St. John Ambulance certificate, and made use of it when the town hall was turned into a convalescent home. Bart Riddell came there to recover. In recovering he met Marguerite, and dared to love her. Dared was the word he used to himself. How could he hope that he would be able to make a happy life for her, any more than he had been able to make it for that lesser love of years ago?

But Marguerite herself, once she had made up her mind that she liked and wanted the tall, lean doctor with the handsome grey eyes so full of a strange regretfulness and unrest— Marguerite, quite simply, settled the matter, twentieth-centurywise, by showing what she felt. After that there was no more hesitation for Bart Riddell. One long night he lay awake thinking and planning with all the power of his fine brain and well- trained mind. Next morning with his plan full-shaped he spoke to her.

He told her only that he loved her and wished to take her away from England and the almost-finished war to a place, far off, where there was nothing, never had been or would be anything, but beauty, sun and peace. It sounded well to Marguerite; it would have sounded well to her if Bart had proposed to take her to a frozen peak in Tierra del Fuego and feed her on wild dogs' flesh. She agreed promptly, only asking in a general way where the place might be. Bart told her that he intended to buy a South Sea island. The girl with the Fra Angelica curls expressed approval, and immediately visited the village library, from which she borrowed *Captain Cook's Voyages*, the works of Lady Brassey, *The Voyage of the Challenger*, and Darwin's *Cruise of the Beagle*. Her parents objected strongly on the grounds that the islands were twelve thousand miles away, and chiefly inhabited by heathens. Also— but this they did not mention, even to each other— on the much more important grounds that a Brigadier-General, no older than Riddell, had been "paying marked attention."

Marguerite being, in spots, very dutiful, and given, as previously mentioned, to the warming of slippers and carrying of shawls, the Rector and his wife expected to win the day. But the twentieth-century spot, the years-of-the-war spot, expanded incontinently, like sun-spots in a year of hurricane, and obliterated the rest, and Marguerite downed slippers and shawls and declared for her rights. She was very fond of her parents, but she loved Bart, and she was more than of age— twenty-three, in fact— and what had they to say about that?

What they had to say did not matter. The Brigadier-General did not matter either. He engaged himself suddenly, almost violently, to a lady prominent in revue; and Bart Riddell, with the armistice impending, went off to finish his convalescence on a troopship bound for the Antipodes. Marguerite remained. She had really not understood why Bart wanted to go and live in the South Seas, but the words rang silverly in the ears of youth and romance, so she carded the last of the sphagnum moss, began the first garments of her wedding outfit and waited, mystified but content.

And Bart Riddell in due time returned.

He brought with him a set of photographs representing Losara and Lilawa; also a drawing by a Wellington architect depicting the house that was to be built. He spent the weeks before the wedding in buying stores, tools, seeds, everything that a man could want for settlement on a Crusoe island. Marguerite, who by this time had procured works on the Pacific more up-to-date than those of the village library, helped him eagerly and intelligently. She sensed the existence of some secret connected with Bart's islands; she would not ask questions, but she was almost certain in her own mind that her lover

was obsessed by the rather outworn ideal of the simple life. Well, if he were, he was Bart; and the king could do no wrong. Besides, everybody one met was wild with interest and envy. A South Sea island of one's own!— what could be more romantic?

The long, amazing journey of the honeymoon through a happy world drunk with new wine of peace left romance still undimmed. Fellow passengers thought the destination of Bart and his wife a wonder in itself. Other people were bound for Colombo, for Bombay, for Adelaide, Perth, or Sydney; some for New Zealand; one for Thursday Island and its pearling fleet. But nobody had such a story-book address to give to correspondents as "Reef Cottage, Losara Island, South-east Pacific." Marguerite was pleased with it, and her curiosity as to Bart's real meaning, real secret, died away as the liner stamped steadily on towards Australia.

Riddell himself, head poised on hand like Rodin's "Thinker" and face almost as lean and sad, used to watch her as she spun from saloon deck to promenade deck, from promenade up to bridge or down to main, from one end of the huge liner to the other— always in a delighted hurry to join in something agreeable— games, gymkhanas, concerts, committees for the getting up of the same, song practices in the afternoon, expeditions to the bow at night to look for the Southern Cross. She was so vivid, so alive, so sure of living fifty, sixty more years, and enjoying every one of them.... He felt a passionate pity for her. She did not know. She could not see that there were black things with crunching teeth and searing claws hidden among the rose-bushes she saw ahead; she did not know that the things would jump out on her, inevitably, as she went singing by, and that after they had had their will of her, her wax-red lips would be silent and her eyes would look not about her but before, with always

*"A listening fear in their regard
As if the vanward clouds of evil days
Had spent their malice, and the sullen rear
Was with its stored thunder labouring up."*

Throughout the voyage to Australia the thought kept possession of him. . . . Yet what did it matter after all, if Rita did not know like the rest of us? She was not going to be like the rest. Losara would see to that.

IT IS ONLY in The Islands that you may know full-grown and flourishing the sea captain's glory in its flower. The schooner captain, the steamer captain, even the master of the little trading cutter, enjoys more real distinction than even the splendid naval captain in his King's uniform with his big grey gunboat

behind him. For the naval man comes seldom, once in a season, when the hurricane time is past— since you must not risk His Majesty's fighting ships among the reefy isles between November and March— and he stays perhaps a day, perhaps a week. In a blaze of splendour and dinner-parties and dances he comes; he shines upon the local tennis club as some strange star; he climbs the island peaks to shoot pigeon, and rides the island horses, sometimes to their destruction and his own. He is entertained; he listens with a granite face to tales of noble ancestry poured forth by hosts in "sneakers" and shirt sleeves; his junior officers store up "howlers" to make the gun-room ring with by and by. Like a flashing comet he comes, and as swiftly goes; and the island once more settles down to ancient peace.

But the sea captain who has no true right to his title, who should in fact be called a "master" only— his glory is perennial; his importance runs from March to November, and from November back to March again. Into his hand, sooner or later, are committed the lives of all the island folk; it is his to bring them safe through peril or with them to die, fighting for their lives until the moment the salt foam chokes his nostrils and the reeling bridge bears down with him into the deep. To all events of island life the ship is inevitably linked. The captain takes away the bridal pair on their honeymoon, and brings the lately married couple "up from South." With him the defaulting tradesman flees trying to hide his crime till it shall be too late to put him back again; next to his cabin sleeps the faithless wife, whose rendezvous "down South" will be known to him before it is known to any. In his care the expectant mother goes to the great island where hospitals and doctors are; the white-faced husbands, staring through a binocular that will not keep still, looks for her figure, with a tiny burden in its arms, as the ship steals home again. And if there is no figure there, or if a strange one carries the small white creature that has cost too dear, it is the captain who will meet on the gangway and clasp by the hand the man who has lost all but all.... Death, love, money, food, appointments, dismissals, ruin, salvation, flow through his sun-marked hands. And from his lips, hard bitten with the salt of countless seas and years, comes all the gossip, all the news, of everything that happens over ten times a thousand miles.

Binham, of the boresome talk and the stupid countenance, who had not met with the approval of Bart Riddell, new from strenuous folk and places where things happened every hour— Binham, captain and owner of the auxiliary schooner Pearl, was, notwithstanding, liked and welcomed in the island groups through which his business took him month by month and year by year.

Perhaps the island people understood him better than Riddell could. The men who had tried— and failed— to read a verdict of life or death upon his

fish-like face in hurricane weather of December, who had welcomed him to the family verandah that takes the place of the family hearth, over Pacific lands, through a generation of changes, and never found Binham change to a friend or truckle to an enemy— these were less easily ruffled by defects of manner than the brilliant, cultivated doctor who had been so hard hit by the war.

Over Morton's verandah in the Palolo Islands a pink and pearly evening was dreaming into dusk. The palm trees out to westward were like some Chinese fantasy in cut black paper laid flat upon a wall of fading rose. Banana birds, dark on the sunset, flirted in and out of pomegranate trees, whose vermilion-rosetted flowers had turned of a sudden to puffs of calcined black.

"Did-you-do-it" called the birds, "Speak-up-pretty devil!"

"When I was trading to Rarotonga, Aitutaki, Mauke, Manuwai, in eighteen-ninety-nine," said Binham, looking out at the sunset with an entire absence of interest, "I remember there was a curious deal in copra with one of the native chiefs, Arikis they call them. It was like this. A white man had taken up an island, same as this Riddell feller. And he—"

"Riddell's the name of the chap who bought the Losaras?" asked Morton, wise trader of many wiles, who knew, if anyone did, how best to head Binham off reminiscences into narrative.

"Yes. I took him up when he went to have a look at the islands. And I brought him and his wife, and cargo— that much as you wouldn't believe it, just after the armistice."

The trader's friends— men and women of Palolo, met together on Morton's big verandah for the great event of "schooner night"— were all talking to each other, more or less, but most of them broke off at the mention of Riddell and the Losaras. It was one of the romances of the mid-Pacific known vaguely to island dwellers over many thousand miles of sea. There are such... you who have heard the reef-song will remember. You have not forgotten the strange, handsome, elderly man who lived in the century's early days at the back of an island famous in mission history, who had a companion, a very beautiful woman of thirty or so, deeply in love with him, and not (one thought) married to him. You will recall the pictures that they made, the books they read, their courteous refusal of all society but their own. You will remember, too, the white girl's grave in lonely Penrhyn, nameless but for initials and a date. You will remember other romances....

Palolo was the nearest island to Losara; six hundred miles distant, it is true, but still neighbours are neighbours. Palolo— one is sorry to state— knowing something of the history of Losara and its sole inhabitants, had promptly made up the rest, and told itself and its calling traders and travellers that Riddell was a man who had run off with one of the supposed-to-be- murdered Russian

Grand Duchesses. Losara, they inferred, was safe from wandering Bolsheviks. That, of course, was why....

Binham, being questioned, said unperturbedly that he didn't know. Mrs. Riddell was good-looking enough for anything. And Riddell, he did seem ready to turn the world upside down for her. He'd built her a house with real imported tiles on the roof, red ones that turned up, and there was real imported tiles on the floor too, none of your island mats. Blue and brown and white and black they was; you never saw the like. It stood to reason a man must be fair silly about a woman to doll up his house like that for her.

Palolo drew an envious breath. In The Islands you rank largely by the material of your roof and the quality of your floor covering. "Rau" thatch is good enough for many; iron is for the well-to-do; but tiles! And on the floor, too— where most people aspired to linoleum at the best. Tiles! It was a wonder in Palolo for weeks.

"I tell you," offered Binham, on his return trip, "if you're all that keen on knowing whether she's a Grand Duchess or not, I can spin you the whole yarn when I come back from Auckland. You see, there's a number-one little beach on Lilawa that slopes right down as steep as a roof into fifteen foot of calm water, sandy bottom, and I was aiming to beach the Pearl there this trip; she's that foul she'll hardly sail, and me and my boys can clean her all right and save expense. I'll be a week or so at the Losaras. Riddell's not like to make no objections. And I'll—"

"What about giving me a passage?" broke in Morton the trader, master of the biggest store and most of the credit in Palolo. "There ought to be fifty ton a year of copra off that low island Lilawa. I saw it once. Is Riddell on for selling any?"

"There's not six ton," said Binham, deliberately, staring at Morton through the bottom of his glass as he swallowed the last drop of beer. "Native planting, or chance— much the same— jammed together, and not much of it, anyhow."

"I'd like to have a look," persisted Morton. "I'm near due for another trip to Auckland, anyhow. And you never know what a chap has up his sleeve when he goes and buys one of those outback places. If I'd neglected chances of new business I wouldn't have been what I am."

"What's that?" If it had been anyone but Binham one might have suspected satire.

"Well—" Morton's hand went to his moustache.

He was a handsome fellow in a rather flamboyant style. The little missionary woman in the dusk corner of the verandah— she who went through life in dusk corners— eyed him. She could eye him safely; no one ever noticed what she might be doing.

"Well— I'm a pretty successful man on the whole, if I haven't got tiles to my roof and my floors. There's some who spend their cash and some who invest it, do you understand? I reckon this store and the others speak for themselves. And as for my house"— he seemed sore on the point; he glanced about him as he spoke— "well, if you can point me out another fifteen-foot verandah in the group, or in any group nearer than Fiji, do you understand? why, you may."

"Riddell's verandah is fourteen eight," proffered Binham.

"Ah!" was Morton's satisfied comment.

"And tiled, every inch of it."

"Oh!" The " Oh " had a different tone.

"A pound a foot they stood him. Without the freight."

"He's an elderly man, isn't he?" asked Morton, still with one hand to his thick moustache. The little missionary woman— she who saw so much because she was always the looker-on and never the player— watched from her corner, and wondered how it was that Binham did not see.... It was all clear to her eyes— clear as shoal water that lies still, betraying the many-coloured things that swim below. That hand to the lip, that sidelong look of the dark-lashed blue eye— she remembered.... There was nothing almost to remember, though it had stolen the sun from her day; that was the double tragedy of it; that was why she knew Morton, and knew when the thought of a woman was not, and was, within his mind.

There was general talk after that, and people drank beer and lemonade, half-warm, and smoked, and sewed, and spent an endless evening. After came the dusk starry roads on the way home, and one little woman alone, thinking and remembering; wondering what would be the end— this time.

On the Losaras time was not.

Night followed day; there was Sunday— kept by Riddell to please his rectory-bred wife rather than himself— there was the north-west season, when rains were frequent, and the south-east, when they were rare. There were schooner calls, once in four months or so. Mangoes, pineapples, oranges ripened and were done; in six months ripened again. The moon marked each four weeks. But the time of populated lands— minutes, hours, tripping in small steps— did not exist here on Losara and Lilawa; the march of the days was stately, large, as the march of eternity.

Bart Riddell and Rita, now a year and a half inhabiting their refuge of mid-seas, could scarcely have told you how long they had been there. Sometimes it seemed a week, sometimes a decade. They had no clocks; Riddell had not supplied the house with any because their ticking rasped his war-worn nerves; and his watch and Rita's, after the manner of watches in a hot damp climate,

had become so unreliable that winding was waste of time. They rose at dawn; ate when the sun was up, when it was high, and when it was setting. Riddell called his Niue Island labourers to work with a conch-shell trumpet when it seemed good to him to do so, and sent them home to their little string of brown huts on Lilawa beach as soon as the day's task— fruit and vegetable gardening, fishing, hunting and killing of wild pig in the hills that crowned Losara— was done. Brown boys habited in tunics of coloured calico did the work of the famous tiled house that stood on the summit of a low green hill overlooking the sea. Others, with their wives, sat among the shallow pools of the river slowly washing, rinsing, and hanging out to dry the linen of the house and countless white garments that, in the uniformly warm Losara climate, Riddell and his wife used without thought of number. It seemed a palatial establishment, and the house and pleasure grounds, the tennis court, small golf links, fruit and flower walks and arbours, fountain-fed from the heights of Losara hills— all, in another hemisphere, would have shouted money.

Yet Riddell was not rich. He had come into some thousands before his marriage— enough to give him a small income, well invested. Every penny, instead of investing, he had sunk in an annuity that gave him seven hundred a year after the capital for a start had been deducted. With this, even at post-war prices, they had all that heart could desire in the present. Of the future Rita did not think. Why should she? Bart did the thinking. A woman happily mated, completely satisfied, is the same woman the whole world over, whether she is a college graduate or a field girl from a farm.

If there was a mystery in their way of living she had never fathomed it. If she had wondered once in a way why a man of Riddell's ability, still young, should give up professional work and remain content to wait for death on Losara, companioned only by herself, occupied only with reading, tennis playing and swimming, a little sport, a little writing— she did not wonder long.

They were happy. Riddell used to ask her, anxiously sometimes, if she was quite sure she was happy— very happy. If there was nothing that she wanted, nothing that she feared. And Rita, tilting back her cap of gold-edged curls to look at him (for Bart was a big man) used to answer, gravely: "Nothing." They had no children nor wished for them. This surprised Rita a little; she had thought that all men— But the very thought seemed unwelcome to Riddell.

"That would be one of the things one could hardly—" he said one day, and broke off. She wondered why, a little— only a little. Losara and Lilawa were very lovely, and she was past the brief time of restlessness and regret that comes to all dwellers in far-out places soon after settling down— when the great world calls— calls— and being unanswered falls at last to silence....

The only " little speck in garnered fruit " that troubled Rita once in a little while was Bart's odd habit of talking in his sleep. He did it fairly often, and he always said the same things, declining afterwards to explain them if asked; seeming, indeed, so troubled by any mention of them that she got into the way of listening, wondering, and keeping her wonder to herself. He used to murmur and throw up his arms, and speak of the war— of horrors that made white Marguerite, sitting up alarmed in the moonlight, put her hands across her ears.... Then he would quieten down and say: "Have I done everything? Have I thought of everything? Yes, yes, I'm sure there's nothing.... It's perfect.... One good deed, one good deed...." On one night he frightened her by crying out in a voice so loud she thought he must be awake: "If I die! " She seized his hand thinking he must be ill. But his eyes were shut and his breath, after a minute, came quietly. The pawpaw and honeysuckle, white in the moonlight about the verandah rail, swept almost over their beds; the air was filled with subtle, exquisite scent. Marguerite, where she lay, could see the mountains and the wide untenanted sea, black, streaked with thread-like reflections of stars. A sudden terror seized her; she felt that just so the flowers would cast out their perfume, insolently, happily, if she lay not quick but dead on her verandah couch; that the silver-threaded sea, breathing soft lullaby, would any evening or morning slay her, turning merely in its sleep, and not even know that it had done so. The terror of the universe was upon her.

She shook her husband awake. "Bart!" she cried.

He opened his eyes, and instantly answered her, as if she had spoken her fears. "Don't be afraid of anything," he said. "Trust me." And Marguerite, clinging in the enormous night to his warm hand, felt terror slip away from her and slept.

She never spoke of that moment; but thence-forward it seemed to her as if she began to guess Bart's meaning in coming to the island.

Nevertheless the days went perfectly and there was nothing wanting in them....

Sooner or later the thing happens. Each of you who read this will remember.

Bart Riddell went out one morning to see a bit of forest cleared. The Niue boys were hard at it when he arrived, some cutting away saplings and underbrush with three-foot knives, some swinging their sharpened axes against the trunks that were already clear. There was a big, sappy cottonwood right out on the edge of the bush; the best two axemen had almost got it down. "Shack, shack!" went their axes, one after another, biting into the soft timber. The boys sweated and grunted; their shell-white teeth gleamed in wide

grins. "Stan' clear, Masser!" one of them shouted, as the crown began to rock; and Bart, judging it with his eye, stood clear.

He had judged rightly, being by now no tyro where timber was concerned. But he did not know, nor did the boys, that the cotton wood was rotten at heart. It toppled, cracked, and fell, not out to the open ground, but sidewise, half against the breast of uncleared forest. The Niue men saw it coming, and leaped aside. Bart Riddell saw it and leaped also. He was too late— by the fraction of a second that his clothes added to the interval between crack and leap. The naked Niueans staggered just clear of the scourging boughs; Bart Riddell fell just under.

He kept his head. He did not feel pain, but he knew he was injured. "Take the door off the tool-house, and bring it here," he told the boys. They brought it, and he directed them in his removal. The great limbs of the cottonwood were cut away and lifted; the door laid beside and slipped beneath him with all precautions. They carried him to the famous house with the tiled roof, past the fountain he had made, with its stone basin that was to last for fifty years; past the rows of poinsettiam and jacaranda trees that he had planted to make a flowery avenue where he and Rita were to walk at sunset-time in nineteen-twenty-five. It was nineteen-twenty now; the avenue was a row of struggling rods. Bart looked at it as they carried him past. The avenue was a long one. He had time to draw a pin from his coat and run it into one leg— into the other— again— as they went by; time to think; to try a muscle, cautiously; to realize....

He saw the avenue, five years ahead, a glory of lavender and scarlet, just as he had planned it should be. He saw that he was not there.

Rita came running out, her hands covered with flour. She had been making dainties for "morning tea."

When she saw the boys and the door her face turned as white as her hands.

"Don't worry," called Riddell to her. "I've sprained my leg rather badly; I'll have to put in a week on the lounge, that's all."

The colour came back slowly to the girl's face.

"Oh, you poor old boy," she said. "Does it hurt you a lot?"

"No," said Riddell thoughtlessly, and then: "Yes, it does, rather." God! but he wished it did!...

"Will you go to your room?" she asked, hovering round him anxiously. She did not doubt his word, and yet— he looked strange, unlike himself. Perhaps he was going to faint.

"On the verandah for the present," he answered. "Boys, put the door on the lounge— so. That's right. You can go."

"Tell me what to do for your leg," demanded Marguerite. "I— I've had a Red Cross course, you know."

"Don't worry," he told her. "All it wants at present is quiet. . . . No, I want to be left on the door just now. The leg must lie straight till the swelling goes down...."

"What nonsense I'm talking," he thought. "But she'll be none the wiser. They and their Red Cross!" He would have laughed; but it came to him— not suddenly, quite quietly— that he would never laugh again. One did not laugh when one was going to die. Of course....

The unbelievable thing had happened. Well for him that he had prepared for that as for all else. He must hurry. The symptoms were unmistakable. There wouldn't be any suffering, and if there was he knew how to deal with that. What little care he would need for the next two or three days— it would not be longer— the boys could easily give. His plan! His plan! It worked, even in this last extremity.

When Marguerite came back with some futile stuff of handkerchiefs and eau-de-cologne in her hands he looked at her between eyelids almost closed. He hoped that she might suppose he was asleep. He did not care to have his forehead bathed, and he wished, besides, to think.

...Rita, poor lassie! how "down" she looked! Her lips had a frightened curve. She did not suspect— or rather, she did not know she suspected— the truth. But nevertheless it was not far from her. "The subliminal consciousness at work," thought Doctor Riddell. He was glad— very glad— of something that he did not specify, even to himself. He waited his time.

Sunset came; night followed; the moon rose full and clear. Rita was busied serving food, fetching tea, to Bart on his lounge. He took them, thanked her, sipped and nibbled, and said he had no appetite. "It's the shock of the sprain," he said. "I'll be well tomorrow." He saw the sun go down. "My last sunset," he thought. She fetched a light silk rug and laid it carefully over his knees. "Thanks, old girl," he said.

"My last moon," he thought, looking out at the garden. "My last night."

Rita, relieved of her fears, chatted and told him about the natives and the fowls. "Yes," he agreed, "I'd lock the henhouse; it's better."

There came a silence by and by. Rita sat beside him, her young face ivory fair in the moonlight, her wonderful gold curls half silvered. There was not a line on cheek or forehead; she held her head as only young wild creatures of the forest, and young human creatures who have never known sorrow, hold it. Riddell, feigning sleep again, watched her through his lashes. What it was never to have known great grief— to have lived a year of love and perfect joy !

Surely he had done well for this white-and-gold creature who loved him so. Surely he would do well

Lying there with eyes half shut, his memory ranged back— back to a day soon after them coming to Losara, when he had slipped away in the evening, alone, to the little chemical laboratory where he stored drugs and medical goods. He could see himself, in there with the door locked, weighing, selecting, measuring, putting away at last, on a top shelf, a small, blue glass bottle with a distinctive gold-edged label. "Tonic" the label said. "Special"

He roused himself from the strange apathy that was beginning to steal over his mind. It was time— full time. In a few hours at most it might be too late.

He had made up his mind, rehearsed, long before any occasion came. He knew what to say.

"Rita— you look tired out. You mustn't stay up with me."

"But of course I must, Bart. How can I possibly leave you to the boys— since you really won't come to your own room to-night? "

"You'll be overtired. You are feeling tired now." The medical man in Riddell well knew the value of suggestion.

Marguerite passed one slim hand over her face. He could see that the suggestion had told.

"It doesn't matter," she said determinedly. "You always trouble too much about me, darling."

"Take a glass of wine."

"You know I don't like it."

"Well, have some of my special tonic; then you won't get tired."

"I never heard you speak of it."

"It's an invention of my own. You must never tell anyone about it...."

"I never will."

"I'm sure of that, Mag. Bring it here from the laboratory. It's on the top shelf, in a blue bottle with a gold label."

"I don't like leaving you." The woman's, the wife's instinct spoke. Only a sprain— Bart had said it, and Bart knew, but— he looked strangely.

"Oh, rot, girlie. Bring it along, and let me see you drink it. It hasn't any nasty taste— any taste at all. And I can tell you the thing's top-hole. It's— it's life, new life. That's what it is."

"I don't need it, really— but if it will please you "

"It will." He was growing impatient now. He could not mistake the symptoms; nor would she be able much longer to mistake them. The injury was graver even than he had thought. There would be no dragging days in the care of careless natives; no swift, sharp end brought by his own revolver. Instead, to-night before the white star-diamonds among the pawpaw blooms

grew pale, he would pass quietly, painlessly out into the unknown, which he had never been afraid to face. And on that strange journey he would not go alone. Beside him, unstartled, unafraid, the One Woman, led through the gates of death before she knew that they had opened, would fare too.

"Hurry, hurry," he kept thinking. "Rita, hurry!"

What could she be doing? Soon it would be too late!

She came back to the wide verandah, two glasses in her hand. One held a colourless liquid; he knew what that was. The other, amber-hued and creaming, sent forth a perfume of rare wine. Rita had opened one of the bottles of pre-war champagne.

"You have got to drink this, if I take the other," she declared. She did not look at him as she spoke.

Riddell, wishful only of attaining his end in time, motioned to a boy to hold his head and give him the glass. He did not want Marguerite to see how helpless he was growing. He could just swallow the wine....

"Now drink!" he ordered, looking keenly at her.

He felt not an atom of remorse. This thing had been done by countless lovers the whole world over; Rudolf of Austria— others— there were others— there were—

What was the matter with him? It was not time— yet. He tried to raise his head. The room was full of smoke— white smoke. Marguerite's face, whirling, dissolving, seemed to hang in the middle.

"What— have— you— done?" he heard himself say. His head fell back....

Marguerite, setting down the glass of plain water that she had almost finished, looked at him with a smile of happy cunning.

"I made you take it, dear," she said. "If it was as good as you say it was you who needed it, not I."

"Oh, my God!" Riddell thought he said. But his lips did not move. The last thing he saw was Marguerite's face, bending over him.... Her mouth was open; she seemed to be crying out....

"I remember," said Binham, "about the year eighteen-eighty-nine, or maybe it would be 'eighty-eight, when I was mate of the brigantine *Susan Vilgate*— her that was afterwards wrecked on Bramble Cay, off of New Guinea, with Walter Goodman captain, and they saved the cargo, which was beads and tommyhawks mostly, but Goodman he was beat to pieces on the reef— I remember we put in at the Petrels, away south of Tubuai, to answer a signal I seen about four bells when I was takin' the morning watch. It was a smoke signal, three fires in a row; the Petrels is low islands mostly. We put in and anchored in about eleven fathom, good holding ground, and the captain, he sent me and a boat's crew of Raratongans to see what might be up. The reefs

isn't much in those latitudes gettin' towards south; I hadn't any trouble makin' the passage. And when we beached the boat and got ashore there was the dead spit of the job I and Morton was on— you remember— it would be near a year now. At the Losaras, you know. When I and the Raratongans went up to the house—"

"At Losara?" asked the small mission woman.

Binham directed a long, fish-like stare about the crowded verandah. He disliked being checked in his stride.

"I didn't say it was Losara, did I?" he asked after a pause. "I said it was a smoke signal, three fires in a row, on one of the Petrels, south of Tubuai, that we was going in to see about. And, as I was sayin' "— he directed another stare at the mission woman— "when we got to the house that was on the island, we found the very spit an' likeness of the job I and Morton had on Losara. Just the same, there was a man lyin' dead and a woman screechin' her head off, and the nigs, they had had the sense all on their own to put up the signal. Only I will say for the woman on the Petrels, she screeched ten times worse than little Mrs. Riddell done. You see, her man was dead just an hour or two, still fresh he was, and Riddell, he was corpsed and buried two days before we came. And both times we took her off, and both times she—"

"Mrs. Riddell?" broke in, unwisely, a passenger from last night's steamer.

Binham, for all reply, took up his glass of beer, drank it slowly and steadily to a finish and walked away.

"What made him do that? " asked the tourist, perplexedly. He was taking the round trip of the main island groups, and thought he had struck, in the person of the schooner captain, valuable local colour.

"You shouldn't have interrupted him; neither should I," explained the little, shadowy mission woman, who had also arrived last night. She had asked— begged— for a transfer from Palolo; no one knew why....

"Do you know him?"

"Oh yes. He takes in the island I was last at."

"What was all that yarn about? "

"Well, I wish you— that is, I was very anxious to hear all about it, if he hadn't stopped. You see, I've been on furlough south, and then they sent me here, so I've heard nothing really authentic about that affair at Losara except that Dr. Riddell died, and a— a— trader from Palolo who went with Captain Binham— the trader— a Mr. Morton—"

"Yes?" The passenger from the Auckland boat wondered what the little mission woman was "backing and filling" about.

"He— married Mrs. Riddell."

"What, immediately?"

"Oh no. Oh dear no. Only quite lately. She— she was very pretty, I understand."

"Well left?"

"No. It seems— an annuity— oh, here's the captain back again; now I wonder could we get him to—"

They did, or rather the passenger did, with the help of a good cigar. Binham, mellowed, drifted by long stages of bracketed reminiscence into the true, only story of Losara and Bart Riddell and Marguerite— the tale that, in its details, was known to no one but himself.... After all, in the Pacific, it's the captains who know....

It was a white island night; moon on the silvered palms, moon on pale coral roadways, moon mimicking fallen snow on the shining iron roofs. The "trade" swept through the tree tops; island men and women, wandering on the beach that edged the town, let their voices rise and fall in windy harmony scarce distinguishable from the song of the night and the sea. The steamer people, beings of another sphere, sat upright on basket chairs, "chatted," as gracious celebrities are said to do, and remembered, always, themselves and their manners.

Binham, fish-eyed, blubber-faced, looking at no one in particular, and apparently thinking of almost nothing at all, boomed along with his tale of island loves and disasters as a blunt, green-winged beetle of the tropics booms along coral roadways in the dusk.

"It doesn't do," he said, "to go again Nature, nor yet to go again luck. You might'll looked into them things, and you mightn't'll looked. I don't exactly say I have. But you can't help noticin'. Things, I mean.

"That Riddell bloke, he said to me, the day he brought her up to Losara— she did look pretty; I never seen such hair except maybe on a Christmas doll for the kids.... She'd run on in front of us up the path to the house, cryin' and callin' out at the sight of everythin'; you see, she was that young. And Riddell, he talked to me till we come to the bend of the road where she run back to meet him. And what he said was that he'd seen hell and damnation in Belgium, if you'll excuse the language, and he'd had particular hell himself all his life. So he'd made a sort of promise to himself about her. And what he'd promised himself was that she wasn't to have no trouble. None of any kind whatsoever of anyhow. 'I've brains,' sessee, 'and I've money now,' sessee, 'and it'll be a damn queer thing,' sessee, 'if I can't make the world what it ought to be for one person. Why, there's nothin' can touch her here,' sessee. 'If she got sick, there's me to look after her, and no one can't quarrel with her here, and no one can't be false friends to her here,' sessee, 'and no one can't do no sort of an ill trick to neither one of us,' sessee, 'because there isn't anyone to do it.

And this island is out of the hurricane belt,' sessee, 'so there can't be any disturbances of nature. There's nothing,' sessee, 'that can spoil the way I have it worked out; I've cheated Fate,' sessee. Those were his very words."

Binham paused and slowly absorbed half of a long glass of beer. This time nobody interrupted.

"Well," he went on, "that's the story." He looked into his glass. "All of it but what Morton and I found when we called at the island. What I told you. You see, Riddell, he had fixed up and down and every which way, by what he said, and he'd even made it certain— so he said— that she wouldn't ever be left a widow, which is a damn poor thing for any woman, specially when the money goes with the man. But that must 'a bin nonsense, because no one couldn't fix things that tight. Anyway, he got a clip on the back off of a fallin' tree and he winked out next day, so it was no bloomin' good, whatever it was.

"And her, she went off of her head for a while, by what the nigs said, but she was comin' round again when I and Morton called, only that she'd take a turn to spout poetry once and again— things that Morton said was from a piece called Romer and Julia, about not leaving her anything to drink; and that was a lie, for a nicer selection of light wines— I bought some of them, and Morton, he got the rest. We took her off; it was a nasty voyage; we met the tail-end of a hurricane when we was about a hundred and fifty knots to sou'-west'erd of the Losaras; I lost a new whaleboat— the davits was snapped off like as if they was sticks of candy '

"But what happened to her?" asked the impatient steamship passenger.

Binham, softened by beer, did not take the inquiry ill this time, only pausing to finish his glass before he replied.

"What happened? She married Morton. He's the deuce of a fellow with women, can tie any one of them round his finger, if you'll believe what he says. Besides she had no money and nowhere to go."

"Did she get on all right? "

"Why, as for that," said the captain, "they say he beats her once in a way. Nobody can have all the luck there is. I shouldn't call it religious to try— if you ask me."

5: Under the Shwe-Dagon

THE shadows of the trees, in that still lake, were like the spreading greens of a moss agate. Surprisingly, in the middle a tongue of gold trembled out, licking towards the centre of the lake. You raised your eyes to see what this thing might be, and .once again the Shwe-Dagon, flaming into heaven, seized you by the heart.

It was always surprising you. When your steamer first came stamping through the yellow ripples of the Irrawaddy mouth, and the wharves and warehouses of Rangoon began to cluster on the starboard bow, you saw it, unexpected, marvellous, blaring its trumpet-note of gold into the blue, beyond the roofs of the town. When you went out at night, beneath the moon, to drive on the Pagoda Road, it caught you round a corner with a sudden sparkle of wreathed lights slaying the stars up three hundred feet of sky. There was no escaping it. In the town, or miles away, it dominated, it was— Rangoon.

You thought a great deal about it. You had time to think, because there were many days to wait for a boat. You had come up country, where the rubber collapse was spreading general ruin, in a vague, foolish hope of finding the "good billet" that is always somewhere else, round the corner. It was still somewhere else. You were beginning to get frightened. The boat had been put off, and hotel bills were high, and somehow or other things had worked out so that you hadn't even enough to pay the steamer fare home, once your bill was settled. You wondered— sitting of nights alone in your high, white-walled room, with the punkah humming away overhead; sitting there because you could not afford the price of drinks down in the lounge— whether, after all, there was any good in taking the ticket, even if you hadn't to pay the hotel. For what can a man trained only to drive coolies do, penniless, in London?

A cab, the little shuttered "gharry" of Rangoon, costs only threepence a half-mile, but you could not spare threepences. So in the afternoon, when the wicked sun was down to safety point, you went out walking, which nobody does in the East— but you could not loaf all day about that three times cursed hotel. And it happened that your feet led you to the Cantonment Gardens. And again you saw the golden Shwe-Dagon reflected in the water among green reflected trees.

And, looking down at the exquisite picture of that golden loveliness, you cursed it in your heart. For it is very hard, when you are drifting fast towards the rocks of financial disaster, to know that just above you three hundred feet of pure gold leaf, caked inches thick on stones, is topped by a slab of solid gold

three feet by one and a half, set with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires of fabulous size and worth.

York had not been inside the Pagoda grounds; hardly any Europeans enter them nowadays since the insulting edict that orders the white man to take off shoes and stockings and advance barefooted over ground trodden by innumerable lepers and diseased, limping beggar-folk to the shrines that surround the great Pagoda itself. But he had walked round the enclosing wall and looked up, more than once, at the amazing shaft of gold that smote the sky, springing from a golden, onion-shaped base. And he had strained his eyes, enviously, up towards the small, horizontal finger, dark against the blue that capped the soaring spire of the Pagoda summit. That was the flag; the flag of thick pure gold, seven or eight hundred years old, starred with jewels, each one worth a fortune. It was safe enough; certainly no one could touch it. The onion-bulge of the Pagoda was unclimbable, even if the priests and pilgrims, never absent, would not have massacred on the spot, despite all British rule, anyone mad enough to attempt such folly.

Down here, in the Cantonment Gardens, York, looking at the golden image in green water, fingered his few last coins, beyond the price of the steamer ticket that was to take him from poverty in the East to poverty in London. He bit his cigarette in two and threw it away. For he was wishing, so hard that it hurt, for the old days back again in Burma; the days he had vaguely heard of, before England's conquest and the driving out of Theebaw. He was sure that, in those times, adventurers like himself had often enough found fortune in ways that no one heard about. Why, to-day, if he weren't afraid of the British Government, he'd swear he could have made a plan of some kind. The thing must be worth a million— anything you liked to name— and there it was up in the sky, doing no good to anyone. But of course, as things were

It was growing dusk at last; the Shwe-Dagon in the water and the Shwe-Dagon in the sky were fading into fingers of dull grey. York turned his back upon them. They leaped, on that instant, into one long serpent of electric stars, standing on its tail. York did not look. He knew they were lighting up, but he hated the Shwe-Dagon.

A few hours later, in the lounge of the shabby-fine hotel encrusted with dirt and marble, they were talking over York.

Two or three men, wearing the curious costume of coat, shirt, and "shorts" affected by Rangoon in leisure hours, were sitting round a small table, smoking and drinking beer. It was moderately hot— scarce warmer than an English August afternoon, for this was the cool season. The fans whined above. Burman waiters, tall, bearded, professorial, moved in stately fashion serving

drinks. It was supposed that they, as servants, were necessarily deaf and uncomprehending; the talk flowed on without regard to waiters.

"Asked you about it too, did he?"

"Yes. Seems to be a little mad on the subject. Nearly cried when I told him about the big wind last year, and how the priests put up scaffolding and took down the flag for the first time in God knows how many hundred years, 'cause it had been blown crooked."

"These newcomers are funny about the Pagoda. Good thing the residents don't bother themselves about it quite so much. One does get fed up with answering their silly questions."

"One does. He wanted to know all about it, and how long they had it down, and when they put it back again. And then those Americans—"

"Sh't!"

The man who was speaking looked round. A woman had just come in, with a husband towing behind. She was tallish, fat, and marked clearly out as lower-class American by the blunt, small features, the heavy, short-waisted figure, the ill-dressed hair of her type. The husband was weedy and suppressed-looking; he had a sharp nose, and a money-changing look floating somewhere on the surface of his indeterminate face. Both were dressed with extreme richness. The woman had chosen an elaborate "costume" of dark embroidered satin, unsuited to tropical wear; she wore the inevitable diamond rings; she had a Paris model hat, of the kind made in Paris specially for the tourist trade. The husband was in thick Assam silk; his watch-chain drooped with heavy solidity, his lustrous socks cried out their price in dollars. The two found a place at the far end of the lounge and ordered iced drinks from a Burman in a white frock coat, gorgeously sashed with red and gold.

"That's the two," went on the man who had been speaking. "They're clean mad on souvenirs. They've filled boxes with rubbish exported from Manchester, and they've chipped bits off the images in temples— wonder they didn't get scragged— and they took off their shoes and stockin's—"

"No—"

"Yes— to walk round the shrines at the Pagoda. Give you my word, disgustin' thing. Man, I know, saw it. The old boy had some decency; he remonstrated— but she said: 'Why-y, Clarence, it's the most inturresting and instructive thing in Burma, and think of the souvenirs we can buy inside!' So he gave in. And I believe he had to pacify the priests with Lord knows how many dollars because she scratched the base of the Pagoda with her parasol to pick off a bit of gold leaf for a souvenir."

A quiet, well-bred looking man at another table took his cigar out of his mouth and remarked: "I suppose you don't take these for representative Amurricans, do you?"

The gossips murmured vaguely that they did not.

"Because," went on the quiet man, "we aren't any too proud of that kind, even in Amurrica. I might as well tell you that the man hadn't the best of reputations in N'York before he made good."

"What's he done?" someone made bold to ask.

The American half shut his eyes.

"Oh, you can search me," he answered with more of a drawl than he had hitherto displayed. And only the hotel manager— an Armenian, whom nothing escaped, who saw everything with the back of his head or the tip of one ear from his window in the hall— noticed that the American gentleman was somewhat elaborately crooking one finger as he held aloft his cigar.

"Crook, eh?" thought the manager to himself.

"I suppose he's all right now," suggested the man in shorts. It seemed impossible to think badly of anyone who spent so much money as did the gorgeous man and his wife.

The American gentleman nodded lightly. "No temptation to be otherwise," he said.

"Yes," thought the Armenian manager to himself, "but once a crook always a crook, and I will tip the waiters a hint to look out for the spoons. Those souvenir hunters—" He turned aside from the window and spat into the waste-paper basket.

All the time the silent Burman waiters, tall, long-waisted, in their sashed frock-coats, archidiaconal in gravity, moved about the hall bringing drinks.

It was almost dark now. York, who had walked back from the gardens to save a gharry fare, came in dusty and perspiring. He passed the lounge without entering and made his way up the shallow marble stairs. How he hated this mock magnificence of the hotel! How he hated the flint-hard faces of the office staff, looking out blankly from their pigeon holes upon the stream of passing travel ! Not the first, nor the millionth, traveller to sense the de-oxygenated spiritual atmosphere of hotels, in which no human feeling can draw free breath. York, young and egotistical, was sure that no one could ever have noticed it before. "It's damnable," he thought. "If one went to those frozen images there, and told them your wife or your mother had just fallen dead on the landing, they'd say: 'Deaths in the hotel are charged thirty-five-and-sixpence extra; we'll be glad if you'll kindly settle it now.' Or, if you said you were just going out to cut your throat round the corner, they'd merely present

your bill for you to settle before you did it. Bill ! I wish to heaven I knew how I was going to settle mine next week."

He had reached his room. He switched on the punkah and flung himself on the bed, wondering as he did so how many other distracted heads had lain where his lay now; how many other miserable hands had plucked at the mosquito curtains in nervous, fidgetty distress. Probably a good many. The East was a place where sudden disasters might fall at any time; where remedies were few. Also his room was one of the cheapest in the hotel. The huge suite occupied by the Americans below had probably not harboured much distress.

The howling of the immense, oar-bladed punkah above his head troubled his overstrung nerves. He rose and shut it off. He did not switch on the light; it was better to lie in darkness. Yes, it certainly was hot without the punkah, but he could stand it for a bit.

Outside, in the white concrete corridor where many wide arches looked down on yards below, on palm tree tops, on pond-like tanks where the Indian crow perched and called, there was silence for a while. Then bare feet came pattering, and native voices rose. The servants of the hotel were talking. Someone had come in from outside; gossip flowed freely. Why should it not? All the rooms up here were out of use save one, and the darkness there, added to the silence of the punkah, showed that its occupant had not returned.

It happened that the plantation where York had been employed used Tamil labour only. York had a gift of tongues; he spoke Tamil unusually well, and what was more understood it. The men outside were talking in Tamil, more or less. They were Burmans, but the visitor, whoever he was, seemed to be Indian.

York, occupied with his own troubles, did not hear at first. By and by a sentence struck his ear.

"Yes, the people from America, who are as rich as Theebaw, could be made to give almost anything. But, brother, what sort of work would this be? Foolish work and bad work." It was a Burman who spoke.

The Tamil visitor replied :

"No harm should come to anyone."

"That is nonsense." The first voice grew excited. "Great harm should come of such a sacrilege."

"Where is the sacrilege? " asked the thin, cynical voice of the Indian.

"Where? He asks me, where?"

"You are a Mission-wallah."

"If I am of the Mission, I can still remember.... And I do not want to have my head cut off."

"Foolish talk. This is no question of head-cutting."

"But I tell you it might be. Before there was time to explain who knows that might happen?"

"It comes to this, then, brother, that you are afraid to make a fortune?"

"No— no. I would make a fortune safely, if I can."

"Well, you can make a fortune if you will do exactly as I say, and there will be no danger to anyone."

The Burman murmured something.

"See," went on the Indian. York by now was sitting upright on his bed and listening with all ears. "All you have to do is this— to tell the rich, mad Americans that one Ramsawmy of the bazaar can obtain for them the finest "soo-ve-nee" in all Asia— in the world— but that they must be secret and pay very greatly. You are room boy to the Americans; it will be very easy for you. I cannot speak their tongue even, and if I tried to approach them they would drive me away as a beggar."

"Yes," agreed the Burman promptly. "You look just like one." And in his tone York could recognize the pride of the fine man confronted by a physical weakling.

The Indian's thin voice was sharper when he spoke again.

"Tell them, if they rise to the bait, that it shall be theirs the night the boat sails, very late. It must be night, you understand, and they must be away before daylight."

"Yes, that I do understand," laughed the Burman, who seemed to have some secret source of amusement.

"And what am I going to get out of arranging the whole matter for you?"

"One-twentieth," said the Indian promptly. The Burman's sneer seemed to rankle; there was a snarl in the voice of the smaller man as he spoke.

"One-half!" was the Burman's reply, given lazily and without excitement.

They began to wrangle, the Indian growing more and more vehement, the Burman calmer. "What could you do without me?" he asked. "Who told you about the Americans and their souvenirs?"

"Who thought of the plan first, brother?" whined the Indian.

"I have said I do not like the plan. That is the more reason for wanting a fair share. If I get a fair share I can leave this accursed women's work in the hotel and go and live like a man in my own town. There is a girl in my town—"

"May your girl—" began the Indian, and broke off. In a quieter, more cunning tone he resumed:

"For the sake of the girl you should take what I offer. One-fifth."

"One-fifth! What do you suppose the Americans will give? A thousand dollars, I daresay— and not American dollars, either. What good would a fifth part of that—"

"Oh, fool," suddenly broke in the other in a low hissing tone, "what do you know? One? One? No, but they shall give ten thousand dollars— and American dollars at that. Or at least," he said, cooling down, "I will ask them for ten thousand."

"Then they will give five thousand, you think? "

"Maybe three— American. That is a fortune."

"I do not like it," declared the voice of the Burman.

"Are we living in the days of Theebaw, foolish one? Does not the British Raj protect—"

"I must have one-third; that is the last I shall say. If I am to help you about such a matter as the Shwe-Da—"

The voice broke off short; there was a brief struggle. York, sitting on his bed, cheeks and hands hot with excitement, nodded to himself. "The little chap has put his hand over the other one's mouth, and the other one's giving him biff," he thought. There was a stamping of feet; a moment of silence and then voices talking fast in abuse. From the main staircase a coloured superintendent came up and called out angrily. The Burman and the Indian moved away.

"Now they will be coming to do my room for the evening," thought York, and he got under the bed.

Someone opened the half-door by and by, switched on the light and the fan, brought fresh water, emptied the basin, tidied up the tables. York, choking in thick layers of dust underneath his bed, was not at all afraid that anyone would start sweeping there. It did not seem to be a custom of the hotel.

When he could safely come out he did so, waited until there seemed to be no sound outside and then slipped out to go to dinner, shaking the dust off his clothes as he went. There was not much trouble about that. York did not wear the all but universal white; he could not afford it. He slunk into the dining-room, conspicuous in his grey tweed, where all the men who did not wear the orthodox dinner coat were in fresh suits of shining white. Everyone else was ordering beer, whisky, at the least iced soda. York drank the tepid water in his bottle, and felt the dignified waiter's scorn fall on him like hot rain.

"Money— money," his thoughts went as he fed with sickly appetite, "It's like a raft in the sea— you drown without it; you're choking and sinking while people all round you are sailing along in their safe boats and never casting a thought to you, unless to despise you. I believe they're beginning to guess. I believe the manager knows. Perhaps they search your luggage— ask questions of the banks. This food I'm eating now isn't mine. I shan't be able to pay for it on Monday, or else I shan't be able to buy a steamer ticket. I wish I was dead."

He saw himself in one long mirror after another reflected endlessly; a well-looking youth full face, with dark hair fashionably brushed off the forehead; a sturdy looking youth three-quarters back, with a coat that had seen too much wear; a refined, well-bred looking youth in profile, with a facial angle that did not quite satisfy....

He felt extremely sorry for all these young men. The world had treated them badly. Europe had taken their subsistence away when it was too late for a profession, and thrown them out per Bibby liner from Liverpool, a doubtful gift to the Far East. Asia had played with them for a little while, cat-and-mouse fashion, and then hit them hard with claws unsheathed. And America— America was, before their very eyes, snatching at the thing that they had coveted; the thing they had longed, but never hoped, to seize.

The various youths ran into one again, and York, sitting up straight in his chair, looked not at the mirrors but at the table where the fat American woman and her husband were seated, richly feeding and drinking. For he knew— had known since he heard the little Indian spring up and clap his hand across the mouth of the Burman waiter— that the thing which was to be secured, with danger, and sold with secrecy to this wealthy, souvenir-hunting pair, was nothing less than the jewelled flag from the spire of the Shwe-Dagon.

He was not at all shocked. York was honest according to the lights that Providence had vouchsafed him. He had never niched profits from his employers on the plantation; had never cheated at cards, "bilked" a cab-driver, or even borrowed money with the intention of not returning it. But deeply engrained in his mind was the idea— fostered by a thousand treasure-hunting tales, by the white man's arrogant pose towards all coloured folk, by the sense of being, in his own small way, one of the conquerors of Burma— that it was not stealing to possess oneself, if one could, of jewels and treasures out of heathen temples. And he also felt that the attitude of the Pagoda guardians, in excluding the European by ingenious rules framed to deter and humiliate, merited punishment. York was no thinker; with him, as with most of us, feelings took the place of reasoned thought. But clear enough in his mind was the conviction that the Burmans would be served "jolly well right" by the loss of the thing that he happened to desire. It was a comfortable thought; it made his desires seem actually virtuous. Other people and their points of view did not greatly trouble him. He was, perhaps, too much concerned with those young men in the mirrors; the impression that they made upon a mostly unimpressed world; the sufferings, undeserved, that they underwent or might yet undergo; the future that lay before them— dazzling, golden, vaguely unseizable, as in the lakes, the shadow of the Shwe-Dagon.

Why, he said to himself as he walked out into the nightly crowd of Chinese, Indians, Burmans, buffalo carts, rickshaws, gharries, motor cars, all seething through the wide, white-lighted streets of Rangoon— why should he not manage to get the treasure after all? He had an enormous advantage in that he knew what was going on, though he was supposed to know, and care, nothing. He was sure that the fellows he had read about in stories would have managed it— somehow; he didn't know how, but he supposed himself to be quite as clever as any hero in a movie or a book. Give him time and he'd see the way.

He had tramped far out from the town into the quiet and the fresh night scents of the wooded Pagoda Road, before he quite realized where he was. The lights of the Shwe-Dagon, drowning a dozen constellations with their own high-flung splendour of electric stars, came on him round a corner. He stood for a long time looking at them; fancying he could see above them, three hundred feet in heaven, the tiny outstretched finger of the jewelled vane.

It was late when he got back to town. He did not sleep well that night. Plan after plan passed through his head as he turned about beneath the wide, close- tucked mosquito curtains. How could he use the knowledge he had filched? He could not hope to overhear again; that had been a chance in ten thousand— lucky he was to have had it. Well! well! the flag would be got at somehow— that was not his concern— would be brought, somehow, to the Americans (if they consented, and he had no manner of doubt they would). It would be brought the night before they sailed— disguised somehow. He must find out when they were sailing; that was obviously the first thing to do.

Sleep came, suddenly.

Next morning he felt lighter, more cheerful than he had done since coming to Rangoon. There was something to think about; something to hope for. He knew what no one else knew, and it would go hard but he'd find some way of capitalizing the knowledge.

Before him, as he dressed, floated the golden shaft of the Pagoda, wreathed with visions more glorious than itself. Not for nothing surely had he felt himself obsessed by that high splendour from the first moment of his seeing it. It was Fate for him. It was going to mean, for him, all the things that his life had missed. He was always missing things; what a history he had had up to this present time! Just not sent to Harrow— just not an inheritor of his father's property (a very moderate fortune that grew larger and larger in his mind every time he thought about it)— just missing the last of the rubber boom in the Federated Malay States and landing upon the edge of the downward slope when he ought to have made his fortune! It seemed tragic to Charles York, who was young enough to have missed experiencing in person

the real tragedies of the war. But these things were going to be made up for him now. Like all unsuccessful men, young and old, York was a firm believer in luck, in turns of chance, in waves of good or of ill fortune.

What was the first thing to do to-day? The very crows in the palm-tree tops outside called out the answer. Watch the Americans, of course; make friends with them, if possible. They were the key.

It would be necessary, too, to find out what ships were leaving the port, and what date had been put down in the hotel register book as the Americans' intended day of departure. It would be well, if possible, to see something of their movements.

Feeling like all the detectives of fiction and the "movies" rolled into one, York ran down the marble staircase.

Luck favoured him at once. The Klaw's were in the hall, and Mrs. Klaw, as he came down, happened to drop her gorgeous beaded handbag. It burst open and a number of small goods rolled out— smelling salts, handkerchief, purse, gold powder-box. Yesterday, Charles York would have left the picking up to the nearest "boy." To-day, he made one jump of the last three steps and flew to rescue the bag and its contents before the scandalized hall porter could cut in before him. If York had not been to Harrow he had been to one of the many "next bests"; his manners were good. Mrs. Klaw, accustomed to and greedy of male homage, felt his action, his bow, to be exactly right. Besides, the young man, if he was oddly dressed, was quite personable looking. He reminded her, surely?— of the dear Prince of Wales, which was not astonishing since York happened to be one of the many thousands of fair, long-faced youths who cultivate a vague resemblance to the Prince, just so far as hair, tie, and pose of head may take them.

It all ran on wheels. Mrs. Klaw asked York if he had breakfasted; if he wouldn't come to their table. Mr. Klaw, gauging him with narrow, money-changer eyes, said nothing. He diagnosed this young man as a not impossible borrower of money. But Sadie had to have her way; she wouldn't be happy without a young man to tote her round, and here in Rangoon, there did not seem to be exactly a flush of amiable polite young men anxious to squire an aging, fussy woman. Klaw had a vision of himself set free to study the Burmese nation in its younger and more attractive aspects if only Sadie could get hold of some harmless youth to "keep her pacified." This York (Klaw knew his name, as he knew most other things) was clearly harmless. Well, let him come along, then, and when the inevitable yarn about delayed remittances arrived, why he, Klaw, would stand for anything reasonable.

York, not knowing this, and anxious to find a chance of talking to Mrs. Klaw alone, was relieved and surprised when Klaw took himself off, directly after breakfast, into the searing sun of the Strand Road.

Mrs. Klaw at once invited her new acquaintance to come upstairs. "We have an elegant suite," she said, "and I'd like to show you some of my curios; I've gotten a first-rate lot of souvenirs."

The verandah sitting-room was cool, rather dark, handsome, and dirty. Mrs. Klaw had piled it up with boxes of silks, Burmese gongs of all sizes, wood carvings and bronzes of high price and little worth. She had a handful of loose jewels in a silver glove-box; she had china, ivory, amber, jade. She had furniture. She had alleged ancient manuscripts. She had toys from the bazaar. She had chips off temple gateways; fragments broken from the exquisite carvings of a Buddhist monastery. She had the head of a warrior from the friezes of the Buddha temple on the Pagoda Road. She had a vase stolen from a Chinese joss-house. There was no end to it. The gem of the whole collection, proudly displayed, was a small packet of gold leaf that, with her own sacrilegious parasol, she had scratched off the surface of the Shwe-Dagon.

York listened and looked, thinking all the time what a flabby, ageing face the woman had; what an overrunning figure and an overflowing tongue.

He did not like being polite to her. His natural instinct would have been to pass her by in the hall as if she hadn't existed. She didn't exist, for him. She was nothing; a puff of wind, the hull of a cracked nut, a withered leaf blown down the winds of Time. But here he was, in her "boudoir," wasting his time with her and talking to her as if she were really something alive and to be counted with. It hurt his self-respect in some obscure, deep way. It made him dissatisfied with himself, for almost the first time in his life.

Mrs. Klaw talked on. It was not often that she had so satisfactory an audience. She told York that she was "Vurry, vurry artistic," that she believed above all things in "mawral uplift," that psycho-analysis was to her more than her daily bread. Also that she had the "most elegant foot in Sen Louis," and that sculptors had begged her to allow it to be modelled, but her natural purity of heart had always stood in the way. She showed him the foot, and York, drowning under the flood of her unceasing talk, wondered vaguely what strange dispensation of Providence it was that so often gave pretty feet to ugly women.

And he grew less and less satisfied with himself.

They were interrupted, at last, by the room boy, who announced, in a voice York knew well, "One man from bazaar wanting to see Mem-sahib."

York's heart missed a beat. What luck, if only Mrs. Klaw asked, sharply, what the man from the bazaar wanted. The room boy disclaimed all

knowledge, but added that "this man Ramsawmy having plentee good thing, Mem-sahib."

"Bring him in," ordered Mrs. Klaw.

York, knowing that no business could be done in his presence, excused himself and fled.

"Good God ! " he thought, running down the stairs with the light foot of youth. "Awful to think that all women grow into that some time!"

On the last flight he almost cannoned into a man he did not know; a tall, clean-shaved fellow, with a fine blue eye and a smallish mouth. Far as the Poles apart from the kind of Klaw, he yet was typically American; the type that is, some day, to rule the world. Had you been asked what term would most accurately describe Bart Hunter, you would have found one word rise automatically to your lips, and that word would be, "Clean."

Hunter was clean in dress and in person; his mind, one felt, was sharp and bright and at all edges nothing rusty, nothing blurred. He thought straight and acted straight. He could be hard, he could be kind, but he would always be just. Masculine in every line, his face showed what an increasing number of male faces show in these growing years of the young twentieth century— the forthright glance and cool self-possession that go with a decent life.

One does not think he would have troubled himself much about York, being no sentimentalist, on the look-out for other folk's burdens to bear, had it not been for the fact that his fortieth birthday had rather recently come and gone, and that he was a homeless man and childless.

At forty, the man without a son begins unconsciously to cast looks of interest, that is almost envy, upon the youth of twenty who might have been his own. He does not know exactly why he does so. He only knows that young fellows, instead of being tiresome, have somehow become attractive to him; that he likes them and pities them as "young bears with all their troubles to come," and that he would very willingly give them, from his stores of experience, many kinds of counsel.

If York, absorbed in his own worries, had not observed the Californian, Hunter had taken note of him. He thought the lad was in difficulties of some sort. He did not think the acquaintance of the Klaws was likely to help him out. Mrs. Klaw— he knew her kind— would try to make a fool of him. As for Klaw himself, his reputation stank to heaven; he was enough to destroy the financial morals of a dozen stray young planters— supposing them to have any. It followed that Bart Hunter, who had seen him go up to the Klaws' suite of rooms and seen him come away a good while later, decided on a mission of reform.

"The lad will go to drink and the devil, as sure as God made little apples, if he drifts about much longer in this cursed East," thought Hunter. "Well, I guess it's up to me."

"You seem in a hurry, young man," was his comment as York pulled himself out of the way and apologized. "Where are you off to? "

"Nowhere," said York, slackening and taking the rest of the flight with deliberation. He had only rushed because he was excited.

"That's bad," remarked the tall American. "Dull work waiting for boats when you've nothing to do. I'd sure go off my head in these Eastern towns if I had to hang around watching myself breathe. Care to come along with me? I'm here putting through a deal in teak, and there's a lot of timber to be looked over."

York would have been abjectly grateful— yesterday. To-day he felt the American's interest something of a bore. But he accepted the invitation. Until Ramsawmy and the room valet had had their talk with Mrs. Klaw he could only mark time.

They spent the morning together. And York came back with a new interest, a new faculty of mind— or what would have passed as both yesterday. It seemed, surprisingly, that he was a natural judge of timber; that he had absorbed more information than anyone, himself least of all, had suspected, away in the Burma jungle overseeing coolies. Also it seemed to him that he liked timber; was on the way to love it. That is, he would have been had not yesterday existed. As things were, of course, he did not care about it. Nor did it matter that he had been able to give Hunter facts new to Hunter's own special line of business. Nor did it matter much that Hunter had been surprised, and pleased. Nothing mattered except the fact that the Shwe-Dagon was splendidly visible from the timber yards, and that its small black horizontal vanes stood up in the blue-white sky and talked and beckoned to him.

That night he dined again at the Klaw's special table, and Klaw, who had enjoyed a singularly interesting day, saw without emotion that Sadie was "putting the hooks in" the new young man. York himself, warmed by unaccustomed champagne, found it necessary to correct his impressions of Sadie's age. He was sure he had erred by ten years or so. Further, he was sure he himself had been to blame for any element of boredom in the morning's talk. Mrs. Klaw, in the light of half a bottle of mis-labelled Pommery, shone out "quite top-hole."

Klaw, silently blessing the guest, slipped away after dinner without hindrance, beyond a guinea-fowl cry of "Come back early!" from Mrs. Klaw. And York found himself asked up to the boudoir again. There, among the niched and ravished "souvenirs," Mrs. Klaw sat her down, the celebrated foot

well displayed, and, touching her eyes carefully with a Venice point handkerchief, proceeded to "register" distress.

"I'm sure up against it," she said in broken tones. "I don't know— where I'm at. Mr. York, the chance of a life has come along and I can't do anything. I feel like as if I were getting bug-house over it all."

York, though somewhat alarmed by the vivid idiom, drew his chair closer and assured the distressed lady of his entire sympathy. While he spoke he was telling himself with the other side of his mind that he rather thought he could name the cause of her distress, though not its exact nature.

Sadie did not leave him in doubt. She also had enjoyed a good many glasses of the golden nectar so cruelly banned from dry America. Charles York, with his vague, cultivated resemblance to the Prince of Wales, with his English politeness and his flattering readiness to be "taken up," seemed to her, in the light of the champagne, a noble and a generous youth, greatly to be trusted. She proceeded to trust him. Within five minutes he had been told the whole of Ramsawmy's tale— almost. Mrs. Klaw, even when warmed with wine, kept some of her native caution. She did not inform Charles York— who knew all about it already— just what the treasure was that Ramsawmy was obtaining for her. Indeed, she lied about that. She said that it was a stone from a Buddhist temple— a carved stone, very sacred and enormously heavy; that its loss was sure to be discovered the first thing in the morning, and that she had found out— too late to alter plans— there was no boat leaving the port before daylight.

"I was as sure as anything," she complained, tears still hanging about the edges of her talk like rain round the horizon rim, "as sure as death there was a boat leaving to-night at eleven. And now I find out the fool steamer man mistook what I said on the 'phone, and what he meant was eleven to-morrow morning. And I got Klaw to take our passages, and he's coming back early to get down to the boat by half-past ten. Ramsawmy's packing the— the stone— in my cabin trunk so as to account for the weight. I let him take the trunk with him this afternoon. He'll be here with it to-night, and what am I to do?"

"Have you paid him anything?" asked York, cautiously.

"I gave him a hundred dollars for expenses, and he's to have two thousand dollars as soon as it's in my hands to-night. I've gotten the money from the bank; it's all ready."

"Two thousand dollars?" York could not quite understand. The golden treasure of the Pagoda— the marvellous jewelled flag— for something between four and five hundred pounds.

"Yep. Of course he's to have more if we get it safely home." Her eyes flickered as she looked at him. York said to himself that he did not think much

of the Indian's chance of securing that "more." There was something he did not grasp about the whole scheme— the Indian's part, and the Klaw's part. Something like a dream that you didn't altogether believe in, yet from which you could not wake up. He thought it must be the effects of the champagne. Probably rotten stuff; he had been sure it was not true to label.

Mrs. Klaw went on:

"They say— with this Indian native trouble brewing— that our lives wouldn't be safe if we couldn't get clear away with it, Mr. York; we've just naturally got to get away to-night. And the boat ain't going!" She held the Venice point up to her face and wept through the holes.

"If you could do anything to help me," she said, keeping back a sniff. "Me and Mr. Klaw would be only too delighted compensation...."

"Oh, don't speak of that," was York's mechanical reply. He was thinking hard; Ramsawmy was, somehow or other, getting possession of the flag. He was bringing it down to the boat, packed in Mrs. Klaw's trunk to account for its weight. Probably he too had supposed the boat was leaving that night. But it wasn't, and there was serious trouble brewing for somebody if the stolen treasure could not be got away before revealing daylight broke high up on the golden spire of the Shwe-Dagon.

Mrs. Klaw looked at him as he sat, head in hands, evidently thinking hard. She was really distressed; she felt grateful to this charming young man for his actual interest and his possible help. If she could have read his thoughts she might have felt differently. For the one idea surging through York's mind, as he sat holding his head and considering, was how he, York, could profit by the hitch in Ramsawmy's plans.

"I'll go and see Ramsawmy," he proceeded at last.

Mrs. Klaw was quite sure he was right. Mrs. Klaw blessed him, as much as a Christian Ethical convert is allowed to bless, and squeezed his hand without any reserve at all. And York went out into the warm, brilliant, busy night of Rangoon.

He found Ramsawmy in a small mixed shop, where Macclesfield silks were sold as real Burmese, and temple gongs from Birmingham claimed falsely a romantic past. York was capable of acting with decision when circumstances pushed him hard enough. He got Ramsawmy into the back of the shop under pretence of looking at picture postcards, and then told him curtly that he was Mrs. Klaw's special friend— ("He can make what he damn likes out of that," thought York, cynically)— and that he was empowered to deal regarding the treasure she was taking away that night. Ramsawmy, who had doubtless been gossiping with the room valet, blinked perfect comprehension of that which

was not. York told him of the difficulty about the boat; and here he got his first surprise, for the little lean Indian overacted amazement and dismay.

"By God he knew it," concluded York. "What does he mean?"

Ramsawmy explained. It was most unfortunate that the error had been made— but in truth the port authorities were very foolish and high-handed over such matters; they would not let boats of large tonnage go out after dark for fear of accidents that might block the only passage available into the harbour. But small boats could go. He knew of a boat— a good fast launch, quite comfortable; a launch that would take the American Sahib and his Mem-Sahib to a safe port down the coast. The steamer would call next day and pick them up, and there would be no trouble. It was necessary to get out of Rangoon before sunrise; that was all.

Again the feeling of something uncomprehended; something he did not grasp, came over York. But he put it aside. Surely nothing could be clearer? It was all so clear indeed that he even saw his own part in it. For he meant that the flag, the golden, jewelled flag of the Shwe-Dagon should never leave Rangoon.

It was absurdly simple. Mrs. Klaw had bought in Rangoon a new cabin trunk specially meant for the safe keeping of what she then persisted in calling the "Buddhist stone." It was a beautiful and expensive trunk of solid leather, strengthened with fine steel ribs. She had not had her initials or her husband's painted on it, but she had covered it with one of the special trunk covers that she affected, made of thickest and finest canvas and carefully lettered with her full name.

Now it happened that York's one and only trunk, also of leather, exactly matched in size and weight the trunk that Mrs. Klaw had bought. This was not a very surprising coincidence, since steamer trunks are made to special measure. But York saw where it would serve him. He knew where he could get a cover at short notice. He knew where lead in thick sheets was for sale. It was only necessary to load up his trunk as heavily as possible, put the cover on it, and, at the first possible chance, change the covers on the two trunks. The Klaws would be getting away in secrecy, in a hurry. They would look once to see that the treasure was safely packed away by Ramsawmy inside the trunk, and then they would never think of opening it again until well out from land. As for himself, he would be down in the hall when they were going; he would have his own trunk there, as if he were leaving that night. He'd probably get his chance all right. If not, he was prepared to follow them and travel with them on the launch; any excuse would do.

There was a good deal that would have to be trusted to chance; still he had an idea that chance was going to favour him. So long a run of bad luck had been his that the turn of the tide must be near.

These and other thoughts ran in his head as he sped in a taxi down to the harbour to settle about the launch; back to the hotel, still in the swift motor that made one feel so prosperous, so full of command. It was a good while since York had cared to hire taxis, but to-night one wasn't going to spoil ships— treasure ships— for the sake of a ha'porth of petrol.

In the hall of the hotel, as he came in, stood Hunter, the tall American. He was lighting a cigar; he looked at York over the circle of his joined hands keenly, but said nothing. It was growing late; people were drifting away to bed. York wished the timber man had not been just there at just that time. He represented things— ideas— that York had jettisoned for good. It was all very well to be complimented on one's knowledge of teak and one's eyes for measurements— to guess, from the conduct of this prosperous and influential man, that doors were opening somewhere, at last, too late. But the vision of the golden, jewelled flag now shut out everything else. It had become a fixed idea, almost a mania, with Charles York. Such things are not common in our day. But in the years when men sought Manoa, the golden city, when rumours of golden altars, lakes and images of gold, crept eastwards overseas to fire men's brains, from the far, little-known Americas— such devilish possession of souls and bodies by the treasure lust was a matter of every day.

Hunter saw the changed look on the face of the lad he had been trying to save; the eagerness, the cunning, the greed. There was little that Hunter did not see. "Whatever devilment the Klaws are up to," he thought, "the lad is neck deep in it." And because of that tall son who was not his, who lived only in the sons of other men, Hunter made up his mind that he would see the thing through, whatever it might be.

So he did not go to bed but went to the reading lounge, half way up the stairs, which, like a steamer's bridge, commanded a view of nearly everything below. And he took up a paper and did not read it, and waited.

York, meanwhile, had gone to the Klaws' sitting-room, found Mr. Klaw returned, and informed the two that he had made arrangements for a launch to take them down the coast, where a steamer from another port could pick them up. He was careful to speak only of the "Buddhist stone," but he saw, by Klaw's face, that the latter knew very well what was in the wind. Klaw did not seem disposed to welcome his interference now that the affair was fairly under weigh, a fact that suited York well enough.

He waited in the sitting-room, keeping Mrs. Klaw engaged in talk, till he heard a heavy step outside. Someone was coming slowly along the verandah, someone who carried a weight.

At that moment the mystery of it all rose up once more and struck him fairly in the face. How had it been done? Why had it been done? Surely the man who scaled the Shwe-Dagon and stole the sacred flag should not have been satisfied with a mere few hundred pounds? Surely the scaling of the onion-shaped Pagoda was not

He remembered that the Pagoda had been scaled, the flag taken down and replaced, only a few weeks earlier. Means were available; whatever they might be. No doubt Ramsawmy— There! he was coming in.

York excused himself and went out to the dark verandah. Two men, panting hard under a heavy weight, passed him by and entered the lighted doorway of the sitting-room. It was very late now; all the electric lights of the hotel were out save one on the stairs and a couple on high landings. Native Rangoon still strolled and traded, made love, quarrelled and ate, down in the Strand Road below, but even Rangoon was beginning to go home. A breath of salt, dank wind came up from the Irrawaddy River.

York was done with scruples— or they with him; it is a nice point. He bent down and looked through the crack of the partially closed door. Ramsawmy had set the leather trunk on the floor; he was explaining with wide gestures that there was no time for delay. The Sahib and the Mem-Sahib must immediately take the taxi he had in waiting and get away to the harbour or he would not answer for what might happen. There was a moon— an entirely accursed moon— due to rise very shortly. They had better be out at sea before the moon came up and shone on the temple vane. Much better. And if they would give him the English bank-notes that the Mem-Sahib was keeping for him he would show them the wonder of the world and go away. He wanted to go away as soon as he could lest things should transpire that might endanger his throat. He, Ramsawmy, did not want to wake up in the middle of some night with his breath and his blood running out together through a knife slit.

York saw the over-dressed head of Mrs. Klaw bend down; he saw her husband's bald, shining skull. The lid of the trunk was raised for a moment; a low cry came from Mrs. Klaw. It is recorded, with regret, that she said "Hully Gee!" Klaw looked, and said nothing for a moment. Then he asked a short question.

The Indian bent down and seemed to scoop with one hand. He raised it. On the point of a knife that he held was a fragment of soft, glittering metal. Klaw took it, bit it, twisted it, and nodded his head. "I reckon you can hand over and let us clear," he said to his wife.

Ramsawmy's clutch at the bundle of notes was dramatic. Dramatic—melodramatic, almost— was his exit from the room, with the unnoticed and unconsidered Burman who had been waiting outside. He seemed to spread his wings and fly. In a moment it was as if he did not exist.

Now arose the difficulty that York had foreseen.

The trunk was too heavy for Klaw's slack muscles; the hotel servants were asleep, save for a single clerk drowsing somewhere in the office. Quietly he slipped down the verandah, to return with audible tread; to knock at the door and civilly offer help in getting the luggage away.

It all went on oiled wheels after that. The Devil must have been in it, was York's half-humorous thought. Nothing could have fitted better. His own trunk was lying in the darkness at the side of the stairs, cover off; he carried down the Klaw's new trunk, laid it beside his own and offered to guard it while Klaw fetched a boy to bring the rest. Sadie thanked him effusively and said something about the value— "purely artistic value, of course, Mr. York"— of the Buddhist stone they were taking away. "Like the Elgin marbles," she explained in a hissing whisper. "We're saving it for a nation that can appreciate real Art."

"Sure thing," affirmed Klaw, nervously chewing an unlit cigar. He padded up the stairs again, followed by a native boy who had by this time waked up and come forth from some mysterious lair, scenting his natural prey— a tip. The half asleep night clerk behind the office pigeon hole leaned over, drowsing, upon an open ledger. Klaw had paid his bill, and in that act, for the clerk, had automatically ceased to exist.

In the hall, one lamp cast wavering light among pools of darkness. York, breathing hard, bent over the two trunks. It was now or never for him.

Had he put enough lead in his trunk? It didn't seem quite heavy enough. If! It would pass; old Klaw would be in the deuce of a hurry. How tight the cover stuck, damn it— if it wouldn't come off— if it wouldn't. Thank goodness! On with his own cover— now to slip the Klaw's cover on his trunk Pull!

They were coming down the stairs— pull....

"That's real kind of you," said Mrs. Klaw in her hissing, conspiratorial whisper. York, panting, glass-beaded with sweat, was standing on the steps of the hotel, a cabin trunk at his feet.

"Shall I put it in for you?" he asked. The taxi was within arm's length; he did not wait for a reply but lifted the box with a mighty swing, and, staggering, dropped it on the taxi seat. The cushions went flat and the woodwork creaked.

"Thank heaven 'twasn't the real one. That's heavy enough," he thought, catching his breath.

Sadie and her silent, cigar-chewing husband scuttled in after the box; the door was shut. "Good-bye, Mr. York, I'll never forget you; you've been real good to me," hissed Sadie over the side as the car leaped forward. The street was long and white under the electric lights; York saw the car grow smaller, quickly smaller, disappear.

And behind him, in the dark at the foot of the staircase, lay the treasure of the Shwe-Dagon.

He was choking to tear it out. He wanted, more than he had ever wanted anything in his life, to lay that sparkling beauty under the lamp and gloat upon the wonders that, as yet, he had never dreamt of, never seen. But he held himself. Not now, not here.

The night clerk was going to bed at last; the Burmese boy had disappeared. One had only to slip upstairs into the dusk reading lounge and watch till the office was closed and the lone light in the hall left to keep guard till morning. Then to toil upstairs with the treasure, to open it in his own safe room and know that the golden, jewelled wonder was his— at last.

Was it time yet? Yes, it was time. The hall was silent; the night clerk gone. They did not trouble about night porters in this Oriental hotel. From midnight until dawn the lower storey guarded itself. Now!

God, but the thing was heavy! Coming downstairs it had been bad enough, but going up it was worse by far. York, tough and in fair condition, strained hard, his arms locked round the trunk, his knee helping up each step of the flight. He was afraid his panting breath would be heard. This was the lounge, this wide arched room running far back into the first storey. He must get in there and rest a minute else he'd never get to the top of the house.

Once in the safe gloom of the reading lounge, lit only by a little glow from the hall lamp downstairs, desire became his master. He felt that if he did not see the treasure, did not set his greedy hands upon it, he would go mad. In truth, he was half mad already; the gold lust, rising like a tide, had drowned all prudence in him. He set the heavy trunk upon the floor, well out of sight, and by the faint light of the hall lamp picked and worked at the lock with a bunch of his own keys. One fitted. The lock clicked.

He had to strike a match and hold it inside the trunk lid before he could see anything. The match flared up, then caught the draught from downstairs, and went out. But York had seen.

God! what a blaze of gold! The jewels— well, a match was scarcely the light to show up sapphires and rubies, but one could see their enormous size. One diamond in the middle shone glassily; it seemed as big as a shilling. What could the thing be worth, wondered York, on his knees in the dim twilight left by the

flaring out of the match. Should he try another? No, better not; someone might be

Someone was.

Knowledge of the alien presence came swiftly, even before proof. Proof followed— a slight vibration of the floor; an air that moved. Then, while York knelt stiff as wood telling himself it was nonsense, merest nerves, came the unmistakable— a hand on his bent shoulder.

For a moment he knelt there, fixed, like a man in a nightmare. Then, with one movement, he clapped the lid of the trunk and swung round. He saw, in the faint light from the hall, a long pair of black dress trousers, a glow-worm shine of shirt. There was a face at the top, but in the twilight it was featureless. The hand that had fallen on his shoulder slipped away as he turned; clearly this tall intruder had no desire to hold him by force. York was on his feet in an instant. He felt surprisingly cool, and set like steel to do battle for his darling treasure.

"It's Mr. Hunter," he said. The American's height and shoulder width were unmistakable.

"It's young York," said the American. " Well, what do you know about that?" —a purely dialectic flourish, for nothing could be clearer than the fact that York did not mean to tell anybody what he knew about anything.

York said nothing, but breathed hard. He didn't think there had been time for anyone to see inside the trunk. And if he chose to examine trunks in the reading lounge, in the small hours of the morning, who had the right to say him nay?

There was a moment's silence, the two men looking at each other through the dusk, trying, it seemed, to read one another's minds. In the hall below, the clock, which no one could hear in the daytime, clicked steadily on towards three. Upstairs, the droning of many punkahs merged into united hum, like the voice of a closed hive. A motor, returning late, tore through the warm, still street at illegal speed.

It was Hunter who broke the spell by turning on a powerful electric torch and holding it so as to show the other man's face.

"You might tell me, if you don't mind," he said quite coolly, "what you are doing with all that trumpery?"

"What trumpery?" defended York.

"I saw it when you struck the match."

"What do you suppose you saw?"

"Looked like a model of the—"

"Model be damned— it was— I mean—"

"The real thing? H'm— worth something, eh?"

York maintained silence.

"Worth a couple of million, they say. Specially since the tribesmen came down from the hills and filled it up with new jewels from all the gem mines in Burma. Didn't know you were a millionaire."

York kept silence. He was conscious now of only one feeling— a fierce determination to hold on to the treasure; to clutch it, to slay for it, to die lying over it and protecting it with his body. If he had wanted it first for its value, so did he not now. Pure gold lust, treasure lust held him. He was not, for the moment, sane.

It may be that Hunter understood. At all events he cut short the scene brusquely.

"My good chap," he said, "do you know what you've made yourself a thief for?"

The stab went home. York, black and white faced in the light of the electric torch, turned on Hunter with fury.

"How dare you?" he demanded.

"You hold your horses, my son. I reckon I know all about it. Some native thief has stolen for the Klaws, and they've stolen from the Burmese nation at large, and you've stolen from them. And the whole lot of you— the whole damned lot— have been sold."

He was quite calm. He lifted the lid of the trunk— York, half paralysed, did not obstruct him now and turned the light of the torch upon the radiance within.

"I guess," he said, in the odd up-and-down accent that expresses American emphasis, "I guess I can reconstruct this—" He pulled a fine diamond ring from his finger. "*You watch me*," he ordered. With the ring held tight in his right hand he worked for a minute over the huge winking diamond that shone in the centre of the flag. "*You look at that*," he droned. And York looked, and he saw the diamond was unscratched. Existence seemed suspended, thought wiped out, as he watched the American calmly passing his ring over stone after stone, leaving white marks on each.

"*You look at this*," went on Hunter. He pulled out a heavy knife and drove it across the golden splendour of the flag. A thin shaving of metal came with the blade. "Put it in your mouth," ordered Hunter, and York, hypnotized, did so. Immediately he spat it out. Brass!

"Lean inside," pointed out Hunter, scratching away. "Brass plated—"

"My God!" burst out York, his words running into one another. "I saw the Indian fellow chip off a piece of solid gold—"

"Sure thing. They're pretty smart at sleight of hand."

Feeling was coming back— with it, dry-mouthed despair. He had lost— he had lost! He ought to have known— the price paid for the flag, absurd compared with its value; the Indian's insistence on a night departure, hurried, unpremeditated; the concealment of the whole affair from Klaw, right up to the last— all these things should have pointed out the truth to him. They had not, any more than they had pointed it out to Sadie— to her husband even. Wily with the wisdom of a race far older than theirs, the Indian had known what the treasure lust could do. On that knowledge he had played, and won.

The Klaw had lost. He had lost. Biters, they were bitten. Thieves, they were robbed.

And York, awake at last, knew himself for what he was. And from his heart went up the cry that all of us have sent to heaven in our day— "How could I do it?"

Hunter, watching, understood; better than York himself.

"He's had his medicine; he'll be the better for it," was the thought of the elder man. "There's stuff in the lad." Aloud he only said: "You and I will tote that box up together; no use leaving it here for the boys to talk about."

They took it up to York's top-storey room, and the American left him. "Tomorrow," he said at the door, "I want to see that Indian."

It was not yet breakfast time when he walked into York's bedroom. His face was grave, but his eyes held amusement.

"Ramsawmy," he said, "will be here to tote that rubbish away some time before tiffin. No, he won't talk any more than you will. Ramsawmy," he added, "is a vurry disappointed man this morning. Yes, sir."

He paused to take out and light a Burmese cigar. "Yes, sir," he repeated presently. "Sadie Klaw knew what she was about. Those notes—"

"What?"

"They were bad. And that rounds the story off real neat."

York, sitting pyjama'd on the edge of his bed, stared up at Hunter's face. How big he looked— how prosperous! How well the world seemed to go with him! And with himself, Charles York, the world was at an end. As Hunter had said, the story was rounded off— was done. He didn't know what remained— unless the Irrawaddy, at high tide, some night when it was late, and no moon shining He wished this intruding, prosperous fellow would go away and let him finish dressing.

"York!" remarked Hunter, with the big Burmese cigar tucked in the corner of his mouth, "you'll have to get up a darn sight earlier than this."

York stared, silent.

"Because," went on the American, "as you're going to learn the timber trade of Burma from me, right here, you'll have particular use for all the hours there are in the day, and I'm going to see you use 'em. *You* watch me."

He went out and shut the door.

Over the tops of the palm trees, far away, as York dressed in a fury of haste and excitement, singing to himself the while, showed, splendid, the golden finger of the Shwe-Dagon. The tiny flag, upon its utmost tip, showed dark in the rose of dawn.

6: The Woman in the Cage

THIN smoke, smelling of all the forests, rose up from the mound of ashes that Ao had piled on the camp over. There was a thigh of young wallaby inside; as the native stirred the ashes and tilted up the oven lid ever so little with a long forked stick, odours of baked meat, warm and mouth-watering, slipped out.

"Smell that," said Gault, the Englishman, impatiently. "It must be done."

Irvine, the Australian, motioned to Ao, who dropped the oven lid again.

"Roast meat," said Irvine, "is like pineapples. You know it's ready when the smell gets so that you just can't keep your teeth out of it. It's endurable, still—"

Gault looked at the other. Though he had been travelling the forests of Papua with Irvine for six weeks he had never quite got over his first astonishment over the fact that the Australian— miner, bird hunter, sheller, anything and nothing as to profession, nothing at all as to birth— used excellent English. Gault was very fresh from "Home"; he could not help feeling instinctively that the man he had hired to run his expedition for him should have talked dialect or Cockney, rather than chosen, cultivated language a little better than his own. It was true that Irvine showed an undeniable gift of swearing on occasion; but any man could swear; Philip Gault could himself, if need were.

The typical bushman's liking for fine literature was not within his knowledge. Nor did Irvine volunteer bookish talk. He had been engaged in Port Moresby by this globe-trotting lad from England to take him through a part of the interior and let him shoot birds of paradise— this being before the days of protective laws. Irvine was willing to do all that he was paid for, but, as he had allowed to Mac Pidgin— biggest man and "hardest case" in Papua— during a "wet evening" at Ryan's Hotel, he didn't see that he was bound to act governess to the Kid, even if he did have to be nursery maid.

It was not within Mr. Philip Gault's knowledge that the town— and incidentally, the territory; for Papua is one big family— referred to him after that as "Irvine's Kid."

Gault was not quite so young as the name might have led one to suppose. He was twenty-two, a well-set-up fellow, with the public school stamp clear to see on his smooth, pleasant, inexpressive face. Gault had stayed late at school; it was a source of secret and inextinguishable laughter to Irvine to know that his employer had been "saying lessons and getting whacked" scarcely two years earlier.

Irvine himself, at two-and-twenty, had already gone through the separate careers of horse dealer, road contractor, foremast hand, pearl poacher, and

sandalwood trader, had had his nose broken in a prize fight, strictly illegal and conducted without rules or gloves; had been engaged to two girls, and should undoubtedly have been married to several more; had seen the world, and fought the world, and fed and kept himself while doing it, without asking a pound note from any man in the world save Jim Irvine. He was thirty-five now; the tale of his wanderings and adventurings was Odyssean— and Jim could have told you what you meant by that; but would have added, quite without reverence, that he always did think that old bloke— meaning Ulysses— had too much yap about him....

Now, while he lifted the oven lid again, and sniffed the seven times delicious smell issuing therefrom— a smell that caused the woolly-headed heathen Ao to bring forward without further words the big enamel plate— he was thinking of the new-enlarged schoolboy who sat so comfortably on a folding chair beside him and waited to be fed. Irvine did not fancy it could be particularly good for young men just out of school to come into large fortunes, and set off to see the world travelling on velvet.

"They're bound to get into mischief," ran his thoughts as he speared the savoury roast on a long knife and landed it safely on the plate, " but the smacks they get won't be the kind to teach them and make men of them, as they'd be if there wasn't the money to reckon with. A bloke who goes on his own will be learning something every time he comes a cropper. Not these gilt-up kids. Now look at this kid of mine "

Ao was dishing up dinner; he had put the baking tin on the hot ashes and blown them to a glow, and made rich gravy with a splash of boiling water stirred in the tin; he had poured it over the meat, set the plate on a flat log, and grunted at his master to say that "dinner was served."

"Look at this kid," thought Irvine, as he sat down on his heels, bush fashion, and plunged a knife into the juicy meat. " He's gone through life, in a way, before he's begun it. Shacks of money, travel round the world, in all the regular places and now the irregular ones— seen all the big stage folk, all the big races and cricket matches that a fellow can want to see in his life— and tiger hunted, and buffalo hunted— with somebody to nurse him through every bit of it— eaten his cakes before he knew what a cake was— got engaged to be married, too, Lord save him, and with it all isn't more than a kid still." Upon which, having filled and emptied his capacious mouth a few times, he felt moved to repeat his thoughts aloud.

Phil Gault, with entire good humour, buttered a biscuit and replied:

"Awfully kind of you, old thing. Don't quite see what you're driving at, all the same."

Irvine fixed him with his blue keen gaze, which was to Phil's good-natured, impersonal look as chilled steel to hardwood. "What I'm driving at," he said, "is that it would do you a lot of good if something got up and hit you."

"Gold tried in the fire and all that sort of tosh. Don't particularly want any in mine, thank you. Where's the tea?"

"I don't mean you're likely to get it," said Irvine. "On the contrary, I think you'll even get out of this cursed country, that you think so romantic, without having your head jammed by any of its romance. There's your tea; I took mine first."

Gault drank from the pannikin, looking about him as the rim tilted slowly up. He was penetrated, more than he would have cared to say, with the romance that Irvine scorned. Night had shut suddenly down upon them a little while before; it was nearly seven now, and the flame of the cooking fire flung butterflies of orange light against the dark surrounding walls of forest. They were in a narrow clearing formed by an outcrop of rocky soil; a small stream slipped away silently at the foot of the rocks; the opening of sky above them, like the opening of a well, was full of stars. It was hot; they sat away from the fire and kept the necks of their shirts wide open and the sleeves rolled up, but sweat trickled down their arms and faces. There might be a breeze somewhere among the tops of the banyans and the cedars and the cottonwood trees, but down below in camp it was as still as the bottom of the sea.

Gault revelled in it all; he felt that he was seeing life and tasting adventure. Only that morning travelling on a forest track they had been attacked by cannibals—he had written a vivid account of it in his diary and meant to offer it to a newspaper when he got away again. (Three months later one of Irvine's "mates" down south received a letter mentioning the occurrence: "A party of (blanks) from the Babakiri tribe pegged spears at us as we were coming down the valley; they didn't mean anything particular and cleared as soon as we fired into the bush, but my Kid thought we'd just grazed the cemetery fence and has been singing hymns to himself about it ever since.") They had got a dozen or so of birds of paradise, and two giant cassowaries; they had shot alligators, seen native dances, and greatly daring, as it seemed to Gault, had visited and been politely entertained in a number of more or less cannibal towns, which seemed on the whole disappointingly like the towns that were not cannibal. They had had an attack of fever apiece—Gault's, according to his own estimate, very severe; Irvine's trifling (the thermometer would have told a different tale if he had seen its readings). They had peeped at the mysteries of the great devil-temples, seen the sorcerers handling, with horrid familiarity, their tamed deadly-snake familiars; prospected for gold, and found none (but the looking was the real fun), eaten strange fruits and foods, spent beads and stick tobacco

upon native curios. They had, in Gault's opinion, been drinking romantic adventure deep at its very spring; the overdrawn black tea in the iron mug was the sweeter for it; the wallaby hindquarter was stuffed and spiced with romance. Even the fact that they were camping in the heart of the great forest instead of at some village delighted him; for Irvine had told him that he didn't think the Babakiri (blanks) were altogether delighted to have them in their district, and it might, therefore, be as well to get into the bush for the night. Which was, of course, adventure all the more....

THEY WERE both too hungry to talk much while feeding. It was not till Gault's plate was empty and Irvine was cutting himself a last junk of tinned plum-pudding that the Kid opened once more the question of his standing in the world of men. Irvine's remarks, thrown out carelessly enough, had left a scratch on his vanity.

"I'm essentially as old as I ever shall be," he declared, his pink, boyish face with the indeterminate dark eyes turned towards Irvine's teakwood countenance. Irvine, like so many bushmen, was almost ageless; you could not have told with any certainty whether he was an old twenty-six or a young thirty-nine; in ten years' time, when he would be forty-five, you would probably put him down as thirty or fifty or anything between....

"Sorry to hear it," answered the bushman. Behind him, in their own narrow corner of the camping ground, the carriers, naked and perspiring, sat round the fire, which they had built up high, apparently to make themselves still hotter, and passed the huge tooled bamboo tobacco pipe from mouth to mouth. It was a quiet night; no wind was stirring, but sometimes, in the pauses of the native chatter, one could hear some creature— pig or wandering village dog perhaps— move with an indefinite rustling through the bush.

"I'm going to be married in six months," played Gault, throwing down his ace. If that was not being grown up, what was? Why in a year and a half from now he'd probably be the head of a family.... Irvine, who was busy lighting his pipe, said nothing, and Gault, his pride growing rawer and more uneasy every moment, pulled a little case out of the swag that lay beside him on the ground.

"I suppose you don't believe me," he said.

"I do believe you, kid," answered Irvine, gravely, taking the first draw at his pipe, "I congratulate you, though you've told me before."

"You couldn't quite understand, I fancy," was Gault's comment, as he fought with a refractory snap.

"That sort of thing isn't much in your line. But there she is."

Irvine, pulling at his pipe and watching, thought perhaps he did understand, rather more than the kid supposed. That catch was rusted. ... He

remembered a photo he had been in the habit of carrying with him thirteen years ago. It had been in a case too. He remembered that the catch was so weak that it would hardly hold. Use had weakened it.... The day he had snapped the case shut for the last time and flung it into the rapids of the Strickland River it had opened out as it went through the air; a face had looked at him from the boiling water, as the rapids sucked it down

He leaned over the picture of Philip Gault's wife that was to be. A nice girl. Yes, a nice girl. Interesting, distinguished-looking. The face that had gone down in the rapids of the Strickland River was not distinguished-looking. Its eyes clutched you by the heart; its mouth tore your soul from your body. But distinguished— no. Nice? Irvine laughed, silently, bitterly.

"Glad you like her," said Gault, taking the smile to himself. He shut the case again and tossed it in his swag-bag. He lit his pipe; it was bigger and blacker than Irvine's, a manly sort of pipe. Silence fell between the two. Gault was thinking: "I should fancy he'd respect me now." Irvine was saying to himself: "Kid, kid. You haven't even met love on the road— or off it. Well, that thoroughly nice girl will see to it you don't— on or off, ever any more."

"Irvine," said Gault, in a half whisper.

"Yes."

"Did you hear that?"

The bushman did not ask "What?" He jerked a word at the chattering carriers and silence held the firelit glade for a minute.

"Yes," he answered presently. "I heard it. I don't reckon it's anything to worry over."

"Why?"

"Because, when a nig is out for business, he doesn't let you hear him."

"Then you think," asked Gault in a low time, "that there's somebody hanging about?"

"I reckon so."

"What do you—"

Irvine pointed at the carriers. They were leaning forward, mouths open, eyes staring, each one of them "registering" curiosity and interest as vividly as if they had been brought up to the picture show business. Fear too, whatever fear had to do with it.

"Girl, for a tanner."

"A girl? What would she be doing about our camp?"

"I should suppose," said Irvine, calmly, "that she's either surveying for a projected railway or collecting taxes."

"I daresay you think that's funny."

"Well, what does your wide experience lead you to think a girl does want, hanging about a lot of men?"

"I suppose she wants one of the men."

"You seem," observed Irvine, leaning comfortably back against a rock, "to be growing up, Kid."

"Ask 'em about it," suggested Gault. The carriers were beginning to buzz among themselves like a hatful of flies.

Irvine asked a question or two, in one or two native languages.

"They say," he explained, "that there's a woman somewhere, because they smelled the flowers the women wear, and heard her moving."

"What are they looking so uncomfortable about?"

"Oh, that's because they think she's a ghost-woman, and up to mischief. If any of them follow her into the bush she turns into a fiend and eats them."

"Well, it's pretty simple; if they think that, they'd better stop where they are."

"But the trouble is," explained Irvine, "that they don't know till they find out. You see, the devils and the common or yam-garden girl look alike.... Seems to me I can remember dreaming of the same sort of notion among people who weren't black."

"She's let them go for this night," observed Gault, interestedly, his eyes fixed on the carriers, who seemed suddenly to have lost interest in the dusk wall of scrub and were turning their attention to the circling bamboo pipe.

One of the carriers nodded.

"*Eo, Taubada*" (yes, sir), he said, "Debil girl him go home. Me no like debil girl. Me flight along him."

"If you pay attention to all the yap of the carriers you'll not have much to spare for anything else," was Irvine's comment. "Did I think there was anyone really there? Yes. ... I don't know who or what she was.... No, village girls don't generally wander off to the bush when there's strange people about; they're too scary.... No, I don't believe in devils.... I don't think at all about it. Is this the longer or the shorter catechism? And are you going to turn in? "

From girl or devil no further sound was heard. The carriers laid themselves out, one by one, upon the stage of branches they had put up, each man wrapped, oblivious of the heat, in his blanket. The white men slung mosquito nets and crept beneath the tent that sheltered them both. The night went by.

Next day it appeared that birds of paradise were very plentiful in this area of dense forest, also that they were somewhat less wild, somewhat easier to stalk with Phil Gault's splendid bird guns than they had been hitherto. It was agreed that a stay of two or three days should be made. Irvine spent an hour or two reconnoitering, and came back with the news that there was a big

village about three miles away, but that the people seemed to belong to the tribe who had attacked the expedition, and he thought, on the whole, it was better to leave them alone.

"We've got tucker enough to do till we get down to the coast again," he said; "mixing with natives when you've a mob of carriers along means rows, and rows mean mischief. If we let them alone I reckon they'll let us alone."

Gault was well pleased to stay on in the forest; apart from the chance of sport he confessed to himself— though not to Irvine— that the ghostly happening of the night had waked his interest. He could not rest till he had found out the cause of it.

"Devil girl my eye," he thought. "It was a live woman, and I want to know what she was up to."

Something told him that Irvine would not encourage his curiosity. The bushman treated all forms of native superstition with fine contempt— even though he and Gault had on that journey been witnesses of "manifestations" among the sorcerers of the great towns that would have puzzled a circle of spiritualists and a team of professional conjurors combined. "Nigger rot," was all that Irvine had to say after translating and explaining as far as explanations could go. He would certainly call this rot.... Nevertheless, Gault was determined to find out, he didn't know what, but find out anyhow.

In the middle of the night he slipped quietly away from the tent and was gone a couple of hours. Irvine woke once or twice, and missed him.

"What bit you last night?" he asked suddenly as he was helping himself to bacon at breakfast. "There's yours," he added. "Don't want any? Rats. Fever again?"

"No, I'm all right," was Gault's reply. He did not answer the first part of the question and Irvine was not minded to press him. Nevertheless he noted the odd, pinched look that the face of the Kid seemed to bear that morning— a look that during the day scarce lessened at all.

"Not fever," thought the bushman. "Looks more like scare of some kind. I wonder what he thinks he's been up to?"

On the next night, being like other seeming simple men of the wilds, very full of guile, he lay still and pretended to sleep while secretly watching. Gault waited until he thought it was safe and then crept noiselessly out of the tent. Through a hole in the side canvas Irvine watched his shadow, dusk among shadows, melt into the ashy velvet of the forest wall. The bushman swore to himself, softly and with determination. Then he lay down and waited.

Near morning Gault came back, treading cautiously, but breathing hard with haste and exertion. He lay down very quietly and seemed to listen. Then he gave a sigh of relief and composed himself to sleep.

It was at this point that Irvine wrecked his comfortable persuasions of secrecy by remarking, in a characteristic drawl:

"What the etcetera dash do you etcetera well think you have been doing?"

"By Jove, you're awake, are you?" was all that Gault could find to say.

"Of course I'm (decorated and embroidered) awake. Where have you been? Playing the giddy goat about the village?"

Gault did not answer; his chest was heaving with some unexpressed emotion. One would almost have thought— had he not been a man, and a millionaire, and a prospective husband— that he was very near crying.

"Here, Kid," said Irvine, irreverently but kindly, " spit it out; this is a devil of a queer country, and if you got any sort of a scare you aren't the first. What's happened?"

Gault, rolling over so that his face was turned away from Irvine, muttered into his camp mattress:

"I saw a woman."

"Well, if you did? What was she doing?"

"She was in a tree."

"In a tree!" Irvine knew as well as Gault— better— that native girls do not climb trees. A thought crossed his mind. Gault might be going insane. In the Papuan bush

But the Kid had not done. "Honour bright," he said, suddenly rolling over and sitting up— Irvine could see his face in the clear, late moonlight— "I did see her. I've seen her two nights. And she was up in a tree. High up. And she looked at me down through the leaves. And her hair was all gold, like gossamer or silk; it stood out and flew. Her face was white."

"That's clean impossible," objected Irvine. "No white woman could possibly be in the country without everyone knowing. You dreamt it."

"Did I? Did the carriers dream there was someone about the other night when they said there was a girl in the bush? Why, you heard something yourself."

"Might have been a dog, or a pig," declared Irvine, who knew very well it was nothing of the kind. "And anyhow, if they did hear a girl, it must have been a nigger. And if there was a girl there, and if you really saw something or another up a tree what are you chewing the rag about? "

"Because I can't understand it."

"What can't you understand?"

"You won't listen till I tell you. She was in a cage."

"A how much?"

"A cage, I tell you. Barred in so that she couldn't get out."

"Well, if she couldn't, how was it she was walking about the camp in the dark?"

"She wasn't. I hid myself and watched. And I saw a woman come, a native woman in a grass petticoat, a black woman— or rather brown, that's what they are. She had a basket in her hand, and it was full of stuff, food I think, wrapped up in green leaves, and she had one of those bamboos they carry water in. She called out and the woman in the cage let down a bark ladder. So then the one who had the basket climbed up it, and I couldn't see her among the leaves. And by and by she came down, and the basket was empty."

"If you had a dream you had a blanky long one," muttered Irvine, who began to look puzzled. "Sounds almost as if there was something in it. I'll lay you saw a tree house— one of the ordinary tree houses, and the rest you fancied."

"I did not fancy it, I tell you. Yes, it seemed like what I've heard about tree houses, but she was caged in. And she was white— at least—"

"Yes— at least— now we're getting at it."

"She was so very white. More than a white woman. Our women are pinky, or sallow, or pale, or something— they're not white— paper colour. She was, and it didn't look— it didn't look alive."

Irvine, staring out through the triangular door of the tent into the moon-flooded clearing, seemed to consider things in general.

"Night— middle of the night's a bad time for thinking," was his verdict. "You go to sleep and I'll go to sleep, and we'll talk it over in the morning. Perhaps you can dream a little more before sun-up."

"It wasn't a dream," persisted the Kid, rolling over.

In the daylight, as Irvine had foretold, things looked different. Gault was inclined to allow— after breakfast and after a bathe in the creek with two carriers on the look-out for alligators— that the mysterious woman mightn't have been so very white after all. He even agreed, under protest, to Irvine's suggestion that she might have been in native mourning— which sometimes expresses itself by a face and body painted over with white wood ashes. But he was quite clear that he had seen her, and that she was beautiful.

"We'll leave the boys to look after our camp, and you can take me to the place," Irvine declared. "There'll be no peace till we know what the thing really is. It sounds like somebody gone crazy to me, but this country is full of things that can't happen— and do."

"This has happened, anyhow," said Gault, leading the way. Irvine noted that he was hurried and eager, in spite of his sleepless night; that he slashed at the lawyer vines overhanging the narrow track as if they were human enemies, and hurried up and down the gullies scanning the way at a pace that left both

of them breathless and wet through. Yet the road was not long; in twenty minutes they came to a huge red cedar tree, beside which Gault turned off into the uncleared bush, motioning, as he went, for silence.

"It's quite close," he whispered. "Stoop down— under those bushes.... I found it by following the sound the other woman made; you could never see it.... Now, look up."

Irvine looked up, and, as he afterwards said, received the shock of his life. Some thirty feet above him, among the clotted leaves of a great Barringtonia tree, a face looked out and down. And it was, as Gault had said, white— white as stone— and it was beautiful. The eyes were large, half hid by very deep curved eyelids; he could not see their colour, but they were not dark. The mouth and nose were nothing in particular; the neck was glorious, a column of pure marble. In that, and in the deep curved eyelids, and in the hair— gold, sparkling, floating, so fine that it looked less like hair than mist— the woman's beauty lay. He could not account for the dead white colour; European, in whole or in part, he was certain she was not....

An idea struck him, and he slapped his leg, crying: "I have it, Kid!" The woman drew in her head, as a startled bird draws back into its nest, but he did not heed her, though Gault nudged him indignantly and said in a hissing whisper:

"Now you've done it!"

"I'll tell you what she is," said Irvine. "She's a white Papuan."

"What! I don't—"

"Albino— same as a white mouse or white blackbird. They're very uncommon; I've never seen one myself, and, it's an odd thing, they're almost always men— but they have that dead white skin, and they have wonderful gold hair like feathers. See how hers grew— not hanging down, but standing up, like a—

"It doesn't stand up, it floats like— like the halo of an angel in a picture!"

"Oh, you're there, are you?" thought Irvine to himself; but aloud he went on: "It's a lot finer than the ordinary Papuan hair, but it does stand up, or would if it was stiff enough. Yes, she's an Albino all right. Looks as if they didn't fancy her much, sticking her up in a tree house by herself."

"She can't get out. I walked round the tree when the moon was shining right on it, and I saw the house has bars all round it, heavy bars lashed with bark rope, and the lashings are put so that they're out of her reach. She'd need an axe, or at least a good knife, to get out of that. It's a cage."

"That's queer— damned queer—" said Irvine, and he fell to thinking. "I don't know the ways of these tribes very well," he told the Kid. "Looks as if she'd made them wild over something or other.... But it might be they're

keeping her for some big chief. I've known them to— and yet that was in a house in the middle of the village, with people on the watch all round. This is another business altogether. It interests me. Let's wait to see the woman come with her tucker to-night; we might find out something that way."

"Yes, let's," agreed the Kid, his eyes looking suddenly very big and bright. Then, after a moment's silence: "Irvine— would you mind going out of sight for a minute? You scared her— you— I want—"

Irvine nodded, without a word, and dived under the screen of bush. He did not see, so far but that he could see, while safely hidden, anything that might be going on at the foot of the great Barringtonia. He counted himself more or less responsible for the Kid, and it seemed to him that there were the elements of trouble, ripe for gathering, not very far away.

Gault, standing beneath the tree, began to call in his own language— for he knew no other— to the gold-haired creature hidden above. He used soft words; he whistled like a bird. There came no reply; the leaves brushed fingers with the winds; a locust, loud and wooden, chirred in a betel-nut tree. Else, in the pauses, there was silence.

"It's no go," he said at last, turning away. "Just close on dark is the time the other woman comes. I'll be there a little before."

"We will," corrected Irvine.

IN TELLING the tale years after, Irvine always used to say that the day they spent in waiting was the worst of the whole trip....

"We'd had leeches in the range," he said, "that hung all over us like bunches of tassels dropping blood— that was a nuisance— and in the sago-swamp country we were never dry night or day; that wasn't agreeable either. And when we camped a day and a night on the Angabunga, we were eaten alive with mosquitoes. There were bad days all those times— but the cap-sheaf of the lot was the day the Kid hung round waiting to see that girl. You see, he was dead mad in love with her, because he'd thought her a spirit or something at first, and because of her face and the goldy hair and the way she looked down out of the tree— oh, because of God knows what— it don't matter what, when a man's got it bad. Well, he had it bad for the first time, and it knocked him clean over. He wouldn't have his dinner, and he wouldn't have let me have mine if yarning and yapping would have kept me from it. He wouldn't stop in the camp, and he wouldn't stay out of it; he would take the carriers off shooting, and come back in a quarter of an hour with one old crow, and lie down on the ground and kick his toes, and say he wished he was dead; and get up again and start smoking, and let his pipe go out and throw it away. All day he went on like a poisoned dog; it just about made me sick. When it

was near dusk he tried to get away without me, but I was on to him and went after, and I put his revolver and mine too into my belt, because when a white man gets to fooling round native girls in cannibal country— Well, you know..."

"Keep quiet," whispered the Kid. "There's the woman with the food at last. I can hear her."

Irvine nodded. The last spears of sunset were sinking low in the forest; huge violet mock-plums lying among dead leaves; red, poisonous mock-apricots; white toadstools, lily-shaped, green snakes of thorn-set creeper were, for a moment, enchanted into fruits, flowers, stems of magic gold, and blotted almost instantly by the dusk. You could still see, as a man sees swimming under the water, the shadowed stems of trees, the feathers of the ferns, motionless, outspread. Then came a moving shadow, and stood still at the foot of the great tree.

Like a cat watching a mouse-hole Gault watched his chance. It came when the basket of food had been taken up, and the woman descending to earth had just let go her hold. Then Gault sprang up out of his cache of leaves, and without hesitation or parley flung himself upon the end of the ladder. The woman let out a scream, and, crying, ran away.

Up in the tree, the white, caged creature pulled at the ladder, and when it refused to answer her hand leaned forth. The men could not see her, but they could hear her voice, asking, remonstrating. Gault answered her as if he knew what she was saying....

"It's all right. Don't be afraid of us. We only want to help you."

"Oh, do we?" muttered Irvine, in the background. "Some of us are a lot more concerned about helping ourselves— out of the mess you're likely to get us into."

The woman seemed to understand, at least, the tone of Gault's speeches. She murmured something indefinite, with a note of entreaty in it.

"She's asking us to set her free— I'll swear she is. Where's that axe?" demanded Gault. He had brought one with him; he found it in a minute, and was away with it in his teeth up the bark ladder before Irvine could do anything to stop him.

"Three miles to the village," thought that worthy, drumming a little tune on the butt of his revolver. "A native girl in a hurry will make half an hour of it. Native bucks in a damned hurry, with their fighting kit on, will make rather less. Something under an hour to get the carriers off and clear, if we don't want to make pot roast for the village.... What's he at? "

There was a sudden crash among the branches above; a heavy beam or two fell whooping through the dark. Irvine jumped aside.

"Done it now, evidently," he said to himself. "And what the several-unpleasant-things he means to do next I should very much like to— Hi, Kid, what are you up to? We'll have the whole village in our hair inside of an hour."

"I've made her understand," came triumphantly from the broken tree-house. ("I'll go bail," was Irvine's comment.) "She knows we want to help her. She's coming with us."

Irvine, to himself, down among the dank-smelling leaves and thorny creepers, swore as few of his friends had ever heard him swear. To the other he said not a word. He, who was above all things a fighter, knew when fighting was no use.

In another minute two came down the ladder— Gault first, scrambling and hanging by his hands; the girl after, moving with less activity than one might have expected from a native.

"She's stiff and cramped, poor little soul," said the

Kid, swinging himself to the ground and watching the descent of the half-seen, shadowy form above him. "My God, did anyone ever hear of such beastly cruelty? Whatever she's done— and it couldn't be much, anyhow— to shut her up like a bird in a cage, away by herself in the bush and, I suppose, to leave her till she died! Thank Heaven we came along."

"Is it any use," said Irvine, blocking the way before him, "to tell you that you've time, just time, still, to get out of the maddest trick you've ever played in your life? Any use telling you that you're probably throwing away your life, and mine, and the carriers', poor beasts, to help a damned little hussy of a native girl who just as likely doesn't want any help at all? Kid, put her back where you got her, and get on as fast as you can. Don't you see she can look after herself, since she's done it so far? She—"

"You can shut up," came sharply through the dusk. "She's coming. I— I don't believe what you said about Albinos, I— I believe she's white. I'm going to take her with us, and when we get to a Mission

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! " was Irvine's only comment.

There was no quiet sleep, rolled in blankets by the fire, that night for the carriers. Instead, they spent the hours from dusk to dawn going hard, relentlessly driven, along the narrow, root-encumbered track that led, by compass, towards the distant sea. Irvine calculated that it was just possible for the party to do the distance to the coast in a night, and he was determined that they should. They had the best part of an hour's start, and they had not encumbered themselves with heavy loads; Irvine, with pangs of regret, had ordered the abandonment of nearly all the stores. "Better starve to death, if we have to, than let those beasts in the village put our eyes on sticks, and gut us like fish before we're dead," was his silent comment, as they drove, hour

after hour, through the tangling dark, the carriers ahead, Gault and the woman next, himself guarding the rear.

It was the woman, chiefly, who kept them from their highest speed. Most native girls, unencumbered by their usual heavy loads, can make as good a show as a man; but the girl from the cage— whether it was due to her recent caging or to her present fear— did not get along nearly as fast as they could have wished. Bush tracks in Papua are seldom wide enough for two; Gault could not give her his arm, but he cut a length of trailing bamboo, and put one end of it in her hand, hauling, as he went, upon the other; and so they progressed. Irvine, through the night, had time to wonder what might be the real cause of the imprisonment that the Kid had so violently ended. He knew that the Babakiri tribe, though savage and fierce, were in some ways further ahead on the road to civilization than any others of their kind; that their dances, ceremonies, tribal customs and taboos were very highly organized. He inferred that the girl, who had clearly offended in some way, must be an object of reverence to the tribe, through her colour, and that to this fact she owed her life. But what, among the Babakiri, could be the crime that doomed her to such close imprisonment he could not even imagine.

As for the Kid, Irvine considered that all was not yet lost. It might be possible, come daylight, to convince him that the girl, gold-haired and marble-skinned though she might be, was no more white in reality than the blackest of their mop-haired, grinning carriers. Yet he felt troubled when he thought of her, and the more he thought the more troubled he felt. He knew that Gault, impossible though it seemed— Gault, who had seen the world and had the best of everything— Gault, who was engaged to a "nice girl of distinguished appearance"— had met with Love, big Love, at last, in the person of the gold-and-marble woman whom the Babakiri had shut into a cage. What was to follow?

Dawn found them nearing the sea coast; the trees, on the impoverished soil, were growing sparse and poor. Ahead, pale lights struck through thinning foliage; the sound of humming surf, when they paused to take breath, made chorus with the rustling of the leaves. No one had pursued them— or, if they had been pursued they had not been caught. With the sea in front, and daylight waking, Irvine knew that, for the time at least, they were safe.

It was none too soon. The carriers were worn out and halting. Gault was grey with fatigue, and the girl, who had kept up bravely with his help, now seemed on the knife-edge of collapse. In the windy dawn, with the waves bursting red upon the beach, she sank upon a heap of sand. She was wrapped in her mantle of native-figured tappa cloth, which she had not taken off all night. Her hair, more wonderful than dreams, waved, half erect and gloriously

gold, in the waxing light of dawn. One arm, white and bare, shone out from the brown folds of her garment; her feet beneath their stains of clotted mud showed delicately arched and small.

"Look at that," said the Kid. "Did you ever see a duchess with such a—"

"I haven't much acquaintance with duchesses, but I've seen some hundreds of native girls with very nice little feet," answered Irvine. "Did you ever see such a nose on a duchess, since you're keen on the comparison?"

"Her nose is just like everyone else's!"

Irvine pursed his lips and whistled softly some frivolous sounding air.

Light was growing; the sea wind, after the dripping heats of the bush, blew gratefully on mouth and cheek. Two of the carriers, under Irvine's sharp command, had trailed their tired limbs along the beach to gather driftwood for a fire. The rest were lying flat on the sand. A little way from them sat the girl, her white face set and hard as the white coral blocks, thrown up from deep sea reefs beyond, that lay upon the beach.

Gault, sitting on a fallen tree beside her, was trying, with the help of a prostrate carrier, to make her understand the words he repeated over and over again. The carrier, it seemed, knew something of some language that the girl— imperfectly— knew. Through the mists of double interpretation, the strange wooing went on. Irvine, his back against a tree, lit his pipe and listened.

The Kid was telling her that he had set her free from her enemies. Vaguely, mangled and distorted, came back to him her thanks. But she still sat looking out, not at him, but at the sea, and her face was set and cold. Only the wonderful, deep-lidded eyes seemed to be awake; and what they were saying, Irvine, curiously on watch, could not even guess. But he sensed trouble, dark and not far off.

The Kid went on to say that there was a Mission some days down the coast, and that he was going to bring her there. That they would have a missionary to marry them. That he would ("Oh, Lord, Lord," said Irvine silently to his pipe) take her away to his country, and make a queen of her.... There was a ring in his voice that Irvine had never heard before.

"Well," he thought as he looked aside at the strong, sharp-lined countenance that had in one night taken the place of the Englishman's baby face: "I'll never call you the Kid again; you've grown up since we made camp last."

There was silence; Gault's hard-breathed, quivering words and the stumbling translations of the carrier died away. No answer came from the girl. But suddenly she sprang to her feet and the marble face broke up into passionate crying. She knelt down, laid her head, with its wonderful gold hair,

for one instant upon Gault's muddy boots, and then broke away and ran wildly down the beach.

The two white men, each equally surprised, stared after her. Gault was the first to speak: "What's— what's the matter?" he asked, not of Irvine, but seemingly of the universe. His face was pale; he seemed as one seems who has been suddenly, treacherously struck.

"She's looking for something," offered Irvine. The girl had stopped, a good distance away. Her tappa mantle was gathered in one hand; with the other she was groping, hunting in a mass of rotten logs that lay piled one upon the other at the margin of the forest.

It was not the bushman with his keen, practised senses who first saw what the gold-haired girl was hunting for— what she had found. It was Gault, never more to be known as the Kid again. He had seen, had understood, somehow, without understanding, and had covered half the distance in a frantic rush before Irvine too understood, and, swearing as he only swore in moments of fiercest excitement, tore after him.

Both were too late to snatch the black snake from the girl before it had buried its fangs in her uncovered breast. Even after it had struck and let go she held it to her as a mother holds her child, and Gault could hardly tear the hideous thing away. In a desperate wrench he pulled it from her at last, flung it on the ground and stamped its head to pulp. Then, with hands that shook, he began fumbling in his pockets after the little first aid snake-bite case that never left either of the men during bush travel.

"Give her a whisky while I get at this," he choked.

Irvine, more slowly than one might have expected, felt for his flask and opened it... The girl seemed to understand; she moved a little from him, and shook her head.

"Quick, man!" ordered Gault, who had got his case now and was opening it. "It's her only chance."

The girl stood silent; she looked at the man who had risked his life for her, and beneath her deep-cut eyelids lay horror, love, tragedy beyond words. She did not move, but she let her half-held mantle fall, suddenly, into folds at her feet.

"Steady her while I try," said Gault, opening his case. "We can't let her— God, she mustn't—"

Irvine's hand came between him and the little phial.

Irvine's voice said, gravely: "Look."

Gault looked up. He saw the gold-and-marble girl still standing moveless in front of him, her mantle fallen down. He saw that her white body was marked.

"What is it?" he asked, his tongue dry between his teeth.

"Leprosy," said Irvine. And then, as if to himself: "I always did say the Babakiri were the most advanced savages in the country."

Gault, grey-faced but trying hard to hold himself, went on fumbling with his case.

"It's our duty," he said. "Not to let— She mustn't—"

Irvine's strong hand came once more between him and the case, and this time took it away.

"Have some mercy on her!" he said.

The gold-and-marble girl, drawing a long sigh, staggered a little and lay down. She drew the folds of her tappa mantle across her face.

7: Peak of the Moon

THE forest, on its climbing ridge, hung round about the clearing as hangs an old tapestry on a castle wall, full of mysterious greens and intriguing shadows. Trunks, tall and pale, made threadbare stitches on the giant fabric, where axes of long ago had broken their way to the sun. There was a stream in the bottom of the clearing; it ran between belts of fern trees like umbrellas of green lace, betel-nut trees, incredibly poised and slim, kapoks with yellow honey-sweet flowers and dangling pods; massed, luscious shrubs and trailers, nameless save to botanists. Lalang grass, kept free by savage hunting fires, filled all the rest of the clearing. And above there was sun, the pouring sun of Papua, not yellow-thick and full of lees as it shines on Port Moresby plains, but thin and clear like new glass. From the spine of the other ridge that was over against the forest one looked down and down, across blue valleys and green- clearings, black chines where the rivers ran, and a tumbling, crumbling mass of mountains unbroken by axe or foot, and last, a very long way away, some white beads scattered on the rim of the sea— Port Moresby.

Jimmy Conroy looked round him, from the view to the ridge, from the ridge into the clearing, down to Port Moresby and back again to the barely visible track on which he was standing. He drew his breath and let it out with a grunt of satisfaction.

"No damned people," he said.

There certainly were no people, damned or otherwise. Conroy had taken two days to travel up from the town, by ways not often used, and once off the one narrow road that led to Sapphire Creek, he and his two pattering mules had seen not a soul save one old gentleman of the rude Koiari tribe who was going down on a holiday to the seaside, with bamboos to carry back salt water. The old gentleman, dressed in a string of dogs' teeth and a worn-out check waistcoat, had not noticed Conroy and his beasts otherwise than to spit at them in passing; and further travellers there were none.

Among the mountains where they now had climbed, Conroy knew from a careful study of Government maps that there were no settlers or planters of any kind. The land on which he stood had formerly been planted and worked but was now forfeited to the Government, the owners having given it up as a bad job because of just that which had drawn Conroy thither— difficult, almost impossible approach. To get to Magani in those days, with the once cleared and dynamited track gone almost back to bush, was no trifling job.

Koiari there were, but the Koiari savage, who still resists, negatively, the civilization that has gathered in almost all his neighbours, is of necessity coy

and retiring in his ways. And in any case this acreage of raw forest and springing ridge, this patch of discouraged clearing, knew Koiari only in the dry hunting days of July and August. Now, in April, there was not a moving thing for miles and days round Magani, save the pigs, black and brown, and the greyish wallabies, and the little, scuttering bandicoots and such small fry that lived their easy lives in the forest.

There were no people. None. Conroy repeated it, stretching himself luxuriously in unison with the suddenly stretched, freed feeling of his soul. That was what he had come for. That was why he had made the long rush up to Papua from Sydney, after.... it.... was over; the short, swift journey from Port Moresby, with the mules and the sixteen hundred pounds of stores, up to Magani— Magani, that nobody knew anything about nowadays, that no one supposed to be his goal, if anyone had cared to ask. He had spent all his money, every shilling he had left in the world, in doing it; but there he was at last with his stores for three months, and his four-legged carriers who wouldn't gossip or tell tales as two-legged ones would have done, and his mountains, and his forest, and his river, and peace— peace.

If the place didn't belong to him it belonged to nobody. It was his as far as all the primitive rights of man were concerned— wooding and watering, killing of beasts for food, and of trees for building stuff. There were many sheets of iron lying scattered about the hill top, relics of the days he dimly remembered when, as a lad of twelve, he had travelled with his father to New Guinea and had stayed for a night and a couple of days at the mountain estate of "The Company."

The iron had been a nice little house then. It would make a good sort of shack now, with new framing. He remembered the place more and more. It had always been his dream— so far away, so blue and clear, so peaceful. And it was like what he had dreamed— wonderfully so. How the thought of it had come over him, like a sudden hunger, in the court-house crowded with people who smelled of wet weather and smoke and beer— people packed like pins in a paper; people who lived and died with their breath in each other's faces, and their elbows in each other's eyes.

Eyes! The word burned. Eyes had scorched him, stripped him, during those wretched hours. Women had fixed lorgnettes upon him; red-faced men had gaped. On the ship he had chosen to feign sea-sickness— he, who was never ill on land or sea— and to stay in his cabin. In the town nobody knew him or his name— but if he had stayed things would have been bound to come out. He had not wanted to stay. He had only wanted to buy food, tinned and bagged food, cartridges and a few useful tools, until his money gave out; to load it all

on the mules he had bought, and then to go— and go. Papua was a devil of a country; no one knew it better than he did, but in Papua you could be free.

One does not rush the ramparts of the Astrolabe in the inside of a morning. It had been afternoon when Jimmy and the mules first caught the cool kiss of main range breezes; it was verging now towards night. Only another hour and the valley would fill up, like a lake fed by mountain torrents, with rising tides of purple and grey dusk. There would be no rain to-night; the south-east season had set in clear and dry. Conroy purposed to hobble his mules by and by, and turn them loose; then to sling his own hammock between a couple of old house piles that still stood by and sleep beneath the stars. No mosquito net for him— down on the plains men might be cursing and fighting mosquito hordes, sleeping, eating and working under stretched nets; but here, in the blue remoteness of the Astrolabe, the curse of Papuan life had no being.

So many other curses had no being. Conroy, making his fire in the lee of a sheet of iron, boiling his billy and frying bacon by the light of a hurricane lamp, conned them all over. The curse of the too-many people. The curse of the Sydney city face, hard, throwing off a casual glance as steel plate casts back an arrow. The curse of "appearances"— doing the things you did not wish to do, the things you ought not to do, the things you could not afford to do, because of what somebody whom you despised would think about it.

The curse of the airless houses, where you shut yourself away in the stuffy dark, like a punished dog in its kennel. The many curses of noise— street bands, blaring, bullying motor-horns, roaring of tramcars; the noise of voices, women's voices chitter-chattering foolishly, men's loud, boring tones, never ceasing. Here, the stars came out, large and silver, above the empty clearing, and beneath them there was so little sound— ruffle of windy grasses, lip-lap of the river— that you could almost hear them shine.

Having hobbled and turned out the mules, having fed, and slung up his hammock, Conroy, before lighting his pipe for a luxurious, sleepy smoke, performed a little ceremony. Out of his pockets, after long dredging, he produced a coin; a penny, useless in Papua, where nothing less than silver will buy anything one wants. He looked at it, bowed his head in mock good-bye, and tossed the penny, with all the strength of his nervy arm, away towards the crest of the hill.

"Go and join the rest of 'em, sonny," he said. "Find 'em if you can, and if you can't, stay away." He laughed— the first time in many a day— and bent down to light his pipe; the wind was getting up— faith, he'd want his blankets to-night if it got much colder.

When he raised his head again, a brown statue was standing beside him in the firelight; a very old, villainous-looking gentleman, skinny, cottony-haired, dressed in a string of teeth and a worn check tourist waistcoat.

"Hallo, Johnny," he exclaimed, "so you've turned up here; now what the devil brought you along, I wonder? "

He had spoken only to himself; but— much to his surprise— he was answered.

"Me come," said the old, villainous gentleman.

"Oh, so you speak English, do you? Well, what did you come for?"

"Me come. Altogether me come." The old man squatted down by the fire and began to warm his thin, bare legs. "Toback," he remarked.

Conroy, who had memories of the country, guessed that the old man was in all probability starved and neglected by his tribe, and had visited the camp with some intention of fastening himself on to the wealthy white. He felt a little dismayed. Three months' stores for one did not make three months' stores if you added another— an old and useless mouth—

"Me Babakori. Me no *kai-kai* plenty," put in the old man, with uncanny divination of his mood. "Me *kai-kai* little bit. All the time, me findem big black fig (pig), big wallaby, me tellem you altogether everything." He finished up with another "Toback."

Conroy gave him half a stick and thought rapidly. Mightn't he do worse, after all? This brown, ghostly thing of seventy years was not "people." He could think aloud, before it— he need never feel that it was there— and it would well save its keep for him. The old man must have been camp-boy to some white man in the past. A harmless, mindless thing.

Babakori, shredding tobacco for his long bamboo pipe, cocked an old eye of the kind that Victorians were used to call "leery," and asked :

"Where you woman, Taubada?" (chief).

"The answer, my wise Johnny," answered Conroy, in some amazement, "is the reason of my coming up here, which I don't propose to tell."

Babakori chewed that over visibly, like a parrot chewing a biscuit held in its claw, and seemed to come to a conclusion.

"You leaven woman along Sydney?"

"Right— though I don't know how you know."

"Him no like come-along a you?"

"Didn't ask her, Johnny. Couldn't." It was a curious relief— almost a pleasure— to talk in this whimsical, half comprehended fashion to the creature who seemed so little of a human being; the almost thing that blended in colour and limb with dim shapes of rocks and trees, half hidden in the firelight. It was like talking to oneself.

"What name (why?) you no askem him? "

"Because I'd lost all my money, Johnny." "Me-fellow Babakori, no Donny. What name you lose money? "

"All kinds of ways. Mostly way of a damned tool. Speculating, backing wrong horses, cards a bit."

"New Guinea boy him flay cards, flenty him lose," commented the old man.

"What do you do when you lose?" asked Conroy, curiously.

"Me, sometime me go me stealem 'nother money, very good, suppose Govamen' he no catchem me-fellow," was the cool reply. It made Conroy wince. The parallel

"You been stealem money? " asked the old man, with an upward squint.

"Johnny," said Conroy slowly, his pipe between his teeth, "I'm blest if I know."

He did not know. After all that had been said in court— after he had been, somehow, let off with a cautionary address that flayed him alive, and was almost worse than jail— Jimmy Conroy, still, did not know whether he was in his own eyes a thief or not.

He had drawn against a non-existent bank balance and passed off the cheque.... Yes, but the remittance ought to have arrived before the cheque was presented. It did not arrive, because the man who owed him the money was dead and had left no sort of proof that money had ever been owed to Conroy at all. He ought not to have paid his hotel bill with the cheque. Yes, but he didn't think.... he was perfectly certain....

It had all been gone over and over in court, till his head swam with it; on that subject his head was swimming still. Out of it all some few clear facts emerged; he had been arrested at the railway station publicly, horribly. He had been tried for fraud on a hotel-keeper. He had got off by means of the First Offenders' Act, and he was just as much ruined for life as if he had been to prison for a year.

If he had not been locally known— if the horrible thing had occurred, say in Canada or the Argentine— it would have not been so bad. But the Conroys were a famous squatter family; or had been, till his father went through most of the property that the end-of-the- century " big drought " had spared. Plenty of people still knew all about them; knew how Jimmy, left an orphan, was brought up by guardians, who sold the remainder of the property for his benefit; how he took the capital into his own charge at twenty-one, cheerfully certain of making a fortune; how he speculated, muddled, lost, won, lost again; hunted "sure things" at Randwick, played auction bridge, and lent money to ladies whose dividends were, somehow, inexplicably delayed. A breach of

promise, privately settled, hit him hard. The war almost put him on his feet again, because in Flanders there was not much opportunity for chasing dead certainties that only deserved the first half of their name, of "being let in on the ground floor" to enterprises that shortly collapsed and dropped you into the cellar. After the war— well, everyone knew what state the money market was in— money had gone mad. Was it any wonder he could not pull things straight when Lloyd George and Billy Hughes and the British Empire couldn't? He had certainly tried— well, as a man does try when he has met the One Girl, and begins to fear the other thousand million unmarried men in the world may win the race away from him. And it ended with the shrieking scandal of the police court, the incredibly unbelieving hotel manager and bank manager and magistrate, and the cruel mercies of the First Offenders' Act— with all Sydney, all Australia, all the whole damned world (or so it seemed to Jimmy's flayed, raw mind) looking on.

And the Girl would marry someone else.

I have not drawn Jimmy as he lived, if I have not succeeded in showing you that he was impulsive by nature. The little boxful of medals that he never looked at— the letters he did not use after his name— proved one aspect of his impulsiveness. The liveness of the copper coin at present lying half-way up the hill-crest proved another. Jimmy, through his few-and- twenty years of life had, hitherto, spent himself and his resources of body, mind and purse in action.

About the first thing that had ever caused him to expend nerve force in thought was the Girl. There was nothing to be done about the Girl. She seemed to like him— Jimmy, swung between the heavens and hells of love uncertainty, was sometimes gloriously certain that she did. He could have stormed a dozen Hun trenches for her, single-handed; he could have fought for her in dizzying mid-air, walked across the continent of Australia barefoot, done any dangerous, difficult, painful thing, any dozens of such things, for her.

But one cannot marry a girl who is gently bred and who goes to the best dances on war records or athletic "stunts." To give her a house in the right part of the right bay, down the harbour— and motor cars, and "little frocks" to wear, instead of simple dresses, which do not dress a woman— one must have money. Conroy had lost his; and every attempt he made towards getting it back only threw him further and further down the social ladder. Now he had reached the bottom in good earnest. Now, therefore, there was nothing to be done about the Girl— nothing but think.

Under the stars, with the mules standing still as black equestrian statues shorn of riders in the half dark, with the old Babakori asleep behind a log, with the deserted clearing of Magani all to himself, and nothing at last between him

and his own soul, Conroy fell to thinking. And he found, as men from the days of Genesis upwards have, that thought, in such places during such hours, springs up like grass in rain.

Conroy had not understood the wild desire that drove him on to this desert place. He had only known that he wanted Magani, and had gone straight for it, as he had always gone for what he wanted. He had not known just what it was he wanted in this case, but had rushed towards it all the same. This night it began to creep upon him that the thing he wanted, and might find, was just himself.

Dimly, through the fog of a mind ill-used to piloting itself, a light or two shone out. Might not the finding of oneself be the first necessary step towards the reaching of that treasure so far above and beyond oneself— the Girl? Jimmy did not know how that could be— yet he fancied it might be so. Or might have been had not the thing happened which had cast him out of his world, and which never for a moment could be forgotten.

And immediately he forgot it, in sleep.

During the days that followed, Jimmy, to his own amazement, was happy. It came to him with a shock that he, like millions of others, had never up to this known the taste of actual freedom. He had thought, on the whole, that he was fairly free, but now he knew. Day upon day he rolled out of his hammock at dawn, and sat pyjama-clad on a rock to drink the tea old Babakori brought him, as slowly as he liked, look out upon the dusky lands below Magani, and watch the marvellous mountain sunrise

*"From its cold crown
And crystal silence creeping down."*

Day after day he hunted the forgotten woods about the clearing for he knew not what— rivers unplaced on the maps, peaks no one had marked, strange flowers that stood up like rows of gold candles upon trailing cables of ground-vine, or peered with purple-red, flushed faces, incredibly huge, out of green thickets impenetrable with bamboo. Evening on evening, he and Babakori— who seldom spoke and scarcely seemed alive during the day— waited, silently, for the right moment of dusk, to creep forth, soft-footed, and stalk the wallabies and pigs that came out to feed towards the falling of the night. Back they would hurry, later, laden with food; then there would be a great fire lit and a lamp hung up, and with big knives the two would butcher the carcase, hanging the choice bits— the tail and thighs of the wallaby, the loin and liver of pork— high in the eucalyptus trees near the camp. There would be bits fried over the fire, better to eat than Jimmy had dreamed meat could be; and Babakori would rub his old stomach and grunt, and Jimmy would

laugh at him, understanding. And while they fed, the giant frogs would keep up their goat-like bleating down by the river, and the night-birds would whistle like a man calling a dog or scream like a woman dying in agony. And Babakori, wise with strange wisdom that the white man never plumbs to its depth, would whisper, gnawing on a bone, of things that lived in the forest and did harm; of other things, good to men if men could catch and tame them— as, he explained, hastily swallowing his gnawed meat, men never did.

Conroy, asking him how, then, he could know the good will of the things, was told, in snatches of English "pidgined" to shreds, that they would throw largesse, once in a way— throw it and run, for fear of being caught. One had to treat them well.

"Taubada!" whispered the old man, looking round him fearfully, in the firelit shadow, "Taubada (chief) you tell along Babakori— what name you frow money long devil belong on-top?"

"Why?" repeated Conroy, puzzled— then remembering his careless casting away of the lone penny he laughed. "I told him to bring me some more, old boy," he said. "But the devil of it is, he never will."

The old man passed this over. "Taubada," he persisted, "what name, you frow money along big-on-top belong moon?"

"Along what? Oh, you mean the top of the mountain. Why, does it belong to the moon, old boy?"

"Belong moon, bee-cause all same moon, Taubada. Moon, bee-fore, one time fall down along top"— he pointed with a spidery claw— "altogether something he stop."

"The moon fell down on top of the mountain and some of it stopped behind. Babakori, you've missed your job, you should have been a— a real estate agent," commented Conroy, forking another choice bit of pig out of the frying pan. Conroy knew about real estate. A few of his light-heeled sovereigns had run away from him by that road.

Babakori, as usual, pursued his own parallel and independent line of thought.

"Altogether we-fellow we fright along that place," he confided, pointing with a gnawed bone towards the spiring peak that rose above the camp. "Me, one time me go make puri-puri (magic) there, me see moon, me run away." Lovingly and slowly he licked his fingers clean of gravy.

Conroy did not pay attention. He was looking down on the silent, moon-sapphired landscape below; sensing its cleanness, its emptiness of crawling, pullulating city life. "No damned people" would have been too violent a thought for him now. He was growing into the place; almost a part of it. He felt

with it; knew that something of its strength and peace were passing into himself.

"If ever I went away from here again," he thought, "I'd be different. I'd have more hold of myself. That's what was wrong. Why, confound it, a horse one rode in the way one rides oneself would bolt. That's why one does bolt. Hands all over the shop, knees not taking hold, and the animal you ride knows and plays up like billy-oh. Funny thing that there should be two of you, horse and rider. I wonder if anyone ever thought of that before."

His mind, unused to effort, slid off the puzzling subject; went, by some zigzag of thought, to the question of stores. Babakori didn't cut them in half after all; he was such a help about game— and fruit— and wild yams— and the bonzer little crayfish in the river that hadn't a name— and how to catch pigeon at dawn, in snares of bark fibre cunningly set. All in all, there would be near the full three months he had anticipated. One month was gone. Nearly two to run.

Conroy thought of the little hut he had put together out of loose sheets of iron for rainy and windy weather; of the home-like feeling he knew at night, sitting under its roof and reading old newspapers by lantern light; of old Babakori humming and droning about the place, and the river talking itself to sleep below. Of stalking, and shooting, and the strange, fresh pleasures savoured in thus, like the bush creatures, "seeking his meat from God." Of the warm smell of bracken in mid-morning when one lay sheltered from the hill-top wind for siesta. Of blue, thin skies above, and blue, far world below. Of a place where no one came; where no one knew you to be hid; where no alien minds or lives battered and butted against yours to deform it out of shape. Of peace, and peace....

He rose at last, thoughts turning bedward. The moon was sliding down behind the peak; it must be getting late.

Babakori, his banana leaf cigarette cocked in one corner of his mouth, looked up and seemed to judge and value him with a shrewd, leather-lidded eye.

"You good man," was his comment. Jimmy, aware that the old savage referred to no moral fineness he might suspect, but rather to five feet ten and a half of height, broad shoulders, mat-thick, ruddy hair, and dark eyes not wanting in fire, felt somewhat foolishly pleased. He knew he was a good man in that sense.

Babakori spoke again, and this time his speech was a cunning plea as old as the ages, on the lips of age. Would not his chief allow him to go and cheapen a nice girl for him? Me, Babakori, knew of several such, very good value for the pigs and axes asked as their price.

Jimmy, answering the simple soul as simply as he had spoken, declared an indifference to native beauty. He liked a white girl, he said, and she was not there. Where was she? Oh, a long way off, further than you could see.

Babakori, in a mixture of pidgin English and native, was understood to ask what the chief would give him if he brought her along. He recommended himself as an excellent and honest bargainer between parent and purchaser. He also explained that he could walk a very long way, if you gave him tobacco enough.

"I suppose you want a spell," was Jimmy's comment. "Well, you can take one, but come back in a couple of days like a good chap. I want you here."

"Me go?" asked Babakori, after consideration.

"Yes."

The old man got up, tied his bark fibre belt a little closer and slung his bamboo pipe over one shoulder. Thus prepared for travel, without further ado he turned away from the camp, and trotted in the moonlight down the track that led, at long last, to the coast and the road and the little, far-off town.

Conroy did not trouble himself overmuch as to what the old fellow might have at the bottom of his mind. Some native nonsense or other....

For three days he hunted, explored, and fed alone. On the fourth, he was beginning to feel what he had not felt since his arrival— bored. Towards sundown he went to the edge of the plateau and stood looking aimlessly out across the wrinkled map of mountain, plain and sea. It was impossible to get sight of anyone who might be on the way, but one could eye the distance and make rough calculations....

He wondered what on earth, after all, the old villain had really been about. There was no ripe betel-nut near Magani; in all likelihood, Babakori's holiday trip had to do with the providing of a fresh supply, for the Papuan without his betel-nut is as a white man without a smoke. But you never could tell. The native mind was full of odd turns.

Another day went by and Conroy found himself growing really uncomfortable. What the devil was the old man after? Was it even remotely possible that

Late in the afternoon a skinny, wiry figure hirpled its way up to the camp. It was Babakori, and he was not at all tired, though he had come all the way from the ocean and the town that day. Nor was he so hungry that the chunk of cold wallaby tossed to him by Conroy impeded his talk. Squatting on the ground, with his horny toes in the warm ashes of the fire, he stowed away the meat and retailed his adventures, without hindrance to either process.

"One steamer come in," he narrated. "Me I go along steamer, I want I ask some white man he give Babakori one sillin, two sillin."

"Greedy old beggar."

"Yes. One man he give, one girl he give. Me say, 'Tank you, missis, you good girl. I like you, makem wife belong my Taubada.' Den altogether white man too much he laugh, girl he say, 'Dis funny old man, you make him photograph.' Den white men he makem photograph, I go away, morning time I come back, I say, 'Me want my photograph.' Altogether man he laugh some more, he give me one. I think he make me pay, I run away very quick. Taubada, I look altogether along Porse Moresby girl, I askem cooky boy belong house, all that cooky boy he say you girl no stop. Dis girl along steamer he good girl, you better catch him. Dis girl give plenty something along me, suppose you have him."

"I'm afraid I can't oblige, Babakori. You know the boat will be gone by now."

The old man gave a grunt of disgust and sat for a moment looking at his leathery toes. He wriggled them about in the warm dust, drew them out reluctantly, and suggested :

"Maybe we go soot one big fig (shoot pig)."

"Show us your precious photo," said Jimmy, who did not feel particularly like shifting. Something had got hold of him— some ill spirit of the wilderness, that weighed down his limbs and paralysed them as the limbs of one who moves beneath deep water. Some nameless, nibbling pain was at his heart. Confound old Babakori and his talk of girls.

He reached for the picture, looked at it in the flaring sunset once, looked again, jumped to his feet, and let loose a shout that sounded across the valley.

"God!" shouted the wall of forest back at him, profanely.

Babakori, handling his pig spear, did not seem much moved. You never could count on what a white man might do.

Jimmy Conroy, with the little tin-type clutched in his hand, had forgotten Babakori as if he never existed. The figure standing on the Marsina's deck at the old man's back— peering forward, laughing into the camera, was that of Cecily, the Girl. The tall man almost hidden was James Weston, Cecily's father.

Of course! Of course! Weston, director of many companies, had big interests in the newly-acquired mandate territory further north, near Rabaul. It was the likeliest thing in the world that he should go up to look after them. And Cecily, when she heard about his going, would be sure to tease him to take her with him. She was such a darling tease.

No, he was sure she didn't know anything about him. Had forgotten he was alive, no doubt, or tried to, so far as the damned newspapers would let her. And the Marsina by this time probably was gone. And once people got to Rabaul you couldn't tell by what route they would return. The only sensible

thing for him to do— the only thing, in fact— was to go out pig-hunting with Babakori, give the old man back his photograph, and forget.

By way of beginning he pulled out of his pocket his most cherished possession, a four-bladed silver-handled knife that Cecily had given him and offered to exchange it for the picture. Babakori showed his appreciation by snatching it like a dog and retreating to a safe corner behind a heap of stones, where he could gloat upon his treasure. He squatted down and examined it from every point of view, testing each blade, opening and shutting, holding the knife aloft to see its silver engine-turnings shine in the westering sun. Satisfied at last, he came forth, the knife concealed in his small bag of treasures.

Jimmy Conroy was gone.

The savage is hard to surprise. Babakori, looking to right and left, seeing the mark of footsteps on the path that led down towards the plain, and missing, at a glance, the brown suit-case that held his (Taubada's) personal goods, only made several small pig grunts and went back to light the fire. Whatever white men did, sensible people must eat. And it was good to have command of the stores.

Late that night, when the town of Port Moresby had been long asleep, Conroy came quietly up the wide, grassy street and slung his mosquito net beneath the piles of an empty house. He had no money for hotels; well, he had food with him and he could wake before sunrise, wash and shave at some tank and be about before anyone thought of rising.

The *Marsina*, from what he had heard along the road, was not leaving until noon. There would be plenty of time to see Cecily, and see her he was determined to do, if the whole world and everybody's fathers stood in his way.

He did not sleep much, though his hard bed was not uncomfortable, and the air under the house came fresh and cool, far cooler than it would have been in a bed-room of the stuffy hotel. He was thinking, with thoughts made clear by the long tramp down, by the sudden shock of seeing Cecily's picture, above all by the silent, lonely weeks away in No-Man's-Land, where he, as other men, had gone to find he knew not what, and in seeking for it had attained to find— himself.

He knew now that he had been wrong in doubting himself. He, Jimmy Conroy, was no thief, not if a hundred hotel-keepers and a thousand newspapers said so. The money was to have been in the bank; the dead man had promised, and he wasn't the sort who ever broke promises. It had been due before. Conroy, being suddenly out of cash, wrote the cheque in response to the manager's demand for money. He had been foolish, but not criminal, in his own eyes, and those were the eyes that mattered. That the bank wasn't one in which he had ever had money did not matter. His dead friend had been

repaying a loan by instalments, mostly delivered in person, but however they were paid, never late. This last payment was a big one; he had therefore told Jimmy it was to be banked. All that had been said in court, and promptly disbelieved. If it was true, why was there no memorandum among the dead man's papers? "Because," Jimmy had explained, "it was a very private matter." "In what way?" Jimmy wouldn't say. He was not going to tell the fellow's widow that her husband had been tangled up with a blackmailing woman. One had to keep one's mouth shut about some things. And George was really one of the best.

Well, that was how it had gone. But Jimmy Conroy now knew that he had not been a thief. And somehow the knowledge was very much to him. It seemed to free him— to open the road....

He fell asleep.

Towards morning he half woke with the feeling of "something wrong." It held him for a minute or two, and then fatigue had its way and he dropped back into sleep again.

With the dawn he opened his eyes, saw the dim forest of the house-piles all round his bed and the lightening road beyond; smelled the wild mint of Port Moresby fresh in the dew, and heard the first faint sound of somebody's axe going for the morning fire. He pulled aside his net and came out from under the house. The sun was nearly up by now and the sea was a sheet of opal-blue, hemmed in by Hills of purest amethyst. The long black wharf stretched, many-legged, out into the deep; beyond, the dolphin, like a stand for a giant's flat-iron, showed up dark against growing gold. And there was no ship there.

"I knew it," he said to himself, without excitement, feeling his hands grow cold, his feet cling to the ground heavy as stones. "I heard her go in my sleep," he thought. "I ought to have waked up Midday, damn them? It was midnight they meant. If I'd known, I could have made better time, got on board for a minute, maybe—"

There was nothing to do about it. He went back.

During the next week or two he did more thinking than ever he had done in his life. It had not been one of Jimmy Conroy's habits, to say the least, but now he thought and thought for hours, for half a day, seated on one of the big warm rocks that overhung the plain, looking, without seeing, out across the matchless view that stretched to the Coral Sea. The view that held his eyes was quite another; that of his own life. Jimmy was looking it over and he did not find it good.

"Everything," he said to himself at last, his cold, smoked pipe hanging unheeded from one corner of his mouth, "everything that ever happened to me has been my own damned fault."

That was something. On another day this struck him:

"People don't understand. They judge me, all the pack of them, by what I've done."

Why shouldn't they? It took him some while to arrive at an answer to that. But by this time he had come to trust Magani. In that blue, empty world you need only throw a question out and wait patiently; by and by the answer was sure to come.

"I've got more in me than they know," was his final judgment. "If I had another chance I could use it. If I had money again I could make a decent hand of things. I know the horse I'm riding— now."

In the end it worked itself down to a fine point. He had to get money again.

Always, when he came so far, he used to get up, stretch himself, and begin to stare about. Papua was a curious country and it did strange things to your mind. Jimmy recognized that. He did not laugh at the blind, fitful instinct, not to be explained, that kept urging him to look— look. He knew there were odd scraps of knowledge scattered somewhere in his consciousness that might leap suddenly into a connected chain, if only one got hold of them at the right end and pulled. But what was the end?

He found himself, one day, climbing where he had not gone before— up the narrow, rugged spire above his camp, called by Babakori, in native language, the Peak of the Moon. The old man saw him and yelled to him to come back. There were evils there, he said. The moon had dropped down, the moon left ill-luck behind it. Did not everyone know that a man went mad, or lost his sight, who dared so much as to sleep in moonlight? He did not want the chief to lose his sight; what would happen to Babakori if he did?

Conroy, laughing, desisted. He had grown almost fond of the queer old creature by now. Coming down the rocks again he chanced upon the penny he had thrown away. It lay in a nest of moss; it was almost as green as the moss from exposure.

"Look," said Conroy, and held it up.

Babakori shook his head. "No good, no good, Taubada," he said. "Dat spilit (spirit) no liking you, him trow back you money."

"No, he doesn't like me," laughed Conroy, and came down to the camping ground. The picture of the Girl was in his pocket; he drew it out, unconsciously, and looked at it as he looked half a hundred times a day.

Babakori, chewing sugar-cane and spitting it out unpleasantly, was understood to say that the Girl would have had better luck— that was, supposing she was a good girl, which girls on the whole were not.

"You black pig," said Conroy, suddenly flaming, " how dare you say such a thing? She's— she's—" he faltered for a word that might express to this savage minded old heathen something of what Cecily— gay, teasing, sunny-hearted maiden— was to him. Under his feet he saw his answer. He picked it and held it up to Babakori— a slender, pure white flower.

"That's what she is," he said, and there was a note of reverence in his voice that even the old savage understood. He laughed and plucked a red hibiscus bloom.

"New Guinea girl, dis one," he said. "Very nice girl New Guinea girl." He chuckled; the reminiscent, wicked chuckle of age.

Conroy stripped his white flower carefully of its thick green leaves and placed it, together with the picture, in the little bark case that he had made. He wore the case now, always, in the breast-pocket of his shirt.

And the days passed, and the days passed, till it was a fortnight. The boat was due again.

Conroy did not go down to the port for boat day. Where was the use? He had procured a passenger-list before leaving the town last time and had seen in it the names of Cecily and her father— single trip only. It was plain they did not mean to return by that route.

The *Melusia*, running directly south from Rabaul, would probably take them.

Nevertheless, on steamer day he could not rest. He watched, from his far headland, the little black plume of smoke show out on the horizon; saw the tiny speck that represented the *Marsina* creep ant-wise over the sea and hide behind the hills. Now the boat was alongside. Now the passengers would be coming off. But not Cecily. She was running south, south, ever so fast, a long way off, on the *Melusia*; Port Moresby would never see her again.

Conroy, in his little house of sheet-iron, dreamed strange dreams that night. They ought to have been melancholy dreams, but they were not. He could not recall them in the morning; still, he was sure of that. He wished he could remember; they had left a pleasant flavour.

But Cecily was gone.

Along towards midday he was busy cutting up a wallaby that had been shot somewhat later in the day than usual. His knife and hands were covered with blood; in a tin pan beside him, afloat in blood, lay the liver and the kidneys and the big, fleshy tail. He was severing one of the thighs, blood dripping on the

ground as he worked, when he chanced to look up and saw, with a thump of the heart that turned him sick, James Weston.

The lean, grey man who walked the ways of this world circled with rainbow haloes, for Jimmy (and who knew for how many other young men? since Cecily had her full share of success), came forward as if he had just parted from Conroy an hour ago.

"Well, young man," he remarked, "you seem pretty dirty, and pretty busy."

Jimmy dropped his knife and ran for the basin.

Slushing himself with water as he spoke, he answered, in a tone of cool self-possession that Weston had never heard:

"I'm very glad to see you; are you making a stay in the country?"

"That's as may be," answered Weston. "I had to see a mineral prospect at the foot of this mountain and something told me, as the penny novelist says, to come further up. You have quite a nice little camp here, haven't you?"

"If you'll stop for lunch," said Jimmy, "my boy can give you a nice bit of steak; I'm sorry there won't be time to make wallaby tail soup."

"So am I," replied Weston, "if he's anything of a cook. I've a weakness for wallaby tail soup. However— That your house there?"

"Yes. Won't you come in? The sun's a bit strong at this hour."

Weston preceded him into the little house. It was cool, notwithstanding the heat of the morning, for Jimmy had built it well and left full space for ventilation at the top. A hammock chair, made out of sugar-bags, invited to rest. The grey man dropped into it. His eyes, sharp as skewers, roamed round the narrow room. There was one whisky bottle in it, unopened. Other bottles, empty, were piled away in a corner; their labels told of their former innocent contents— sauce, olives, baking powder, vinegar, oil. The place was neat and clean; a range of books, on a bamboo shelf, seemed to have been in fairly constant use. Whatever the place was, it was not the home of a man who had sunk down in anything but income.

Conroy, opening the whisky and dipping water from his kerosene-tin bucket, played the host. Weston, meanwhile, talked lightly, drank a little, looked about him and seemed, all the time, to keep something unsaid within his mind. By and by it came out:

"Jimmy, you damned young fool!"

"What?" was all that Jimmy found to say.

"Jimmy, if you'd waited a bit you'd have known that Mrs. George came along and told."

"Mrs. George! She didn't know herself."

"My dear Conroy, when you get married"— Jimmy turned vivid crimson, and Weston, amusedly, scorched him with his eyes, "you'll find out just how

much a wife does know, generally. I reckon she knew all along. Anyhow, when she got over his death— you know she was altogether knocked out by it; they had her in hospital— she told the whole yarn. Nobody bothered much, because nothing had been done to you anyhow "

"Nothing! my God, nothing but ruin."

"Rats! You deserved the little bit you did get, my boy; take it from me, a man who draws a cheque against a credit that he doesn't know— know— *know*— to be existent is looking for what he'll get, one day if not another. But I reckon you've had your lesson."

Conroy, being of the same opinion, had nothing to say. He sat on an up-ended log, drinking his own moderate portion of whisky— ("Not afraid of it anyhow," thought Weston)— and wondering, so hard that his mind seemed almost at bursting point, whether Cecily— Cecily—

As if the name had somehow travelled through silent air, Weston spoke it aloud.

"Cecily's a very modern daughter."

"Oh? "

"The new girl— not like their mothers— well, thank heaven my kiddy's straight. But there's no shrinking violet about any of them now."

"Cecily—" began Conroy, almost furiously. Weston lifted up his hand. "I know all that," he said.

"You might let me finish. Cecily— maybe because her mother didn't stay— is as up-to-date as any of 'em, in some ways. Not that I'm quarrelling with it or her. She's better friends with her old dad than I daresay we were with our parents. Well, the long and the short of it is, that Cecily thinks you proposed to her."

Waves of fire seemed rolling over Jimmy. He could not have told, under oath, under torture, whether it had ever got so far between himself and Cecily, or not. He had said all sorts of things, he knew— But then— it didn't matter; she knew.

"You might as well mention," said Weston, with horrid coolness— he was slowly lighting a very good cigar. "Have one? No? Well, between man and man, you might as well say if she's correct."

"Yes!" shouted Jimmy. True or not true, he didn't care,

"Well," continued Weston, "the kiddy was fretting somehow, off her feed and all that, and I took her on this trip. And on the way I got it out of her. But we hadn't a suspicion you were here until that very extraordinary savage henchman of yours came down to the boat to hunt for a wife for you and happened to mention your name."

"My name? Confound his—"

"Oh, no, don't confound him; it was just as well. My kiddy— Well, you can find out all that for yourself."

He paused and Jimmy realized that his luck was not yet at an end. He sprang to his feet.

"Is she there?"

"Didn't I say that something told me to come on up to the top? I reckon Cecily thinks she amounts to something "

The sentence was not finished before Weston found himself alone.

Outside, in the wind and the sun of the mountain top, was Cecily, wearing the most modern of knickers and puttees, with a big shade hat upon her wavy hair, a climbing stick in her hand, and a most old-fashioned blush upon her face. Jimmy, grown suddenly bolder, took her by one gloved hand and said, devouring her with his eyes:

"If— if you'll come a little way back and see the view—"

They went a little way to a spot where you could see some burnt trees and a few large lumps of rock. And Jimmy hugged her like a man. And Cecily, crying— why?— stretched up and hugged him back.

"I always did want you," she said. "You've been cruel to me, Jimmy. Dad could have got you a job."

"I'll get myself one," answered Conroy, with new-found hardihood. Not even in that moment could he picture himself as depending on Cecily's father. Then he said other things, pleasanter for the Girl to hear.

They were interrupted after a long, short time, by Babakori, who came, without apology, right on the middle of Jimmy's longest hug.

"You make you girl frowem money," was his remark.

"Go to hell. I beg your pardon, darling," was Jimmy's dual reply.

"What does he want?" asked Cecily, tidying her hair. Conroy explained.

"Oh, but I simply must," cried Cecily. "It sounds ducky. Where do I throw?"

"You frowem you money, up dat hill," directed Babakori. He scanned the girl the while with an appraising glance that made Jimmy all hot. "She doesn't understand," he thought. But he hurried the little ceremony over, and when Cecily had thrown he brought her back to Weston without more ado. Babakori remained squatting on the ground, mumbling and laughing to himself.

"We'll have to be going down now," said Weston presently. "We're putting up a mile or two from the foot; got our camp there. This mineral proposition— gems they say it is— well, there may be something in it or there may not. So far, I don't feel actually in love with it. There's been no real find."

Jimmy was glad to hear so much. It might mean delay.

When they were gone Magani grew dark, though the sun was not yet down. Jimmy, seated on his high rock, cursed himself for a fool. What, lament

at her loss, when he had won her! There were a thousand and a thousand to-morrows.

But he was not so joyous as he might have been. Between the fair vision of Cecily and himself rose always that one galling sentence:

"Dad will get you a job."

It might have suited the Conroy of months ago. It rang all wrong in the ears of Conroy to-day.

"I'm worked up," he thought. "I'll go for a walk. And, of course, there was only one walk to take— the way that Cecily's feet had taken her, when Babakori made her climb up and throw.

Why, surely to goodness! was that the silver coin she had thrown, far up above his head? She must have the very deuce of an arm for a throw, thought Jimmy, not quite admiringly. But he climbed up after the coin, which shone out wonderfully in the fading sunset.

He did not find it. He found the thing that shone. When he found it, he sat down and looked— simply looked. It was quite a long while before he found breath to swear, quietly and emphatically.

"Opal!"

The crest of the rock was a sheer mass of opal matrix, hidden by foliage from below. When you mounted up close you could see, at one point only, an amazing outcrop of the precious gem— pale, gleaming, moon-coloured under the sinking sun. Peak of the Moon, indeed !

Jimmy Conroy, at the height of his high luck, neither laughed nor— as some men in such moments have done— broke into tears. He simply looked and looked, and said to himself with the calmness of one who knows the gods have heard:

"It seems that I'll be giving Dad the job— after all."

And the sun sank down upon Magani.

Of Babakori? He is back again in his village, but they do not neglect and starve him now; for he is rich.

8: Something Lost

IT was wonderful to be travelling up a great tropic river. Elliot sat back on the uncushioned seat of the launch— ancient, coughing thing, driven by a black engineer— and stared about him. The coastal steamer had dropped him within the reef; the launch had been there to meet him. They had run across a bar of green lagoon— Elliot liked the colour; it reminded him of the beautiful greens in Dresden dessert plates— round a wooded cape, and gradually, by narrowing arms of coast, into the mouth of the river.

And all that time there had been no one— nothing— only the capes and bays furred with forest, the white sand beaches, the thin palms ruffling to the wind. For anything you could see from the launch belonging to Green River Plantation, Papua was uninhabited and uninhabitable.

Elliot knew a secret delight. He would not have spoken of it to anyone; he hardly understood it himself. But it was there, warming his heart. All that country— and more, infinitely more— with no one living in it; all those forests and beaches, sand spits running out delightfully to sea, lawny clearings that looked out with invitation from black woods where no one went— all at his disposal; and no one to interfere....

He didn't know that he wanted to do anything with it. The thing was that it was there, and nobody in it. England, with the one lurid half-year of war, and some months of hospital in France had been his share of the world hitherto. The crowds in England— the crowds at school (it had been one of the just-as-good-as- Harrows), the crowds in London, where " they " had pat him to a banking career, after the war years; the dozens and hundreds of people who had opinions, told you things, gave you advice, wanted to know— all of it nibbled away a man's independence, as beetles nibbled into bread.... That was like it; beetles, scuffling and scrambling in myriads, as one saw them of nights on a London kitchen floor— running over everything, taking the taste out of everything they touched....

"They" had been against him, of course, when that bank director, who was also a director of the Green River Company, had promised him the job. They had wanted him to stop where he was. The "they" always did. Well, he hadn't stopped, and here he was, all by himself, with his luggage at his feet, going up the river. A delightful river. Nobody lived on it. Nobody could live on it— it had not any banks. He had never supposed that a river could be without banks. But the Green River ran wide and soundless between walls of forest a hundred feet high, rooted clear in the water of the stream. It was wonderful— you looked in and in, as the launch went by, and all you saw was glittering water among the stems of the trees, and laneways of water that ran among spiked and fanned

palm bushes, and glades with water floors, where fronded, lacy, green things looped and swung themselves overhead, just as they do in theatres.... There! a patch of grassy stuff— there was some soil, after all. But you knew that nobody lived there, nobody ever, ever, went in. It was delightful to know it.

Elliot leaned back and looked. The morning was grey; the river ran tea-green, with little shine. The forest was dull emerald, hiding a latent glow. He knew what it must be like in sun. Sometimes, as the launch went on, it parted, you could not tell why, and showed you a glimpse of velvety-black tunnels leading— where?— a flash of light jade coloured ground; then steel-gleaming water again, and again. It was not lonely. No. It was full of things. What things? Elliot, unaccustomed to analyse anything but figures, could not tell. A bird, in a high clearing, suddenly began to sing. It echoed astonishingly— like echoes in a cave. It was a delightful sound; it was very free— somehow. He had never that he remembered heard a bird that sounded so free.

Of a sudden he became obsessed with the idea of going into that forest— going alone, some day, without telling anyone. The secret waterways beckoned. The openings that swung past— the high, echoing song of the birds, instinct with exulting knowledge of something that he did not know— the feeling, strong as a perfume, but making appeal to other than his known five senses, of a world in there, a dimension, apart from human life, a— a— hang it; he could not get the word. Something lost. That was not it, but it was near it. Kipling had been trying to get it when he spoke of the explorer and his "Something lost behind the ranges." But Kipling had missed it. London had tried for it in his clear-cut phrase "The call of the wild." Too clear cut, that. It did not express the shadowy, fine, joyous, terrible thing that he, Frank Elliot, meant. Oh, there were no words. But what did that matter? He could go after the thing. But no one must be told. It hadn't anything to do with people, anyhow. He knew that as certainly as if he had visited a hundred lone, unpeopled lands, instead of only one....

All day the launch struggled up the river— all day the unending forest, dull emerald colour, and the water, dull tea-green, streamed slowly, steadily past. Herons and hornbills planed away, with winnowing noises, as the boat pattered round sharp corners; parrots, green, violet, and red, shrieked disapproval; once or twice the meteor rush of a flame-hued bird of paradise struck a torch across the grey of the skies, and the trees, heavy-leaved and tall, stood always deep in still, glittering water; and the wonderful, beautiful pleached alleys opened and wound and beckoned, in and in. And there was always nobody, no house or hut, no fisherman wading the shallows of the river bends, no smoke spiring up from inland. He had heard that certain districts of

Papua were bare of all inhabitants— for what reason no one could tell. This river country plainly must be one.

In the afternoon they passed a clearing. Elliot stared at it as if he could hardly believe it was not a mirage of his own imagination. But no, it was plain and real; a section— some scores of yards only— felled out of the tall forest, in one of the rare spots where land underlay its roots. In the midst of the clearing there was a small iron house, with closed doors and windows. Grass, thick and poisonously green, grew all round it. If there had been a path it was overgrown.

"What's that? " asked Elliot with interest. The launch man was making no move to stop; he held on up the river.

"Him storehouse belong plantation " was his reply. "Taubada (the chief) puttem copra alongem store, by an by one small feller steamer he takem."

Elliot recognized, by the narrowing and shallowing of the river ahead, that this was probably the last point to which the small coastal steamers could come. He supposed the plantation must lie near.

But it was still some hours ahead, at the slow pace of the under-powered launch. He had time to grow tired of the emerald greens and tea greens, of the forest itself and all its mysteries, to wonder what he had been thinking about, and find himself longing simply and earthily for food and drink, and a chair to sit in and somebody, not black, to speak to, before the launch swept round a corner into what seemed like a sudden sunlight, and proved to be a large open clearing, a-flutter with young palms. There was a jetty, and a track; there was a horse tied up to a tree; in the far distance, one could see a bungalow, light iron colour, against the recommencing forest wall.

"What a God-forsaken spot," Elliot thought. The lone, unpeopled reaches of the river had not seemed forsaken. That was strange, if one thought of it.

Mounting the horse and setting off at a canter he began wondering what he was going to see in the way of people. The manager and his wife were the only white folk for some days' journey. Elliot hoped they'd be all right. It seemed they were on the look-out for him; as the horse swept on he could see a light dress on the verandah, and somebody in the universal khaki of the bush beginning to walk, slowly, down the track. He supposed they'd be "waybacks" of the mossiest variety....

More palms, sweeping by with an occasional sharp flick on his sun-helmet; a sudden blaze of scarlet-flowered weeds; the nursery, full of young nuts beginning to sprout.... The house, Wicks, khaki-clad, looking at him with a critical, unwelcoming air as he dropped off the horse; Mrs. Wicks— this must be she coming forward— Wayback? bush girl? Well, not much! Mrs. Wicks was young, pretty, and dressed with amazing smartness. Her skirt was light gauzy

stuff; she had silk stockings on her handsome legs; her full-blown figure (was she so very young?) displayed itself candidly through embroideries and lace. She had a pleasant, plumpish face, with an easygoing smile. You felt that her friends would inevitably refer to her as "good heart" and that she was known to them as "one of the best." A type well known; familiar in Sydney offices, shops and streets as flannel- flowers and Christmas-bush in the baskets of the town flower-sellers. But here in the Papuan bush!

"How long will she stick it?" was Elliot's thought, even as he shook hands with her. "What on earth made her— and what on earth made him— Oh, well, it's none of my affair."

The desolate plantation looked brighter. Elliot, of course, was engaged, more or less, to a waiting girl at home, but equally of course did not feel himself debarred by that circumstance from all agreeable female society. Mrs. Wicks was clearly a "good sport." He wondered if her husband was jealous. While he was looking at her he felt Wicks looking at him. "He is—" was the thought that worked its way up, followed by a sneaking little train-bearer: "Probably he's got some—" The bringing out of glasses and decanters made a break; Elliot was glad. He didn't want to think caddish things about a pleasant-looking, pretty— girl? Well— not over thirty. He thought not....

"Thanks— thanks— enough. It's a bit early... I beg your pardon"— for they were both talking at once, with the eagerness of isolated folk, and he could hardly follow— "Put up with you? Oh, you're too good. Of course I'd love to— but—"

"The overseer's house has to be re-roofed," explained Wicks carefully. "It will take a—"

"Why, Jim, you know it wants rebuilding. It's all in pieces," put in Mrs. Wicks. "You must have another, Mr. Elliot. Come, have one with me— Oh, yes, you must. Don't be a wowser. The heat's something cruel, you want it. Oh, you are a pussyfooter— not one more? Well, I'm that tired I'll have it myself since it's poured out; waste not, want not. Well, and how's things in Port Moresby? How's all the old cats there?"

"Cats?"

"Yes. Cats that meow and scratch at a girl who's pretty— oh my, my trumpeter's dead, pardon me— a girl who likes to have a good time, and isn't afraid to take it."

"She means," said Wicks, indulgently, "the ladies of Port. Some of them were down on her. Gladys doesn't care, do you, Glad?"

"Not I," said Gladys, with flushed face. "I worked for my living in Farjeon Josephs' store, and I played for my amusement; you should 'a seen me dance on the table when the boys gave a supper... Here, I'm keeping you torking,

when you want to see where we're going to bunk you. Come on. This is your room; like it? I done my best with it, but it isn't—"

"It's quite delightful," asserted the new overseer, bravely. He didn't care, anyhow, whether the furniture was camouflaged packing-case or carved oak—who does, at twenty-anything?

Dans un grenier qu'on est bien a vingt ans!"

Wicks followed them; he seemed to make no secret of his jealous disposition. "I see I'm going to have trouble there, if I don't walk warily," thought Elliot. "How silly!"

Rivers bring winds; in the clearing of Green River Plantation the wind seemed to blow all day. Elliot heard the wind here; he had never, that he could remember, heard winds before. Of course, when it howled and broke things up, one couldn't help noticing— but these other voices.... What a lot of things there were in the world that you did not know about till other intervening things were taken away! He was pleased with his own intelligence.

On the top of that, Gladys Wicks, coming out into the clearing across the three-year plantation, in tilting heels and a foolish skirt of silk, observed calmly:

"Hark at that; sounds a treat, don't it? I'm a great one for hearing everything. Seems to me, sometimes, it's yarning to you of things that happened some time or other, things that give you the pip to think of."

*"Of old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago,"*

quoted Elliot, somewhat patronisingly.

"Did you make that up?" asked Mrs. Wicks, chewing spears of lemon-grass. She did not wait for a reply, but sent her eyes carelessly roving about the gold-green weedy carpet that floored the three-year ground, along the red scar of pathway leading to the house. Elliot looked also; also, saw nothing. Wicks was off at the far end of the plantation, doctoring up the new— and unreliable—copra drier.

"You know lots of things, don't you?" asked Gladys Wicks, looking now at Elliot with the Colonial girl's grudging, suspicious admiration for what comes from "Home." "I suppose we seem like the beasts of the field out here to you, don't we? "

"There are lambs in the fields. And ducks," was Elliot's counter.

"Oh, I understand," said Gladys, sharply biting at her strand of scented grass. "We're not by any means so stupid as you think. We don't spit out everything that's in our minds, that's all."

"That would hardly be desirable, would it?"

"Don't talk like that! I can't answer you in your own way, but I've as much brains as you have, for all your— Well, I didn't come out here to quarrel. I wanted to tell you something."

"That's very kind of you," answered Elliot gravely.

He was beginning to get just a little uneasy about Gladys. It was clear that, whatever might have induced her to marry dark, ill-humoured little Wicks, love had had no say in the matter. It was almost equally clear, after three weeks on the plantation, that— He did not phrase it definitely. He only shrugged his shoulders, and half laughed, when the thought came to him alone. After all, there was Joan. There was always Joan. When he had learned plantation management, and the friendly director gave him a chance all to himself...

He was glad, nowadays, that he had that matter to think of. The somewhat nebulous engagement became daily clearer to his mind. He thought about it. Because, when you came to think of it, and even if she was full thirty years of age, this Gladys was undeniably pretty; also, she had that "way with her" in which the official, approved fiancée is so often lacking. And, hang it all, if she would come out and meet one in the three-year and the five-year, without even being asked, was one to slap her in the face?

The sun was low among the palms now; the talking wind had died. Under the trees the grass, for an enchanted moment, was crusted with rare embroidering of gold. Elliot had learned to look for that moment since he came to the plantation; learned to watch for the last upward swing of the light when the grass grew grey, and low palm fronds, flushed for an instant with orange-fiery stain, faded as quickly into purple dark. There was something in these swift sunsets of the equatorial lands of which one never wearied. He could not have given it a name. It was one of the things outside language— like the thing that lived in those tall forests where the echoing bird told, with high voice, secrets that you could almost understand....

Something of this he vaguely hinted at, sure of not being understood. It did him good to stretch what he felt to be the sinews of an original, uncommon mind.

Gladys of the tilted heel and the silken leg, chewing her spear of lemon-grass, looked at him sidewise, as vampires look on the picture screen. The resemblance was heightened by the fact that she had put black grease on her eyelashes. Elliot knew why, and she knew that he did, and she did not care.

"Aren't you superior?" she said. "What long words you do use." Then, with a sudden dart of perspicacity that left him almost dumb— "But don't you go looking for things in the bush, all by yourself."

"Why on earth," said the overseer, "do you suppose I would?"

"It gets them," went on Gladys, as if she had not heard. "It's got more men than you'd know, on plantations. Specially if they was alone. Of course, Wicks, he has me, and I keep him all right. You want someone to look after you, you do. Men's just children, nothing else."

Elliot felt that the thought of Joan was rising up in his mind, and that Gladys would read it in another moment. He was certain that he did not want her to read it. He broke into talk about nothing in particular. They had turned back, with one accord, towards the distant plantation house; already dark was making tremendous strides.

Wicks came out of the house and advanced to meet them. In the dusk the plantation clearing was like a sea of grey-green water, clipped by dark lofty shores. Wicks, Elliot, and the woman seemed to float in it, chips of driftwood, insignificant.

"One matters nothing in these places," thought the overseer.

"Elliot!" bellowed the loud voice of little Wicks as they came up towards the verandah. "The boys have got the roof on the storehouse to-day, and I'd be obliged if you could shift your things down there to-morrow."

Gladys, running up the steps ahead of Elliot, had something to say to her husband. Whatever it was, the answer did not seem to please her. She swung away to her room muttering angrily. Elliot observed at supper that the black paint had been washed off her eyes. He only realized then that it had been becoming. The vampire airs had gone with the paint; she hardly looked at him throughout the meal; but when he met her glance he was aware of a certain piteousness that made him feel hot about the throat. "She has good in her," he kept thinking. "Certainly there's good—"

He figured her dancing on the table at the bachelors' supper-party—scarcely half dressed, more than half intoxicated— he figured Joan, white, gentle, prim, gathering in an English lane bunches of dog-violets and pale bee-orchids to place in the vases of the rectory drawing-room. He fixed his mind upon the virtues of Joan. She was a girl whom you could trust. There would be a plantation house some day— perhaps this very house of Green River— with Joan as its mistress. Quite right, quite suitable. One could wish for nothing better.

Meantime he was being banished from Wicks' house because Gladys— Well, there was no use saying it, even to oneself; not even though one felt warm with certain gratified vanity, strictly anonymous. All that apart, there was something in him that, in spite of Wicks, rejoiced over the solitary iron house with the shuttered windows, and the grass growing thick about the door. It seemed a joy that he must go there; a joy that ought to be hidden, as though it were something almost vicious. He was impatient to be gone.

Mrs. Wicks and her husband quarrelled a good deal in those steaming, breathless days of February. Their acquaintance had begun in the bar-parlour of Hogan's Port Moresby Hotel, and been cemented by a mutual liking for the same kind of liqueurs, and for large, potent sherry cocktails. On Green River Plantation the cocktails and liqueurs, also certain stiff whiskies and sparklets—taken because the day was hot or because fever was about, or because the dinner hadn't been good, or because it had been good, and cried out for a digestive after—lost their cementing powers, and became instead most potent dissolvers of peace. It has been and will be the story of many Papuan marriages.

No one had called for three weeks and a half; no one, till the return of the Resident Magistrate from an up-river patrol after native murderers, was likely to call for at least three months more. It rained furiously, shriekingly, every day from half-past twelve till six; during the morning hours the sun seemed to blister everything it touched, and to make one's skin steam like a pelt stretched out damp before a fire. All the "boys" got coughing, spitting colds, and half of them got sore legs. Wicks, deprived by his own act of his overseer's help, was kept busy, rain or shine, fever or none, and his temper grew worse every day.

"I tell you strite," said Gladys, "if you don't let me go down to meet the steamer this time at the landing, I'll get a canoe and mike off to Port Moresby on my blooming lonesome."

"Go down to meet the steamer," repeated Wicks viciously. "Go down to meet that cursed cad Elliot."

"It's a shame that you haven't gone yourself to see him," she dodged. "For all you know he might have been eaten by an alligator, same as the last man as lived there."

"What's it to you if he has been?"

"You're a proper brute," was Gladys' comment. Skilfully she abandoned the question of the steamer. There were other ways....

For a week the iron house in the clearing was delight.

When the launch had dumped him there, with the stores and his cabin trunk and his books, and had pattered away up stream, Elliot, heart beating eagerly, turned the key in the shrieking lock. An instant he paused, before opening the door, to savour his enjoyment. The glade was fiery green; perfumes of warm leafage, of sweet gums, crept to his senses soothingly. It was the high tide of morning, when day pauses, perfect, at the full. Most of the birds had ceased their calling; one only sang on, invisible, joyous, among the tops of the trees; and it was the bird that he had heard three weeks ago, when

he first came up the river, the careless, delighted thing that knew— that knew....

What did it know?

What did the forest know, and the water avenues, and the green, mysterious arcades of sago palm? What thing was lost among them all, that he was seeking?

It was curious, the sense of almost guilt that laid pinching fingers about his heart. "They" would all be against him, if they knew. And yet— this nameless thing— did not everyone at some period of his life desire it? Let him think what it was— as far as anyone could think.

It was what you looked for when you ran away from school, and hid yourself a whole long summer day with indescribable delight in the loneliest, most overgrown stream-bed that you could find— a place concerning which your boyish fancy would have taken oath, almost honestly, that no human foot had ever trodden before yours.

It was what you thought, older, you must find in lands described as "unknown " and " scarcely explored"— words that delighted you and everyone else, though almost everyone denied they did. It was the thing that had stretched out arms to him the day he came up to the mouth of Green River from the open sea, and saw that the lawny glades, and the forests, and beaches, had no one in them, anywhere at all. It was the thing that was calling him now, when he stood, alone, in the sunlight that shone for him only, among the trees that whispered to no other ear than his. If there had been anyone, even, in the little iron house, the sense of this calling thing would have been obscured. Not that it would not have been there. He was certain about that, even as he was certain about the fact that it was a thing one ought not to want.

Inside the house— a one-roomed hut, with partitioned-off copra store— there was a strong oily copra smell, and a smell of damp that had lately dried. There was purply dimness, struck through by one blinding fall of light from the door. There was, when the iron shutters were set back (no glass was in the windows) a bedroom furnished with stretcher and tin basin; a sitting-room that had a table and two chairs and some books with mushrooms beginning to grow over them; a kitchen fitted out with Primus stove, cup, plate, spoon, billycan and frying-pan. They were all the one room. Elliot looked at his establishment, and thought, with the same sacred delight, that he had it to himself; nobody would come in here, perhaps, for weeks and weeks. Nobody could come. The feeling that all of us know in a lesser form, springing up on hopelessly rainy afternoons, that leads us to rejoice over avenues free of

ironed roof or rubbered wheel, over doorbells securely silent, had hold of Wicks' overseer.

He knew quite well that Wicks meant to justify this turning-out to the Company on account of thefts from the store of copra put away for the steamer. Elliot was so sure that such thefts had never taken place that he did not even trouble to count the bags in the adjoining storeroom. Four tons and a third had been sent down to the house; four tons and a third would be there. He hadn't been sent because of copra, and he was not going to bother over it. The house was his. The clearing was his. The river and the whole great untrodden forest were his. And there was no one— no one— no one. Lord, but it was good!

It was very good, for the usual time. At the end of the week Elliot had not tired of "doing for" himself; of having, for the first time in his life, his meals, his rest, his walks, his everything, just when he, and no other, liked. He had not tired of wandering in the amazing mangrove swamps, where the knotted tree roots sprang clutchingly up through marsh and water like buried witches' hands; of hunting for, and finding, cases of fairy-like green lawn, overhung with flowers almost too wonderful to be true; of following the track sheared through the bush by the fall of some giant tree, and lighting on its powdery shell of a corpse, covered with huge fungus cups that shone, on dusk evenings, like lilies of green fire. The thought of alligators did not trouble him. He had never seen any, and he judged the story of the late overseer to be one of the fictions by which the native plantation hand attempts to cover up the track of some murderous deed. Floyd, he knew, had not been liked by the "boys." As it happened, he himself was popular with them, since he had never kicked or sworn at them. Wicks, now, was the man who might be found, or missed, "taken by an alligator," some day. Not he.

At the end of a week things had begun to change.

It rained a good deal for one thing, but it was not the rain— not altogether— even though rain, on the Green River, looks and sounds like a waterfall broken loose in the sky. One could sit indoors and read the stuff Floyd had left behind; scraped clear of mushrooms, some of it was good. One could listen, when the rain grew less, to the extraordinary sounds that came up from among the mangroves just a little way off— sounds like snarling bulls (Elliot was rather proud of that metaphor), or like half -choked syrens of ships. This, Elliot knew, was the call of bitterns. He had read as much in several Australian papers. It was a mistake, the papers said, to set it down to anything else. And anyhow, when you went out to look, it wasn't anything else. You could see nothing at all; which proved it was bitterns, though you did not see the bitterns either, if it came to that.

You thought about it sometimes as you sat in a chair, not reading, not smoking, not thinking, either, very much. As the days went on past the week you found yourself sitting in chairs often and long. You found you did not read much; you did not want to do anything, much. Sometimes you went out, and thought about the thing in the forest. You knew it had come nearer to you, or you to it. You felt that you understood each other; but that "they" didn't understand, and would not like, anything about the whole affair.

It was a week to steamer day.

Elliot had ceased to think very much about the steamer; about anything, almost. He used to hear the bitterns a great deal at sunset; he wondered a little why they got louder and louder every night, and came closer to the house, but he supposed they must be nesting; everything was nesting and mating in this hot midsummer weather. He did not go out so much as he had done. He was content to sit, long and silently, on the steps that led up from the marshy ground to the hut door, smelling the forest smells, listening to sounds of bird and reptile in the sun-warmed bush, and drinking in, with a kind of quiet eagerness, strange pleasures and intoxications to which he could have given, even had he wished, no name. But, always, the pleasure was furtive; always, he knew that it should not have been....

Of Gladys Wicks he thought sometimes, when he was lying at night in his stretcher bed, listening vaguely to the gargling of frogs among the mangroves, the chopping and cracking of woodcutter birds and waggoner birds in the bush. Of course he wasn't going to stay here always; of course, when he left the Company— as he must do now— it was unlikely that he would see her again. Why should he be sorry? He wasn't sorry; hanged if he was. He wondered, inconsequently, what she might have been like if she and Joan could have changed places; if she could have been brought up in an English rectory, and Joan had been left to "do for" herself among the shops and offices of great, wicked Sydney town.... But the idea would not work. He could not imagine Joan anything but the guarded, gentle creature she was. He could not— yes, he could, laughingly— picture Gladys going round among the old women giving them tracts and tea; he could fancy her, very kind and a little the worse for cocktails, calling them "Me dear creature," dropping all the tracts on the road, but distributing bottles of port and parcels of beefsteak, pauperizing light-heartedly right and left. Heavens, how she would shock the parish! Joan never shocked anyone. She was the sort you could trust. Of course. And he would fall asleep, with the flying foxes scrapping on his roof, and the ghost-pigeon cooing, and the bitterns— yes, the bitterns at it again.

On an evening— he was not quite sure what evening; he had lost count of the days of the week since coming to the iron house— Elliot went out for a

ramble. It was rather near sunset, but he thought he could be back before dark. There had been heavy rain all day; the forest was steaming with it yet, and smelling with a million odours, every one sweet; too sweet, even, some of them— they seemed to pierce to the very marrow of the brain, as a sound too shrill stabs into the tissues of the ear.

When you went out on an evening like this, all alone— intensely alone, as man can only be in the unpeopled countries of the world— you felt, without argument and without doubt, that you were near the secret— the secret that the forest knew, and the high-calling birds, and the winds of the Green River, but not you.

You wandered, head down, hands clasped behind you, not thinking, or even trying to think; letting yourself be taken, drunk-up by that which was around you. And it grew later. And the sun went down invisibly behind the netted boughs. Green, violet-breasted parrots flew screaming to the tree tops. Frogs began to cough. For the first time, close at hand, you heard the bitterns— those strange bitterns— beginning their evening chorus. It was far-off at first, then suddenly nearer, then God! God! The people— the ignorant people— of Port Moresby were right. The magazines were wrong. It was not bitterns.

Elliot, as if the ground had broken away before his feet, stood still. He was himself now. He was wide awake; the dream was shattered. Almost beside him again sounded that terrifying snarling bellow, the sound of no bird that ever lived on earth or flew in air. The trees seemed to tremble under its immense vibrations. There was a thick, sweet, horrible smell— he had noticed it before; he had thought it was some rank marsh flower, but now he knew. Flower smells did not rise and move about. It was coming nearer.

There was an interval of searing terror, filled with mad physical exertion. At the end of it— whether it had been long or short he could not have told— he became conscious of bruised knees and bleeding hands. His sleeves were torn; his helmet had fallen off, and was lying on the ground like a white fungus, ever so far— twenty feet— below.

He looked down from the fork of the thin wild breadfruit tree into which he had climbed. What he saw could not be true. It could not be a real alligator— it was far too big for one thing, something like thirty feet. It had an immense open mouth, pinky lined, full of yellowish teeth. Its green eyes, slit like the eyes of goats, were fixed on him with the fullest understanding. It did not make any noise, but looked, and waited.

From the mangroves came the snarling bellow again. Then there was another alligator— he had not seen it come, but it was there. He twisted round in the tree. There were three more on the other side.

"My God!" he thought, "this must be one of the 'walk-about' grounds."

For he knew from the natives that alligators, though they live mostly in water and mud, have dry beaches or lawns on which they come ashore from time to time. They keep to the same places, year in year out, unless driven away by organized slaughter. Slaughter! why even if he had been armed, he owned nothing but a common little Colt of small bore, enough to stop an attacking native if one happened along, but of no more use against alligators than a pea-shooter.

He heard the alligator, the big one, close its mouth with a sound like the slamming of a door. They began shifting about in the oozy ground at the foot of the tree, moving, in spite of their size, as lightly as lizards. He did not think that they were concerned with him so much as with each other, but all the same if he ventured to come down .

"Floyd.... they found him.... without his head," he recalled. What had Floyd done? No one would ever know. And if he could not hold on to the little fork of this little tree until morning, no one would ever know about him.

He could not hold on. He knew it. For an hour or two, perhaps— for half the night if terror nerved him to stretch his powers beyond all that was commonly possible. But the position was painfully cramped, and too much strain came on his arms. Some time in the darkness he would let go and fall— into those jaws.

He watched the light die. It might be, probably it was, the last day he was ever going to see. What came after? What secrets were there on the other side of the veil? Among them surely there must be the half-told, never-finished secret, that something lost that he had so nearly found....

With a stab the truth pierced into him. These things that the earth and the soulless creatures of earth knew, that man did not know, were hidden from him by the wall of his own consciousness. There was but one way of breaking down that wall— the way he was to go to-night.

That— that was why the secrets were dark, furtive, tasting of forbidden fruit. Through much loneliness through the strange, nameless influences of soulless things, one might wear a little chink in the wall; might guess, as he had almost guessed. But knowledge was on the other side. Here, in these wilds so full of peril in all forms, the secrets seemed near— because, near also, hovering, imminent, was Death.

He came back to common things; to the grip of his aching thighs and arms; to the darkened mangrove woods, and the light showing low through the trees. The alligators were still sliding and moving about below. Their eyes, with the fading of the light, had become phosphorescent; their long ribbed bodies showed so clearly that he knew they would, soon, shine in the dark like the

fungi that grew on and outlined the fallen trees. And the smell rose and sickened him. There was no bellowing now, only the gargling cough of frogs some distance off, and a sound like a heart beating, somewhere away on the river. There were so many strange, inexplicable noises, always, in the bush that....

What?

It sounded nearer. It was a launch.

He took a tighter hold on the tree, and shouted. He shouted again and again. The sound came nearer. Two short blasts from the whistle answered him.

"Someone going down to the coast to meet the boat to-morrow," he thought, remembering that the steamer must be due. He shouted again.

The launch had stopped; it must be at the landing. He could hear someone coming now.

"Keep away," he yelled. "There's a bunch of alligators here."

An answer came, astonishingly loud and near. He remembered too that the Green River launch owned a ship's trumpet for speaking to ships in rough weather.

"Where are you?"

Gladys ! She must not come....

"Send someone else," he shouted. "It isn't safe for you. Tell the launchman to come along with a gun. They'll scatter if he fires."

"No knowing what they'll do so late in the evening," came the odd, hollow tones through the trumpet. "There's no launchman anyhow. I'm alone. I drove her myself. I meant to— Oh, no matter. Is the dynamite still in the store?"

"What dynamite?"

"If you don't know, it is— in a Chinese box."

"Yes— on the shelf. But, my God, Gladys, don't you—"

"What are you going to do— get eaten? They're the worst alligators in Papua, worse than Kanosia or Bioto Creek. Don't worry. A plug of dynamite will do the job, if I don't miss. Hold on till I come."

It was not yet dark. The light had failed early owing to the rain, but full dusk was scarcely due for another quarter of an hour. So much time, and no more, remained for his chance of life.

Gladys knew it, better than Elliot himself. It was not five minutes before he saw her, in her white dress, coming along the pig-track that led towards his tree.

"Don't come," he called, frantically.

"Rats," was the only reply. The girl was holding in each hand a plug of dynamite, with fuse attached. A spark, just visible in the glowing dusk, crept slowly up each fuse.

"For God's sake," croaked Elliot, hoarse with fear and shouting. Would she blow herself to pieces? Would she?

The ugly things below the tree were turning, swinging their great tails in the slime. Their absolute noiselessness was terrifying. It was certain that they scented prey— and she was between them and the river....

Crash!

The ground seemed to rise up and hit Elliot on the back, violently. It knocked his breath away for a moment. He could not make out where he was. Then he became clearly aware that he was lying on the ground, below a tree that seemed to have suffered damage; that something long and grey was smashing into the bushes at the far side of the clearing; that another something, long and grey and red, lay on the ground without moving.

He got to his feet, stiffly. Where was the girl?

Then he saw her. She was walking towards him in the dusk, swaying as she came.

"It's so odd," she said. "It doesn't hurt a bit." She laughed. "It ought to be stopped," she said. And Elliot saw that her right arm was gone, and the sleeve of her dress pouring blood.

No one who has lived in Papua is ignorant of the treatment of the typical dynamite wound; if he has never seen it he has certainly heard of it. Elliot, putting aside his horror and dismay, improvised a tourniquet, supported the girl back to the iron house, and laid her on his bed. She would not endure the tourniquet; she pulled it off with the other hand when he was not

looking. "It hurts," she said. He had to leave her for a little while to find the whisky, mix a glass with water, and bring it. When he came back he saw that she had pulled away the bandage a second time.

"Don't," she said, weakly, when he began to replace it. "It's no good. I've got mine. Anyhow, who'd want to live, like this?"

The arteries seemed to have contracted; he left the bandage off, since she would have it so, and since he was very sure the mischief was done. Gladys Wicks would not live to be carried down to Port Moresby and patched up in the hospital. She had given her life— her stained, strange life with its veins of darkness, its streaks of sudden gold— for him, Jim Elliot.

Growing weaker as the night went on she told him, faintly, that she had come down the river alone, as a runaway. She had not been able, she said, to stand Wicks any longer. And she had not got to stand him if she did not like. They were legally married, in a way, and in a way not. There was a flaw— a

former divorce, not legal in Australia— Well, she could 'a had her freedom if she'd gone the right way about it.

Wicks knew that, and it made him jealous, something cruel.

"If this hadn't happened," she said suddenly, just at the turn of the night, when the forest was silent and the swinging hurricane lamp threw strange shadows on her face, now growing sharp and thin— "If this hadn't happened, I wonder would you—"

Elliot wondered himself, but it was no time for wondering. He answered her as she wished.

"Of course, my dearest girl— of course, of course!"

He found himself crying.

"I'm going to snuff out— do you know?"

"I— I— yes."

"Wicks won't care, not long he won't. I don't think you'd 'a cared long either. They don't, when it's someone like me. You're a gentleman, you wouldn't have let me know. But—"

She was silent for a minute.

"Lost's— lost," she said, presently.

"Oh, dear girl, don't let those religious bogies "

"I don't mean religion."

"Oh! "

"As for the Holy Joe business, well they do say, don't they, that if you get wiped out doing a job for someone else you're as right as rain? That's the way I take it, anyhow. Give me a nip, a stiff one. I want to say something more."

He gave it.

"Look here. You clear out of this country. You weren't meant for it. Get south. Sail now. I'm sleepy. Night-night!"

When the kindly director, who had interests in Melbourne, offered to have Elliot put in a suburban branch of the bank he made objection. Could he not be placed in Collins Street?

"Of course you can," said the manager. "But it's heavier work, and no more pay. I should think you'd—"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't!" said the young man, with something like a shudder.

"I— I like people, plenty of people, millions. ..."

9: The Long, Long Day

WHEN Winans was young, stray words, gleaned from one book or another, used to lay thrall upon his boyish mind. "Trader" was such a word. It seemed to him to be full of ocean breezes, the rustle of palms, beat of surf upon coral shores. He could see fierce faces, devil-may-care, showing under huge shade hats; there would be a cigar in the teeth; the man's moustaches would sweep half-way to his shoulder. One could hear orders shouted to a dusky crew. Somewhere there would be a lonely island; a house with balconies and long cane chairs, upon which the trader— still fiercely hatted, moustached and cigarred— would recline, gorgeous, defiant, drinking brandy....

It was clear that nobody could interfere with a trader; no one could give him orders, claim to know better than he did about every confounded little thing. Winans was quite sure— in those nineteenth-century days— that his people were wrong in keeping him at school and marking him out later on for a profession. Who wanted to mend broken legs or keep murderers from being hanged when the Pacific Ocean covered— as one was credibly assured— one-third of the earth's whole surface (or maybe it was one-seventh), and was simply crying out for traders?

Be careful— always be careful— lest you wish for a thing too often and too long. It is possible you may get it.

IN NINETEEN HUNDRED AND VERY LITTLE, I was wandering down the western beaches of Papua. On an evening, I came to the trading station of Kaluna, and, as I knew that no other white man than the trader was to be found in fifty miles, I went to the store to ask for a night's lodging. I had my boys and my gear; I was not the roving beachcomber you (perhaps) have pictured me. But I will not tell you why I was there.

We of the Western Pacific do not tell our stories to everyone. Make no mistake about it, we have them— no white man (or woman) lives beyond the hundred and seventieth parallel in the red sunset land of the Solomons, New Hebrides, New Guinea, without a shadow in his heart for company. I do not speak of the passing folk, in stores, on plantations, who are here to-day, and gone next mosquito season. I speak of ourselves, the settlers, survivors of a ten-years' "long ago"— if you will have it, of the pioneers. And no one was, or is, a pioneer in the cruelly-beautiful, malarial, man-eating West of the island world, for any light reason.

Let that pass. I went down the coast from Maiwa, and I went alone with my boys. And I came, in the dusk, slack-green evening of a Gulf hot-season day, to

Kaluna. It is a village, or a collection of villages, numbering many hundred natives, and no whites; it lies strung out along the shore for a couple of miles, showing, in its curious cannibal architecture, like a collection of up-ended boats cut in two. You are here on the famous, infamous, black-sand beach of the West, which runs unbroken for more than a hundred miles, traversing which, you may go mad, die, break your legs and neck, commit murder, raise the dead, without attracting any particular notice or interference.

White men, marooned in far stations westward, have tried to reach the settlements, in emergency by this same cursed black beach; have fallen sick and died upon the way, or have turned back, just not too late. White women.... but that story is too new, and too true to tell.

The store of Kaluna stands perched upon high piles like a squat heron fishing on the beach. Black sand blows about its steps; underneath, where the fierce sun strikes lightly or not at all, beach creepers, succulent, of a deadly green, twist themselves about like snakes. Before it the short, wicked waves of the Gulf of Papua break in dirty foam; behind, a belt of ruffling palm trees hides marshes and lowlands. There is the wind, and the crashing of hot seas on a hotter beach; there is the whimpering of the grasses, and the fitful hand-beating of the palms; there is the smell of mud and fish, and the reek, twice daily, of native cooking fires; there is the empty, paint-grey sea to look at, and the brown naked Western men, with their gauds of shells and seeds, and the grass-crinolined women, ugly, sullen, tramping under burdens of yams and fuel. There is not, there never has been and never will be, any more.

Yet, because of the palm trees and the copra that is made from them, it pays to trade at Kaluna. There was a trader, and his name was Winans.

I suppose he would not have told me how he came to be buried alive in Kaluna, had we met when he was on holiday in Port Moresby or Thursday Island. But it was Kaluna, and we were alone. And that evening, when we had eaten the inevitable curried tin and yam, and drunk the inevitable beer, and when we were sitting on the shore verandah, watching, through the dusk, the grey sea battering the black sloping shore; when, further down, the bucks of Kaluna were beginning to lift up a hideous sing-song from their pointed temple house, and the pig that was to make the evening's feast was joining his voice of dismay to all the clotted noise, Winans spoke out.

I may say I liked him. He was the sort of man men do like, even to look at, which is not to say that he was handsome— he had a long-nosed, currant-eyed, plain face enough. But he was a strong fellow, well hung, with big reach, and he didn't slump in his chair. And he kept his nails as an old public school boy should keep them. (Yes, I was, but it is no business of yours.) Also, he had a good laugh— a very good laugh. You can tell a lot about a man from his laugh.

I have been too long in the Gulf; I talk too much and do not keep to the point. You must pardon me. We all do it. Why, when one does meet another white man, one may speak without a pause all afternoon— one often does— without hitting on the thing which.... It was about Winans, was it not?

Winans told me of his boyish dreams, and how his people, thinking he ought at least to have an outdoor occupation, made him a civil engineer. And he did well. And so someone— I cannot remember who; we have no memory in the Gulf— gave him the Loch Gordon Bridge to build.

Oh! you say, you remember that. You know that it will never be forgotten, even when every relation of the two hundred and fifteen souls who were dashed to death through the failure of the bridge is as dead and gone as they.

So you will understand why Winans— who really was not much to blame, but nobody could be got to understand that— ran away. Ran away from his profession, from his country and his home, and also from his wedding, which was to have taken place a week after the day of the bridge disaster.

At this point he got up, went into the house, and returned with a photograph in a frame. Out of his bedroom, it must have been; I had not seen it when we were in the hot little iron parlour, eating our curried tin.

I turned up the lamp and stared at the little picture. "Lord!" I said, "she is what the Americans call a 'looker.' "

She was. The lips were the most beautiful I had ever seen, not excepting those of any picture or statue in the world. You could hardly see beyond that perfect mouth at first, but presently you noticed the depth and the shine of the eyes, and the crop of naturally curling hair that waved over forehead and ears— like the hair of Reynolds' bodiless little angels, whom everybody knows. The picture showed head and neck only, but the noble round of the throat could have gone with none but a perfect figure. I liked the expression; it had nothing of the pretty-girl grin, and she did not seem to be thinking of herself and her pose; she looked simply and naturally out of the picture, apparently watching and thinking of you. And there was something curiously noble— I can find no other word— in the face. A good woman, one said, at once.

In answer to my comment, Winans said, without glancing at the photograph: "She was very lovely."

"Is she—" I hesitated— it is strange how one does hesitate— at the word, though not at the meaning.

"She's dead," answered Winans. He reached for my glass and poured me some more beer. Away down the beach the natives were singing louder; a horrid brassy sound had crept into their song. "They're going to spear the pig now," said Winans. "Some years ago it used to be a man, but the Government

got at them, so they had to use something else. They're all cannibals, and they have the richest brand of sorcery there is in Papua."

"Did she die suddenly?" I asked him.

"She died in hospital from the effects of a dock accident."

"Dock? How—"

"Fell off the gangway as she was going aboard. She was going to follow me— to South Africa."

"And you never saw her again?"

Winans opened a pouch and filled his pipe. "I did," he said. "I came back from the Cape at once and she lived six days after my return. She died on the morning of the eighth of May, at two o'clock. Our wedding day had been fixed for the seventh of May. I was with her."

I sat unable to say anything. I was not surprised—

I knew the hideous turns that Fate can play a man. If you don't know, you could not believe. Why, in Apemama, in eighteen— I beg your pardon; it is the effect of living here. I will go on.

"So I came out to the Islands and by and by struck here," concluded Winans, selecting a match. "South Africa seemed too crowded, public— you know. One met people there, or thought one might. It isn't crowded here."

"No," I said, listening to the crash of the black waves on the black shore. "No." Then it occurred to me to ask— God knows why— "Did you go to the funeral?"

"I left the damned place five minutes after," answered Winans, unemotionally, "I sailed that night."

Neither of us said anything for a minute, and then Winans asked me: "Seen any of the Gulf dances?"

I said I hadn't.

The screams of the pig, which had punctuated everything Winans said during some minutes, had now sunk into snorts, and choked themselves out. Winans told me there might be a chance of seeing a dance at the *dubu*— a sort of club-house— and, more to escape from the emotional tension of the moment than anything else, or so one thinks, he proposed a walk down the beach.

There was no moon, and the stars looked thick and dull, but we had plenty of light for our walk; native cooking fires were going everywhere, and bucks were running up and down the beach yelling and waving great torches of cocoanut that threw showers of sparks about. I hadn't been long in the Gulf and the West at that time; it amused me to see the brown, shaven-headed married women bending double, like huge mushrooms in figure, over the round clay pots that held a bubbling puree of sweet-potato which they were

thickening with handfuls of crumbled forest sago; to watch a girl, full-figured, painted oily red to her bare waist, swiftly shelling prawns into a bowl and pouring thick white coconut cream upon them....

They fed well, these folk. They lodged well— their cool, thatched homes were far more healthy and comfortable than the ugly, stifling houses of corrugated iron in Port Moresby. They had any amount of sport, fishing, pig-hunting, canoeing; they had social amusements— no white folk get a chance to sleep down West when the dancing— native dancing— season is under way. They did some work, but not very much, and no one, on the whole, worked longer than he wanted to or went without a holiday when he felt like having one. Life, for them, one felt, must be very long and full. Is not even a single day incredibly long when you find time in it for everything that you want to do? It seemed to me that, in leaving the world of the white man, I and Winans had come into a place that one best might name the Land of the Long, Long Day....

And yet, you know, one dreads to let that world take hold of one. One feels the drag of it, like an undertow. One resists. Why?

"They haven't any souls," I said to myself as we plodded through the sand. "They haven't any Art. And life without Art—

....I wonder were you, by any chance, at Barbizon in the latter years of last century? You'd have met me there working hard. I didn't get into the Salon; I said I didn't want to, but all the same....

The Gulf habit again; I ask your pardon.

Winans went to the first and biggest of the *dubus*; I think it was about eighty feet high to the top of its extraordinary up-ended-boat-shaped frontage, and maybe three hundred feet long, right back to where it tapered down to a mere ten feet or so of height. We climbed up the ladder and went in. There were a couple of score men there, sitting each in his proper place on his own side of the *dubu*, and there was a good deal of light from torches and from fires outside. And hanging to the roof, dangling all over the walls, projecting from long pegs, set upon the floor in heaps and rows, was— Art.

You may leave it to me; I know. Plenty of people see nothing in the dancing masks and shields of the West but sheer comicality; they look at the amazing beast faces modelled on them, at the grinning snouts that stick out, and the goggling eyes and the queer, half-fishy, half-human expressions that these odd devils of natives contrive to get into the things. And they roar with laughter. But there's more in the stuff than that. There's colour— pinks and reds and greys and yellows and the divine right touch of black, cut and painted in designs of interwoven curves that I'd give an eye to have invented. Line? These half cannibals could teach it to all Paris. Colour? They take the sunset— the strange, secondary-colour sunset of the black-sand country and spin it into

their skeins of twisted pattern, hue for hue. I saw in about ten seconds that I had been very far wrong indeed when I told myself they didn't have Art.

"Well, they haven't any real intellect," I thought (artists may pardon me or not, as they like, but I'm one, and I know). "It's the intellectual pleasures that are wanting.... Who is the big bug in the corner, Winans?"

I was looking at an oldish man, not clothed at all you might say, but very much painted and heavily jewelled with shells and long dogs' teeth.

"Most important sorcerer along the coast," said Winans. To my surprise, the undressed gentleman nodded gravely and answered :

"Yes, all right, I very big sorterer, sir. I was once Government interpreter in Dam. I have had salary two poun' a mont'. I have been mission teacher; damme, I very good teacher, sir, but they have frown me out because I have three wive. Now I am sorterer I have eleven wive, I think, or maybe ten, and I have fourteen big pig."

There was a certain grave courtesy about the man; he had the way that one notices in what is known as good society. I suppose it comes from being the biggest person about, and is much the same thing whether you are Lord-Lieutenant of an English county or the sorcerer par excellence of the black-sand coast.

"Koki, this gentleman doesn't know the dances. Can you show him one?" asked Winans, handing the sorcerer a stick of tobacco.

"There not be any dance to-night, sir. The people, they eat pig by and by, and then they sleep, sir. But I dance a dance for you myself, suppose you like."

"Yes, we'd like it very much."

Koki got up from the floor and took his stand in the narrow aisle that ran down the middle of the *dubu*. The whole place had a curiously church-like effect; its brown old colouring, high nave, long aisle, and pendant garments of tappa, like captured battle-flags, made one think vaguely of old cathedrals visited on Continental wanderings. And the immobile dusky figures seated each in his own place, and the smell, musty and mildewy, just like the smell of old churches

Koki began to dance.

I noticed at first how wonderfully light-footed he was. A biggish man, and well muscled, he yet touched the floor as lightly as a frolicking kitten. I will swear you could not even hear his bare feet. I don't know what the steps were, but there was advancing and retreating in them, stalking too, swift stalking like that of a panther nearly on its prey, and once a sudden, velvet spring that almost made me jump backwards. All the time he danced— still perfectly without sound— a sinister, poisonous-sweet smile was steadily growing on his face, and his body kept sinking into itself and lowering down; soon he was

dancing with the upper part from the waist so completely foreshortened that the horrible saccharine smile grinned up at you from a face apparently set on the top of a pair of twinkling legs and a couple of swaying arms. Then the arms began to winnow back and forth, gathering, catching. The grinning face sank lower, the soundless feet flew like shadows; the arms were drawing things— invisible things— in, as the clutching fingers of the deep-sea polypus draws in the little fish that swim within its reach. I heard the nearest man of the sitting rows fall back against his neighbour and catch his breath with a grunt of fear.

"That's enough," said Winans rather quickly. To me, aside: "He's scared them; this dance has a business tang to it, though it's only a private exhibition. What the devil is the matter with you?"

"I'm giddy," I said. I had to sit down. Koki, not looking at me at all, slid to the floor in his own particular corner. I do not know how I became aware that he was somehow, covertly, watching.

I put my hands before my eyes; it seemed to be there were things— thoughts— visions— that I wanted to brush away. Hypnotism? No, not that. I haven't the word. There isn't one in English, I tell you; the Black West is full of things that have no names in European languages.

I turned my back on Koki and looked at the dancing torches on the shore; at the stars seen palely through drifts of smoke; at the grey glimmer of foam a long way off, where the tide was coming in. I tried to think of Gulf geography— of the day of the month— of anything commonplace, anything rooted to the ordinary earth, but all through I felt Koki's steady, sly eyes; they were looking straight through my shoulder-blades and my spine. And I remembered.... I dreamed....

"Like to go home?" It was Winans' voice beside me. I did not make any answer, but I got up, heavily, as if something were holding me— perhaps something was— and went down the steps of the *dubu* into the milk-warm wind of night without looking back.

When we had reached the store and turned up the lamp, Winans, looking at me squarely, with his long legs stretched out in front of his chair, asked: "What did he do to you? "

I wanted to say that Koki had done nothing at all, but instead— my mind being not quite out of the queer, gelatinous state into which it had fallen— I answered truthfully:

"He made me see people who are dead."

Winans fell to twisting his dark moustache till you would have thought he would pull it out by the roots. He did not ask me what people. He was not a bit more interested in me than you are, and yet, if I told you my story— if I could make you understand it and realize it

I have one bit of wisdom left. I never try.

I stayed a day or two at Kaluna, and it struck me that Winans too, although I had thought him different from others, was falling, little by little, under the spell of the Long, Long Day. He had got the habit of staring— staring for half an hour at a time, silent, out across the grey unlovely sea, where no ships went. He used to wait quite a long while, sometimes, before he answered what you said— and he never knew that he had done so. He read less, I thought; he smoked all the time. Drink had not got him yet. I thought it would come.

A good deal of time, for no reason that I could find, he used to spend in the native *dubu*. I thought he talked to Koki. Just about then Koki began to decorate himself with expensive gauds out of the store— red shell-money belts, curved boar-tusks, which cost a lot, and even a couple of those thick white armlets, carved by native ingenuity out of the inner side of the giant clam, which are just the same as jewellery to a Papuan. Every store keeps them; they pass as coin— and a good deal of coin too— among the natives.

I didn't know of any equivalent that Koki had given, and I could not have missed seeing it if ordinary trade had been done, for there was the value of a ton of copra at least in the stuff that he had got. I never went near the *dubu* again myself. Some people may like— may even seek out— the sort of experience that had been thrown at me. I am not one of them.

But I rather thought, one day when I met Winans coming back to his house with a small, cornery photograph frame visibly distending his trouser pocket, that I had got the key of the mystery.

I had not. I had touched the fringes of it— no more.

Next day Winans, who was looking extraordinarily well— bright-eyed, erect, and almost with a colour— told me that his health seemed to be breaking and that he wanted to get away to Sydney by the Thursday Island boat, which would be due a score or two miles down the coast in a day or two.

"I can pick her up in the whaleboat and the boys will bring it back," he said. "I want to know if you'll take on the store while I'm away."

We had become rather friendly, I might say. Winans was a little bored with me— most people are— but he seemed to like me all the same. I liked him very well, and I liked the job better. Things were not going prosperously with me just then. I took it on without much discussion. I may say the terms were all right. Winans left next morning at daylight; he told me he might be away three months, and might be six. "If anything should happen to me," he said, "look up the papers in the small tin box. But I don't think anything will. I think my run of bad luck has run out."

I could not think why he should say that, with his professional name still in the gutter; his home still on a black-sand western beach, among cannibal

niggers; and his girl, who must have been far too good for him, still dead. But the only thing that concerned me just then was the fact that I had struck on something that suited me very well. And I unpacked my swags in Winans' room, from which the photograph had disappeared; and I set to work to take proper stock of everything in the store and make out a system of my own for keeping things in order.

And, though I say it who shouldn't, Kaluna trading store was no loser by the change. In a week I had worked the business up to a point beyond any reached by Winans. I had a method of cumulative payments intended to encourage the bringing in of copra on a larger scale; I had a system of credit with all the influence of the *dubu* behind it to hurry up defaulters that would be worth your own while to learn if ever you thought of going trading down the coast of Papua. But of course you will not.

Two things only troubled me. One was Koki. He could not get over Winans' abrupt departure, which, I may say, he had done his best to prevent by dismal prophecies as to loss of goodwill and lessened or vanished trade. And he never ceased worrying me about the matter and begging from me. He would want a string of beads to-day, to-morrow a couple of new tomahawks, then six sticks of tobacco and a packet of matches; after that he would have the cheek to loaf in, painted black, white and red up to the eyes, and want to take a new three-legged iron cooking pot away with him to his house. I had to put a stop to the thing. I knew that Winans had given him unlimited credit, and he was valuable, in his way, to trade, but a fair thing's a fair thing in my opinion, and Koki had gone beyond what was fair. I told him flat out he would have to pay cash—that is, copra—for every bead or match he got from the store in future. He looked at me out of his sullen, black-fiery eyes, and went away humming the cannibal death song. I knew what he meant, but I did not care two pins, because the Government steamer was overdue along the coast and I had made up my mind that Koki should get what was coming to him as soon as the Southern Cross flag should flutter in the roadstead. It was a matter of nine murders, two more or less ritual, four concerned with jealousy of his numerous wives, and the rest spite, revenge, and cruelty, or maybe it was desire of power.

The Government authorities wanted to know why he hadn't been given up before. I said that, so far as I could make out, it was because he was good for trade; but I dare say, if I had tried very hard, which I did not, I could have made out a little farther, and perhaps a little differently.

Anyhow, Koki was taken off in irons, and I knew he would be hung. They don't hang a native in Papua for a stray (native) murder or so, but when it

comes to murder by wholesale the Government loses patience. So that was one troubled removed.

The other, it seemed, nothing would remove. I had not felt any bad effects from Koki's games with me on the evening of my arrival— I suppose, because I was not looking for that sort of thing, or wanting it— but after Winans left, from the very first queer things began happening to me, and the annoying part of it was that they were not my things— if I make myself clear— but his. Whatever subjects for remorse my past may hold— whatever sorrows have gone ploughsharing through my heart— they are not concerned with the building and the breaking of bridges, or with faces of people tumbling down in a smash of broken railway carriages into a foaming firth. I do not think I ought to have been bothered with these things, especially when I was wide awake and trying to read a novel in Winans' long planter chair, with the work of the day behind me and a pleasant air creeping up from the breeze-cooled sands, in the quiet hour before one goes to bed.

But there it was, and the going away of Koki made no difference at all, as I had rather hoped it might. On the contrary, things got worse. It was not only drowning, smashed people, and engines plunging horribly down through the air (you cannot think how sinister, how alive and dying at the same time a railway engine can look unless you have seen a thing like that); it was things a great deal more unpleasant.

One does not mind the ghosts— the spirits— the ... (it would be no good giving you the native word, but that is what I really mean) of people, all together; at least, one does not mind very much. But when it is one person alone, and all the time, one does mind.

It came to be one person, and, as I said, it was not anyone connected with my history— nothing so remarkable! It was simply Winans' girl; the dead one.

Rosemarie (he had told me that was her name, Rosemarie Isbister) kept showing me her face, of nights, between my book and my eyes, and I did not want her to do anything of the kind; she was pretty, but she wasn't my girl, and, dead or alive, a man does not take much interest in a woman who is crazily in love with someone else. One could not mistake the face, it was so distinctive in style and the hair was so unusually lovely. But I cannot remember that I liked it as well as I had liked the photograph. I thought it was because the thing bothered me so. I may be of another opinion now.

Well, the face kept coming, as I have said, and now and again the suiciding railway engine, that looked so horridly alive, came too. And once— it was a curious thing— I was looking through some of Winans' books; pictured books they were, and very good ones; reproductions of famous paintings, scenes on the Continent, and so on. And I came across one picture, among others, that

seemed to me extraordinarily lifelike. It was in a set of photographic reproductions; somebody's great picture, "The Death of Mary Queen of Scots," somebody else's "Spirit of the Summit"— a girl wrapped in a sort of sheet, very well done, but not cheerful— and another picture after, just a woman with lovely curling hair cut short on her forehead and a sort of white scarf wound round her face, lying dead on a bed. Rather morbid I thought it, and then I looked for the painter's name, and it was not there, and then I saw the picture was not there either, and I was looking at a clean blank sheet of paper, the sort they put in between those good photo-reproductions to keep them from sticking to one another. There hadn't been any picture at all; it was just that Rosemarie again, lying dead, with her head tied up this time.

I threw the book down on the floor, and I believe I got rather angry. I know I said to myself that for two pins I would call in a parson— if there had been one handy, and if I had known enough of their pattern to know what to ask for. I believe there is, or was, some game or other which they play to stop that sort of thing. There certainly ought to be. Otherwise, why do we support them in rectories— with greenhouses and tennis lawns— and ask them to dinner among the county set?

But it was the land of the Long, Long Day; and while there is time for everything, in that day, there is not always everything that there is time for. So I had not any remedy for the things that, most unjustifiably, continued to bother me.

After the call of the Government launch, nobody, for quite a long time, came near Kaluna grading station. I don't know that I minded; I had been going through the various stages of mind that out-back men know well— the first brief stage when you think it the fun of the world to be all alone, when you sit after breakfast and smoke, and damn the rest of humanity and wonder why you ever lived in a city; the second stage, a longer one, when you begin to look down empty tracks and over empty seas, counting on the chances of someone— anyone— coming along; when you know you are wasting in spirit, as a starved creature wastes in body, for contact with your kind. Then comes the third stage, when you begin not to care; you find you can get along very comfortably without people— but, unlike the first stage, this one has no fun in it; nor has the fourth stage, when one begins to fear the coming of any human creature; nor the fifth, when one hates the very thought.... Further I will not go, but there are those who can fill in what is wanting.

I think I was somewhere between the third stage and the fourth when something did come along, a stray cutter on its way to Thursday Island. It called to bring me stores ordered some time previously by Winans, and to deliver a letter from him, posted on his arrival in Sydney.

The letter told me what I had never yet known— the true reason for his going away.

Koki, it seemed, had been at his tricks with a vengeance; he had given good value— from Winans' point of view— for the boars' tusks and clam-shell bracelets he had begged. He had shown Winans picture after picture of Rosemarie; he had promised him that he should see her again, an actual living woman. I don't quite know what he meant to do or how, exactly, he meant to draw fresh profit from Winans' mad generosity; be sure the old devil had some cunning plan or other— but Winans upset it. As soon as there was the slightest hint to go on, he remembered that he had not, after all, seen Rosemarie buried; that, mad with grief, he had run away from her dead body which, after all, might not have been dead. Injuries to the head were deceptive; trances had been heard of; doctors had made mistakes.... Anyhow, Winans, with the bit between his teeth, had bolted, and made for London with all the profits of his trading in his pockets and his heart on fire within.

I don't know what I thought. I sat for a long time, I remember, after the boat had gone, looking at the letter and smoking the strange new smell it brought into the familiar faint odour of kerosene copra and mouldy-turning biscuit that distinguishes a native store. I heard the warm, black waters of the Gulf crashing on the warm, black sand; I saw the bucks from the *dubu* wandering by, their haloes of cassowary feather trembling in the breeze. And it all looked unreal to me, as things do when you are thinking hard. I thought a good deal, but I came no nearer to a conclusion. Except, I remember, that I felt myself quite uncommonly glad to know that Koki was going to be hanged.

That evening, as I was sitting on the side verandah, which is the quiet one, enjoying a last pipe before turning in, I heard steps coming up the front verandah ladder. They were shod steps. You cannot imagine what that means when you see one white man in six months— maybe not so many. I stopped smoking and sat dead still in my chair, listening; and I could hear my heart beat in the stillness.

I thought it was the captain of the cutter, possibly; he was a Malay half-caste, and he wore boots. He might have come back about something or other. But I did not really think so, if you understand; I was trying to prepare myself for disappointment.

The steps came in; they paused at the entrance to a room— Winans' room. The doorway of this room was in my sight, if I turned the least bit in my chair. Will you believe me when I tell you that I could not make up my mind— or maybe it was my body— to do so?

Winans used to shave every day, which I don't do myself. There was a little trade mirror hanging on one of the verandah posts where you could get a good

shaving light. It hung opposite to me as I sat; the light from the lamp near my chair was strong enough to throw reflections. In it I saw the person who had come into the house. And it was a girl. A girl with a mass of short, waving and curling hair, and two large, deep eyes set under reed-straight brows, and a mouth like an antique statue.

I did not move.

The girl may have seen me, or may not. She began walking about, turning her head this way and that, and seemingly looking for somebody or something. She did not speak; but I had a strong impression that she wanted to. I felt, or knew, that she was so shy she literally could not speak unless someone addressed her first. And yet, you know, she did not look shy. She was just like the photograph, line for line, yet she was almost brazen-looking. That seemed strange, when one came to think of it. The photograph was like a lily.

I do not know why I spoke. I only know I did it.

"Can I do anything for you?" I said. It was rather silly, but what would you have said yourself?

She seemed delighted.

"This is Mr. Winans' store," she said, "isn't it? Is he here now? "

"No!" I said, talking to her in the mirror, "he is gone away on holiday."

She seemed perplexed at this and (I thought) angry. But she said nothing at all, just came a little further in and sat down in Winans' room; I could see her.

"How did you come here?" I asked, perhaps a little sharply.

I will swear she began a native word in reply, but it seemed to fade away into air, and she answered composedly, "By the Kiami."

Now that was strange; for the Kiami, though undoubtedly she was— would have been— due to call at a native village some three or four miles away about this time, was, as a matter of fact, lying wrecked on a river bar, a hundred miles off. It seemed almost as if the girl did not know that, whoever she might be. I should not have known it myself, had not a canoe come along the coast with the news, some hours earlier in the day.

I said nothing, and when I looked into the glass again she was not there. She was not in the house at all. I lit a hurricane lamp and went out to stare at the sand below the verandah steps— I don't know why. But I got nothing out of that; it was a mere porridge of native footprints and dog-pawings. The hour was very late— getting near one— I went to my stretcher and turned in. Something within me said, "So she really was not dead at all— like the people in the stories," and something else, low down in my mind, laughed for all reply.

In the dubu there was drumming that night— low, threatening, thunderous drumming that went on hour after hour. It kept me from sleeping for a good while, but I went off at last with the sinister murmuring still in my ears. I knew

what it meant; I knew the news had come down the coast by "native telegraph" that Koki was to die.

Some days later I saw the woman again. It was in broad sun; she did not actually come or appear, she just was, on the verandah outside Winans' room. I did not speak to her this time. She stood there staring at me for I do not know how long, and I never saw a lovelier nor a more evil face. Now you are to recollect that Rosemarie, by her pictures and by what I had been told of her, was hardly a little lower than the angels.

I thought— not then, but afterwards— that I understood.

While I was looking at her, determined that on this occasion nothing should tempt me to speak, a sudden burst of sound came from the great dubu, where the fish and crocodile devil-figures were, and where Koki had made his home. It was a loud, brazen cry, a concerted shriek from all the men (I think) of the village, and it was followed by such a burst of thunder-drumming that the very walls of the store seemed to shake. Then there was a sudden silence, and in the silence I heard the black waves breaking on the beach, and my little travelling clock, that I never parted with, in my room striking a tiny, silvery Two.

When I looked where the woman had been she was gone. She never came back. Nor did the plunging engines, nor the pale faces of people falling into gulfs of foam. It was as if a clock had stopped, as if a door had shut. Something was ended.

I went on keeping store. I got the copra house well filled, and it pleased me when a stray copy of the *Papuan Rag* came down the coast to note that prices were soaring. I read the paper all through, even the advertisements. It seemed shorter than usual. When I had done, however, I noticed that an extra slip had fallen on the floor. I picked it up; it was printed on the side and contained late news. Among other items was the loss, with all hands, of the ship in which Winans sailed for home.

I felt rather sorry, on the whole. Winans had been good to me.

I went to the tin box and looked for his paper of instructions. It was a will, of sorts; not legal, since it was unwitnessed, but the Intestate Estates people were very decent about it. It left the store and goods to me, with the proviso that I must first of all cable to a certain doctor in a certain London hospital and ask for particulars of Rosemarie Isbister's end. If living, she was to have all there was.

I cabled when I got in to Port Moresby, and I had the answer to show when I went up to the office to claim my legacy. The doctor said that she had died on a certain date and had been buried in Kensal Green; he gave the number and place of the grave.

I heard all about Koki's execution. They hanged him near the town, and thousands of natives and hundreds of white men came to see it. "It was a great sight," said my informant. "But they wouldn't let us take photos."

"What day was it?" I asked. He told me, and I did a little counting in my head. "It was about two o'clock, was it not?" I asked.

No," he said, "it wasn't, it was half-past one." But, somehow, that did not satisfy me and I asked the gaoler.

"Was to have been one-thirty," he said, "but the old beggar said he wanted time to say his prayers or something, and with one thing and another it didn't come off till the stroke of two."

I may have thought a good deal, but I said nothing.

I kept the store of Kaluna, and I live there now. You had better not call on me; I have gone on to the fifth stage and I do not welcome visitors. I don't expect to go any further. If there had been any possibility of that, what happened to Winans would prevent it.

....You want to know what I think? I think that Koki played too high, and succeeded in losing things he couldn't control. I also think that it— she— was not the girl— neither alive, nor dead.

The End.